

***The BFG* and the Spaghetti Book Club: A Case Study of Children as Critics**

A. Robin Hoffman

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Abstract Situated at the intersections of ethnography, childhood studies, literary studies, and education research, this reception study seeks to access real children's responses to a particular text, and to offer empirical description of actual reading experiences. Survey data is generated by taking advantage of an online resource: an archive of children's book reviews of Roald Dahl's *The BFG* posted on the website of the Spaghetti Book Club, a for-profit educational organization that provides web hosting services for school classes and their students' book reviews. Thirty different reviews and their accompanying illustrations are analyzed; all were produced by fourth-grade students ranging in age from 8 years old to 11, and representing a broad diversity of American demographic groups and geographic areas. Far from revealing an "essential" or passive child reader, this sample set bears witness to children's capacity to derive highly personal meaning from the text while simultaneously manifesting self-awareness about their status as children in a larger reading community. More importantly, these child-reviewers represent themselves as capable of sophisticated negotiations between self and story. A significant number of individuals demonstrate a capacity or propensity to approach the text as an aesthetic—rather than a bibliotherapeutic—experience. This study prompts us to re-evaluate the primary significance of categorical distinctions between fantasy and reality when analyzing reader response.

Keywords Reader response · Roald Dahl · Reception · Fantasy · New media

Robin Hoffman received her MA in the History of Art from University College London, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the English department at the University of Pittsburgh. Her writing and teaching focuses on illustrated books, representations of childhood, and nineteenth-century British culture.

A. R. Hoffman (✉)
Department of English, University of Pittsburgh, Cathedral 526, 4200 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh,
PA 15260, USA
e-mail: ALH73@pitt.edu

“This is like nothing that has ever happened and it will never happen. It is a great book!” Thus does 9-year-old Nicole S. conclude her review of the children’s book *The BFG* by Roald Dahl (1982).¹ At pains to demonstrate her awareness that the book is a work of fantasy, Nicole offers a recommendation that doubles as a warning: don’t look here for mimetic realism! And in the process of parsing the book’s appeal, Nicole S. encourages further exploration of how the interactions between a text and a child reader, and between that reader and various versions of reality, are subject to idiosyncratic twists. She invites us to consider how an assessment of realism in children’s literature may serve as a pivot or background for further evaluation rather than a simple (de)merit. Indeed, in this essay I argue that scholars invested in reception need to recognize the categorical distinctions available to child readers beyond the familiar binary of fantasy and realism. Labels like poetry and prose, for instance, or form and content, are underutilized as viable and significant instruments of taxonomy, and focusing on children’s *imaginative* responses to literature has obscured child readers’ capacity for purely *aesthetic* appreciation.

Until relatively recently, the ostensible audience for children’s literature has been strikingly absent from published discussion of it. When Nicholas Tucker wondered in 1980, “Can we ever know the reader’s response?” there were some children’s literature scholars who answered with a resounding “no.” After all, Jacqueline Rose and others reasoned, if the books are written by adults and marketed with varying degrees of directness to adults who will buy them, criticize them, and award them prizes, then critics might as well forget about the child’s perspective.² Or as Jack Zipes (1981) rather stringently puts it, “Literature for children is not children’s literature by and for children in their behalf. It never was and never will be. Literature for children is script coded by adults for the information and internalization of children which must meet the approbation of adults” (p. 19). In 1984, at the height of this trend, Peter Hunt was inspired in name and purpose by feminist literary studies to introduce the term “childist criticism” as an attempt to bridge this gap between text and reading experience without resorting to consulting actual child readers.

This study stands with critics like Geoff Fox (1979) and Michael Benton in answering “yes” to Tucker’s question and will attempt to redress the common error of essentializing child readers and speaking *for* them—as “childist” criticism attempts to do—without seriously considering either real child readers or their actual experiences of reading. Fox was one of the first to bring forth children’s self-awareness about how “their experience of fiction... was fashioned by the conscious and unconscious fantasies, memories, and expectations they brought to the text” (p. 32). Holly Virginia Blackford (2004) and the research team of Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath (1982), among others, have ventured into the intersections of ethnography, childhood studies, literary studies, and education

¹ All quotations of book reviews are drawn from the Spaghetti Book Club website, which indexes posted reviews by author, class, and title reviewed.

² Jacqueline Rose’s semi-famous response to the problem of “What is children’s literature?” (in *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, 1984) was to declare that children’s literature is impossible. Adults, she claims, write something called “children’s literature” for their own purposes, and as part of a self-serving image of childhood in general; this all entails implicit and ultimate disregard for “real” children, even though they are ostensibly targeted by the label of the genre.

research with case studies of either particular child readers or child readers' responses to particular texts.³ I follow their lead with this study of a set of children's book reviews of *The BFG* by Roald Dahl.

Child Readers: Gaining Access

This survey avoids its predecessors' reliance on interviews and surveys by taking advantage of an online resource. I survey 30 different book reviews of *The BFG*—and their accompanying illustrations—drawn from an archive of children's book reviews posted on the website of the Spaghetti Book Club, a for-profit educational organization that provides web hosting services for hundreds of school classes and their students' book reviews. All were produced by fourth-grade students ranging in age from 8 years old to 11 and representing a broad diversity of American demographic groups and geographic areas. Each review identifies the child writer by first name (or in a few cases, first initial) and last initial, school, teacher, city and state. Self-portraits in a variety of media, as well as illustrations, are posted by the supervising teacher with each review and shed further light on the otherwise-anonymous children behind these reading experiences. These 30 reviews include all of those on *The BFG* available on the website as of January 2010.

This book was chosen as a focal point in part because it is by Roald Dahl, an author of enduring and “outrageous” commercial success (to borrow Peter Hollindale's descriptor, 2008), whose popularity among children has proven notoriously controversial.⁴ Jonathon Culley observed in an essay entitled “Roald Dahl—It's about Children and It's for Children—But Is It Suitable?” that there is pervasive discomfort among adults who see their children clutching Dahl's books and are aware of the threads of racism,⁵ violence, grotesquerie⁶ and even bathroom humor⁷ that pervade his oeuvre.⁸ As others had done before him—most notably

³ For reading-response research on child audiences, see particularly Wolf and Heath, *The Braid of Literature: Children's Worlds of Reading*, and Simpson (1996), “Fictions and Facts: An Investigation of the Readings Practices of Girls and Boys.” For a study particularly concerned with the ways in which the reader's gender influences response, see Holly Virginia Blackford's *Out of this World: Why Literature Matters to Girls*. For a useful survey of the recent history of reader-response research in children's literature, see Benton (1999) and Flood (2003).

⁴ Dahl himself has had to respond to these charges directly, as he is occasionally asked interview questions like Mark West's: “Why are many adults made uncomfortable by your children's book?” (p. 74). See also *Roald Dahl* (West, 1992, pp. 67–77) for an overview of the controversies surrounding *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

⁵ The Oompa-Loompas are the most notorious offenders here. In 1972 Lois Kalb Bouchard made the initial charges of racist stereotypes (p. 112) that prompted Dahl to revise his characterization of the Oompa-Loompas in subsequent editions.

⁶ See West (1990, pp. 115–116) with respect to Dahl's children's literature in particular, but for a survey of the grotesque and horrific elements of Dahl's fiction see Alan Warren (1985).

⁷ See Culley (1991, pp. 65–66), West (1990, p. 84), and Hamida Bosmajian (1985).

⁸ For an overview of the controversies surrounding Dahl's books, and a summary of the criticisms of his work for children, see Culley (1991, pp. 59–60) and West (1988, pp. 70–73). The most aggressive critic of Dahl's work is Eleanor Cameron, who published a series of articles in the early-to-mid-1970s declaring *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* unsuitable for its purported child audience. The *Horn Book* website

Alasdair Campbell⁹—Culley (1991) concludes that children love these books *because* they are subversive, and so those elements must be either explained away, or safely framed as catharsis (p. 72). *The BFG* in particular is usually criticized for including an entire chapter—titled “Froboscottle and Whizzpoppers”—devoted to a euphemistic discussion of flatulence (pp. 65–66).

While a number of Dahl books are reviewed on the Spaghetti Book Club website, *The BFG* was chosen partly because it has already served as the basis for research into children's reading responses, most notably by Charles Sarland and more recently by Culley.¹⁰ Their research can be legitimately continued via this case study in cyberspace because *The BFG* did conveniently attract many more reviewers than is usual for the website, even among Dahl books; for instance, *The Witches* garnered only thirteen reviews and *The Twits* only nine.¹¹ The vast majority of the hundreds of books reviewed on the site inspired fewer than five apiece, including Dahl books like *Danny the Champion of the World* (three reviews). In this case, however, and by contrast with titles like Judy Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (46 reviews) or Louis Sachar's *Holes* (52 reviews), those numbers were not inflated by the inclusion of an entire class of students all reviewing the same assigned book. In short, *The BFG* reviews were all the product of some measure of choice on the reviewer's behalf, because he/she chose to review *The BFG* rather than some other book, even if the choice itself was prompted by a classroom reading assignment. It is to be hoped that this initial choice may set the stage for recovering children's voices more directly: for maximizing the opportunity to discern what these children desire when they embark upon a reading experience; what they carry away from it by choice or by accident; what they value about it rather than what educators or parents want or expect them to remember and value—and, in turn, what they may *choose* to articulate about the experience as well as what they are *expected* to say.

These materials were selected for study with the primary goal of maximizing the child readers' expressive autonomy. However, the choice of this particular novel introduced a productive complication because it intermingles fantasy and realism as well as text and image. It opens with our child protagonist Sophie lying in bed in an orphanage, unable to sleep; an illustration by Quentin Blake occupies just as much space on the first page as does the text describing her plight. Her insomnia leads to a midnight encounter with a tall dark man-shaped creature, who immediately kidnaps her and whisks her away to a land of “human bean”-eating giants. Sophie's

Footnote 8 continued

(<http://www.hbook.com/history/magazine/camerondahl.asp/>) offers a “Virtual History Exhibit” with a timeline of the debate, including links to full-text versions of the relevant articles; see “Eleanor Cameron vs. Roald Dahl.” See also Charles Sarland (1983).

⁹ Alasdair Campbell (1981) is Dahl's most stalwart defender against charges from Eleanor Cameron and like-minded critics.

¹⁰ See particularly Sarland, 1991, pp. 121–123.

¹¹ Although all of the students whose work is included in my study resided in America at the time of writing their reviews, their reading choices reflect a larger pattern among children's reading choices in which Roald Dahl—and *The BFG* in particular, when individual titles are solicited—tops the list of “favorites,” according to a 1994–1995 survey conducted in England (Hall and Coles, 1999).

kidnapper turns out to be the eponymous (and, fortunately, vegetarian) Big Friendly Giant, the runt of the giant litter. He is the mythical individual responsible for distributing dreams to sleeping humans, and his speech is riddled with nonsense words and malapropisms. Cleverly utilizing the BFG's strange vocation, Sophie and the BFG concoct and successfully execute a plan to gain the Queen of England's assistance in trapping and imprisoning the nine nasty giants. The novella-length narrative is abundantly illustrated with several dozen black-and-white pen-and-ink drawings by Quentin Blake scattered throughout Dahl's text, with a single image sometimes occupying an entire page or flowing across the gutter and covering most of a two-page spread. Precisely because the book offers such a rich mix of formal and generic variety, children's reviews of it offer a similarly potent opportunity for exploring how children construct the reality (or realities) of the book with respect to their own. By following children's choices in reading material, rather than narrowing our purview to fantasy or realism a priori, we will hopefully be better-situated to contextualize their articulations of reading experiences.

Beyond following the implicit threads of motivation for choosing one title over another, in this study of responses to *The BFG* we also have the opportunity to observe how child readers construct and represent themselves as readers, and how they choose to respond to different elements of the text as well as the paratext—that is to say, the information that surrounds the text itself like authorial information, the cover, and the recommended reading level.¹² I begin by surveying how these reviewers position themselves both as critics and as children, evincing a sense of identification with a specific age group or young reading community. Reviews are chosen for quotation on the basis of “typicality” rather than representativeness, although I should stress that each review bore the mark of a highly individualized response to basically the same printed text. By emphasizing “typicality” I am drawing on the work of Martin Barker (2006), who argues that “it is more important to be able to investigate *what an elaborate version of a discursive position might look like*, and *what it might enable a person or group to see and do*, rather than to know what an *average* version of it might be” (p. 133, emphasis in the original). Following this logic, I strove to extract quotations that characterized an emotional or intellectual aspect of audience response in the most precise or evocative way. Such an approach seems warranted here because quotations that are technically more “representative” would, by contrast with those I have chosen, inevitably be characterized by bluntness or inarticulateness in keeping with the reviewers' youth. Next, I will consider the ways in which the child reviewers deal yet another blow to the common image of children as a relatively “passive” or vulnerable audience, by unpacking their sophisticated negotiations between real-world experience and narrative or fictional experience. They emerge as an “active” audience, which is to say one matching the definition provided by Patricia Harkin (2005): an audience exercising the prerogative to “engage in an active process of production-in-use,” or

¹² Besides the liberties taken with illustration, I use the term with the general limits described by Genette. He suggests that illustrations would be considered part of the paratext rather than the text itself (Genette, 1997, p. 406), but I would insist that this is the result of his own focus on literary studies. At any rate, the child reader/reviewers in this archive include discussions of both text and nominal paratext without distinguishing between the two, so I will defer to their orientation(s).

meaning-making, as they use/read texts; this stance depends upon contradistinction with a “passive” audience that privileges authorial intent and figures a text “as a repository of stable meaning” (p. 413).¹³ In this section, I expand on the work begun by Louise Rosenblatt (1993) with her “transactional” model of the reading experience, described most succinctly and comprehensively in her essay “The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response.” Again, a qualitative approach is employed, with quotations necessarily selected less for their representativeness than for their power to suggest the *possibility* for variations aesthetic experience. These reviewers variously identify with the child protagonist of the novel, draw connections between events in the book and their own experiences, and enjoy the action depicted in the book as disinterested spectators, so it is precisely this exploitation of possibility that is most important. Finally, I consider the ways in which these child reviewers refuse to submit, or to be compelled, to make their experiences of a text dependent upon a relationship—whether one of resistance or of reflection—with lived experience. They do this primarily by distinguishing between the book’s form and its content, insisting upon the text’s status as a text, non-referential and yet an aesthetic experience nonetheless, usually made visible through mention of valued formal qualities like language play. Far from revealing an “essential” or “passive” child reader, this sample set bears witness to children’s capacity to derive highly personal meaning from the text while simultaneously representing themselves as “child” readers and demonstrating that they are, in accord with the explicit goals of teachers employing the Spaghetti Book Club approach, learning the conventions and responsibilities of book reviewing (e.g., summary, evaluative critique, recommendations for further reading).¹⁴

Child Readers: Their Stances and Their (Self-)Construction(s)

The Spaghetti Book Club website frames these reviews as being “by kids” and “for kids,” but the reviews themselves clearly demonstrate that while writing, these “kids” constructed separate but largely overlapping identities as children, and as members of a larger and non-age-specific reading community (Rosmarin, 1999–2010).

All of the reviews evince some awareness of the conventions of book reviewing, a natural result of the curricular choices available to teachers who choose to integrate the Spaghetti Book Club into their lesson plans. However, none of these ingredients for a book review necessitates a consideration for the

¹³ For a survey of research pertaining the active/passive audience dichotomy see Pertti Alasuutari (1999, pp. 4–6). In this study I will not be able to take into consideration the larger cultural experience of media that Alasuutari describes as a concern of the “third generation” of media studies (p. 7).

¹⁴ The conventions of book reviewing are implicitly determined by the Spaghetti Book Club’s supervisory staff; according to the website, “The Spaghetti Book Club offers curriculum, training and web publishing services to schools, after-school programs and libraries. The curriculum consists of standards-based lesson plans to help teachers guide their students through the process of writing and publishing book reviews. Through this process, students learn to make personal connections to what they are reading, summarize stories, construct meaning from text, express their opinions and reactions, and compare literary works” (Rosemarin, “About the Spaghetti Book Club”, <http://www.spaghettibookclub.org/about.html>).

intended (i.e., child) audience of *The BFG*. A summary of the plot is included in every review, although in 20 of them, or two-thirds of the sample, those summaries are partial. This is because over half of the reviews in my archival sample explicitly invite or encourage others to read the novel with some variation on Dominick R.'s "Read the story to find out what happens." Here, his use of the second person address is even more typical: the overwhelming majority of the child reader/reviewers, or twenty-seven out of thirty, use the second person address at some point to acknowledge their audience—some more directly than others, as we see in Nicole S.'s invitation to *her* reader to place him- or herself in the protagonist's position at the opening of the novel. She writes, "Imagine this! One night you cannot go to sleep..." The consistent use of the imperative, whether it is as direct as Nicole S.'s or, as is more common, rendered as a suggestion rather than as a command, implies that the child reviewers do position themselves as members of a reading community, even if it is not as coherent or bounded as the "interpretive community" conceived by Stanley Fish (1980). Furthermore, the child readers clearly recognize *The BFG* as one choice among many available to readers at large, and thus choice in reading material is a constitutive or reflexive element of the reading community they want to address.

One indication that the reviewer is aware of the role of choice is allusion to the author of the book. Few of the students are as enthusiastic about promoting Roald Dahl as is Alastair L., who lists fifteen additional Roald Dahl books as suggested reading, "if you like this book." But about half of the reviews mention Roald Dahl by name,¹⁵ and more than half of those who *do* identify the author do so in the context of recommending his other work. M. O. Grenby points out that this behavior may be part of a socially cultivated sense that reading is a community experience, one that involves semi-direct communication with the author as a personal acquaintance. Or, as he puts it in borrowed terms, children want to read books by authors they know in order to "travel in the company of reliable friends" (Gabrielle Cliff Hodges qtd. in Grenby, 2008, p. 10). This pattern of seeking comfort in the familiar may apply to content as well as to authors. Along those lines, even if they do not name Roald Dahl or otherwise allude to an author, all of the reviewers include recommendations for other, similar kinds of reading, or identify a kind of readership appropriate for enjoying *The BFG* specifically.

Of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that the reviewers usually—although not always—made their recommendations by specifically addressing a subset of the larger reading community, namely other children. But it is also worth noting that children were clearly not bound by their status *as children* in envisioning themselves as part of a reading community, or a subset of it. About a third of the reviews disregard age in their evaluative comments. Zach W. declares, "I recommend this book to Roald Dahl fans, people who like humor, and fairy tale lovers, because it is a humorous book, is a fairy tale, and is a Roald Dahl book," suggesting a very specific (but undeniably logical) ideal audience for *The BFG*. Jake S. is more broad in his vision, suggesting that "Anyone who likes creative or

¹⁵ In a reception study based on her own two children, Virginia Lowe (1991) determined that "There is no doubt that young children are able to grasp this concept of the author before they are five" (p. 86).

fictional stories would probably like this book,” while Katie B. is the most inclusive: “I think everyone would like this book.” In short, these child readers do not seem to see the label of “children’s literature” as exclusive or exhaustive in identifying *The BFG*’s potential audience.

Wendy M.’s hypothetical, “If you are a reader who likes to read Roald Dahl’s funny books like my class,” is one among many statements evincing the reviewers’ sense of being situated within a peer group, and thus equating their reading environment with one dominated by that peer group. It is also possible that elements of the paratext contributed to the reviewers’ self-identification as a *child* reader; the formula of specifying a lower bound on the appropriate age group is strikingly similar to what is printed on Penguin paperbacks, as in Khadeeja Q.’s statement that: “It’s good for children in grades 3 and up.” Moreover, it is precisely this sense of age group as corresponding to fluency with reading that seems to dictate who is *too* young to read *The BFG*, as we see in R. R.’s comment: “Children of all ages are welcome to read this book. There are only a few hard words.” Content does not seem to factor into their evaluations of suitability for various age groups. This is even clearer in the preponderance of comments that identify more general characteristics of reading material that will incidentally, but not necessarily, appeal to an audience of children. For instance, Joey C. says, fairly specifically, “I recommend this book for boys and girls who like exciting fantasy books by Roald Dahl,” while Ivy M. more typically deems it appealing to “kids who are interested in fiction.” About a third of the total reviewers suggest that the subsets of “child” and “readers who would like a certain aspect of this book” overlapped, but merited distinction—i.e., they point to characteristics that will incidentally but not *exclusively* appeal to an audience of children. For instance, Jessica S. says “I recommend this book for people who love going on adventures to mystical places. I think the age group for this book should be 7 and up,” while Nicole S. makes a similar dual distinction: “I also recommend this book to anyone older than 5 years old... I recommend this book to anyone who searches for exciting adventure!” Collectively, the various permutations of audience that the reviewers imagine reading *their own* work clearly reveals a propensity to contextualize their reading practices within a community of readers who are like themselves in ways that substitute for, instead of simply elaborating on, age group.

Getting “Into” the Text—and Getting Back Out Again

Whether a reader/reviewer’s sense of being-a-child-reader was created or foregrounded by the content of the text—more concretely, through its child protagonist and identification with her—is addressed in the next section, in which I consider how child reviewers transact with the *content* of *The BFG* in idiosyncratic ways, constantly negotiating between the reality of lived experience and the alternate reality of the book. Here I borrow Louise Rosenblatt’s model (1993) of

reading as “transaction” precisely because I would also like to “emphasize the contribution of both reader and text” (p. 7), while avoiding the binary of activity versus passivity. As J. A. Appleyard helpfully elucidates Rosenblatt’s model, a narrative conveyed through text

is an event that has roots both in the text and in the personality and history that the reader brings to the reading. The text is a system of response-inviting structures that the author has organized by reference to a repertory of social and literary codes shared by author and reader (1990, p. 9).¹⁶

That “repertory of social and literary codes” is not *completely* “shared by author and reader,” of course. Because those gaps are themselves informed and altered by the act of reading, we are chasing a moving target by trying to track children’s responses to a text. The challenge is exacerbated when we consider that children have a smaller personal history with which to transact, and thus reading experiences have a greater proportionate effect.

The fictional narrative is sometimes interpreted by these child reader/reviewers as a kind of window into a distant reality, and sometimes understood as a purely imaginative enterprise. The liminal ontology of the fictional reality is particularly reflected in children’s emotional engagement with the child protagonist, their extraction of “lessons” (and the characteristics of those lessons), and their visual responses to the text and/or illustrations. The opportunity for a graphic response allows these students to describe more freely and fully their actual transaction with a narrative that does, after all, interweave different forms of storytelling through a collaboration between Dahl’s text and Blake’s illustrations. The reviewers’ accompanying illustrations are a unique potential for insight into reader response offered by the format of the Spaghetti Book Club.

The novel’s only child character, the protagonist Sophie, offered a seemingly-natural entry point where reviewers could insert themselves into the text, as indeed several did. The reader/reviewers’ identification with the child protagonist was sometimes based on shared emotions; by this I mean that their transaction was dependent upon their ability to empathize with Sophie’s experience when she is kidnapped by the eponymous Big Friendly Giant and helps him to defeat the troupe of evil giants. For instance, Dominick R. commented that “Sophie reminds me of myself because she was scared of the giants. I would be scared of the mean giants too.” Eliza M. told a similar story of experiencing the book’s events in concert with its protagonist:

When I read the book I felt kind of weird, happy and scared. I felt weird at the beginning when the BFG snatched Sophie. I felt happy when Sophie tried

¹⁶ My own study dovetails in some respects with his longitudinal study, which integrates the transaction model with a developmental timeline and thus positions the transactional model as one that children effectively grow into. He found that “for young children the authority of any interpretation of the text is simply a nonissue; indeed, at this age texts are not interpreted, they are only enjoyed or rejected. Interpretation first becomes a matter of concern to older juveniles and adolescents, who are concerned with figuring out the truth about the world and their own lives and therefore with discovering what the writers of books have said about these subjects” (Appleyard, 1990, p. 18). The groundwork of his approach was laid by Harriet H. Ennis (1986).

drinking frobscottle, she loved it! I felt happy for her because she actually had something yummy to drink. I was scared when the Bloodbottler was threatening the BFG because I didn't want the BFG to get hurt.

Here, it would seem that Eliza's emotional experience in reading the book is entirely dependent upon her agreement to be thoroughly and sympathetically identified with the character that most resembles her. Recognition of that formal correlation initiates a more sustained series of mimetic correspondences in which the positions are reversed and Eliza follows Sophie. Once she agrees to be "identified" with Sophie, her emotions may be dictated by those that Dahl ascribes to the character. It is just this pattern of submission that concerns adults guarding children's reading choices: if the character should find it pleasant and rewarding to make immoral choices, won't this teach children to enjoy misbehaving?

However, such fears are quite exaggerated, if not entirely baseless. In this sample of children's responses, it was more often the case that the reviewers' emotional engagement with the text was apparently based on abstraction, as emotions described or prompted by the narrative were transferred into the real world and associated with the reader's own experiences rather than vice versa. Surprisingly, similarities or resemblances between the reader/reviewer and a given character, whether in terms of personal and physical characteristics, age, sex, or even mere humanity (most of the characters in the book are, after all, giants), had no apparent effect on the likelihood that a reader/reviewer would identify with that character. As Blackford has pointed out, this sort of mimetic correspondence is imposed on children's reading practices by adults (p. 7). This is what drives the effort to have children's books represent a multicultural society—but the assumption that children look for themselves in a book may reflect a posteriori connections rather than actual reading experiences. This seems to be the case here, as many more students claimed that some *event* in the book or an *aspect* of it could be equated with experience outside it, than those who showed evidence of "identifying" with a given character. Thus, Joey C. observes that "This book reminds me of my friend Kevin because he is short and Sophie was too. This book reminds me of when I was little and would dream about giants" while Brian S. remarks "This book reminds me of the time things were stolen from our car. It was a scary and frustrating time for my family. I can understand how Sophie felt when she was stolen from the orphanage." More surprisingly, Justin S. seems to identify himself with the villains, saying, "I liked it when the giants started fighting and when the army captured the giants... It reminds me of my brother when we tussle and tackle each other." A statement like this exposes the vast array of possibilities in meaning-making and emotional connection with the narrative or its characters, including the evaluations of characters' morality and/or sympathy.

This view of the narrative world as having *potential* rather than *necessary* connections to the reader's own world is most evident in the images that reviewers produced to accompany their written reviews. Roughly two-thirds of the reviewers replicated Quentin Blake's drawing style or a specific image from *The BFG* in illustrating their reviews, and the significance of this requires several levels of consideration. To begin with, four students fairly directly reproduced the book's

cover—an image of the BFG holding Sophie aloft in his hand as they converse—to accompany their review. The cover image is the signifier for the entire text in both the real world and the review. To be sure, charges of simple laziness or lack of imagination may be laid at these children's feet, particularly when they follow Blake as closely as Victoria S. does in replicating, line-by-line, his opening image of Sophie, stricken with insomnia, lying wide-eyed in her bed with her trademark thick glasses on her bedside table. However, variations in color and background or details included or excised, collectively suggest that the reviewers did often choose what to change and what to adapt in accord with a more personalized vision.

When the most direct imitations of Blake are placed alongside those that seem to have used his illustrations more as a starting point or inspiration, we can see more clearly how “imitation” might be more accurately characterized as a means of respecting the text's primacy and thus its authority over their own visualizations. Given his investment in a developmental model, Appleyard (1990) would say here that these fourth-grade reviewers are in a phase of psychological development where interpretation simply doesn't enter the picture. These readers are convinced that “the text has a meaning, put there by its author, that the reader is meant to discover” (p. 18). I am less inclined than Appleyard to see children's meaning-making processes as a sort of treasure-hunt for authorial intention. I would rather suggest that these children understand the text as a *reality* “put there by its author, that the reader is meant to discover.” A reality somehow connected to their own. And the potential variety of that “somehow” is precisely what is demonstrated over and over again in these reviews. In considering the specific case of a fantasy novel, I would go even further and suggest that imitation may be a way of according the text's narrative world an ontological independence from the reader's own. Indeed, these transactions with the illustrations exist on a continuum of flexibility or liberty, one that situates direct copying as a comparatively rare response. Andrea C. elaborates on an illustration of the BFG peering into the window of Sophie's orphanage, including the very pertinent detail of Sophie standing in a window. Sophie is not visible in Blake's shadowy illustration of the orphanage where she resides, although her peeping out of the window is described in the text. Ivy M., by contrast, also drew what appears to be the orphanage, a building with many windows and dark surroundings. However, she drew merely the house and removed the tall, dark figure of the giant that appears in Blake's version. Similarly, Katie D. is obviously influenced by the book's cover in her decision to represent the BFG seated in a rock-strewn desert that readers of the novel will recognize as the land of giants. In Blake's version of the library edition of the cover, the BFG is comfortably seated among the rocks with his valise and a long horn (his dream-pipe). He holds Sophie aloft in his hand as they appear to converse (a detail of this image, showing just Sophie and the BFG's head and hand, was used for the Penguin paperback edition of the novel). Katie D., however, *eliminates* Sophie from her version of this picture, for reasons we can only surmise.

Other students illustrated scenes *described* but not *illustrated* (by Blake) in the original text. Robert T.'s image of a giant with a bald, green head holding a cucumber-shaped object, while the big-eared BFG stands in the background, is probably inspired by the scene where the giant named Bloodbottler “picked up the

snozzcumber” and “began raising it on its long journey to his mouth, some fifty feet up in the air” (p. 56). However, the Bloodbottler is neither green nor bald: “His skin was reddish-brown, there was black hair sprouting on his chest and arms and on his stomach. The hair on his head was long and dark and tangled” (p. 53). In other instances, the children first interpreted and then reproduced images in their own way, with one reviewer named Katie B. deploying a clip art image of a caveman, increased to giant-size proportions with respect to the barren desert landscape and a clip art tent. Her illustration suggests an iconographic resonance between giants and cavemen rather than a strictly visual one. And finally, at the most extreme end, Dominick R. imagines a soldier shooting a giant (presumably one of the nasty ones instead of the BFG), which is not described anywhere in the novel, much less represented. This suggests that on the spectrum of possibilities for interaction with the plot, strict adherence is most common, but dramatic revision is hardly unheard of. All in all, a third of the reviewers produced drawings incorporating their own free interpretation of visuals and events, suggesting a sense of their own responsibility for constructing this world *through* reading and imagining it – a responsibility which includes the option to alter or expand on its visualization.

Negotiation with the authority of the text can also be seen in that particular aspect of children's literature that most often concerns its critics, and Dahl's work in particular: the moral lesson it “teaches” its readers, especially that which can be fully abstracted from the text and applied to other situations. This is what Culley (1991) helpfully calls the “morality play dimension” of children's literature (p. 60). Depending on whether a teacher or parent *likes* the moral lesson they perceive *The BFG* to be conveying, they may be either encouraged or dismayed to learn that only a third of the reviewers identified a “lesson” in the novel (either implicitly or explicitly). Alicia G. stated that the book “teaches you a lesson” without further explanation. Furthermore, among those who identified a “lesson,” there was no consensus about what that lesson was; six reviews identified lessons fully abstracted from the text, most of which were about encouraging tolerance for difference. For instance Katie W. and Rachel B., in their co-written review, were most elaborate in explaining that “This book reminds us of *The Twits* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, which are both written by Roald Dahl, because they have the same lesson - if you're mean to someone they might just get you back... It made us realize that being different makes people who they are, and we should respect that. That's what we think the other big lesson is.” Jessica S., however, saw a different lesson: “This book is fiction and can be used to teach kids not to give up!” Both conclusions seem to have a reasonable basis in Sophie's experiences, indicating both the possibility and the unpredictability of children's conclusions about a text's moral thrust.

While moral lessons may be “imported” from the text to the real world, connective threads trailing behind, that act of abstraction is in turn dependent upon whether the world “outside” of the text is mentioned at all in the review, or how connections between the real world and the world of the text are drawn or rejected. Only one reviewer suggested that *The BFG* taught a moral lesson bound inextricably to the world of the text. Ryan S. concludes his review of *The BFG* by declaring that “No matter what size you are, you can still be a good person (or giant).” And while his comment is idiosyncratic in terms of lesson-extraction, it points to a larger and

more interesting pattern among the reviews: how the choice between one word and another is perhaps more important than the border between fiction and reality.

Text as Text and “The Language the Author Used”

Fantasy has long been the whipping boy for adults concerned about what children “learn” (in many senses of the word) from books. Although fantasy famously achieved mainstream acceptance during the “Golden Age” of children’s literature in the mid-nineteenth century in England, fairy-tale haters like Hannah More have their descendents in the advocates for urban teen literature and other self-consciously-realistic contemporary genres. Resistance among child-readers to adult-proscribed realism persists as well, though, and in surprising forms. Holly Blackford found, in her recent survey of girls’ reading material, that many students sought texts which would take them “out of this world”—by which they variously meant conventional science fiction or fantasy, but also simply books “out of” the narrowly-conceived “world” of their daily experience. As Blackford (2004) puts it, “the literature they wish to discuss looks nothing like their life—formally, stylistically, socially, or thematically” (p. 19). This list suggests that physically-oriented metaphors, like Victor Nell’s “lost in a book” (1988) or even Blackford’s “out of this world” demand further interrogation. The utility of categorical distinctions like “fantasy” and “realism” for predicting reader response become quite troubled when a child reader testifies that a “realistic” novel can provide her with an “out of this world” experience.

My own study goes one step further and suggests that child readers may circumvent the reality/fantasy dichotomy entirely by finding pleasure in aesthetics rather than in the act of imagination, or the act of learning. This sample reveals that child reviewers often choose to transact with the *form* of *The BFG* in ways that disregard or compartmentalize the text’s relationship, whether one of resistance or of reflection, with a lived experience or a distinction between reality and fiction. The narrative may be understood as a self-contained unit, so that connections to the “real” world are either never addressed, or remain purely on the level of the reader/reviewer’s imaginative and emotional experience. In particular, use of the labels “fantasy” and/or “fiction” suggest that the reviewers maintained a constant “double consciousness” throughout the act of reading. Perry Nodelman (2000) first applied this term to children’s reading practices as part of a preliminary investigation into how children’s perceptions of themselves *as children* might be shaped by representations of children and childhood in the books they read.¹⁷ Here, I’m appropriating it for still-wider application, i.e., to accommodate the reader’s continuous awareness of difference between the sensory experiences of real-life, and those prompted (however realistically and/or concretely) by the act of reading. This willful “doubling”—or what Blackford (2004) identified as “reading with

¹⁷ Thomas Travisano (2000) contests Nodelman’s suspicion (2000) that this might produce “some weirdness in terms of the way in which texts construct childhood as something children are both involved in and detached from” (p. 13, n. 1) by insisting upon the term’s applicability to adults’ experience(s) of identifying with characters dissimilar from themselves.

multiple selves” (p. 23)—is apparent in several students’ descriptions of their experience. Wendy M. raves that “You can just imagine what Sophie and the giants are doing,” while S. L. declares, rather self-consciously, that “I think readers would love all the fantasy.” In short, these children describe the inherently *self-conscious* pleasure of escapism.

More importantly, the frequency with which students addressed Dahl’s language as such (for instance, discussing a word without reference to its meaning) demands that we also acknowledge their ability to distinguish between form and content, and thus to avoid the fiction/reality decision altogether, at least at certain moments of reading or in their evaluation of reading material. Fully half of the students comment on Dahl’s style, language and/or word choices as such. For instance, Zach M. hinges his recommendation on precisely that evaluative criterion: “This book is one of Roald Dahl’s best-written stories... I hope you like this book as much as I do” while BV’s comment that “This book was really exciting because the language the author used was funny” is more typical. But Eliza M.’s advice that “This book is fun to have a grown-up read to you!” is even more telling. Her suggestion that reading the book could be enjoyed as a *performance* of language implies a sensitivity to features of the book apart from its narrative, its characters, and its opportunities for comparison with reality. For Eliza M., and presumably for many of her peers, the act of reading is more than, or just very different from, a matter of simply comprehending events.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the child reviewers’ investment in language *qua* language was their preoccupation with word choice and particular words. Individual words are often identified as “fun” without even a mention of the definition, as in Zach W.’s review: “I think the BFG is a very interesting book because of how the author makes things up like: frobscottle, snocumbers [sic], whizpopppers and a lot more.” Similarly, Brian S. rather obliquely quotes the novel “‘All giants are drinking frobscottle.’ This is just one of the funny quotes in *The BFG*.” The prospect of engaging with a narrative involving giants may or may not excite the readers’ interest; but the giants’ names certainly evoke positive responses like that of Ryan S., who was one of several reviewers to be so specific: “They have wonderful names like Bloodbotter [sic], Fleshumpeater and Bonecruncher... The author’s writing style is really cool because he makes up his own words.” Culley offers his own “extreme example of the children’s fascination with Dahl’s use of language” by noting “the high proportion of children that spelled words like *frobscottle*, *whizzpopping*, and *snozzcumber* correctly” when he conducted a survey about children’s favorite Roald Dahl books (pp. 67–68). Responses that focus on language in terms of pleasure without consideration for meaning, personal or otherwise, present a very different picture from that of a child reader “hunting” for the author’s intended meaning, or seeking insight about how to live his/her own life, or even for escape from reality. The frequency of responses that blaze a trail *around* narrative content (even in a sample set of this size), invites us to reconsider the heretofore-unquestioned centrality of negotiations between fantasy and reality in children readers’ responses to fiction.

The opportunity to write a book *review* rather than a book *report* may well have created the conditions for these revelations. The latter’s emphasis on accurate,

thorough description precludes the former's implicit emphasis on eliciting a reader response, albeit one clearly cognizant of responsibility to an audience. While conceptions of the "active" reading audience have tended to privilege resistance to prescribed meanings as a key sign of activity, the children's book reviews of *The BFG* posted on the Spaghetti Book Club website trouble this notion in a variety of ways. Most obviously, we see a complication of audience itself in their demonstration that the term "child reader" implies two separable identities, overlapping but not isomorphic. But they also complicate the notion of "active audience" by incorporating another relevant identity, one hidden in plain sight: that of the child *writer*. The nature of this online archive, with reviews written by children rather than elicited through interview or survey, creates the conditions for those child readers to reveal how their experiences of language are structured in part by their own struggles with the act of writing. And struggle they do. About a quarter of the reviews make reference to the act of writing and the rarity of its success, usually by praising Dahl. More importantly, all of those allusions also demonstrate the child readers' cognizance of the *rewards* of struggling with language. For instance, Alicia G. admits that "My favorite character is the BFG because he has courage to write a book even though writing was hard for him," while Shanice L. sympathizes with the BFG on similar grounds: "I used to make up words and people used to laugh at me." As these comments and similar ones demonstrate, there is an oft-overlooked experience within the "repertory of social and literary codes shared by author and reader" to which Appleyard alluded. While reception studies have tended to focus on the "message" transmitted by children's literature, they have also obscured child readers' awareness that medium matters. Children understand that words do more than denote because they use them too.

As is clear from these children's emphatic delight in the texture of Dahl's text as well as its narrative, we may be pursuing a red herring by attending to the experience of fiction as a border-crossing between worlds. The reviews available on the Spaghetti Book Club website suggest that the image of a child "lost" in a fantasy world may be a projection of adult nostalgia rather than an ethnographic description of experience. Nor are child readers like sponges passively absorbing the "morals" communicated by fiction, although prevailing assumptions about children's vulnerability to narrative subtext has made their literature a prime site of concern for ideologues of all stripes and created anxiety about Dahl's "suitability" for child readers. Most significantly, these reviews reveal the unpredictability inherent in how children construct reality/realities on the basis of a narrative text. This includes their refusal to construct a specific reality, if it necessitates translating a purely aesthetic experience into a referential one. A false dichotomy of reality versus fantasy is exposed in these children's ability—indeed, their apparent propensity—to distinguish between form and content *as well as* fiction and reality. In response, I suggest that we expand our notions of the "active" child reader to include critical approaches to form, genre, and composition. In this respect, critics of children's literature have a great deal to learn from writers of nonsense, whose appeal to child readers is well-known but comparatively little-studied in terms of reception.

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