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Cultural Orienteering: a map for Anthony Browne’s Into the Forest
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Observing historical changes in the cultural construction of childhood and of child characters in fairy tales, Nodelman and Reimer (2003) conclude that fairy tales encode the ideology of the culture that retells them. Taking Little Red Riding Hood as a case in point, they contrast assumptions about the child protagonist in Perrault’s (1697) tale with those in the version by the Grimm brothers (1812). In the first, it is assumed that the child is aware of the danger in the forest and therefore has the knowledge to survive in the world. In the second, the plot is driven as much by the child’s disobedience as her ignorance of danger. According to Nodelman and Reimer, Grimms’ narrative reflects the belief that ‘children need only know how much they don’t know so they can see the wisdom of accepting the wise advice of their parents’ (2003: 308, emphasis in original). These two versions of the tale reflect different understandings about the child protagonist’s understanding of risk, the knowledge she needs to survive in a dangerous world, and therefore beliefs about childhood at the time they were written. What remains constant, however, is the danger the forest represents.

In Into the Forest (2004), Anthony Browne offers a retelling of Little Red Riding Hood which expresses – and contests – more recent assumptions about childhood, risk and the resources children need to survive in today’s world. In Browne’s version, the forest is the terrain in which a young male protagonist imaginatively explores his anxiety about his father’s unexplained absence. In this respect, the narrative speaks to widespread social anxieties about the family, particularly the effect of parental separation and divorce on children. The mother’s instruction not to go into the forest in Browne’s version is suggestive of contemporary parents’ desire to protect children from unnecessary worry about what might happen to them if the family breaks down. On his journey through the forest to Grandma’s house the boy meets various fairy tale child characters, each representing some of these possibilities.
However, the boy’s anxiety in the opening frames suggest that he is acutely aware of the social reality of family breakdown and its signifiers before he enters the forest. He obsessively labels the house with the message ‘Come home Dad’, written on sticky yellow labels like the commonplace ‘post-it note’ which typically acts as a reminder of a small task. In this format, the poignant plea collides with a signifier of the niggly chore that might easily be forgotten by parents who are caught up in their own interests and worries. This implies a (somewhat critical) textual commentary on the impact of these cultural shifts in contemporary families.

In this respect, the boy’s imagined fears reflect the fact that today the fundamental certainties of life – even home and family – have been disrupted. New risks, insecurities and anxieties have taken their place and children (in fact all people) are increasingly responsible for constructing their own biographical life projects, but without the support – or coercion – of tradition. In what German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) calls risk society, marriage and family have become fragile institutions, and the risk of divorce or separation is something which children growing up in the West can hardly fail to be aware of. Into the Forest works to address the anxieties contemporary social change and cultural knowledge creates for children. Unlike its traditional predecessors, however, it is not a cautionary tale. This close reading of the text investigates the way in which Browne’s protagonist manages his feelings of apprehension about his father’s absence, and what it might mean for his family’s future, by imaginatively reconstructing his individual and family biographies. Ironically, this management entails seeking out a tradition to guide this process.

In the face of Beck’s claim that traditions have been eroded, Browne’s protagonist follows an (albeit frightening) path through the traditions of narrative. Folktales and fairy tales are stories marking the inception of children’s literature, and the protagonist’s journey through these stories to Grandma’s house is equally a journey toward Grandma as the storyteller. Her generational status signals the traditions of these rituals that are closely associated with childhood, both in relation to pleasure and socialisation. As such, she is set in contrast with the young mother who offers her son no explanation about his father’s absence. But Into the Forest is also a challenge to traditions, and it enacts this challenge through its revisionary approach to Little Red
Riding Hood which sets it apart from both traditional versions and typical contemporary re-workings.

This strategy of narrative transformation refigures the logic applied to visuals in Browne’s 2003 publication, The Shape Game. Ostensibly about a family trip to the museum, The Shape Game demonstrates that drawing, or visual art more generally, can be played with as a means to (positively) reconstruct the world. The players in the shape game metamorphose a squiggle into a recognisable object as a means of bringing order from chaos, using art as the reconstructive tool. Following this strategy, but in narrative rather than visual form, Into the Forest’s re-interpretation of Little Red Riding Hood is by no means a simplistic reshaping. One reading of the text – quite subversive given the children’s book industry’s many unwritten rules about ‘appropriateness’ for young readers – is that the ideal of the family is a fairy tale. This ideal, of a stable happy home shared by mother, father and children, is no longer the norm, if it ever really was.

Fairy tales and, indeed, children’s texts more generally, have long used a disruption of the family in some form or other as a narrative device. According to David Witt, a scriptwriter for the Australian animation company which produced Blinky Bill and Dot and the Kangaroo, ‘Killing off the parents or contriving them to be away is a technical problem of narrative, not a moral theme’ (Quinn 2004: online). Andy Griffiths, author of The Day My Bum Went Psycho, explains that ‘When something happens that disrupts the normal order of things you’ve got story. It’s where you get to see what happens when you operate outside of the rules adults lay down for you’ (Quinn 2004: online). Of course, this is to make assumptions about what is ‘the normal order of things’. Although the reunion of the family in Into the Forest appears to conform to the ‘happily ever after’ ending of traditional fairy tales, this comforting cliché is positioned against reader knowledge that the permanent emotional security it signals is can no longer be guaranteed in the contemporary family life.

The narrative closure reflects a wish-fulfilment fantasy and the fact that ‘The most significant truth about fairy tales is that they represent things not as they really are but as the implied audience imagines they ought to be’ (Nodelman and Reimer 316). In this respect, Browne’s closure is ironic and bespeaks a compelling political subtlety.
Attending to a similarly ironic, even bleak outlook, in Browne’s work, Clare Bradford reads the three flying pigs in the opening pages of *Piggybook* (1986) against the text’s overt feminist conclusion. The downtrodden mother transforms her husband and sons into good domestic subjects so that she has time to work as a mechanic. However, the precursive visual signifier speaks the adage of impossibility about this happy ending, implying: ‘yeah…and pigs might fly’ (Bradford 5).

Arguably, then, the undercutting of the distortion of reality in the fairy tale ending of *Into the Forest* is defensible since it attends to the disjunction between the ideological fiction of the family and the reality of which contemporary child readers are not only aware, but often experience. However, such social comment requires careful treading. Thus, the family breakdown is elided beneath the metaphor of a stormy night that wakes the child. In Browne’s typically oblique style of written text, the opening line is simply: ‘One night I was woken up by a terrible sound’. If readers choose to ignore the clue in ‘Come home Dad’, stuck on the window frame of the title page, the illustration of a lightening-filled sky outside the protagonist’s bedroom window suggests that the terrible noise is thunder. The other distinct visual on the page is a one-legged toy soldier holding a gun. In the context of the narrative developments as they transpire the next morning, namely ‘Dad wasn’t there’ and Mum doesn’t seem to know when he is coming back, the soldier suggests that the terrible noise of the night before was not the storm, but the battle of a domestic dispute – which is also a gender war – that has left the soldier/Dad crippled.

Unlike his protagonist, Browne here skirts around the thorny forest of directly addressing the fight. His strategy is reminiscent of John Burningham’s distressing picture of red-tinged, angry-faced parents fighting in *Aldo*, for whom there is no accompanying text to translate the event for the child reader (or child protagonist) who witness the scene. There is only the protagonist’s undirected and inexplicit comment on the facing page in which she is shown with her back to the fight, ‘Sometimes I wish Aldo would help, but he’s only my special friend’. In Browne’s text, although the forest path through fairy tales is the most direct way for the male protagonist to reach a conclusion, for the author/illustrator the same path provides the indirect metaphoric camouflage of the fairy tale intertexts.
These intertexts begin on the front cover which embeds Snow White’s glass coffin, the poisoned apple and the Frog Prince in the forest scene. Cinderella’s pumpkin and glass slipper, Sleeping Beauty’s spinning wheel and Rapunzel’s tower appear later, also embedded. In the course of his journey through the forest, the protagonist encounters Jack, on his way to sell his mother’s cow, Goldilocks and Hansel and Gretel, before discovering Little Red Riding Hood’s coat hanging in a tree. In his review in *The New York Times*, Roger Sutton suggests that ‘Each of these motifs is indeed powerful in its proper place, but it seems careless, if not dangerous, to scatter them so promiscuously all around the woods …’ (online). In our view, their inclusion is hardly casual or random.

Given the current social and cultural context and the realist frame to the text, it is not insignificant that the plot in the narratives to which these fairy tale characters belong is precipitated by family disruption. Jack belongs to a single parent family in dire financial straits, Cinderella is an unloved orphan, and Snow White is the victim of a wealthy but dysfunctional blended family. Hansel and Gretel are abandoned by their parents and it would seem that Goldilocks finds comforts in the three bear’s house that she doesn’t enjoy at home. Jack and Goldilocks want the fruit cake in the basket Browne’s protagonist carries, which it transpires is a peace offering sent by the mother to the father who is at Grandma’s house. Perhaps they too desire the means to mend their families’ ills.

On the one hand, the common feature of these tales might appear to reinforce ideological constructions of the family like the three bears’ nuclear household. On the other hand, and as we have suggested, the political subtexts that typify Browne’s oeuvre frequently subvert dominant ideology. Although all of these intertexts are driven by some form of family collapse – and in *Into the Forest*, a fear of it – it is ‘what happens next’ that matters. How does each of these child characters deal with their circumstances? How does Browne’s protagonist deal with his? What is the significance of so many diverse intertexts when one might have done the job as effectively? These questions raise the issue of the agency in narrative and in life.

The opening frames of the narrative suggest that the boy has neither the knowledge nor power to be agential. With the exception of his one choice to enter the forest...
when his mother has told him to take the longer, safer route, Browne’s protagonist is merely subject to the circumstances which afflict him. Even this choice is framed as a response to parental behaviour. As the protagonist explains, it is the absence of his father that causes him to take the dangerous route: ‘But that day, for the first time, I chose the quick way. I wanted to be home in case Dad came back.’ It seems that the unhappiness linked to parental behaviour leads children into dangerous places, particularly, the dangerous territory of fairy tales. And yet, traversing these dangers is arguably resilience-building for the protagonist, despite his apparent helplessness. According to psychologists, a precondition for the knowledge, sense of control and optimism that resilience assumes is the existence of the harsh circumstances that children must survive. (LizP find citation)

In this respect, the characters in the fairy tale intertexts in *Into the Forest* do not fare equally. Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel and Cinderella are present in the text only as pictorial allusions and Browne’s protagonist does not engage in dialogue with them. This is hardly so very surprising, given that two of them are asleep, one is imprisoned in a tower and Cinderella is probably back home cleaning. Moreover, the image of Prince Charming on his steed reminds us that these fairy tale princesses are not agential in their own survival but dependent on being rescued from the circumstances of which they are victims. Jack, Goldilocks and Hansel and Gretel, on the other hand, do make choices which ultimately decide their fate for good or ill. The significance of these intertexts depends on the child reader’s knowledge of what will happen next.

Browne’s narrator does not appear conscious of this since it is left to the reader to realise that the girl with golden hair is Goldilocks. Not to be deterred from his quest, the boy appears detached in relation to the distress of these fairy tale children and this is excused, even promoted, by the narrative. This is less so the case for Hansel and Gretel, who are a good deal more powerfully emblematic of the misery caused parental abandonment and therefore of the risks children face in family breakdown. However, he makes no attempt to intervene in the traditional trajectory of any of these stories. The text implies that the various fairy tale children must reach the conclusions indicated by the tell-tale signifiers hidden the forest that surrounds them (Jack’s beanstalk and the giant’s club, the three bears, their house, and the gingerbread
cottage respectively) without suffering any changes caused by intervention. This is unlike John Scieszka’s complete upending of fairy tales in *The Stinky Cheese Man and other fairly stupid tales* (1993). But perhaps Browne’s protagonist, in choosing the path that negotiates these stories, indicates his rejection of the scenarios they signify.

It is a quest through these stories, or an interpretative navigation of them, that the protagonist must undertake to reunite his family. There is a clever metafictiveness to this strategy because while the child protagonist navigates fictive stories (fairy tales) in order to understand his real-world fears, the reader of *Into the Forest* is occupied by the same task. Browne’s text has become, in this equation, the next step outward in a spiralling pattern of intertextuality that has a potential to speak to parental separations affecting real child readers. In some respects, then, the text becomes a ‘how to’, but this manual-like status is not by any means clear-cut. On the contrary, the narrative seems to invite children to revise the stories they have been told in order to suit their circumstances, just as this protagonist re-genders the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale.

This process speaks to Ulrich Beck’s claim that in contemporary risk society individualisation means that we are obliged to construct our own reflexive biographies – by finding and inventing new certainties. Individualisation ‘is dependent on decision-making as it assumes agency, the ability to shape one’s destiny through self-determination and identification’ and, thus, the construction of a personal biographical trajectory that is ‘self- rather than socially-produced’ (Lupton 70). On the one hand, this is liberating since we are no longer as constrained by social class or gender as we were once. On the other hand, uncertainties and risks proliferate and the decline of old certainties and tradition means the path through life – including family life – is no longer clearly signposted. It is significant, therefore, that when Browne’s protagonist leaves the forest path and becomes lost, he both ‘becomes’ Little Red Riding Hood and revises the ending of the traditional tale. Gender – or the disruption of gender – is crucial to this metamorphosis.

This reversal is anticipated by a self-referential intertext. The Hansel and Gretel in *Into the Forest* are the same children as those Browne drew in his 1981 re-telling of the classic fairy tale. They wear the same clothes and are drawn in the same pose.
However, against this carefully duplicated repetition, they are notably reversed. The boy is now on the left, his sister on the right. This switch of genders is a compelling precursor to Browne’s male protagonist cross-dressing in Red Riding Hood’s cloak, albeit in the gender-neutral form of a duffle-coat. This gesture in itself poses a powerful challenge to the operations of such binary logic as those which produce gender difference. Wearing the jacket is a challenge to social norms directing gender behaviour which, as Beck would have it, is no longer possible or desirable in risk society. The resolution of the boy’s anxiety involves a symbolic acceptance of femininity into the male body. This is not depicted as transgressive; it is depicted as providing the appropriate solution to the child’s problems. In addition, this subject positioning is directly embodied by the colour scheme deployed in the text, whereby red and blue are the mother’s colours, blue and green are the father’s colours and yellow green and blue stripes are the grandma’s colours. The protagonist in most illustrations combines all these colours in his clothing but when he dons Red Riding Hood’s coat he wears only his mother’s colour-coded textual position.

It is also at this point that the boy first experiences fear, recalling his Grandma’s story about a bad wolf. He begins to feel he is being followed and the wolf does indeed lurk in the background. It would seem that in putting on the coat that he symbolically, but unconsciously, accepts its narrative trajectory. At the same time, however, in trying to outrun this fear that he becomes lost. What follows is no longer pre-determined by the narrative formula of the fairy tale, a departure already anticipated by the alteration of the gender positioning of the original. In so doing, he alters the ending of the story. He arrives at Grandma’s house and knocks on the door. The voice that answers doesn’t ‘really sound like Grandma’s voice’ and the boy is ‘terrified’. However, it is the reader whose expectations are directed by fairy tale structures, by the knowledge that the voice who answers the knock at Grandma’s house should belong to the wolf. The fact that it is Grandma’s voice after all, altered by a case of the sniffles, suggests that life is no longer determined by rigid and traditional biographical narratives. Life no longer conforms to traditional social narratives; the ending of the story is no longer fixed. Instead, it is the product of decisions and risks undertaken in negotiating one’s way through the forest of risk society.

**Conclusion needs work**
Into the Forest ends with the boy’s family happily reunited. This focus on loving family relationships is in many respects the balm for the harsh commentary proposed at the beginning of this reading, that happy families are a fairy tale. This explicit textual split between these ambivalently positive and negative representations is made most apparent by the back cover in which two trees are central. The healthy bark of one has a love-heart carved into it, while the gnarled bark of the other shows face of a wolf, muzzle raise in a howl, as the emblem of anxiety that haunts this difficult and ambiguous text.

References