
‘Cutting it’ in New Times: The Future of Children’s Literature?

Kerry Mallan

In 1998, I attended my first ACLAR conference at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga (NSW). John Stephens gave the keynote address and his paper was principally concerned with what children’s literature scholars were interested in – namely, what theoretical/critical approaches were reflected in journals and what were the predominant concerns with the fiction. His conclusions, based on a survey of 24 articles published in the then latest 1998 issue of four journals – *Papers*; *Children’s Literature in Education*, *Children’s Literature*, and *Lion and the Unicorn* – were:

We are interested in fiction and literary history, often in tandem; we are not much interested in poetry, film, drama, or theory in itself; we approach texts from historicist and formalist stances; we are modern in our thematic concerns with socio-cultural discourses of ethnicity/race, gender and class (but the fiction itself is apt to dictate that); and critical practice is taking on board some concepts from modern cultural and literary theories... the most common of these is intertextuality, which is characteristically deployed in relation to smaller/ or visual texts to fiction (Stephens 1999, p.7).

The fourteen papers included in the proceedings of that conference, *Something to Crow About: New Perspectives in Literature for Young People* (Clancy & Gibney 1999), tend to support Stephens’ point in that whilst some papers incorporated postcolonial, feminist, and narrative theories, the majority tended to view texts and genres from a formalist and/or historicist perspective. Furthermore, the majority of the papers were interested in realist fiction, historical fiction, and picture books; however, poetry and film were also the subject of two papers. What is interesting from a 2006 perspective is that Judith Butler and theories of performativity were absent, and Harry Potter was still being conceived in some coffee shop in Edinburgh by an allegedly desperate housewife soon to become a literary superstar.

So eight years on, I want to consider not so much the question – ‘What are we interested in now?’ – but to raise some questions about the future of children’s literature, both its fiction and its scholarship. By turning the phrase ‘the future of children’s literature’ into a question, I don’t want to pose a philosophical puzzle, but to ask a real question

which demands serious consideration. I think that given the ‘new times’ in which we are all supposedly living we need to give careful consideration to this question, not out of concern for any discomfort these new times might afford us on a personal level, but out of a genuine concern for the future of children’s literature studies. I want to approach this paper by considering three things: (i) How are new times impacting on us as scholars working in children’s literature?; (ii) What are the new directions offered to us by children’s cultural texts? (iii) What are the new tasks we can set ourselves before they are set for us?.

‘Who sank the boat?’: New times, Generation Y, and Children’s literature scholars

While ‘new times’ can be recorded at various points throughout the history of the world, the current ‘new times’ we are experiencing in the Western world are also emerging in many other non-western countries – the opening of McDonald’s in Beijing is an example. A number of factors characterize our current period of new times which are producing fast and continual social, economic and cultural changes. These factors include: (i) rapid innovations in scientific and technological knowledge; (ii) high-speed flows of information, ideas, images, people and money across increasingly porous territorial borders through global capitalism; (iii) increased consumption; (iv) the blurring of online and offline worlds; (v) and a merging of global and local (glocal) as global flows of cultural products are reworked and reinscribed in local settings (Castells 2000). One of the expectations of living in new times is that we must learn to navigate and negotiate multiple and diverse social worlds. These new times may well advise us to ‘shop till you drop’ as a perverse reworking of Herbert Spencer’s ‘survival of the fittest’. Young people, let’s call them Generation Y (born between 1980 – 1994), appear to embody liquid modernity with apparent ease. However, those of us who might easily be referred to as ageing Baby Boomers often struggle to come to terms not so much with the pace of change (though this too) but with the way in which familiar ideas, practices, and the materials with which we able to craft our identities and forge our livelihoods are becoming obsolete. I do not want to universalize young people, nor do I want to claim that they are totally at ease in these new times. My point is that while there has always been



a gap between university lecturers and their predominantly younger student cohorts, the gap today is perhaps widened by the kinds of expectations we have about knowledge (its acquisition and worth) in a world that is characterized by rapid change, uncertainty, and instantaneity. The perception of what counts as worthwhile knowledge or by extension worthwhile learning is something that many of our universities are currently making decisions about (I would like to say debating but I don't think this is an accurate reflection of the processes involved). Outcomes and real-world application are valorised while everything classified as non-scientific, non-technical, non-commercial is relegated to the wasteland of lost and forgotten things. Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* (2000) takes the folly of this dichotomous argument to its logical extreme in a narrative in which the privileging of scientism, capitalism, and bureaucracy is at the expense of the imagination, human interactions and empathy. The story depicts a futuristic Melbourne where personal names are no longer necessary as individuality is lost to the past and stories are no longer remembered. The story begins with:

So you want to hear a story?

Well, I used to know a whole lot of pretty interesting ones. Some of them funny you'd laugh yourself unconscious, others so terrible you'd never want to repeat them.

But I can't remember any of those.

(Tan 2000)

Without wishing to paint a picture of grim destiny, I think we are in danger of becoming lost things in the world of academia. Whilst it is important to keep telling each other interesting 'stories' about our research, we need also to tell them to different audiences and in different contexts. And perhaps this is a good thing that has come out of university life in new times of high impact journals, and international esteem. Many people who have come to children's literature from other disciplinary paths have a record of publishing in journals across a wide spectrum of literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, education, librarianship and other fields. But perhaps we don't often write enough about children's literature in these other

forums, thus bringing attention to the ways in which children's texts also write the world.

As scholars working in literature, contrary to popular opinion or at least the opinion of the senior management of our universities, we prove time and again how we are capable of adaptive change and persistently demonstrate the positive gains of having an 'insatiable curiosity', stubbornly resisting Kipling's cautionary tale of the elephant who learnt his lesson from asking too many questions. But in terms of the future of literary studies, and in particular, children's literature studies, we are faced with challenges that will test our ability to demonstrate our flexibility, creativity, and self-reflexivity – characteristics of the kinds of adaptive responses required for living in new times. One of these challenges is the way innovation is viewed both in our universities and in the national research priorities set by the Australian Research Council (ARC). As Bullen, Robb and Kenway (2004) argue, in the new knowledge economy policy proposed by the Federal Government, research funding targets science, mathematics, and information technology and 'the humanities and creative arts are conspicuous by their absence' (p5). I'll return to this article a little later, but for now I want to stay with the point I've just referred to, about the absence of the humanities in the new knowledge economy. The literary boat has not sunk but it seems we need to acquire new skills in navigating a course through the turbulent seas of research priorities in order to stay afloat and appear relevant to new students and university administration.

An article 'Grant us time, not cash' by Imre Salusinszky in *The Weekend Australian* (April 8 – 9, 2006) touches on points similar to those Bullen and her colleagues make, but there are essential differences. Salusinszky's article is written for a general readership and perhaps one which is sceptical about the money thrown at university lecturers to do spurious research. While he makes some valid observations about the way in which the grant culture demanded by the Australian Research Council is one which is more suited to the sciences and social sciences than the humanities, I take issue with his point that 'liberal arts scholars should do themselves, scientists and taxpayers a service by bailing out of this system. Because the more they succumb to it, the further they drift from the humanities'.

It seems that the drift is away from a nostalgic past where humanities professors read, pondered and wrote while eager Ritas sat at their feet seeking an education and entrée into a privileged domain of knowledge. As recent successful ARC grants by children's literature scholars here have demonstrated, we can work within this system to produce new knowledge and to demonstrate the relevance of the humanities, particularly our field of children's literature, to a society where the status of literature and its consumption have to compete for attention as one of many commodities in the cultural marketplace.

At the Edge, Around the Edges

The metaphorical play suggested by our conference theme, 'Children's literature at the edge', implies a number of possibilities. Are children's books on the edge of something great and new? (What will follow the popularity of Harry Potter or Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*? The gothic cynicism of Lemony Snicket? The coolness of *Artemis Fowl*?). Is the discipline of children's literature studies on the verge of a new paradigm shift? Are we as scholars in the field along with our beloved texts teetering on the edge of oblivion waiting for that final puff of economic rationalism to push us into the abyss of academic lost causes? Such a final note of despair seems surly and almost unthinkable, especially given the glow that children's literature invariably engenders.

The term 'children's literature' is often used as a shorthand for books written for children and children's books studied by adults. This separation of what Rod McGillis (2006, p.89) terms 'book people' and 'child people' is somewhat arbitrary. But as McGillis quite rightly notes, the difference in terms of how children's literature is viewed and discussed translates into the academic approaches that inform courses in children's literature across Education, Arts, and Librarianship faculties. In the light of our conference theme it is more complicated than a separation of the heart and the head. Children's literature as a field of scholarship has long proven its intellectual rigor, and as Stephens noted in the ACLAR address in 1998, 'Children's literature scholars are less diffident about the idea of theory than they were a few years ago' (p.2). One need only look at the papers presented at recent conferences organized by IRSCL,

Children's Literature Association, and ACLAR to see that theory is alive and well. But there has always been a tacit separation of critical and materialist approaches between conferences such as those by IBBY and the Children's Book Council of Australia and the more theory-based conferences just mentioned. Despite the differences, there is undoubtedly a multiplicity of viewpoints, theoretical positions covering historicist, formalist, and critical theory, and personal and political passions that are canvassed when children's literature scholars gather *en masse*.

I want to turn now to consider briefly what this conference sees as the new directions offered by children's cultural texts. After a perusal of the abstracts, I wonder if children's literature scholarship is not so much on the edge but at the edges – listening, reading, experimenting, creating, and appropriating everything that the imagination and critical theory have to offer. Like artful dodgers we weave our way through various theoretical terrains, keeping out an eye for sparkling gems of ideas, always ready to pick the pockets of the famous in order to bring our own spin on old texts, new texts, old theories, new theories. This contrasting approach to old and new theories and to texts generally, characterises the way this conference theme has been interpreted by a diverse range of scholars.

When the Berenstains wrote *Old Hat, New Hat* (1973), a primer disguised as a children's book, their point – old is good – is now quaintly at odds with these new times of rampant consumerism. It seems that the old hat just won't do any more. However, as several of the conference presenters argue, old texts may not necessarily be old hat, but may indeed offer scholars and child readers someone new. So they would suggest that we don't want to dismiss Louisa May Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and E.B. White just yet. In a similar fashion, what we might term 'old theories' or new takes on old theories appear to inform the ways in which new and old texts can be read in many of the papers. Some of you utilise feminist, postcolonial, and psychological theories and social semiotics in examining fairy tales, fiction, picture books, and film. Others highlight children's literature's responsiveness to literary trends and innovations, considering new genres (e.g. 'chicklit'), postmodern genres such as magical realism, and the merging of genre and theory (feminist science and science

fiction). Asian and indigenous literatures, animations, and translations are the subject of several papers offering fertile opportunities to explore difference, and debate notions of authenticity, performativity, relativism, and incommensurability. Issues of identity, conservative politics, globalisation, and genre are raised in other papers in ways that hold promise for new readings about new times and new spaces. The past and the future also appear in papers that consider the place of memory and remembering, of temporality, and of imagining in a postmodern and post 9/11 world. Shifting ecological discourses, a 'discourse of the end', and technological discourses variously form the basis of several papers, prompting further discussion about the global environment, dystopic futures, virtual experience and social relations in an information age. Finally, in this age of uncertainty and change, the human and posthuman body is the subject of papers that consider notions of physicality, humanness, ethnicity, gender, and class in narrative fictions.

While this is a rather superficial overview of the range of papers that comprise this conference, it nevertheless demonstrates the diversity of children's cultural texts in terms of their fictions, appeal, transnational marketing, and the critical discourses we bring to them. Given this rich context, I don't want to rehearse specific texts or topics that many of you will be discussing in depth. I do want to spend a few minutes, however, considering some of the issues you raise and which appear to grab the attention of writers for children and young adults in new times.

Our ever-changing world presents new challenges for writing and thinking about identity formation and social relations, about local differences and totalizing schema. Undoubtedly, the political and cultural times in which we are living are shaping many of the narratives that speak of globalisation, terrorism, new technologies, and deterioration of the planet. In the context of the globalised age and the hegemony of new technologies, we might ask: How does the geographical location of developing countries inform or dismantle traditional identity categories? How are new technologies being used to reinstate or overturn versions of patriarchy and to make and remake bodies? How can globalisation foster new collectives that will forge intersubjective understandings? These questions and others

raise conflicting worldviews and present double takes on cultural and scientific phenomena.

In a recent special issue of *Papers* (December, 2005), contributors were invited to write about utopian and dystopian texts for children and young adults. Despite the majority of articles focusing on the 'dystopian turn' in children's literature in the past few years, Ann McGuire, the guest editor of that issue, noted that despite this emphasis on dystopia, the texts discussed by the contributors signify 'an enormously positive phenomenon' as they can be read as markers of a counter tendency to render history irrelevant, flat, and depthless by displaying

a willingness to read the present as part of an historical continuum of change, and an assumption that in order for the future to be different, the present must be seen as a complex of active social and economic processes in constant transition that need to be explored and analysed by active readers.
(McGuire 2005, p.3)

Furthermore, McGuire asserts that writers of these children's texts position readers 'to see their own society and its inadequacies from a fresh, estranged perspective' (p.5). The task for children's writers is, I think, to continue to open up new ways of seeing the world, of making the familiar strange, of engaging with alternative ideas that speak of transformed social spaces. This is not a new task, but one which can be easily forgotten amidst the overabundance of conservative texts offering safe and all too familiar scenarios and resolutions. Despite many of the transformative children's texts cited in this special issue of *Papers*, there is a more pervasive tendency for fictions that engage with issues of identity formation, sociality, family, and new social orders to lose their transformative potential by slipping into a new didacticism that echoes prevailing conservative politics and social insecurities. I term it a 'new' didacticism because such texts which begin by challenging existing societal norms and tyrannies, often end by proposing new world orders that are remarkably similar to the ones they first attempted to escape from. Thus, the ideological work of many children's books continues to make its invisible presence felt by establishing and maintaining a system of beliefs and practices that seem inevitable and natural. It is not that I'm advocating

wholesale anarchy and chaos, but in terms of perpetuating systems of prescription and proscription, I think we need to consider the overt and covert ideological assumptions of children's and YA texts particularly as they relate to aspects of ethnicity, race, gender, class, religion, and sexuality in a world that is characterized by fear, and by globalizing forces which attempt to standardize culture, suppress difference, and homogenize identity.

In some cases, a comedic turn offsets a world that is becoming increasingly sombre. In his novels, *Burger Wuss* (1999) and *Feed* (2002), M.T. Anderson is able to deal with issues of globalisation, consumerism, advertising, and what it like to be growing up as a teenager in America with both insight and a satiric edge. These books are like the 'The Glass House' of YA literature as the writing style is punchy with a youthful vernacular and sense of comedy. (The Glass House is an Australian comedy talk show on ABC television that offers satirical comments on current affairs.)

There is, of course, another side of globalisation, particularly if we look at its economic axis. Globalisation has impacted on children's book publishing opening up opportunities for many writers. As Nadia Crandall notes:

Successful children's writers enjoy larger advances, more prestige, better publicity and unprecedented opportunities for film, television and merchandising spin-offs. It is unsurprising that celebrities and established adult authors, as well as aspiring writers, are making what Nicholas Clee (2004) has called a 'fashionable move' into children's literature.

(Crandall 2006, p.x).

While Crandall is writing about the UK children's publishing market, Australian publisher and independent writer Robyn Sheahan-Bright, writing seven years earlier, also notes that globalization and other social changes, along with increased government spending and intervention, have altered the field. It is interesting that while she also names celebrity publishing and increased marketing as trends, others include:

- Monopolisation
- Shift away from British to US and global publishing influences
- Increased power of the Children's Book Council of Australian awards
- A nexus between the trade and educational sectors
- Growing influence of the electronic media
- 'Issues-based' publishing. (Sheahan-Bright 1999, p.24).

It is Sheahan-Bright's point about the 'growing influence of the electronic media' that I want to consider. New media technologies are often seen as the *bêtes noires* of children's literature by some parents, teachers, and politicians who fear that digital media will lure children away from reading books and result in a generation of asocial technophiles and hackers. This is a spurious claim and one I don't want to consider here. What I think is more interesting is the way in which new technologies and children's literature work in tandem. While science fiction writers have always written about imagined futures which are inhabited by the products of science, writers of realist fiction are increasingly (yet not surprisingly) incorporating 'newish' technologies with characters surfing the net, using mobile phones, and emailing. Other stories have virtual entities inhabiting computers as in the early examples by Gillian Rubinstein – *Space Demons* (1986) and *Sky Maze* (1989) – and more recently in *Exodus* (2002) by Julie Bertagna, where a cyberwizz comprising a globe, a wand and a halo, is the 'old' technology Mara uses to enter into cyberspace and meet with the mysterious 'cyberfox' who turns out to be a realworld person who inhabits another part of the now submerged Earth of the future. Marla Harris (2005), writing on this trend of computer-and-internet novels, notes that writers are using a range of typographical conventions and graphics to simulate being online in these novels by incorporating computer screen images of emails, chat rooms, complete with frames, icons, toolbars, and menus (eg. series such as *Cybersurfers*, *Internet Detectives*, and *Danger.com*). Harris speculates that perhaps this trend of computer-and-internet novels is 'attracting children and

young adults who like to read as well as those who like to “surf the net” (2005, p.125). Possibly. But maybe these novels are simply reflecting the multimodal world in which children live and the incorporation of these textual features may have more of a novelty impact on adults than they do on children.

In the past decades of the twentieth century, postmodern narratives for children and the technological embodiment of narrative, such as Internet fiction, have contributed to the demise of traditional narrative authority and opened up new formulations of the role of readership in narrative. For example, hypertext fiction, though still fairly uncommon in children’s literature, operates in an environment in which there is an increased awareness on the part of readers of the characteristics of genres and an enhanced sense of the capacity for participation in the narrative. The early attempts to simulate hypertext fictions in print form, such as Choose Your Own Adventure series, allowed readers to choose an ending from those that the author devised. Hypertext fiction takes this further by allowing alternatives *within* the body of the narrative, exploring what in print culture we would call ‘digressions’ which could be as long and as complex as the ‘main’ text (see Snyder 1998, p.127). It is pertinent to note that this kind of reading that hypertext fiction encourages is not new, but it highlights the ways in which Internet searching, with its capacity for spontaneous information, has become a pervasive investigative tool. An extension of online writing is evident in initiatives such as Sticky.net.au set up by Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology (Australia): an online interactive space designed to encourage young authors, artists, and musicians to create and share their work online.

While Crandall considers Internet fiction or e-novels for children as currently not economically viable, website marketing is a very profitable and widespread phenomenon. Many publishers and writers set up blogs and websites to promote author information and forthcoming titles, or to just talk about stuff in general. Julie Bertagna’s website includes songs such as P. J. Harvey’s ‘Big Exit, A Place Called Home’ and Elvis Presley’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ as soundtrack suggestions to accompany her book *Exodus*. Popular teen writer Ned Vizzini uses blogs and a personal website as a shrewd way to communicate with readers and to market

his books. His web production company Brain Bridge has created ‘Squiverse’, an online marketing space for Squip paraphernalia (stickers, art, stories, and t-shirts) that are spin-offs from his second novel *Be more Chill* (2004), a story about a mini computer called a ‘Squip’. This marketing strategy is interesting in the way that this young writer has produced a kind of McVizzinisation that combines global commodity, teen novel, and virtual community. The active consumption by readers in Squiverse highlights the increasing globalised nature of human, economic, and cultural relations for young people.

The future of children’s literature: putting newness to work

In his media commentary about the future of the liberal arts in universities, Allan Luke (2006) concedes that while universities serve the national economic interest they must also ‘remain seedbeds for basic intellectual work, for speculative theory and experimental practice’. Within the children’s literature research community, many of the primary materials we work with are speculative fictions and our scholarship is often the kind that does experiment with the critical practices of reading and writing about texts. Utopian fiction is a good example of how a speculative work can propose practical politics of social and political reforms, which have either been carried out or which offer practical possibilities. The New Gothic genre is another example whereby a diverse body of texts ranging from ghost stories to cybergothic tales make it possible for us to study them as both literary phenomenon and cultural paradigm as they engage with deep-seated societal fears and paranoia, barbaric rituals, and taboos. The television series *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and other Gothic tales like the children’s novel, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman (2002) not only help ‘to dislodge areas of cultural anxiety’ (Reynolds 2001, 17), but also satirise contemporary social and political horrors. What gothic texts like *Buffy* and *Coraline* are able to achieve is an ambiguous representation of menace and perversity. Both texts draw on traditional Gothic tropes. *Buffy* delights in the gothic style of sensationalist imagery – dark underworld caverns of Hellmouth, graveyards at midnight, and trees in shadowy forms. In the cramped space of the domestic interior, *Coraline* tells a family story from a female child’s point of view highlighting the

fears and psychic conflicts of familial relationships, and the *unheimlichkeit* of the nuclear family: in the Freudian sense that something we thought was safe and homely turns into something terrifying and uncanny.

By bringing to texts such as these our interests in psychoanalytic theory, feminist theories, gothic studies, utopianism and other critical discourses, we are able to engage in the kind of intellectual work that Luke sees as essential to university life. Whilst some might see this as a heavy-handed approach to discussing children's literature, others will argue that children's and young adult texts do more than entertain, as they respond to the world in ways that are accessible to children and ostensibly from a young person's perspective. Our role is to consider the effectiveness of a text's re-presentation of the world, to trouble the relations between literary form and the reality it attempts to imitate by attending to matters of referentiality and authenticity. In other words, we concede that pure reference – between language and the thing it refers to – is not possible and that the literary or filmic text that purports to be an authentic account of human experience can only ever be a construction. But, nevertheless, these fictional constructions allow readers imaginative spaces to entertain new ideas, to vicariously experience alternative ways of being, and to consider the consequences of actions. As Frank Moorhouse observes:

The reality of our world is messy and it is no wonder that people seek comfort in idealistic dreaming with its appeals to a distant partly imagined world body that has answers to all questions and can solve all problems, relieve all suffering.
(2003, p.27)

Children's literature and the criticism of it have in the past 10 years or so taken on these more political projects. Suman Gupta writing, in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, says that this move towards the political sees children's literature criticism as 'a site of reflections on identity-based approaches and locations (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, north-south locations, migrant identities, etc.), or more broadly on ideology and politics itself' (2005, p. 314). Given that children's literature's idealised function is the socialization of children it would seem that this move

entails not just 'more complex negotiations of socialization practices' as Gupta suggests, but an opportunity for these texts to open up ways of 'disturbing the universe', to borrow a phrase popularised by the physicist and futurist, Freeman J. Dyson.

A new task then that we can set ourselves is to consider how we can go about disturbing the universe by reconsidering the methodologies we use in discussing books and the theoretical orientations we take up. No matter what methodology we use there is an inherent problem that the viewpoint or critical discourse we bring to our reading of a text inevitably determines (or locates) the problems we see, the questions we ask, and the solutions we find. Whilst we have long abandoned orthodoxies that promote universals, grand narratives and teleology by embracing critical discourses such as postcolonial, poststructuralist, and queer theories, in reading about 'new worlds' we need to remain mindful that what some may see as 'old problems' – class conflict, gender relations and so on – are still present and not resolved. Roland Barthes wrote of this theoretical dilemma through the notion of *para doxa*. As Barthes explained: '*doxa* is current opinion, meaning repeated as *if nothing had happened*'. *Para doxa* on the other hand, is 'that which could resist and disturb the beliefs and forms and codes of that culture. It is anything which is contrary to common opinion and to that which is considered "natural"' (Barthes 1975, 70-71). It difficult to stand back from our preferred theoretical perspective to understand how our methodological approach to texts may be preventing us from reading them in ways that help us to see the limitations of our own histories, and what Hall calls our 'theoretical self-presentation' (2003, p.87). Barthes was highly critical of Method, saying that there was 'no surer way to kill a piece of research than ...Method' (1977, p.201). Rather, he advocated reading texts as a critical practice, which affords a perspective, an attitude, and a sensibility. To do this is to call into question *doxa* – the taken for granted meanings, the 'naturalness' of the so-called givens, 'the dogmatic, the fixed, static, and limiting' (Hall 2003, p.87). Queer theory attempts to do this and to some extent so does a poststructuralist approach that emphasises its own implication in the structures it examines. Hopefully, many of the papers in

this conference will be obstinately refusing to submit to a text's doxa – its socially sanctioned dominant meanings and the subjectivity it proposes.

I think queer theories have much to offer critics who have a desire for working paradoxically (that is, beyond doxa). At present there have been only a few children's literature scholars who engage in queer readings of children's texts, and, by turn, there are relatively few queer texts written for young people, though writers such as Melvin Burgess, Bette Williams, Francesca Lia Block are among the few who write queer fiction (as distinct from stories about gays or lesbians). [It is heartening to see a paper at this conference that is using queer theory.] However, a queer reading can apply to most texts and as Donald Hall maintains: 'All texts have certain queer internal aspects, traces, and resonances, and, of course, all texts can be used "queerly" by any reader or set of readers who wish to do so' (2003, p.148). By queering ostensibly 'straight' texts we open up the ways for seeing how the performative processes of identity formation provide evidence of biases, exclusions, and proscriptions. As Hall says, 'we all speak out of our own sexual, historical, geographical, ideological, class-, gender-, and ethnicity-related positions' (p.167). Consequently, if we are intent upon taking a self-reflexive move in our work we need to also consider how the theories we adopt and ourselves as scholars reflect upon and actively live out the epistemological standpoints and critiques they/we espouse.

New times make new demands on literary studies (and cultural studies). As queer theory and the work by Judith Butler have provided us with new directions for thinking about literature as a cultural site of gender construction, we need also to consider how globalisation demands our attention in new ways. One demand requires us to reconsider the primary textual materials that are the basis of our research and teaching. Given the current demographic, economic and political developments that are occurring in Australia and in many other parts of the world, then it is an important social and political function that we begin to include a wider range of literatures and other cultural products in the courses we teach, and as part of our own research agendas. Thus, by actively participating in cultural research that attends to both nonhegemonic cultures and

western cultures, we can connect our discipline with tasks of high social and political priority. The work carried out by Rey Chow, Stuart Hall, Stephen Muecke, Gayatri Spivak, and children's literature scholars such as Clare Bradford, Rod McGillis, and Louise Saldana, and others working with postcolonial theory have helped to reorient the academic map around global phenomena of exile, diaspora, forced migrancy, immigration, and indigenous literatures. Thus, one possible answer to the question of the future of children's literature at both the institutional level and at the research level lies in the diversity of global projects we can undertake and the kinds of collaborations we can forge with scholars from different disciplines.

In shifting our often exclusive concentration on the traditional hegemony of Eurocentric or Anglophone texts to include other cultures, literatures, televisual texts, and digital media that have previously been either ignored or marginal to our interests, we encounter a different set of problems and dilemmas. For example, the Iranian graphic novel, *Persepolis: The story of a childhood* (2003) by Marjane Satrapi and the Iraqi film *Turtles Can Fly* (2005) by Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi are examples of recent texts that offer western readers an insider's view into the daily lives of children living through repressive regimes or surviving in liminal spaces with the fear of impending war: events which we hear about through syndicated news reports. Our reading/viewing of these texts is made accessible through the skill of the writers, illustrators, filmmakers, cinematographers, and actors who use humour as well as tenderness to make an empathetic connection. But how do we write about these texts? How do we work out the connections between representation and reality? How do we locate the texts within the contexts that they were produced and circulated and the contexts in which we receive them? How do we seek productive tensions between different theoretical perspectives to assist in reading agency in these texts as well as for seeing how individuals are positioned in oppressive structures? Adopting a random eclecticism is not a solution. As Ania Loomba notes, 'within the literary academy, we often see a too-easy pluralism, where all theories are regarded as equally and unproblematically available for the scholar' (1998, 254). Therefore, in developing new discursive

frameworks for considering the ways that new times impact on cultural conflict, changing social relations, and power alliances we need to keep in mind the paradoxes that persist and encircle conflicting concepts of oppression and liberation; survival and extinction; war and peace.

It would seem then that new discursive frameworks require us to be both self-reflexive and critical. This dialectical critical engagement can be used to interrogate both the phenomenon we study as well as our own participation in it by challenging our own blind spots and exclusions. While self-critique smacks of humanist idealism, we nevertheless must not condemn ourselves to a cycle of perpetual critique without an exit. We might find that self-reflexivity is achieved more easily when we participate in collaborative projects with colleagues who are not only from other disciplines, but from a cultural background that is different from our own. To do so is to realize the possibilities of what Mary Louise Pratt figures as 'unforeseen matings and crossbreedings' (1995, 58). Pratt's notion of 'matings and crossbreedings' brings to the fore the idea that children's literature scholars like other critics, theorists, and practitioners must identify their position within what Stanley Fish terms 'an interpretive community' (1980). This also means dissociating ourselves from other communities, while participating in several interpretive communities through a shared critical vocabulary. However, we need to preserve those aspects of our discipline which speak to the particularity of the texts and its readers. We must not lose sight of our ability to understand how textuality functions. This is our strength and one that can contribute to other projects. This might mean offering principled accounts of how children's literature remains a significant site in which the global imagination is produced and represented. In plain terms, this means considering how narrative and critical theory can illuminate not just literary studies, but cultural phenomena.

In setting ourselves new tasks that are cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and self-reflexive, we might reconsider, for example, the directions in which theorizing of new technologies have taken in new times with respect to texts, reading practices, and subjectivity. Just as the rise of literature in the early decades of the nineteenth century demanded new modalities of literary reading, new

technologies also demand new modalities of reading. Many children's literature and education scholars have already tackled this area (among them, Margaret Mackey, Andrew Burns, Catherine Beavis, James Gee, Wendy Morgan). But there is more work for us to do, not just in the area of multiliteracies, but also in engaging with the humanist and posthumanist ideologies that invariably shape these texts. Jean Baudrillard's contention that science fiction is no longer necessary as we are already living it must hold a certain significance for children who are growing up at a time of a biotechnology revolution whereby even young children are aware of the ways medical science can make perfect bodies, enhance performance, produce mood and mind altering drugs, extend lives and so on. But medical and scientific research goes hand in hand with legal reform and parliamentary decision-making. The promise of a better world is always tempered with fears of a 'brave new world' whereby new forms of control and surveillance through electronic storage and retrieval systems such as national genetic databases will impose severe limits on an individual's right to privacy. These medical, legalistic, and humanist themes are rehearsed in futuristic scenarios in stories written for children and provide fertile ground for debate and discussion.

In commenting on academic accounts of new technologies, Richard Coyn argues that much of the research centres on a new postmodern romanticist vision which contains:

A focus on subjectivity, a new metaphysics of proximity, a revival of the early socialist dream of community, a disdain for the constraints imposed by the body, embracing the holistic unitary patterning of chaos theory, the representation of the object world, a hope for its ultimate transcendence through the technologies of cyberspace, and a quest for a better, fairer more democratic future (Coyn 1998, p.349).

There is a similar reliance on a romantic ethos of the subject, in children's futuristic fictions which entertain scenarios of our Promethean efforts to remake nature to serve our purposes. In the latest issue of *Papers*, John Stephens discusses notions of performativity and subjectivity in a selection of recent children's books that deal with the posthuman. Stephens's conclusion accords with Coyn's

point in that he states: 'What I miss in these books is a use of the posthuman to suggest other forms of awareness, or different subjectivities' (Stephens 2006, p.x). It seems then that writers are unable or unwilling to deconstruct the liberal humanist subject in children's texts, in order to consider the possibilities of new technologies for interrogating the performative behaviours by which subjectivity and sociality are currently organized (Stephens p.12). In other words, they tend not to propose other ways of being than those that are currently constructed through language and neoliberal discourse. Our task as scholars is to understand the implications of these and other fictions in terms of the social ordering of our times and their failure to seize the opportunities to explore alternative discourses.

Instead of bemoaning the fact that others might see us as goodwill ambassadors of 'kiddie lit', we need to strut our academic stuff and show that we know how to cut it in these new times by bringing our work to the attention of the academy at large and to the granting bodies. If children's literature as a field of study is to survive amidst the political storms of high impact journals, national research priority areas, vocationally obsessed tertiary courses, then it must find new ways of making its presence felt both within the academy and outside of it. I want to return to the article by Bullen and colleagues that I mentioned earlier. They support the point that research and learning in the arts and humanities is not a luxury and cite some key benefits of humanities research by Bigelow:

- The vital role it plays in intellectual freedom;
- The indispensable service it provides through critical analysis;
- The provision of a sense of place in history and the world;
- Its function as a key player in public culture;
- The preservation and transmission of traditions from one generation to the next;
- The questioning and maintenance of ethical values; and
- Thinking constructively about what the future may hold.

(cited in Bullen, et al. 2004, 7)

These are salutary points for us to keep in mind, especially at times when we might wonder if what we are doing is worth it. But we need to be careful that we do not appear to adopt a defensive position. In this globalised age, we cannot ignore other mediums that transmit culture and ideas electronically and need to incorporate these into our research agendas along with print fictions. Although we place emphasis on *children's* literature, we are working with texts whose form and content deal with serious, nonserious, imaginary, and hypothetical scenarios. Thus, we attend to human dilemmas and solutions, to thought processes and affective responses, to linguistic games and metaphors, to the creative workings of the imagination, to humour and the absurd. Jerome Bruner and others have long told us what we intuitively have known since we were children, that we are story animals, we like to tell stories, as much as we love to read, listen, or view them. Whilst children's literature may be suffering a crisis of self-importance, it may mean that we need to think about what attracted us to this field of endeavour in the first place. Was it because of some nostalgic return to our childhood pleasures? Or was it an opportunity to undertake a form of academic self-renewal?

The desire to engage in a perpetual process of (self)renewal has become a serious undertaking as numerous sources urge us to make a new start, undergo a makeover, improve our lot in life. Marketing is particularly adept at selling the recent past at a profit. The recycled gets a second chance on the market as 'retro' thus providing what Currie (1998) calls an 'accelerated recontextualisation' ensuring that we take 'flight from the present' as we seek a temporal space that is anywhere but now. As scholars we bring the past into a meaningful relationship with the present through recontextualisation. Consequently, as we explore in this conference the question of what is new – 'new texts, new technologies, new readings, new readers' – we need to pause and consider what is the lure of the new? What is it that makes us want the new hat over the old one?



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kerry Mallan is a Professor at the Queensland University of Technology. She has published widely in both national and international journals on children's literature and film. Kerry is currently co-authoring a book on children's utopian fiction (with Clare Bradford, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum), and working on a funded ARC grand (with Parlo Singh) on youth and new media.