

***Poetics of Children's Literature.* By Zohar Shavit. Athens (Georgia) and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986. Pp. xiii, 200. \$25.00.**

Any serious study of children's literature is welcome, and a book with as noble a title as this one is even more eagerly received. Zohar Shavit begins with the place of children's literature, not as an adjunct to education, but as "part of the literary polysystem" (x), albeit an underrated part. Shavit is concerned with the inter-related complexities of that polysystem and the "socioliterary constraints" which affect them. Thus she is not interested in evaluating texts, and she refers to individual texts only to illustrate the "universal structural traits and patters" that she claims are "common to all children's literatures" (xi). To be strictly accurate, her study of universals embraces children's books in English and Hebrew chiefly, but also in French and German.

The early part of the book is not new, but it is a valuable introduction for those to whom children's literature is a new study. It traces the history of the "notion of childhood" and outlines how changes in that notion correspond to changes in children's literature. For all the updated critical language, however, this is still the stuff of the usual histories of children's literature; it is only in a later section that the argument becomes really interesting. Using England as her example, Shavit sketches the origin of children's literature in response to the demands of an emerging education system, and its changes as the principles informing the educational system change. But her contention that this development is a universal pattern rather than one peculiar to any historical era or national culture gains credence from the example of Hebrew literature for children. The similarities in the development of children's literature in England, France, Germany and the United States are not surprising, since they are roughly contemporary. But though Hebrew children's literature emerged a century later, it still followed the same pattern, despite the fact that Hebrew was a second language, and even across national borders.

Shavit goes on to examine the relationships between children's literature and other parts of the literary polysystem. Like non-canonical literature for adults, children's literature is of lowly status. Both systems share other characteristics, too, such as subdivisions by subject and by the gender of the readership. However, Shavit prefers to downplay the parallels with non-canonical adult literature, and to concentrate on the "self-image" of children's literature.

In examining self-image, Shavit seeks to clarify "society's expectations of the children's system" (34) and the literature's response to those expectations. Her catalogue of evidence for the low status of children's literature is dispiriting; no wonder writers for children often resent being penned off (in Jill Paton Walsh's lovely phrase) from the literary mainstream. This discussion of writers' self-image and their sense of the place of children's books needs further attention; Shavit uses it only as an introduction to the constraints placed upon children's literature by society's pronouncements as to what is suitable or appropriate for child readers

In the way of subject matter, language, or narrative form. Roald Dahl's "The Champion of the World" (in *Kiss, Kiss* 1959) and *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975), an adult story reworked for children, is the fascinating, and rare, test case.

The essential problem of children's literature, in this study, is its dual audience. Though addressed to child readers, children's books must also meet adult standards. Two kinds of solutions to this problem are analyzed, neither of which actually reconciles the duality. The first so-called solution is the text of ambivalent status, which appeals "primarily to adults, using the child as an excuse rather than a real addressee" (63); the second is the non-canonical text which "[rejects] adults altogether" (63). *Alice in Wonderland* exemplifies the first; Nancy Drew the second. The discussion of Carroll's various version of *Alice* as different solutions to the problem of audience illuminates her point.

In fact, the book is illuminating whenever it deals with the broad cultural contexts of children's literature. The force of the argument is not irresistible, however. From time to time it falters over its own details. How trustworthy is the test case, for instance, when the translation is inaccurate? (One example: "un libraire" (12) is not a librarian.) And how much faith can we put in a writer who thinks that reluctance to attend school only appeared in the nineteenth century? (26)

Ironically, moreover, in a book so concerned with readership, the writer's sense of her reader is confused. That confusion is partly explained, though not excused, when we realize that chapters of this book appeared earlier in quite different kinds of journals. Insufficient attention has been paid to making the parts into a coherent whole. However, that is not the only problem. Shavit has, I think, misjudged her audience appeal. She sees her book as a contribution to "poetics and semiotics" (x), whereas I suspect it is more likely to be read as a contribution from poetics and semiotics to the understanding of children's literature. If I am right, then Shavit has erred in choosing to assume her readers' familiarity with the polysyllabic formulas of her criticism and their lack of acquaintance with the elementary history of children's literature.

Finally, it is her allegiance to her critical categories and systems which raises the most serious questions. For example, Shavit takes for granted that children's literature means literature written for children. Such a definition excludes both the literature which children have appropriated and such creations as schoolyard songs and stories which are generated and perpetuated out of the adult's hearing. To include either of these would destroy the neat circularity of Shavit's argument, that is, the explanation of how a literature which is defined by its readership is shaped by that readership.

Add to the narrowness of that definition a fondness for "binary opposition: either the text is for children or for adults, either it is canonized or non-canonized [sic]" (64), and real weakness appears in the resulting argument. For example, for Shavit there is no such thing as a truly ambivalent text; a book like *Alice* only pretends to address itself to child-

ren. Yet the economic dependence of young readers upon adults not only to buy their books, but also to publish and sell them, means that every text for children is ambivalent. It must appeal to the guardian in order to reach the child. Even non-canonical works — even the comic books a child buys secretly with her pocket-money — have met the minimum standards of adult society or they would not be on the cornerstore shelves.

When a system has no clear place for *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Hobbit*, *The Little Prince*, and *Watership Down*, then perhaps the whole system is at fault. It is not, I am sure, an accident that all these books, so troublesome to Shavit's systematic mind, are fantasies. Perhaps readership after all is only incidental, and we should look elsewhere for the real issue.

To question the very premises of a book may seem like faint praise, but it is, in fact, a sincere compliment. *Poetics of Children's Literature* demands, and deserves, thoughtful attention and response.

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