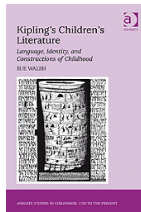



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KIPLING'S CHILDREN'S LITERATURE-LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOOD



By **Sue Walsh**
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 Reviewed by **Marah Gubar** on 2010-08-10.

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What's the matter with Rudyard Kipling? England's first (and youngest) winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature was phenomenally popular during his own lifetime. Yet by the time he died in 1936 "many had lost interest in him and many others had been repelled," as an obituary in the *Times Literary Supplement* noted (Falls, "Flower" 25 January 1936, p.65). Even today, despite decades of efforts to rehabilitate his reputation by identifying *The Good Kipling*, a large proportion of his work is rarely read, taught, or studied in depth. Discussions of why this is so have not been wanting, from Edmond Wilson's "The Kipling that Nobody Read" (1941) to U. C. Knoepfelmacher's "The Chameleon Kipling: His Rise and Fall and Rehabilitation" (2001). This ongoing conversation has often revolved around the issue of Kipling's perceived political and formal conservatism, his reputation as a jingoistic apologist for Empire and as a vulgar realist who declined to experiment with daring Modernist techniques.

In this book, Sue Walsh elaborates on another explanation: she maintains that "much of [Kipling's] work has remained un-discussed in any detail, largely because it has been assigned to a category labelled 'children's literature'" (1). Texts associated with this category, Walsh contends, are apt to be ignored and misread because scholars--including Kipling critics and biographers, post-colonial theorists, and even children's literature specialists--share a set of deeply problematic assumptions about childhood and children's literature. For Walsh, in other words, the question is not, "What's the matter with Kipling?" but "What's wrong with us?"

Throughout the book, but especially in the introduction and in chapters one and three, Walsh sets out to show that contemporary critics remain wedded to the notion that children inhabit a separate sphere "in which the cultural and political hierarchies of the adult world have no significant purchase" (6), an innocent world of play and instinctual (rather than intellectual) pleasure. As a result, scholars presume that literature written for children features direct, transparent language that demands little in the way of analysis; or they explain away the linguistic sophistication of child-oriented texts by ascribing their appeal to their playful orality; or they offer reductive biographical readings, because the idea of the innocent child functions to legitimize a set of naïve notions about authorial intention and the relationship between language and reality. The presumed naturalness and purity of children, Walsh argues, serves to license the critical fantasy that identity is stable, language a transparent reflection of the real world, and children's literature a self-evident and self-contained category.

A good deal of Walsh's criticism of critics seems well justified. In her chapter on biographical readings of Kipling's children's fiction, for example, she meticulously demonstrates that even highly regarded scholars such as Knoepfelmacher tend to "assert the primacy of the life as 'truth,' but go on to construct that life by reference to a variety of texts including those that are elsewhere acknowledged as fictional" (78). She also justly observes that while critics praise Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) for their linguistic playfulness, they set aside the question of "how that 'play' should be interpreted . . . as presumably beyond the scope of a text for children on the one hand, or as completely self-evident on the other" (7).

I also applaud Walsh's resistance to the condescending critical habit of characterizing children's authors as themselves childish. The case of Kipling nicely illustrates the different variations this theme can take. As Walsh notes, some critics praise Kipling for adopting a child's eye view in his children's fiction (76), while others laud the "maturity" of texts such as *Kim* (1901) for being more attuned to cultural difference, as if only adults pay attention to issues of race, identity, and politics (8). In 1943, Lionel Trilling characterized Kipling's entire oeuvre as a childish pleasure to be given up in adolescence, partly because he linked the author so strongly with a less enlightened past. As Walsh points out, this move exemplifies the problematic tendency of associating children with prior eras and more "primitive" peoples (89).

To my mind, however, the best moments in this book come when Walsh lives up to her title by demonstrating that the children's stories of Kipling themselves challenge the problematic assumptions about childhood, language, and identity that slip into the scholarship. In her chapter on the *Jungle Books* (1894-95), for instance, Walsh observes that even post-colonial critics attentive to the hero Mowgli's "amphibious identity" tend to insist that growing up resolves the vexed issue of his hybrid selfhood (52). On the contrary, she demonstrates, Kipling never stops seesawing back and forth between affirming and destabilizing identity categories, thus "calling into question the borders between child and adult, human and animal, 'native' and 'white'" (63). In a bravura reading of Mowgli's enraged speech to the wolf council (58-60), Walsh shows how Kipling's wild boy represents identity as on the one hand essential and fixed and on the other a product of choice and

performance, even as his deployment of different languages disrupts any notion of a secure link between language and identity, representation and reality.

Indeed, Walsh's close reading of this passage is so rich and revealing that it made me wish that she had spent more time elaborating on her own reading of the *Jungle Books* and less time differentiating herself from critics such as John McBratney and Don Randall. After all, as she herself notes, in arguing that Kipling's children's fiction is far more conflicted about colonialism than most critics have given him credit for, she is following in their footsteps, participating in "a re-evaluation of his work as 'a complex articulation of colonial discourse in all of its ambivalence'" (63). Both here and in most of the other chapters, the balance between the two major strands of Walsh's argument seems off: while she dissects previous criticism at great length, her readings of Kipling's stories furnish less than sufficient detail.

In chapter two, for instance, Walsh limits her discussion of *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) to the "Mowgli" stories even though she could have strengthened her argument by examining the hybrid format of these two oddly structured texts. Her treatment of the *Just So Stories* is even more narrowly circumscribed: although she develops her argument about the representation of language in this popular text over the course of three chapters, she focuses only on the three "Taffy" stories, which to most readers seem like outliers compared to the far more famous tales about how the Camel got his hump and the Leopard his spots. Indeed, one of the "Taffy" tales never made it into the published version of the book. Since Walsh deplores the critical neglect of Kipling's children's fiction, her decision to ignore ten out of the twelve *Just So Stories* and long stretches of the *Jungle Books* is unwise. Even as she overdoes her critique of contemporary critics, her appreciative reading of Kipling's children's fiction loses force because it seems inattentive to the overall structure and atmosphere of his stories.

But Walsh's final chapter provides a welcome departure from this tendency: there she scrutinizes both individual passages and the overall structure of *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), the first of Kipling's two historical fantasy novels, whose impact on twentieth-century fantasy writers has still not been fully acknowledged. John Masefield, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Rosemarie Sutcliffe, Susan Cooper, and Alan Garner were all influenced by the style and content of Kipling's tales, which chronicle how two English children magically gain access to a series of important moments in English history with the aid of Puck, "the oldest Old Thing in England" (45), who gives them back their land both literally (via an ancient ownership ritual and contact with antique artifacts such as arrowheads) and metaphorically (by familiarizing them with British history). Yet although *Puck* seems rooted in an anthropological approach to history, Walsh persuasively argues that it cautions against the tendency to read historical artifacts as transparent guarantors of the truth about the distant past. Kipling thus troubles the distinction between history and fiction, real life and fantasy.

Children's literature specialists will be particularly interested in the line of argument Walsh pursues here because *Puck of Pook's Hill* seems to belong so securely to the retrograde strand of children's fiction that Jacqueline Rose sets out to delineate in her influential book, *The Case of Peter Pan: or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1985). "There is," Rose argues, "a continuity in children's fiction that runs from Rousseau up to... Alan Garner, in which the child is constantly set up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history, which it can therefore be used to retrieve" (Rose 43). Drawing our attention to narratives in which child characters make use of artifacts such as rocks and cave paintings to revisit a more "primitive" past, Rose contends that such stories deny the instability and constitutive power of language by promoting the idea that "you can read the true history of the world from objects, and out of the earth" (Rose 45).

If any text seems to confirm the existence of such a tradition, it is *Puck*. Yet Walsh shows that reading it this way would be a mistake. At the same time, her overarching--and compelling--case for the linguistic complexity and philosophical sophistication of Kipling's children's fiction challenges Rose's contention that "playing with language--in [the] sense of undercutting its transparency and ease--is something which has, for the most part, been pushed to the outer limits of children's writing" (Rose 40). As a major figure from the Golden Age of children's literature, Kipling can hardly be regarded as marginal, especially when we add his name to the list of writers that Rose herself cites as "exceptions" to her generalization: Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, W. M. Thackeray, Tom Hood, and J. M. Barrie (Rose 40, 83). Moreover, Golden Age scholars such as Fiona McCulloch have expanded this list to include R. L. Stevenson, George MacDonald, and Charles Kingsley, among others. Then, too, recent work on radical children's literature by Kimberly Reynolds, Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel has further undermined Rose's claim that avant-garde ideas about childhood, language, and identity have "largely been kept out of children's fiction" (Rose 41).

Nevertheless, rather than amend Rose's work in any way, Walsh presents her own study as a faithful amplification of *The Case of Peter Pan* and faults other critics of children's literature for not following Rose's methodology closely enough. Even when scholars such as Perry Nodelman and Roderick McGillis set out to support Rose's position, she complains, they misinterpret *The Case of Peter Pan* or engage in "theoretical cherry-picking...which dispenses with the logic that produces those very cherries" (42-43, 94).

Given Walsh's own repeated insistence on the instability of language, why does she not consider that Rose's elliptical and at times self-contradictory prose might be open to conflicting interpretations? Why not consider, too, that critics might respect and comprehend Rose's argument yet reasonably disagree with certain aspects of it? Walsh fails to mention the important work of scholars who do just that, including McCulloch, Reynolds, David Rudd, Katherine Jones, and Alan Prout, all of whom have raised serious, thoughtful objections to various ideas outlined in *The Case of Peter Pan*. Similarly, Walsh ignores Nodelman's more recent work, which revises the views he expressed in the 1992 article she attacks. In *"The Precarious Life of Children's Literature Criticism"* (2007), for instance, he explicitly addresses Walsh's critique of his prior work.

Unfortunately, Walsh's neglect of the criticism that most directly threatens Rose's paradigm seems to confirm what Nodelman contends in his 2007 essay: that she is not really trying to understand positions other than her own (even if only to fend off the best objections to her poststructuralist approach). To be sure, Nodelman goes overboard when he compares the stance of Walsh and her colleague Karin Lesnik-Oberstein to George W. Bush's foreign policy and implies that it constitutes a form of terrorism ("Precarious" 13). But he rightly resists the charge that he and other children's literature scholars are essentialists because they refuse to accept the injunction that we cannot and should not say anything about child readers: that the impulse to "reach toward 'real children'" is intellectually indefensible (Walsh 37).

According to Walsh, all such references to "real children" are inextricably bound up in the naïve notion that childhood "exists beyond discourse" in an "unconstructed" form free from adult influence (37, 43). But Nodelman, Jones, and others

working in the emerging interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies do not endorse this view. Instead, they attempt a complicated balancing act. While admitting that we can never fully know the nature of an unchanging, universal "child," they argue that we can still attempt to investigate the lives, practices, and discourse of individual young people from particular times and places. What individual children read, write, and do--insofar as we can recover it--is worth studying, not because it transparently conveys the unvarnished truth about what children as a group are like and how they think, but because it tells us more about what individual young people are (and were) up to than *not* studying it.

Though ethical aims motivate such efforts, scholars who make them do not (*pace* Walsh) "fall back on the idea that oppressed groups can simply 'speak and know their conditions'" (36). Instead, they push forward on the grounds that to ignore what we can learn about actual children--however fragmented, unrepresentative, and hard to interpret such information might be--is to replicate the inattentive stance that makes such evidence so rare in the first place. When we devalue the study of children's reading and writing practices, we perpetuate the long-standing neglect of materials related to this subject both within and outside the academy. (As a result of this condescending stance, for instance, no serious effort has been made to preserve, archive, and analyze children's writing.)

In setting out to determine "how and why certain of Kipling's texts are categorized as being for children" without reference to child readers or the material conditions of publication, Walsh suggests that the category "children's literature" exists only as a fantasy in the minds of critics (30). Yet here too, it seems likely we could find some middle ground between this radical stance and an essentialist vision of children's literature as an immutable, self-evident, and self-contained category. Unquestionably, such balancing acts are hard to maintain, and those of us who attempt them might be aided by the thoroughgoing skepticism of critics such as Walsh and Lesnik-Oberstein. But that productive dialogue will only happen if both sides base their critiques on attentive, intellectually generous readings of each other's work.

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