



Metafictional Play in Children's Fiction

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What we need is not great works, but playful ones....A Story is a game someone has played so you can play it too. (Suknick 1960, pp.56-57).

Notions of play in metafictional texts apply both to the role-playing activity of writing and the different roles created for the reader. Toys, cartoons, comic books, TV shows, video games, movies and role-playing games such as 'Dungeons and Dragons' are the most obvious models of imaginative play and storytelling with which children will be familiar, but many metafictional children's texts also draw on several kinds of playful textual strategies: the game as a text or fiction, utilising the game structure or rules of an actual game; characters represented as players in a game; the physical book as a game; and the text as a game — that is, books or texts which cannot be fully recuperated without reader participation or interaction.

Before discussing these categories of textual play, I'll first expand two crucial terms: 'metafiction' and 'play'. Metafiction is generally associated with terms such as 'reflexive' or 'self-reflexive', 'self-conscious', 'auto referential', 'narcissistic', 'introverted' or 'postmodern fiction'. The term 'metafiction' itself dates back about a quarter of a century and as Wenche Ommundsen argues, *if it is a genre, (and even that is debated, many taking the position that metafiction is a tendency within a novel) it is a genre in the making* (Ommundsen 1989, p.264). The point of consensus among theorists is that 'metafiction' is a fiction about fiction — that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity. It is also a fiction preoccupied with problematising the mimetic illusion and laying bare the construction of fictional reality.

Ommundsen identifies 'three different ways of accounting for the phenomenon of fictional reflexivity' (Ommundsen 1990, p.171). One is to declare metafiction a genre apart, an anti-mimetic form concerned with the process of fiction writing and seeking to destroy the fictional illusion. The second approach declares that all fiction, including nineteenth century realism, is fundamentally self-reflexive. This argument can be extended to incorporate the position that all fiction carries within itself the potential

for a metafictional reading. The third position locates metafiction firmly in the eyes of the beholder; a metafictional reader will find textual signals 'functioning as statements about the artefact in which they figure' (Ommundsen 1990, p.172), so that metafiction is seen as the product of a certain practice of reading, a particular kind of attention brought to bear on the fiction text. This position argues against the concept of metafiction as a separate genre of writing.

Some texts, such as Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, are so overtly metafictional that they set themselves apart from realistic fiction; but apart from examples such as these, the borderline between metafiction and non-metafiction is difficult to identify. If establishing boundaries of covert or overt metafictional territory is problematic for theorists, the question is: How does the reader 'recognise a metafiction when she sees one'? The answer to this question would require a discussion of its own, but it is particularly relevant when the discussion of metafiction is extended to children's fiction. A question that frequently arises is whether metafiction is an appropriate literary form for children's books; for example, Geoff Moss asks, 'Do metafictional texts have any place in children's literature ... [or] are metafictional texts for adults only?' (Moss 1990, p.50).

Derived from a long humanist tradition which has been challenged only recently, the dominant model of children's stories has produced stable, knowable, readable texts which set out comfortably to seduce the child reader. They generally deploy features such as chronological sequence; well-made plot; authoritative omniscient author/narrator; and the primary narrative modes of first person narration by the main character, which includes the commonly used diary format; and third person narration of a series of events focalised by the central character. Children's books also have a strong ideological function and, historically, exert social control, functioning as part of an educational apparatus — a means of teaching and influencing children.

Children are inexperienced readers. That is not to say that they cannot read the words or understand them, but that they are inexperienced in decoding texts. Accordingly,

the forms and language of metafiction in children's books are not normally so far removed from realism as to be entirely beyond young readers' knowledge of narrative or modes of communication. So children's metafictional works incline towards texts which, on Waugh's 'sliding scale of metafictional practices', implicitly invoke some 'context of the everyday world' rather than emulating those radically indeterminate texts in which the only 'frame of which the reader is certain is the front and back covers of the book he or she is holding' (Waugh 1984, p. 115). Metafiction for children functions by preserving a balance between the innovatory and the familiar, so that the reader can make predictions and construct coherence.

An author who wishes to challenge or even abandon mimesis in books for children, who wishes to foreground the fictional illusion as illusion, must ask how fiction can be created which will still engage and satisfy the reader. Brian Stonehill argues that the answer to this is to be found in the *ludic* theory of art — the conception of art as a game or form of play (Stonehill 1988, p. 12).¹ Many self-conscious novels are concerned with, or have been compared with, game playing, some well known examples being Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association Inc. J. Henry Waugh Prop.*, based on a tabletop baseball game; Fiona Moorhead's *Still Murder*, shaped by the form of a jigsaw puzzle; and Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Defence*, which is centred around the game of chess. Add to such adult works, those most playful of stories for children, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, which foreground chess and card games.

Playful fiction can be extended beyond the use of the 'actualised game model' or fiction built around the idea or rules of an actual game, to include metafictional devices such as puzzle-solving (including the detective novel); multiple narrative endings; playful, 'lying' or unreliable characters and narrators; linguistic play; playing with the book as an object, and playing with or 'reworking' genre conventions and established literary codes by means of parody and intertextuality to discover the new possibilities of the literary game.

The broadest conception of 'play' and 'game' is that seen as synonymous with the concept of reader involvement,

the textual means by which the metafictional reader is provoked into an awareness of the role she plays in activating the text: 'By theorising and problematising the reader's function, metafiction produces readers at once aware of their participation in the fictional game ...' (Ommundsen 1993, p. 77). The reader has increasingly become the focus of much postmodern and metafictional discourse, not just as a receiver of the text but as a producer; Barthes argues that discursive authority has shifted from the originating author to the reader or textual Scriptor who exists only in the time of the text and its reading (Barthes 1977, p. 145).

It is important to emphasise that this paper is concerned with interrogative or metafictional play rather than works which may be simply playful or which have children's play as a central theme. The books selected for this study are works which self-reflexively make the reader aware of the interplay between reality and illusion.

The game as a text

Power and Glory, by Emily Rodda and Geoff Kelly, is a picture book which foregrounds the computer game and interrogates the boundaries of fantasy and reality. In another time and space is the solipsistic world of the computer game — a world of hyper-reality; an independent, free standing world of its own, providing a semi-permanent or even permanent escape from consensus reality: 'The player loses him or herself in a fantasy world and actually becomes the role being played (a favourite metafictional theme)' (Waugh 1980, p. 41). In *Power and Glory*, the game is depicted as a miniature escape fantasy, a world-within-a-world in competition with the primary world of the text.

Because of the high level of participation and interaction required by the player, the computer game, like a 'Choose your own adventure' narrative, is constantly being 'written'; *Power and Glory* depicts the 'I' of the story as lost in his role as a player and a co-creator. He has completely given himself over to the illusion of the game and, by his participation in the game, to the act of writing in a non-literary context — he has become a maker of fiction. The characters of the game do not exist as independent characters; they are generated by the narrator,

produced by his interaction with the game which becomes an activity enclave into which he can escape. This projection of himself into the imaginary world of the game begins to shape his perception of his frame world to the extent that any return to 'reality' is encumbered by the signifiers of the game, such as 'THE WITCH' and 'THE GOBLIN', so that the signifiers begin to apply to signifieds beyond the game, and the familiar realm of his family becomes replaced and dislocated – 'a mirror image, a paraxial realm, on the edge of reality' (Jackson 1981, p.109). Representation begins to turn to reality, and defamiliarises the 'real' world. In other words, reality begins to copy art; because the game breaks the boundaries of the frame, the 'real' becomes a notion which is under constant interrogation. And the capacity of the world of the game to take over the 'real' world implies, as Waugh comments, that 'human beings can only ever achieve a metaphor for reality, another layer of 'interpretation' (Waugh 1984, p.15).

The use of rebus within the text is in itself reflexive. Rebus demands a special type of attention: it breaks up the page, undercutting its transparency and ease, and it requires the reader to make sense out of apparent nonsense. A rebus is a mixed form of coding which changes from the verbal to the visual, often mid-sentence, and has all the playful elements of a puzzle: 'The fracture lines between letters and images offer the child the pleasure of juggling back and forth from one code to another....[It] is especially telling because it underscores the puzzling aspect of the reader's encounter with a gap between one code and another' (Higonnet 1987, p.40). In *Power and Glory*, the visual rebus does not replace the verbal; the two are juxtaposed as competing semiotic systems, so that the reader can 'read' either or both and must constantly cross-check two forms of signification.

The computer screen is a metaphorical mirror, a frequently used motif or self-reflexive image in metafiction. The computer/mirror in *Power and Glory* which allows the narrator through the looking glass into another time and space does not allow the reader through. The reader is positioned as an observer who witnesses both the construction and the deconstruction of a pseudo-reality, since as Bersani explains,

By presenting images of the self in another space (both familiar and unfamiliar), the mirror provides versions of self transformed into another ... It employs distance and difference to suggest the instability of the 'real' on this side of the looking glass.
(in Jackson 1981, p.87)

In *Beyond the Labyrinth*, Gillian Rubinstein appropriates a game motif, the 'Dungeons and Dragons' role play. She has also deliberately used a metafictional technique that ironically parodies 'Choose your own adventure' stories, and self-reflexively comments on the fatalistic outlook which sees Brenton randomly resolving life decisions through the throw of a dice. Rubinstein is well aware that children understand the shared terminology of fantasy and the rules or codes of these popular game and fiction conventions. This understanding gives them greater access to the rich diversity of an ambivalent text which can be read at many levels.

Rubinstein points out that the labyrinth of the title echoes the structure of a book.² The text does not contain a spatial labyrinth but a metaphysical labyrinth in which the basic story ramifies into many other stories offering a range of choices and directions for the reader to take. Rubinstein uses the labyrinth with irony by setting it against the enigmatic message of the anonymous graffiti artist, 'DEAD END', 'DEADEN', 'DEADN'. When Brenton asks what the graffiti means, the creator answers 'Mean? I don't know if I can explain what they mean. I just stand there, facing an empty space, and the words come to me. They feel right, so I put them into space. They can mean whatever you want them to mean' (p.166). The game book that Brenton is reading is called *Labyrinth of Dead Ends*; while Borges sees the labyrinth as a model for infinite possibilities, Brenton paradoxically sees it as a dead end, as though 'he is playing out a fantasy game in which all the rules have been written and the moves pre-ordained – a game which is now approaching its climax and its end' (p.152).

One of the most powerful conventions of story is narrative closure. The sense of ending, however, can easily be disturbed; we expect some sort of resolution in a story but if that resolution is deferred or made inaccessible to the

reader, this can result in dislocation and disorientation. Gillian Rubinstein exploits this expectation through the double ending of *Beyond the Labyrinth*. How does a reader respond to narrative rupture in which closure is denied or subverted? Many readers will assume they have misread and reread the text for verbal clues they may have missed. Or they may feel that they have not misread and attempt to give meaning to the apparently incomplete narrative. They will extrapolate, try to fill gaps; in fact, they will become co-creators in their desire to make meaning. Rubinstein maintains the game play theme by giving the reader the power to change the story by the role of a dice: 'The one who speaks into the poised silence is Cal. "Throw the dice!" Her eyes are bright and feverish, her voice harsh and urgent. She is not speaking to Brenton and Victoria. She is speaking to *you*, the Reader. You who have been the observer so far. You who have been watching the whole story. Throw the dice!' (p.143). And the reader, having to choose an ending, becomes a player in the game.

The Westing Game, by Ellen Raskin, is an example of a plot which has parodically appropriated the framework or construct of a popular fiction genre, the detective novel. It rewrites the detective genre reflexively, explicitly relating the acts of reading and investigation, with the detective often functioning 'as the model for the reader's activity' (Ommundsen 1993, p.10). Waugh comments that, 'In metafiction, ... writers experiment more commonly with the formulaic motifs of popular fiction ... science fiction, ghost stories, westerns, detective stories, popular romance' (Waugh 1984, p.81), partly because genre fiction foregrounds its conventions and is therefore itself self-referential. This kind of metafictional reworking of a popular genre must be accompanied by a thorough reworking of its constitutive conventions. Detective fiction operates most commonly as the literature of concealment, but also paradoxically contains mechanical certainty and hyper-logic represented by the detective who is the agent of order and meaning. It is a construct in which the readers are often left to fill gaps and to sort through both over-determined and under-determined 'clues' which are part of the puzzle or intellectual game played within the fictional construct of the genre. The character of the detective echoes the task of interpretation undertaken by the real reader.

The Westing Game has not one detective, but sixteen. Sixteen named beneficiaries have been called together under the terms of the last will and testament of Samuel W Westing, described in his obituary as a person who believed in fair play, 'never drank, smoked or gambled. Yet he was a dedicated gamesman and a master at chess' (p.19). The beneficiaries are instructed to work in pairs to solve a puzzle, with the winning pair to inherit the Westing fortune. The puzzle itself is obscure and the words of the will ambiguous: 'my life was taken from me - by one of you!' (p.29). Each pair is given one set of clues, consisting of four single words on a piece of paper. In some cases even the word is obscure: for example, 'ON' could be 'ON' or 'NO', depending which way the paper is turned, and MT could stand for 'Mount' or 'Empty'. The reader must participate in this linguistic play, the kind of play which 'functions to disengage words from syntax, thus hindering the reconstruction of the projected world, and foregrounding the ontological difference between the stratum of worlds' (McHale 1987, p.162). By removing the word from any known context, the author has broken down the idea of a natural affinity between the signifier and signified.

This disengagement of words from syntax also forces the reader to reflect on the assemblage of the words. Is this a word list, and if so, what governed the selection of the words, and their arrangement in this particular order? The reader is confronted with a verbal collage in which the play of meanings is infinitely plural, and to try and bring meaning to the words, is tempted to make lists, to write down each 'clue' and, like the main players in the story, to rearrange, reconstruct, manipulate, order and apply learned codes and rules to try and make mimetic order out of linguistic chaos. Readers, more often than not, willingly participate in Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' in the act of reading; but 'self-depicting' fictions, by acknowledging the limitations of imitations, invite us to suspend our disbelief not only willingly, but wittingly' (Stonehill 1988, p.15).

The reader is also reflexively aware that she has been given information not available to the characters in the story. The narrator, whilst impersonal, is distinctly in control, having an authoritative voice with an implied

knowledge of completed events. But the alert reader will find the narrator's storytelling practices odd; at some point the reader ceases to be lulled into a false sense of security and begins to wonder what sources the narrator draws on for the story, uncomfortably aware that this omniscient and implied presence appears to, but cannot, share the same ontological world as the reader. On the first page, the reader is told that the letters delivered to the new tenants of Sunset Towers are signed 'Barney Northrup', and that, on the other hand, 'there was no such person as Barney Northrup' (p. 1). In what Brian Stonehill calls a 'conspiratorial mystique' (Stonehill 1998, p. 8), the reader is told that she has all the clues, whereas the characters have only selected clues. But, whilst the reader might hold all the clues, the narrator cannot be counted on to supply the answers, but only to prod the reader into making further efforts to make meaning of the clues.

Throughout *The Westing Game* the game of chess is used as an image of the text. It sustains the artifice of the game and mirrors the manipulation of the sixteen heirs/players, comparing them to chess pieces, and the carefully constructed Westing Game to the chess board on which they must play. Chess, like language, is infinitely plural but some aspects are given – sixteen pieces, eight black, eight white, and strict game rules as to how these pieces may behave or move. The heirs are temptingly aligned as black or white through references to their appearance or clothing, but these clues remain tantalisingly incomplete. Throughout the mystery, references to chess occur: 'The judge says she is a pawn and Otis Amber says he's a king, Crow's the queen' (p. 51). But the work never fully resolves the possible combinations and permutations of chess pieces and characters. The reader will be compelled to try and make meaning of this game within a game, filling in the spaces on the board as she proceeds, interpreting and ordering, but the very structured, traditional rules of chess are undermined by textual indeterminacy in much the same way that metafictional devices undermine the realism of a text. Thus the reader must construct his or her own game to fill the void, to activate the work.

Characters as players in the game

Readers have traditionally been drawn to the liberal

humanist treatment of characters as full-blooded and three dimensional, and can, like Annie in Stephen King's *Misery*, become so involved with the character that they lose sight of the fact that the character on the page is a literary construct. Metafictional authors will systematically flaunt this artifice and foreground a fictional character as an artistic creation: 'Within their fictions characters become dehumanised counters, abstractions that are manipulated with the same freedom as non-human elements of the novel like the plot, setting or symbol... to be a character is to be an assortment of words on a page' (Boyd 1983, p. 29).

Gary Crew's *Inventing Anthony West* reminds us that Anthony West exists only because he is created. The term 'invented' is used, but he is really 'reinvented', being a pastiche of 'real-life' images of young men published in magazines. The illustrations and photographs imitate the real thing, but they are not the real thing; they are merely representations, symbolising something which is absent.

The creation of Anthony West begins as a game between two teenage girls who, like Frankenstein creating his monster, decide to invent the perfect boy from various parts of other boys depicted in magazines. When the 'perfect' physical image is created, the girls realise they must give him an *identity*, and in order to create such an identity they select the symbols of a pen and an axe, and name their character Anthony West. Metafictional works such as this foreground the arbitrary control of the author in naming a character and highlight the paradox of referentiality in fiction where the naming and description of an object brings it into being. This fictional arbitrariness is continually brought to the reader's attention by the girls' disagreement over whether their creation is named Anthony – intellectual owner of the pen, or Tony – macho owner of the axe.³

The figure of Anthony West demonstrates that 'a fictional character both exists and does not exist' (Waugh 1984, p. 91). In the case of a character in a mimetic or realistic novel, a reader may 'know' the literary/fictional character and discuss him/her like a real person. The figure of Anthony West denies the reader that intimacy, since as a metafictional character he is clearly meant to lack substance, and his presence is at best nebulous and

changeable. He wavers in and out of parodic popular culture stereotypes; he is dehumanised, and finally, disappears back to the paper construct where he began:

held high above them, they waved a poster – an old, faded movie poster. Libby recognised it at once. It was Tony – or all that was left of him. Tony 'The Axeman' West, Tony the Star, still flashing his million dollar smile, still rippling his million dollar muscles ... but all on paper, on faded yellowing paper ... which was what he had become.
(p.89)

In his discussion of Robbe-Grillet, Brooks describes his works as 'impressive examples of what can be done with the leftovers of the traditional novels as with the 'ready-mades' of consumer society: the mannequins, the glossy photos, the clichés of desire:

Narrative becomes a combinatoire; a game of putting together, a kind of metonymy in which the given elements – as the given products and paradigms of culture and society – provide, as it were, the metaphoric glue ... The reader never is vouchsafed anything we would want to call a plot, in the traditional sense, but he himself is left to engage in plotting, if not towards the creation of meaning, at least in exploration of the conditions of narrative meaning.
(Brooks 1984, p.316)

Such a description could well apply to *Inventing Anthony West* and could be expanded to argue that Anthony West – collage, pastiche, invention – serves as a metonym for the pastiche-like 'invention' or construct of this fiction, with its overt and playful embracing of pop-culture, popular fiction and film (especially cult films) where codes are made and learned, and sophisticated and complex narrative techniques are experienced.

A fascinating use of metafictional character is to be found in the picture book *Bad Day at Riverbend* by Chris Van Allsburg. In this work, Van Allsburg blurs the world of the reader with that of the book. This play of ambiguities culminates on the last page, when it is discovered that the reader of the book is also a protagonist. Although inscribed,

she is silent and temporally and spatially removed from what appears to be the natural main plot, which takes as its generic model the traditional Western. This reader is also, paradoxically, a playful encoder without whom the story cannot exist. The fictional world has acquired an invisible maker and along with that, the status of an artefact.

Bad Day at Riverbend problematises the layers of 'worlds' that can be embedded in a work of fiction and explicitly lays bare the framing devices which are part of the formal, conventional organisation of novels. To begin with, there is the 'paramount world' or what is thought of as the real world, and there are the invented worlds of fiction. In some fiction, invented worlds can be found within invented worlds; Eco calls these worlds-within-worlds 'subworlds' (1979, p. 234) and Pavel calls them 'narrative domains' (1980, p.108). In these doubly fictional worlds, one possible world is said to be accessible to another by manipulating the first world's entities ... a second world is accessible if it can be conceived by the inhabitants of the first world (McHale 1987, p.35). In the case of *Bad Day at Riverbend*, the first world entities (those who 'inhabit' Riverbend) are manipulated by the character, whose playful act of creating 'textual' changes to that world with crayon causes disruption to a narrative world which has already been 'written'.

The text calls into question the gap between characters who occupy different universes. It is impossible in this work to determine which world is hierarchically superior and which is subordinate. In *Power and Glory* the characters of the fantastic universe of the game belong to a secondary world and cannot conceive the character of the fictively 'realistic' primary world, but in *Bad Day at Riverbend* the fictively 'real' world is fully conceived by the characters of the fantastic world even though they do not understand that their fictional border is being manipulated and trespassed upon by an unseen character from another possible world. Ontological boundaries are seen to be permeable and unstable when a character can migrate from one world to another and the space of the fictional world is exposed for what is – a construct – just as the characters and objects within it are, or the actions that unfold within it. Borges asks,

Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote and Hamlet a spectator in Hamlet? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters in a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious.
(Borges 1970, p.230)

It is also interesting to see the authority of the visual image in *Bad Day at Riverbend* so ambiguously subverted. For the book's visual images, rather than inviting a suspension of disbelief, in the end disrupt any possibility of a mimetic reading; the fictional worlds are so annexed to the physical space and physical elements of the book that a realistic reading becomes literally and paradoxically impossible. Further, the auto-referential image of the book on the last page as it sits closed upon the desk signals not only the virtual nature of the story which precedes it, but highlights the nature of the book-as-an-object.

The physical book as a game

Reflexive books for very young readers often require active involvement in the material substance of the book, for example through the devices of split pages, pop-ups, fold-outs, holes, lift-up flaps, and so on. One example is that of strip or 'mix and match' books, in which 'The break between strips offer points of entry for the child, who can play with the creation of her own absurdity ... [and] permits the child to act as the blind hand of chance, creating her own aleatory structures' (Higonnet 1990, p.40). In such cases, the very fabric of the book is part of the game.

Another work which requires visual, if not physical manipulation of the split page device is Macauley's *Black and White*. It is layered and multi-diegetic in such a physical way that to recoup the narrative the reader must decide first of all how to read the book. Every page is divided into four narratives which are enigmatic and apparently unrelated to each other. The reader is forced to decide on some arbitrary order of reading since simultaneous reading is nearly impossible. This may require each page to be opened and read four times. There is no unifying narrative and the reader must interpret the

shifting perspectives of various narratives, all of which offer their own constructions of reality.

Similarly, in Martin Waddell and Philippe Dupasquier's *The Great Green Mouse Disaster*, the reader must choose from 'reading' several narratives on one page as a horde of green mice create havoc in a hotel. Each page shows every room of the hotel simultaneously so that the reader has the choice of reading several narratives on one page or following the strand of one narrative from beginning to end and recommencing at the beginning with another narrative. McHale describes this procedure of improvising an order of reading as 'glossing a text'. He points out that we are forced to 'manipulate the book as a physical object, thus never losing sight of the "ontological" cut between the projected world and the material world. Such manipulations certainly serve to keep the materiality of the book in the forefront of the reader's consciousness' (McHale 1987, pp.192-3).

The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales shows just how far the form of the book-as-object can be subverted. This overt parody of traditional nursery tales is reflexive literally from cover to cover. It declares its reflexivity from the blurb on the dust jacket, which in the tradition of advertising announces, 'only \$16.00! 56 action-packed pages. 75% more than those old 32 page 'Brand X' books. New! Improved! Funny! Good! Buy Now!' On opening the book, the reader is confronted by a diatribe by the Little Red Hen, interrupted by the narrator Jack (of the beanstalk), who points out that she must not tell her story at this point, because this is only the book's endpaper. The book continues to self-consciously comment on itself as an object; its every physical aspect is interrogated, including publishing and copyright details, author and illustrator biographies, and the 'ugly' ISBN number. *The Stinky Cheese Man* plays with its readers; it upsets their expectations not only of how the story should be told but how the book should proceed in a cohesive, linear format from beginning to end. In this way, readers' expectations of an ordered creation are completely frustrated, resolution is denied, chaos rules, and as page numbers rain down on unsuspecting characters, the reader is constantly reminded that narrative is constructed and that the book is an artefact.

The text as a game

Linda Hutcheon comments that 'the most extreme example' of the contemporary 'aesthetic and theoretical interest in the interactive powers involved in the production and reception of texts' is that of 'interactive fiction' or computerized, participatory "compunovels". Here, she says, 'process is all; there is no fixed product or text, just the reader's activity as producer as well as receiver' (Hutcheon 1988, p.77). 'Choose your own adventure' books could well fit within the parameters of Hutcheon's 'interactive fiction' in that they successfully question linear, traditional narrative strategies, problematising the whole process of the reception of texts and the role of the reader as a producer of text by inviting the reader to re-run and replay a text.

In these books, the reader is typically 'the star of the story'; the narrative is written in second person, 'the most immediate of all narrative voices, a strategy which makes the choice of action seem like the reader's own ...' (Higonnet 1987, pp.42-43). In these texts, bifurcating, mutually exclusive possibilities are juxtaposed. It has been argued that fictions such as these still set themselves against a conventional framework, since readers will try hard to shape a narrative result which is meaningful compared to traditional works with which they are familiar, and because they are free to make choices only within terms of the options presented: 'The traditional reading is preserved as a foil for the act of transgression, a constraint without which the various liberties would not so much be free as meaningless' (Ommundsen 1990, p.178). On the other hand, children reading these texts are made aware of the notion that they are 'eternally written here and now' (Barthes 1997, p.145), in a way which contests the notion of the original and originating author.

Containing the same textuality disruptive elements as 'Choose your own adventure' books are those personalised books which Sharon Clarke discusses as metafiction:

The action of these texts work in the same way as Calvino's description of 'you' ... the child is conscious of not having met such figures/people, visited such places or performed such feats as those described within a personalised book, and

so therefore would realise that s/he is being moved about like a character. ... The text thereby becomes the site of a 'game' signalling this to the child/reader/listener through every encounter with personalised detail. Thus the text sheds its realistic cover and openly and continually declares itself a fiction which is relying on reader-participation.

(Clarke 1991, p.85)

These two forms of interactive books are the forerunners of the electronic 'texts' – computer story-games such as 'Power and Glory' — which contain the elements of a story in which the player must make decisions about characters, the action, the moral structure – or what Aidan Chambers calls the 'why' of the story (Chambers 1985, p.75). These are strikingly similar to the process-driven 'compunovels' which Hutcheon describes.

A number of children's books which could not be described as adhering to the 'Choose your own adventure' form nevertheless reflect a collaboration with the reader and a high level of reader participation. Strip books, as previously mentioned, are just one example, allowing readers to create absurd characters by manipulating the top half of the page with any combination on the bottom half. Books such as *Black and White* and *The Great Green Mouse Disaster* could also be described as reader participation books which require a high degree of play and interaction.

Other texts in this style are multi-choice books. Perhaps one of the best known examples for young reader is John Burningham's *Would you Rather ...* (1978). Although this work presents as one narrative, it is in fact a series of fragmented narratives, each with a multiple ending – sometimes as many as five – and there is no 'right' ending. The reader is left with a choice that relies on his or her own personal preference or on their socialisation rather than on any preconceived knowledge of the conventions of traditional texts which may lead the reader towards an ending which appears to be 'right' in literary terms. This work cannot be recuperated into a narrative structure which is controlled by preceding conventional narrative structures.

A large part of the game strategy repertoire comprises narrative gaps and ambiguities which force the reader into active rather than passive reception, and within this repertoire the most common action is re-reading to search for 'clues' to make meaning. For example, I defy anyone to read Crew and Woolman's *The Watertower* just once. One reader describes her experience with this work as following: 'With courage and optimism I read [*The Watertower*] through once, twice, thrice... then backtracked yet again' (Lamond 1994, p.15). Even more interesting is her next response: 'I recorded phenomena. I counted prongs on pitchforks, I noted odd reflections and chilling thoughts in the natives' eyes. I examined rippling water and the slant of shadows' (p.15). Despite being disturbed and unsettled by the work, this reader has been provoked into engaging herself intellectually in its co-creation; she has become a participant in a world she is forced to acknowledge as fictional.

The Watertower appears, superficially, to be a conventionally crafted picture book but the page design and layout are active tools for creating layers of information or misinformation. The physical properties of the illustrations have been so manipulated that in the course of reading, the book moves through 360 degrees, echoing the uncanny circular leitmotiv and, more broadly, suggesting cinematic influences. Readers' imaginative responses will depend on their literary and filmic points of reference, which may include American Gothic, 1950s B-grade science fiction, and *cinema noir*.

The illustrator has reflexively provided far too much visual information. By divorcing seeing from knowing, he has engaged the reader in a type of metaphysical game in which no amount of obsessive and exasperated revisiting can discover the significance of the excessive clues in this work. Recurring symbols, visual subplots, red herrings and the disconcerting juxtapositions of buildings, cars and fashion of the 1950s with modern objects such as satellite dishes and the advanced technology of the tower itself, all add to the reader's task of deciphering the story from over-determined illustrations and an under-determined text in which the resolution is endlessly deferred. *The Watertower* is 'a text of absolute epistemological uncertainty: we know that something is

happening here but we don't know what it is ... Inevitably, epistemological doubt as total as this has ontological consequences as well; in particular [the work] flickers in and out of existence, depending on which hypothesis we choose to entertain' (McHale 1987, p.18).

Metafiction poses ontological questions about the nature and existence of reality, the creation of literary universes and the nature of human artefacts. It reminds the reader of the book's identity as an artefact and of the reader's own role in realising the text. Reading and writing are considered vital functions in most modern societies and metafiction involves the reader in both – metafiction is both a process and a product which denies the reader a passive role. Barthes points out that:

reading, in the sense of consuming, is far from playing with the text. "Playing" must be understood here in all its polysemy. The reduction of reading to a consumption is clearly responsible for 'boredom ... to be bored means that one cannot produce the text, open it out, set it going. (Barthes 1977, p.163)

In conclusion, when theorising metafiction for children, it is important to remember that 'children are remarkably competent at handling all sorts of technical devices of story telling provided that the story is clearly of their culture, for them' (Sarland 1983, pp.169-70) and can quickly recognise when a code has been violated and the fictional illusion destabilised. As Brian Caswell observes,

Far from being turned into mindless sponges, the video generation is far more sophisticated in the demands it makes of its story tellers ... The post-Spielberg generation demands a style of narrative which allows for interactive reading – Not the patronising narrator who sets the moral agenda [but] multiple narrators, mixed genre, fragmented narrative, shifts in person, episodic and cinematic plot sequencing – bold experiments ... to address the sophistication and needs of young readers. (Caswell 1992, pp.7-8)

Secondly, it is important to consider what 'pre-knowledge' children bring to a text that will affect the way they make

meaning. The context in which children read or listen to stories includes their dealings with adults, their world knowledge, and their participation in the shared underground oral culture of the playground in which the child as transmitter is also the author. Any significant theory of children's literature cannot ignore the texts children hold in common, or their encounters with popular culture or their games, with their complex rules and elaborate role-play.

Notes

1. The term 'ludic' derives from Huizinga's 1938 study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, but the idea that play should be taken seriously, as a way of representing the experiences of writing and of reading, was proposed much earlier by Immanuel Kant and extended in Frederick von Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).
2. The theme of the labyrinth or maze is commonly used in metafiction. The paradigmatic text is Jorge Borges' *Garden of the Forking Paths*, in which the narrative agent is faced with a bifurcation at each point in the story. Choosing one, he is faced with another branching; choosing again, he is faced with yet another – the labyrinth (see McHale 1987, p. 106).
3. Naming is, of course, a primary act of invention. Henry, in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Inc ...*, creates a dice game of baseball, inventing the dialogue, looks, and mannerisms of his players. But names are crucial: 'Strange. But name a man and you make him what he is. Of course he can develop ... but the basic stuff is already there. In the name. Or rather: in the naming' (Coover 1968, p.46-47).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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