CHILDREN’S LITERATURE, AN ALMOST FORGOTTEN SOIL

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Abstract

This paper invites the reader to be acquainted with Children’s Literature, a relatively new field of study in Indonesia. It explores the many genres of children’s literature, of what one could expect to find in the field of children’s literature, of the relationship between children and literature, of how important this new field is. It discusses that literature can touch children’s lives, as well as teach and entertain them.

Keywords: Children, Literature, Children’s Genres, Early Childhood Education.

Introduction

The study of children’s literature is generally an almost forgotten soil in Indonesia; a study that has not been receiving enough attention. Though there has been a major increase in interest among Indonesian educators on early childhood education, for example, there has been a lack of attention and interest given to children’s literature. The subject of children’s literature has also surprised, if not shocked, the majority of audience at the HISKI 16th International Conference in 2005. This may explain the rarity of the study of children’s literature in Indonesia’s higher education institutions. At present, not many Indonesian universities offer the course on children’s literature.

This cultural positioning of children’s literature is similar to that of childhood. The conjunction of the two reveals much about the creation of the ideology of both children’s literature and childhood. As Allison Halliday (1996) argues “children are born but childhood is constructed”. The event of the birth of children is ‘natural’, while the idea of childhood is always a product of complex social

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1 Himpunan Sarjana Kesusastraan Indonesia
demands. It is the adult who recollects and recreates their own past experiences and tempers them with their idealized expectations for the children to mould a notion of childhood. A child born in the world will soon have no choice but to accept accompanied baggage thrust to them by the adult.

As a member of a marginalized group in our society, children are never centrally situated. Rather, according Patricia Holland, children, are objects of power and pleasure. In her book *What is A Child* (1992), Holland writes “our gaze puts children in their place, conforms their image to expected patterns” (p. 16). It is true that children’s positions are always determined by adults. They are being told, dictated to, and moulded into expected individuals. With the justification that children still need guidance, all types of control over children are considered proper.

**Children and Children’s Literature**

According to Louise Rosenblatt (1983), literature can enrich students’ experience, enabling them to see themselves, others and their world with new eyes. To Isaac Gilman, a story is never a mere story for children. Stories can call children to imagine the extraordinary, to believe the impossible, to experience the unfamiliar, and to see themselves in the lives of the characters. As they grow up, children need to be exposed to a wide variety of stories and genres.

John Stephens (1989) also states that there are at least three imperative advantages of reading books for children. First of all, children discover a lot about written language before they receive any formal instruction: they learn how print is organized, the top-to-bottom or left-to-right ordering of language, and they may also learn to regard print as a medium offering access to pleasure and information. Secondly, researches (Irwin, 1960; Snow et al., 1976) show that reading books stimulates the most complex speech, promotes the growth in the child’s vocabulary, and produces complex interaction between the adult and child. Thirdly, through story reading, children learn the nature and function of connected discourse. The ability to produce coordinated structures and later subordinated structures is to some extent subject to cognitive constraints (Kemper 1984); which may not be taught through reading, but can be reinforced when the child has achieved capability.

Diana Mitchell (2003) affirms that children take what is written in books very seriously. They believe that books show truth, that the words would not be in print if they weren’t true. If they see dogs and cats in books, they accept them as appropriate animals to have for pets. If they see only two-parent families, they might begin to question what is wrong with their single-parent family. If non-white people are shown only in
subservient roles, children internalize that view. If only women are shown doing housework, they believe that is the natural order. Children learn from books what behaviors are considered appropriate for males and females, children and adults.

Books, still according to Mitchell (2003), validate for children that their lives are normal and that they are part of the culture. Children learn from books what behaviors are considered appropriate, and books serve as a touchstone to which children compare their realities and from which they form their sense of the world. Through literature, children are taught what society values. “Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men”, writes Mem Fox (1993). Beneath the surface of the words and pictures, children’s books contain an array of information and messages. Among the elements embedded in literature are the author’s world view, societal constructs, and evidence of society’s attitudes about such issues as racism, sexism, and classism.

Herbert Kohl (1995), who writes widely about educational issues, describes the deep impact of books for children:

I believe that what is read in childhood not only leaves an impression behind but also influences the values, and shapes the dreams of children. It can provide negative images and stereotypes and cut off hopes and limit aspirations. It can erode self-respect through overt and covert racism and sexism. It can also help young people get beyond family troubles, neighborhood violence, stereotyping and prejudice - all particulars of their lives that they have no control over - and set their imagination free. (pp. 61-62)

It is clear now that stories can show children the possibilities, and the freedom, which childhood offers them. It is the knowledge that the window will always be left open, the knowledge of constant parental support, which enables the children to leave on their fantastical journey and embrace the freedom of their childhood. And the importance of parental support to children’s ability to fully embrace childhood through children’s literature as a space of imaginative freedom cannot be overstated.

Children’s literature is therefore deemed necessary, but sadly absent. Just as childhood becomes an absence to the adult, so too is the position of children’s literature which Peter Hunt (1992) regards as “surviving in the gaps” (p. 128). It is true that, according to Allison Halliday (1996), childhood is also a ‘gap’ in the spectrum of a life. It is a time for learning and change, separate from but creating the adult. Much of it may be forgotten but it is an intrinsic part of what comes after (p. 24).
In focusing on introducing children’s literature, it is necessary to confine children’s literature in some way. What is children’s literature and why study it? According to Hancock, children’s literature is literature that appeals to the interests, needs, reading preferences of children, and that captures children as its major audience (2000, p.5). Mitchell, however, makes a more subjective differentiation that not all “kids’ books” can be categorized as children’s literature. Children’s literature should contain “the author’s passion, interest, and intention; authenticity; literary merit; the high quality of the illustrations and the effectiveness with which they interact with the text; and the richness of the themes” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 4). Although Mitchell’s consideration on the different criteria of mere kids’ books and literary books for children is important, my concern is on the importance to have the children in mind when selecting children’s literature. Children’s literature should generally be dedicated for children: its content is appealing and clear for children, its characters are often children, people, animals or things familiar to children, its settings are places well known to children or places they would love to go, its themes speak to children and their concerns.

There is a sheer abundance of children’s literature as children’s literature comes in different shapes, sizes, genres and formats. Children’s literature includes picture books, poetry, realistic fiction, fantasy, biographical books, informational books, as well as traditional stories such as myths, folk tales, and fairytales. I will discuss four major genres of children’s literature here.

Picture Books
Although a common definition of a picture book is almost impossible to draw, experts agree that the interplay of narrative and illustration is fundamental to the book as a whole. A picture book is a union of words and pictures. Outstanding picture books seamlessly mould both components together, forming a rich and rewarding reading experience. While the illustrations are the core of the book, the text is still essential. After all, it inspired the pictures. Picture books range from wordless books, picture storybooks, to illustrated books as easy readers. These terms are often used interchangeably. The difference between the three is the degree to which illustrations play a role.

In wordless books text is absent or minimal, so children apply meaning to the story. The marvel of wordless/ nearly wordless books is the opportunity to retell the story over and over. Illustrations in wordless/ nearly wordless books offer a degree of detail and plot complexity. In a picture storybook, the pictures merely complement the story, often mirroring the plot. In an illustrated book text and art are equally balanced. Illustrations are used
to emphasize or compliment the story, and are often as or more powerful that the text. Illustrated books are often in the forms of easy readers. Easy readers or sometimes called beginning books or readers, are transition books for children moving from picture books to chapter books. They are designed to read with minimal or no assistance from an adult. Features include larger typefaces, short sentences, sight words, and extra space between words and lines.

William Moebius (1986) believes that illustrations in picture books are not accidental or fortuitous phenomena, but downright basic to the symbolic force of the story. In picture books, there are codes that are important to the storyline. There are, according to Moebius, at least five graphic codes that can play crucial elements in picture books.

The position of the subject on the page, whether the main character is depicted high or low on the page, in the centre or on the fringe, on the left hand side or the right, constitutes the so-called codes of position, size and diminishing returns. Height on the page may be an indication of an ecstatic condition or dream-vision or a mark of social status or power, or of a positive self-image. Being low on the page is often by contrast a signal of low spirits, or of the unfavorable social status. These positions may be strengthened or weakened depending on whether the character is centered or in the margin, large or small, or presented in one or in more than one scene on the same page.

The presence or absence of horizon or horizontals, vanishing points, and contrasts between facades and depths is important in picture books, and constitutes codes of perspectives. The sudden absence of a horizon, of a clear demarcation between ‘above’ and ‘below’ may, for example, likely to spell danger or trouble. The play of the horizon can be complicated if there is a vanishing point, or if above the horizon there is a sheer open space. Either complication may place the reader along with the character in a state of suspense. The position of a character within a two-dimensional façade or a three-dimensional ‘depth’ may give a different perception of the character itself. The one located within a two-dimensional façade is likely to be less ‘open-minded’ and less able to give imaginative scope to desire than one pictured within a three-dimensional ‘depth’.

The code of frames enables the reader to identify with a world inside and outside the story. Framed illustration usually provides a limited glimpse ‘into’ a world, while unframed illustration constitutes a total experience. As the frame usually marks a limit beyond which text cannot go, or from which image cannot escape, the reader may associate a sense of violation or of the forbidden or of the
miraculous with the breaking of the frame. The discussion of the code of the frame has a strong attachment with the code of round vs. rectilinear shapes. A character framed in a series of circular enclosures, for example, is more likely to be secure and content than one framed in a series of utterly rectangular objects. Often, an emphasis on rectangular shapes is coupled with a problem, or with an encounter with the disadvantages of discipline or civilized life. The picture book also provides a temporal as well as a spatial frame. What the front and back pages say is often mutually complementary, even symmetrical.

The intensity of a character’s experience may be represented by the thickness or thinness of lines, by their smoothness or roughness, by their sheer number or abundance or by their spareness, and by whether they run parallel to each other or at sharp angles. Thin, spare lines may suggest mobility and speed, thick, blurred lines may suggest paralysis or a comfortable stasis. Rough and jagged lines and those that run at sharp or odd angles to each other usually accompany troubled emotions or an endangered life. Moebius calls it as the codes of line. While what Moebius calls as the code of capillarity refers to the presence or absence of capillary-like squiggles or bundles. An abundance of such marks often signals vitality or even an excess of energy, representing the scene crowded, nervous, busy, as if each line were a living organism, part of a giant audience.

We have been familiar with the association of certain colors with certain moods or feelings, with the association of bright colors with exhilaration and discovery and of dark colors with disappointment and confusion. Similarly, we should not overlook what color can say inside the text. The reader needs to be sensitive to color as a linkage among different objects.

The graphic codes that Moebius outlined above are interactive, simultaneous, though not always in harmony with the codes of the verbal text, or of the presented world. A picture book reading is never complete without considering the above graphic codes.

Poetry
Poetry is regarded as being an integral part of childhood. Children respond to rhythm ‘naturally’. Word games, jokes and riddles are important parts of children’s experiences from nursery rhymes to the playground. As babies, many of us fell asleep to the soothing sounds of poetry and songs. As toddlers we enjoyed the delights of nursery rhymes told or read to us. As children, we recited rhymes as we skipped rope, and we repeated the slogans we heard on television.
As much integral poetry is in the lives of children, there has been a lack of discussion of poetry in critical discourses on children’s literature. As Hunt (1992) questions, ‘Why is it when we speak of children’s literature we mean fiction and exclude poetry?’ (p.127). Hunt noted that he was unable to find any work which is ‘adequately explores the problems of discussing - or even defining- verse and poetry for children’ (p.14). Thus poetry seems to be part of us all, and it is necessary that children be ‘exposed’ to it but it is seen as obscure by teachers and educators and ignored by literary scholars. Poetry even “dies at schools” according to Myra Cohn Livingston (1984).

How do children connect to poetry? Enjoying poetry isn’t a matter of understanding but experiencing, argues Mitchell (2003). Poetry for children is more than just “meaning”.

Poetry will never move you or speak to you if you see it as a puzzle to be figured out. It isn’t something that can be made whole by taking the pieces apart and putting them together again. Dissecting and analyzing won’t make you a lover of poetry. (p. 144)

Poetry is meant to be enjoyed, and teachers should invite the children to read poetry for the fun of it, for the beauty of it rather than weighing the children with the task to analyze poetry and figure out its meaning syllable by syllable. Children should be invited to sit back and appreciate the power of poetry and watch how a few words, carefully chosen with attention to sound, rhyme, rhythm can produce such impact. Poetry can tell children that they are not alone - that others experience the same feelings of fear, sadness, jealousy, and joy. As X.J Kennedy and Barbara Kennedy point out, poetry can also make us laugh. Laughter connects us to other people and helps the children experience and share joy in the moment. Here is an example of a poetry that children enjoy so much without ever worrying about the meaning just yet.

The pickety fence
The pickety fence
Give it a lick it’s
The pickety fence
Give it a lick it’s
A clickety fence
Give it a lick it’s
A lickety fence
Give it a lick it’s
A pickety fence
With a rickety stick
Pickety
Pickety
Pickety
Pick

(from ONE AT A TIME
by David McCord)

Folk and Fairy Tales
Folk tale is a short story that comes from the oral tradition. Folk tales often have
to do with everyday life and frequently feature wily peasants getting the better of their superiors. One of the central themes of folktales is “might makes right”. Fairy tales are a subgenre of folk tales and almost always involve some element of magic and good triumphing over evil. A good rule of thumb: if there’s a fairy in the story, it’s a fairy tale.

Folktales were originally not meant for children. Folktales started to be addressed to children during the Enlightenment Period, when discipline and obedience on the part of the child were stressed. The church, pedagogues and moralists viewed the child as closer to God than adults and they believed children needed education and discipline.

As school systems began to emerge, the child was then perceived as a delicate creature that had to be protected, educated, and moulded in accordance with the current educational beliefs and goals (Shavit, 1999, p. 321). From then on, children’s books were written on an understanding of the child as the audience and of the child’s needs which were assumed to be different from those of adults (Shavit, 1999, p. 326 - 7).

Zipes also states that folk and fairy tales “were written with the purpose of socializing children to meet definite normative expectations at home and in the public sphere," (Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, p. 9). Folk and fairy tales are believed to influence the behaviour of children in a way that reflects societal standards. This makes folktale a convenient vehicle for moral, socio-cultural, and other agendas. It is therefore not surprising that in many countries, including Indonesia, folktales automatically win the heart of every parent who is choosing a suitable text for their children for folktales are texts believed to be derived from authentic cultures, and help to create a community and maintain the customs of their culture.

Scholars believe that folktales and fairy tales have a greater impact on the psychological and moral development of children than other forms of literature. Robbins (1998), for example, contrasts fairy tales with “mere short stories”, claiming that fairy tales go further by reaching into a child’s subconscious, where images and attitudes can perpetuate societal standards. Folk and fairy tales, therefore, look as if they are expressing our desires because we have taken up their standards since our childhood. Their legitimacy may thus continue to be unquestioned (Robbins, 1998, p. 101).

Narrative Story
Children's narrative stories may include fiction or non fiction books. John Stephens (1989) points out that language generally works by linking words together in a line, like the links in a chain. When this is done
in a literary text, we expect that the resulting chain will be more than a mere accumulation, but will have some direction imparted to it by the overall structure of the text. This is especially important in children’s books, since, as any parent or The old woman pulled the old man.

The old man pulled the turnip.
And they pulled and pulled again, but they could not pull it up.

The first two sentences present the simple narrative sequence: old woman → old man // old man → turnip; the third sentence complicates the syntax with coordinate conjunctions (and, but), deictic (they, it), and negation of a key term (could not pull), and at the same time these process convey a complication of the story in the disjunction between effort and result.

After discussing the importance of children’s literature to children, I believe we have all agreed that children’s literature should be cultivated. From reading books, and being read to, children could benefit from the above advantages of children’s literature. There are things which can only be learned by doing, hence the importance of books in early childhood.

REFERENCES:


