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## **‘It’s not *just* writing’: Negotiating ‘childness’ in children’s literature through performance**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reflects on insights gained from a larger study that explored how a class of ten to eleven-year olds read and responded to David Almond’s hybrid novel, *My Name is Mina*. Through focusing on the children’s performances of the poems contained within the text the discussion examines embodied aspects of the children’s engagement and suggests that these play a critical role in their shared readership. The implications of this analysis are considered in relation to Peter Hollindale’s definition of ‘childness’ and it is argued that a closer analysis of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* reveals tensions inherent between linguistic constructions of childness within the text and embodied performances on stage. Drawing on critical perspectives from children’s literature theory and research conducted on classroom dialogue, the article argues that children make use of their social and physical positioning to engage in fictive negotiations of childness and adulthood and, in so doing, co-create the aesthetic experience that we refer to as children’s literature.

**KEYWORDS:** childness, adulthood, David Almond, children’s poetry, embodiment, hybrid novels, performance, Peter Hollindale, reader response, Shakespeare, the material turn

## Introduction

The cultural geographer, Doreen Massey (2003), writes that there will be moments during a researcher's life when well-worn categories no longer fit material that once appeared to be so pliable. It is at these points, she continues, that scholars working within a field may be able to transgress existing limits and "imaginatively reformulate" (Massey, 2003, p. 77) some aspect of the field. Until relatively recently, researchers in children's literature have, largely, relied upon an understanding of children and childhood as socially constructed entities. However, it appears that social constructivism no longer comfortably fits the texts and experiences researchers are interested in examining due to a growing appreciation of the various ways in which the material world intersects with the social on its own terms, affecting action and resisting signification. Reflecting on the impact that the 'material turn' is having on the field, Maria Nikolajeva (2016) argues that this is neither a return to a previous naivety nor is it a unified approach. Instead, children's literature is responding to a larger trend in the social sciences and drawing on a wide variety of disciplines, including cognitive poetics (Nikolajeva, 2014; Stephens, 2011; Trites, 2014a), disability studies (Aveling, 2009; Keith, 2001) and ecocriticism (Curry, 2013; Dobrin and Kidd, 2004), to imaginatively reformulate the complex relationship between materiality, children and culture. My interest in contributing to this body of scholarship lies in the opportunities that conceiving of reading as a fundamentally embodied experience offers researchers working empirically with children's literature. Drawing on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1999) work on embodied metaphors, that is metaphors that explain concepts in terms of our experiences and perceptions, I ask whether embodied realism might provide empirical research with new insights into the means by which children engage in negotiations of 'childness' (Hollindale 1997) through reading and writing children's literature. In particular, if we accept that the mind is inherently embodied, and that reason is shaped by the body, then to what extent is it necessary to find ways of examining children's embodied responses to the texts that they read?

Historically researchers working with picturebooks have led the field in drawing attention to the embodied aspects of reading. Just over forty years ago, Barbara Bader (1976) famously defined picturebooks as "text, illustrations, total design" (p. 1) and, in doing so, recognised how the book as an object and the child as an actor play an essential role in shaping the literary text. However, these insights into the embodied aspects of children's reading experiences have not carried through so readily to children's literature scholarship as a whole. Indeed, Hollindale's (1997) work on defining children's literature as a unique fictive negotiation that occurs within and beyond the pages of children's books is a case in point. In contrast to critics of children's literature that posit the impossibility of a viable relationship between children and adults (Rose 1984; Lesnik-Oberstein 2000), Hollindale argues in favour of there being a "shared ground though differently experienced and understood, between adult and child" (1997: 47) that he defines as 'childness'; the adult remembers what the child experiences, but the quality of being a child persists into adulthood because, "an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived" (Le Guin 1979: 44). To arrive at a clearer definition of what this shared property might be, Hollindale turns to an extract from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in which Polixenes describes his relationship with his son, Florizel, whom he has left behind in Bohemia:

If at home sir,  
He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter:  
Now my sworn friend, and then mine enemy;  
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all:  
He makes a July's day short as December;  
And with his varying childness cures in me  
Thoughts that would thicken my blood. (1.2.166-9)

As Polixenes speaks, he conjures up the absent boy and constructs a child whose, "varying childness" challenges the adult to physically engage with him by playing out different stories. At times soldiers, statesmen, enemies and friends, children are conceived of by Polixenes as being unexpectedly changeable in their interactions with adults, leading Hollindale to argue that the noun 'childness' denotes, "the quality of being a child – dynamic, imaginative, experimental, interactive and unstable" (1997: 46). Through engaging with children in this manner, Hollindale notes adults are 'cured' of thoughts that would make their blood run thick. The reference to 'thick blood' echoes an earlier appeal made by Lady Macbeth's to the spirits to "stop up th' access and passage to remorse" (*Macbeth*, 1.5.43), implying that interactions with children may play an essential role in keeping adults connected to their more sensitive and empathetic side. However, whilst

celebrating the healing properties of childness, it is important to remember that for Hollindale childness is not intrinsic to children but negotiated between children and adults. Therefore, although children's literature is colloquially identified as literature that is of interest to or suitable for children, Hollindale argues that is more specifically literature that engages with childness by providing children and adults with a shared space within which to play out stories that are of interest to them both. Hollindale's use of Shakespeare's text to define children's literature in terms of childness succeeds in capturing the dynamics of a linguistic transaction between adults and children. However, although his close reading of Polixenes' speech recognises the possibility of children and adults engaging in negotiation of childhood within a discursive space, he fails to take into consideration the children present on stage: Leontes' son, Mamillius, and his yet unborn daughter, Perdita.

*The Winter's Tale* tells the story of Leontes' descent into a jealous rage over the prospect that his childhood friend, Polixenes, has slept with his wife, Hermione. As a result of this madness Leontes' son and wife die, and he orders his daughter to be left out to perish in the wilderness where she is found and raised by a shepherd. The Shakespearian scholar, Carol Rutter (2007) argues that while literary critics, like Hollindale, tend to focus on what the adults who inhabit this play say and do, theatrical performances begin with the children around which the action of the play turns. These children have had a significant effect on the design of successive productions. For example, the set design of Trevor Nunn's 1969 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) payed homage to the childhood spaces by decking out the white box in which all actions took place like a nursery with overblown toys on which the adults played, while Adrian Nobel's later RSC production (1992) opened with the adults enjoying a raucous birthday party upstage within a gauze box while Mamillius plays alone downstage. In both cases adults are seen to dangerously encroach on traditional childhood spaces or experiences. Within these contexts the significance of Polixenes' careful construction of the playful negotiations between father and son speech referenced by Hollindale is developed in synergy with the rougher interactions between children and adults on stage.

At the same time as Polixenes speaks to Hermione about his son, Leontes watches with his son, Mamillius, at his side who only speaks four brief lines within the scene. These lines, spoken in response to his father's insistent questions, give little indication of his interior state, leaving it unclear how the actor playing Mamillius should react to his father's increasingly violent and sexual observations about Polixenes and Hermione's continuing dialogue. Consequently, it is up to the company to decide whether spectators are witnessing a father "prematurely wrecking childhood" by sharing his twisted fantasies with his son or a "child somehow safe from soiling – his mind not taken, tainted by what it can't absorb" (Rutter 2007: 129-30). In either case, parallels set up between the two father-son relationships – one constructed through language and the other played out on stage – highlight the tensions inherent between linguistic and embodied constructions of childness in *The Winter's Tale*. The first are easier to discern and more predictable than the second that need to be reconstructed with each new performance, so that the manner in which Mamillius is played tells us about "childness" and what it means as a cultural construction in the 'now' of every subsequent performance" (*ibid.* 130). When applied to Hollindale's definition of children's literature as a space within which children and adults engage in negotiating childness, Rutter's analysis of *The Winter's Tale* alerts researchers in children's literature to embodied aspects of reading. These embodied aspects are more difficult to identify but, through an analysis of case study data, I hope to argue that they are essential features of ongoing negotiations of childness in children's literature.

### **Performing texts: Reading and responding to *My Name is Mina* in the classroom**

As part of a larger project examining children's developing literary competences (Meek 1980), I worked with a class of twenty-three children aged between ten and eleven years old reading and responding to *My Name is Mina* (2010) by David Almond. Published twelve years after his debut novel *Skellig* (1998), *My Name is Mina* acts as a prequel for readers familiar with the story of *Skellig* providing them with an insight into Mina's life before she meets Michael. However, for those who are unfamiliar with the story of how Michael and Mina nurse a mythical being back to life, it works as a standalone exploration of a child's relationship with language, ideas and living things. Mina is a young girl whose father has died and who lives alone with her mother. In terms of dramatic incident, the key episode is the story of how Mina came to be home-schooled due to her school's excessive reaction to a nonsense passage she writes as part of a national standardised assessment. However, most of the book is occupied with the various thoughts, reflections and experiments that Mina records

in her journal whilst sitting in a tree in front of her house looking out at the world around her. From this hidden perch, Mina re-examines episodes from her childhood, writes about discussions she has had with her mother on subjects as diverse as metempsychosis and astral travel, and composes poems about eggs, cats and owls.

Elsewhere, I refer to *My Name is Mina* as a ‘hybrid novel’ and explore how Almond is able to make use of the synergy between visual and verbal elements to engage in metafictional reflections on the nature of storytelling (Tandoi 2014; 2017). However, for the purposes of this article, I would like to focus on how an understanding of reading as an embodied process provides me with a means of exploring the unexpected way in which the children in my study engaged in negotiations of childhood through responding to the lyrical aspects of Almond’s writing and performing the poems contained within the text. This study took place over a period of four weeks at the end of the summer term. With the classroom teacher I planned and taught a series of literacy lessons that were designed to meet curriculum objectives and provide the children with a range of opportunities to respond creatively and critically to the text. The data collected for the purposes of research sought to reflect the variety of ways in which the children were invited to respond to the text within the context of the classroom. Consequently, semi-structured whole-class and small-group discussions were planned to fit with existing classroom routines and reflect the way in which meaning was constructed and negotiated within this ‘interpretive community’ (Fish 1980). In addition, I invited the children to keep writing journals (Bragg and Buckingham 2008; Cremin and Myhill 2013) as a means of exploring more personal interpretations of the text and kept detailed field notes to capture additional information gleaned from casual conversations or observations. Through working qualitatively across the different sets of data I had gathered I was able to cross-verify results and identify common themes that characterised the children’s responses to *My Name is Mina*.

When reflecting on the experience of reading *My Name is Mina*, the children overwhelmingly identified the poetry included within the text as something that they particularly enjoyed. The poems in *My Name is Mina* are predominantly shape poems that Mina is supposed to have written in her journal. As such, they form a part of the bricolage of texts through which she is constructed as the heroine of a feminist *künstlerroman*. Like the heroines cited by Roberta Seelinger Trites (1997) in her study of adolescent fiction, Mina uses writing as a means of changing her perceptions of herself and her world. In contrast to the short stories that focus directly on redefining her sense of self through experimenting with a third-person perspective, the poems function as a space within which Mina explores non-human perspectives, including those of a cat, an owl and a hatching within an egg. In a tantalising comment at the end of a chapter Trites (2014b) concludes that it is through the poetry contained in *My Name is Mina* that Almond engages young readers in metaphysical and existential questions by using interconnected metaphors to build conceptual connections between categories. For example, the quote from William Blake that sits above Mina’s bed, “How can a bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing?” (cited in Almond 2010: 49) is a double metaphor that can be expressed by two basic metaphors: children are birds; and schools are cages. At one level, these basic metaphors operate as fairly traditional symbolism but through a process referred to by cognitive scientists as ‘entailment’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), Almond extends the possible connections to include the philosophical concepts of children, freedom and the imagination. The poems within *My Name is Mina* augment the strength of the interconnected set of metaphors surrounding the idea of flight by showing how Mina is able to imaginatively inhabit the perspectives of the creatures she sees around her by using writing as a means of breaching the limits of her body through a form of metaxis (Boal 1995). For example, in the poem ‘Egg’ Mina can be seen to simultaneously inhabit two worlds by developing a speaking voice that both is and is not Mina:

I SIT IN  
MY TREE, MY KNEES TO  
MY CHEST. I EMPTY MY MIND,  
AND FORGET THAT MY NAME IS MINA.  
I HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD. I HAVE NO  
KNOWLEDGE OF ANYTHING AT ALL. I AM INSIDE AN EGG.  
(*ibid.* p. 178)

In the first three lines, the punctuation, line breaks and repeated possessive may be seen to create a regular rhythm consisting of a dactyl (stressed, unstressed, unstressed) followed by a spondee (stressed, stressed). This is then interrupted by the fourth line that breaks the rhythm and marks the transition between a speaking voice that exhibits a heightened sense of ownership over her body and mind to one that negates both body and mind in

a process of metamorphosis from girl to chick. In the book, the poem is laid out on the page to form the shape of an egg so that the 'I' in the poem is effectively contained within an egg, marking at the same time Mina's transformation into something other than what she is and her continued existence as a self-identified speaking voice.

*My Name is Mina* construct a child protagonist whose written experiments are as dynamic as they are imaginative. Through these experiments Mina demonstrates how writing has the potential to open up new roles and identities through playful interactions. Like Florizel, Mina demonstrates how childness renders identity unstable and encourages individuals to take on different roles so that they can play at being soldiers or hatchlings. In both cases, the child's body plays a crucial role in enabling these transformations. Like Hollindale, David Rudd (2007) identifies children's literature as a space within which adults and children meet. However, in contrast to Hollindale, Rudd is keen to highlight how the child's bodily comportment and actions form a crucial non-discursive aspect of childhood. At times resistant and at others pliable, the body situates individuals within time and space, influencing the way they speak through the embodied metaphors that it generates and the social interactions it enables. This embodied understanding of childness is evident in the constructions of Florizel and Mina whose playful actions mark them out as children within the text. However, as I have already indicated, these discursively constructed bodies gain in significance if they are considered alongside the empirical evidence of how children use their bodies to read and respond to the text in the 'now' of each subsequent performance. Therefore, when considering how the *My Name is Mina* engages in negotiations of childness, it is important for any textual analysis to be informed by empirical evidence. Before beginning my fieldwork my analysis of the (Tandoi 2014) focused on the stories contained within it. However, through working with the children I began to be aware of their interest in the poems and some of their comments caused me to reflect on the role that they play in the book. For example, during one of the small-group discussions held after the children had finished reading the book, one of the children, Iqra, drew attention to the way in which Mina's poems are, "not really like normal poems" because they are about "an egg and birds and the black beast." Other children also identified the poems as being "different" but it was Iqra's remark that caused me to consider the non-human perspectives explored within them. While Carrie's suggestion that they, "kind of changed the book, so it's not just writing" played on my mind and led me to reconsider the whole class discussions I had recorded. Doing so, made me increasingly aware of how the poems changed the book because their meaning needed to be worked out in performance.

In keeping with best practice and existing research (Barrs and Cork 2001), the class teacher and I had chosen to read *My Name is Mina* aloud during the literacy sessions. However, when faced with the different text types and layouts present within *My Name is Mina*, one voice did not appear adequate to represent them all. Therefore, we enlisted the aid of groups of children to experiment with rendering the text's visual elements orally. Over the weeks in which we read the book, the children began to challenge each other to read the poems "really quickly" or with different intonations, volumes or accents. The performances that resulted from these challenges often disregarded the poem's linguistic meaning, but the children derived great pleasure from experimenting with the physical challenge of articulating words during the performance and creating a multi-sensory reading experience. This pleasure was particularly evident in one of the small-group discussions held after we had finished reading the book. In it Henry asked if they can share their favourite page from the novel and Yasmin immediately choose one with a poem on it:

**Yasmin:** My favourite poem is 'Dreams of Horses' because I like holding my breath and trying to say all the words.

**Joe:** (*interrupting*) Do it.

**Yasmin:** In one breath then listing and there's so many...

**Joe:** Do it.

**Researcher:** Have you ever managed?

**Yasmin:** Yes, I have managed.

**Henry:** Prove it.

**Joe:** What page?

**Henry:** 289

**Joe:** I want to read this one really quickly. 'Black Beast' (*reads it quickly*)

**Yasmin:** Can I do it? Can I do it? Really spooky [...]

**Researcher:** Ok. Go for it Yasmin, go for it (*Yasmin reads the poem parodying a spooky voice and the children giggle*)

In the first exchange Yasmin justifies her choice by explaining that this is her favourite poem because she enjoys trying to “say all the words” in one breath. The manner in which she phrases this remark implies that this is not the first time she has performed the poem in this fashion and this is confirmed when she responds to the researcher’s question confirming that she has previously managed to read it all in one breath. The sheer length of the poem renders the task challenging and Yasmin’s claims are greeted with enthusiasm by Joe and Henry, who challenge her to “prove it.” The boys’ interest is evident in the tone of their voices and in Joe’s repeated, “do it” that leads him to accepting Henry’s challenge himself and applying it to his favourite poem ‘Black Beast.’ On her part, Yasmin is also keen to show the boys what she can do and raises the stakes by claiming that not only can she read ‘Black Beast’ in one breath but that she can do this “really spooky.” The effect of her performance is that all the children dissolve in giggles at Yasmin’s attempt to fit the words into one breath while keeping up the spooky effects.

Joe and Yasmin were not the children within my study to enjoy performing the sections of the text quickly or in parodic fashion, relishing the physical challenge of regulating their breath at the expense of engaging in what the text might mean. Karen Coates (2013) and Debbie Pullinger (2017) argue for an approach to children’s poetry that acknowledges the manner in which a text is used by its readers. Drawing on research conducted in early language development, Coates points out that children’s poetry is often characterised by a similarly exaggerated prosodic register to that found in Infant Directed Speech (IDS) and argues that, not only does this feature provide cues to grammatical units and utterances boundaries, but it also acts as ‘holding environment’ (Winnicott 1969) that helps young children regulate sensory input by replicating the shushing sounds of the womb and swinging rhythms of the body in language. When performed by the children, the regular rhythms and exaggerated registers of the poetry in *My Name is Mina* bore strong resemblance to the communicative musicality of IDS. These embodied aspects of the children’s responses to the book are in keeping with the multi-sensory nature of stories in early childhood that Shelby Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath (1992) notes in their ethnographic study of Wolf’s daughters’ early literacy development. Like Coates and Pullinger’s work on children’s poetry, they point to how the rhythms of children’s literature are often *felt* before they are understood. Reflecting on the experience of reading *My Name is Mina* with a class of ten and eleven years old children, I would like to argue that the rhythms and sounds of a text play a crucial role in reading for much longer than we concede. For example, when considering on the effect that listening to the last chapter of *My Name is Mina* read aloud to her, Daisy explained that:

I think the walking bit was kind of mentally - it was mentally relaxing. Because you’re like, you listen to it. And when you were reading it to us I just felt like really sleepy. Because she was just walking through and they were just saying, ‘let our feet take us where they need to go’. They were like acting like they were merged together.

Up until this moment in the discussion, Daisy had indignantly written off the book as “starting off interesting” but then becoming a bit too boring and eccentric. However, in the section quoted above she admits to having enjoyed the meditative state that the final chapter lulled her into and postulates that the rhythm of walking might have had a similarly calming effect on Mina and her mother. Then she goes on to suggest that as Mina and her mother fall into step their physical synchronicity is matched by an emotional closeness that causes them to act “like they were merged together.” Although Daisy’s reflections are occasioned by a prose section rather than a poem, they point to how children’s embodied responses to the text might serve to increase their engagement and understanding of it.

The insights that may be gained from analysing the children’s embodied responses to *My Name is Mina* might allow researchers to move beyond what Marah Gubar (2011) refers to as a narrow definition of children’s literature that “cuts young people out of the picture entirely” so “nothing that actual children write, say or do has any place in discussion of what constitutes children’s literature” (p. 212). Unfortunately, the complex epistemological and methodological questions that inevitable arise when dealing with the intricacies of children’s performances made the data needed to analyse them difficult to gather and approach. Similar difficulties are often experienced by teachers who, due to the time pressures associated with a system of high-stakes testing within schools, often prefer to maintain tight control of discussions by employing a strict ‘Initiation Response Feedback’ (IRF) (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) discourse structure in which students are

required to wait their turn to respond. Although IRF interactions play a valuable role in pedagogic discourse, the dangers of them being the dominant structure of interactions between teachers and children across the world (Howe and Abedin, 2013) is touched upon by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) when he observes that:

In an environment of philosophical monologism the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus a genuine dialogue is impossible as well. In essence idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousnesses: someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and pupil, which, it follows, can only be a pedagogical discourse (p. 81).

What Bakhtin identifies as the underlying problem in this scenario is not the structure of discourse but the assumptions that lead to an IRF exchange tending toward a closed or monological pedagogic model. These assumptions can be traced back to idealist or rationalist philosophies, typical of the European Enlightenment that understands consciousness to precede embodiment as single, unified and distinct; hence Descartes *cogito ergo sum*. In classrooms and children's literature, monological models manifest themselves in pedagogical exchanges that privilege authoritative discourse structures in which the adult directs the structure and content of the interactions and individuation is possible only through error. Children who acquiesce to the teacher or author's demands are absorbed into the semantic unity, while those who dissent are excluded.

The dangers of excluding a child who does not ascribe to adult normativity are illustrated in the final tableau of Cheek by Jowl's 2017 production of *The Winter's Tale*. The play ends with the assembled cast gathered around the kneeling Hermione who has been miraculously brought back from the dead. An image of extreme tenderness and physical intimacy, it resembles a resurrection until the moment when the dead Mamillius enters and walks silently around the group he cannot join. His absence from the congregated cast transforms the scene into a *pietà*. I mention this production because it demonstrates the eloquence of the silences between the lines and points to the crucial role that each performance of a text plays in constructing contemporary understandings of childness. When considering this in relation to children's literature, it is essential to frame any studies of children's reading within an understanding of the reading event that acknowledges these silences and is attentive to the manner in which they may be filled by the young readers. Despite an increasing use of cognitive poetics, most empirical research with young people in children's literature still draws heavily on reader response theories that understand reading either as an 'interaction' (Iser, 1974) or as a 'transaction' (Rosenblatt, 1938; 1978). At first glance, there does not appear to be much separating the two approaches. However, on closer examination, they yield a significant difference because while the first privileges the text and focuses on the readers filling textual gaps with previous experiences, the second understands reading as a transaction in which the reader's past experiences (both lived and literary) contribute to bringing the work of art to life "under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text" to create a "new order, new experience" (Rosenblatt 1938, p. 12). Rosenblatt refers to this aesthetic experience as a 'poem' that is both unique and situated because it is embodied and "becomes part of the ongoing stream of the reader's life experiences" (*ibid.*). Establishing just what these poems might be is tricky when it comes to children's literature due to the uniquely situated nature of childhood. However, it might be possible to begin sketching the outlines of these poems by paying attention to the discursive and embodied aspects of children's reading transaction, and by taking into consideration their 'literary competences' (Culler, 1975) that provide them with an "implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse" (*ibid.* p. 132) and guide their engagements with children's literature.

In her work on children's literary theory, Margaret Meek (1982) draws attention to the impact that social and generational differences have on literary competences. In the light of these differences, she argues that a theory of children's literature needs to include an understanding of how the culture of childhood, including the oral tradition of rhymes, jokes and playground games investigated by Iona and Peter Opie (1959), shapes children's literary competences:

This lore is embedded in play, the essential activity of children... It is the *shared* text – the *first* literature of an emergent social group that is exploring the boundaries of its common world, discovering reality, discovering forms of utterance that are not communicative speech trafficking in information sharing (Meek, 1982, p. 287).

Like the children's performances of the poems from *My Name is Mina*, the early literary experiences Meek describes revolve around embodied forms of discourse that explore the playful and performative aspects of language. These performances, observed by Opie and Opie in school playground and present within the classroom in which I worked, are part of the "vast quantities" of literature produced by children that Rudd (2007: 32) refers to when he argues in favour of recognising the crucial role that the child's body plays in "reworking the discourses around them" (*ibid.*) by discursive exchanges appropriating and rekeying adult-authored texts to create "a separate counterscript in which their multiple voices are raised" (Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson, 1995, p. 460). Researchers (Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn and Bishop, 2013) responding to Opie and Opie's seminal study of playground games and rhymes found that fifty years later children were still appropriating adult discourses within their play and drawing on the rich media world in which they are immersed to expand on and adapt traditional forms of rhymes and games that had been passed down from generation to generation. As part of this study, Jackie Marsh and Julia Bishop (2014) explored an innovative sub-genre of play in which children enacted episodes from reality television shows as a means of parodying the adult world and constructing collective moral sensibilities through performance. By framing the children's play as dramatic play rather than pretend play, Marsh and Bishop drew attention to the children's performances as self-conscious and wilful acts of metaxis that required the children to "simultaneously occupy two worlds: the world of childhood and the realities of everyday adult life" (2014, p. 27). Like Mina's ability to write herself into a position where she is at the same time human and non-human, the children Marsh and Bishop observed used their performances to breach the limits of their bodies to engage with the different versions of adulthood observed on reality television programmes.

In my own research on *My Name is Mina*, I was surprised to find that the class were keen to talk about the adults present within the story world and those implied by it. During a class discussion held after they had finished reading the book, Kyan provocatively stated that he could, "see the author in an insane asylum" because "it [*My Name is Mina*] is just weird." When asked to explain his comment further he exclaimed, "none of this makes sense!" using a high-pitched and indignant tone of voice. At the time, I took this to mean that he was uncomfortable and wanted to move the discussion forwards. However, on reflection his exaggerated prosodic register could have been specifically chosen as a strategy proven to effectively appropriate and rekey adult discourses. Drawing on the linguist Ronald Carter's (2004) work on the creative use of language in everyday conversations, Rupert Wegerif (2005) argues that while working together to solve problems children use "more overt, presentational use of language" (Carter, 2004, p. 109) such as punning, idioms or exaggerated prosodic registers to oil social relations and advance their shared understanding. While reviewing the scripts I had transcribed of semi-structured classroom discussions, I became increasingly aware of the role that this kind of linguistic creativity played in directing the children's talk. Alongside Kyan, Francis was also particularly gifted at making funny remarks that sparked new lines of thinking. For example, in a class discussion held after the children had finished reading the book, Francis protested that:

**Francis:** It's kind of like part of the life of a crazy person (*some laughter*). It's just telling the story of how a crazy - I mean ah, a different mind works.

By describing Mina as "a crazy person," Francis was testing the limits of what was acceptable within the discussion. Instead of trying to couch his views in a conciliatory fashion, he rendered them more extreme through his choice of language, encouraging the laughter that this provoked through his tone of voice that took on intonations of mock protest. On the other hand, the idea that *My Name is Mina* might be conceived of as a story about "how a crazy - I mean, ah, a different mind works" offered the class with an alternative approach to interpreting the story structure that was in keeping with suggestions made towards the beginning of the text. In a previous class discussion, Zuleka had also suggested that the structure and layout of *My Name is Mina* was best understood in relation to the workings of Mina's mind. However, the false starts and long pauses within the script indicate that Zuleka was probably thinking aloud when she made this suggestion, making her ideas hard to understand. Possibly due to this lack of clarity, Zuleka was not encouraged to try and develop her ideas further and neither the teacher nor the students referred to them again during the session. Instead, it was not until Francis pithily put forward the idea again in a class discussion at the end of the project that it really registered with the class. Similar instances in which the children engaged in linguistic creativity as a means of soliciting approval through laughter were essential in bringing the class together into an interpretive community that participated in a shared and co-created literary transaction.

## Conclusion

Conceiving of reading as a fundamentally embodied experience brings to light new ways in which children engage in negotiations of childhood through reading children's literature. In my study of a class of ten and eleven-year-old children reading *My Name is Mina* the children's comments and interaction led me to recognise how the poems, "kind of changed the book, so it's not just writing" because the significance of these poems needed to be worked out in performance. Diagetically, these performances took the form of writing experiments in which Mina tested her bodily limits by imaginatively inhabiting non-human perspectives through playing with the semantic and iconic affordances of language. Extra-diagetically, these performances were marked by the children's shared delight in challenging each other to read poems aloud all in one breath in a parodic fashion. Like Francis and Kyan's provocative remarks, these performances made use of exaggerated prosodic registers to effectively rework adult discourses as a means of testing the limits of what responses to a text are appropriate within a literacy lesson. As Rudd has pointed out, narrow definitions of children's literature that privilege discursive aspects of childhood have led researchers to ignore vast quantities of child-authored texts, including "rhymes, jokes, songs, incantations, tall tales, plays and stories" (Rudd 2007: 32). These texts are often embedded in play and form the first literature or shared text that Meek (1982) identifies playing an important role in shaping young reader's literary competencies.

In keeping with emerging studies on adulthood in children's literature (Joosen 2018), I would like to suggest that exploring children's embodied responses to children's literature might be crucial in bringing to light new ways in which children engage in negotiations of *adulthood* as well as childhood. For example, Dahlia felt so strongly about the implied author's motivations for writing *My Name is Mina* that she wrote about it in the writing journal she was asked to keep as part of the project. However, it is not the content of her text that caught my attention, but the way in which she used the text to perform her indignation within a semi-structured class discussion. In response to Kyan's provocative statement regarding Almond, Dahlia responded:

Because um...teacher said that um...we could write anything that we could write a review of the book so far [in our journals]. So, I said, '*My Name of Mina* so far, "In my opinion, I think that this book is very, very boring. Sometimes I think about what she says and what it means. When I think and think about it, it seems pointless. There's nothing really good about Mina. I know that he [Almond] put a lot of work into it but if he reads over the book he should think to himself, 'Will this be interesting to a kid?'"

Dahlia began her contribution to the class discussion by highlighting the teacher's invitation to "write anything" in her writing journal and, in so doing, justified her use of the writing journal as a space of resistance and dissent. Dahlia may be seen to exercise 'textual power' (1985) within this exchange by making her critical positioning clear and highlighting how her opinion of *My Name is Mina* emerged from repeated transactions. The repeated, "very, very boring" echoes the repeated, "when I think about it and think about it" and she makes it clear that she is writing from a child's perspective in the final question, "Will this be interesting to a kid?". However, rather than accepting this as a disempowered position, she constructs it as a powerful one by positing it as a position that the Almond needs to imaginatively inhabit when he "reads over the book." Exactly what is 'interesting' means is then discussed at some length by Kyan and Daisy who argue that adult authors must ensure that the children's stories they write are believable rather than "over the top," exciting rather than "boring," and morally palatable rather than "a bit too eccentric." The notion that adults must take responsibility for their actions is also evident in their treatment of Mina's mother who are held accountable for her daughter's strangeness. However, although the children's construction of adulthood may *appear* to redress the imbalance of power between children and adults both, by effectively absolving Mina of any responsibility for her writing or her actions they effectively rob her of power or agency.

Answering the question posed so eloquently by Carrie, "Why does he [Almond] want to become an author? What inspired him to write really unique and different books to what most writers write?" became of paramount importance during class discussions held towards the end of the project. One contribution that stood out because it moved beyond considering the possible monetary gains to be made by publishing a book was Kasha's. Drawing on her experiences of writing in her writing journal, she suggested that, "he [Almond] is just trying to fill in random time with writing words on a page with whatever he wants like [we did] in our journals." Her

attempt to understand why an adult might write a book like *My Name is Mina* was unique because it involved her creatively drawing on and repurposing her own literary and lived experiences to interpret adult desires and motivation as different but related to her own. In doing so she unconsciously ascribed to Gubar's (2013) kinship model of discourse that understands children and adults to be separated by degrees of difference rather than by absolute difference. I am aware that in many ways the critical perspectives that I have drawn together are widely accepted within their separate fields. However, my hope is that through bringing them to bear on specific insights gained while working in the field I have succeeded in imaginatively reformulating a small aspect of that same field. If we can think like Kasha and draw creatively on our own experiences to interpret the embodied aspects of children's discourses, we might be able to build a richer understanding of playful ways in which they act alongside us as co-producers and enactors of aesthetic experiences. As Kris Gutierrez and her colleagues (1995) point out, the responsibility for bringing adult scripts and children's counterscripts together into a dialogical relation lies not only in the hands of the adult but in those of the child. To ensure that children's literature is a dialogical rather than a monological transaction in childness and adulthood, *both* parties need to leave behind the comfortable predictability of traditional scripts and enter into an unscripted space in which "counterhegemonic activity or contestation of dominant discourses can occur for both" (Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson, 1995, p. 451). This is not a comfortable place to inhabit, but it is necessary if we wish to explore negotiations of childness and adulthood in children's literature because children's literature is not *just* writing.

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