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**Screech, Ben ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8644-9607> (2019) Finally, time to listen? 'Unsilencing' the child in children's literature research. PRACTICE Contemporary Issues in Practitioner Education, 1 (2). pp. 106-111. doi:10.1080/25783858.2019.1659627**

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2019.1659627>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2019.1659627>  
EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5924>

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***Finally, time to listen? ‘Unsilencing’ the child in children’s literature research.***

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**Key words:** Children’s literature, reader-response, qualitative research, unsilencing, listening.

**Abstract:** This think piece argues for a more equitable approach in researching and writing about children’s literature. Namely, it suggests that adults seeking to explore and understand this literary genre might best do so with explicit reference to what children themselves have to say about ‘their’ literature. Given the context that listening to ‘actual’ children is still relatively rare in children’s literature studies, this article is essentially a manifesto for why, as scholars, we must seek ways to genuinely listen to young readers and value their responses. This is because of the key attitudes and insights they offer associated with personal experiences of growing up and living in the contemporary period, that as adult critics we are necessarily exempt from. From a theoretical standpoint, I also argue that such an equitable approach offsets Jacqueline Rose’s claim that continues to characterise the discipline; that children’s literature is a problematic or ‘impossible’ form, due to children’s lack of agency in the field.

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**Article:**

**A case for listening to children.**

As critics like Jacqueline Rose (1984) and Perry Nodelman (1992) have long since lamented; the irony of children’s literature is that children themselves have habitually been ‘silenced’ in most aspects of its production, consumption and interpretation. Children’s literature research exists at the intersection between English and Education Studies. There are key methodological differences between these two field’s approaches to researching children’s literature, and I believe that an effective way to bridge these is warranted if we are to give children a greater sense of agency in academic research in the genre. This is particularly the case as the study of children’s literature becomes of increasing interest and eminence in

university departments. One way in which this can be accomplished is through the use of qualitative 'reader-response' theory as a guiding methodology for research in this field.

Based on my experiences of undertaking reader-response research, this article will make the case for what a reader-response lens, and the privileging of the voice(s) of young people that such an approach necessitates (thereby 'unsilencing' them); can offer to children's literature studies.

In contrast to the multitude of critical studies of children's literature that make little to no reference to 'actual' children, reader-response research can result in unique, contextually-situated readings of children's fiction. As its name suggests, reader-response theory is primarily concerned with the role of the reader in interpreting literature. As Jane Tompkins suggests:

Reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects', psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader.

Specifically however, reader-response based research in children's literature emphasises the centrality of *children's* readings and interpretations, and therefore shifts the focus away from principally adult-led textual analysis. It therefore bridges methodological approaches with their origins in both English Studies (i.e.: literary analysis) and Education Studies (i.e.: school-based qualitative enquiry).

### **The 'impossibility' of children's literature.**

In her seminal *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), Jacqueline Rose argues that 'the history of children's fiction should be written, not in terms of its themes or the content of its stories, but in terms of the relationship to language which different children's writers establish for the child' (78). The crucial question that should be asked of children's books, Rose continues to assert, is: 'what are the conditions of participation and entry which they lay down?' (78). What Rose views as the inherent 'impossibility' of children's literature, centres upon the very fact of such a 'conditional' relationship between author and (child) reader existing at all.

Children's literature becomes an 'impossible' form precisely because of such a dissonance. Adults become gatekeepers, negotiating and establishing the terms through which children both access books, and are constructed within its pages. This means that children, both the subject and implied reader of a corpus of fiction perhaps fraudulently presented as 'belonging' to them, are essentially rendered voiceless. Children rarely write their own fiction, and even if agency was bestowed to them in this regard, the subsequent processes of editing and publishing their work would likely remain adult domains.

Perry Nodelman extends Rose's argument, drawing on a postcolonial lens in his 1992 article 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's literature'. Here, Nodelman argues that children's literature is not only *itself* inherently other from the preeminent genres and styles of writing that comprise modern English literature, but in addition, adults writing for children, *necessarily* construct the child as other because, to use Rose's term, it would be 'impossible' not to:

Children are not the ones who write either the texts we identify as *children's* literature or the criticism of those texts [...] Our attempting to speak for and about children will *always* confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as thinkers and speakers (29).

Nodelman illustrates this with reference to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Orientalism, Nodelman explains, is 'inherently and inevitably a study of what theorists call *the other*-of that which is opposite to the person doing the talking or thinking or studying' (29). The relationship between adult author and child reader is one of 'opposites' or otherness then. Just as Said viewed Orientalism as a 'western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (3), so adults exist within comparable hegemonic frameworks in relation to children. In attempting to 'speak' *for* children, adults inevitably become complicit in 'silencing' them.

Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theory of the 'gaze' (1978), Nodelman further explores this tension between adult subjectivity and the representation of young people, asserting: 'representations imply the *right* of he who observes and interprets to observe and interpret; he who can fix others in his gaze, and thus define who they are *as* no more and no less than what he sees, has authority over them' (29). As a result then, I would contend that a means of remedying this contradiction at the heart of the discipline is strongly needed, and one means by which this can be achieved is through reader-response research.

### **'Doing' reader-response research.**

Drawing on young peoples' attitudes, thoughts and feelings in regards to *their* literature through adopting a reader-response lens, results in a more egalitarian approach. Through listening to the voices of readers and genuinely valuing their responses, we are able to make strides towards 'un-silencing' them. Bringing children's own criticality to bear is by no means a routine, or consistently applied strategy in the field. However, I believe that it is only by

drawing on the responses of readers that we are able to oppose Rose's view of children's literature being inherently 'impossible'. Nevertheless, its antonym ('possible') still fails to denote *certainty* in this regard. Indeed, the question of whether to include the child's voice is at the heart of the discipline, and whilst I believe that children's literature scholarship is far from complete without such inclusion, it remains crucial to identify the limitations and potential vulnerabilities of reader-response as a methodology.

Specifically, we need to negotiate the question of the adult gatekeeper. This is because, in the process of 'doing' reader-response research, the adult researcher remains the proxy through which responses are filtered. The adult's presence in reading discussions may result in readers positing their responses in ways that they feel most successfully fall in line with this authority figure's expectations. Indeed, the fact that reader-response discussions typically take place in schools or other educational environments that, as Michel Foucault illustrates in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), function through the imposition of power hierarchies, does little to alleviate this issue.

The adult researcher records and edits responses and ultimately, embeds them into their own narrative. There remains a sense then, that through the adult's intervention, the responses may be manipulated to fit their agenda. As a reader-response researcher, one must demonstrate an awareness of this situation and utilise appropriate strategies to overcome it. My own research for example, drew strongly on Aidan Chambers' recommendations on the use of 'non-guiding' questioning (1993), to *facilitate* discussion, but not to *direct* it.

However, it would be foolish to claim that such strategies are infallible, or not impacted upon by the key tensions underpinning reader-response criticism. Indeed, as Nodelman

argues, even as we try to minimise the adult's voice in favour of the child's, it inevitably remains present, albeit 'hidden' (2008) in the background of both children's books and their associated body of criticism. For Nodelman, adults lurk consistently in the 'shadows' (9) of children's literature, 'contaminating' (30) the corpus with their 'assumptions about childhood' (30) potentially existing at odds with how children may choose to represent themselves.

However, whilst reader-response may be a flawed methodological framework, it does at least demonstrate a key attitudinal shift, wherein the child's voice is given a credence that, as ascertained, has traditionally been lacking. Through collaborating with young readers, we can be rewarded with insights on texts that are outside of our own experiences as adult critics. In my experience, young readers can be relied upon to present some wholly original perspectives on literature. However, even where they articulate arguments or observations that the researcher may have already considered, the manner in which they draw on their own personal 'transactions' (Rosenblatt 1986) with primary literature, may well suggest additional levels of nuance and texture that surpass the researcher's own considerations. Reader-response research then, is not necessarily a definitive method of 'solving' the tension between adult and child that exists at the heart of children's literature studies, but rather, it is a strategy we can use to advocate for a greater sense of what Marah Gubar terms 'kinship' in the field, where children's perspectives are valued and afforded equal 'weight' to those of adult critics.

### **What can young readers offer?**

Young readers are typically less constrained by the measured academic approaches to texts that we, as adult critics occasionally let cloud our more heartfelt attitudes and ideas. Young people, by contrast, are typically interested in how books make them *feel*, seeking themselves within the pages, whilst sensing the emotional resonances texts have, as well as how real bonds with characters can be. Such facets necessarily invoke the kind of personal relationship to texts that reader-response criticism encourages. However, with young people especially, it is important not to underestimate the ability of school to produce blinkered, overly guided and objective-focused perspectives on literature. Indeed, because as Foucault suggests, the school teacher is an 'all-powerful' figure; a 'master of discipline' (166), the natural order of the classroom rests upon the pupils or, 'disciplined individuals' (166), complying unquestioningly with a teacher's 'orders' (166). As such, the notion that there are 'correct' or 'school-sanctioned' readings of texts persists, even within the most progressive environments.

In reader-response style discussions however, we are reading in an exploratory capacity, to share ideas and learn from each other. We are emphatically not attempting to extract *definitive* readings of texts. As such, it is crucial that the researcher avoids positioning themselves as an inherently powerful, 'teacher-like' figure within the reading group, to ensure they are not simply reproducing the power dynamics of a typical 'guided-reading' session. In reader-response groups, reading needs to be designated as a 'special' activity, existing outside of routine day-to-day classroom practice, and the researcher must establish themselves as a listener first, and participant second.

An example of what may be afforded by the adoption of a reader-response approach may be observed in David Rudd's study *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature*



(2000). In this book, Rudd provides a 're-examination' of Blyton's substantial corpus in line with young readers' critical engagement with her work. Enid Blyton is a writer who, even though her work is somewhat dated and not always wholly politically-correct, continues to attract a substantial young readership. This is despite the attitudes of adults, who are, Rudd suggests, often rather disparaging about the quality and literary credibility of her work. This was the first study to draw extensively on the views of Blyton's readership, past and present, and to use a reader-response approach to demonstrate how adult criticism has consistently missed the secret, or 'mystery' of this author's appeal. Rudd believed that children's thoughts on one of the most divisive popular writers for young people could be revealing of broader attitudes and feelings children may have in regards to fiction more generally. This idea of adult critics potentially 'missing' pertinent details in texts that children's readings *could* reveal, is further evidence for the value a reader-response approach may offer to the field.

### **Makers of meaning.**

For Lawrence Sipe, pertinent aspects of children's life experiences also have the potential to be revealed through reader-response: 'Researchers and practitioners who focus on literary response are in a position to trace children's sense of identity, purpose and common humanity' (Sipe 127). This is crucial evidence for the argument that children should be the primary interpreters of *their* fiction, because only they understand what it means to be young in the contemporary period, and are therefore best placed to comment insightfully on cultural representations of the 'historical moment' in, for example, literature.

Crucially, Sipe also argues that: 'Text is produced actively by readers who must put it together for themselves [...] All meaning making is active' (122). Here, the notion of 'meaning' is not static – it does not relate solely from what may be deduced the text. Conversely, it is 'active' because it is constructed by readers whose contribution is underscored by 'individual experience *and* cultural backgrounds' (123). However, Hamida Bosmaiian argues that in children's literature, 'the authorial self is in a sense liberated, in that the textual strategies and gaps that constitute the subtext of the work escape the implied reader, the child' (103). This represents a perspective all too often held in relation to child readers. Essentially, because they are not reading through, what Robert Bator terms 'adult eyes' (244), they do not possess the readerly skills necessary to fill the Iserian 'gaps' in narrative.

As we have seen, this is a particularly prevalent perspective in children's literature studies, a discipline in which one could be forgiven for assuming the child reader would be held in higher regard. My personal experience of undertaking reader-response research however, rebuts Bosmaiian's claim. Rather, time and time again, they demonstrate just how sophisticated young readers' skills of inference and close reading can be, in their accomplished ability to explore and comprehend 'textual strategies and gaps', often in a more vibrant, imaginative and lively manner than their adult contemporaries.

### **Reading together.**

The establishment of reading groups in reader-response research as what Stanley Fish terms 'interpretive communities' (1980) is, I believe, crucial in the elicitation of the most sophisticated and astute responses that participants are capable of. In such 'communities' meanings are arrived at through shared discussion in which one reader's thoughts and feelings on a text inform another's. As such, the readers' 'individual experience *and* cultural backgrounds' (Sipe 123) contributes to an interpretive melting pot in which the 'transactional' outcomes are richer than those likely to be arrived at, at the individual level. As for the readers themselves and the 'connections' (Naidoo 150) that they inevitably develop with the texts introduced to them, I concur with the sentiments expressed by Beverley Naidoo, in relation to the participants in her own reader-response project in *Through Whose Eyes?* (1992): 'What they will do with their newly aroused feelings and knowledge is uncertain, but at least they will have been opened to new voices. That, at an individual level, is a beginning' (150). Crucially of course, we, as (adult) researchers, have, through this process, also been 'opened' to new voices – those of children.

Ultimately then, these aspects highlight why I believe consultation with readers is such an important facet in academic research in children's literature. It is the reason why, as researchers in this particular field, we need to consistently ensure we are traversing the bridge between literary criticism and qualitative research in the form, for example; of reader-response. In children's literature there is a nuanced dialogue between the author and its implied reader, which can be challenging for adult readers to comprehend in its entirety. On some level, the purest understanding of children's literature relies on *being* a child then, and so consulting and working with them seems, to me at least, fundamental. This, I believe, will have the ultimate effect of lifting the veil of silence that, at present, characterises children's involvement (or lack thereof) in children's literature studies;

resulting in more balanced and certainly more equitable contributions to future research in this discipline.

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