Review: Subjectivity and Identity: Bakhtinian Readings of Texts for Adolescents

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In characteristically forthright terms, Robyn McCallum articulates her intention in writing Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: to 'examine the representation of dialogic conceptions of subjectivity in adolescent and children's fiction using a Bakhtinian approach to subjectivity, language and narrative' (p. 3). The measure of McCallum's success lies in the important insights which she provides into constructions of subjectivity in a substantial corpus of Australian, British and American texts for children and adolescents, and in the analytical models which she formulates, which will be of lasting usefulness to scholars working in the field of children's literature.

Ideas about subjectivity and agency are slippery ones, caught between humanist and poststructuralist formulations of the relations between individuals and the cultures in which they develop as subjects. McCallum's deployment of Bakhtinian frameworks allows her to trace representations of subjectivity in the language and narrative strategies of fictive texts, and this she does methodically and adroitly, so that in reading her discussions of many of the novels which she has selected for close analysis I found myself noticing features which had passed me by on other readings, and noting interpretations to return to following a rereading of the fiction.

A significant strength of McCallum's book is its careful elucidation of the language of Bakhtin's work on narrative and representations of subjectivity; this is a crucial contribution because Bakhtinian theory deploys a particular set of terms, some of which will be familiar to readers in other contexts but not as they are used within Bakhtinian frameworks. McCallum's definitions of terms and explanations of concepts are at their most informative when they directly inform her discussion of fiction, and this is the second main strength of the book, for her judicious textual analysis both sharpens one's reading of a range of novels and suggests strategies for examining other fictions for children and adolescents. A third strength is the coherence and thoroughness with which McCallum conducts arguments, and the careful scholarship evident in her writing.

Ideologies of Identity offers so much by way of conceptualisation and analysis that it is a pity that it presents such an unfriendly face to readers in its introductory chapter. As I read this chapter it seemed to me that its flavour was too strongly that of the introduction to a thesis, with its delimitation of topics outside its purview, its definition of key terms, its introduction to theorists and its outline of the content of the eight chapters of the book. Knowing that the book began its life as a thesis, and thinking that my reaction was coloured by this knowledge, I read the introduction again, but I found it difficult to react to it except as to the beginning of a thesis. This is partly because McCallum's writing, flexible and direct in the body of the book, seems in the introductory chapter to strain after trying to say too much, without saying quite enough. For instance, her discussion of different versions of subjectivity points out that while humanism often essentialises an individuality seen as the stable core of a person's being, anti-humanist approaches such as Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism tend to overstate the power of social and cultural forces, to the extent that the very possibility of agency may be denied. So far so good. But the sentence which concludes the paragraph dealing with this contrast reads: 'However, it has been claimed by many theorists that Bakhtin's concept of dialogism overcomes the opposition between individuals and societies, and between humanism, structuralism, Marxism and poststructuralism (Holquist, 1981 and 1983b; Polan, 1983; A. White, 1984; Lodge, 1990, p. 21)' (p. 6). What McCallum is talking about is a way of conceptualising how fiction represents relations between individuals and societies; but in this sentence it seems as though she refers to a much larger claim, in which Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is invested with an overriding capacity to overcome oppositions between conceptual and ideological systems. Of course the book does not make such a grandiose claim; my point is that here and elsewhere in the introduction McCallum's language seems unduly condensed and elliptical. In the sentence I have quoted it is not at all clear to which terms
the second 'between' refers, so that there are in addition problems of ambiguity. The style of the book's 'Conclusion', which presents ideas in far more open, expressive language, would have been better suited to the introductory chapter.

Another thesis-like feature which seemed to me to hold up the flow of argument throughout the book was what I thought to be excessive signposting of the directions taken in arguments. Often McCallum outlines how she intends to proceed in the next section of a chapter, as on page 37: 'The following section will examine the use of multivoiced narrative and intertextuality in _Goldengrove_'. There follows a heading which more or less repeats what has just been said: 'Polyphonic Discourse: Multivoiced Narrative, Intertextuality and Intersubjectivity in Jill Paton Walsh's _Goldengrove_'. It is always helpful to know how an author intends to proceed in discussion of ideas and texts, but such signposting should perhaps be done at the point where an argument moves in a particular direction; and it is never necessary to provide the same signpost twice in close succession, as is a common practice throughout the book. I would have expected Garland editors to notice the features of expression which I mention, and to work with the author in order to address what are essentially matters of expression rather than of content.

Once I passed the hurdle of the first chapter, my enjoyment of _Ideologies of Identity_ increased considerably, largely because Bakhtinian terms and concepts were explicated cogently and because McCallum's textual analysis enhances a reading both of the novels she discusses and of the Bakhtinian material itself. Thus, the discussion in Chapter Two on polyphonic narrative techniques usefully extends Bakhtinian frameworks to consider how strategies such as focalisation contribute to the dialogic nature of texts. The contrast between Walsh's _Goldengrove_ and Cormier's _The Chocolate War_ clearly demonstrates that multiple focalisation, such as Cormier deploys in this novel, need not in itself construct the dialogism of a number of voices played off one against another, but can subordinate such voices to an overriding ideological position. Another illuminating discussion in this chapter focuses on the uses of intertextual references in _Goldengrove_, tracing the different effects which occur when meanings are constructed in the notional spaces between texts.

Chapters Three and Four consider representations of subjectivity in fiction, focusing in Chapter Three on novels featuring quest narratives and in Chapter Four on narratives in which characters are caught in conditions of solipsism and alienation. In her discussion of the double, or _doppelgänger_, McCallum draws upon Lacanian theory to enhance Bakhtin's theorisation of the relation between self and other, spelling out the contrasts and similarities between Bakhtinian and Lacanian formulations. The double figure occurs in a number of novels for adolescents, including Katherine Paterson's _Jacob Have I Loved_, Penelope Farmer's _Charlotte Sometimes_ and William Mayne's _A Game of Dark_, and McCallum's careful analysis considers a variety of uses of the trope, including narratives in which the double functions as an alternative subject position; and those in which it is a substitute for an absent or lost self. Other uses of the double in narrative appear in metaphorical depictions of states of alienation such as that of Donald in _A Game of Dark_, and of transgressive forms of subjectivity, exemplified by the Emma/Magda double in Caroline Macdonald's _Speaking to Miranda_. The particular value of McCallum's treatment of the double in narratives dealing with alienation and transgression lies in her elucidation of the possibilities of Bakhtinian theory for showing how narrative represents negotiations between individual subjects and their social and cultural worlds.

McCallum's discussion of two multistranded novels, Walsh's _Unleaving_ and Alan Garner's _Red Shift_, in Chapter Five, is framed by a comparison between two strands of modernism: the pessimistic and negative view of human relations exemplified by _Red Shift_, and the more optimistic position taken by Walsh in _Unleaving_. While the differences between the texts are amply supported through McCallum's analysis of the philosophical ideas informing the texts, and the ways in which readers are positioned in the two novels, I was not altogether convinced by her characterisation of the two as modernist narratives. For one thing, although ideas about modernism are canvassed at the beginning and end of the
discussion, they do not often appear in the body of McCallum’s analysis of narrative techniques and philosophical issues. Moreover, modernism shades into the postmodern in a number of features of the texts, so that ‘typically modernist’ narrative strategies such as ‘unreliable first person narrators; extensive character focalization; indirect modes of discourse representation; and multiple narrative frames, strands and voices’ (p. 132) anticipate postmodern strategies which further destabilise the tenets of liberal humanism. This is not to say that Unleaving and Red Shift are postmodernist rather than modernist texts (they predate Jean-François Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition (1979), a major text of postmodernism); but that modernism and ‘modernist narrative strategies’ are categories not as unproblematically evident or watertight as McCallum’s representation of them might suggest.

Questions about the relation of the present to the past, and specifically about the place of history in the development of subjectivities, are imbricated within ideological formations which ascribe value to past events and practices. The three chapters in which McCallum uses Bakhtinian theory to explore how the past is represented in fiction for adolescents are, to me, the most successful section of Ideologies of Identity, and represent a significant advance in children’s literature scholarship. It is difficult to choose from the array of approaches and models deployed in these chapters, and I will make mention of just two: McCallum’s discussion of the chronotope in historical fiction in Chapter Six; and her treatment of dialogism and monologism in historiographic metafiction, in Chapter Eight.

Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope is seldom utilised in discussions of children’s literature, so that McCallum’s description of the idea and its application to textual analysis constitutes a valuable model. The term ‘chronotope’ means ‘time-space’, and refers to the specific formal combinations of time and place (or “chronotopes”) which structure a novel’ (p. 184). McCallum distinguishes the chronotope from the archetypal plot types of structuralism, emphasising its combination of the narratological and the ideological, and the function which it performs in narratives, which is to provide structure and allow for the construction of characters. To illustrate the workings of the chronotope in narrative, she considers the image of the ‘driftway’ in Penelope Lively’s novel The Driftway, identifying its four main functions: (1) it thematically interconnects the narrative strands; (2) it is a metaphor for historical and narrative processes; (3) it implies a dialogical relation between the past and the present, and (4) it is a metaphor for a child’s development out of solipsism’ (p. 189). In showing how intersections of time and space construct narratological and ideological significances, McCallum both enlarges on the concept of the chronotope and traces its analytical functions, so providing a scaffolding which invites readers to consider its possibilities in relation to other texts.

McCallum’s treatment of dialogism and monologism in two historiographic metafictions, Peter Hunt’s Backtrack and Gary Crew’s Strange Objects, usefully distinguishes between the reading positions constructed by the two texts. Both novels involve mysteries and both engage in genre-mixing and frame-breaking strategies; both incorporate historical material as well as texts using the conventions of everyday forms such as diaries, letters and excerpts from newspapers. An important difference between the two lies in the extent to which the two authors position readers to interrogate not merely the veracity of the materials used in the narrative, but ideas about the possibility of knowing the past. In order to develop her comparison between the texts, McCallum conducts a perceptive and nuanced examination of the extraliterary discourses and narrative techniques deployed by Hunt and Crew, and the interpretative positions which they construct.

In her conclusion to Ideologies of Identity, McCallum says that she has often ‘found need to canvass difficult and rather complex ideas in order to find ways to define and articulate the radical diversity in adolescent fiction’ (p. 260). I do not believe that the Bakhtinian and other concepts explored in the book are in themselves difficult, since I agree with Peter Barry when he says that ‘there are very few inherently complex ideas in existence in literary theory’, but that ‘what is difficult ... is the language of theory’ (1995, p. 7). Moreover, the extent to which
readers find discussions of concepts difficult to understand depends largely on the knowledge which they bring to a text, so that what may be difficult to one person may be quite straightforward to another. Readers encountering claims of 'difficulty' in critical works are sometimes positioned as admiring observers of an author's cleverness in dealing with such difficult ideas, a move which increases the distance between implied author and implied readers and creates the impression that any failure to understand an argument must surely be the fault of readers and not the writing. For just as readers of narrative 'infer from the text a narrator, a voice which speaks' (Culler 1997, p. 88), so readers of critical writing infer from the text a voice which persuades or challenges or intervenes through the argument which it conducts.

Finally, I make a similar observation to one which I made when I reviewed Stephens and McCallum's Retelling Stories, Framing Culture for Papers, concerning the cost of Ideologies of Identity, which like the earlier text is produced by Garland, under the general editorship of Jack Zipes. My review copy of Ideologies of Identity was priced at $151.80 (Australian), which places the book out of reach for most students, and even for institutional libraries, which are increasingly reluctant to purchase expensive texts unless they are to be used by large numbers of students. It is unfortunate that a book which offers much to researchers in children's literature is available only in an expensive, hard-cover edition.

REFERENCES