JOHN STEPHENS:
Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction
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Ambitious in its scope is this study, the fourth in Longman's new Language in Life Series, which fulfils admirably the series' life-giving concept: that of interdisciplinarity in terms of both subject matter and methodology. For, while shedding a good deal of light on children's fiction –fiction written for children– it does a lot more in the process. In relation to children's literature as such, the author provides the reader with a wide and fascinating sampling of writing for children, especially contemporary, from several English-speaking countries, including England, Australia and the United States. He also offers a carefully illustrated typology of the range of genres the field subsumes, discusses the place of visualization and semiotics, the contemporary relevance of the defamiliarizing historicity common to many texts constructed for children, and the value of critical linguistic analysis in the understanding of textual imagery and tale. However, as the series' General Editor, Christopher N. Candlin, of Macquarie University, Sydney, mentions in his preface, the book has a relevance beyond that of simply understanding children's literary texts to the study of language in fiction more generally. This is due mainly to Stephens' view of children's fiction as having certain characteristics which make it a peculiarly fertile field for discourse analysis and which requires a new interdisciplinary methodology to do justice to its multiplicity and diversity.

Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction begins with an introduction by the author himself entitled "Examining ideology in children's fiction"; is divided into the following seven chapters: 1. Ideology, discourse and children's fiction, 2. Readers and subject positions in children's fiction, 3. Not by words alone: language, intertextuality, society, 4. Ideology, carnival and interrogative texts, 5. Primary scenes: the family picture book, 6. Contemplating otherness: ideology and historical fiction, 7. Words of power: fantasy and realism as linguistically constituted modes; and finishes with a bibliography and index. A feature of the general organization is the "Taking it further" section in each chapter, designed to stimulate both seminar discussion and personal research.

In the introduction the author reaffirms the premise held from a number of social and critical perspectives that language as a system of signification –discourse– is "endemically and pervasively imbued with ideology" (Barthes 1972, Larrain 1978 and Fairclough 1989) and then delimits his discourse concern to the specific field of narrative fiction produced for children from infancy to early adolescence or the eighth year of schooling. He argues convincingly for the need for more attention to be given to this discourse. Firstly, he says, because writing for children is usually purposive, it is more consciously designed to inculcate certain values either by perpetuating or resisting the socially dominant ones. Secondly, whether the ideology is overt, where writers agree or disagree with significant groups in society such as government, boards of education, ecology-orientated organizations, women's groups and so on, or whether it consists in less obvious social and ethical positions, where the relationship between the individual and society is represented, it is important for anyone concerned with children's fiction to understand the processes and ends of the construction of ideology in these narratives. The reason for this is the favoring of the effacement of a reader's subjectivity in the reading process by many writers, critics, etc. Behind most recent discussion of children's fiction, explains Stephens, lies Iser's observation that literature constructs a unique relationship between an observer and an object and that readers are situated inside a literary text; the subject (the reader) is located inside the object (the narrative) it has to apprehend (1978). This view confirms the common assumption that a reader's subjectivity is

effaced in the reading process. Citing Protherough's five-fold division of children's descriptions of what they do when they read (1983), Stephens points out that all the "modes" involve total or near-total effacing of reader subjectivity, and although the fifth, "detached evaluation", involves a more critical stance, it is viewed by Protherough with some suspicion as a "form of behaviour learned in school". If we consider the ideology of texts to be important then education systems in the English-speaking world often inculcate a defective model of readings, asserts Stephens. Part of the problem hinges on the preference for *verisimilitude*, where language which invokes "the real world" is considered superior to that which does not. While the purpose may be to orientate children towards "the real world", the effect is to imply a one-to-one relationship between objects and their representation and to obscure the processes of textual production of meaning: representation becomes equated with "truth". Secondly, and relatedly, children are encouraged to situate themselves inside the text by identifying with one of the main characters and its construction and experience of the world. A mode of reading which locates the reader only within the text, says the author, is disabling and leaves readers susceptible to gross forms of intellectual manipulation. Nor is the problem simply one of schooling, he adds, since the majority of writers have such a reading process in mind, and picture books and anthropomorphic animal stories display the same tendency.

He makes the case that with one or two pioneering exceptions, there has been little influential application of pragmatics to the critical understanding of literary texts, and hardly any of the results in conversational structure has been directed to this field. On the other hand, contemporary sociolinguistic attention to the relationships of language to social and personal power, in the sense of the critical explanation of unequal encounters, has had little resonance in literary critical discussion. He also laments the fact that while there are substantial linguistic and narrative studies of stories produced *by* children, there is an absence of equivalent studies of fiction produced *for* them. His aim is to fill in the gaps by combining the insights of linguistics and narrative theory in the examination of ideology of the text and subjectivity in children's fiction. The study of language, he maintains, is central to this interdisciplinary methodology, since it is through language that the subject and the world are represented in literature, and through language that literature seeks to define the relationships between child and culture.

What follows in the seven main chapters is the discussion, coordination and application of a wealth of concepts from significant research, especially of the last two decades, concerning children's literature, social theory, semiotics, literary generic issues, sociolinguistics, narratology, and so on. The author adopts an ecclectic approach in serving himself to what he considers the most useful and acceptable findings, and occasionally offers his own theory, where necessary, in the form of personal perspectives or taxonomies. A simple example of the latter occurs in Chapter 1, in the section on "Point of view", which he claims is the most important aspect of fiction to be understood by children. By discussing it under the two broad headings of (1) *Perceptual* point of view and (2) *Conceptual* point of view, he conflates, whether intentionally or not, the ideas of Uspensky, Friedman, Mackenzie and other narratologists, with the first category being concerned with the vital issue of "Who sees?" and often merging into the second, where attitudes are involved and which compromises all intratextual acts of interpretation. What the reader does not find, anywhere in the book, however, is a compact presentation of Stephens' new methodology. The foundations are laid in the first chapter and from then on each chapter deals with particular aspects of the representation of ideology and subjectivity. To summarize as briefly as possible:

Chapter 1, "Ideology, discourse and narrative fiction", lays the ground for the examination of ideology by expounding a theory of narrative. As a text may overtly advocate one ideology while implicitly inscribing one or more other ideologies, the interpretation of texts needs to take into account the following factors: The narrative *discourse* must be read simultaneously as a linguistic and a narratological process. This includes reference to important discoursal components such as mode, point of view, narrating voice and order of events. It also includes a compulsion to read narrative discourse both for its *story* and *significance;* ideology operates at both levels. Significance is constructed by the application of both top-down and bottom-up reading processes, some of which readers bring to a text, and

some of which the structures of the text demand. Narrative structure, and especially closure, is an ideologically powerful component of texts, since aesthetic completeness and the sense of an appropriate story ending spill over into the affirmations of the discourse's thematic conclusions. But an open ending can still be ideologically powerful by evoking particular values and assumptions by its very evasion of them. Finally, narrative discourse implicitly offers its readers a range of possible subject positions: aligned with narrators and/or focalizers; in opposition to unreliable or unlikeable characters; and so on.

The nature of these subject positions is the concern of Chapter 2, "Readers and subject positions in children's fiction", which examines strategies by which readers may be prevented from adopting a singular subject position. The relationship between a reader (as subject) and a narrative fiction (as object) mirrors other forms of subject/sociality interactions, so that the creation of characters as intersubjective constructs functions as a model for the construction of reader subjectivity. The ideological impact of a text on its readers varies according to the possible interpretative subject positions; the *subject* can signify not only the role of one who acts, but also one who is *subjected* to the authority of the text. The interaction of discourse types draws attention to narrative processes, so that subject positions may be evaluated. The meaning of a text may also be constituted as a dialectic between textual discourse and a reader's pre-existing subjectivity. The concept of focalization is vital to the analysis of subjectivity and ideology. An interesting section in this chapter is that dealing with "Multiculturalism and subjectivity in books for young readers", where programmes, since the 1960's in Britain and the USA and since the 1970's in Australia, for the production of books for minority groups are discussed. Here the principal aim in constructing a variety of subject positions for readers is to contribute towards a positive self-concept for children from minority groups and to the social and personal development of *all* children by effacing notions of racial, class or gender superiority. A means to this in which focalization is important, is to situate books entirely within the culture of a particular social group representing its experience of the world and its own perception of that experience –in other words its own subjectivity, thus avoiding focalizing them through the perspective of a majority culture and the tendency to emphasize the exceptional, the exotic or the stereotypical. The example chosen by the author as exemplifying these objectives is a story by Patricia C. McKissack, *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (1988), set in the American South at the beginning of the century. Contrary to custom, narrative shifts do not coincide with code-switching between Black and Standard English; that is, Standard English is not restricted to narration any more than Black English is restricted to conversation.

Chapter 3 examines the relationship between intertextuality and ideology. Meaning is produced by the interconnections of discourse and society, an observation of great importance to children's fiction, which is an amalgam of other discourses, including broadly defined cultural discourse, such as folktale, romance and mythology.

A special kind of intertextual mode, carnivalesque interrogative, is studied in Chapter 4. Drawing on Bakhtinian theory, its basic premise is that the socially desirable and undesirable are cultural and linguistic constructs and such texts temporarily or radically evade, invert or transgress ideologies and structures of authority. By denying simple empathy with characters or situations, and by emphasizing signifying processes, such narratives situate readers outside the texts as separate subjects.

Chapter 5 deals with the importance of the representation of power relationships in the conversational exchanges in picture books in the socialization of children into conventional roles; Chapter 6, with the ideological motivations of historical fiction, especially in the impulse to use the past to inculcate moral, humanistic values, and to assert that human nature is stable and unchanging. Finally, Chapter 7 explains the distinction between fantasy and realism (perhaps the most important generic distinction in children's fiction) as a difference between linguistically constituted modes: fantasy is essentially a metaphoric mode and realism a metonymic mode. The two discourses are concerned with the theme of language and power, but encode it in different ways: realism through conversational encounters and allusions to social practice, and fantasy through a mythic representation of transcendent meaning. A

fantastic fiction by Diana Wynne Jones and a realistic fiction by Lois Lowry are examined in detail.

The book, as well as supplying a lot of useful detail along the way, such as Birch's (1989) and Fairclough's (1989) updating of the language/parole dichotomy (Chapter 1) and the list of the types of relations between the focussed text and its intertexts, (Chapter 3) for example, is an eloquent demonstration of the need for combining linguistic and literary insights with cognitive top-down and bottom-up decoding processes in the analysis of narrative fiction. It also reveals the amount and sophistication of writing for children being produced in the English-speaking world with both unplanned and calculated ideological implications. Although most readers would probably be grateful for a final formulation of the author's new methodology, the perceptive analyses of so many stories demonstrate implicitly that a serious attempt has been made to "fill in the gap", as Stephens proposes in his introduction: viz. "to examine fiction written for children by bringing together into one methodology the elements of narrative theory, critical linguistics, and a concern with ideology and subjectivity" through the examination of "narrative fictions of various kinds and genres produced for children up to about their eighth year of schooling."

As far as the author's own theoretical position is concerned, his delight in Bakhtinian concepts of the "dialogic" mode, of polyphonic discourse and the carnivalesque; his assertion for the need to replace structuralism with a new linguistic paradigm; his acceptance of the existence of the subject (in dialectical relation with society); his conviction that an individual core of being mediates the subject's experience of sociality, and the importance of closure for meaning, place Stephens in the middle of the post-structuralist stream.

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