PHILIP NEL

A Manifesto for Children's Literature; or, Reading Harold as a Teenager

Those of us who read, create, study, or teach children's literature sometimes face skepticism from other alleged adults. *Why would grown-ups take children's books seriously? Shouldn't adults be reading real books?*

There are many responses to these questions:

1. Children's books are the most important books we read because they're potentially the most influential books we read. Literature for the young reaches an audience still very much in the process of becoming. It stands to make a deeper impression because its readers are much more impressionable.
2. Adults who dismiss children's literature neglect their responsibilities as parents, educators, and citizens. What future parents, teachers, doctors, construction workers, soldiers, leaders, and neighbors read is of the utmost importance, if for no other reason than some of us will continue to live in the world they inherit. If books leave such a powerful impression on young minds, then giving good books to children is vital.
3. Almost no children's literature is written, illustrated, edited, marketed, sold, or taught by children. Adults, and their perception of "children," create children's books. It's hypocritical for adults to claim that children's literature is unworthy of their attention. To make such a claim is to erase the adults who make children's literature possible. Indeed, any adult who alleges that children's literature must be segregated from the grown-ups is a hypocrite, a fool, or both.
4. Children are as heterogeneous a group as adults are. There is no universal child, just as there is no universal adult. Defining the readership of any work of "children's literature" is a tricky, sticky, complex task. Paradoxically, and as the term itself indicates, "children's literature" is defined by its audience—it's *for* children. It is thus a literature for an audience whose tastes, reading ability, socioeconomic status, hobbies, health, culture, interests, gender, home life, nationality, and race vary widely. Children's literature is for an unquantifiable group. For this reason, the very *term* "children's lit-

erature" is a problem. Only someone who has never thought about children or what they read could argue that children's literature does not merit serious consideration.

5. Children's literature has aesthetic value. Good children's books are literature. Good picture books are portable art galleries. If we don't take children's literature seriously, then we diminish an entire art form and those who read it. We also prevent ourselves from being able to distinguish high-quality works from inferior ones—thus neglecting our responsibilities outlined in point number two, above. This is not to suggest that we can or should all *agree* on what is a great children's book. We can't and we shouldn't. What we can and should do is *care* about what makes children's books bad or good, average or classic, banal or beautiful.
6. The ability to tell stories makes us human. From a very young age, children make sense of the world by telling stories. A child will narrate the day's events. He will serve you imaginary breakfasts on empty plastic plates and warn you, "Be careful. It's hot." Or she will invent a story to accompany the pictures of a book whose text she cannot yet decipher. To help them comprehend the world and their place in it, children need stories. Children's literature gives them narratives on which to build their own.

But my focus in this essay is less on those preceding six points and more on a seventh point: children's books have much to give those of us who are no longer children. There are levels of meaning we may have missed when we read the book as a child. Adults' experiences may grant us interpretations unavailable to less experienced readers, just as children may arrive at interpretations lost to adults who have forgotten their own childhoods. In children's books, there is art, wisdom, beauty, melancholy, hope, and insight for readers of *all* ages.

What inspires me to make this seventh claim is that I have no memory of reading *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955) as a child. As an adult, I created a website devoted to the book's creator, Crockett Johnson, and wrote a biography of Johnson and his wife, fellow children's-book author Ruth Krauss. But the book that inspired both website and biography is completely absent from my memories of early childhood.

The book *does* appear in memories *of* those memories. In eighth grade, when I had long since "graduated" into reading chapter books, my mother got a job teaching at a private school, thus enabling my sister and me to attend for free. Once a month, there was a faculty meeting after the end of the school day. During that time, my sister and I were left alone in the school library to do our homework. She did her home-

work. I did not. I wandered over to the picture books and began reading them. There, I rediscovered *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, a book I then remembered fondly from my preschool days. I also realized that there were other books about Harold—*Harold's Trip to the Sky* (1957), *Harold's ABC* (1963). Had I read these other Harold stories when I was younger? I wasn't sure. But I knew they were just as enchanting as the first Harold book.

So, at the age of fourteen—an age when you might expect a person to be reading young adult novels—I began to collect paperbacks of Crockett Johnson's Harold books. Every time I was in a bookstore during those pre-Internet days, I headed straight for the children's section and looked for those small (4½" x 5¾") books, in which Harold stars in his own circus (*Harold's Circus*), rides a rocket to Mars and a shooting star back to earth (*Harold's Trip to the Sky*), or builds a continuous and alphabetical story (*Harold's ABC*).

I wonder what needs were fulfilled by those particular words and pictures. Perhaps it was the books' presentation of the imagination as a source of power and possibility. As a new student at a new school, I may have been comforted by the idea that creativity would help me find my way. Maybe Johnson's iconic, clear-line style better enabled me to identify with Harold as he and his crayon navigated an uncertain, emerging landscape. Distinguishing between iconic representation (a circle with two dots for eyes, and a line for a mouth) and realistic representation (a photograph of a face), Scott McCloud says that readers project themselves into the blankness of the former, but see the latter as someone else. Harold's round head, open eye, and brief line of a smile allowed me to see not another character, but myself, moving through a world of my own invention.

Two-thirds of the way through the first book, Harold—unable to find his way home—draws and climbs a mountain, because "if he went high enough…he could see the window of his bedroom." But he slips off the unfinished side of his mountain, his crayon leaving the page as he plummets headfirst through the air. At that moment of crisis, Johnson's narrator explains, "But, luckily, he kept his wits and his purple crayon." Sure enough, Harold's crayon begins to draw the arc of a circle, which becomes a hot-air balloon, beneath which Harold adds a basket "big enough to stand in." Ultimately, he draws his way home—as he does in each of Johnson's seven Harold books. It is likely that what spoke to me was the idea that I could find my place in the world simply by imagining it.

I also wonder why, as a freshman in college, I adopted A.A. Milne's *The World of Pooh* (a collection containing both *Winnie-the-Pooh* [1926] and *The House at Pooh Corner* [1928]) as my bedtime reading. Perhaps the story of Pooh and Piglet hunting a Woozle resonated with my compulsion to pursue my own unseen anxieties. Or maybe Eeyore's ability to find joy in a damp piece of rubber (a balloon that Piglet had accidentally burst) and empty pot (because Pooh ate all the honey) provided perspective: though not the birthday presents that Pooh and Piglet intended to give, Eeyore enjoys them just the same.

I wonder, too, if my attraction to children's books during my college years also expressed a yearning for a time when I could be happy in an uncomplicated way—a moment prior to the emotional turbulence of adolescence and before the sudden collapse of my parents' marriage. The books of A.A. Milne or Crockett Johnson temporarily removed me from some of the painful knowledge I acquired that first semester of college, as when a dear childhood friend confided that, at the age of sixteen, she had been raped by a man she trusted. The memory of that telephone conversation still makes me cry.

Yet reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* or *Harold and the Purple Crayon* was not nostalgia for early childhood, but rather a longing for Early Childhood's Greatest Hits. My choice of books evinces a fondness for those happier moments, conveniently forgetting that children feel broken hearts, betrayal, and failure just as acutely as adults do. Perhaps more acutely. The first time an alleged friend taunts you, you are completely vulnerable. Time and experience grants us older people some context to soften the blow and a repertoire of responses to deflect it. But, for a young child, the pain is entirely new.

My adolescent and collegiate attraction to children's books returned me not to the vulnerability of infancy but to the happy sense of achievement I had as an early reader. Born the same year *Sesame Street* made its debut, I learned to read from that show and its companion program *The Electric Company*. One of my earliest memories is, at three years old, slowly reading my way through Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960)—a book written (I later learned) in response to Seuss's publisher betting him that he couldn't write a book using fifty or fewer different words. As a beginning reader, I found it ideal because I encountered the same word many times. The first time I saw each word—house, mouse, fox, box—I had to sound it out, and Seuss's end rhymes gave me pronunciation clues. Subsequent times, seeing a word I now knew gave me a sense of mastery. I remember experiencing such joy as the difficult words quickly became easier. When I finished reading *Green Eggs and Ham*—the first

time I had read a book all by myself—I was so happy that I flipped the book back over to the front cover and began to read again.

Reading children's books brought me back to my childhood delight in language and in stories—a burgeoning intellectual and aesthetic curiosity that public school did its best to quash. When, on the first day of first grade, the teacher asked who could already read, I raised a hand, as did one or two others. We each received a book to read. As the first one to finish the book, I raised my hand, said, "I've finished," and asked what I should do next. "Read it again," the teacher replied.

So began the lesson that school is boring, the main theme of my seven years of public education. One result was that I became a terrible student. I would finish the worksheet and then devote my free time to amusing my classmates. I paid attention only when it suited me, trusting that I'd be able to master the material on my own. This approach worked well until about sixth grade, when attentiveness was no longer optional. My grades began slipping, and I began to fall behind. If I had stayed in public school, I'm not sure that I would have gone to college.

Those adolescent afternoons spent reading children's books instead of studying were both a continuation of my public school truancy and a reminder of the fact that learning *can* be fun. In private school, I didn't become an "A" student overnight, but I did gradually come to understand that formal education can be interesting and was in fact worthy of my attention. In this sense, those teenage travels with *Harold and the Purple Crayon* reconnected me with an intellectual curiosity I'd lost. Children's books were—and still are—not just an escape into fantasy, but a way of grounding myself in the world.

In my forties, I discovered Guus Kuijer's *The Book of Everything* (2006), a lyrical, profound novel in which nine-year-old Thomas must cope with his rigid, abusive father. Thanks to friends, neighbors, and his own perceptiveness, he does. He comes to understand that his father "was afraid of laughter and joy. He was particularly afraid of ridicule." And Thomas learns "how happiness begins. . . . It begins with no longer being afraid." That's a powerful message for readers of any age.

Books "for children" can speak to people of all ages and backgrounds—if we are ready to listen. It's hard to predict when or why we will be ready. It is indeed dangerous to assume that recommended age ranges on the backs of books will tell us anything about who may read them. When I read and reread the Harold stories at age fourteen, the books did not then have age ranges on them, though I note that a more recent copy of *Harold's Fairy Tale* alleges that it's for "Ages 3 to 8." Yet, as Philip Pullman has said of his own work,

> I did not intend the book for this age, and not that; for one class of reader, and not others. I wrote it for anyone who wants to read it, and I want as many readers as I can get, and I want to meet them honestly…. For a book to claim "This was written for children of 11+," when it simply wasn't, is to tell an untruth.

Exactly. Books "for children" or "for teenagers" are books for all who are ready to listen to them. They are for all who recognize that art cannot be confined within such narrow labels.

Here's one final example.

When you read Leo Lionni's *Frederick* (1967) for the first time, you think it's a version of Aesop's "The Ant and the Grasshopper": ant stores food for winter, grasshopper prefers to sing, winter comes, grasshopper starves. Similarly, in *Frederick*, most mice gather food for the winter. The title character doesn't: he gathers sun rays, colors, and words. Winter comes, and then you realize that this is *not* a version of Aesop's fable. When the mice run out of food, they ask, "Frederick: What about your supplies?" Frederick's words give them warmth, provide them with hope, and help them survive.

It's not a version of "The Ant and the Grasshopper." It's a version of the Persian proverb about the two pennies. The proverb goes like this. To live, a person needs two pennies: one penny for a loaf of bread, and the other for a lily. If you just have the first penny—the one for the loaf of bread—you have food, and you're surviving. But you're not really living. To live, you need the second penny—the penny for the lily, for art, for hope.

For me, that second penny is Harold's purple crayon. The second penny is children's literature.