

## Children's Literature - A Cinderella Story

Irina RAȚĂ\*

### Abstract

*Children's literature is probably the most controversial and belittled literary genre, except, maybe, for that of popular literature. It is subject to a permanent debate: firstly, due to its lack of consistency with genre definitions; secondly, due to the fact that it contains multiple genres; and, finally, due to the fact that it has ethical issues. It is constantly ignored by the world of literary critics, academics, and even by the popular opinion, being continually compared to popular literature; it is dismissed as too simple, and often assimilated with genre literature. This article is an attempt to examine the origins of this situation; to look into the similarities and differences between children's literature and adult fiction from a narratological point of view; to summarise the issues of children's literature as a genre; to try to define the popular literature as a genre; to discover the common traits of children's literature and popular literature; but, most importantly, to point out the differences between the two genres. It will try to address the qualities that make children's literature a unique genre, deserving to be considered worthwhile, and seen as literature at its best.*

**Keywords:** children's literature; narratology; popular literature; genre literature; kidult.

Children's books are the first books one reads, and, considering this fact, they are probably the most important books in everyone's life. However, these books are largely ignored by critics and academics. Aside from the specialists working with children – educators and librarians, who are mostly interested in children's books' educational value – there is an enthusiastic, relatively small number of children's literature specialists, passionate about children and their books, attempting to redeem the literary worth of these books; and, in order to achieve that, the first and foremost discussion led by these specialists is related to the definition of children's literature genre.

Children's literature is a genre hard to define, mostly due to the fact that it does not fit any genre definitions; it contains multiple genres (mystery, fantasy, science fiction, crime fiction etc.), multiple literary

---

\* PhD student, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, irina.rata@ugal.ro

forms (poetry, prose, and drama) (Nodelman 2008: 133-142), mirroring literature per se. There are voices stating that children's literature should not be considered a separate genre. As Cunningham argues: "children" and "childhood" are social constructs determined by socioeconomic conditions and have different meanings for different cultures" (1995 in Zipes 2001: 40). Therefore, according to Cunningham, children's literature is an imaginary concept, as well. Zipes proposes, based on Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field, the idea that children's literature should be considered a cultural production field (Nodelman 2008: 118).

Considering these, the field of children's literature should include not only the children, but the entire children's publishing industry, along with those involved in children's education: teachers, librarians, parents, as well as all of the business corporations producing books related memorabilia (magazines and posters, candy, action figures, collectibles, etc.), including mass media promoting the goods; all of these using children as mere commodities (2008: 118). The fact that our society is a "Consumer Society" only encourages this proliferating trend. The children's literature publishing has become a major industry in the last thirty years. The number of books printed in one edition has increased exponentially. In 2000 the popularity of the first two books in the *Harry Potter* series determined *The New York Times* to introduce a new category in the best-sellers list (Smith 2000). At first, the children's best-sellers list had the books for all age ranges fit in a single category, but the increasing sales and popularity of the genre determined *The New York Times* to further divide the children's books into several categories: Children's Picture Books, Children's Middle Grade, Young Adult, Children's Series, Hardcover Graphic Books, Paperback Graphic Books and Manga. The popularity of children's books changed the perspective on children's literature as a genre; unfortunately the change is not necessarily a positive one. This popularity brought them to the public's attention; however it only gave one more reason for the conservative academic world to dismiss them, as in their eyes children's books became a subgenre of popular literature; thus the necessity of genre definition.

In their attempt to define children's literature, critics like Nodelman, McDowell, Hillman and others list a series of features or characteristics specific to the genre. As Weinreich (2000: 34) declares: "I prefer to see children's literature as a *genre* and by 'genre' I mean here a notion of a group of texts characterised by recurrent features."

According to Hillman (1999: 3 cited in Nodelman 2008: 189), children's literature texts commonly display five specific characteristics: typical childhood experiences written from a child's perspective, children or childlike characters, simple and direct plots that focus on action, a feeling of optimism and innocence, a tendency toward combining reality and fantasy. McDowell (1973: 51) offers a list of children's literature characteristics as well: generally shorter books, that favour an active rather than a passive treatment; the usage in children's books of dialogue and incident, rather than of description and introspection; children protagonists are the rule; the usage of conventions; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism ignored by adult fiction; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is simple and child oriented; plots are presented in a distinctive order; probability is often disregarded; these books present an endless usage of magic, fantasy, simplicity, as well as adventure.

However, these features and characteristics are problematic, because when trying to use them as a checklist to determine if the analysed book pertains to the children's literature genre, one discovers that a large number of books, traditionally considered as children's books, should be excluded from this category for not displaying these characteristics. According to these, the main character in children's books is always a child or a teenager, and the book is describing typical childhood experiences. In this case one unwittingly ends up putting the bildungsroman novels in the children's literature genre. This way, books like *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, despite being classics of English literature are also children's literature classics. On the other hand, in books like *A Christmas Carol*, *Gulliver's Travels* or *Robinson Crusoe*, *Wind in the Willows*, the main characters are not children, nor childlike characters, nor do they describe typical childhood experiences, but they are considered children's books nevertheless; even if, for example *Gulliver's Travels* and *Wind in the Willows* were not even intended for children in the first place. While these books present the tendency to combine the reality with fantasy, they do not display the other genre characteristics. The assumption that children's books are shorter does not account for the length of such books as *David Copperfield*, *The Hobbit*, or *There and Back Again*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter series*, *The Book Thief*, etc; nor does the assumption about the vocabulary simplicity, seen in the aforementioned books, manifested in the increased number of

polysyllabic words, difficult, and even invented words (*The Hobbit*, *Harry Potter*, *His Dark Materials*, etc.). As for the obligatory happy endings, such books as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *The Bunker Diary*, *Soldier Bear*, *Russian Roulette*, *The Last Battle*, etc. have rather depressing endings. Nevertheless, these books are still considered children's books. As for the other traits of children's literature - the usage of the active narrative is preferred over the descriptive, passive one, as a feature intended to attend to children's shorter attention spans. Related to the narrative, Hugh Crago states that: "Children's literature has in a sense taken over the tradition of fiction as a primarily *narrative* experience" (Crago 1983: 62 cited in Nodelman 2004: 214).

If one considers the descriptive fiction of adult literature, with its focus on techniques, style, characters and settings, as an evolved form of action centred narrative, then children's literature is less evolved from this particular point of view. However, this leads to the children's literature "higher sophistication in its absolute simplicity" (Butler cited in Nodelman 2004: 216). These traits that make children's literature a less evolved form of adult fiction are mostly restrictions applied by adults writing children's literature, and are based on adults' assumptions related to the child and childhood. Consequently, it would be interesting to see the children's literature texts analysed from another point of view, ignoring the imposed features of children's literature, in order to see how they are different from the adult ones.

Seen from the point of view of narratology, children's literature narratives offer an interesting subject of study. Most children's books follow the typical linear plot structure presented in Aristotle *Poetics*: beginning-middle-end or exposition-complication-climax-reversal-catastrophe, according to Freytag (Prince 1989), however certain children's books, deviate from this order. Instead, they present a nonlinear narrative, starting in *media res* as in: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* where the book starts with a boy brought to the doorstep of his relatives, the main reason for that being disclosed later in the book; technically the main events: the killing of Harry's parents, and his survival have taken place already, by the time the book starts. Other examples are *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Hexwood*, etc. Or the narrative that takes the form of "a slice of life", a middle narrative, without a natural beginning or end (Nikolajeva 2003: 6), such as in the books like: *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Book Thief*, *Ramona the Pest*. The plots are not simple or clearly cut in every children's book;

multiple plots, with numerous subplots and multiple secondary characters are quite frequent (e.g.: *Heroes of Olympus series*, *Harry Potter series*, etc.). The anachronies, under the form of *analepsis* or *prolepsis* can be found in children's literature, as well. Prolepsis, which is rarely used outside the myth or religious prophecy, is frequent, as in: *The Magician's Nephew*, *Emily of the New Moon*. The iterative narrative specific to Proust in adult fiction can be found in children's books as well, because the events are often routinely described, acquiring a special significance, and reflecting the child's perception of time as cyclical, non-linear, as in: *The Adventures of Pippi Longstocking*, *The House at the Pooh Corner (Winnie-the-Pooh)*. The second person narrative is present in children's books, as in the first chapter of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The voice and the point of view seldom coincide in children's literature, since the narrative voice belongs to an adult, while the point of view is that of a child, as in *Harriet the Spy*. Collective or multiple protagonists, an achievement of modernism are present in children's books as well, in: *Mary Poppins*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Heroes of Olympus series*. Narratologists often use *What Maisie Knew* as a unique example of a description of a child's naive and innocent perception, due to the fact that readers share both Maisie's literal and her transferred point of view, but in children's books this device is quite common (Nikolajeva 2004: 167-176); in books ranging from *Curious George*, and *Ramona the Pest* to *The Giver* and *Bridge to Terabithia*. In *Narrative Theory and Children's Literature* Nikolajeva argues that: "[g]eneral narratologists fail to acknowledge that many supposedly unique narrative devices are a rule rather than an exception in children's books" (2004: 166).

So, as one may see children's books are far from being simple, or easy to define and classify. Rare literary techniques and devices are used in children's literature narrative, as well. Some of the main features of children's literature like: a child or childlike as a main character, childhood experiences described from a child's perspective, shorter books, simple language, action oriented plot and its didacticism, are mostly imposed by adults and their ideas about children and childhood. Since adults assume that children are interested mostly in reading about other children or childlike characters (animals, childish adults); that children have shorter attention spans (action-oriented, short books); that children have basic vocabularies (simple language, simple words); and that children are in need of education (moral schematism, didacticism), the books they write for children reflect most of these ideas. Which

makes one wonder: if one removes these assumptions, what traits would remain to reflect the true characteristics of children's literature? Would there be any specific characteristics at all? McDowell argues that: "[t]he distinction between adult and children's fiction is an artificial one, maintained for administrative convenience" (1973: 50). Numerous children's writers like P. Travers, S. O'Dell, L. M. Boston etc. state that they do not write specifically for children, and that publishers are mainly responsible for classifying their books as children's books (Nodelman 2008: 140). Nevertheless, children's literature is still considered as a separate genre. McGillis (1996: viii) proposes another type of definition centering the books written, addressed, published and marketed for children, within the age range: from birth to eighteen. Similarly, Hunt (1974: 117) states that if the author wrote the book for children, then it is a children's book. Except that if one considers that most of the children's books are written by adult authors, one faces another ethical dilemma: the cognitive gap between the addresser and addressee puts them in a position of asymmetry. The adult is in the position of power in this context, and most of time he uses it to influence reader's opinions, views; to teach; to manipulate; to mold the children according to their conceptions about children and childhood. Wall (1991 cited in Nikolajeva 2004: 166) in examining the consequences of this asymmetry, talks about three possibilities: single address, when an adult addresses the child from the position of superiority and power; double address, when an author is pretending to address the child, in fact addressing the adult behind the child; and dual address, when the author addresses the adult and the child simultaneously, on different, but equal premises. The narrator, an adult pretending to be a child, so that the child reader would relate to his story, infuses his writing with his memories about childhood, not even a real childhood, but rather an imaginary one, an ideal one (in the writer's opinion). The child, whom the narrator addresses, is not a real child, but rather the concept of a child, an imaginary child or an idealized child, that the author tries to educate and influence one way or another. This is exactly the position of power of the adult over the child that so many children's literature critics are denouncing. The literature published for children "is a form of colonizing (or wrecking) the child" (Rose 1984: 26). McGillis (2002: 7) argues that children are always influenced by the attitudes of an elder generation. Those who are responsible for children's education: parents, educators and librarians, those who publish children's books: editors,

publishers, are the persons that choose, recommend, impose and demand certain books from the child reader. Lesnik-Oberstein (1994: 2 in Nodelman 2004: 152) states: “[c]hildren’s literature criticism is about saying ‘I know what children like to read / are able to read / should read, because I know what children are like’”.

Rose agrees with Lesnik-Oberstein, and affirms that the adults writing children's fiction and evaluating it, take into account not the audience of real children, but rather the adult’s concept of what children “ought to be and ought to learn”, without ever addressing a real child. Therefore most children’s books have a double agenda, hiding under the entertaining content, the subversive one. On the one hand, children’s books are supposed to be entertaining; on the other hand, they are supposed to be didactic. This ambivalence of the adult’s project is called by Rose “securing the child” (Rose 1984 cited in Nodelman 2004: 169). In *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Rose comes with the idea of “impossibility” of children’s fiction. Children’s fiction is considered impossible by Rose, because of the inexistence of the implied reader of the books, written by adults for children. This implied reader is not a real child, but rather the author’s projection of a child, based on his assumptions, and his own childhood and experiences. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein in *Children's Literature - Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994) introduces the notions of the “real child” and the “fictional child”. The real child notion refers to the reader that ends up reading the book, written for a fictional child that represents the author’s projection of a child; and whom the author is trying to teach, influence, or guide, thus being in a position of power over this child reader.

The position of power of the adult author over the child reader leads children’s literature critics to talk about colonialism. This child or childlike being of the adults’ colonial project is simultaneously a creature in the process of becoming an adult and a creature “alien from and opposite to adult humanity” (Nodelman 2008: 181). The adults’ representations of children that are either innocent or wild, but definitely different from adults, determine the apparition of so called children’s “otherness”. The discussion about child’s otherness increased in the last decade of the twentieth century, including among children’s literature scholars such names as Kristeva (social and cultural otherness), Lesnik-Oberstein, Rose, McGillis, Hazard, etc. This attitude toward the child as being different from adult has led to debates related to the child’s “otherness”, that materialised in such disciplines as child psychology

and psychiatry, that focus obsessively on the otherness of children and of childlike thinking, on the conceptions of different stages of cognitive development, and characterizations of who children in various age groups are, and what they like or need (Nodelman 2008: 142). McGillis (1997a: 7, 1997b) argues that children “remain the most colonized persons on the globe”. Children’s books are inherently didactical, even those which are mostly entertaining for their readers contain a hidden agenda of teaching morals, ideas or guide children through certain situations or emotions. These attempts to influence and manipulate children are seen as a colonial enterprise by many children’s literature critics, as McGillis, Rose, Stephens, Nodelman (*Orientalism*), etc. Nodelman points out that the colonialist thinking represents people as colonisable, by perceiving them as childlike, thus the adult thinking about childhood is colonialist as well (2004: 163). The children’s books are produced mainly by adults; they are intended for double audience, and their most important discourses are obviously intended for adults, because the adult audiences of parents, teachers, librarians, etc. are the ones to choose the books for children to read and study. Therefore these books must represent the adults’ values, morals, knowledge, ideas that are manipulating the child reader. Nodelman points out that: “[w]e write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves we approve of or feel comfortable with” (1992: 30).

McGillis (2002: 7) states that: “[c]hildren’s literature has most often favoured a social vision of the group over the individual”. Thus adults’ interests prevail in children’s books ideology. And adults’ interests in children’s books, more often than not, are adult centered, rather than child centered. The adults want their children subdued, polite, compliant and easily controlled. In *Of Mimicry and Man* (1994), Bhabha talks about the ambivalence of the colonial discourse in general; an ambivalence that is also present in children’s books discourses. These books invite the children to mimic not the adults’ behaviour, but rather the childhood that the adults imagine for them (Nodelman 2004: 186). Shavit states that children’s books are inherently ambivalent, because they belong simultaneously to more than one system, since they were intended from the start for double audience: that of children and that of adults. Each of these audiences reads these books differently without even realising it (2004: 208). Nodelman argues that children’s narratives ambivalence consists of their “doubleness”. They address simultaneously a double audience of adults and children; they are set on entertaining children, while simultaneously teaching them morals; they present a double

vision of childhood and children, first one presenting how childhood or child is, and the opposite teaching the child how childhood or the child ought to be. The children's texts are structured on two levels, one simple surface narrative addressing the child, and a shadow text addressing the complex adult knowledge. This "doubleness" of the text consists of binary opposites between childhood and adulthood that are specific to children's literature texts. The shadow text implies a more complex knowledge that is understood by adults, and while the children do not understand it, they are aware of its existence nevertheless (Nodelman 2004: 179-197). This ambivalence of children's books that Shavit and Nodelman talk about, is considered as subversiveness by Lurie, who argues that children's books are subversive in their intention of teaching children and adults as well, how to be the right kind of childlike being:

The great subversive works of children's literature suggest that there are other views of human life beside those of the shopping mall and the corporation. They mock current assumptions and express the imaginative, unconventional, non-commercial view of the world in its simplest and purest form. They appeal to the imaginative, questioning, rebellious child within all of us, renew our instinctive energy, and act as a force for change. (1998: X-XI in Nodelman 2008: 182)

Reynolds talks about children's literature ambivalence, as well, stating that, on the one hand it depends on and respects the educational system, but on the other hand it mocks and critiques the values and practices of the same system, being simultaneously subversive and liberating (Nodelman 2008: 183). McGillis explains these by the dependence of the publishing industry on the book sales that ensure its solvency. The publisher has to make sure that nothing in the books s/he publishes do not alienate the potential readers, implicitly the adults responsible for the acquisition of books (2008: 183). Which brings the question to another controversial point: should be the genre called children's literature, when it clearly is produced by adults?

The denomination of the genre is subject to debate, as well; why call it children's literature, when almost no children's books are written, illustrated, edited, published, marketed, sold, selected, bought or taught by children (there is only a small number of children's books actually written by children or teenagers)? Children do not have much to say about what ends up being considered appropriate, and deemed as children's literature. Adults and their ideas of "children" and "childhood" are entirely responsible for the creation of children's literature. The children's books

appeared out of the adults' need to educate, manipulate and control children. In the beginning there were no books specifically intended for children. They happened to read whatever the adults read, especially considering that there was a little number of children reading. The changing in the attitude towards children, as a result of Enlightenment and Romanticism ideas, brought the development in children's education, and implicitly the apparition of children's books. The twentieth century came to be known as "the century of child", due mostly to the effect of the two world wars that brought the focus on the new generation. In the post-war era, children became the target for market consumption (McCulloch 2011: 22). Suddenly, there were books, toys, movies, radio and, later, television programmes for children. Nevertheless, this brought a new category of adults consuming children's products: movies, toys, games, and literature; in an attempt to cling to the childhood nostalgia (McCulloch 2011: 24-25). A trend that can be seen in children's literature, in the increased numbers of "kidults" or "kiddults" - adults that tend to read children's books, and in the large number of such books read both by children and adults. This trend was named by Postman as "the rise of 'adultified' child" and of the 'childified' adult" (Postman 1982: 126 cited in McCulloch 2011: 25). Every day, worldwide, there are marketed, publicised, and sold books, sometimes randomly assigned to children's literature genre without a second thought. After the success of certain children's and young adult books in the last ten to fifteen years, many authors, either traditionally published or self-published, saw the potential for their books to reach easily a wider audience; to become part of the large crossover category. So, many books these days are being marketed as children's books rather than just genre books. Harold Bloom, Byatt, Furedi and others argued that for adults to read such lightweight fiction is degrading and infantilising (Falconer 2009: 43). The sociologist Furedi named the phenomenon "cultural infantilism" and expressed his concern related to the adults that refuse to grow up. This category of kidults or boomerang-children is formed of adults that indulge in childhood activities, trying to relive their childhood. Therefore a new crossover market formed around children who aspire to grow up, and the adults who want to behave like children (Furedi 2003 cited in Falconer 2009: 43). The phenomenon is so wide-spread that literary critics become concerned with this new trend, as well, but whether their concern is legitimate or not, the criticism against children's books has reached new heights lately. The fact that the phenomenon of adults reading children's books is considered degrading does not help the case for the worth of children's books.

Children's literature is considered to be less demanding than the literature for adults, and, therefore, of less value or interest. The academic world and most of today literary critics still regard with contempt the genre, despite the major attempt of the children's literature critics, in the last fifty years, to redeem its worth. In December 2013, a scandal related to a statement, made in the description of the creative writing course, on the University of Kent website, provoked an outburst of indignation. The creative writing course description said:

We love great literature. We are excited by writing that changes the reader, and ultimately – even if it is in a very small way – the world. We love writing that is full of ideas, but that is also playful, funny and affecting. You won't write mass-market thrillers or children's fiction on our programmes. You'll be encouraged to look deep inside yourself for your own truth and your own experiences, and also outside yourself at the contemporary world around you. Then you'll work out how to turn what you find into writing that has depth, risk and originality but is always compelling and readable (Said 2013).

This statement obviously provoked a storm of criticism coming from children's writers, children's literature critics, and from a large number of people unrelated to children's literature, as well. This kind of statement however is not a unique occurrence, nor it is a mistake in the author's judgement, more likely, it represents the position taken by the "great literature" or mainstream literature academics and critics against the genre of children's literature. The problem with this statement is related to the fact that its author sets a rhetorical system that places "great literature" in opposition with children's literature and popular literature, represented by thrillers. Making thus the two terms mutually exclusive, implying that children's books cannot ever represent "great literature"; that children's books can never do what "great literature" is doing (Said 2013); and thus associating them with popular literature. However, if the criteria for defining literature are the way it influences the reader in particular, and the world in general, than children's books should be considered "good" literature. One can think of no other genre of literature that might influence the reader the way that children's literature does. Children's books have the potential to be the most influential books in someone's life, being the first books that a person reads; having the power to form the reader's personality, character, value system, and even the reader's literary taste. The discussion about

the children's books value inevitably involves the notion of "good" children's books. C. S. Lewis stated that: "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story" (1973: 233 cited in Nodelman 2008: 235).

Hillman (1999: 3 cited in Nodelman 2004: 145) argues that literature has the following qualities: it is "engaging the intellect", displays "beautiful language", and "deep and subtle human motives". In this case, one can argue that since children's literature possesses all of these qualities, then it should not be that different from mainstream literature. In fact, as it has been mentioned before, there are many voices among children's literature critics arguing that children's literature is in fact an artificially created genre, rather than an entirely different category. Nodelman argues that: "Good children's books might well have something in common with good adult books, if only because 'quality' or 'the best' are so tied up in subjective opinion" (2004: 145).

In fact there are many children's books that are considered literary classics: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Wind in the Willows*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, etc. If according to *Collins English Dictionary* classic means "an author, artist, or work of art of the highest excellence", then there should be no discussions about the "inferiority" of the children's literature; however this is not the case. As it was mentioned before, the wide popularity of *Harry Potter* has led to the introduction of a new category in *The New York Times* best-sellers list, the Children's Literature Best-Sellers. While the large sales of the books should have been greeted with enthusiasm, after all children were reading actual books in the era of the extraordinary popularity of media, the fact only encouraged critics to dismiss the books, associating them with popular literature, seen by Nagourney as "a catch-all phrase usually including all the texts - 'best-sellers' [that] happen to be commercially successful in the culture at a given time" (1982: 99).

In other words, the texts that are read the most become popular literature, regardless of their quality or literary worth. In the category of the most read must be included the children's literature successful writers as: Beatrix Potter, C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, J. K. Rowling, Diana Wynne Jones, Philip Pullman, etc. Most of the aforementioned authors received numerous honours and awards; most of their work represent crossover books, read both by children and by adults; considering these, do all these honours and awards have any value for the critics, if they are dismissing these books solely on the basis that they are best-sellers? According to the above

definition, one could easily include authors like Dickens or Shakespeare in the popular literature category, since both of them were and still are widely popular. However, things are not that simple, since one hardly can compare Dan Brown with Charles Dickens. Therefore, one must look for another definition for popular literature. Cawelti proposes four categories for the analysis of popular culture in general, that can be applied to popular literature: the analysis of cultural themes; the concept of medium; the idea of myth and the concept of formula (1969: 382). For the purpose of describing the genre of popular literature and comparing it to children's literature genre, the concepts that interest us are: the cultural theme, the myth and the formula, since the medium of transmission for both genres is the same. Popular literature is represented by genre fiction: mystery, horror, romance, fantasy, etc., which is certainly mirrored by children's literature; however, popular literature avoids treating in detail difficult or "serious" themes, and while this might be applied for a certain category of children's books as well (again mostly due to the genre restrictions than to children's literature inherent features); other books, predominantly those for older children (*teens, young adult*) treat such themes as: death – *A Monster Calls, The Book Thief, Dance on my Grave, Lord of the Flies*; war – *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, The Book Thief, The Diary of a Young Girl*; kidnapping – *The Bunker Diary, The Winters in Bloom, Kidnapped*; homosexuality – *Dance on my Grave, Keeping You a Secret, Ask the Passengers*; depression, thoughts of suicide – *Dying to Know You, If I stay, Eclipse*; faith and religion – *His Dark Materials trilogy, Now I Know*, etc. As one can see there is no shortage of "serious" issues approached in children's books. Coats states that:

Quite apart from its hard-hitting content, contemporary children's fiction can also be formally challenging. Anthony Browne, Aidan Chambers and Alan Garner, to name only a few, have written experimental or postmodern fiction for child readers. (2004: 162 cited in Falconer 2009: 6)

Another concept in analysing the popular culture is the myth, which might be considered to be similar to theme or formula, nevertheless in the sense used by Cawelti, it represents general conventions. According to Cawelti:

All cultural products contain a mixture of two kinds of elements: conventions and inventions. Conventions are elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand - they consist of things like favourite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly

known metaphors and other linguistic devices, etc. Inventions, on the other hand, are elements which are uniquely imagined by the creator such as new kinds of characters, ideas, or linguistic forms. (1969: 384-385)

That is the myth represents a set of conventions shared by the author and his audience that help the reader to recognise the theme, the issues, the characters involved, etc.; thus connecting the reader to the work. Children's literature as a genre relies heavily on these types of conventions, but so does not only children's literature and popular literature, but mainstream literature, too. What makes the difference between good and bad fiction, is the amount of inventions in each particular work. This is what in Cawelti's words makes the distinction between popular literature and mainstream literature, or between Dan Brown and Shakespeare. While narrative fiction struggles with its continuous quest for invention and innovation, the popular literature uses less invention and more convention in its works. And despite the genre restrictions, more and more children's books are written in a manner that makes them indistinct from mainstream adult fiction, which makes some of them challenging to read. Another concept to analyse in popular literature is the concept of formula, which is defined by Cawelti as "a conventional system for structuring cultural products" (1969: 386). He opposes formula to form, the way he opposed conventions to inventions. Similarly, a piece of work with more formula would be popular literature, while a piece of work with more form would be deemed as literature. For a great artistic value, however it is not sufficient to have only one concept from the list present in one's work to obtain quality; because quality is a combination of features (Cawelti 1969: 386-387). Children's literature, as it was mentioned before, contains other genres: mystery, science fiction, fantasy, etc. and these genres follow the formulaic restrictions too, but there are further children's literature genre restrictions applied to children's books. This way, one ends up with certain anomalies in children's literature genre books, like: detective stories with no bodies, no blood, no drugs, no alcohol, etc., so the author has to innovate more to create interesting enough characters, setting, plot, etc.; creating thus more form, and adding more innovation, which is more likely to result in quality. That being said, it does not automatically mean that every children's book is better, or more interesting, than a popular literature book, it only means that there are more chances for the children's author to go in search of originality in form and content, if he cannot completely rely on formula fiction.

In conclusion, children's literature as a genre is greatly underestimated, yet as it was stated it also has a lot to give. If given the chance it may surprise the reader with unexpected depth and intricate narratives, beautiful language and deep and subtle human motives, literary innovations and difficult themes treated with grace. As a genre, it mirrors the literature in general with all its genres and forms. All of these make children's literature an interesting object of study, where one may rediscover the pleasure of reading, and uncover unknown things about the genre of children's literature. The amount of attention received by children's books has increased in the last decades, which can be a great thing for children's literature in general, and result in the increase of attention from academia, leading to an increased quality of children's books, and thus in the cultivation of its readers' literary tastes.

### References

- Bator, R. (1983) *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*. Chicago: American Library Association
- Bhabha, H. (1994) 'Of Mimicry and Man.' In *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 85-92
- Cawelti, J. (1969) 'The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature'. In *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Volume III. Issue 3. 381- 390
- Coats, K. (2004) *Looking Glasses and Neverlands*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press
- Collins English Dictionary (2003) *Complete and Unabridged*. HarperCollins Publishers [online] available from <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/classic>> [24.20.2014]
- Crago, H. (1983) 'Children's Literature: On the Cultural Periphery'. In Bator, R. *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*. Chicago: American Library Association 61-65
- Cunningham, H. (1995) *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*. London: Longman
- Falconer, R. (2009) *The Crossover Novel. Contemporary Children's Fiction and Its Adult Readership*. London and New York: Routledge
- Foyster, E., Marten, J. (2010) 'Introduction.' *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in the Age of Enlightenment*. Volume 4. New York: Berg Publishers
- Furedi, F. (2003) 'The Children Who Won't Grow Up,' *Spiked* (July, 9). [online] available from <<http://www.frankfuredi.com/site/article/103/>> [24.10.2014]
- Hunt, P. (ed.) (2004) *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Routledge
- Hunt, P. (ed.) (1999) *Understanding Children's Literature, Key Essays from the International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. London: Routledge
- Hunt, P. (1995) 'How not to read a children's book'. *Children's Literature in Education*. Volume 26, Issue 4, 231-240
- Hunt, P. (1984-85) 'Narrative Theory and Children's Literature'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 9. no. 4 (winter) 191-94
- Lesnik-Oberstein, K. (1994) *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

- Lewis, C. S. 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children'. In Haviland, V. (ed.) (1980) *The Open-Hearted Audience: Ten Authors Talk about Writing for Children*. Washington: Library of Congress
- McCulloch, F. (2011) *Children's Literature in Context*. London: Continuum
- McDowell, M. (1973) 'Fiction for children and adults: some essential differences'. *Children's Literature in Education*. Volume 4, Issue 1 (March), 50-63
- McGillis, R. (2002) 'Getting what we want - The Politics of Identity'. *Children's Literature in Education*. Volume 33, Issue 1 (March), 1-10
- McGillis, R. (1997) 'Learning to Read, Reading to Learn; or Engaging in Critical Pedagogy'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 22, no. 3 (fall)
- McGillis, R. (1997) 'Postcolonialism, Children, and their literature'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 28:1 (January)
- McGillis, R. (1996) *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*. New York: Twayne
- Nagourney, P. (1982) 'Elite, Popular and Mass Literature: What People Really Read'. *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Volume XVI. Issue 1. 99-107
- Nikolajeva, M. (2004) 'Narrative Theory and Children's Literature'. In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. by Hunt, P. Oxford: Routledge, 166-178
- Nikolajeva, M. (2003) 'Beyond the Grammar of Story, or How Can Children's Literature Criticism Benefit from Narrative Theory?'. In *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Volume 28, Number 1, 5-16 [online] available from <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/chq/summary/v028/28.1.nikolajeva.html>> [24.10.2014]
- Nodelman, P. (2008) *The Hidden Adult, Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Nodelman, Perry (1992) 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature'. In *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 17:1, 29-35
- Postman, N. (1994) *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books
- Rose, J. (1984) *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan
- Prince, G. (1989) *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002) *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary poetics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group
- Said, S.F. (2013) 'Who says children's books can't be great literature?'. *The Guardian*. [online] 3<sup>rd</sup> December. Available from <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/dec/03/childrens-books-great-literature-university-of-kent-sf-said>> [24.10.2014]
- Shavit, Z. (1986) *Poetics of Children's Literature*. Athens: University of Georgia Press
- Smith, D. (2000) 'The Times Plans a Children's Best-Sellers List'. In *The New York Times*. [online] 24<sup>th</sup> June. available from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/24/books/the-times-plans-a-children-s-best-seller-list.html>> [24.10.2014]
- Weinreich, T. (2000) *Children's Literature: Art or Pedagogy?* Frederiksberg, Denmark: Roskilde University Press
- Zipes, J. (2001) *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York: Routledge