

Relying on the pillars of existentialist writing, such as that of Jean-Paul Sartre, or children's literature criticism, such as that of Perry Nodelman, in *The Mighty Child* Beauvais hypothesises “that the hidden adult is always subjected to a specific form of power belonging to the child. That form of power is might, and its currency is time. Thus, alongside the adult's authority inside and outside the narrative, the child's might emerges: the potent, latent future to be filled with yet-unknown action” (19). In that framework, children's literature emerges as literature that “addresses the child as a mighty temporal other who may do in future what the adult was unable to do” (135). But in counterbalance with raising existentialist problems (such as the impossibilities of fully being-for-others and being-in-the-world at the same time), children's literature also idealistically calls for solving these problems. These calls are important because they, as Beauvais demonstrates, can be seen as signs of not only an adult desire for a lost indeterminacy, but also as signs of the child as the one through whom this indeterminacy can partly be regained. Therefore, this desire for indeterminacy also signifies the “adult faith that the child is an independent individual who can do something not yet known” (135). In this context, the specific power of the child reader emerges as might, and the specific power of the adult author as authority.

The Mighty Child's reading of time and power in children's literature redefines basic concepts of children's literature studies, such as the child, adult, didacticism or hope, and marks new pathways for children's literature scholarship and criticism. Its coherent, informed and lucid confronting and merging of existentialist writings with recent children's literature criticism and divergent children's literature texts – from classics to recent work, from novels to poetry, from picturebooks to crossover literature – can be seen as a demonstration of one of the multiple intellectually stimulating directions which children's literature studies might take if they dare to try. Future theoretical and historical testing of its arguments and conclusions, their development, confirmation or rejection, will hopefully have the same revealing effect.

Marijana Hameršak

A Long Time Ago

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Clare Bradford is an eminent scholar and writer with research interests in literary studies in general and children's literature in particular. She holds a personal chair as Alfred Deakin Professor at the Faculty of Arts & Education, School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. She is also a very prolific writer, whose achievements have been recognised through several international fellowships, grants and book awards. She was also the President of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (2007–2011).

In 2008, with Kerry Mallan, she initiated and edited the Palgrave Macmillan series titled “Critical Approaches to Children's Literature”, with the aim “to identify and publish the best contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film and media texts” (ix). The most recent contribution to this series is Bradford's own

book *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature*, which, in the author's own words, on her official staff profile web page of Deakin University, "explores how the Middle Ages are used and abused in medievalist texts for the young – that is, post-medieval texts which respond to and deploy medieval culture".

From the title alone, it is obvious that Bradford made a brave effort to integrate history and literature studies into a coherent, interdisciplinary text focused on children as specific recipients of literary writings. There are several indicators supporting an interdisciplinary approach in this book. For example, the fundamentals of relevant medievalist studies such as *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture* (2006) by Stephanie Trigg are clearly laid out and referred to as the starting ground for the literary and sociological interpretation of the selected and analysed material. The corpus of the analysed texts is very diverse, including children's and young adult novels and picturebooks, in addition to other multimedia content such as children's films and video games based on novels. However, the study is limited to 20th and 21st century publications.

It is clear that the analysed texts were written in a time far removed from the medieval period, thus opening a unique opportunity to examine how the Middle Ages were presented to a more contemporary, young public. Bradford suggests that contemporary children's books, novels or picturebooks that include representations of the past are actually about contemporary issues and that they reinforce the values of contemporary societies. In order to support such a claim, she includes numerous examples, alternatively examining texts from the perspective of the Middle Ages and of modernity.

The book is divided into seven chapters, mostly with respect to different aspects of modern representations of medievalism. In the introductory section titled "Framing the Medieval", Bradford clearly presents her stand on the difference between the medieval and medievalism. She considers the term "medieval" in the context of texts written during the Middle Ages, and "medievalism" in the context of texts set in the Middle Ages or containing symbolism characteristic of the Middle Ages, but written afterwards. Then she reflects on parallels between medievalism and children's literature research, only to unite them in a coherent study that can provide new insights into both fields of research.

In the first chapter, "Thinking about the Middle Ages", Bradford provides one of the most convincing arguments for her suggestion that writing about the past serves to explore the present, and that medievalism in children's literature is strongly related to issues burdening modern society. For example, contemporary gender issues are clearly reflected in the analysis of Martin Baynton's *Jane and the Dragon* (1988), where Jane, who wants to become a knight, meets a dragon who fights only because this is expected of him. The resolution is positive for both and contrary to medieval social expectations and roles; it rather reflects the "values and attitudes promoted to young girls in progressive contemporary societies" (23).

The next two chapters consider temporal and spatial aspects of medieval representations in children's literature (or games based on novels). The notion of time in literature, time travel and multi-temporal narratives are analysed together with their implementation in complex, virtual games. The use of specific medieval settings such as manor houses and Gothic buildings is promoted as the most important link to past times. These places represent sites of heroic acts or serve as descriptions of a glorious past.

The next two chapters deal with deviations from the common or normal in the form of disabilities and monstrous bodies in medievalist fiction. These chapters offer great possibilities for drawing parallels with contemporary policies of accepting and respecting differences in physical ability or appearance, and current initiatives for the inclusion of children with different needs in regular classes; they also raise issues of overcoming problems and compensating for shortcomings through virtuous characters and kindness. These opportunities are just partially realised, with most of the chapter limited to descriptions of examples such as DreamWorks' animated film *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010; loosely based on Cressida Cowell's series of novels) in which the main child character wears a prosthesis in a medieval Viking village, or Disney's Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1996) who bears traces of Victor Hugo's Gothic imaginings of disability and difference. Representations of monstrous bodies are related to social changes in contemporary society and developmental changes in children transforming into adults through puberty. Examples of fairy, vampire, dragon and werewolf stories prevail in these chapters.

In the sixth chapter, Bradford turns to the motif of the relationship between animals and humans in medievalist texts, describing the change from the anthropocentric treatment of animals (the assumption that they derive value only from their utility to humans) towards their role as agents, active participants in stories. Anthropomorphic animals as substitutes for humans in texts written for younger children are also described.

In contrast to the serious and sometimes dark and naturalistic tone of medieval representations characteristic of several chapters, the book ends in a more relaxed and positive tone, with the final chapter titled "The Laughable Middle Ages". Humorous representations of the so-called dark Middle Ages are most prominent in picturebooks and animated films for younger audiences. The analysis focuses on the social function of children's texts that make fun of this historical period, usually from the safe vantage point of modernity. For example, in stories titled *Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole (1987), *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch and Michael Martchenko (1980) and *The Knight Who Was Afraid of the Dark* by Barbara Shook Hazen and Tony Ross (1989), comic elements centre on narratives which mock patriarchal versions of gender relations and stereotypes characteristic of the medieval period. Other examples include alternative humorous non-fiction historiographies aimed to amuse an already informed reader, such as the *You Wouldn't Want to Be...* series of books, which includes the title *You Wouldn't Want to Be a Medieval Knight* by Fiona Macdonald and David Antram (2013).

In her concluding remarks, Clare Bradford presents us with some tentative answers to the question why medieval characters, creatures and motifs tend to creep into our contemporary lives, reflecting our reality as a dreamlike experience. She underlines the increasing presence and global expansion of medievalism in the popular culture of young people. Therefore, this book is a timely and indispensable source for doctoral students and researchers who wish to further investigate and illuminate this cross-section of literary criticism, specific historical period and socio-cultural perspectives with children as recipients of contemporary medievalism. With that in mind, this book is less of an exhaustive list of medievalism in children's literature, and more of an open invitation to further study this fascinating topic from different literary, sociological, educational and psychological perspectives.