

New Perspectives into Children's Literature: An Interview with Peter Hunt

Zhang Shengzhen & Peter Hunt

Abstract: Peter Hunt is a pioneer of the academic study of children's literature as a literary, rather than educational, discipline at university level, and he has been instrumental in creating a global network of scholars in the field. The courses he ran at Cardiff from 1985 were the first of their kind in the UK. He has lectured on children's literature at over 150 universities, colleges and to learned societies in 23 countries, and over the past few years he has been Visiting Professor at Trinity College, Dublin, Università Ca'Foscari Venice, Newcastle University and Hollins University, Roanoke VA, USA. He has written or edited 26 books and over 500 papers, reference book entries, and reviews on the subject. His books have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Danish, Greek, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese (Brazil) and Serbian. In 1995 he was given the Distinguished Scholarship Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, and in 2003 the Brothers Grimm Award for services to children's literature, from the International Institute for Children's Literature, Osaka. His most recent books have been two for the Bodleian Library Publishing, Oxford: *The Making of The Wind in the Willows* (2018), and *The Making of Lewis Carroll's Alice* (2020). This interview covers many facets of children's literature, including the importance, its relationship with cultural norms, British children's literature, new challenges and perspectives in academia and the impact of *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (edited by Peter Hunt). Peter Hunt holds that perceptions of children's literature depend on historical and cultural context—what was and what is acceptable. As children's literature has always both mirrored and been influenced by adult literature and attitudes, it seems probable that the future of children's literature will continue in sync: reflecting and being reflected by cultural norms.

Keywords: children's literature; challenges; culture norms; childhood; crossover

Authors: **Zhang Shengzhen** is Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Beijing Language and Culture University (Beijing, China 100083). Her areas of research include children's literature, British and American literature, and comparative literature (Email: zhangshengzhen@blcu.edu.cn); **Peter Hunt**, a British scholar who is Professor Emeritus in English and Children's Literature at Cardiff University,

UK (Email: peterhunt1@hotmail.com).

标题：儿童文学研究新视野：彼得·亨特访谈

内容摘要：作为儿童文学研究的先驱，彼得·亨特是世界第一位将儿童文学设在文学系的学者，突破儿童文学被当作教育学科进行学术研究的藩篱。亨特教授创立的学科范式迄今仍发挥着引领作用。自1985年起，亨特教授在英国卡迪夫（Cardiff）大学开设了首门儿童文学课程，其后在23个国家的150多所大学和学术机构讲授儿童文学，并在都柏林圣三一学院、威尼斯大学、纽卡斯尔大学和美国霍林斯大学等担任客座教授。亨特教授撰写（主编）了26部著作，发表了500多篇学术论文，部分成果已被译成阿拉伯文、中文、丹麦文、希腊文、日文、韩文、波斯文、葡萄牙文（巴西）和塞尔维亚文等。1995年亨特教授获国际艺术奇幻协会颁发的杰出学者奖，2003年获大阪国际儿童文学研究所颁发的格林兄弟儿童文学奖。牛津大学博德利图书馆出版社出版了亨特教授新作《〈柳林风声〉的形成》（*The Making of The Wind in the Willows*, 2018）和《刘易斯·卡罗尔“爱丽丝”的创作》（*The Making of Lewis Carroll's Alice*, 2020）。本访谈覆盖了儿童文学研究的诸多领域，包括儿童文学之重要性、儿童文学与文化范式的关系、英国儿童文学学术研究领域的新挑战和新观点以及《世界儿童文学百科全书》（彼得·亨特主编）（*International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt）的学术影响等。亨特教授认为，对儿童文学的认知取决于历史和文化语境。世界各国的历史渊源和文化接受范式决定了儿童文学的产生和发展。由于儿童文学既是成人文学的镜子也是成人文学的产物，因此，未来的儿童文学极有可能继续与成人文学相向而行：既呈现特定民族的文化范式，又为文化范式所形塑和制约。

关键词：儿童文学；挑战；文化范式；童年；跨界文学

作者简介：张生珍，北京语言大学英语学院教授、博士生导师，主要研究领域为外国儿童文学、英美文学和文学翻译；彼得·亨特，英国科迪夫大学资深教授，儿童文学研究学者。本文系2019年国家社科基金重大项目“《世界儿童文学百科全书》翻译及儿童文学批评史研究”【项目编号：19ZDA297】阶段性成果。

Cultural Norms and the Importance of Children's Literature

Zhang Shengzhen (Zhang for shorter hereafter): Prof. Hunt, you are a pioneer of the academic study of children's literature as a literary, rather than educational, discipline at university level. Why and how did you promote the literary scholarship in the discipline?

Peter Hunt (Hunt for shorter hereafter): The answer to this is, at least in the

beginning, very personal. I come from a non-academic, non-literary, background, and I have always been acutely aware that whatever I studied must have some *practical* value—and that originality was to be valued above anything else. Children's literature provided the opportunity!

Having taken a first degree in English Literature—which at that time, nearly sixty years ago, was the most important (or, at least, the largest) of the humanities subjects in British universities - I wanted to pursue my literary studies in some original way. However, I found that, even then, it was difficult to find areas which had not already been studied. I had developed a taste for eighteenth-century English fiction, and accordingly spent two years researching a (still) little-known novelist, Robert Bage, for my MA degree (a 100,000-word piece of original research). When it came to selecting an area for a much longer-term project (in those days, PhDs commonly took ten years or more), my criteria were that the area must not have been researched before; that it must have some *practical* value; that I enjoyed it; and that I would be able to think for myself—after all, those were the days of the primacy of the literary canon: we were told what was good, and expected to endorse that judgement.

Children's literature fulfilled all those criteria. There were no more than a dozen books in English covering the whole of the subject area, and it was distinctly not canonical: the academic establishment positively disapproved of it. It was, as one Professor of English said to me, 'not worthy of University study.' I was therefore compelled to think for myself. As for practical value, children's literature was then primarily studied and taught in education colleges and library schools: it was a *practical* subject—its task was to bring the right books to the right children—to develop literacy and cultural literacy (or conformity). But this was not what I regarded as being of *practical* value. Indeed, it seemed to me that much of what had been written about children's books, having such a narrow aim, was without the kind of intellectual rigour that I felt the subject deserved. Even now, fifty years later, what educational or literacy experts write about children's literature, and what academics in literature and theory and cultural studies departments write about children's literature seem hardly to be speaking the same language—although I have now learned that there are different kinds of rigour, and I have great respect for my colleagues in education and literacy! My aim, across my career, has been to try to build bridges between disciplines concerned with children's literature, and to build on the best in all these fields.

It is only recently that I have realised why I was attracted to children's literature—apart from the fact that I enjoyed reading it and I did not enjoy reading

a great deal of ‘canonical’ literature. The children’s novel has a great deal in common with the early English novel, which flourished in the 18th century. In contrast to the 19th century, post-romantic novel, which was character-driven and concerned primarily with internal states of mind, the 18th century novel was action-driven and theme-driven: it dealt with externals—how characters were affected by their environment. Things were, in many ways, simple. There was little character development, the picaresque form was dominant; the books commonly used circular narrative structures, often ending in closure, or a reversion to the status quo or to fairy-tale endings. Landscapes were functional, solutions often physical; good and bad were clearly distinguished; characters were often outsiders, and were very iconoclastic and subversive. Although the genre of the novel in the 18th century quickly developed conventions, it was essentially an experimental form, often, in effect, explaining to a new reading audience how the form worked. And the majority of the books were written by women. Critically, they have been seen as inferior by post-romantic critics and as their characteristics are very similar to the popular or ephemeral novel, they have been doubly dismissed.

I am, of course, also describing children’s literature: it too was regarded, by definition, as being simplistic—childish and unsubtle; it too had a low academic status; it too was confused with ‘popular’ or ‘ephemeral’ literature, and so was not treated seriously nor properly studied—but it was still, of course, widely read.

Zhang: But why is children’s literature of special importance to you?

Hunt: It soon became clear to me that far from being simple texts for simple minds, texts for children were of huge cultural importance, and that the audience had to be taken into account in the discussion of them (something not fashionable in ‘adult’ critical circles). Even more dauntingly, to study them was a multidisciplinary activity: a critic would need to have at least some knowledge of history, psychology, art, film, music, publishing and many other things. And children’s literature is *international*.

It was also clear, from observing popular political movements of the time, that a change in the prejudice against these books was more likely to be achieved from a position of strength, rather than from an enthusiastic and well-meaning position of academic weakness - however valid the arguments. For this reason, I attempted as far as possible to publish books with mainstream publishers, and to develop courses in an English Literature department rather than in an Education department, which had lower status.

I was fortunate to be working in a university (Cardiff) that allowed us to teach

what were then seen as marginal subjects, and so I was able to establish the first undergraduate module on children's literature on a BA English degree in Britain. To begin with, for tactical reasons, I included only texts which were also recognised as members (if minor members) of the 'literary canon,' such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island*, or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, books which were old, predominantly by men, and not necessarily of any interest to children. The courses were, however, very popular, and I was able to broaden the content to include picture books and books that would not have been canonical. Equally, I was working at a time when interdisciplinary subjects were fashionable, when literary theory was undermining the idea of the canon—and when colleagues in the USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, France and elsewhere were following the same path, so I cannot claim to be any more than one fortunate pioneer.

Zhang: The definition of children's literature, seems straightforward—texts for children—but in English each of the three words can cause problems. Should our subject area include texts in the broadest sense—printed, video, audio; does 'for' the child mean for the child's education, or for the child's enjoyment; and what does 'children's' mean?

Hunt: The concept of children's literature in any culture depends almost entirely on the concept of childhood current in that culture. Different cultures at different times see childhood differently, and consequently have very different ideas about what texts for children should do—or, indeed, whether there should be any texts for children. Equally, some cultures see texts for children as educating gender identity, others as inculcating state-defined values. Very often texts for children are driven by a nostalgia for childhood and may have very little of interest for actual child readers.

The least ambiguous definition, therefore, is 'texts designed for children'—whatever that may mean at that place and time—rather than a definition that derives from the form or content of texts. Form and content are almost infinitely variable—but the most common, inescapable, and defining characteristic of texts for children (with some very rare exceptions, if any) is the power imbalance between the writers and the implied audience. Until very recently, with the development of electronic publishing, virtually no texts were produced by children for children, and consequently the form involved an inevitable manipulation of (inexperienced) child readers by (experienced) adult writers.

Zhang: This leads to another question, what is the relationship between child reader and adult writers?

Hunt: These issues have been extensively theorised in recent years, especially on the question of how far the (child) reader can read *against* the power of the (adult) writer. My own theory of ‘childist criticism’ was designed to acknowledge that, in very general terms, the way in which the inexperienced reader makes meaning of any text is likely to be very different from that of the experienced reader, and that this should at least be acknowledged when we are describing or evaluating texts for children. This was not to claim that it was possible to know what a child, or a group of children, understand from a text: merely to point out that judgements and analyses of children’s texts but adults are inevitably flawed. What is ‘obvious’ to an adult reader is *probably* rarely ‘obvious’ to a child reader.

Most recently critical ideas based on cognitive science have begun to acknowledge that because of differences in brain structure as children develop, it is not possible for either an adult writer or an adult reader to re-experience childhood. We are left only with memory, approximations, and guesses. This makes coherent criticism of texts for children very difficult, and, equally, makes any totalitarian attempts to manipulate children through their literature a very uncertain undertaking.

Zhang: How should people view the cultural norms?

Hunt: For much of the 20th century, there were, in the west, undefined but rarely questioned ‘accepted’ cultural norms about literature, as to what constituted quality; these norms were—and to a certain extent still are, subliminally—dictated by an undefined group—old, male, European, authoritarians. Certain kinds of content—such as the exploitation of other races in the Empire in British children’s books, or the virtual genocide of the native Americans and the assumption of inferiority in African Americans in American children’s books were never challenged. These assumptions, in some parts of the world, are being revised as the views of minorities, or those previously disempowered are becoming politically powerful. Also, in the English language (and in some others) the word ‘literature’ implies a superior quality of text, often with particular forms, which is only accessible to, and suitable for, mature audiences. This means—and it is particularly the case with poetry—that it is easy to see ‘children’s literature’ as a contradiction. Current thinking would be that this kind of comparative value-judgement is unhelpful: ‘children’s literature’ is a ‘system’ different from other literatures and should be treated as such.

Zhang: Do you think that the importance of children’s literature depends on cultures?

Hunt: Children's literature influences children in terms of ideas, cultural attitudes, and modes of thinking; it establishes norms of right and wrong, and social behaviour. As both advertisers and totalitarian regimes know, adult behaviour is formed in childhood. It has a symbiotic relationship with the concept of childhood. As a body of texts, children's literature contains some of the most innovative narrative and visual art, which cannot, by the very nature of communication, be simple. For example, what appears to be minimalist art in picture-books for the very young is necessarily highly symbolic. Children's literature commonly has roots in ancient tales and modes of understanding the world, and these are frequently international. Children's literature demonstrates the highly complex relationship between adults and their childhoods, with extensive social consequences; it commonly pivots on an adult's perception of childhood.

Children's literature has, commercially, in the west, accounted for up to 40% of sales and revenues, frequently subsidising 'adult' publishing (including film and internet). Children's literature is bound up with literacy, the necessary prerequisite of an effective education. It is part of the intellectual makeup of higher education across the world; a recent congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature had delegates from 43 countries; the International Board on Books for the Young, which concentrates on building the resources of children's literature, operates in around 80 countries. It is frequently censored, which indicates its perceived political importance; and is endlessly fascinating and entertaining. For me, this is perhaps the most important thing about it: it is a major player in increasing the sum of human happiness.

Zhang: These are very interesting and persuasive aspects of children's literature. Children's literature is no longer an "emerging" discipline, but an established one. What factors have promoted this change?

Hunt: As I have suggested, this is the result of complex changes in society and academia—most notably the move away from authoritarian concepts of value and quality in literature. Equally, childhood is now recognised as an integral part of adulthood in terms of psychology and culture: consequently, the study of texts designed for childhood, and which must, by definition, be influential, is now regarded as legitimate.

Zhang: Questions of how we make sense of texts for children, and how we intervene in the process of transmission between author and child, as educators, commentators and theorists, are challenging on many levels. What are the specific

challenges of Children's Literature?

Hunt: I have mentioned the prejudice against the study of children's literature, which is often based on ignorance—which is in turn based on the principle in *The Bible* (Corinthians 13.1): “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” In fact, the denial of the importance of childhood, and the connections between childhood and adulthood (and hence children's literature) leads to interesting and ongoing challenges.

Children's literature, for all its success in universities across the world, and in academic publishing, remains marginalised. For example, the latest volumes in the highly prestigious *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, and *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, contain between them over 90 chapters. Each has one chapter on children's literature—but given that in the period that they cover, children's literature accounted for something like 40% of publications, proportionally it should have had 35 chapters.

Zhang: What are the attitudes and assumptions that (still) need to be challenged?

Hunt: Children's texts are written for simple, childish readers, and must therefore be simple (both not true and not possible). children's literature is part of ‘popular literature’ and so neither style nor content can be taken seriously (there has been a considerable shift in recent years as to what should and should not be taken seriously in literary and cultural studies). The writing and teaching of children's literature are dominated by females, and females generally have lower status (this is a surprisingly persistent view).

Children's literature as a study breaks academic boundaries, and so does not fit neatly into departments and fields of study (twenty years ago, this was an advantage, but with the diminution in importance of the humanities in western universities and the consequent reduction in funding, it has become a challenge). The study of texts for children is very often seen as a part of Educational Studies, and Educational Studies, at least in the UK and the USA tend to have a lower status than Literary studies (this does not seem to change over time); and because it is so influential in childhood, children's literature produces loyal, not to say obsessive readers, and as a result a lot of the best and most detailed research into it is by amateurs (this was once a stigma, but the internet has changed what is perceived to be legitimate and admirable).

Zhang: Are there also challenges inherent in the nature of the texts and the different

readership, which make the study of children's literature inherently more complex than that of other disciplines?

Hunt: Yes. Power relationships are central: there is an inevitable imbalance of the power-relationship between writer and reader (which intensifies the power imbalance inherent in all literary experiences). The implied audience for the texts differs in many ways, in terms of cognitive skills, and knowledge of allusion, intertextuality, and so on, from adult readers. There is a difference between books that WERE for children and ARE for children. Adults read children's books in at least five ways: to discuss with other adults; as the implied reader; as the child they were; as the adult they are now; on behalf of a child or children; and they will also read different parts of a book in different ways; and judgements of content are in the hands of readers who are not necessarily publishing professionals, and the depictions of a wide variety of content items, such as sex, violence, depression, nihilism, religion, childbirth, and race become problematic. And all of this depends on the time period and the cultural context—what was and what is acceptable.

British Children's Literature and *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*

Zhang: How does British children's literature come into being? What factors have promoted the development of children's literature in the UK?

Hunt: Stories that were read and (presumably) enjoyed by children, although not specifically intended for them, can be traced back for many centuries in China, Japan, and Sumeria. For example, Britain has the oldest history of commercially produced books for children. This is the result of a complex social, political, and religious history which led to a particular commercial climate. But most of all, it depended on how childhood was understood; since the mid-eighteenth century there have been changes that have been replicated throughout the west.

Before about 1500CE there was little to distinguish child from adult, apart from size and experience; from then until the twentieth century, childhood was seen as an imperfect condition to be corrected and educated; for much of the twentieth century it was seen as a separate, vulnerable and innocent phase to be protected; and for the past fifty years it has again become hardly distinguishable from adulthood, except for marketing purposes. Consequently, the form and content of materials written for children in Britain (and in other western countries) changed from there: being no distinguishable difference from that written for adults (children and adults shared, for example, folk tales); being primarily concerned with education; being

primarily concerned with a safe form of entertainment; and now being very few distinguishing differences.

However, history, it is said, is written by the victors, and in the past 25 years the people in charge have changed. Thus, for example, for many years the 1920s and 1930s in Britain were seen as ‘impoverished’ in terms of canonical works of children’s literature. The general ‘standard’ of texts was deemed by historians who made their judgements in traditional terms, to be low and regressive. Recently, there has been a movement—empowered by both the breakdown of the canon and authoritarian thinking in universities, and the increasing resources devoted to research—to revisit and revise these judgments. For example, a vast amount of politically left-wing—socialist and communist—material designed for children has been unearthed, often in magazines and ephemera which had not previously been on the critical radar. Equally, it has been discovered that one of the major writers whose books have survived that period, Arthur Ransome, was in fact but one figure among many exploiting Britain’s interests in its maritime heritage, and the fashion for ‘camping and tramping,’ imported from Germany. Since around 1940, publishing for children has thrived, and it is now a fully integrated part of the publishing system.

Zhang: What was the importance of the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*? What is included?

Hunt: The publication of the *International Companion Encyclopedia* was important because it was a volume in a series produced by a major international publisher, the other volumes of which covered major literary forms. It was an indication that the study of children’s literature had reached parity with other subjects. Since then, books on children’s literature have routinely been included in major series published by mainstream and prestigious academic presses, such as Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press in the UK. It followed the pattern of other books in the series the first half being primarily a description of (Anglophone) genres, and the second half being a survey of children’s books worldwide. Where it differed from other volumes was in having substantial sections on theory and critical approaches, contexts—including censorship, translation, storytelling, and research collections—and ‘applications,’ something unique to the series.

Zhang: What are the characteristics of *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*?

Hunt: One of the critics of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia* described it as

'uneven.' In my view, that was totally inadequate as a description: it was very, very, very uneven in all possible ways! I did not assume that 'even-ness' was either possible or desirable. The distinctive feature of children's literature as a body of texts is that it is a world-wide phenomenon, covering an astonishing range of forms and genres, verbal, aural, and visual. Cultural attitudes to it, the uses to which it is put, and judgements of its value are as diverse as the cultures of the world. To study it, we need to have available the work of academics with expertise in a correspondingly vast range of disciplines, and it should be obvious that these academics will speak in different voices, with different tones: not only will what they think and say be different, but how they think and what they think is worth saying will be different.

Thus an educationalist/teacher recommends a certain poet using terms like 'good,' 'well-crafted'; poems 'mesmerise' children. That is not the language of critical theory: it assumes that 'good' is understood, and that 'well-crafted' means the same thing to all readers. This is friendly, accessible writing; it could be argued that it does not increase our understanding of *why* or *how* the poems are good - but it does not find it necessary to do so. Here is a literary-critical theorist, on the other hand, discussing pictures in picture-books: 'The combination of two sign systems clearly provides a way of problematising the representational function of visual and verbal signs and of foregrounding the ways in which relations between signs and things are structured by culturally inscribed codes of representation and signification.'

What do those writers have in common with an historian, probing the earliest children's books, whose work is based on very specialist archaeological research, and is not in the least concerned whether anyone reads the texts, or how they are read or understood — and is definitely not concerned with living children and books? Or writers who are both historians and critics concerned with national heritage: '*The Analects*, is an example of a classical piece of literature considered very heavy reading material for adults, let alone children—yet children in ancient China had only these texts as literature. However, many of the earliest versions of myths and legends were incorporated into these philosophical writings and historical chronicles.' Or, at another extreme, here is a psychotherapist, writing about the *effect* of books—psychology and 'bibliotherapy': 'Originating as a variant of strategic family therapy, but employing Foucauldian notions about power, language and meaning, Narrative Therapy invites clients to become aware of how they have been participants in the construction of a 'dominant story' of their own life ... and instead to consider alternative ways in which they might have constructed

their personal narratives.’ Note how, once again, we have a different language—a different preoccupation - and casual assumptions that we know about Foucault, and that we require scholarly references and would be prepared (or have the time) to read them.

Zhang: What are your attitudes between educational and literary studies in the field of children’s literature?

Hunt: The position of children’s literature, somewhere between educational and literary studies has often led to mutual snobbery: the teacher is not intelligent enough to cope with theory: the theorist is too out of touch to write intelligibly. The *International Companion Encyclopedia* refused to accept such stereotypes. Just as we need to accept that the concept of children’s literature differs in every one of the countries and cultures explored in this book, and that none is superior to or inferior to any other, so we need to accept that each critical contribution is equally valid. From this position a style of criticism—one that comes *from* children’s books, one that reflects the uniqueness of children’s books and the fact that people concerned with children’s books come from many fields and that we are writing for experts in other fields—is steadily emerging.

Zhang: What is the leading role of *Encyclopedia* plays in the field of children’s literature?

Hunt: *The International Companion Encyclopedia* represents a major step towards a new style of criticism - one that comes *from* children’s books—one that reflects the uniqueness of children’s books and the fact that people concerned with children’s books come from many fields and that we are writing for experts in other fields. Thus we need to develop a way of critical thinking that embraces all these fields, and which gives the way people think in these fields equal status and importance. We need to understand what other people can contribute.

Scholarship and New Development in the Field

Zhang: What do you think about recent attention by scholars working in children’s literature to hot topics such as climate change, ecocriticism, environmentalism, critical race theory and Indigenous studies? Does the theoretical interest have any impact on the cultivation of ecological awareness of responsibility among children?

Hunt: The criticism of children’s texts has always closely followed (and occasionally anticipated) its adult counterparts, and so it is not surprising to find a sudden interest in eco-criticism and race-related criticism. To some extent this is

what we call in English 'jumping on the bandwagon'—that is, following a fashion for one's own profit. The recent *Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017) has chapters on such fashionable and politically correct topics as 'Critical Plant Studies,' 'Health and Sickness,' and 'Feminist Ecocriticism,' and these are symptomatic of the relationship of criticism to the texts it criticises.

Pragmatically, it would seem that criticism would like to think of itself as having a symbiotic relationship with texts: that is, that its interest in ecocriticism is not only the result of more texts having been published that deal with environmental issues but is also the *cause* of more texts being published that deal with environmental issues. This is certainly the case with race-related criticism, where organisations such as the Children's Literature Association (USA) are making it a positive policy to influence publishers to increase the number of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) central characters in texts.

In my view it seems unlikely that academia, for all its theories, can have such an influence on the pragmatic world of publishing, and that ecological or racial change is more likely to be driven through the popular press and primary and secondary education. This is already happening, and non-fiction books on ecological themes are commonplace and this is being followed by fiction. Academic critics may have something valuable to say about these developments, but whether they could, *or should*, influence them is more questionable.

Zhang: "Ethical literary criticism," put forth by Nie Zhenzhao, is "defined as a critical theory for reading, analyzing, and interpreting the ethical nature and function of literary works from the perspective of ethics. Seeing literature as a product of morality, it argues that literature is a form of ethical expression in a specific historical situation" (Nie, 189). Would you please remark on the importance of ethical literary criticism to children's literature?

Hunt: I would say that in the literature that interests me the most, ethics and psychology are mixed together. Focusing entirely on ethics in literature runs the risk of missing what is often most interesting about the great characters of literature, which is that they are imperfect even when they try their best, because human nature is complicated and even contradictory at times. So, I think that studying literature can lead to a better understanding of the psychological complications within ourselves, whether or not it also leads to more ethical behavior.

Zhang: How has the concept of children's literature changed in recent years? What

are the new trends for the past twenty or ten years in children's literature?

Hunt: With the 'disappearance of childhood' recognised in the 1990s—that is, the erosion of childhood as a 'protected' state—children's literature has become increasingly difficult to distinguish from adult literature. Clearly, some forms, such as the picture book for young children are immediately distinguishable, but they even follow the same graphic (often computer-generated) styles, and their messages of social behaviour and narrative expectation, are identical. Otherwise, texts are increasingly dominated by major international publishers, and the concept of commodification of the audience has been perfected. The vast majority of texts are controlled (and commissioned) often in marketing 'cycles' in which themed series dominate across a marketing arc. In terms of sales, bookselling (in the UK and the USA) is dominated by a small number of conglomerates, and as few as 6% of published titles make their way to (standardised) shelves.

Zhang: It is an obvious phenomenon that the market also fuels the boom in crossover fictions. What are the dominating factors in this change?

Hunt: The past twenty years have been dominated by globally-successful books, such as the 'Harry Potter' franchise, and franchises in general; the exploitation of 'crossover' titles and franchises which are designed to be read by both adults and children. There has been a strong emphasis on 'age-banding' to which writers are implicitly or explicitly expected to conform, while for many years the cost of warehousing and accounting systems that demanded any book must make a profit within its first year meant that 'back-lists' were neglected, and series-books flourished. To balance this, the freedom to publish on the internet (together with print-on-demand services) has meant that individuals and small publishers can circulate material as never before, and so some kind of individuality, if not originality, may survive.

Zhang: People across the world are reading *Harry Potter* series which is viewed as the success of crossover fiction. How did crossover fiction come into being? What are the codes of its popularity?

Hunt: As I have suggested, the form of children's books depends on concepts of childhood and adulthood. And so, in the Anglophone tradition, there is nothing new about 'crossover' books—books that are published for, and read by, both adults and children. Similarly, books that have *moved* from one readership to another because of changing attitudes to childhood, have a long history.

In the UK, before the mid 18th-century, when children were first seen as a

separate market, books were read equally by children and by adults. In the late 19th century, when children were seen as small adults, books such as the adventure stories of G. A. Henty, were read by both boys and men, and the romances of Frances Hodgson Burnett, by girls and women.

As the 20th-century concept of childhood as a protected space was eroded, and fantasy was acknowledged as being legitimate reading for adults, so the conditions for dual-audience books, such as Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972), or the Harry Potter franchise became favourable. Similarly, the erosion of strict ideas of what is thought acceptable for 'children' has meant that books designed in, say, 1935 for 15-year-olds, would now be marketed to 9-year-olds. In turn, this has meant that the border between children's reading and adults' reading has become particularly fuzzy. This means that that adults can (and do) read harmless fantasies originally designed for 6-year-olds, such as *Winnie-the-Pooh*, while lists of children's 'classics' now routinely include books that deal exclusively with adult themes, such as *Huckleberry Finn* or the 'Sherlock Holmes' stories.

Zhang: Why do you hold that the most important changes are to the very essence of what texts for children are?

Hunt: Electronic media are not simply changing the way stories are transmitted, they are changing the very nature of story, of what we understand (or do not understand) to be narratives. Traditionally—and in the book as we know it—a story is told in a series of linked elements, all marked by change of some kind; these units are given coherence by links such as character, scene, atmosphere, theme or motif, and overwhelmingly aim towards a resolution. All of these elements and resolutions are guided by *generic* traditions. Now, narratives in the internet world—hypermedia stories—do not live by these rules. The 'beginning-middle-end' structure may seem, in the west, 'natural,' but it is demonstrably 'culture-specific': it is not how many readers now see 'story.' Equally, there need not be a 'storyteller': electronic narratives have no traditional structure and can have many authors.

Traditional linear narratives, then, offer fixed outcomes but imaginative opportunities. We have to supply the images. In contrast, a good many computer 'games' (which lean towards the conditions of hypertext) offer us landscapes, visualised characters, and images of all kinds, but allow the players to choose different outcomes or personalities. What were previously thought of as external or extraneous items (back stories, actors' biographies, cut-out toys, adaptations) become part of the 'narrative.' By 'surfing' the internet—interacting with the world of stored data, we build up a matrix or constellation of 'items': they are the story—

but that story is complex and intensely personal. It is continually changing and cannot be transmitted to anyone else: the reader is making and claiming his/her own meaning. This leads to the paradox that these new narratives are both personal and involve ‘shared authorship’ and they are all unstable works-in-progress. Criticism, if it has a place at all, has to be to be an intervention, an interruption, and an extension of the story itself.

Fundamentally, for the foreseeable future, two quite different mindsets will be operating at the same time in our educational system, and what we now think of as children’s literature—narrative for children—will be at the centre of it. It need hardly be said that the political implications are quite revolutionary. Just as the internet has the potential to destroy cultures, so the admission that individual internal narratives (or co-operative narratives without any authoritarian centre) totally undermines politically and culturally established standards.

Zhang: Children’s literature is defined and changed by the changing faces of the world. What are the most conspicuous changes of children’s literature in the past ten years?

Hunt: In the past ten years, the concept of children’s literature (in the west) *as a discipline* also shows signs of change: activists in the two major international organisations, IRSC and ChLA, have become more visibly concerned with inequalities in the profession and perceived inequalities in the literature itself. There is, of course, no question that, by its nature, texts for children have always reflected the conscious and unconscious prejudices and shortcomings of the culture/ideology that surrounds them. It has, for example, been a common observation over the past forty years that the number of characters in western children’s books of ‘minority’ ethnic origin has been disproportionately small. Similarly, the variations of gender that have now come to the fore are, it is suggested, under-represented. Until recently, the critical ‘establishment’ has taken a descriptive role, and what is published is something to be observed, not manipulated. In the current political and cultural climate, such ‘neutrality’ is increasingly being seen as culpable, and critics have turned not only to foregrounding those books that have been written for ‘minority’ audiences but are actively promoting their publication. These trends have been linked to such contemporary movements such as ‘Black Lives Matter.’

Zhang: Would you like to predict the future of children’s literature?

Hunt: Predictions are always dangerous: who would have predicted in 1996, when the *International Companion* was published, that the world children’s book market,

which at that time was flatlining [not developing] in terms of sales and creativity, would be dominated for the next two decades by a series of books that would break all previous publishing records. It may have been possible to predict that international market forces, including the growth of huge publishing conglomerates would accelerate the trends of homogenisation and commodification of children's books. But it would seem unlikely that anyone would have predicted the increase in internet users—from 16 million (0.4% of world population) to well over 5,000 million (60+%) over the next 25 years—nor the effect of this on children's texts.

But, as children's literature has always both mirrored and influenced adult literature and attitudes, it seems probable that this will continue. The future of children's literature is the same as the future of the human race: whichever ideology dominates will determine what books are written.

Zhang: Is there anything you want to share with Chinese readers?

Hunt: It seems to me that, perhaps more than at any other time in human history, it is essential for our survival that we understand the cultures of different countries. Understanding the children's literature of a country provides a key to how its citizens see the world, to what their underlying values are, and how they are likely to react. Reading children's literature does, quite literally, reveal another world, and I hope that Chinese readers will be entertained, as well as informed, by the experience.

Works Cited

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207.