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Editorial

As this issue of *IRCL* coincides with the fortieth anniversary of the International Society for Research in Children's Literature, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the nature of research and scholarship in our field, and hence on what the diverse contributions to this volume suggest about those endeavours. Over the past forty years, IRSCL's congresses have pursued the ideal of research as an exchange of ideas between researchers in different countries and in different branches of learning. The Society was founded at the Frankfurt Colloquium of 1969, and thus at an early moment in what we now think of as 'the age of theory', and the Society's various intellectual exchanges – and, it must be said, controversies – were often shaped by this context. At present, scholarship is – arguably – less dominated by methodological prescriptiveness than it was in the last decades of the twentieth century, and very concerned with finding a way forward. It can neither retreat to some idealised pre-1969 condition, nor slough off the past forty years to invent something entirely new. Its condition is well reflected by a remark by David Scott Kastan in *Shakespeare after Theory* (1999):

The great age of theory is over [...] but not because theory has been discredited; on the contrary, it is precisely because its claims have proven so compelling and productive. [...] If theory has convincingly demonstrated that meaning is not immanent but rather situational, or, put differently, that both reading and writing are not unmediated activities but take place only and always in context and action, the specific situations, contexts and actions – that is, the actual historical circumstances of literary production and reception – cannot be merely gestured at but must be recovered and analyzed. (31–2)

Scholarship in many fields, including children's literature, has consequently turned to concrete, pragmatic, or historical grounds for arguments about texts and culture, and there seems little doubt that for the foreseeable future interpretation will be linked to context. In saying this, we are not advocating a naïve empiricism or historicism: the scholarly project that resolves a research question through analysis of accumulated data will now be aware of its own historical situatedness and social and ethical assumptions. Protocols of interpretation will continue to be shaped by the perspectives explored during the 'age of theory', but there is also a unique opportunity to pursue dialogues with academic cultures hitherto only sporadically represented (if at all) in international children's literature scholarship.

This issue of *IRCL*, like the preceding issues, is distinguished by the wide range of countries and cultures represented by its contributors; and it is published as IRSCL welcomes to its anniversary celebrations in Frankfurt many delegates from countries new to IRSCL congresses, as well as those who have been members since its inaugural years. This breadth of representation not only testifies to the robust internationalism of the journal, and of IRSCL itself, but to the diverse conceptions of relevant contexts and critical discourses that frame the articles here. A common strategy amongst contributors is to invoke historical context as frame for discussion of themes in the work of authors: both contemporary,

as in Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer's study of children's books about religion, or Roni Natov's reflections on Louise Erdrich's stories of early America, and from the past, as in Elisabeth Wesseling's reassessment of the supposed racial stereotypes in Heinrich Hoffmann. But the historical context within which a work is produced and consumed furnishes only a limited account of causality and textuality, and may reduce complex works to merely symptomatic or evidential objects. In her close attention to textuality, Elisabeth Wesseling demonstrates how the historical context must be used to do both more and less than this. Any venture of interpretation involves diverse acts of translation, and, as children's literature scholars have long been aware, even seemingly simple and accessible texts open up questions about embedded cultural assumptions, whether of their conditions of production or of the moment of reading. So, in her study of three different language versions of a Japanese picture book, Tatsuko Ochiai brings together historical contexts of production and reception, paying close attention to visual images and linguistic forms, to explore how such meanings change as a text is transposed from one culture to another. In tracing such migrations, the processes of recovery of lost or forgotten texts remain important to children's literature studies. In *IRCL*'s new 'Notes' section, Kazunari Takaya presents his discovery of a hitherto unknown Japanese translation of Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*; and many of the reviews, too, bear witness to continuing programmes of archival research, retrieval and re-evaluation.

Context may also be a pressing issue in contemporary social ideology and practice. In the paper which opens this issue, Michelle Ann Abate weighs the political context and overt agenda of a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian fiction series from the United States. The authoritarian, anti-humanist, and monocultural vision that informs this series, and its authors' conviction of their own absolute truth, represents almost everything antithetical to international research in children's literature. In the context of the papers gathered in this issue, its effect is to highlight an alternative conviction that underpins the arguments of, for example, Yvonne Hammer, Judith Inggs and Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer: it is in our responsiveness to the needs and very consciousness of other subjectivities that we ground our being as ethical subjects and find a basis for whatever acts of intervention we may contemplate. Context for Yvonne Hammer is thus not only the social fact and limited agency of homeless children but also contemporary understandings of cognition and intersubjectivity through which one subject interacts with another. A comparable perspective informs Shelley Chappell's study of the werewolf figure in contemporary children's fiction. In mapping significant shifts in a specific fantastic genre, she argues that such figurative representations of otherness embody a positive ideological shift in conceptions of race and ethnicity, but also, as a metaphor for 'the stranger, foreigner and minority ethnic and racial group', disclose a persistent ethnocentrism.

In the monologic rants of the US series sounded in Michelle Ann Abate's article, as, for example, though in a less strident key, in some of the earlier Protestant texts of religious instruction discussed by Helma van

Lierop-Debrauwer, children and young adults themselves figure as the stranger, the monstrous even – dangerous elements, to be tamed and brought into line. As we prepare this issue of the journal for publication, newspapers in the UK are humming with fresh debate about the security device, the ‘Mosquito Teen Deterrent’ – a high-frequency sound-device, audible only to the young, increasingly used to discourage groups of teenagers from hanging around in public places. The counter ‘Buzz Off Campaign’, called by the Commissioner for England’s 11 million children, has reinvigorated discussion about children’s rights, in what the prominent psychologist and TV presenter, Tanya Byron, has called an ‘ephebiphobic culture’. If youth itself is seen as a pestilence, so too, the apocalyptic plagues of modern times, that loom large in the jeremiad of the ‘Left Behind’ series, are part of the habitat and hazards negotiated by many of the young protagonists in other fictions canvassed here: homelessness, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, death and old age, nuclear war. So, a movement traced, across a range of children’s literature, in all our issues on the theme of ‘Power in Children’s Literature’, has been from the certainties of didactic imperatives to an openness to dialogue, diversity, and models of agency. For the central characters in many of these fictions, such agency takes many forms – political, sexual or spiritual, or in the telling of stories and life-narratives; and, on the part of the audience, dialogue and participatory engagement, through acts of reading, remain in the foreground of many of the contributions here.

If our era is going to seek ways to privilege scholarly rigour (or ‘scientific’ rigour, in European terminology) over ‘Grand Theory’, it will need – as our contributors emphasise – to be self-conscious about its presuppositions when dealing with the social themes that pervade children’s literature and with literature from other countries and cultures. This, we think, may become increasingly evident as *IRCL* continues to publish submissions from all corners of the world. In what is our first Vietnamese contribution to the study of children’s literature, Tran Quynh Ngoc Bui demonstrates the cultural uniqueness of a folktale form found in South-East Asia. Her study may serve to remind us, further, that ‘Grand Theory’ was European theory and grounded knowledge in a Eurocentric perspective. It might, therefore, make more sense to read a Vietnamese ‘innocent persecuted heroine’ tale, for example, not through a Eurocentric comparative lens which discovers in it another version of the Cinderella story, but as a narrative shaped through historical time by Buddhist and Confucian ontologies of the world and existence.

Forty years on, research in children’s literature has become international to an extent perhaps beyond even that imagined by *IRSCL*’s founders in 1969. Its expansion coincides with another paradigm shift which will require empirical depth profoundly engaged with multiple forms of context: history, certainly; linguistic structures, always; the changing forms and status of genres; acts of translation in the broadest sense; methods of reading; and the relationships between local cultures and global forms. We live in interesting times.

John Stephens and Pamela Knights

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