**Story Makers Press: Disrupting Aetonormativity by Positioning Children as Authors**

In a recent review of literary criticism relating to children’s literature, Beauvais (2018) demonstrates how literary criticism tends to articulate the power that the adult writer has over the child reader. As Beauvais explains, whilst other forms of literary criticism have focussed upon the reader as the meaning making, the fact that children’s literature is written by adults means that literary critics are often beguiled into describing the ways in which the child reader is constructed by the adult writer. As Hunt puts is, “the writers and manipulators of children’s books are adults; books are the makers of meaning for their readers, and the readers are children” (1994, p.2). For Knowles and Malmkjaer, this manipulation of the child reader is the ideological purpose of children’s literature, which they see as a particularly effective agent in promoting “the acceptance by the child of customs, institutions and hierarchies” (1996, p.44).

Beauvais, however, problematises what she sees as an often simplistic view of the way which power is seen to operate through children’s literature. In doing so she adopts Nikolajeva’s (2010) concept of ‘aetonormativity’ – a view that it is adults’ perceptions of what is normal which patterns children’s literature. With the aim of attempting to save aetonormativity from becoming synonymous with power in literary criticism, Beauvais (2018) suggests that there are in fact a number of ‘powers’ at play in children’s literature and that these are not necessarily one-directional, from adult to child. She highlights, in particular, the power of ‘authority’ and how ‘authority’ takes many forms and is often transgressed and repositioned by child readers. Equally, explaining the etymology of the French word for power (‘pouvoir’), Beauvais highlights how power is linked to potential and how, regardless of authorial intention, future meanings of texts can change (what she calls ‘might’).

The idea of ‘might’ in children’s literature is in part based on the fact that unlike other theories of power in literature which involve the self colonising the other (e.g. feminism, postcolonialism), aetonormativity has to acknowledge that the adult was once a child too. The fiction text, therefore, always already presents the ‘might’ for patterns not deemed normative by adult cultures to take hold. The ‘might’ in children’s literature also includes reader response theories as a fiction text will always already be interpreted differently by the child reader, who necessarily constructs their own meaning. According to Brown and Brooks (2012), reader response theories in relation to children’s literature often involves adult critics homogenising children’s responses to texts as they fail to take into account cultural contextual factors which actually result in the child reader making their own meaning. Brown and Brooks (2012) call this cultural context a child’s ‘homeplace’ and illustrate through children’s responses to a range of fiction texts how homeplace helps children make meaning through four key dimensions – their ethnicity, their community, their family and their peers.

Taken together, notions of the range of powers involved in aetonormativity, including authority, aligned with a child’s idiosyncratic, culturally informed response, seem to justify Rudd’s earlier, sensitive view of textual meaning making as occurring “in the space between the constructed and the constructive’’ (2005, p. 23). What these positions do not take into account, however, is the possibility of authorship itself as a site shared by adults and children. If children were to have a degree of authorship in the writing of children’s literature, the children involved would surely gain in authority and this would, in turn, have the potential to alter the ways in which the fiction text was patterned as adults’ views of normativity would no longer be pervasive. The co-authorship of texts by children and adults is a central principle of our new and innovative publishing house, Story Maker Press (SMP). Housed within the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University, SMP’s first publication is set for release in June 2019 and, like future publications, will involve children at each stage of the publishing process, acknowledging them as part of a collective of authors.

The idea of writing texts with children came from my PhD thesis (Dobson, 2014) where as a teacher-writer I created a ‘community of writers’ (Cremin and Myhill, 2012) with 11 year old children to co-construct texts. What emerged where ‘hybrid’ texts (Bakhtin, 1981) and elsewhere (Dobson, 2015) I discuss how in a community of writers the children would always respond differently to my writing. Thinking about this difference, I drew on another of Bakhtin’s ideas, the superaddressee (1986). For Bakhtin, the superaddressee is the ideal reader of a text, someone who will respond just as the writer intended. Whilst new criticism renders the actual existence of the superaddressee impossible, the idea became useful to me as way of thinking about the extent to which the children in the writing of their stories apprehended what I perceived at the time to be my superaddressee as they responded to my writing. In short, what became clear to me was that children writers would always already replace my superaddressee with their own superaddressees, creating fictional worlds and characters I could not have anticipated. The hybrid texts that emerged were not only creative and original, but they also disrupted aetonormativity, with the construction of texts which captured the ways in which children experience their worlds.

SMP’s first publication will focus on gaming – a cultural world which is largely constructed by children rather than adults. In writing this story, we are working with 16 children aged between 8 and 11 years, who are broadly in line with the middle grade readership of the book. Whilst the school is in an area of lower social economic status, the children come from different socio economic backgrounds and ethnicities and their homeplaces, therefore, vary. That said, the children all express an interest in and experience of gaming, which they bring to the workshop sessions we are running with them. These workshops are run though process drama – a child centred pedagogy which utilises drama conventions to facilitate children actively co-constructing meaning as they fluidly move between the roles of authors, actors, directors and audience (Edmiston, 2003), constructing the world of the protagonist and the gaming world they play.

This process and how it is being negotiated and framed by us as facilitators will be explored in future academic publications. At this point, however, it is worth giving an example of how involving children in authorship can serve to disrupt aetonormativity. Based within the Carnegie School of Education, SMP is aligned to our five research centres and seeks to explore and represent marginalised issues and childhoods in a way that is research informed. Accordingly, in discussion with our centre of Excellence for Mental Health, we are informed by research into the effects of social media and gaming on children in relation to mental health. Whilst such research often aims to taken a balance view, the headlines generated are often predominantly negative. Interestingly, some of these negative effects – sleeplessness, depression, antisocial behaviour – were also shared with us at the start of this process by the children’s teachers. When running the workshops, however, the children themselves were excited and wholly positive about gaming and were keen to share with us their experiences and use these experiences to inform the story we were making. In utilising the children’s ideas to write the first draft of the story, therefore, we realised that what we were constructing was a story about the positive effects of gaming – the ways in which it could develop skills, feed the imagination and ultimately help resolve considerable issues at home. As adult authors, we felt the need to apply aetonormativity by adding touches to the text, for example representing the protagonist as tired at school, which suggested that too much gaming could be problematic. That said, the story at the moment definitely disrupts aetonormativity in its depiction of gaming and it is difficult to imagine the story being written in this way without the children having authority as authors.

As well as seeking to capture this process of writing with children in order to think about the effect that children authoring has upon the meaning and patterns of texts, we are of course also interested in the ways in which our texts are received by child and adult readers. To start with child readers, it will be interesting to think about how the child authors feel about the final text – how engaged they are and the extent to which they are the text’s superaddressees. For other child readers, it will be interesting to explore the ‘might’ of the story and think about whether the story speaks for them and what the relationship is between their response and their respective homeplaces. For the adult readers, it will be interesting to explore the extent to which the story makes them think differently about children’s lives and, conversely, it will also be interesting to find out how they feel about the way future childhoods might be constructed by the text.

The first SMP publication is due to be launched on the 8th June 2019 at the Story Makers Conference. At the moment it is entitled The Warden Tree (but this may change depending upon what the collective of children and adults decide).

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