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Introduction: An Energetics of Children’s Literature

All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net. (Iris Murdoch, Under the Net, p. 91)

Let me begin by commending the incredible range of scholarship that is currently being undertaken in children’s literature studies. It is making strides as never before, perhaps especially in work on earlier, formerly neglected periods (eighteenth-century studies have been particularly productive, e.g. O’Malley, 2003, 2012; Grenby, 2011; Horne, 2011), but also in work that ensures that children’s literature is seen in the wider context of children’s studies (in cinema, toys, new media, pastimes, subcultures, ethnographic studies, etc.). But while celebrating this, I also have a sense of something missing. Namely, that we sometimes seem to be trying too hard, that we have become too ponderous in our deliberations about children’s books (we murder to dissect), such that we lose the actual excitement of reading. To borrow from Peter Brooks (himself borrowing from Jacques Derrida), I would suggest that there is too much ‘mechanics’ and not enough ‘energetics’ in much of our analysis (Brooks, 1984: 47). Thus our increasingly sophisticated vocabulary for discussing key issues around texts for children is sometimes in danger of itself becoming a straightjacket. In Foucauldian terms, that which escapes our grids of classification is often neglected. But this is not in any way to suggest that we need a more finely graded mesh; in fact, the opposite. I am arguing for more openness, more edginess. Neither is this a call for a return to some illusory realm labelled ‘post-theory’.

In some ways, I connect this latter attempt with the state of higher education in the 2000s. After a burst of energy in literary and cultural criticism between the 1970s and 1990s – the excitement of opening (indeed, ‘exploding’) the canon, bringing to English Studies an awareness of children’s texts (amongst many other, formerly neglected areas), coupled with the work of new, often more innovative, universities and
their associated curricula – most of us have had to retrench in these more straitened times. But it does not seem coincidental, for instance, that the death of theory (following the demise of the author a generation before) should have come at a time when Higher Education was itself becoming increasingly locked into materialistic concerns about its economic contribution, with research being required to show its ‘impact’, or ‘footprint’, at which assessors gaze with an imperiousness that surely exceeds that of Robinson Crusoe. Generally, a more utilitarian approach to the teaching and use of English has prevailed (from the National Curriculum in the UK compulsory sector, up to a growing uniformity in courses at Higher Education level), often at the expense of new ideas, of the delight and fun of seeing them explored in and through texts. The fact that what was formerly regarded as the heart of ideas in any university, the Philosophy Department, and which now seems an endangered species, is indicative of this; just so, perhaps, is feminism’s morphing into post-feminism, which one might link not simply to the ‘pinkification’ of the Labour Party in the UK in the 1990s, but also to those endless aisles of ‘girly’ products that swamp toy and clothing stores.

However, before this soapbox becomes malignant, let me say that there are also more positive developments. High theory of the 1980s did have its downside, as its hieratic name suggests. Though there were more, innovatory, theoretical grids in those days, many readings took no prisoners, stripping-down texts, grinding them up and reconfiguring them, never to be quite the same again. Even the word ‘deconstruction’, originally having a quite specific meaning in Derrida’s usage, gradually came to designate a more nebulous and de(con)structive process: of disassembling the text as thoroughly as Humpty-Dumpty ever was. Moreover, there was also a sense that, at the end of such analyses, the disassembled texts uncovered nothing more than a number of socio-logical facets (‘middle-class’, ‘colonialist’, ‘gender imbalanced’, ‘racially stereotyped’), under which they were filed for further reference, often being assigned a score on a scale of political correctness, too. Again, I don’t wish to traduce excellent and essential work undertaken in many areas, but when it comes to asking whether Babar, as a colonialist’s pawn, should be burnt, I begin to worry, and seek out my non-flammable copy of Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451.2

Theory had originally become more explicit in literary and cultural studies as a way of articulating the interests of particular oppressed groups as a result of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA (and similar movements elsewhere, often associated with the young). Marxism was
thus extensively used to theorise issues of class, of colonialism and, often, of gender oppression; psychoanalytical thought likewise found favour; and out of these general sociological and psychological approaches came more specific theorisations around feminism, racism, postcolonialism, queer studies, ecocriticism and so forth. However, in some cases these theoretical discourses not only divested themselves of authors, but of their clientele as well, seeming to float above them all with a will of their own (with their own free-floating signifiers, to boot): they became constructions without visible signifieds. The young daredevil theorist, formerly declaring, ‘Look Mum, no hands’, now began to return more empty-handed: ‘Look Mum, no teef’. The loss of any sense of the real, of any social relevance (not merely utilitarian, of course), eventually took its toll, and accusations of theory being irrelevant, dry and boring (let alone sometimes difficult and jargon-ridden) grew – reaching their own theorisations in what could only be called post-theory.

Again, I don’t want to lose sight of the excellent work that came out of this period and a whole toolkit of useful concepts and approaches with which to discuss various aspects of children’s literature texts, let alone of the debates around the problematic figure of the child. But I fear that the excitement of those earlier days has gone, and there is a certain predictability in much that appears in our journals as yet another feminist, postcolonial, ecocritical or ‘fill-the-gap’ reading is undertaken (and I am aware that I might have served this production line, too – but I’ll avoid harping back to the effects of Research Assessment Exercises on scholarship).

However, though I hold my hand up as sometimes guilty, I always like to think that I have tried to be light on the ‘mechanics’ and celebrate the ‘energetics’ of texts. I am attracted by Gilles Deleuze’s notion of theory, wherein it is seen not as detached from ordinary human activity, but as immersed in it, in what Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 9) describe as tracing new ‘lines of flight’, that is, releasing new possibilities for experiencing texts (as the epigraph from Murdoch avers). As Clare Colebrook (2002: 151) puts it, ‘the challenge of “Deleuzism” is not to repeat what Deleuze said but to look at literature as productive of new ways of saying and seeing’. In what Deleuze and Guattari term a ‘rhizomatic’ way of thinking, notions of hierarchy (critics rule!) are abandoned. This is a model that seems more in keeping with the egalitarian ethos that the Internet and the new social media have inaugurated, where open-ended dialogue is the norm, as the increasingly prevalent Australian interrogative (uptalk) might suggest. Final readings, the sense of an ending, are ever more things of the past. Rather than murdering to dissect, then, we hope, more fruitfully, to reconnect!
It might seem that what Deleuze and others suggest is itself anti-theoretical, to ‘go with the flow’ (whether it be into a Bravely Pink New World, or whatever) rather than question it. But this misses the point, which is to recognise that all texts offer possibilities for developing new ‘flights’ of thought. Moreover, this does, indeed, apply to all texts, including our prized theoretical ones. These are not holy writ, or instruction manuals; rather, they are there to help us release new ways of viewing the world and its cultural products. So, as I have always maintained, to think that one is ignoring theory is, in fact, usually to be enslaved by it, by the very thought patterns handed down to one as ‘Just So Stories’, as ‘common sense’. One cannot read any text without certain theoretical notions being invoked (of gendered beings of a certain age, ethnicity, nationality, etc.), just as no fiction writer can escape his or her socio-historical coordinates.

The word ‘theory’, which I have dealt with in more detail elsewhere (Rudd, 2011) could therefore do with greater clarification. Raymond Williams (1983: 316) gives its etymology in the Greek theoros, meaning ‘spectator’, which itself has its roots in thea (the same root as ‘theatre’), meaning ‘sight’. It subsequently moved to imply not just ‘looking’ but ‘contemplating or speculating’ (Wolfreys et al., 2006: 347). So, all creative writers give us works that involve shaping or crafting the world from a particular perspective. Sometimes, of course, we are offered far more than one perspective (Melvin Burgess’s Junk (1996), for instance, involves ten voices). But even the lone, supposedly omniscient narrator is awash with theoretical presuppositions. And, moving across to the audience’s side, we as readers are required to fill in the many gaps that even the most fastidious narrator leaves (how characters look, their locale, their motivation, their possible futures, and so on).

It is this perception of theory – as a way of framing life, existence, meaning (something that all creative works do) – that I want to pick up on, for it involves matters that no one can be indifferent about. Moreover, theory becomes a two-way street with this approach: not only do certain theoretical lenses (feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytical) illuminate primary texts in particular ways, but the texts themselves help to inform our ways of thinking. As we know, Freud drew on myth and fairy tale extensively – most famously, of course, in ‘the one about Oedipus’, drawn from Sophocles’ Theban plays. Turning to children’s literature, works like Lewis Carroll’s Alice have proved a playground for philosophers, mathematicians, logicians, chess players and, of course, psychoanalysts – let alone countless other creative writers and, let us not forget, children. More recently, one might single out Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials
with its theological and cosmological speculations. In my earlier piece on ‘Theory’, I concluded my thoughts by suggesting a definition by which I stand: ‘theory helps us see how a particular constellation of linkages throws into relief particular elements of a text, and how productive this can be for our understanding of society, its people and artefacts’ (Rudd, 2011: 219).

We should be clear what is being claimed here, then: that there can never be an end to theory in literature (or, more generally, in Cultural Studies, let alone Life), because both theory and literature are involved in charting, in their different ways, what it means to be part of society, from whatever perspective. Thus works of fantasy, horror, romance or utopia, whether traditional or avant-garde – none can escape this fate: all will refract the concerns of a particular time and place. At a later period, of course, we might attempt to recreate how we think contemporary readers would have made sense of these texts (a task that New Historicism sets itself) but we will also be approaching these texts from our own, current viewpoint. Indeed, the very fact that certain texts have an appeal to us at any particular time is often itself informative.

In terms of theory, the focus on ‘text’ was one of the main shifts to occur in the wake of structuralism, and it proved liberating. It allowed us to set ‘classic’ and ‘popular’ texts alongside one another; to intermix fiction with non-fiction; and, moreover, to include films, paintings, pictures, plays, operas, musicals, architecture, furniture, landscapes, clothing, food, toys and, indeed, new social media. It is the way that a culture uses these various items to create meaning that is crucial; thus, armed with our tools of textual analysis, we could start to explore patterns of signification and then to ask why ‘texts’ were ‘read’ in the way they were (classics vs ephemera), often challenging traditional value judgements.

More recently, a number of theoretical developments have taken a similar line, such as that known as ‘new aestheticism’ (Joughin and Malpas, 2003), which offers a far more open approach to texts. Like the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement that inspired it, new aestheticism emerged as an attempt to escape the confines of academic political correctness and social utilitarianism. As the editors put it:

In the rush to diagnose art’s contamination by politics and culture, theoretical analysis has tended always to posit a prior order that grounds or determines a work’s aesthetic impact, whether this is history, ideology or theories of subjectivity…. Theoretical criticism is in continual danger here of throwing out the aesthetic baby with the humanist bathwater. (Ibid.: 1)
In contrast, they argue for the equi-primordiality of the aesthetic – that, although it is without doubt tied up with the political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it is as other than determined by them, and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for an artistic or literary specificity that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to contemporary culture. (Ibid.: 3)

Isobel Armstrong, in an earlier work, *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), speaks of this approach as one that ‘escapes from the master/slave model of reading which is the dominant model in our culture’ and is, thereby, not only more open and democratic, but perhaps more conducive to fields like children’s literature, seeking to redefine the aesthetic in more playful terms, as breaking down categories, empowering and enabling us:

> The aesthetic energizes us by demanding not judgement but a desire of explication, an ever more adequate understanding of its possibilities, a repeated pursuit of the meanings informing it. Such arousal of intellectual and emotional desire, which persuades us not to judge or to consume, constitutes the importance of the aesthetic…. (Ibid.: 168)

That word ‘energises’ again. If anything could be seen to stand for my project in this book, Armstrong’s statement captures it: an ‘arousal of intellectual and emotional desire’ in relation to various texts and to widen their provenance beyond restrictive notions not only of gender and class, but even of those categorisations ‘child’ and ‘adult’. (I have always been fascinated at the seemingly more open attitude of our Victorian forebears to reading novels, with many of them discussing works that we now more firmly categorise as children’s, hence things to be ‘put away’, to avoid ‘infantilisation’.) There would seem to be potential in trying to ‘see how the text thinks’, as Armstrong puts it; to respond as ‘the text calls out its need to “enter into a relationship with someone”’ (ibid.: 101–2). The fact that Armstrong also draws on critical thinkers who have themselves been closely involved with children – such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and D. W. Winnicott – itself seems positive (and perhaps less relevant, but the fact that Armstrong was sister to the recently deceased children’s fantasy writer, Diana Wynne Jones, has always seemed noteworthy to me).

Like Armstrong’s book, then, this work is also theoretically eclectic, seeking to animate both primary and secondary texts as it progresses. A psychoanalytic undertow, however, is ever present (as, indeed, it is in Armstrong’s work). To my mind, this is because the psychoanalytic has always been an approach on the margins, always heretical, never quite
respectable and, therefore, it has more room in which to manoeuvre. It also seems pertinent in that it treats people in much the same way as books: we ourselves are texts, as Freud realised, and often quite enigmatic ones. In fact, as Lacan puts it, ‘[c]ommenting on a text is like doing an analysis’ (quoted in Fink, 2004: 63). And, in order to read us, Freud drew extensively on literature to demonstrate the possible ways we operate. Though psychoanalysis has undoubtedly been responsible for producing more than its fair share of rather crude, reductionist readings, in ethos it advocates an open-ended, dialogical process; theoretically, it shuns the closed book in favour of the open text. It should always make us wary of the ‘master’s discourse’ as Lacan termed it, of the person presumed to know.

When discussing children’s books this is an area particularly fraught with difficulty, and one that Jacqueline Rose confronted in her groundbreaking work, *The Case of Peter Pan*, discussed in Chapter 1. There is the undoubted presumption that we, as adults, can know and speak on behalf of this ‘simpler’ being; that we can ‘read the child’, as my title expresses it. This belief derives partly from our claim that we too were once children, but also from the fact that we have developmental theories, to which psychoanalysis itself has contributed. Thus we might claim to be able to spot the attractions of stories like ‘Hansel and Gretel’ or *Where the Wild Things Are* because of their oral appeal (though we’d also have to account in similar terms for decidedly adult works like Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* or Joanne Harris’s *Chocolat*).

But the claims to understand the child run deeper still with the development of the notion that humans have an ‘interiority’, which Carolyn Steedman traces back to the late eighteenth century. Beginning with Goethe’s figure of Mignon, the ‘dislocated’ child acrobat, Steedman charts adults’ ongoing fascination with children out of place, children who became the object of spectacle, whether as actors, street children or other performers, such that notions of normal development were set alongside these ‘abnormalities’. Steedman maps this focus on the child with the then voguish notions of cell theory (also explored by Goethe), eventuating in nineteenth-century physiologists tracing homologies between the child’s unfolding being and conceptions of cellular development; that is, of the child arising out of a small, interior space:

The metaphorical structures utilised by Freud involved the irreducible unit of physical organisation, the entity that was both a place, and a place where things happened: the topos of the cell. The cell, the smallest place within, promoted another set of analogies, for what the cell carried was the child turned within, an individual’s childhood history laid down inside its
body, a place inside that was indeed very small, but that carried with it the utter enormity of a history. (Steedman, 1995: 92)

This interior space also functioned as a realm that was seen to defy the normal coordinates of existence and chronology – that is, ageing and death – standing outside these, timeless and immortal (as Rose would characterise the impossible ‘Peter Pan’ child). As Steedman (ibid.: 96) puts it, ‘the unconscious mind was conceptualised as the timeless repository for what was formerly the matter of time and history, that is, an actual childhood, an actual period of growth and its vicissitudes’.

The double-edge that the child has always possessed, as a being either innocent or evil, is played out in this scenario, where childhood is not only the source of all our later neuroses, but also the place which, once revisited, might be cleansed and renewed. The child and the unconscious, therefore, came to be ever more closely associated. By the early decades of the twentieth century this had become such a strong link that, as Adam Phillips (2000: 42) expresses it, the unconscious was being ‘usurped by a new figure called the child’; hence, ‘describing the child was to describe the unconscious. The child was, as it were, the unconscious live: you could see it in action. It had been found; in fact, you could virtually talk to it’.

This notion of the child as an unfettered and timeless id, arising out of Romantic conceptions of childhood, reaches its apotheosis in the almost parodic Peter Pan – ‘I’m youth, I’m joy… I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg’ (Barrie, 1986: 187). But it also informs many later works of children’s literature. For example, in Philippa Pearce’s classic novel, Tom’s Midnight Garden, the young protagonist, Tom, is quarantined in a Victorian house with his childless aunt and uncle. He has been sent away from his own family because his younger brother, Peter, whom Tom misses greatly, has measles. It seems to be Tom’s loneliness and yearning for a playmate that bring the house alive, such that its owner, the elderly, widowed Hatty Bartholomew, regresses in her dreams to her own Victorian childhood, allowing Tom to enter her dreams and join her in the unconscious space of the home’s walled garden, glimpsing what seems to Tom to be a lost golden age. And, in the process, the elderly Hatty is revivified, such that by the end she looks ‘as if she were a little girl’ (Pearce, 1970: 154).

Through the figure of the child, then, the unconscious, this ‘timeless repository’ (or Neverland), will be forever accessible: a place where a boy and his bear will always be playing (they are often male figures that inhabit this space, I grant). Before I get carried away by this rhetoric,
though, let me return to my main point, which is to criticise the idea that the child is so easily ‘read’, ‘written’ or, indeed, ‘paged’. This is Rose’s point, too, although I also think that we need to consider very carefully why such an imaginary being is clung to so tenaciously – and to recognise how attractive we, also, find such a notion. This said, *Reading the Child* will mostly involve dismantling such binary oppositions as child/adult and innocence/experience. I am interested in relaxing our deployment of those jaws that bite and claws that snatch (‘Damn braces: bless relaxes’ as William Blake expresses it), suggesting that a more fruitful way of discussing children’s literature is to push these artificial boundaries to their limits and, as Buzz Lightyear would contend, beyond.

In some ways, then, the essays in this book take an heretical approach to children’s literature studies, using the word ‘approach’ in a fairly loose, non-formulaic way. They seek to maintain the ‘energetics’ of close reading, mentioned earlier. As for my main title, ‘Reading the Child’, this was originally to have been ‘Texting the Child’, but the rather misleading connotations of the latter made it inadvisable (as would be the alternative, ‘Paging the Child’). ‘Reading the Child’, then, addresses the notion that we can, in some almost telepathic way, know what goes on inside the child’s head (a notion bolstered by more recent, neuroscientifically informed approaches). Armed with this knowledge, a children’s author is seen to write stories for children, ‘filling them in’ in some way, from the inside out, with notions of what it is to ‘feel like a kid’, to adapt Jerry Griswold’s title (2006; see p. 34). Moreover, there is the related idea that we, too, as adults, can also come to know the child simply through reading children’s books, effectively ‘cutting out the middle man’, the child her or himself. This is something that, as I suggest in Chapter 4, also happens when children’s literature is treated as a genre.

**Overview**

Chapter 1 begins with a text from 1984, one that does not quite rival Orwell’s dystopian commemoration of that year, but one that certainly caused many ructions and rifts within the field of children’s literature studies. This was Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, the subtitle of which precipitated the outcry. My chapter grows out of an article appearing in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* which looked at the impact of Rose’s claim about this impossibility some 30 years on. Whereas we sometimes tend to lose sight of the aesthetic
dimension of children’s literature, reducing texts to their ideological coordinates, from Rose’s position it could hardly be otherwise; that is, if children’s literature is written and effectively controlled by adults, they will, in Rose’s famous words, seek to bring that child outside the text ‘within its grasp’ (1984: 5). It is not just matters of gender and colour that are being subtly (or less subtly) encoded in these books, but the whole way that a child should inhabit the childhood that is being constructed – one that seeks to conceal the porosity of the symbolic order, offering instead the reassuring presence of the eternally young and innocent child. Thus ‘writing’ the child is also seen to involve ‘righting’ the child, setting it on the right path if not the actual path to righteousness. Broadly, though, the idea that this power differential thereby makes fiction for children impossible is rejected; for, it is argued, separating out children’s fiction as peculiar in this way has already involved putting in place a category of being whose status is regarded as different from the rest of us: a special (if not Romantic) being. In contrast, I argue that, because language constructs positions for us all (the symbolic contract), we are, thereby, all potential contributors.

Mention of the Symbolic makes Rose’s Lacanian thinking more evident; for despite his impact on her work, the French psychoanalyst seems conspicuous largely by his absence (though Rose admits that it was a remark by Lacan – about children’s fiction – that sparked her interest: ‘Est-ce qu’il peut exister une littérature pour enfants?’ (quoted in Rudd and Pavlik, 2010: 227)). But, in the way that the child is not completely enslaved within the Symbolic, Rose does point towards Lacan’s two other orders: most obviously, the Imaginary (with the child as an idealised being seemingly untroubled by language, sexuality, etc.), but also towards the third order, to something beyond; that is, to an insistent Real which causes the child to resist the Symbolic’s ‘grasp’ and, we imagine, to savour that semiotic, somatic space where the young are ‘for ever beaching their coracles’ (Barrie, 1986: 19).

Of course, this is a line from Peter Pan, which is treated in depth in Chapter 2, but without in any way reading that work in a reductive, ‘case study’ manner. It is certainly there because Rose makes it such a test case, but this itself was because she realised the consummate power of the Peter Pan figure in capturing the essence of adult dreams of childhood: a being of the Imaginary. Chapter 2 therefore allows the further explication of Lacan’s key notion that we all exist within these three overlapping orders, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (the RSI), which is how I have organised this book. These first two
chapters, then, are more centrally concerned with the Imaginary, whereas the next two take us into more in-depth discussions of the Symbolic, and Chapter 5 deals specifically with the Real, before the whole RSI is brought together in Chapter 6. In French, these three spell out, in their pronunciation, heresy (air–ess-ee), which amused Lacan in the way that signification was forever ongoing, fluid and could never be fully mapped in any grid-like way.

In Chapter 3 the focus moves on from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, with an awareness that, although each of these registers of existence acts as though it defines reality, in effect, each is dependent on the others. In this chapter, then, the claims of the Symbolic to determine our existence are most strongly contended, such that, for some theorists (e.g. social constructionists), we are entirely defined in terms of our roles, as gendered beings with a certain ethnicity, colour, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, class, abled-ness, and so forth. As mentioned earlier in this Introduction, crucial though these socio-cultural dimensions are (indeed, they can mean life or death in some cases), they don’t fully account for our existence because we are not merely symbolic functionaries. Chapter 3 thus takes issue with some critical positions that seem unnecessarily reductive in this way.

The critics mentioned here are not meant to be singled out as being exceptional in any negative sense; but I have drawn on them as indicative of a trend that I want to resist (even though I have no doubt also participated in it). For me, the critical apparatus that is brought to such analyses can end up losing sight of the primary text; it is like watching a work performed on an overly cluttered Victorian stage, where the proscenium arch, heavy drapes and orchestra pit effectively detract from the action. The result, as Armstrong (2000: 87) puts it, is often ‘distance reading, not close reading’. An analysis of Milne’s ‘Pooh’ books and Louis Sachar’s Holes seeks both to demonstrate and rectify such short-sightedness.

Chapter 4 continues this tack of looking at how adult discourses can be seen to have such a controlling influence over children’s literature. Of course, this was Rose’s initial claim, hence her belief that the whole enterprise was impossible, for the child can never properly flex that possessive apostrophe. Perry Nodelman (2010), who acknowledges his debt to Rose, still clings to the possibility of children’s literature, but gives adults very much the controlling role, seeing a hidden adult figure lurking within its texts. From my perspective, as we are all beings located within the Symbolic, I do not see adults as having quite the colonising power that
Nodelman and some others grant, so I do not see his definition as determining the texts of children’s literature in the way he depicts it.

Whereas these last two chapters are organised round the Symbolic, the next deals with issues relating to the Real; that is, it considers occasions where our symbolic universe is found wanting. In Lacanian terms, this can result in uncanny experiences. However, I shall argue that despite the uncanny’s increasing deployment in discussions of children’s literature, it is in effect a term often safely recuperated by the Symbolic, with the term’s more disturbing connotations removed. There are, therefore, very few works of children’s literature that confront the more troubling, uncontainable and unsymbolisable elements of the uncanny, but I suggest that Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is one (again, partly responding to Nodelman’s analysis).

As a result of my reading of *Alice*, where I suggest that we do this work a disservice by reading it as ‘mere’ fantasy – that is, as simply escapist, compensatory – Chapter 6 involves a closer look at the whole divide between fantasy and reality (or realism), arguing that we should rethink the difference between these modes of writing. Whereas the former chapters were organised according to their respective emphases on the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real, Chapter 6 brings together all three registers in what Lacan termed the Borromean knot of the RSI. This knot is a topological figure, as is the more well-known Möbius Strip, which I deploy metaphorically in an examination of two celebrated picturebook texts – Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), arguably the most famous picturebook ever, and Anthony Browne’s *Zoo* (1994) – with a third, Shel Silverstein’s (1976) *The Missing Piece*, putting in a guest appearance, too.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I turn to a work that, though entitled *The Children’s Book* (Byatt, 2010), is anything but. Indeed, it is a work that, I have discovered, many adults fail to finish. Does this mean that it isn’t an adult’s book, either? Somewhat ironically, it does contain some stories within it that, just like the Peter Pan chapters that were originally part of Barrie’s adult novel, *The Little White Bird*, could easily be extracted and published for children, given some suitable illustrations (artists like David McKean and Shaun Tan come to mind). They would be dark tales, undoubtedly (as the children’s novelist within Byatt’s novel notes), but children *have* been here before. This chapter therefore forms a useful bookend to a work that starts out with Rose’s claim about the impossibility of children’s fiction; for, in her novel, Byatt half seems to test this claim, suggesting that the seductiveness of children’s books can turn
out to be quite dangerous. But Byatt also shows how problematic it is to make a divide between works for children and adults, given that we are all inhabitants of the Symbolic, let alone these two other orders that shape our existence.

For many people, the notion of framing this book in Lacanian terms, around his three different registers, will seem to be against the very openness I argued for earlier. But it needs to be emphasised that Lacan’s three orders ‘remain neutral on the question of truth . . . . The would-be truth-seeker will find that the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real are an unholy trinity whose members could as easily be called Fraud, Absence and Impossibility’ (Bowie, 1991: 112). Hence Lacan’s notions of ‘heresy’, mentioned above, and hence my adoption of this term in my subtitle, to suggest a more heterodox stance towards children’s literature studies, arguing that one cannot live in the Symbolic alone, contrary to what the more sociologically inclined approaches to children’s literature often suggest. There is always some residue, some deficiency in their codifications: something beyond that resists such tidy, lawful ordering (or awful laundering, even). This is the Real, felt indirectly, and always filtered through our fantasies, for it can be unnerving, horrific or, occasionally, blissful. On the other hand (there are three hands needed in this unholy model), we must recognise that we will always be captivated by idealised images of the child and all that has become associated with this figure (purity, innocence, wholeness, etc.) as it exists within the Imaginary – which is where, if you are all sitting comfortably, we shall begin.¹
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