The embrace: Narrative voice and children's books

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Résumé: *Dans cet article qui fait l'analyse précise des paragraphes initiaux de plusieurs oeuvres extrêmement connues, comme* The Paper Bag Princess *de Munsch/Martchenko ou la série des* Jacob Two-Two *de Mordecai Richler, R. McGillis observe que l'enclanchement de la narration dans l'oeuvre destinée à l'enfant-lecteur tend à adoucir, à amadouer, à produire une adhésion et un rapport de sécurité. Ce "ton" particulier pourrait s'appeler l'*étreinte, *unissant le lecteur et* son *narrateur.*

A proper understanding of narrative voice is in fact very complicated, but it is also simple in the sense that there is no narrative we would call a story that does not involve this voice, so that thinking about it is lesson one.

Jill Paton Walsh

I take narrative to be the telling of a story; it sets out a series of events. This is simple enough. I also understand, following Genette, that the narrative must be told by someone and that this someone must take up a position in language (the language, of course, might change depending on the discourse in which the story unfolds). We may analyse either the events or the telling of the events or the speaker of events. These areas for analysis focus on aspects of narrative which differ from each other: to analyse the events might be to organise and even to evaluate the significance of what happens in a particular story, perhaps to sort out themes; to analyse the telling of the events might be to discuss the shape of narrative, its temporal ordering, its detail or lack of detail, its style and so on; to analyse the speaker of the events is to focus on who tells the story and to articulate something about the voice we hear as we listen to the story. I will focus on the last of these three approaches to suggest that children's narratives do not differ from narratives for adults in technique, but that the voice that speaks from a children's book seeks to draw the child reader in by gaining her trust, by embracing her.

By "embrace" I mean something akin to Robyn Warhol's use of the word "engaging" to typify a certain kind of narrator in fiction. In Warhol's sense, the engaging narrator "strives to close the gaps between the narratee, the addressee, and the receiver." Such a narrator, she goes on to say, "addresses a 'you' that is intended to evoke recognition and identification in the person who holds the book and reads" (811). In Warhol's description, the engaging narra-

tor is a presence in the narration, whether extradiegetic or homodiegetic, and she speculates as to whether the presence of such a narrator is gender based (a trait of women's writing) and a "historical phenomenon, reflecting certain nineteenth-century women's impulses to speak" (817). By invoking the notion of an "embrace," I wish to extend Warhol's suggestive isolation of a narrator who draws her reader into the text to include narrations without an explicit narrative presence. Further, I suggest the presence of a narrative voice, implicit or explicit, which embraces the reader is a distinguishing feature of literature for young readers.

Again, by "embrace," I wish to draw on the several meanings and implications of that word. Most obviously, "embrace" means to grasp, often as a sign of affection; the text that embraces gives pleasure. The pleasure of the embrace may be based on mutual submission: the reader submits to the text, but possibly because the text submits to the reader. In other words, the text offers the reader something familiar; it accommodates itself to the interests and experience of the reader. If I begin to approach a circularity we associate with hermeneutics, then remember that "embrace" means also to encircle. Of course, the word may suggest an attempt to influence, or to fit with a brace. And here we come to the sinister side of the page. Texts that embrace may refuse to let go; the healthy embrace is brief. The reader leaves the text braced, that is strengthened, not hobbled by the voice that speaks the story.

Much has already been written concerning the narrative voice, point of view, implied author, focalizing character and so on. In writing for children – my concern here – an author must take into account, as Aidan Chambers has noted, the possibility that the reader of the book is not prepared to yield to the book. Somehow the teller of the story must gain the confidence and interest of the reader. A familiar technique designed to accomplish this is the use of a child as the story's focalizing character. As Chambers remarks: writers for children employ a "sharply focused point of view...by putting at the centre of the story a child through whose being everything is seen and felt" (98). The use of a child as focaliser does not, however, in itself mean that a story is a children's story. Henry James's *What Maisie knew* or Steven Millhauser's *Edwin Mullhouse: The life and death of an American writer 1943-1954*, by Jeffrey Cartwright are examples of narratives told through the consciousness of a child and yet we do not think of them as children's books. Conversely, some writers, as Chambers also notes, use an "adult-focus" in order to attain "a fuller picture of adulthood without losing the child-attracting quality of the narrower focus" (99). Chambers suggests the writer has another alternative to affect this desire to draw in a readership that crosses age barriers: he or she may write fantasy. But even a fantasy must have a teller, a voice speaks to us from the pages and this voice may be an ally or an observer, someone who sides with the child reader or someone who stands aloof, perhaps even above the child reader.

Narrative theory, as Peter Hunt has observed, "cannot escape the problem of audience" (107). This problem, as Chambers and Hunt both know, finds complication in narrative for children. What do children know when they come to any narrative? One can make certain assumptions about adults that are more difficult to make about children. What level of "competency" do children have in reading or in understanding the conventions of narrative? Does narrative competency proceed in stages as Arthur Applebee argues? Or does the child have the capacity, as Gareth Matthews and perhaps Jacqueline Rose would be prepared to argue, to grasp inversions and parodies of the very conventions she is supposed to be learning? Do narratives for children fall, as Zohar Shavit suggests, into canonical and noncanonical categories whereby the canonical text really speaks to the adult who will oversee the child's reading and the noncanonical text speaks to the child and is so simple as to be ephemeral? Or does Alan Richardson's variation of Shavit's thesis, his idea that children's books speak to a divided child audience, make more sense? Are narratives for children "overcoded" (i.e., do they use repetition, simple patterns, and clear statements) so that the inexperienced reader will have no difficulty following the events? Do narratives for children teach children how to read, as Nodelman argues in his analysis of *Charlotte's web*? How do readers learn to read? Is story more important than discourse in narrative for children?

So many questions call for so many answers, and these many answers will take us into several areas of investigation: epistemology, cognitive development, semiotics, historical analysis, linguistics, reading as process, structuralism. Answers to these questions take us both into and outside of narrative as text, both to what text is and how text comes into being. In other words, the tangle of issues at stake is a forceful reminder of the problems narrative presents us with when we begin to examine it rather than simply enjoying it. One problem, perhaps the root problem, is language itself. Children's books, narratives for children, implicitly assume the transparency of language, its innocence. To put this another way, we might direct attention to the origins of literature for children as we know it in the Romantic period. Wordsworth, Keats and the others strove to recover a pure language, one that spoke straight from the heart and straight to the heart. The paradox in a work such as Blake's *Jerusalem* is that the poet strives for absolute clarity in a language estranged from the familiar. More obviously pertinent is Wordsworth's design to speak in his poems in the language really used by men, an essential and pure language. The Romantics, however, were not naïve; they were well aware of the sad incompetence of human speech, of the slippage between word and thing, between word and feeling, and consequently between a speaker and his or her audience. But in the area of children's literature the problem of language was largely overlooked. Is largely overlooked.

By and large, the language in children's books assumes the relationship between words and that to which they refer (the relationship between signifier

and signified) is simple and clear; more specifically, the relationship between the speaking subject (the *sujet de l'enonciation*) and the spoken subject (the *sujet de l'enonce*), between who is speaking and the narrative events being set out for us is straight-forward and unproblematic. When this relationship becomes a problem, as Chambers suggests it does in the work of William Mayne, then we do not have a narrative for children, or at least we have a narrative which will draw children in only if it is carefully crafted. Chambers's observation is helpful, and his example of Enid Blyton as a writer who sets out to collude with children is pertinent. The majority of children's books speak reassuringly to the child reader; rarely do we have an unreliable narrator. Take, for example, the first paragraph of Diana Wieler's *Bad boy* (1989):

> The music was blaring, a solid wall of sound that pressed A.J. Brandiosa against the wall. His shoes were vibrating; he counted at least thirty 200-pounders bouncing and bobbing under the orange lights. No wonder the floor shook. A.J. could envision the newspaper headlines: "Beer barrel polka kills 100" or "Dancers bring down the house." It was enough to make him smile.

The voice that speaks to us from the text is indicative, stating bluntly that the music was oppressively loud. Yet as the speaker tells us this, she or he also lets us know that the music was oppressive to A.J. Brandiosa, not to the thirty or so 200-pounders who are dancing happily. This speaker takes up a position sympathetic to the character she or he is introducing. We get A.J.'s point of view. He thinks of the music as old-fashioned; he is somewhat bored and to pass the time he has counted the number of dancers; and to break the boredom and assume a distance from the crowd of overweight people, he imagines amusing newspaper headlines. Whether he smiles or not, the thought of the headlines is enough to make him smile, and also enough to make us smile with him as we obligingly enter his world guided by the narrator.

Already, however, we have made at least one assumption: A.J. is bored. But perhaps he is anxious, ill at ease, not simply bored. In other words, we cannot know for certain the full significance of the speaker's words. The voice from the text is not as transparent as we might at first think. The first sentence not only asserts that the loud music pressed heavily upon a character named A.J. Brandiosa; it also throws up a paradox: a wall pressed A.J. against the wall, an indefinite wall presses the character against a definite wall. One wall, clearly, is only a wall in a figurative sense. The intricacy here is that for A.J. something intangible has the effect of something tangible and solid. Sound becomes a solid wall effectively pressing A.J. against the wall. The rest of the book will examine how something intangible – sexual desire – can become something tangible, can effect how we act and react in areas seemingly far removed from the sexual. Or we can turn this around: like music here in the first sentence, desire can be oppressive.

But again we get ahead of ourselves. The first paragraph cannot give us a

clear thematic idea because we do not have enough information. All we can say at this point is that as narrative, *Bad boy* begins with a speaker who does not identify herself (or himself), who speaks from outside the narrative action. In Genette's terminology, the narrator of *Bad boy* is both extradiegetic and heterodiegetic; the narrator narrates from outside the action and does not take any part in any of the action. We do not, however, have what used to be called an omniscient narrator. Instead we have a narrator who tells the story from the outside, but who also enters the perspective of the characters (A.J. here in the first paragraph) to further the events of the plot. In other words, several characters are focalisers – A.J. here in the first paragraph and mostly A.J. and his friend Tully throughout the book. At times, as in the sentence "No wonder the floor shook," the narrator and the character who focalises the action are indistinguishable. Nothing is especially novel here.

Does anything in this beginning to *Bad boy* announce that this is a book for young readers? Before answering this question, we should note that the publisher markets the book for a specific readership. An indication of the book's readership, its *implied readership*, is available on the cover; the Douglas and McIntyre edition announces "Groundwood Young Adult" on both front and back covers. The cover illustration depicts three teenagers, one with a hockey stick, skates, and equipment bag. Two males, one sitting on the hood of a red car, confront each other in an attitude (perhaps?) of conflict; between them is a girl. The message is that this is a narrative about hockey, cars, and the politics of desire; in short, the cover announces a romance for adolescent (now referred to as "young adult") readers. Before a reader, any reader, begins to read the first page of the book, any book, a number of clues as to the nature of the narrative are apparent. We might equate this to the choosing of the ground in an oral telling. Before a storyteller begins an oral telling, she selects or has selected for her the place for the telling. The time is also a factor. Other prior-to-narrative aspects might also communicate something about the kind of stories to follow in the oral telling: the reputation of the teller, the clothes she wears, the occasion of the performance. No narrative, either oral or written, springs neatly and completely into existence without some prior matter preparing us for it. In this sense every narrative is performative, every narrative places itself before we read it. Obviously, in written narrative we have the publisher's indication as to the audience for a particular narrative; in the case of *Bad boy*, the publisher clearly sees the book as calling to an audience of teenagers.

But how did the publisher decide to market this particular narrative to this particular audience? Because a narrative concerns itself with teenagers does not necessarily mean that the narrative seeks out an audience of teenagers. Something in either the style or the content of the narrative must mark it as suitable for a specific audience. This is true of all narrative. In the case of *Bad boy*, something in the style and the content conform to our idea of books for

young adults. Let's return to the first paragraph. Nothing here strikes us as difficult either in diction or syntax. The sentences tend to the simple assertive, and in conformity with many narratives they offer verbs in the past tense. The action of the narrative precedes the telling of the narrative. One sentence – "No wonder the floor shook" – is incomplete, and voices an informal comment that effectively brings the narrator and the character and the audience together. It speaks of complicity. The diction also works in a similar way. The alliterative "b" which runs through the paragraph is less important than the choice of words: "blaring," "bobbing," "bouncing," and "200-pounders." Something strikes me as not only informal and colloquial, but also as slightly overblown about the use of these words. We have in this language a hint of the kind of language (sometimes hip) that is supposed to appeal to a teenage reader.

Implicit in this call to an implied readership is the question of genre. The words "Groundwood Young Adult" indicate not only an implied (and for the publisher a hoped for actual) readership, but also a type of fiction, in this case a genre dubbed "young adult novel." Readers familiar with this genre will expect certain things from this book: a teenage protagonist, a sympathetic and honest treatment of a problem familiar to many teens, a privileging of the young person as opposed to the adult, a certain hip language, a realistic and familiar setting, strong emotions, a traumatic rite of passage, a confirmation of the reader's view of life. Sheila Egoff has clearly listed and discussed the features of the genre and she leaves one with an impression of its exaggerated, if clichéd, form ("The problem novel" 357-58).

If exaggeration exists in the first paragraph of *Bad boy*, then it is the exaggeration of youth, a necessary exaggeration to stave off dissolution, the darkness drawing down. A.J. smiles to think of the dancers crashing through the floor. He remains on the outside, safe from the self-destructing dance. But of course he is not safe, as the rest of the story will show. He, like the rest of us, dances in darkness. The narrative is a means of keeping the darkness from becoming complete. Narrative is a way, as Ursula LeGuin has it, of drawing teller and hearer together around the campfire. Complicity has its purpose. Here the complicity is of youth as it identifies itself by contrast with the two-hundred pound adults who polka to the loud music. We have here an example of what Marie Maclean terms narrative's "negentropic force" (2). Not only does narrative create community, but it also creates identity. As the narrator invites the narratee to enter the narrative space, she also invites him or her to remain outside, seeing the narrative as a reflection of the self. Narrative for young readers is, in a sense, an occasion for the actualising of the mirror stage. By entering the narrative as a participant, and remaining outside it as receiver of the narrative, the reader may recognize herself as the other. In *Bad boy* this is very clear when we recall that the focalising character is male and the narrating voice, if we attach the name Diana Wieler to it, is female.

But nothing in the narrative itself urges us to identify the narrating voice with Diana Wieler. Whoever narrates this book remains in the background, although we can surmise that he or she is an adult. The question of the narrator's gender is unclear to me, but I choose to refer to a female narrator who stands at a distance from the characters. In the first paragraph, she uses A.J.'s complete name rather than the more familiar initials alone, and throughout the book she refers to A.J. and Tully as "boys." She also states confidently that A.J. is wrong to think that sex is a problem for Tully. The message is one of tolerance. We might take from this what Perry Nodelman notices when he suggests that writing for children might well be a form of women's writing. Certainly, it is interesting to read so many books for young adults in Canada which have women authors and male protagonists: *Bad boy* (Wieler), *Hunter in the dark* (Hughes), *Cowboys don't cry* (Halvorson), *Witchery Hill* (Katz), *Jacob's little giant* (Smucker), *The hand of Robin Squires* (Clark) are just a few. The connections between narrative and orality, between narrative and complicity, and between narrative and trust seem deeply evident in narrative for children. I cannot think of any unreliable narrators in fiction for children.

Narrators, like narratees, range "from a fully characterized individual to 'no one'" (Chatman 151). In *Bad boy*, the narrator is neither fully characterized nor no one. What is important is that the narrator has a distinctive voice which is, as Chatman shows in his taxonomy of narrative discourse, separate from the point of view. The first paragraph of *Bad boy* takes up A.J.'s point of view, but not his voice. The two extremes of narrative voice are evident in the following two passages from the beginnings of their respective books:

> I couldn't believe it. My dad couldn't do this to me. Not on my first day in a new school. But it was him all right. You just can't mistake a beat-up half-ton with "Josh Morgan – Rodeo Clown" painted across the door. Especially when it's parked in the lane marked "School buses only" and the principal, himself, is out there yelling at the driver. (Halvorson, *Cowboys don't cry* 1984)

> When Elizabeth was a beautiful princess she lived in a castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald. (Munsch, *The paper bag princess* 1980)

The first passage is an example of the connection between point of view and narrative voice. Many similarities are apparent between this opening paragraph and the opening paragraph of *Bad boy*: the point of view – that is, the perspective, both visual and emotional – is that of a young person, an implicit division occurs between adult and adolescent, the language is both simple and dramatic, and gaps encourage the reader to speculate about the situation – where is A.J.? why is he there? who is he? what is the father doing to the speaker in *Cowboys don't cry*? who is speaking? why is the principal yelling? Despite the difference in voice – unnamed and uninvolved narrator in *Bad boy*

(heterodiegetic) and as yet unnamed but certainly involved narrator in *Cowboys don't cry* (homodiegetic) – something strikes me as similar about these narrative beginnings. In both, an implied author comfortingly reassures the reader; in the silence behind the speaking voice of the text is a presence (who is of course absent) who knows what the reader wants to hear and who stands aside in order that the reader may hear it. Both books present the reader with a sense of injury; the protagonists are implicitly concerned with their own sense of self, with what they desire. This sense of self-importance granted to the character and by implication to the reader might be what distinguishes books such as *Bad boy* and *Cowboys don't cry* from books such as Cormier's *I am the cheese* (1977) or Major's *Far from shore* (1980) in which first-person narratives are distanced either by the estrangement of experience or by the fracturing of point of view.

The second passage is from a book for younger readers. Here the presence of a narrator is all but muted; nothing appears to stand between the reader and the story. Yet unless we move into direct dialogue (much of *The paper bag princess* is in dialogue) or unless an author records the thoughts of a character directly (as Joyce sometimes does with Leopold Bloom, for example) a narrator must mediate the story. In other words, the story must take the form of a discourse and the discourse must imply someone who discourses, who does the telling. The first paragraph of *The paper bag princess* clearly presents us with a narrative voice, one which speaks both in and against tradition. Readers hear of familiar fairy tale conventions: princess, castle, prince, marriage. The conventions are slightly askew from the first word "When" which picks up the sense of the past in the conventional "Once," yet complicates the usual fairy tale beginning in the past by suggesting a before and after within this tale. "When Elizabeth was a beautiful princess she lived in a castle," but does she not live in a castle now and does she not wear expensive clothes? Why? Furthermore, she was going to marry a prince, but did she? The implication is that she did not. Thus the fairy tale conventions are turned on their heads. Even the names are playful; Elizabeth is a familiar royal name, but who ever heard of a King Ronald? This story both attaches itself to tradition and departs from tradition. In familiar fairy tale fashion, the narrator is not intrusive; in fact, he is nearly hidden completely. The voice of the fairy tale is the voice of tradition, of the folk. But here the departure from tradition is the mark of a distinctive voice, one that ingratiates itself with the child reader by being at one and the same time familiar and playful, safe and yet slightly subversive. And it is worth pointing out that the names, Elizabeth and Ronald, offer a clue to the narrator's sympathies. If Elizabeth did not marry Ronald as the narrator implies, perhaps she had good reason.

What *The paper bag princess* illustrates is the necessary reliability and trustworthiness of the narrator in a book for young readers; despite the departures from tradition, we know this story will end happily. Although the

final sentence of the story appears neutral – "They didn't get married after all" – it isn't because it follows Prince Ronald's high-toned dismissal of Elizabeth. The narrator sanctions Elizabeth's calling Ronald a "bum." In fact, Elizabeth's words are not separate from the idiolect we can imagine the narrator using.

Another feature of narrative voice in books for young children lies in their visual dimension: books for young readers are usually illustrated. *The paper bag princess* is a picture book, and the first page of printed text (verso) is followed on the recto by a full-page illustration in which the Princess Elizabeth looks adoringly at Prince Ronald; hearts float around her head like an aureole. Ronald, for his part, turns away from the princess; his eyes are closed, he holds a tennis racket, and he seems completely drawn into himself. In short, the illustration presents Ronald as a prig. The narrative voice here speaks from both the printed text and the illustration; they reflect upon each other or, in this case, they reinforce each other. The same is true of the end of the book where the verso contains the line, "They didn't get married after all," and the illustration on the recto shows a jubilant Elizabeth bounding free towards either the setting or the rising sun. Illustrations or pictures can work in several ways to carry along or give another dimension to the narrative as Perry Nodelman has so intricately shown in *Words about pictures*. However they work, they draw the reader's attention away from the strict linearity of print and consequently from pure mimesis or showing of the story and focus it on aspects of telling, and perhaps this is why Peter Hunt states that "the encounter with the picture book seems to be akin, for the child, to an oral encounter, and the combined text is likely to be read far more fluidly and flexibly than the purely verbal text" (118). Why the experience should be akin to orality for the child and not the adult, as Hunt seems to imply, is unclear to me. What is clear is the convention stipulating that printed narratives for children combine words and pictures and printed narratives for adults consist of words alone. This is, of course, purely conventional as the many novels in comic book form for adults testify. This is true for both the picture book and the illustrated book. Convention now associates book illustration with books for children in the so-called middle years (eight- to twelve-year olds), but many of the great Victorian novels came into being with illustrations (Thackery's work offers the best example, although we might also cite Dickens's), and the Folio Society remains fully aware of the power of book illustration.

The distinctive feature of books for the young, in both verbal and visual narrative instances, is what I call the embrace. The voice that speaks from the pages of a children's book is reliable, friendly, confiding, non-alienating, reassuring, trustworthy. We are invited to share an intimacy, an experience, a secret, or a joke. The world that waits for us in a children's book might have its mysteries and even its threats, but these remain muted. The cover of *Night cars* (1988) by Teddy Jam and Eric Beddows represents the narrative situation. We are implicitly in the position of the infant who leans and rests on the

threshold of the night world which beckons to him with its green and red street lamps. The narrative may be out there, beyond the threshold or in a frame, but what frames it is a narrative situation controlled by a friendly teller. The first words and picture of the book reinforce the intimacy of the storytelling experience. "Once there was a baby" is allied with a picture of a smiling father holding a baby who looks through a window at a city street. The picture tells us that not only was there a baby, but there was a protecting father too.

As a final example of the narrative embrace and its loosening, I will look at Mordecai Richler's two Jacob Two-Two books: *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* (1975), illustrated by Fritz Wegner, and *Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur* (1987), illustrated by Norman Eyolfson. Egoff and Saltman in *The new republic of childhood* categorize these books as "Light Fantasy." In the first book, according to Egoff and Saltman, "Richler achieves a raw comic-book appeal," but the second book contains "heavy-handed satire on politics and other aspects of contemporary life." They go on to say that the "adult, mordant humour overpowers the childlike aspects of the plot, greatly to its detriment." They note that the "finely drawn pen-and-ink illustrations by Norman Eyolfson are also satirically adult" (269). Egoff and Saltman, then, perceive that *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* is a more successful children's book than its sequel, and their reasons appear to hinge on the book's contents. Satire, or at least political satire, cannot appeal to children. This last point seems to me debatable, but I do not wish to take up the debate here. Instead I would focus on the narrative voice in each book and its ability to embrace.

Here are the opening paragraphs of each book (I shall refer to the books as *The Hooded Fang* and *The dinosaur*):

> ONCE THERE WAS A BOY called Jacob Two-Two. He was two plus two plus two years old. He had two ears and two eyes and two arms and two feet and two shoes. He also had two older sisters, Emma and Marfa, and two older brothers, Daniel and Noah. And they all lived in a rambling old house on Kingston Hill in England. (*The Hooded Fang*)

> When he was six years old, a mere child, he was known as Jacob Two-Two. He was given the name because he was two plus two plus two years old. He had two ears and two eyes and two feet and two shoes. He also had two older brothers, Daniel and Noah, and two older sisters, Emma and Marfa. But most of all he was given the name because, as Jacob Two-Two himself once admitted, "I am the littlest in our family. Nobody hears what I say the first time. They only pay attention if I say things two times." (*The dinosaur*)

These paragraphs are very much alike; many of the same words and sentences occur in each. Yet significant differences indicate that a different voice speaks from each text. Most obviously, the first words in the two texts differ from each other. *The Hooded Fang* begins in the most familiar of ways with the fairy tale convention "Once there was." Immediately the reader knows what kind of story to expect (unless, of course, the book surprises by parody or reversal of convention, not the case here, although the book does contain parody and satire

in several of its incidents). The narrator is both familiar and matter-of-fact, and he speaks in simple sentences, sentences which accumulate detail as if cataloguing things which make Jacob a normal six-year old. The catalogue or list is also a familiar structural feature of books for children, one which works as a means both of investigating the world and of collecting data. The list is probably a vestige of orality, a means of taking in the world. In children's narrative, it also takes in the child, embraces him. In fact, the whole paragraph embraces the child and his world, moving as it does from Jacob himself (his name, his age, his physical attributes) to his brothers and sisters, to his place of residence. The narrator places Jacob, but as he does so he is careful to place him in a family context. We might stress the "in." Jacob is *in* the family which lives *in* the old house on Kingston Hill *in* England.

Evident in this placing is the narrator's play on "two," which occurs twelve times in six and a third lines. Each sentence, except the last one, contains the word "two." The last sentence, like the first one in that it differs from its counterpart in *The dinosaur*, draws the siblings together and tells us where they live, "in a rambling old house on Kingston Hill in England." Coming at the end of the paragraph, this sentence might catch our attention in its use of two adjectives to describe the house ("rambling old"). This play on two is more subtle than the obvious use of "two" in the previous sentences, and it initiates the less obvious two-two game that will continue alongside the obvious game throughout the book. But even if the child reader does not consciously catch the joke, he must surely find the rather exotic old home on Kingston Hill unthreatening. I will go further and suggest that something comforting resides in the words "rambling" and "old."

By contrast, the opening words of *The dinosaur* are less clear. The clear preterite timelessness of "Once there was" becomes more obviously time bound: "When he was six years old." The voice here does not adopt the stance of the fairy tale; instead he plunges directly into time as we experience it, something which passes, which has passed. Jacob Two-Two is no longer six years old. The preterite here assumes that the now of the story time will be, if not occurring in the now of the reader, closer to the reader's time than to the time of the details which we receive at the outset. And the words, "a mere child," present a difficulty. Are these words meant descriptively? Are they meant to strike us as humourous? If they are meant to strike us as humourous, then what is the nature of the humour? Do they poke fun at the Jacob of six-years old or at the Jacob who is no longer six-years old and who thinks of his six-year-old self as a "child"? Even more important is the perspective from which these words are spoken? Are these words meant to express Jacob's own feelings that when he was six, he was a mere child, or are they the words of a narrator who aligns himself with the older Jacob and comments wryly on the younger Jacob, or are they the words of a narrator who looks down from a patronising height with this wry aside? The phrase will occur again as we read the first several para-

graphs, but I do not think answers to these questions are any easier to come by after these paragraphs than they are here in the first sentence.

One thing about both of Richler's books that is clear is that the behaviour of adults does not differ markedly from the behaviour of children. The Hooded Fang, Louis Loser, Mr. Cooper, Wacko Kilowatt, and Perry Pleaser are all childish. Looked at from one perspective, this juvenilization of characters is part of Richler's satiric comment on human behaviour; from another perspective, it indicates his sympathy with his readers, children. Whatever else Richler wants us to think about Child Power, it is something we should take seriously. The empowering of the child is as important an issue as the empowerment of other marginal groups. Both books depict capable children; to a certain extent, both books embrace the child. The plots are not unfamiliar to readers of children's books: a child finds adventures in a dream world where the forces of an alien and adult world threaten, unsuccessfully, to overwhelm him (the *Alice* books set the style for books of this type), and this same child saves a friend from a fate as good as death by undertaking a long and arduous journey (examples in children's literature are numerous from realistic journeys such as the one in *Huckleberry Finn* to more allegorical journeys such as the one in Margaret Mahy's *The dragon of an ordinary family*). What Stott and Moss term the circular journey informs both books; the departure from and return to home offers reassurance to the child reader.

Why, then, should the two books differ as children's books? I return to the matter of voice and offer into evidence the opening paragraph of a book decidedly for adults, Richler's *Cocksure*:

> Dino Tomasso braked before the high, familiar gates with the coupling snakes woven into the wrought iron. It was not necessary for him to show a pass, but he had to wait, drumming his three-fingered left hand against the steering wheel, while the armed, black-uniformed guard threw the lever that opened the gates and waved Tomasso's AC Cobra 247 through. Tomasso turned into the winding, cypress-lined driveway, whistling happily until he spotted Laughton sitting by the poolside.

That this book speaks to an adult audience is clear. The cover of my paperback edition proudly prints an excerpt from a review (apparently anonymous!) of the book which appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Shocking, disgusting, scatological, dirty, clever, near-pornographic, funny, embarrassing, nauseating, bewildering, cynical, uninhibited, unruly, unabashed and very interesting. I'm glad I read it!" Yet little or nothing in the book's first paragraph is either closed to a child reader or inappropriate for child eyes or ears. What is noticeable is that the narrator plunges us immediately into the story. This is a novel about, among other things, the cinema and its opening resembles a quick cut in the cinema. Action and character in action are evident right away. Whereas the opening paragraphs of the children's books offer a few details which establish Jacob's name, age and place, *Cocksure* begins with many

details: wrought iron gates, an armed and uniformed guard, a winding cypress-lined driveway, and a swimming pool all indicate a place of wealth and power. Questions rise: why does Tomasso have only three fingers on his left hand? why does he dislike Laughton? are details such as the "coupling snakes" and the AC Cobra 247 loaded? who are these people? where exactly is this place? why is an armed guard necessary to protect this place?

Obviously, an author can present his narrative in a variety of ways. The narrator may be overt or covert, or somewhere in between as in the case of Richler in *Cocksure*, *The Hooded Fang*, and *The dinosaur*. What interests me here, however, is not so much the degree of the narrative presence, as the tone of that presence. The narrator in a children's book is unlikely to go out of his or her way to leave gaps which detour the reader from the storyline (although gaps are inevitable), whereas the book for adult or older readers draws its reader in precisely by opening gaps which the active mind of the reader begins consciously or unconsciously to fill in. None of the three opening paragraphs from Richler's work quoted above actually initiates a plot by the usual means of presenting a conflict, but, perhaps strangely, *Cocksure* comes closest to doing this. The reader begins to ponder the reasons for Tomasso's visit. The tone here is close to neutral. The narrator, like a camera, describes the scene as Tomasso drives into the Star Maker's estate, and as the description rolls we must find difficulty separating the narrating voice from Tomasso. For example, the "familiar gates" in the first sentence are familiar to whom? Presumably to Tomasso, and if so, then the narrator is reporting the interior perspective of Tomasso. In fact, the narrator moves smoothly from Tomasso's perspective to a distanced camera-eye perspective. This technique is possible in a children's book as we see in *The dinosaur*, for example, but there the alignment of narrator and character allows for sympathy with the character. In the case of *The dinosaur*, the narrator goes so far as to have Jacob speak for himself at the end of the first paragraph.

But here lies the ambiguity in this book which is absent from *The Hooded Fang*. When the narrator allows Jacob to speak for himself, he notes that Jacob's words are an admission ("as Jacob Two-Two himself once admitted"). Why would Jacob have to admit that he received his name because he was too little? Why would a simple explanation not be enough if someone had asked him why or how he got his name? How does this notion of an admission make Jacob look in our eyes? On the one hand, we have here the narrator giving us an explanation in Jacob's own words and in the process empowering Jacob; on the other hand, Jacob's words take the form of an admission and we only admit to things when we feel guilty about something. To put this second point another way, I suggest that the narrator diminishes Jacob with the word "admitted." He puts him in his place as a child, one whose speech reflects lack of power. Of course, the story will show us a child who has the wherewithal to assist his friend Dippy to escape, but here at the outset of the story a gap be-

tween the narrating voice and Jacob opens. This does not happen in *The Hooded Fang*.

No matter what technique a writer uses to present a narrative, the important thing is not to alienate the reader, and, as Chambers tells us, the child reader is less patient than the experienced adult reader. The child reader requires a stronger hook or at least something to attract him or her to the book. A narrating presence that reassures the reader provides a means of attraction. Picture books, which are often as spare in their narrating presence as possible, may use the tension between the pictures and the brief text to attract the reader. Take for example, *Architect of the moon* (1988) by Tim Wynne-Jones and illustrator Ian Wallace. The assertive first sentence – "A message arrived from outer space, a message from the Moon" – occupies two verso pages, each accompanied by coloured pictures on the recto pages. The prose is simple and spare. Clearly a narrator gives us these words, but who she or he is remains a mystery. The tone, however, is warm, perhaps because of the narrator's willingness to repeat – a message, a message from the moon – and in repeating to clarify. The warmth of the telling is secured by the warmth of the soft focus in the pictures by Ian Wallace which use light and space to suggest security and quiet before the dream journey begins. Something similar occurs in relation to the illustrations in *The Hooded Fang*; the book's first illustration, occupying the top of the second page of text, is a conventional portrait of Jacob and his brothers and sisters outside of their "rambling old" house. Throughout the book, the illustrations remind us of the comic book (or cartoon) quality of the story. In contrast, the first illustration in *The dinosaur* gives us a distorted perspective of the school yard in which Jacob feels threatened by "fat Freddy Jackson" and some other kids who make fun of Jacob for his English accent. This illustration too relies on cartoon distortion, but here it is closer to caricature than the illustrations in *The Hooded Fang*. The pen lines are more deeply shaded than in the first book and a combination of sharp angular compositions with dramatic close-ups give these illustrations an ominous quality lacking in *The Hooded Fang*. To put this another way, we might say that the illustrations in *The dinosaur* are not reassuring; rather, as in the first school yard scene, they are claustrophobic and allusive. Jacob Two-Two may wear the same t-shirt in both books, but his hair is markedly different in each set of illustrations. His tightly crinkled flat top in *The dinosaur* is less conventionally safe than the rounded mop-like locks he wears in *The Hooded Fang*. In short, we have more sympathy for the Jacob in the first book than we do for the Jacob in the second book.

Sympathy for the character is part of the embrace. Even a troubled and troublesome character such as Rose Larkin in Janet Lunn's *The root cellar* appears before us in the opening paragraph sympathetically. We have her point of view in all three senses that Chatman outlines for "point of view": we see from her perspective, we share her feelings about the world, and we under-

stand her predicament (Chatman 151-52). The same is true of Jacob Two-Two: we have his point of view in both books. Then why, aside from the effect of the illustrations, should we have more sympathy for Jacob in the first book than in the second book? The answer takes us not to Jacob, but to the voice that tells Jacob's story. Egoff and Saltman are right to notice a difference between the two stories. For one thing, the narrator in *The dinosaur* tells his story with more deviations from a focus on Jacob than in the first book. Whether or not we should use Genette's term paralepsis (providing an excess of information) for these deviations is unclear to me, but we do receive information from the narrator which takes us away from the diegesis. For example, Chapter 5 gives us fill-in information regarding the term "think-tank," and the narrator's explanation of this term contains wry and satiric comments on politicians and their aids. Earlier in the book, in Chapter 2, the narrator provides over a page of information on dinosaurs capped with the quotation of a poem by Bert L. Taylor sometime of the Chicago *Tribune*. What this deviation from diegesis has to say about this narrative is that the narrator plays fast and loose with his audience. He stands apart from the child reader; rather than joining him in the delights of story, he situates himself above his reader. His focus shifts from Jacob and his friend Dippy to Perry Pleaser and Wacko Kilowatt, and when it does, the tone changes. The notion of heroism, so nicely ordinary in *The Hooded Fang*, is debunked in *The dinosaur*. Dippy and Jacob may win the day, but Wacko and Perry, childish as they are, do not join him in a game of two-two; they remain separated by their desire for power. They give heroism a bad name, but they too win the day, or the television coverage which is even more important than winning the day.

My point in all this is as simple as narrative: children's narrative does not differ from narrative for adults in terms of techniques used to tell the narrative. All narrative must have a narrator and a narratee; all narrative must order time and space in some way either mimetically or elliptically; all narrative must depict characters in some way either acting or thinking or both. If anything differentiates narratives for adults from those for children, then I suggest this difference resides in aspects of the telling: tone or mood. The narrative voice, whether that be the voice of the narrator or the voice of an implied author behind the narrator, will embrace us in a children's book. This does not mean that such books cannot be complex in theme or structure or image, only that the voice that tells us the story is warm and reliable. And by reliable, I mean reliable in the sense that we trust the narrator not consciously to lead us astray. Huck Finn, for example, is an unreliable narrator in certain respects, but he is also someone whose humanity we trust. As we approach a transition stage in our reading experience, our books will reflect an emerging ambiguity in the narrative voice. I speak here of books such as those by Kevin Major, Robert Cormier, Jill Paton Walsh, Alan Garner, or Ruth Nicols. When books for younger readers – Richler's *Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur*, for

books for younger readers – Richler's *Jacob Two-Two and the dinosaur*, for example – manifest ambiguity in the narrative voice, they risk losing their young audience. Only those readers who are prepared to take the world as a puzzling and duplicitous place will find such a book attractive. We have to learn that people who tell us stories have motives beyond the mere unfolding of a plot. We have to learn to hear with ears attuned to the possibility that the storyteller's design on us might not be innocent.

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