
The Children's Culture Reader

EDITED BY

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The Case of Peter Pan

The Impossibility of Children's Fiction

Jacqueline S. Rose

Peter Pan offers us the child—for ever. It gives us the child, but it does not speak to the child. In fact so rarely has it spoken to the child throughout its history, that it led me to ask whether there might not be some relation between this all-too-perfect presence of the child and a set of problems, or evasions, in the very concept of children's fiction itself. Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. It is an idea whose innocent generality covers up a multitude of sins. This will attempt to trace the fantasy which lies behind the concept of children's fiction, and will base its case on *Peter Pan*.

Peter Pan stands in our culture as a monument to the impossibility of its own claims—that it represents the child, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists for the book, much as the book (so the claim runs) exists for them. Where or how such a claim originates in the first place will be one of the questions asked here, but the question will be focused on *Peter Pan* in so far as *Peter Pan* is the text for children which has made that claim most boldly, and which most clearly reveals it as a fraud. *Peter Pan* has never, in any easy way, been a book for children at all, but the question this throws back to us is whether there can be any such thing.

Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. To say that the child is inside the book—children's books are after all as often as not *about* children—is to fall straight into a trap. It is to confuse the adult's intention to get at the child with the child it portrays. If children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp.

There is, in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee. Children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*.

None of this appears explicitly inside the book itself, which works precisely to the extent that any question of who is talking to whom, and why, is totally erased. We do see something of it in the expanding industry of children's book criticism, but mostly in the form of a disavowal—the best book for children is a book for adult *and* child, or else in the form of a moralism (another version of the same thing)—the best book is the book which does the child most good, that is, the book which secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effects.

Let it be said from the start that it will be no part of this chapter's contention that what is for the good of the child could somehow be better defined, that we could, if we shifted the terms of the discussion, determine what it is that the child really wants. It will not be an issue here of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech. Children's fiction draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child. How often has it been said recently that what is best about writing for children is that the writer can count absolutely on the child's willingness to enter into the book, and *live* the story? (Townsend, 1971, p. 13).

This is to describe children's fiction, quite deliberately, as something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction. *Peter Pan* is certainly all of these. Recently we have been made at least partly aware of this, as J. M. Barrie's story has been told and retold, as the story of a man and five small boys, whom he picked up, stole and possessed (Dunbar, 1970; Birkin, 1978). Barrie eventually adopted the Llewellyn Davies boys around whom he built the story of *Peter Pan*, staking a claim to them which he had already acted out symbolically by drawing them into his tale. But in the case of *Peter Pan*, knowledge of this has taken longer to surface than it did, say, in the case of *Alice*, whose underworld journey was long ago traced to its author's fantasied seduction of a little girl. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (*alias* Lewis Carroll) wrote his classic for children on condition that the child remain a little girl, held to him by the act of telling the tale. A sexual act which we can easily recognise now, despite (or because of) the innocence and youth of its object. But then, it is argued, Dodgson was a 'schizophrenic', both a mathematician and a writer for children (as if mathematics and verbal play were somehow incompatible), and the worst thing he did was take pictures of little girls (as if the visual image were not the ultimate fetish). *Alice* has been saved as a classic for children, and the question of what we mean by that '*for*'—the question of its more difficult implications—remains unasked.

In the case of *Peter Pan*, the problem is more delicate. Behind *Peter Pan* lies the desire of a man for a little boy (or boys), a fantasy or drama which has only recently caught the public eye. Thus just at the moment when we are accepting the presence of sexuality in children's fiction (which we believed—wrongly—that the Victorians had repressed (Marcus, 1966)), we are asked to recognise it in

a form which violates not only the innocence of childhood, not just that of children's fiction, but what we like to think of as normal sexuality itself. There is nothing too disturbing about a man desiring little girls—it is, after all, the desire in which little girls are in the end expected to recognise themselves. And the fact has in any case been relegated to a contingent status as far as *Alice's* position as a classic for children is concerned. But 'men and little boys' is something else, something in which our very idea of what constitutes normal sexuality is at stake. Children's fiction cannot, I will be arguing, be discussed without touching on this question, but it almost invariably is.

Suppose, therefore, that Peter Pan is a little boy who does not grow up, not because he doesn't want to, but because someone else prefers that he shouldn't. Suppose, therefore, that what is at stake in *Peter Pan* is the adult's desire for the child. I am not using 'desire' here in the sense of an act which is sought after or which must actually take place. It is not relevant, therefore, to insist that nothing ever happened, or that Barrie was innocent of any interest in sex (a point which is often made). I am using desire to refer to a form of investment by the adult in the child, and to the demand made by the adult on the child as the effect of that investment, a demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place. A turning to the child, or a circulating around the child—what is at stake here is not so much something which could be enacted as something which cannot be spoken.

The sexual act which underpins *Peter Pan* is neither act nor fantasy in the sense in which these are normally understood and wrongly opposed to each other. It is an act in which the child is used (and abused) to represent the whole problem of what sexuality is, or can be, and to hold that problem at bay. This is something which, we will see, surfaces constantly throughout the history of *Peter Pan*—it is part of the fabric of the work. But the fact is either not known, or else it is displaced (as with Carroll) onto Barrie himself, and then disavowed (Barrie as the innocent of all innocents).

To call *Peter Pan* a fantasy does not, therefore, absolve us of the sexual question. It focuses it more sharply. At the moment when Barrie was writing *Peter Pan*, Freud was making his most crucial (and in this context least known) discovery that sexuality works above all at the level of fantasy, and that what we take to be our sexual identity is always precarious and can never be assumed. Sexuality persists, for all of us, at the level of the unconscious precisely because it is a question which is never quite settled, a story which can never be brought to a close. Freud is known to have undermined the concept of childhood innocence, but his real challenge is easily lost if we see in the child merely a miniature version of what our sexuality eventually comes to be. The child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality—it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own.

The problem is not, therefore, J. M. Barrie's—it is ours. Ours to the extent that we are undoubtedly implicated in the status which *Peter Pan* has acquired as the ultimate fetish of childhood. All Barrie ever did was to write *Peter Pan*, and even that can be disputed. But it is we who have recognised *Peter Pan* ('recognised' in

both senses of the term), and given its status. *Peter Pan* has been almost unreservedly acclaimed as a children's classic for the greater part of this century. Its presence in our culture is in fact so diffused that most of the time we do not even notice it. We take it for granted as something which belongs to us and to children, without there being any need for us to ask the question of the relation between the two. Like all children's classics, *Peter Pan* is considered to speak for everyone—adult and child (which in itself neatly disposes of the whole issue of what we mean by fiction for children). The child and the adult are one at that point of pure identity which the best of children's books somehow manage to retrieve. Time and again in its history, *Peter Pan* has been set up as the very emblem of that purity and identity. But this, I would say, has only been possible (and desirable) because it reveals so crudely the travesty on which any such notion rests.

It is, therefore, no part of my intention to analyse Barrie, to try to produce a psychobiography which would diagnose the author so as to set *Peter Pan* free as a myth. *Peter Pan* is a myth, but its status as such rests on the very difficulty which most commentaries refuse to recognise, or else recognise in order to diagnose and remove. *Peter Pan* is a classic in which the problem of the relationship between adult and child is unmistakably at the heart of the matter.

Peter Pan was not originally intended for children. It first appeared inside a novel for adults, J. M. Barrie's *The Little White Bird* (Barrie, 1902), as a story told by the narrator to a little boy whom the narrator was trying to steal. In order for it to become a work for children, it was extracted from its source, transformed into a play, and sent out on its own. *Peter Pan* emerges, therefore, out of an unmistakable act of censorship. The book which it leaves behind is one of the most explicit accounts to date of what it might mean to write fiction for the child. *The Little White Bird* is the story of the difficulty of that process—the difficulty of the relation between adult and child, and a question about the sexuality of each. What is the sexuality of the narrator? What is the origin of the child? What is *going on* between them? Questions which are never quite answered in the book, but which provide the basis for the telling of *Peter Pan*. The rest of *Peter Pan*'s history can then be read as one long attempt to wipe out the residual signs of the disturbance out of which it was produced. *The Little White Bird* is an origin of sorts, but only in the sense that no origin is ever left behind, since it necessarily *persists*. *The Little White Bird* shows what cannot, or must not, be allowed to get into fiction for children, but the problems to which it so eloquently bears witness do not go away. They remain in such a way as to undermine, finally, any simple notion of children's fiction itself.

Thus the result of that first act of censorship was that *Peter Pan* was both never written and, paradoxically, has never ceased to be written. Barrie himself certainly couldn't manage it. He did not write the play until twenty-four years after its first production. The publication had nothing to do with children, since it was the only children's text in a volume of collected plays (this was the main publication although in the same year it was printed on its own). The story from *The Little White Bird* was eventually published separately, but it cannot be described

as a book for children. It was released onto the fine art collector's market, at a time when a whole new market for children's books was developing, a market which it completely by-passed and to which it never belonged. Barrie persistently refused to write a narrative version of the play, and, when he did, it was a failure, almost incomprehensible, and later had to be completely rewritten along the lines of a new state educational policy on language in the early part of the century (Barrie, 1915). During this time Barrie authorised *Peter Pan* to a number of different writers, which means that its status as a classic for children depends at least as much on them as it does on Barrie himself. Barrie may well be the source of the play, but this constant dispersion of *Peter Pan* challenges any straightforward idea of origin or source. Above all it should caution us against the idea that things can simply be traced back to their beginning, since, in the case of *Peter Pan*, what followed is at least as important as what came before.

What has followed has been a total mystification of all these forms of difficulty and confusion. Barrie *is* *Peter Pan*, despite the fact that he could not write it. *Peter Pan* is a classic for children, despite the fact that they could not read it—either because it was too expensive, or because it was virtually impossible to read. Nowhere has it been recognised that there might be a problem of writing, of address, and of language, in the history of *Peter Pan*. *Peter Pan's* dispersion—the fact that it is everywhere and nowhere at one and the same time—has been taken as the sign of its cultural value. Its own ethereal nature merely sanctions the eternal youth and innocence of the child it portrays, and for which it is most renowned.

The sexual disavowal is, therefore, a political disavowal. A disavowal of the material differences which are concealed behind the category of *all* children to which *Peter Pan* is meant to make its appeal. That *all* speaks volumes of a further set of evasions: not just why are we speaking to the child, and what is our investment in that process; but to which child are we speaking? For, as *Peter Pan* very clearly demonstrates, if we are talking to one group of children, then the chances are that we will not be speaking to another. More likely, the very idea of speaking to *all* children serves to close off a set of cultural divisions, divisions in which not only children, but we ourselves, are necessarily caught.

There is no children's book market which does not, on closer scrutiny, crumble under just such a set of divisions—of class, culture and literacy—divisions which undermine any generalised concept of the child. And there is no language for children which can be described independently of divisions in the institution of schooling, the institution out of which modern childhood has more or less been produced (Ariès, 1962). How language is spoken—both by and to the child—is subject to strictures which need to be located inside the institution where language is systematically taught. The clash between *Peter Pan's* status as a cultural myth and as a children's book is nowhere clearer than at the point of its confrontation with educational policy of the state.

When *Peter Pan* was written, educational policy on language was directed towards a rigorous separation of the forms of language to be taught in different sectors of the state schools. A whole new concept of 'synthetic' language was

developed in the public elementary schools. It was a language to be based on the impressions of the visible world, as opposed to the classical and literary language which was simultaneously being taught in the secondary schools. This is a division which still affects the way in which we use language today, but it is rarely discussed in relation to children's writing. Recently there has been attention paid to class difference in children's books, but this has been posed exclusively in terms of values, to be identified and then avoided in subsequent children's books. *Peter Pan* is no exception to this, and it can certainly be assessed in this way. But when *Peter Pan* is rewritten in order for it to be accepted into the state schools, class difference can be seen to operate at a more fundamental level—that of the base components of the language which the child is actually allowed to speak.

This is an issue which relates to our understanding of literature as a whole—the fact that language has an institutional history which determines how it is written, spoken and understood. But it is a history which most literary criticism, in its concern to identify creativity and individual expression, makes every effort to ignore. In the case of children's fiction, however, the problem comes much closer, since the child belongs to the very institution through which language is being produced. The failure to discuss the importance of educational policy on language for children's writing is, therefore, the more conspicuous evasion.

The material and sexual aspects of *Peter Pan* have been the vanishing-points of its history. They are there, however, and they can be exposed. But what we have been given instead is a glorification of the child. This suggests not only a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood; it implies that we *use* the image of the child to deny those same difficulties in relation to ourselves.

Peter Pan comes at the end of a long history, one which can be traced back to the beginnings of children's fiction. Literature for children first became an independent commercial venture in England in the mid-to late-eighteenth century, at a time when conceptualisation of childhood was dominated by the philosophical writings of Locke and Rousseau. This is a fact which is known, but its implications for thinking about children's fiction have not been fully recognised. It is assumed that children's fiction has grown away from this moment, whereas in fact children's fiction has constantly returned to this moment, repeated it, and reproduced its fundamental conception of the child. Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state.

The earliest children's writers took from Locke the idea of an education based on the child's direct and unproblematic access to objects of the real world, an education which would by-pass the imperfections of language (Newberry, 1944, 1756; Watts, 1741). They took from Rousseau the idea that it is sexuality which most totally sabotages the child's correct use of language and its exact knowledge of the world. One of the earliest extended narratives for children, Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* (Day, 1783–9), was based directly on Rousseau's *Emile* (Rousseau (1762) 1763). It shared with Rousseau's tract a conviction that both sexuality and social inequality were realities that the child somehow be

used to circumvent. The child is rendered innocent of all the contradictions which flaw our interaction with the world. Above all, for both Locke and Rousseau, the child can be seen, observed and known in exactly the same way as the world can be grasped by a rational understanding.

Children's fiction emerges, therefore, out of a conception of both the child and the world as knowable in a direct and unmediated way, a conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation. It is a conception which has affected children's writing and the way that we think about it to this day. We can see it, in differing forms, in such apparently diverse types of writing as the fairy tale and the adventure story for boys. Andrew Lang published his fairy tales in the nineteenth century as the uncontaminated record of our cultural infancy (Lang, 1899) to which, it was assumed, the child had a direct and privileged access (an idea whose purely mythical nature was pointed out by Tolkien long ago (Tolkien 1938) 1947)). And the boy's adventure story, which came into its own in the mid to late nineteenth century with writers such as Marryat, Kingston, Henty and Stevenson, was always part of an exploratory and colonialist venture which assumed that discovering or seeing the world was the same thing as controlling it. Both types of writing are present in *Peter Pan* which condenses a whole history of children's fiction into its form. They can also be seen in the works of Alan Garner who is considered by many to be one of the most innovatory writers today. But what I want to stress in both cases is the idea which they share of a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access. The child is, if you like, something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us, and gives them back to us with a facility or directness which ensures that our own relationship to them is, finally, safe.

I am not, of course, talking here of the child's own experience of the book which, despite all the attempts which have been made, I consider more or less impossible to gauge. What I am describing is how these different forms of writing, in their long and continuing association with childhood, have been thought about *for* children. Again, Freud's concept of the unconscious can be seen as a challenge to this association, for it not only undermines our idea of sexuality; it equally questions the idea of mastery which lies behind the notion that the world is something to which we simply have access, or that language is something which we can control. And yet for all the apparent shifts in the way that childhood and children's writing is discussed, what always seems to return in the analysis, in one form or another, is this idea of mastery, which means by implication securing the child's rationality, its control of sexuality or of language (or both).

Thus, for example, even when a troubling of sexuality is recognised in the fairy tale (Bettelheim, 1976), it is something contained by the cohesion of the narrative, transcended on the path to reality, and resolved in the name of a psychological and sexual identity, which ensures in the end that we can master not only the world, but also ourselves. And although addressed to a very different context of children's writing, a similar demand can be seen in the recent

appeal to the coherence of realist writing in children's fiction, against the disintegration of the adult novel form, which can lead such a well-known children's writer as John Rowe Townsend to say without inhibition 'I came to the child because I see in him the last refuge from a literature gone berserk and ready for suicide' (quoting Isaac Bashevis Singer, Townsend, 1971, p. 12).

Peter Pan was written at the time of Freud, and the status which it has been given seems to testify above all to our inability to recognise the dislocation which he operated on our conception of childhood. Not just in the sense of what childhood is supposed to be, but, more crucially, as a challenge to why, in terms of our own relationship to language and sexuality, we attempt to construct an image of the child at all.

What we constantly see in discussion of children's fiction is how the child can be used to hold off a panic, a threat to our assumption that language is something which can simply be organised and cohered, and that sexuality, while it cannot be removed, will eventually take on the forms in which we prefer to recognise and acknowledge each other. Childhood also serves as a term of universal social reference which conceals all the historical divisions and difficulties of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part.

There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction', other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes. These purposes are often perverse and mostly dishonest, not wilfully, but of necessity, given that addressing the child must touch on all of these difficulties, none of which it dares speak. *Peter Pan* is sometimes scoffed at today for the excessive and cloying nature of its innocence. It is in fact one of the most fragmented and troubled works in the history of children's fiction to date. *Peter Pan* is peculiar, and yet not peculiar, in so far as it recapitulates a whole history of children's fiction which has not yet come to an end. . . .

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