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Maria Nikolajeva’s *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (2010) is a responsive exploration of how to approach children’s literature from a critical theory perspective. Nikolajeva artfully applies her three decades of research and scholarship to respond to Hunt’s (1984) call for a theory specific to children’s literature and to react against the recent tendency to reject theory (Nodelman, 1997; 2005; McGillis, 2006). Her approach is bounded by the foundational concepts of practicality and applicability. She says, “a theory that cannot be used in concrete text analysis is like a bicycle with square wheels: radical and daring, but hardly functional” (p. 2). In alignment with the reader response tradition, Nikolajeva says that consciously or unconsciously, theory guides the questions we ask the text while reading and informs our responses.

In outlining what a theory of children’s literature needs to do, Nikolajeva borrows some basic principles of inquiry from queer (de Certeau, 1986) and carnival theory (Bakhtin, 1968). Her analyses illustrate that a foundational aspect of a theory of children’s literature can best be understood by examining power tensions between adults and children. She conceptualizes *aetonormativity*, which identifies how adult normativity governs the way children’s literature has been patterned “to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group” (p. 8).

Nikolajeva articulately illustrates the complexity of aetonormativity and the insight that carnival theory can provide because of the constant change of power positions: “yesterday’s children grow up and become oppressors themselves” (p. 9). She uses Pippi Longstocking’s wisdom to describe this distinct power structure:

> Of course you have to eat your good cereal. If you don’t eat your good cereal, then you won’t grow and get big and strong. And if you don’t get big and strong, then you won’t have the strength to force your children, when you have some, to eat their good cereal…. *(Pippi in the South Seas*, p. 55, italics in the original).

Nikolajeva invites scholars of literature written for children to embrace “Bakhtin’s overall view of literature as carnival, a symbolic representation of a socially liberating process, a subversive, that is, disguised, interrogation of authorities” (p. 10). She illustrates how principles of carnival theory are useful for analyzing literature written for children because children’s literature can “subvert its own oppressive function” (p. 9) when fictional children are *allowed* “to become strong, brave, rich, powerful, and independent—on certain conditions and for a limited time” (p. 10). Nikolajeva explores how writers of literature for children have used specific
genres, settings, characters, and narrative devices such as voice, focalization, and subjectivity to “confirm or interrogate power structures in their texts” (p. 11).

This book is a powerful example of how tenets of queer and carnival theory can be used to guide textual analysis of literature written for children. Queer theory posits that: 1) all categories are falsifications; 2) all assertions about reality are socially constructed; 3) texts form discourses that are exercises in power and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation. Nikolajeva combined these ideas with the Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style through humor and chaos, as she explored various texts including Winnie-the-Pooh, Harry Potter, and George MacDonald’s fairy tales.

These textual analyses reveal eleven power hierarchies, or forms of alterity, commonly found in literature for children and raise interesting questions regarding how writers of literature for children “confirm or interrogate power structures in their texts” (p. 11). The eleven elements of alterity outlined in this text are as follows: 1) how fictive children can be empowered or disempowered; 2) the use of standard, aetonormative language rather than child language; 3) how elements of fantasy are used to aetonormatively socialize the child; 3) the deconstruction of aetonormative viewpoints in dystopian literature; 4) aetonormative attitudes toward place, space, and nationhood; 5) heteronormativity; 6) subversive use of voice; 7) society’s structure; 8) specism; 9) counterpoint between text and illustrations in picturebooks; and 10) the relationship between the child reader and the child character.

*Power, Voice, and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* is a powerful proposition for a specific theoretical framework for approaching children’s literature. Through the various textual analyses presented in this book, Nikolajeva builds upon her prolific years of scholarship as she demonstrates how children’s literature can be understood by exploring alterity in various forms. In beautiful Nikolajevian style, she has again produced an accessible work of scholarly depth. She maintains that “we cannot unconditionally abolish adult normativity . . . Yet we can, through the carnival of children’s literature, make young readers aware of the fact that adult norms and rules are not absolute” (p. 204). Despite the inability of adult scholars to fully interrogate their own power position, Nikolajeva’s conceptualization of aetonormative inquiry created a theoretical framework that I look forward to applying to my analyses of books written for young readers and my examination of pedagogical practices related to literature in the elementary classroom.

### References


