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Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book

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Abstract

While children's metafiction shares some of the preoccupations identified by the orists of adult metafiction, it also reveals a specific set of authorial assumptions about child-adult as well as child-book relationships. This article examines that subset of metafiction sometimes termed "intrusion fantasies," namely fantasies containing characters who engage with others designated within the text as "fictional." In their exploration of reader-text interaction as the warp and woof of the marvelous, authors such as Geraldine McCaughrean, James Reeves, Chris Van Allsburg, David Wiesner, Cornelia Funke, and others contemplate the psychology of reading while simultaneously functioning to define what reading should be.

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Writing in 1970, William Gass christened self-reflexive texts, or texts about text, "metafiction" (Waugh 2), a term that theorists have employed in a variety of ways. Broad definitions of metafiction encompass *Hamlet's* references to acting and *Northanger Abbey's* references to Catherine's novel writing, for instance, while other definitions insist on a more emphatic recognition on the narrator's part of the fact that the world of the text is a fictional construct. A particularly influential iteration is Patricia Waugh's, which considers metafiction that form of

fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Following Waugh, various theorists have proposed that the aim of the more openly self-conscious examples of adult metafiction is to "[expose] the conventions of realism" in order "to show that the mechanics of fiction construction are similar, if not identical, to reality construction" (Hembree 3). Or, according to Victoria Orłowski, metafiction aims to "prove that no singular truths or meanings exist. . . . [and] to transform 'reality' into a highly suspect concept" (3). In Waugh's words, metafiction "converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism" (11). Adult metafiction, then, is typically viewed as both post-modern and didactic, inasmuch as it seeks to engage its reader with particular philosophical and literary-critical questions.

Claudia Nelson is a professor of English and director of Women's Studies at Texas A&M University and a former associate editor of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. Her *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850-1929* won the Children's Literature Association's award for the best scholarly book of 2003 in the field of children's studies.

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