Aesthetics
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There is perhaps no more vexing, fraught, and neglected concept in the study of children’s literature than aesthetics. No doubt the neglect of a serious, theoretical inquiry into the aesthetics of children’s literature stems from our contemporary understandings of the discipline of children’s literature itself. The study of children’s literature has, historically, been the work of librarians and educators of children. Children’s literature came to be seen as an appropriate site of purely literary study only after the rise and fall of mid-twentieth century New Critical and formalist modes of criticism, a state of affairs made possible by the inchoate canon-busting/expanding cultural studies movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the discipline of children’s literature was shaped in a theoretical milieu suspicious of objective claims of aesthetic value, suspicious even of the unproblematic category of “literature” itself. Occupying itself, therefore, with ideological criticism, the discipline has largely—but not entirely—elided the tricky issue of aesthetics and the ideological roots of the same.

The word “aesthetics” first appeared, in its Latinate form, in Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750–58). Baumgarten, as Raymond Williams reminds us, uses the term to describe “beauty as a phenomenal perfection” (Williams 1983a). Immanuel Kant complicates and extends Baumgarten’s insights in his *A Critique of Judgment* (Kritik der Urteilskraft; 1790), providing a role for the intellect in the apprehension of aesthetic value. Whereas Baumgarten suggests that the aesthetic affects us solely through the senses, in Kant’s view, the beautiful encourages intellectual contemplation. Kant also famously links beauty to taste, a concatenation that marks the aesthetic as both subjective and universal. He writes, “*Taste* is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking devoid of all interest. The object of such a liking is called *beautiful*.” He continues, “[I]f someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone.” Taste, then, is the ability to discern what is and what is not beautiful, and it rests, for Kant, on *common sense*, a sense that, curiously, is anything but common. *Common sense* in the Kantian formulation is reserved for the educated elite, for there is a correct and incorrect apprehension of beauty, a quality that, Kant maintains, inheres in objects themselves. Some artifacts are beautiful and some are not. To distinguish between what is “agreeable to me” and that which is beautiful, one must cultivate taste. Thus, according to Kant (1987), one with taste may rightly reproach those who “judge differently.”

Following Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of Kantian aesthetics in *Truth and Painting* (*La Vérité en peinture*; 1978), Amelia Jones (2002) notes, “This dual gesture, which affirms universality even as it admits
particularity, structures the aesthetic in its dominant forms of articulation within Western art discourse.” Kant’s logic is seductive, especially when applied to children, and it no doubt informs ideological commonplaces such as the teleological notion that children have not yet developed taste. This lack of developed taste explains why their tastes are often not in concert with those of cultured adults. Adults know that Chris Van Allsburg’s intricate pencil drawings are beautiful, whereas children may similarly (but “wrongly”) apprehend the new Dora the Explorer sticker book as beautiful (in Kantian terms, we might grant that the former is “beautiful,” whereas the latter would simply be “agreeable” to some, i.e., children). As Terry Eagleton (1990) explains, Kant’s conception of aesthetic judgment works like ideology, for it is “essentially a form of altruism,” a way of bracketing one’s “own contingent aversions and appetencies” and putting oneself in the place of everyone else, judging the artifact “from the standpoint of a universal subjectivity.” This altruism, like ideology itself, “promotes an inward, unconstrained unity between citizens on the basis of their most intimate subjectivity.” Yet this unity is not simply feigned or adopted in order to be altruistic; rather, the viewer knows what is beautiful and what is not, just as one knows what is right and what is wrong. As Eagleton writes, “[T]he essence of aesthetic judgments is that they cannot be compelled.” However, they can, like ideology, be learned. Consider the child who responds positively to Randall Jarrell and Maurice Sendak’s *The Bat-Poet* (1964), a work designed to look sophisticated, with its delicate black-and-white illustrations, fairy tale beginning, subtle humor, and finely crafted poetry. It is crafted to appeal to youngsters attuned to the prevailing adult view of aesthetic value. *The Bat-Poet* asserts itself as an *objet d’art* standing in contrast with, say, Sheila Sweeney Higginson’s early reader *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse: Are We There Yet?* (2007).

The construction of such aesthetic hierarchies generally runs contrary to the study of children’s literature, which, as a discipline, tends to focus on the ideological, social, and thematic implications of childhood texts rather than their aesthetic value. For instance, in “Perspective, Memory, and Moral Authority: The Legacy of Jane Austen in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter,*” Karin E. Westman (2007b) compares the Harry Potter novels favorably to Jane Austen’s. While convincing, Westman’s comparison is largely limited to thematic issues. Austen is well regarded for her beautiful and innovative prose, her elegance of expression, and yet Rowling’s much-maligned prose style never emerges as a point of comparison in Westman’s essay. Westman has little to say about the Potter novels as aesthetic works, and never explicitly makes aesthetic comparisons. Of course, such comparisons can be made; Philip Nel gestures toward them in “Is There a Text in This Advertising Campaign? Literature, Marketing, and *Harry Potter*” (2005). Nevertheless, this sort of aesthetic inquiry is still rather rare in the scholarly discourse surrounding children’s literature, especially when one looks for sustained studies with aesthetic questions at their heart.
The tendency in the discipline of children’s literature to avoid aesthetics can also be traced to traditional aesthetics’ rather limited focus—its inclination to concern itself with “fine art” to the exclusion of the “popular,” those agreeable arts designed to entertain. Children’s literature, a popular art, is what philosophers call a “heteronomous” rather than “autonomous” endeavor. For Lambert Zuidervaart (1991), heteronomous art—unlike autonomous art—is not adequately “independent from other institutions of bourgeois society.” Heteronomous art is, therefore, that which is “produced and received to accomplish purposes that are directly served by other institutions.” As examples, he includes “everything from liturgical dance to tribal masks, from advertising jingles to commercial movies.” To this list we might add children’s literature.

Although The Bat-Poet appears to be an objet d’art, in the eyes of most aestheticians it would fall among the entertaining “agreeable arts,” for it is a heteronomous text lashed to the publishing industry, just as it “accomplishes purposes . . . directly served by other institutions” by serving the educational sphere as a primer on poetical craft. Thus, while Jerry Griswold (2002) urges scholars of children’s literature to keep in mind the distinction between “children’s literature” and “children’s reading,” he is nonetheless aware that all children’s literature is deeply enmeshed in the market. It is all a matter of degree, from the grossly commercial (texts shaped explicitly to appeal to a given market, such as Are We There Yet?); to the less commercial (texts shaped a bit more autonomously, like The Bat-Poet). In Aesthetic Theory (Asthetische Theorie), Theodor Adorno (1970/1997) suggests that a work of art’s placement on this continuum depends upon how free it is of distortion “by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity.” He notes that the autonomous work is not the product of “socially useful labor,” and, as a result, it resists “bourgeois functionalization.” Since aesthetics has conventionally focused on fine, autonomous art, ignoring popular, heteronomous art, the gap between aesthetics and the discipline of children’s literature widens on both ends: the latter tends toward cultural studies and a postmodern aesthetic, whereas the former focuses on the “fine arts.”

Even within the discipline of children’s literature, there is a privileging of work that suggests autonomous “fine art” or references canonical painting or literature, such as the aforementioned Jarrell-Sendak collaboration, but also work like Anthony Browne’s intertextual Willy the Dreamer (1997), Nancy Willard’s allusive A Visit to William Blake’s Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers (1982), Chris Van Allsburg’s surreal The Mysteries of Harris Burdick (1984), or David Macaulay’s architecturally precise Castle (1977). This aesthetic insecurity complex is evident in a great deal of children’s literature scholarship. In When You’ve Made It Your Own . . . Teaching Poetry to Young People, for example, Gregory Denman (1988) defends what he doubtlessly sees as the more autonomous poetry of Robert Frost by stressing “there is more to poetry than shel silverstein.” He continues, “[Y]ou no more need to teach children the poetry of Shel Silverstein than to
give them lessons in eating McDonald’s hamburgers, fries, and a shake.” One suspects that when Denman claims that “there is more” to children’s poetry than Silverstein, this “more” involves aesthetic value, not merely thematic complexity or didactic “appropriateness.” Denman suggests that Silverstein’s work has the aesthetic value of fast food while insisting that Frost is a writer of nutritional (read: “aesthetically valuable”) poetry. These dismissive attitudes derive from a reliance, in the words of Beverly Lyon Clark (1992), “on New Critical strategies for criticizing a work,” the very same strategies whose abandonment created space for the literary study of children’s literature in the first place. Clark notes that New Critical approaches “privilege complexity, so that it will be difficult to find anything to say about seemingly ‘simple’ works of literature.” For Perry Nodelman (2000), however, this simplicity is the basis of children’s literature’s aesthetic appeal, “because [children’s texts] seem so simple and yet allow for so much thought.” He continues, “There’s something magical about texts so apparently straightforward being so non-straightforward.” Striking a blow against the West’s tendency to canonize a priori texts of a more evident complexity, Nodelman explains, “I find more obviously complex texts much less magical.”

Nodelman’s *Pleasures of Children’s Literature* (1992/1996), now revised with co-author Mavis Reimer, engages aesthetics by analyzing the pleasures produced by the contemplation of literature for children, while also exploring the pleasures inherent in the contemplation of the ideological underpinnings of our aesthetic value, especially when those values involve texts prepared for children, a class about which we hold a myriad of often contradictory assumptions. Nodelman does not engage directly the philosophy of aesthetics in *Pleasures*, nor does he purport to be an aesthetician. On the other hand, Maria Nikolajeva’s *Aesthetic Approaches to Children’s Literature: An Introduction* (2005) summons aesthetics in the title only to skirt it in the text. Despite its title, it is a textbook of critical approaches to children’s literature, and one that largely sidesteps the aesthetic debates philosophers have been engaging with since Kant. As a result, the chapter on “The Aesthetic of the Author” concerns not how beautiful a given author might be, but “the relationships between the author and the text,” while “The Aesthetic of the Reader” treats only “the various categories of readers, real and implied.” She elides the fundamental questions of what art is and how it functions in society, thereby dispensing with the issue of whether there is a distinction between what Griswold calls “children’s literature” and “children’s reading.”

In the end, the question of aesthetic value in children’s literature is closely aligned to the politics and history of a discipline that is itself still negotiating a place in the academy. There are scholars who carefully make the distinction between children’s literature (art) and children’s reading (not art) precisely so that discussions about children’s *literature*, and hence aesthetics in children’s literature, can easily fit into the academy’s preexisting debates about aesthetics. As Griswold (2002) writes, “[W]hen we are able to talk
about Children’s Literature as literature, we will be able to address others outside our discipline with genuine confidence and authority.” Kenneth Kidd (2002) is sensitive to Griswold’s desire for disciplinarity and authority, noting that “[f]or so long children’s literature wasn’t taken seriously, and just as it’s being granted greater respect, the academy is turning to cultural and area studies, theory and ‘everyday life.’” Kidd asks, “Will our emergent interest in children’s culture be indulged at the expense of the literary tradition we have worked so hard to champion?” His answer is an excited maybe, but he is quick to insist upon his “enthusiasm about the shift away from a narrow vision of literature, criticism, and academic life”—and, we should add, a narrow view of what is aesthetically successful in children’s literature. Kidd’s response points to the productive tensions between literature and cultural studies. Any future conversations about aesthetics in children’s literature will have to be mindful of such productive tensions.

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African American
Michelle Martin

From the beginnings of African American children’s literature around the turn of the twentieth century, the parameters of what should be included has been as much of a source of conflict as the terminology used to label this group of people. Commenting on the contested nature of this genre, Dianne Johnson (1990) asserts in Telling Tales: the Pedagogy and Promise of African American Literature for Youth:

Like children’s literature, as a broad category, African American children’s literature is a label which refers to the intended audience. On the other hand, like Afro-American literature, Black children’s literature refers to the ethnic and racial identities of the authors. When the two categories are combined into one, the parameters of the new category are much less clear. This confusion in definition is important, largely because of the deliberate uses to which the literature is put.

In this passage, Johnson highlights the shifting terminology associated with the people, and therefore with the genre—African American, Afro-American, Black—as well as the anomalous nature of the genre itself: unlike most literary genres, children’s and young adult literature are defined by audience, not by authorship.

Furthermore, in stating that “Black children’s literature refers to the ethnic and racial identities of the