

“The road goes ever on!”

An Interview with Professor David Rudd

ROUNDTABLE TEAM

In his first interview since retiring from his position as Professor of Children’s Literature and Director of the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature at the University of Roehampton, David Rudd reflects candidly on his own academic journey and developments within Children’s Literature and Higher Education. His publications include *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children’s Literature* (2000), *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature* (2010), and *Reading the Child in Children’s Literature: An Heretical Approach* (2013). He maintains his status as Emeritus Professor of Children’s Literature at the University of Bolton.

RT: Can you tell us a little bit about your own professional/academic journey?

DR: I could tell this story in several ways. In biographical terms, I was a typical, sixties, hippy dropout, leaving school at 16 with hardly any qualifications. I bummed around Cornwall for a while then took several menial jobs before returning to education and becoming a trainee librarian. This led to academic librarianship and some occasional teaching, including the odd talk on children’s books. I subsequently went to the University of Hull and studied Sociology and Psychology before taking a job as Tutor Librarian at what was then Bolton Institute of Higher Education, where I also trained as a teacher. I had a heavy lecture load at the time, mainly in information and study skills, across ten departments (from Textiles and Engineering to Art and Philosophy). During this period, I also undertook a part-time MA in

Communication Studies (at Sheffield Hallam University), which had modules in Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, amongst others subjects. I emerged with a distinction and my dissertation, on Roald Dahl, became my first monograph.

My tutors at the time had a book contract for a study of Enid Blyton, which they wanted me to take on. I said that I might as well get a PhD out of it, too, which I also undertook, part-time. By the time I'd completed the PhD, the original publishers didn't want to know any more, but another publisher, Macmillan (as it then was), was keen. This became my second monograph, which was extensively picked up by the media, featuring also in such places as "Pseud's Corner" (*Private Eye*) and *The Write Stuff*.

I then moved into the Department of Humanities at Bolton, teaching literature, and was elevated to Professor in 2007. In 2014, having thought I'd be at Bolton till I retired, I was invited to apply for a professorial post at Roehampton, where, at the time, I was External Examiner on the Children's Literature MA. This proved a delightful swansong. In fact, I wish I were still enjoying it, but unfortunately my health deteriorated, hence my sudden retirement in summer 2016.

That's one way to relate my erratic journey, but it could be told otherwise. For example, there's definitely a more Blyton-themed version. When I was a young boy, the *Noddy* books were being published, and I can remember being given the first, *Noddy Goes to Toyland* (another journeying book, clearly influenced by *Pinocchio*), on my 4th birthday: "This Book Belongs to...", invited the mock bookplate within, and it was certainly the first book I can explicitly remember owning.

Fast forward to age 10. I was sent to Boarding School and made the mistake of replying to the Headmaster's question, about what books us schoolboys were reading, by mentioning Blyton. Hoots of derision! Despite everyone else reading her books under the bedclothes, none but a new boy would be naïve enough to have admitted it. Things hadn't changed when, years later, I became a librarian. Blyton was still branded as "slow poison". Of course, my subsequent PhD on Blyton challenged this. But before I'd undertaken any real research, the media went 'viral,' as we'd now say, at the idea of a grown

man studying Blyton: “Noddy gets a PhD”, declared the headlines back in 1992. However, by the time my monograph was published, in 2000, things had changed radically, with media personalities jostling to announce publicly how important Blyton had been in their lives, with a number of writers proclaiming that they had first been inspired to take up the pen thanks to Enid. I like to think that my outputs played some part in this *volte-face*.

Finally (on this Blyton-themed journey), when in the early noughties I was working in Zambia, helping to deliver a B.Ed. programme, I was taken to a barren compound that housed and schooled (in one room) about fifty HIV/AIDS orphans. Knowing about the Enid Blyton Trust for Children, I subsequently applied to it and secured £600 for these kids who, in nineteenth-century terms, when Blyton was herself a child, would have been known as “street Arabs”: children who would probably never know the luxury of having a book of their own.

This journey is turning into a marathon, but before I finish, there is one other, Odysseus-like journey that I’ll briefly mention. For my mother was born and grew up in Roehampton, just down the road from the University, and used to bring me, again as a four-year-old, to play in Richmond Park. So it seemed highly fortuitous that I was to return “home” to round off my academic journey.

RT: Where do you see the field of children’s literature criticism journeying to?

DR: It doesn’t seem quite right to think of children’s literature criticism as journeying to a particular destination. As the cliché has it, the journey itself should provide its own reward – and I have certainly enjoyed travelling in this manner. However, I am aware that in these days, when funds are often dependent on formulating very clear and articulate proposals, which in turn often involve working closely with partners, and specifying the likely outcomes and outputs, the luxury of being a *flâneur* – allowed to wander and idly window-shop, waiting for inspiration to strike – has probably gone.

But I still revel in the fact that literature itself goes nowhere (or, rather, wanders everywhere); that it is still dealing with the same issues as those tackled by the Greeks over 2,000 years ago: good, evil, love, jealousy, rivalry,

desire, beauty, revenge, death – and so on. In this way, children’s literature, likewise, has always addressed society’s cultural concerns, refracted through ideas of what children and childhood are. Children’s literature criticism, then, must inevitably follow in the wake of its primary texts, interpreting, analysing, and commenting on them.

In this manner, children’s literature critics have, since the 1970s, been closely allied with the concerns of other social commentators: around issues of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, disability and sexuality – and such concerns continue, as they should. Behind these issues, though, for critics in this area, lurks the key question of what Maria Nikolajeva has called “aetonormativity”; that is, with the fact that, as with sexuality, where heterosexuality is the norm, so with age, the adult is the norm (and, we might add, the white, middle-class, able-bodied, male adult). Accordingly, children’s literature critics have always wrestled with ideas about how the child differs in certain respects from the adult, and how, therefore, it is possible for adults to address this different being in ways that are in some way authentic. These more ontological and epistemological issues will run and run, and I’ve certainly enjoyed contributing to debates in this area.

More recently, we have seen this field of study becoming more fragmented, with literature for adolescents increasingly being seen as a separate concern (“Children’s and Young Adult Literature”, as it is popularly described). This said, it was certainly exciting to have been involved in the early days of this sub-discipline, when commentators could, to varying degrees, become *au fait* with the whole field, including related areas like fairy stories, folklore, mythology, children’s culture, nursery rhymes, comics, and so on. Given the huge amount of scholarship that has since been undertaken, being a generalist is no longer possible. As with mainstream literary studies, scholars are increasingly becoming pigeon-holed as “eighteenth-century” or “early modern” specialists.

In terms of the journeying metaphor, then, we have more and more pathways spreading out from that main highway, with less and less traffic between them. So, comic and graphic novel specialists have their own conferences, journals and networks, and rarely are their views shared with mainstream children’s literature critics.

However, though we might be divided over content, there is still much common ground in terms of critical approach. Thus the chief social concerns mentioned earlier – around class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on – are still central to most areas of enquiry. Children’s literature has therefore tended to follow mainstream trends, discovering its own “ethical” and “affective” “turns”, and pursued hot topics like cognitive poetics and the theory of mind. The road goes ever on!

RT: You are among a number of foundational figures in children's literary criticism who have recently retired or who are retiring soon. Do you think this will have a big impact within the field?

DR: I certainly prefer the present participle, “retiring”, to the past, “retired”! As I said earlier, I was sorry to have hung up my boots at Roehampton so soon. I am still excited about lots that’s happening in the area, and it was a pleasure to be amongst so many young and up-and-coming scholars, who always gave one a sense of purpose. However, “retiring” remains the keyword, as one moves into that University of the Third Age, to adopt a useful euphemistic phrase. And as I look around me, I’m not alone. Perry Nodelman, Peter Hunt, and John Stephens, to name three key figures from across the globe, seem as prolific as ever, despite their “retired” status. Jean Webb, Kim Reynolds, and Maria Nikolajeva are also moving towards that jumping-off point.

On a matter of fact, I don’t actually see myself as a foundational figure. Generally that honour belonged to a slightly older generation, many of whose key figures have either retired, or were never closely associated with the academic world in the first place. And, of course, countless others have left us more permanently, though their works live on. Mary Cadogan, Robert Leeson, Millicent Lenz, Mitzi Myers, John Rowe Townsend, and others are all sad losses, then, along with the many outstanding children’s writers, some of whom also contributed critical voices, like Nina Bawden, Catherine Storr, David Rees, and, as mentioned above, Leeson and Townsend. It’s good to see that some other foundational figures are still with us and active, though, like Brian Alderson, Dennis Butts, Sheila Ray and Roehampton’s own Pat Pinsent (and apologies to all those that I’ve not given a name-check to).

While talking about foundational figures, it's also worth mentioning that huge body of anonymous librarians and teachers who, early on, helped get the discipline started with their enthusiasm, encyclopaedic knowledge and bibliographical expertise. Anne Lundin's book, *Constructing the Canon of Children's Literature*, is one of the few works to attend to this, but from a predominantly North American perspective.

As for the impact this current wave of retirements will have, I don't think it'll really make much difference. For, in many ways, older scholars tend to be more set in their ways and can be less receptive to new ideas, let alone less aware of the new primary literature coming through. (I say "in many ways", for there are provisos, which I'll save for the next question.) All in all, though, it's good to see new blood shaking things up a bit.

RT: How do you think the REF system is influencing the journey of children's literature criticism?

DR: In two words: very badly. It's so sad to see academic institutions being ranked in league tables, like football clubs, with their REF stars being bought and sold like prima donna players. And, of course, once one's research started to be graded, researchers naturally responded to the criteria in a focused, strategic fashion, just as schoolteachers seek to maximise their pupils' exam success. With the REF system, this has resulted in 3* submissions becoming the gold standard, such that staff at a number of institutions have been penalised when their publications fall short of this.

What, though, does it mean for a piece of research to be awarded a 3*? The shorthand is that it is "paradigm shifting"; that is, in literary terms, that it interprets texts or concepts in a new way. As a journal editor (of *Children's Literature in Education*), I have to say that I experienced the impact of the newer REF system fairly early on. Whereas, formerly, an author might contribute quite an insightful article that undertook a close reading of a single text, such studies are now far more rare, as are articles that give a critical overview of a particular area of study (a genre, a period, a critical approach, for example). What we now receive, instead, are more bloated pieces, where an author clearly feels – or has been advised – that a close reading is not sufficient (i.e. it will rate 2* at most). So, there is a strained gear-shift, mid-article, as an author

struggles subtly to communicate the view that, “In this way, I am indicating how this is a totally new approach ...”. One shudders at authors’ desperate attempts to wrestle perfectly good pieces into what frequently turn out to be fairly artificial frameworks: tendentious, taxing, excessive, far-fetched, egregious. These are the sorts of words that more frequently find their way into reviewers’ feedback.

To my mind, the whole idea of a “paradigm shift”, as famously introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his classic work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, has lost its critical edge. Such contenders for a paradigm shift are few and far between. Newton, Darwin, and Einstein obviously come to mind, but the generations that follow are then inevitably engaged in “normal” research within this new mindset. In short, the majority of paradigm shifts in children’s literature, as in other areas of the Humanities, turn out to be more rhetorical than substantive.

The other unfortunate effect of the REF, with its focus on four outstanding outputs, is that many academics have been instructed not to engage in other activities. So the process of reviewing books, of writing conspectuses or metacritical works, or even of giving keynotes at conferences, tends to be less attractive. The result is that young scholars do not get the opportunity to engage with a rounded community of academics, as happened previously. This is where, to make the link with a previous question, emeritus academics can be less than retiring in voicing their opinions, forthrightly criticising the system from positions of relative immunity: Brian Alderson, Peter Hunt, Perry Nodelman and others are therefore worth their weight in gold.

Personally, I think the whole system of research assessment has distorted the more rounded work of academics in HE. It has certainly rendered almost extinct those outstanding teachers that we can all recall, who have been forced to publish rather than disseminate their insights in a more Socratic manner, through lecture and tutorial.

RT: J.R.R. Tolkien famously wrote, “Not all those who wander are lost.” Journeys play a huge role in children’s literature, please tell us about one of your favourite journeys in children’s literature and why this journey resonates with you!

DR: This is a wonderful invitation, but one that has also caused me much *angst* as I have tried to reduce my response to a single, favourite text. As is well known, children's literature has been defined by several scholars as a literature about journeying. The journey, in fact, provides its defining ur-plot: Home – Away – Home, as Perry Nodelman succinctly expresses it. So, Peter Rabbit, unlike his sisters, Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail, has a story only because he disobeys his mother and journeys to Mr McGregor's garden. But his journey is defined as children's literature specifically, because, unlike much adult literature (and Peter Rabbit's father, too), Peter *does* return home (Young Adult literature is thus often seen to be characterised by omitting this final stage).

Anyway, after considering *Watership Down*, *Brendon Chase*, *The Little Grey Men*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Water Babies*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Pinocchio*, *His Dark Materials*, *The Magic Pudding*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* – and many more (realising how much I like books about journeys), I finally alighted on Russell Hoban's classic novel, *The Mouse and His Child*. It was a close-run thing, in fact, and for a long time I was going to choose *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but decided I'd already spilt too many thousands of words on that text.

So, Hoban's modern classic is about a clockwork toy, which comprises two tin mice, a father (the Mouse) and son (his Child), "with outstretched arms and joined hands", destined to dance in endless circles as the father raises and lowers his son; until, that is, their clockwork winds down. They are safe but bored in their toyshop "home". Eventually they are bought, then broken. A tramp repairs them and, in the process, turns their circular state of stasis into a linear walk. "Be tramps", he advises; and later, a prophetic Frog adds: "you have begun your journey, and all else necessarily follows from that".

And it does, with lots of adventures on the way, largely thanks to the Child's dissatisfaction with their life and, in Romantic terms, his belief in a better future ("The child is father to the mouse", as he declares at one point.) Along the way they encounter various creatures and experience different philosophical perspectives, including one delivered by a Beckett-like turtle, C. Serpentina, who lives, appropriately, at the bottom of a pond in the mud. The Mouse and Child have previously encountered Serpentina's dramatic work when performed by a couple of crows at their theatre company, The

Caws of Art. Unfortunately, the play ends prematurely thanks to some bloodthirsty and philistine weasels.

The Child, however, won't accept Serpentina's bleak pessimism. In contrast, his own, naïve, visionary self-belief proves infectious. Despite their mechanistic origins, Cartesianism is rejected in favour of "self-winding", showing that even if the universe is meaningless, the Mouse and his Child, along with the community of believers that come to live with them, have created their own system of values.

RT: Dr Seuss's *Oh The Places You'll Go* offers its readers the following sage advice:

I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang ups
can happen to you.

Do you think it is important that children's literature represents mishaps and misadventures as well as successful journeys?

DR: Another interesting question. There would seem to be two responses, depending on what is meant by a "successful" journey, for any journey might be deemed a success, perhaps, if the mishaps and misadventures are overcome. And most stories, of course, fit this pattern, which is once again inscribed in the "Home-Away-Home" model. In the "away" phase, all sorts of adversities occur (through either lack or villainy, as Vladimir Propp put it). So, once again, we might instance Peter Rabbit, feeling sick, encountering Mr McGregor, ending up in a watering-can, and so forth; or, more radically, Pinocchio, who is beaten, abducted, hung, turned into a donkey, and swallowed by a whale, amongst other "mishaps".

But this brings me to my second response to this question. For what if there is no ultimate 'success' in a story? Does that militate against the work being children's literature? *Pinocchio* is a case in point, as the initial, serialised version ended tragically with the puppet being hung, swinging "stiff and insensible" from a tree branch. Personally, I would argue that a happy ending is not es-

sential, despite the fact that, since Victorian times, it has become commonly associated with the genre of children's literature, and is actually part of some critics' definitions (e.g. Fred Inglis's *The Promise of Happiness*).

Of course, "happiness" is by no means synonymous with "success", the latter term suggesting something that goes beyond the fate of individual characters. Rather, it considers a work as an artistic whole, pondering over authorial intention and anticipating how readers are expected to react. For example, in the final volume of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* Chronicles, *The Last Battle*, the key protagonists all die, and yet, from a Christian standpoint, we are meant to see this outcome as successful (resulting in everlasting life). Many of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, like "The Little Mermaid", have similarly morbid endings. Beyond this, if we are indeed talking about the wider area of children's literature (rather than children's fiction in particular), then we will find many examples of precipitately terminated journeys: in folk and fairy tales (Red Riding Hood consumed), in nursery rhymes ("Here comes a candle to light you to bed/ And here comes a chopper to chop off your head") and in cautionary tales (think of Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, with characters having their thumbs chopped off, being burned alive, and expiring from anorexia).

As I said earlier, it is only since the Victorians that children's books have been deemed inveterately upbeat, so it is noteworthy that a number of authors have recently challenged this enforced optimism, both at the picture book level (*Duck, Death and the Tulip*) and in works of YA fiction (*Bunker Diary*). However, I'd argue, the artistic success of these journeys remains intact.

RT: What gives you hope as we journey into an uncertain future?

DR: My initial reaction to this question was, indeed, that "we are all doomed", especially in the aftermath of several world-shaking events. We are post-Brexit, post-Obama and, as it now seems, post-truth, saddled with a world that is curiously 'alternative factual', although more obvious terms like 'fantasy' and 'la la land' are not countenanced!

This said, art and culture have always existed in a dialogic relationship with society, interrogating and often seeking to subvert dominant values, so we must all look forward to some stimulating ripostes from the artistic world,

whether in the form of books, films, or other art forms. Of course, countries that become more authoritarian also seek to shut down free speech and silence minority voices (as the examples of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Franco's Spain have shown, with their staid, conservative artworks), so it might be up to a Europe that is, at the least, united in culture, to provide a note of sanity. On the other hand, given that the betting odds for the American President leaving office before the end of his first term, either via impeachment or resignation, are 11/10, perhaps we have less to worry about. I'm reminded of one of Disney's cartoons, also about a duck: *Slide, Donald, Slide*.



David Rudd on the road. Photograph: Sheena Rudd