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Papers

Explorations into Children's Literature

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The cover illustration is by an unknown illustrator for *Jancy Wins Through* by Arne Bracken, Jons Productions, Sydney, 1947.

EDITORIAL

In this special issue, we look both at how schools and schooling are represented in literature for young people, and at questions relating to how they are read and taught. The papers bring together perspectives and priorities drawn from two divergent fields, literary theory and education, with teachers positioned in the middle, between reader and text, between the child and the book.

While literary theory and the worlds of education are sometimes presented as antithetical, as the essays in this issue show, both fields have much in common in their concern to develop critical understandings, and to explore the workings of ideology and the ways texts are constructed and read. The essays in this issue explore representations of school and schooling in past and present times, the discourses embedded in them, and the figure of the teacher and the student. They canvass issues that are at the forefront of much current thinking in education - questions of masculinity, of gender and ethnicity, of social and cultural identity, and the ways such matters shape and impact upon young people's experience of their own identity and work in school. They explore the importance of space; of the school as locale for the workings out of constructions of self and the mediation of relationships and values. They discuss classic and contemporary texts, novels and picture books, transient and enduring publications. They consider what sense might be made of the representations of teachers and schools, young people and the classroom, knowledge and authority, social structures and individual agency.

Kerry Mallan explores the nexus between location and identity in her paper 'No place like... Home and school as contested spaces in *Little Soldier* and *Idiot Pride*'. For the young men (and women) who are the main protagonists in these novels, school and peer relations, the physical space and geography of the school and its institutional structure and ideologies are seen as demarcating the limits of possibility as well as contributing to the production of subjectivity. For Kamida, in *Little Soldier*, the superficial universalism he is forced to endure, and the bland and anglocentric culture of the school work as an alienating regime. To survive, he learns to disassociate his memories and identity as a Lasai from the world of school, to preserve his sense of cultural belonging and of agency. *Idiot Pride*, by contrast, deals with a group of boys going to school in a culture they've grown up in. Like a number of papers later in the issue, Mallan's discussion foregrounds issues of class, ethnicity, and hegemonic masculinity, and the ways in which 'the spatial parameters of neighbourhood, gang membership, ethnic and class allegiances, and familial relationships are variously resisted, contested and confirmed within gendered and other discursive limitations'.

Constructions of masculinity are at the heart of Carol Naylor's paper 'Passion and Power: Edwardian Censorship and E.F. Benson's Homoerotic

Public School Novel *David Blaize* (1917)'. Through a delicate analysis of the homoerotic friendship with which the book is concerned, and the ways this is represented and commented upon, she explores the ways the novel works to resist and subvert rigid delineations and versions of 'manliness' current at the time of writing. In doing so, she locates her discussion within the framework of contemporary (twenty first century) anxieties about masculinity and schooling, as well as the early twentieth century world out of which the novel arose. Her paper offers a thought provoking extension of this very present and pressing issue. It suggests, reassuringly, that a more diverse and subtly nuanced range of narratives on ways of being a male/school boy have been available to readers over time than is often claimed, and that the negotiation of roles and identities in schools has been an important focus for young readers for many years.

The next three papers deal more directly with representations of the school: with classrooms, teachers and curriculum, and the vision of education embedded in them. The authors build strong links between their own professional roles in education and their topics, foregrounding the pedagogical implications of their analyses. Diane Bushner's paper, 'The image of schools and fiction in recent American fiction for children and preadolescents' arises from her concern that student teachers in her classes should be aware of models presented in literature, and of the ways teachers are represented in the books their future pupils read. As such, she explores images of the teacher in a range of popular novels and picture books, including books not often addressed in discussions of 'quality literature'. She groups schools according to type: Kindergarten to five year old, Primary or Elementary schools, teachers in the Middle school and teachers in Rural Schools. Her paper is distinctive in its inclusion of books for the primary school, including picture books and the depiction of teachers as animals. She evaluates these 'literary' accounts of teachers' work, of pedagogy and classroom practice against her own experience, and against educational writing in the area.

Cheryl McMillan continues the debate about questions of class and gender raised by other papers in the issue. She takes a number of popular novels for young and young

adult readers, as well as a picture book, *Captain Abdul's Pirate School*, to examine how such issues are represented, and the implications of these narratives and strategies for readers. She focuses particularly on questions of agency, both within the narrative and in relation to the positioning of readers. While traditional versions of school narratives persist, a number of more recent texts recast and resist conservative patterns of authority and power, and offer a greater range of possibilities. In their emphasis on agency and diversity in gender identity, such texts, she argues, with their promotion of critical and reflective self consciousness, 'echo ... educationalists' current emphasis on the school's potential for change and contestation and on human agency within the structures and discourses of the school environment.

Like McMillan, Elizabeth Braithwaite draws on a number of school stories well known to students and teachers, in this instance set in the future. Futuristic stories of adolescence and schooling are widespread amongst set texts and wider reading programs in many schools, offering teachers and students the chance to explore extrapolations of current policies, trends and ideologies and to reflect upon them in salutary ways. In such a forum, attention to the selective and constructed nature of narrative is particularly important in the development of critical perspectives, so that the 'lessons learned' cut many ways. Braithwaite points to the close relationship between schooling and socialisation, and the ways the novels she discusses represent formal schooling, knowledge and individual responsibility.

In the last paper, Helen Nixon and Barbara Comber turn not to literature but to reviewing, and the ways reviews might be used. Nixon and Comber edit the 'Books for Adolescents' column in the International Reading Association's *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (JAAL). Well known for their work in critical literacy, popular culture and new technology, Nixon and Comber write out of a professional context where, as they say, their concern is to 'think about the serious business of literacy education rather than the pleasure (or otherwise) of children's literature'. In their paper they describe the ways in which they used the column in innovative and expansive ways to become a pedagogical site. The column

became a forum for young people and student teachers, amongst others, to contribute actively. More than this, it became a space for teachers and students to work together to examine and reflect upon the views of texts proposed by the contemporary work in literacy. Nixon and Comber demonstrate, through their selections of reviewers, texts and 'content', that 'literacies are culturally and socially situated practices, that texts can be read in a multiplicity of ways, and that texts for adolescents and young adults are now often produced in many media, modes and interconnected webs beyond the pages of books'. Their paper describes a fascinating reworking of the genre, reflecting the changing nature of young people's textual worlds, and suggesting ways young people might be empowered to develop critical and reflective understandings of the politics of texts and literacy.

Young people are surrounded by a world of texts on every side, perhaps more than ever before, but their textual worlds are not necessarily predominantly of a literary or even print-based kind. Like other forms of textual practice, reading is never neutral nor merely passive, but has real effects for readers. Running through all the papers in this issue is an awareness of the power of representations, and of intimate links between reading, texts and subjectivity, with the web of moral agendas surrounding childhood brought into sharp focus in stories of school and schooling such as those considered here. Critically reading and reflecting upon the representations

of teachers and students, power and authority, agency and identity, and the school as the site for working out much of the business of identity provides important insights into the shaping power of language and to what's at stake in the narratives and models that are the stuff and substance of school stories over time.

Catherine Beavis
Barbara Kamler

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