

An Essay about Childhood, and Children's Literature

At the age of seven, his education being complete, (Darius) was summoned into the world. It is true that he could neither write nor deal with the multiplication table; but there were always night schools in which studious adults of seven and upwards might attend if business permitted.

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The man Darius was first taken to work by his mother. It was the winter of 1835, January.

.....

By six o' clock on Saturday night Darius had earned a shilling for his week's work.

Arnold Bennett: *Clayhanger* ¹

(Tom) cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day of the week; and when his master beat him, which he did every day of the week, and when he had not enough to eat, which happened every day of the week

Charles Kingsley: *The Water Babies* ²

I am currently working on a book which I have provisionally entitled *An Adventure to be Enjoyed: Some Discourses of (and in) Children's Literature*. This essay is written as if it were the first introductory chapter of that book.

In this book I shall be exploring some of the discourses to be found operating in children's fiction: how children are represented in the fiction that is written for and read by them. The account will be substantially descriptive, I am not seeking to develop, or further develop a theory of children's literature, that job is already being very ably done by others.³ The discourses I am interested in can perhaps most usefully thought of in terms of thematic narratives, and of the characters that are at one and the same time both products of, and framed by those narratives. In that sense it will address a simpler question, which is what sort of representations of childhood are we presented within children's fiction. Note the plurals: I shall most decidedly *not* be suggesting that there is a single discourse of childhood that can be found in all children's literature. In my book (which is of course this book) that would be patently absurd. And if you want to know what discourses I am interested in, a glance at the contents page will tell you. I also however need to briefly set the discourses I discuss against some of the discourses of childhood as they are handed down to us by history and as they are currently constructed, which is one of the things these few introductory pages are all about; the other being the problematics of the notion of children's literature itself.

So far as childhood is concerned we could ask: 'What *are* children?' We could ask: 'When and where does childhood end?' We could ask: 'What differentiates children from adults?' We could ask: 'What do children *do*?' We could ask: 'What do children *know*?' There are doubtless others. Plus there are all the 'should' questions: 'What *should* children be, know, do?' etc. When it comes to children's literature we could ask at a general level whether it has any defining characteristics, and if so, what are they. We could ask if it counts as 'literature' at all. When it comes to individual books we could ask about their ideologies, or their structures, or their rhetorics and styles. We could ask about how the characters are constructed and portrayed. We could ask, again at a general level, what sorts of representations and accounts of childhood children's literature offers. And we could ask how those representations and accounts differ from others to be found in the world at large. As will already be clear, when it comes to answering these questions I find the notion of discourse very useful, discourse in its modern sense in which it means the ways of thinking about and understanding the world, as encapsulated in the very language we use to describe it.⁴ So our questions become: firstly, what are the discourses, both historical and current, that dictate our current understandings of how we think of children and childhood; secondly, and by contrast, what discourses are found within children's literature that offer possibly alternative ways of thinking about children and childhood. It is that second question, about the discourses of childhood to be found within children's literature, that constitutes the central subject of this book.

Before we go any further, however, it also needs to be noted that the answers to these questions will depend on who is asking them, on who is doing the answering. Clearly in the case of the book you are holding in your hand it is me who is asking the questions, me who is answering them. It is therefore important to note that *my* focus is that of an adult white Western (English) male living at the beginning of the 21st century. My own history is that of a teacher in school and subsequently as an academic involved both in teacher education and more generally in educational research, and with a lifelong enjoyment of and interest in children's literature. I shall thus bring with me all the limitations, presumptions, understandings and, hopefully, insights that such perspectives imply. While I shall do my best to draw attention to these limitations as I go through, there will doubtless be some that I miss and some that I am not even aware of. So it should be noted straightaway that the material I am drawing upon has an English bias. But otherwise I offer no definitive answers: apart from anything else I don't believe in definitive answers in the first place.

1. Childhood

Nowadays in our Western societies and cultures we expect to find children in standard two up two down nuclear families and, apart from high-days and holidays, we also expect to find them in school. We do not expect to find them working for a living. We expect them to be concerned with 'childish' things. We attach characteristics to our representations of them that serve to differentiate them from adults, that serve to accentuate the discontinuities rather than the continuities between childhood and adulthood. In some sort of general undefined way we expect them to *be* how a child is supposed to *be*. Brief glances at the history and geography of childhood have taught us

that this modern discourse of childhood is both recent, and culturally and geographically specific, that the very notion of childhood is unstable, that childhood is far from being a fixed discourse at all. Thus when Philippe Ariès, that first historian of childhood, made the much quoted assertion that 'in mediaeval times the idea of childhood did not exist,'⁵ he is effectively arguing that the present discourse of childhood is so radically different from that of our forebears that we might as well be talking about two quite different things. And the differences are about what children are expected to be and what children are expected to do.⁶

The Discourse of Biology 1: Age

Historically two biological turning points have always been recognised, the end of infancy, at somewhere around the age of seven, infancy being seen as period of dependence on adult support; the other turning point being puberty. In between there was childhood proper, and after puberty came adolescence.⁷ We still recognise these distinctions; chronological age thus giving us a fairly stable base in the discourse. Adolescence itself was (and still is!) more problematic. There was no clear agreement about where it ended. The late teens? Twenty one? One source even has it not ending until the age of thirty five!⁸ And while biology was recognised, in some contexts adolescents continue to this day to be referred to as children, or even as infants. (Don't worry, there is a *Discourse of Biology 2*, but it doesn't turn up for a couple of pages!)

The Discourse of Labour 1: Victimhood

Before the middle of the nineteenth century in the UK you would expect to find the majority of seven year olds, the children of the poorer classes that is, at work: in the fields, in domestic service, in agricultural gangs, or as street traders in the towns and cities, and, with the rise of industrialisation, in the factories. Conditions of work were harsh, and could be cruel, with children working for long hours in damaging and unhealthy working environments, and they could be subjected to brutal abuse, and in the towns and cities prostitution was rife. Some children could even be sold to their masters, and, as in the case of Kingsley's Tom, the orphanages were a continuous source of child labour. It should be noted, however, that children shared those harsh conditions with their elders, the only difference being those of size and strength. Children could only do the lighter jobs, and, by virtue of their size get into smaller spaces than the adults, spaces of greater danger it needs to be added, working under machinery, up chimneys, and into the narrow fissures of the coal mines. But in other respects children were not seen as a special case. Then, from about the middle of the 19th century onwards, increasing mechanisation meant that many of the smaller tasks were eliminated, the demand for child workers declined, and there was a growing demand for a workforce that had had some basic schooling. And so the discourse began to change. It was no longer seen as appropriate or desirable that younger children should be at work, and legislation was introduced that gradually raised the age below which children were allowed to work until by the end of the 19th century it was twelve. The labour of younger children was now represented in an entirely negative light, they were 'exploited', they were subject to cruelty, they were in need of 'protection', they needed to be 'rescued' from those harsh and unhealthy conditions and, from the perspective of some of the reformers, from the moral laxity of the workplace. It was, in short, a discourse of victimhood. And, since

child labour still exists in many parts of the third world, even today the first world continues to use the discourse of the child as a helpless victim of dire economic circumstances; and even though much of this labour is being undertaken by young teenagers, no distinction is made between them and the younger children that are also involved, all are included as 'children', and the term 'child labour' has lost its descriptive function and has simply become a pejorative term in its own right, often used in combination with the trigger phrase 'some as young as nine'⁹ Thus are young teenagers and children proper again promptly placed back into the discourse of victimhood.

The Discourse of Labour 2: Self-determination and Responsibility

Bennett's Darius Clayhanger was put to work in the potteries at the age of seven, but for him it was a far from negative experience. His job was to get his master's fire lit before he got to work, and 'was too excited to feel fatigue' when on his first morning he succeeded. And on Saturday when he has to go to the public house to get paid, it is crowded and warm and Darius gets to eat a cheese roll: 'Never had he tasted anything so luscious.'¹⁰ Bennett's account is fictional of course but there is non-fictional evidence too. Reynolds, for example, quotes Mayhew's account from the 1840s of the 8yr old watercress seller whom he interviewed, and who told him how she had worked since she was 5, helping her mother to sew furs, looking after younger siblings, and now selling watercress on the street. Mayhew comments that "'she had entirely lost all childish ways, and was, indeed, in thoughts and manner, a woman'"¹¹. It is clear from his account that the girl thinks it is entirely natural that she should be thus employed, and there is certainly no evidence that she sees herself as a 'victim' of her economic circumstances or those of her family. Another example comes from Bailey, who offers first-hand accounts from miners who, as children, gazed longingly down the mineshaft, longing for the time when they too could follow in their father's footsteps and join the adult world of work.¹² In addition there is plenty of evidence that, even if the work was arduous and hard, the socialisation of the workplace gave children the opportunities for meeting other children, for playing games, going swimming in the local river, etc. Even Kingsley's Tom, who, even if 'he cried half his time', 'laughed the other half'¹³ – the other half being the time he got to play with other children, possibly in the same predicament as he was. From a financial standpoint, then, in the past in the UK and in the present in many parts of the world child labour was and is an economic necessity. Families depended, and still depend, on their children's contribution to the family budget. They 'worked to feed their little brothers and sisters'¹⁴, and were to be commended for doing so. In such circumstances children and young teenagers expect to work and since children want nothing more than to grow up and become adult, they will, as the Bailey quote above suggests, be more than pleased when they get to do so. Whatever else, they will not see themselves as victims, victimhood is a condition laid on them by others who, whatever their admirable motives may be, don't think they should be doing what they are doing and what to stop them from doing it. So Bennett's Darius is indeed a man, with the responsibilities of a man, bringing home his wages to support his family just like any other man. The raising of the age below which a child is not allowed to work can thus be seen in two ways. From one perspective it releases children from the dire conditions under which they have to work, but at the same time it denies children the right to work, it effectively raises the 'child leaving age' if I may put it that way.

The Discourse of Education, Teaching, and Learning

I have called it the discourse of teaching and learning rather than the discourse of education for reasons that will become clear later in the book. The legislation about the age below which children were not allowed to work was also, by default, the same legislation that introduced compulsory schooling for all, with an inbuilt school leaving age, the child leaving age as I have so characterised it, which was initially ten¹⁵ and which has risen progressively over the years until today, when in the UK it is currently seventeen. Opening up educational opportunities for children and young people is thoroughly desirable, but the legislation that opens up such opportunities also makes that education, though schooling might be a better word, compulsory. Children and young people may have gained the right to go to school, but they had lost the right *not* to go to school. It has also, as it happens, deprived them the right to go on to higher education before what is deemed to be the 'appropriate' age: in 1564 Sir Francis Bacon went to university at the age of 13 and the practice continued well into the 19th century. No young teenager, no matter how bright, could do that today.¹⁶ Looked at negatively you could argue that the modern overarching discourse of childhood now includes everyone under the age of seventeen. The discourse excludes the right to earn a wage, and includes instead the practices of compulsory education and training. Not only that, these same 'children' have little or no control over what they are to learn. The teaching and learning that goes on is highly regulated and subject to compulsory curricula and prescribed content.

The Discourse of Violence 1: Victimisation

Child soldiers are an emotive subject, perhaps the most emotive subject when it comes to the discourses of childhood, and these days we are rightly appalled by the use of child soldiers, but that said it tends to be a discourse more driven by emotion than by analysis. Since Roman times young teenagers have been found in battle, whether it was the twelve year old squires supporting their knights in medieval times, powder monkeys in the navy from the 16th century onwards, drummer boys in the Napoleonic wars or in the American civil war; there are many examples. As I say it is mostly young teenagers that are being referred to, though there is no lack of evidence of younger children being caught up in conflict and bloodshed too. Many of them were press-ganged or forcibly conscripted in other ways, or drawn from the orphanages, or even sold into military service, for life it should be added, by their parents. They almost certainly didn't want to be there, but they had no option. The situation is no better today. The use of child soldiers continues in many parts of the world. In the 1990's child soldiers, some as young as eight¹⁷, were involved in the *Interamwe* in Rwanda and in the civil war in Sierra Leone, to quote but two examples.¹⁸ The discourse by which these children are defined by all who condemn the practice is yet again a discourse of victimhood. Children as a category are seen as being entirely powerless, victims of unscrupulous regimes and or rebel guerrilla armies, forced to join at the point of a gun. Whatever else, they need to be rescued and protected. It also needs to be noted that in this discourse of victimhood again no distinction is made between children proper and teenagers, they all become 'children', and having all become 'children' find themselves in a category in which child and victim are mutually defining terms. A final up to date example precisely illustrates this usage. The UK is currently

criticised because it 'persists in recruiting children into their armed services'¹⁹: these 'children' are in fact sixteen and seventeen year olds, but the use of the term 'children' to describe them again functions to turn them into victims, in this case of unscrupulous recruitment campaigns, but who are thus also in need of rescue and protection.

The Discourse of Violence 2: Self Determination

Power grows out of the barrel of a gun, as the saying goes²⁰, and while, as I have suggested, it may be assumed that the discourse of child soldiers is an entirely negative one, representing children as powerless victims in need of protection, there are alternative discourses. One of these is praise: Napoleon praised his young recruits for their heroism and bravery; an eleven year old drummer boy was awarded the Medal of Honor for his part in one of the battles in the American civil war; the children and young teenagers who took part in Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 are described as heroic, (in distinction, it should be noted, from their counterparts who rushed to join the Hitler Youth and who thus were the 'victims' of brainwashing.) As for the children and young teenagers themselves, there are plenty of pictures of them wearing their uniform with pride, or carrying their weapons with pride, and even the worst of circumstances left many of these children and young teenagers with a good deal of self-determination. Here for instance is Ishmael Beah writing about his experiences as a young teenage soldier in Sierra Leone and demonstrating both sides of the argument. On the one hand he recognises that he had no control over his longer term future: '...but I knew my chances of coming back to the village were slim, as we had no control over our future'²¹; on the other hand, in his immediate task of getting through the jungle in search of his lost family he writes, 'Every morning I made my own fate by deciding which way I was going to go.'²² As for power growing out of the barrel of a gun, here is his graphic, if horrendous, account of one incident:

We opened fire until the last living being in the other group fell to the ground. We walked toward the dead bodies, giving each other high fives. The group had also consisted of young boys like us, but we didn't care about them. We took their ammunition, sat on their bodies, and started eating the cooked food they had been carrying.²³

As he makes clear, at the time he and his comrades felt entirely positive about the attack. When he and his fellows were 'rescued' by UNICEF – he was by this time 15, and leader of a squad – he is furious. Instead of being treated as an adult soldier by the army, in command of his own destiny – 'I had learned to survive and take care of myself'²⁴ – he is back to being a child. His gun is taken from him and he no longer has any say in what is going to happen to him; even the army had given him the option of joining or not joining, but now he is met with compulsory schooling. Even the more sympathetic psychiatric social worker infantilises him, telling him he should not feel responsible for what he did. '“You were just a little boy”' yet he was 12 going on 13 when he was recruited. Hardly a 'little boy'. As he writes, 'I hated the “it's not your fault” line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.'²⁵ There could be no clearer example of how the discourse of victimhood, whatever else it did, took away the power of self-determination from the individual young person.²⁶

The Discourse of Biology 2: The Body, and Sex

By and large sex doesn't feature in children's literature proper, though from the 1970's onwards it has featured in what is currently called 'young adult' literature. In the discourses of the world at large, particularly in white western Anglo-Saxon countries, any association between sex and childhood has become a forbidden area, and even any association between sex and early adolescence is problematic. It was not always so. Plumb, writing about the 17th century in France, describes the Dauphin at the 17th century court 'playing with his naked sister to the ribald amusement of the court'²⁷ In 1457 Margaret Beaufort gave birth to Henry VII when she was 13, which means that she must have been only twelve when he was conceived. His father, Edmund Tudor, was twenty six at the time. Today the child would have been taken from her, she would have been taken into care, and he would have got ten years. Yet the direct descendant of that union sits on the throne of England today. Age of consent laws only changed in the mid nineteenth century, before then it been twelve, but it was then raised to the current sixteen. Across the world even today the age of consent is still twelve in a number of countries. While the increase of the age of consent was seen as very necessary to curb child prostitution and child trafficking, it at the same time takes away the right of persons under sixteen to take control over their own bodies or their own sexual lives.

Turning from sex to the body more generally, in 1886 the photographer Thomas Sutcliffe took a famous picture of naked children, all boys, bathing, which he entitled 'Water Rats'. Today he would have been arrested for paedophilia, and the children themselves would not have been naked in the first place. Today, in a bizarre and contradictory mix, totally naked children are seen as a threat, while at the same time modern teenage fashion has lots of bare midriff for the girls, and jeans set so low on the hips for the boys that you wonder what is keeping them up, which costume is then aped by young children, with the encouragement of their parents it may be added, in child beauty pageants for instance. And what can only be called the fear of nakedness does not include continental Europe more generally, in Germany for instance, where families are more than happy to bathe naked at the drop of a towel. As for paedophilia itself, Jenny Kitzinger argues cogently that the constitution of the children in the dominant discourse of victimhood actually reduces their power to cope with it, and with the psychological aftermath.²⁸

Another bodily pleasure that is these days under constant surveillance is food, and this does have more relevance to children's literature. The newspapers are full of advice, often contradictory, about what is good for you to eat what is bad for you to eat, and obesity is a current obsession. Whatever else this discourse isn't about, it certainly is about the surveillance and regimentation of the body.

The Discourse of Childhood in the Media

I have already talked about the way that the media reports on child labour and child soldiers, so I only need here to make the general point that when children are represented in either the print or the electronic media, it is almost always within the discourse of powerless victimhood. Reports of famine or disaster always feature photographs of suffering children. Stories about the murder of children run for weeks if not months.

Children are included in that universal noun of victimhood, *womenandchildren* – when people are killed in civil wars for instance the reports invariably tell us that such and such a number of people were killed, including *womenandchildren*. The use of the portmanteau word brings with it added value connotations of victimhood which the more neutral term ‘people’ doesn’t have. And let us not forget that other trigger phrase ‘some as young as nine’. By now it should be clear that I am suggesting that the noun ‘child’ has ceased to be merely descriptive and comes instead with the added meaning of victimhood. In the media discourse of childhood, to be a child is to be a victim and, as I have noted, more often than not no distinction is made between children and teenagers. If the latter are to be perceived as victims they too must become children. Lest you think I am exaggerating here are ten stories involving children I culled from just one edition the UK Guardian newspaper²⁹: – there is a story reporting on a development in the investigation of the suspected deaths of two children in Portugal; there is a story about a stampede at a Hindu Temple – ‘Women and children were among the dead’; there’s a story about ‘prison babies’, children who are born in prison in Gaza; there’s a story about a cyclone in India describing ‘terrified children’ clinging to their mothers as they sought shelter; children are victims of ‘an ideological experiment’ in a report from the UK parliament; in another report we are told that ‘A quarter of adults have maths skills no better than a ten year old’ – so much for ten year olds; there is a story about recruiting boys from deprived areas of the inner cities into the boy scouts in order to ‘have discipline instilled, and learn new skills’; there is even an absurd story about conker swinging being dangerous! Only two stories have more positive representations of childhood in them. One is a little feature item about fashionista Gok Wan talking about his close relationship with his brother, it was ‘me and my brother against the world from the start’ They called themselves the bad boys. ‘We’d always be there causing havoc’. Interesting to note the appropriation of the negative adjective ‘bad’ by the boys, turning it instead into a much more positive signifier of resistance.³⁰ Finally there is a story about Pakistani Malala Yousafzai being interviewed on a television current affairs program. We are told that ‘the 16 year old was shot by a member of the group at her school for campaigning for girls’ right to education.’ She is called ‘a campaigner’ and we are told that it is easy to forget that ‘she is still a teenager’. The two terms, ‘teenager’ and ‘campaigner’ seemingly being mutually exclusive terms. In fact the way in which her story has been handled since it first broke in 2012 makes for an interesting case. That she first came to the attention of the western media within the discourse of victimhood – she had after all been shot – is undeniable, but in all other respects the reporting of the case has gone out of its way not to represent her as a victim. She started publically campaigning when she was just eleven, but never once in all the reporting either in the press or on television was she called a child. Instead she was called a campaigner, an activist, a schoolgirl, very much the heroine of her own narrative, responsible for her own actions. It is even argued that she was partially responsible for a change in the law in Pakistan. Her father is also an active campaigner, but it has never been suggested, (except of course, by the Taliban, who claimed responsibility for the attack on her in the first place) that she has been brainwashed, or even unduly influenced by him. Whatever else, as I say, she has not once been referred to as a child. ‘Children’ cannot be the heroines of their own stories, responsible for their own actions and making an impact on the world. Malala Yousafzai’s story is an exception, though the picture is not quite so

bleak if you turn to the local press. There you do find more positive representations, celebrating the victory of a local school football team for example, or the achievement of an individual child winning a prize in some field of personal endeavour. Only occasionally do more positive stories make the national press, one of the commonest of which is the story of the child who has made a miraculous recovery from some sort of dire medical condition – but even then they must have been a victim in the first place, otherwise they couldn't have recovered from their victimhood.

To sum up so far, I am arguing that much public discourse frames children in a negative light, as powerless, as victims, as exploited, as in need of rescuing from deprivation and exploitation, as in need of being rescued from disease and famine, the list is very nearly endless. There are two glaring omissions from the above, and they are the discourses of parenting, and of education, but the former does not tend to get a look in in the more public contexts of the press and the media, unless something has gone wrong, and though I have touched on schooling, above, there is a much more positive way of thinking about children within the educational discourse, and that I shall be dealing with more fully in chapter 3. (***** to be corrected if the chapter numbers change.) Before moving on to discuss children's literature itself let me just finish this section by taking quick look at some of the other discourses of childhood that there are that do have a bearing on the case, what I am calling the discourses of 'the essential child'.

The Discourse of the 'Essential' Child

With the raising of the child leaving age that started in the 19th century and which I have sketched in above, the child him or herself started to develop into a category of its own. No longer could children be regarded as mini adults, now they needed to be defined in some way that distinguished them from adults. They had to be conceptualised as having some essential nature of their own. I shall briefly outline five such conceptualisations.

1. The child as innocent. At its most extreme the innocent child lives in some sort of prelapsarian state of grace. He/she is the child of nature, the child of feeling, inherently good, closer to God: 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'³¹ The idea was very much taken up by the romantic poets at the beginning of the 19th century, and finds its most extreme and mawkish expression in the childhood deaths of the melodramas of the second half of the century where it is better for a child to retain his innocence and die rather than to grow up and to lose it: "It's nothing to die when God loves us," the child declares."³² The romantics themselves did not so much want to separate children off into some sort of idyllic enclave, they saw instead the processes of maturation, socialisation and education as building on the innate goodness that was already in the child. It should be added that the innocent child has remained an informing idea in the discourse right up until the present day. Condemnation of child labour and the use child soldiers is often expressed in terms of a 'lost' or 'stolen' childhood, (c.f. the quote from Mayhew, above), and the same applies to sexual knowledge if it is acquired 'too soon'.

2. The child as the embodiment of evil. At the other extreme is the idea of the child as the embodiment of evil, very much a tenet of the puritan reformers of the 19th century,

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and the only way to get rid of that evil was to beat it out of him, or indeed her, and 'spare the rod and spoil the child' was the prevailing principle of child rearing; corporal punishment was a fact of life in the stricter puritan homes, even for the most trivial of offences, and it was certainly a feature of school life too, all the way from Dickens' Dotheboys Hall to Thomas Hughes' Rugby. As with the innocent child, the evil child is very much still with us, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* or John Wyndham's *Midwich Cuckoos* being prime examples, never mind horror movies such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*.³³

3. The 'blank slate' child. The blank slate, or 'tabular rasa' child, to use philosopher John Locke's coinage, is neither good nor evil. Whether children become one or the other depends entirely upon their upbringing and education. Yes, it is necessary to curb and channel their natural instincts by the use of reason, but otherwise there is no 'essential' child in this conceptualisation. It follows from this reasoning, of course, that the principles and the manner of parenting must be directed in the right path, and in school, care must be taken over the design of the curriculum that will constitute a good education, and those views are also most decidedly still with us. Modern schooling functions both to socialise children into the values and mores of society at large, and to choose what knowledges, as enshrined in state curricula of one sort and another and controlled by systems of examination, should either be imposed upon or withheld from children.

4. The 'developmental child'. The developmental child, Piaget is a leading proponent, has certain inbuilt, biologically determined age related capacities. In this discourse it is not until they are over eleven that children are fully capable of abstract decontextualized reasoning. Before that they have somewhat more limited capacities. Without necessarily sticking strictly to Piaget's stages, modern school curricula have a built-in structure of progression, which may be helpful from one perspective, but from another can be seen as limiting and constraining. Crucial is a notion of 'readiness', as often used *against* the child, as in 'you're not yet ready for this knowledge', as it is used for his or her benefit.

5. The enquiring child. The enquiring or learning child is not much found in the modern discourses of childhood. 'Progressive' educational institutions, which take the view that child him or herself should take control of their own learning, struggle to survive, and initiatives in the state system in the UK that emerged in the 1970s have since been very firmly sat upon.³⁴

The five conceptualisations that I have identified above by no means exhaust the possible discourses of the essential child, and all, as you can see, have an educational and or socialisation bent. I have, for instance, not discussed the medical child, or the legal child, or the Freudian child, or the Lacanian child³⁵. Apart from the fact that I lack the expertise for any useful exposition of such discourses, such an approach would not have been germane to my purpose, which is that of offering more a descriptive than a theorised account of the discourses with which I am concerned the main body of the work.

To sum up, I am suggesting that, in the public discourses at any rate, references to children are almost entirely negative, with victimhood being the dominant motif. The working child is the victim of exploitation, of 19th century industrial practices or of modern third world economies. The child soldier is the victim of unscrupulous recruitment practices which are themselves the product of the civil wars going on around them. The unschooled child is not seen as having the capacity to work and earn a living, rather he or she, and initially it was just he, is seen to have a lack, to be in need of schooling. The fascist / communist child is seen as the victim of brainwashing. In addition, modern discourses of child rearing, of child development, of schooling provision, and of education and learning, sometimes incidentally, as in the case of a too strict adherence to Piagetian 'stages of development', but mostly by design, require that certain knowledges, the most salient being sexual knowledge,³⁶ be withheld from children; and what all these negative discourses do is deny children agency and power, a feature which is exacerbated by the fact that, as I have argued, since the middle of the 19th century what I have called 'the child leaving age' has been steadily raised, resulting in the disempowerment of more and more (young) people.

2 Children's Literature

In the light of the foregoing it is important to note that the discourse of children's literature itself, as a socio-economic and literary phenomenon, ipso facto also constitutes yet another discourse of childhood and the child. At the most basic material level children's literature is a product in the marketplace, and as such it has a target consumer, a target audience. That audience emerged with the development of the middle class in the 19th century, and the accompanying raising of the child leaving age, as I have called it, and publishers were not slow to recognise the economic potential of that consumer, and started producing lists of what came to be called juvenile fiction ('juvenile' being for my money a very usefully flexible categorisation which has now disappeared, but I digress). Once that market is identified, you promptly need writers, and modes of distribution, predominantly booksellers and librarians³⁷, and the situation essentially hasn't changed even today, except that a lot the bookselling now happens on line. All these players, of course, are adults, as indeed are the parents who do the actual buying, and there needs to be a consensus about what a child *is*, or rather *should be*, otherwise the whole system breaks down. And that child is of course the very same child who is framed by the discourses of childhood that are found elsewhere in society at large, some of which I have noted above.³⁸

An anecdote illustrates my point perfectly: Green tells me³⁹ how, as a child, he was not allowed to take books out of the adult library, he was still 'a child', and as such was only allowed to read children's books, books that constituted him as a reader who was a child rather the books that allowed him to be constituted as a reader who was an adult. He even remembers the book, it was Hester Chapman's 1962 biography of Lady Jane Grey – he was interested in the book because he had read about her in the weekly educational magazine, *Look and Learn*, and visiting the library with his aunt had seen the book on the shelf, but when he actually wanted to take it out and read it he was told he couldn't, he could only take books out of the children's library. He was told that he was only allowed

to look, he was not allowed to learn; his very childness was being policed, and the instrument of that policing was the books themselves.

Moving on from modes of production, distribution and marketing, which are easy enough to establish, we come to the question of the implied reader, which is intimately tied up with the question of what children's literature is and whether it can be defined as a distinct genre. This is a potentially more problematic area, and it has received a lot of attention recently, most notably perhaps from Nodelman⁴⁰, who argues, to reduce his substantial book to a couple of lines, that the child characters of children's fiction are denied knowledges of the adult world, both specific knowledges such as that of sex, or knowledges of the general duplicities and hypocrisies of the adult world: Yvonne Roberts' *A History of Insects* provides an excellent contrasting example, a novel for adults where a child protagonist ends up becoming complicit with the duplicity of adults⁴¹. Nodelman also argues that those adult knowledges are held by the anonymous narrators / implied authors and that they will then provide the standards, moral and otherwise, by which we are invited to judge the behaviour of the characters, but without letting on that they are doing it, hence the subtitle of his book, 'The Hidden Adult'. If the child characters in children's books are denied adult knowledges, then, by implication the child readers are too, and Nodelman offers detailed analysis of a number of texts to show that this is so. As to whether he successfully then makes the jump to the assertion that thus he has managed to define children's literature as a separate genre, I must confess I have my doubts and I am not alone in this⁴², but I do accept his basic thesis that one of the surest ways of identifying a children's book is to examine it to see if the implied reader is denied adult knowledges of the sort that he has outlined.

Personally I am not bothered about whether any specific text is a children's book or not, I will just offer my threepence worth to the debate, not least in order to clarify, or perhaps hopefully fail to clarify, how *I* came to choose the texts *I* chose to discuss. So to start with, I find it interesting that it is what I might call the 'boundary' books that receive the closest attention. *Peter Pan* is the 'book', though phenomenon would be a better term, that comes under the closest scrutiny⁴³, I would suggest because it is such an unstable (set of) text(s). Is it a story told to, or more accurately *for* a child within the context of a novel for adults, *The Little White Bird*?⁴⁴ Is it a play first produced in 1904⁴⁵ for a 'family' audience who came to the matinées, or for an adult audience who came to the evening shows, in the case of the latter an audience to take delight in a play *about* children, rather than for them⁴⁶? Or is it the subsequent novelisation, *Peter and Wendy*⁴⁷ whose implied reader, so far as I am concerned, shifts so wildly and completely unpredictably from sentence to sentence that it is difficult to know, as a reader, who or where you are from moment to moment? Because it is such an unstable text it is very useful to those who want to question where children's literature ends and adult literature begins, and indeed to challenge the idea that there is any such thing as children's literature. Another boundary text, often discussed for the same purpose,⁴⁸ is *The Wind in the Willows*⁴⁹ which also seems to shift its implied reader as you move from chapter to chapter. If, however, one turns ones attention from these two problematic and unstable texts, the problem, so far as I can see, becomes simpler. It would, I venture suggest, be difficult to assert that *Five Have Plenty of Fun*⁵⁰ is a book for adults, though it shares

many genre features of an adult detective story / thriller, with the collection of clues, the following of leads and the daring rescue of one of the principle characters from the clutches of the bad guys, but the fact that all this is done by 4 children and a dog in their summer holidays pretty much indicates that it is a book for children. A perhaps more interesting example is *Carrie's War*,⁵¹ a book about two children coming to understand and learning how to cope with adult behaviour; and an instructive comparison might be *What Maisie Knew*,⁵² in which a child once again has to struggle to understand and learn to cope with adult behaviour. I would challenge anyone to argue that *What Maisie Knew* is a book for children, but I am quite prepared to accept that *Carrie's War* is. I will put it like this: the nature of the protagonists, the themes, the content, the language and style, and the sorts of understanding that are required to read the books, all suggest that it is appropriate that *Carrie's War* and *Five Have Plenty of Fun* are marketed as children's books, and that *What Maisie Knew* isn't. As for what is in between, nowadays it has variously been called adolescent fiction, books for teenagers, and the currently p.c. formulation, books for 'young adults'. (And I may note in parenthesis that, as I have argued above, when teenagers are found fighting in civil wars in west Africa they are called *child* soldiers, or when they are found working across the world to support their families they are seen as *child* labour, but when we want to sell books to them, they promptly become young *adults*. So much for the hypocrisy of the West.) The very fact that there are these 'in between' books, marketed at teenagers, already suggests that there is going to be a continuum between children's literature and adult literature, with *Noddy* at one end, and Henry James at the other, and *Forever*⁵³, or *Breaktime*⁵⁴, or the *Weetzie Bat*⁵⁵ books, or *Little Brother*⁵⁶ somewhere in the middle. As for how this all affects what I am looking at here, as I say, I am not particularly bothered. If I want to write about it, I'll write about it, and if I don't I won't; and as for my choice of texts, how about 'old ones, new ones, loved ones, neglected ones'? I'm happy to leave at that if you are.

There remains one thing to be added, so far as the term children's literature is concerned, and it concerns the word literature itself. In the good old bad old Leavisite days books for children were divided into two types. There were the books that counted as 'literature', and there were the rest. At the bottom end came the likes of, you've guessed it, Enid Blyton herself, and she, along with a lot of other stuff, was classified as rubbish. We were told by some not to worry about the rubbish, but others were convinced that it rotted children's brains. Perhaps the most thoroughly argued through of this point of view is Brian Inglis's *The Promise of Happiness*,⁵⁷ whose subtitle, *Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction* perhaps best sums up his approach, but the attitude lingers. Nikolajeva for instance, makes it plain that she is interested in books in which:

We see a depiction of human relations. We see how the authors use the riches of the language and stylistic devices, how they create the time and space of the novel, how they penetrate into their characters.⁵⁸

If a book has all this, she continues, it can be seen as 'a living piece of art'. And even Nodelman, who is not centrally concerned with those old battles about what constitutes a

children's book of quality, lets his guard slip momentarily when he is writing about the *Goosebumps* books, suggesting that they 'differ from those that achieve literary distinction'⁵⁹ It is of course impossible to read books without coming to some conclusions as to which ones one likes and which ones one doesn't; we all have our personal canons and I am no exception. And I think I can give an account of why I like the books I like. But that is not the point. If postmodernism has taught us nothing else, it has taught us that no two people's canons will be the same, and I think that's great. In all intellectual enquiry the most important thing is to destabilise the received wisdom, and so far as literature, whether it be adult literature or children's literature, is concerned, one of the most effective ways to do this is to get people to fire their canons at each other. That way new discoveries are made and new pleasures discovered.

3 Discourse

Finally a note about my use of the word 'discourse', a use I touched on in my introductory paragraphs. Discourse analysis grew from a specific focus on the socio-linguistics of everyday language use, looking at the way language is constructed and the meanings it generates, and, under the influence of Foucault and others, developed from that until it became an examination of the whole way that we think about and conceive and talk about ourselves and the world; and in Foucault's case, looking at the structures of power that lie underneath this. The notion of discourse itself is perhaps best summed up for me by this quote from Valerie Walkerdine:

Particular disciplines, regimes of truth, bodies of knowledge, make possible both *what can be said* and *what can be done*...⁶⁰

Given that in this book I am focussing on children's literature, I felt that it was important to look at the underlying discourse(s) of childhood that is/are to be found in the culture at large. You will doubtless have noticed that there is a slippage in my use of the word discourse, in that sometimes it is in the singular and sometimes in the plural. Let me explain it like this. The underlying discourse of my investigation is the discourse (singular) of childhood itself, but above that underlying discourse there are discourses (plural) nearer to the surface, and it is those that I am interested in. And so far I have argued that many of these discourses, including, from one perspective, that of children's literature itself, are pretty negative. From another perspective, however, it will not perhaps be surprising that I shall be arguing (I am almost tempted to say 'of course be arguing') that if you look within children's literature rather than at it, the sun finally emerges from behind the clouds, and a whole number of more positive discourses of childhood come tumbling out, and these can perhaps be divined from the chapter headings. It is of course true that those chapter headings could also be seen to be referring to underlying discourses, but again I shall be looking at those nearer to the surface. Thus, for instance, when I look at control of the material world Ch ?????? ??????, a heading which could imply a profound analysis of the way that we create knowledge and the way that that knowledge then penetrates everything we do in our lives, I shall not in fact be attempting such a profound analysis. Instead I shall be looking at specific examples of the characters engaged in specific activities to do with the control of the world around them. The fact that my secondary title to that chapter is

Robinsonade, perhaps indicates the way my thinking is going. The same applies, for instance, to my chapter on 'isms' in which I shall be looking at those old favourites, racism, sexism, and classism (ugly word), not in order to show how children's literature was, and to some extent still is, steeped in racism, sexism, and the stereotypes of class distinction; I shall, rather, be looking at the actual activities of such characters, at what they do in the story despite the fact that they are trapped in what ostensibly look like stereotypical roles. And the same is true for the rest of the book – I shall not for instance, be looking for the underlying profound discourses of education Ch ??????????????, or of the body Ch ??????????????, or whatever else the chapter headings may suggest; instead . . . but rather than expand any further here I shall explain myself as I go along.

Finally finally, I want to make it clear, again as I hinted at in my opening remarks, that I am most decidedly *not* suggesting that by identifying and describing these discourses that I have thereby defined children's literature. I am quite sure all these discourses can be found in adult literature too. Furthermore I am *not* suggesting that that every children's book you pick up will have all these discourses in it, far from it. Some will have some, others will have others, but I venture to suggest that none of them will have all of them. You will also discover that these discourses interweave and intertwine. The same element in a book can quite often be part of more than one discourse. The absent adult, for instance, is part of both what I have called the discourse of the idyll that I discuss in chapter 2, but also clearly part of the discourse of the relationship between adults and children that I discuss in chapter 3; or to take another example, pretty clearly the discourse of the Robinsonade cannot but overlap with the discourses of teaching and learning.

As for the discourses I may have missed, I am tempted to say that I do hope I have. I would hate to think that this book constituted the last word on the subject. And given that that is the last word of this introductory chapter, let's get on with it.

¹ Bennett, Arnold 1910 pp.38 / 40

² Kingsley, Charles 1863 p.4

³ See for instance the work of Maria Nikolajeva (Nikolajeva 1996, Nikolajeva 2000) or David Rudd (Rudd 2000 & 2013), or Peter Hollindale (Hollindale 1997), or Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994), or Perry Nodelman (Nodelman 2008) to name but several.

⁴ It was when I was writing my essay on *Masterman Ready* (Sarland 2013) that I realised how useful the notion of discourse – a notion it needs to be recognised bequeathed to us by Foucault – was in discussing the content of the novel, and when I subsequently read David Rudd's book on Enid Blyton (Rudd 2000) I discovered that he had beaten me to it, though I take my analysis in a different direction than he did. From another perspective again, discourse analysis is already anyway very much the current chosen approach to childhood studies. (See for examples Heywood 2001 and James & Prout (Eds) 1990)

⁵ Ariès 1960, p.125

⁶ In what follows I have drawn on Ariès 1960, Heywood 2001, Lawson & Silver 1973 and my argument very much reflects those put forward by the various contributors to Hoyles (Ed) 1979, and James & Prout (Eds) 1990

⁷ By way of example, a medieval 11th century Latin source talks of 'infantia', 'pueritia', and 'adolescentia' (Heywood 2001, p.13);

⁸ Ariès suggests that: 'Until the eighteenth century, adolescence was confused with childhood' In one specific case a fifteen year old is referred to as an infant, and in another a fourteen year is referred to as a 'young child. (Ariès 1960 pp.23 & 24. Heywood 2001, p.17) The particular example comes from Ariès, p.19 where he quotes *Le Grand Propriétaire de Toute Choses* from 1556 which is itself a historical overview of previous notions. In this source youth does not even start until 35, the previous age range being referred to as adolescence.

⁹ Time after time news reports about child labour include the phrase, even though more often than not the children we see in the reports look a good deal more like twelve year olds, which is not to say that there aren't younger children involved – there is overwhelming evidence that there are.

¹⁰ Both quotes: op. cit. p 40

¹¹ Mayhew: *London Labour and the London Poor*, quoted in Reynolds 1994, p.18

¹² Bailey 2007, pp 65 et seq.

¹³ Kingsley, op. cit. p.4

¹⁴ Kingsley, op. cit. p.252

¹⁵ The 1870 Elementary Education Act was the act that started it all.

¹⁶ In the UK that is. Some American universities do have fast-track provision, and there it is still possible for very bright young teenagers to gain admission to them.

¹⁷ This time, of course, I am using that same trigger phrase (see above in my discussion of child labour) designed to increase the sense of outrage about the issue.

¹⁸ Meredith 2005 pp. 514 & 563

¹⁹ Rachel Taylor of Child Soldiers International, quoted in a Guardian article of Oct 28th 2012 by Chris Atkins: 'Young British army recruits at higher risk of PTSD and suicide, says report.'

²⁰ Wikipedia informs me that it was Mao Zedong who said it, though what he said was, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun,' but it amounts to the same thing.

²¹ Beah, Ishmael 2007 p.87

²² *ibid* p.46

²³ *ibid* p.19

²⁴ *ibid* p.153

²⁵ *ibid*: both quotes p.160

²⁶ As a footnote to this section, it is hard for the mind not to boggle at the contradiction between Western condemnation of the arming of child soldiers in West Africa and the fact that in some states in the USA it is also thought to be perfectly acceptable for 9 yr. olds (here we go again: 'some as young as 9') to be taught to shoot automatic weapons, a practice defended by the gun lobby even when one of the instructors is accidentally killed by a nine year old girl with an Uzi in the course of such instruction on a shooting range in Arizona. (A report in the UK Guardian newspaper, Sept 2nd 2014)

²⁷ Quoted in Hoyles 1979 p.8

²⁸ Kitzinger 1990

²⁹ The Guardian Oct 14th 2013

³⁰ In the same story Gok talks about how the fact that he was gay was never an issue for his into martial arts straight brother. Gok is the older of the two: 'I'll always be his big brother,' he says, 'so I'll always be protective of him', thus neatly reversing several gay stereotypes too.

³¹ Matthew Ch.18, v.3

³² Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, 1861, quoted in Coveney 1967 p.183

³³ William Golding *Lord of the Flies* (1954); John Wyndham *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957); William Friedkin *The Exorcist* (1973); Richard Donner *The Omen* (1976)

³⁴ For an example of one such initiative see Medway 1980

³⁵ Exposition and analysis of these last two psychological discourses and their application to children's literature are about: see for instance Rudd 2013 or Rose 1984

³⁶ Though one might also argue here that political knowledge is also withheld from children – political in the widest sense of the term, i.e. knowledge about the articulation and imposition of power within society - but that, I suspect would be the subject of another book.

³⁷ Once upon a time, and really only for a brief period of time between the middle 1960s to the early 1980s one could have included teachers alongside the publishers, the booksellers, and the librarians but since nowadays, in the UK at least, school libraries are a thing of the past, and teachers, for whom I have the

greatest respect and sympathy, are forced to teach something called 'literacy', which so far as I can discover consists of nothing so much as a sophisticated version of, in Harold Rosen's phrase, barking at words, they have little time left over to encourage their charges to actually read, whether it be for information or for pleasure, or indeed for information *and* pleasure.

³⁸ Jack Zipes offers a fuller definition of children's literature, but one which, I would contend, amounts to much the same thing: "The (cultural) field of children's literature must include the interrelationships between children, teachers, librarians, parents, publishers, bookstore owners, vendors, business corporations, the mass media, and their various practices of producing and consuming books intended for the young as commodities." (Zipes 2001 *Sticks & Stones*) quoted in Nodelman 2008, p.118

³⁹ Green, Garth: personal communication.

⁴⁰ Nodelman, Perry 2008.

⁴¹ Roberts, Yvonne 2000

⁴² See e.g. Rudd, David 2013

⁴³ Jaqueline Rose 1984 and David Rudd 2013 give it particularly detailed attention.

⁴⁴ Barrie, J.M. 1902

⁴⁵ Barrie, J.M 1904

⁴⁶ Or even for other reasons entirely, given that all the boy parts were played by young women, given licence, by virtue of their characters and as photos of the first production testify, to wear costumes that revealed a lot of shapely female leg.

⁴⁷ Barrie, J.M. 1911

⁴⁸ See for instance Hunt 1994 who offers a comprehensive account of the book from a number of perspectives.

⁴⁹ Graham, Kenneth 1908

⁵⁰ Blyton, Enid 1955

⁵¹ Bawden, Nina 1973

⁵² James, Henry 1897

⁵³ Blume, Judy 1975

⁵⁴ Chambers, Aidan 1978

⁵⁵ Block, Francesca Lia 1989 et seq.

⁵⁶ Doctorow, Cory 2008

⁵⁷ Inglis, Brian 1981

⁵⁸ Nikolajeva, Maria (1996) p.6

⁵⁹ Op cit., p. 313

⁶⁰ Walkerdine, Valerie 1984 pp 154/5 (Her emphasis.)