

Children's Literature as Child Pornography

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WHILE THEY BOTH CENTRALLY CONCERN CHILD CHARACTERS, children's literature and child pornography appear to have nothing to do with each other. Children's literature is writing intended for an audience of children. Child pornography, obviously, is not. That it stages activities involving children for an implied audience of adults is a main reason why child pornography is scandalous, and why we have laws circumscribing it. For a lot of adults, the idea that children might be the audience for pornography is almost as horrifying as the idea that pornography can be about children.

But let me assume for a moment that the provisions of the criminal code might affect children's literature. In economic terms, its implied audience of children is something of an illusion. As well as being the people who write children's literature, adults like you and me are also the ones who edit it, publish it, review it, sell it, and buy it. In the process, these adults are often readers of children's literature. Jack Zipes declares, "My guess is that the largest reading audience of children's books in the United States and England is constituted by those students at the college and university level who take courses in children's literature along with teachers, librarians, and writers, who eagerly and discriminatingly read vast numbers of books for children" (54). As a form of writing that, like child pornography, stages childhood experience for a significantly adult audience, might children's literature, too, be at least potentially pornographic? Might texts of children's literature then come under the purview of the criminal code?

The idea that it might is likely to strike most adults as outrageous—perhaps even unthinkable. Children’s literature began when adults started to believe that children needed to be kept from certain kinds of knowledge—to know less. Since then, childhood has been primarily understood as a matter of *being* less: less knowledgeable, less experienced, less reasonable, less responsible, less capable—and certainly, less sexual. As a result of this focus on childhood as lacking, children’s literature is centrally a literature that lacks. It characteristically lacks darkness, violence, moral ambiguity, big words, hard ideas. Most of all, it lacks sex. Sex is what innocence is most essentially innocent about. Children’s literature pornographic? Yeah, sure, and there really were weapons of mass destruction.

The unquestioning certainty with which most people connect children’s literature with asexuality becomes obvious on occasions when specific texts challenge the connection. Back in the nineteen-seventies, some librarians were reported to be so offended by Maurice Sendak’s depiction in his picture book *In The Night Kitchen* of young Mickey’s full frontal nudity, triumphantly displayed as he shouts “*Cock a doodle doo*” (emphasis mine), that they covered the offending bits with felt marker diapers, lest the sight of a penis shock and distress young viewers as much as they themselves seemed to be shocked (Huck 42). More recently, I read another picture book, Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland’s *King and King*, to a University of Winnipeg class of children’s literature students. The book describes how a queen’s efforts to find a suitable princess for her son to marry fail, until one of the candidates shows up on the arm of her brother, the prince immediately falls in love, and the two princes marry and become king and king. Many of my students were shocked that a children’s picture book was acknowledging the possibility of homosexual marriage, because, some said, the audience the book was clearly intended for was too young to need to know about sex. The diaper-drawing librarians’ response to Sendak’s pictorial acknowledgment that boys actually have penises and my students’ response to the fictional representation of young males feeling physically attracted to each other are much like the way the Criminal Code understands pornography—“any publication a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex” (163[8]). In children’s literature, it seems, any hint of sex amounts to undue exploitation. As usually understood, children’s literature is the exact antithesis of child pornography.

In real life, of course, boys do have penises, and some young males do feel physically attracted to each other. I’m sure that the librarians and students who objected to these things being acknowledged in children’s literature knew that. As a literature that leaves things out, the purpose of children’s

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literature is not centrally to depict reality as it is—particularly, I believe, not reality as children themselves might actually experience it. The childhood children's literature stages for child readers more significantly represents an adult wish-fulfillment fantasy of what childhood ought to be. Indeed, that might be what it most shares with child pornography, which also represents an adult wish-fulfillment fantasy of childhood—in this case, a pornotopia in which every child is desirable, untrammelled by sexual repression, and willing and able, always and completely sexually available.

Consider, for instance, Chris Kent's *The Real Tom Brown's Schooldays*, advertised on its cover as “an English school boy parody” and currently available on Amazon.ca. It describes page after page of consensual sex between boys and boys and between boys and masters. No one is ugly or undesirable. No one is prudish or frightened. No one is heterosexual or worried about not being heterosexual. What this determinedly happy tome most specifically “parodies” is Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, a Victorian children's novel about a Rugby School where only the bad guys are ugly or undesirable, where no one is even aware enough of his sexuality to consider the option of being prudish or frightened about it, and where everyone is assumed to be potentially heterosexual—for if sex is unthinkable, homosexual sex appears to be impossible. For Hughes, Rugby under the command of the heroic Dr Arnold is a perfect school—a paradise. Hughes never explicitly says that's because it's so sexless—but he certainly implies it, in a passage that hints at a real-life sexuality the novel keeps closeted as it speaks of “the miserable little pretty white-handed, curly-headed boys, petted and pampered by some of the big fellows, who ... did all they could to spoil them for everything” (233). A footnote to this passage implies that readers will know what it does not actually say: “there were many noble friendships between big and little boys; but I can't strike out the passage”—presumably because not all such friendships were so sexlessly noble. Paradoxically, then, Hughes's staging of childhood as utopian in its sexlessness replicates the utopianism of its sex-obsessed parody. Children's literature generally might be most pornographic exactly in its absence of sexuality.

As something adult authors and readers get off on and want to encourage children to find desirable also, the asexuality of children's literature often has a suspiciously sexual charge. Consider the homosocial paradise of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, which celebrates the bachelorhood of its adult male animal characters as ecstatically free of any hint of either hetero- or homosexuality. Consider James Barrie's *Peter Pan*, in which refusing to grow up represents a commitment to a disturbingly sadomasochistic form of theoretically asexual innocence. An article about the release of the recent

film version of this story reports that “some of the more prudish members of a press-screening audience were surprised by the pubescent sexual frisson generated between Peter and Wendy” before it hastens to add, “It’s all very innocent.” As I argued some years ago, furthermore, a sexual charge is less obvious but still present in the many images in more recent children’s picture books that show clothed and not-so-clothed children apparently aware they are being viewed and smiling available in poses characteristic of pinup photography (and porn)—happy to be vulnerable to the sensuously engaged gaze of their viewers.

Viewers are allowed such gazes because, as the newspaper story says about Peter and Wendy, “It’s all very innocent.” The imagined children being depicted are presumed not to know they might be seen as sexy—not to know sex is even possible. In the fantasy of unknowing described by most children’s literature, as I suggested earlier, boys are not aware of their penises—nor are girls of their clitorises. More exactly, I suspect, they are aware of their penises and clitorises as things they ought not to acknowledge they are aware of, just as the literature does not acknowledge it. In staging a childhood that is generally devoid of penises and clitorises—and violence, and moral confusion, and homosexual desire—children’s literature works to inform children of what adults most seem to desire and most want them to know: what to be silent about, what not to say they know so that adults will not have to acknowledge it and deal with it.

The case of *King and King* makes that clear. As I pointed out to the students who objected to it on the basis that children are too young to know about sex, the traditional stories about princes finding princesses that *King and King* is modeled on are equally about sex—about the heterosexual desire we tend to take for granted as a subject of appropriate interest for children in endless fairy tales and Disney movies. That the attraction the characters in these tales feel for each other is inherently sexual becomes blatantly clear in the earliest printed version of the story of *Sleeping Beauty*—published before the invention of modern childhood—in which the prince who comes upon the sleeping girl is so overwhelmed by her beauty that he joins her in the sack and gets busy (Basile). She keeps right on sleeping—possibly dreaming of England?—awaking only some months later after the births of the resulting children. The idea that heterosexual desire is an innocently appropriate subject of interest to children while homosexual desire is shockingly sexual and inappropriate reveals the extent to which children’s literature operates, not as a mirror of childhood or any other reality, but as a way of indoctrinating readers in ideology. Contrary to my students’

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declaration, sex is not the issue—appropriately conventional ideas about what’s normal are.

That’s mostly because children’s literature is understood to be, above all, a literature of recommendation. Most adult thinking about it operates in the faith that young readers will in fact be constructed in terms of the childhood it depicts—learn to ape its desirable innocence. Most adult thinking about child pornography makes the same assumption. It’s criminal because it’s understood to be a literature of recommendation, designed to make viewers feel positive about and want to imitate the actions it depicts. It’s instructive that, while the Criminal Code makes sexual activity involving a young person an offence only when the person is under fourteen (152), it identifies as child pornography “any written material or visual representation that advocates or counsels sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen years that would be an offence under this Act.” In other words, it’s illegal to represent what it is in fact legal for fourteen-to-eighteen-year-olds to do. Just as children’s literature describes a childhood that shows less than children do often actually know and experience, what the Criminal Code legislates as acceptable in the depiction of sexuality shows less than young people do often—and legally—actually know and experience. In literature as in law, our ideas about childhood are centrally concerned with the need for misrepresentation. And in both cases, misrepresentation is necessary in order to fulfill an adult need to imagine an innocent childhood that closets all the theoretically adult aspects of real children’s experiences—makes pain, and sex, go away.

In successfully making sex go away, children’s literature is clearly *not* pornographic, then. But as I’ve already suggested, it’s not always successful at that, and its presentation of a deliciously and desirably sexless world is in itself suspiciously sexy. If a text written for children were to be accused of being child pornography, what might be the effect of the changes in the law proposed in Bill C-20?

The current Code allows a defence of artistic merit. As a literature which by definition lacks, children’s literature might well be viewed as lacking merit also. It often says less and with less complexity than most adults generally tend to assume is artistically meritorious. I think they’re wrong to assume that—that it is a literature rife with the subtleties of the adult minds that produce it. But in the light of the degree to which conventional assumptions about childhood hold sway even in the Criminal Code, I doubt I’d get very far persuading a court about that. The proposed legislation replaces the artistic merit defence with one that argues for “the public good” of the materials being charged. So are the ways in which children’s literature does

and does not describe sexuality for the public good? For those who believe that children are already as innocent as most children's literature depicts them to be and in need of protection from knowing more, the answer would have to be yes. For those of us who think children know and are capable of knowing more, and who worry about how the protection of children from knowledge and how the training of children in keeping knowledge from adults might be dangerous for children and bad for all of us, the answer might well be different. As a literature that tends to express adult desires for childhood asexuality in ways that deprive child readers of the power to imagine themselves in the light of their actual experience, perhaps children's literature *is* sexually exploitative and against the public good—pornographic after all.

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