BOOK REVIEWS

Maria Nikolajeva distinguishes between series, sequels, prequels, and pseudoquels in the works of Milne, Montgomery, and J. M. Barrie. Nikolajeva explains how these new texts are connected to the original in various forms. While the original work is recognisable, she states, it at times 'subverts the meaning of the original work' (190).

There are chapters noticeably weaker in their style than others in this volume, such as Malini Roy's essay on Campfire publishers. While interesting, this chapter wastes part of its content stating several times what the 'present critical chapter is about', and thus seems to have been in need of stronger editing. A significant aspect of this article is the author's argument that most Campfire publications claim to aim at a 'global public' but in practice often duplicate cultural colonialism in themes, choice of language, and even in the creation of the graphic novel itself.

One of the most important features of this collection is its twenty-first-century awareness of the processes of transformation evident in a wide range of internationally diverse texts. The idea of 'mash-ups' (2) is ingrained in how the book itself is presented and affects it in two ways. This book mashes-up or mixes anime, Shakespearean plays, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Little House on the Prairie, Vietnamese folktales, Japanese animated films, Perrault's Cinderella in Polish adaptation, Chalet-school-based books, Anne of Green Gables, Indian graphic novels, and Winnie The Pooh, all in a single volume. On the one hand, a literary critic can enjoy this structural feature as a brilliantly creative bricolage; on the other hand, the book offers a very good general overview of a variety of topics and genres to the non-specialist, as a mosaic of themes in one volume.

In this sense, Textual Transformations in Children's Literature is a book that represents an impressive and wide range of works, which provide a foundational and introductory framework for a conceptualisation of the relationship between the text and its transformative forces. The volume is thought provoking and rich in text-transformation examples, which makes a remarkably interesting read.

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WORKS CITED


Cherie Allan's Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque has a shopworn, familiar quality; it is a book that will best serve scholars (and especially
students) new to the concerns of postmodernism and picturebooks. Aside from the inevitable theoretical and interpretive quibble, readers acquainted with its dual subject won’t find much to disagree with. The volume initially appears to be a textbook, in terms of both content and design, but despite this first impression, it does not read like a textbook. The writing is fairly dense, and Allan counts on her readers to be familiar with important figures in the field of English Studies but not, confusingly, with their ideas, which she recounts in great detail alongside fairly boilerplate rehearsals of key debates constituting postmodern theory. I found myself wondering whether the opening twenty-five or so pages were intended to be a refresher or an introduction, questions that haunted the rest of the book. If an introduction, Allan lays a lot of heavy stuff on students; if a refresher, Allan spends too much time covering well-trod ground.

Chapter One is largely concerned with how postmodern picturebooks offer alternatives to the conventions of realist fiction by laying those conventions bare. Its predominant strategy involves citing postmodern theorists and then applying their insights to various picturebooks. Robyn McCallum argues that metanarrative is a postmodern technique, so Allan finds metanarrative elements in postmodern picturebooks. John Stephens and Kerry Mallan focus on postmodern ‘playfulness’ (29), and Allan finds playful, game-like moments in postmodern picturebooks. She then moves to intertextuality, typographic experimentation, heteroglossia, and other topics, distilling several decades of work on postmodern literature while applying those insights to contemporary picturebooks. Only a few moments frustrate, generally because they suggest unrealised potential. For instance, Allan discusses the Giant’s Dadaist cut-up poem in The Stinky Cheese Man without noticing that it is a Dadaist cut-up poem. Such an observation could vex the rather rigid theoretical and historical understanding of postmodernism that informs the book, demonstrating how The Stinky Cheese Man, generally characterised as unambiguously postmodern, employs modernist techniques like Dadaist collage and cut-up. Much has been written that problematises the easy line between modernism and postmodernism (Charles Bernstein, for instance, in his seminal ‘The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA’), but Allan tends to tidy up this kind of historical and textual messiness (commonly associated with postmodernism—and postmodernity), preferring the neater (and counter-intuitively Structuralist) approach of listing ‘postmodern’ traits and then finding them in specific postmodern picturebooks. While this approach is pedagogically useful, there is little new here for the scholar already rigorously invested in postmodernism and picturebooks.

Allan organises the remaining chapters much like the first, with all its promise and problems. Chapter Two is concerned with how postmodern picturebooks use language and image to ‘draw attention to the conventions of representation, and, consequently, undermine the represented discourses within the texts’ (78). Chapters Three through Five interrogate a number of discourses of the dominant liberal humanist mode of being, raising questions about the ways in which reality (Chapter 3), history (Chapter 4), and unity (Chapter 5)
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are represented in fiction (and picturebooks). Each chapter accomplishes its aim, roots its questions in literary examples, and summons relevant theorists and scholars in the process. Like Chapter Two, these chapters primarily aggregate the insights of others and make explicit their implications to postmodern picturebooks such as The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs, Black and White, Ooh-la-la (Max in Love); and other prototypical examples.

Chapter Six traces a shift […] from postmodern to what [Allan] term[s] postmodernesque literature’ (140). The postmodernesque picturebook refers to books that draw on their postmodern precursors, employing their familiar characteristics of style and format but focus their ‘attention to the effects of globalisation, the influences of the mass media and the results of rampant consumption’ (142). That is, for Allan, postmodernesque and postmodern picturebooks differ in that the former more directly (rather than implicitly) treats the conditions of postmodernity. I am unconvinced that the new term is necessary. Let me explain.

In ‘The Politics of the Paraliterary’, Samuel Delany persuasively argues that defining a social object is a vain project, especially when the social object (in Allan’s case the postmodern picturebook) ‘encourages, values, and privileges originality, creativity, variation, and change in its new examples’ (239). Allen seems to appreciate Delany’s point, noting, ‘The postmodern picturebook is […] a dynamic form responding to the changing social, cultural and political conditions in which it is produced’ (26). But she also argues that the postmodern picturebook is uniquely dynamic. Thus, the ‘postmodernesque’ element of her title—and the subject of Chapter Six—ultimately undermines her appreciation of the postmodern picturebook’s ever-changing nature (do we need a new term to label a change in a body of texts notable for their constant change?). Of course, all healthy, living social objects (poetry, comics, picturebooks, etc.) change: this trait is not unique to the postmodern. As an especially healthy and vibrant aesthetic enterprise, picturebooks have a long tradition of change and evolution, so that what we call ‘postmodern picturebooks’ are simply an example and illustration of that health and vibrancy.

Admittedly, Allan’s In/Conclusion makes a similar argument, but with a crucial difference: rather than allowing that picturebooks are—at their most interesting—a complex and evolving genre’, she suggests that the postmodern picturebook itself is a genre (171), positing a fairly rigid set of characteristics for them. She also opposes the postmodern picturebook with ‘more conventional, realist picturebooks’, creating a suspect binary. The word ‘conventional’ hedges Allan’s conclusion, but I resist the notion that so-called realist picturebooks evince ‘certainty, coherence and resolution’ (173). Again, there are minor quibbles, evidence of a provocative heart to an otherwise agreeable book. Collating and explaining key insights in postmodern theory and criticism, Playing with Picturebooks uses those insights to illuminate some of the most exciting picturebooks published in the last thirty years. ‘Ceci n’est pas une finale’, the final section of Allan’s book, could easily apply to the book as a whole. Far from proffering the last word on picturebooks overtly marked by their postmodernism,
Playing with Picturebooks lays a promising foundation on which future scholars will build, a useful introduction to an important area of enquiry.

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WORKS CITED


Robert Cormier is one of the most prolific authors of young adult fiction of the twentieth century, praised for his honesty and realism and criticised for his dark endings and stark portrayals of religion, peer pressure, and the adult world in equal measure. This collection of nine essays on his work, ranging in their approach from thematic concerns to cultural criticism and reader response, frequently returns to the perceived honesty and integrity of Cormier’s writing and its supposed consequences and impact on his readers, real or intended. While such points seem to undermine the ostensible aim of providing ‘literary criticism’ rather than pedagogical insights, they do not detract from the collection’s wealth of different perspectives which all seem to add new insight into Cormier’s work.

The collection is roughly divided into sections by theoretical approach. The first four chapters take a thematic approach to Cormier’s work. Both Karyn Huenemann’s ‘Fade to Black: Adolescent Invisibility in the Works of Robert Cormier’ and Andrew F. Humphries’ ‘“So many disguises”: Questions of Identity in Robert Cormier’s *After the First Death* and *Heroes*’ discuss the often contradictory ideas of a stable teenage self which Cormier’s texts problematise. Pat Pinsent’s contribution, ‘Fascinated by Evil: Robert Cormier as a Catholic Novelist’, offers perhaps the most original framework for analysis of all the essays, and displays what strikes an outsider as an impressive awareness of Catholic philosophy, but the analysis of Cormier’s texts, unfortunately, seems over-simplified. The article quickly seems to forget both the Catholic dogma and partly also the proposed intertextual references to Graham Greene and instead reverts to a thematic exploration of Catholicism in Cormier’s texts. The final paper in this section of the collection, Stefania Ciocca’s ‘“Nobody out of context”: Representations of Child Corruption in Robert Cormier’s Crime Novels’, makes a compelling argument that would serve well as teaching material on a course on children’s literature (and indeed any study in cultural constructions of childhood).