

The narrator: the actual voice in children's literature

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The narrator, a voice that conveys a story is if not just important in children's literature can be considered one of the most integral subjects which in many ways is at par with children themselves. Children's literature is in itself a controversial genre of literature, much like some others where one is concerned with the intentions of the author; the one who writes, the reader; the one who reads, the narrator; the one whose voice is heard and the listener; the child or maybe another audience. Furthermore, it is also inevitably required to understand the texts of children's literature— '...is children's literature texts designed especially for children, or (ones that are) read only by them...' to this question that Grenby raised in *The Origins of Children's Literature* I would hope to include the presence of the narrator, the internal voice in the story (author) and the other narrator who is the external voice in the story (the actual narrator). When I just say the narrator, I mean the person who is reading out the story. Through this paper I will expand on— ' the internal and the external narrator's role in eliciting a response from the adults and also from the children in how they consume it.' This will explore the understanding of the author, the narrator and the addressee in how they perceive the text as something that makes this genre of literature unique.

Wall explains in his book *The Narrators Voice: The Dilemma of children's Literature of Children's Fiction* as a children's book is ' not what is said, but the way it is said and to whom it is said' (Wall 3) which is the biggest question of all, which is the target audience— children and in many cases young adults and even adults themselves. The relationship between the narrator and the child in the retelling of the story not only gives the reader

more agency in how the narration takes place to shape not only the understanding of the text to the child but also delves into the meaning of the story for the adult who is most likely the narrator. Often times in children's stories, there may be a dual narrator. The one in the text who tells the story of the characters- " Once upon a time there was a..." and the second narrator or the author who is the addressor gives the story and the written narrator a voice, the adult—parent, teacher etc. This narrator, an external being away from the story can be equated as a secondary author because of his or her ability in modifying the text to their capacity and in invoking prejudice to the characters and most importantly in their capability of vocalizing the text and manipulating it.

In a book that you read to others, it becomes that the retelling may have your own version of certain events. This is such that there is a cause for manipulation based on what the narrator may deem right. Authors when writing a book for children make sure to understand the duality of readership where her or she may not tell the whole truth which could be understood by the adult reader. When an adult is reading to the child, he or she has the full agency to give a character more depth or even less depth and give another character none at all. Although the essence of the story written by the author would not be subject to change, one can expect that there will be a certain lack or abundance of immersion that may or may not be intended by the author. The question that could arise at this juxtaposition is—do authors write children's books knowing there is an adult or a narrator who understands the book in which case, does he intend to write to the child through the narrator?

In children's literature, the written narrator or whom we can conveniently call the "author" has imbued the story within himself or herself such that they are a part of the story—as something of an external character that watches over the other characters. His or her job is reciting the story that is subsequently to be told. Although they are very much a part of the story they can tell us nothing about the story other than them being a subject that was present with only the ability to recite the events. His voice is in the hand of the external narrator who is the means of communication for the author of the story. He provides a framework or a skeleton by creating a design that is dependent on the retelling. The idea of the author can unconsciously shape the narrative of the story and the narrator or the reader can consciously shape the narrative of the story. What is the role of the author in children's literature? Is he just one who is to give the story an idea or to give an idea a story?

Unfortunately, as we understand it, in children's literature unlike adult literature, the role of the narrator triumphs the role of the author. As I have enunciated in the previous paragraph, the narrator has the ability to change the characters and the story. He has the ability to leave some parts of the story out and the ability to add more content to it as well. Is the child expected to understand what the author idea and inspiration may have been? Or even if the understanding of the author as a person. When a child says, "Daddy/ Mommy, tell me a story" and when the adult proceeds to read from a book—the adult is then being the narrator who is in control of the story and to the child, the parent or the adult is more or less the author to them. While the author writes his or her story from within the story, he or

she doesn't exactly expect the story to be intended for a particular section of the population and in this case, the children. Their intention, I would argue is to not provide the readership to just children but to expand the readership to adults as well or, as it has sometimes always been. This, though has many inlaid assumptions which would argue that children's literature is almost patronizing in the way the story conveys the text as a lesson in most cases although, this form of writing or idea isn't blatantly put out by the author themselves, the subtle shade of unconscious dwelling of this tone is provided, not only by the author but also by the narrator.

C. S Lewis and Roald Dahl authors of many well-known pieces of children's literature have written stories that form an opinion between the narrator and the child as a reassuring figure who focuses on just children as their audience, with their often patronizing and almost superior tone. Dahl in *Matilda* often says, " I will", " I might", " I could", " I insist" as a third person in the narrative which could insinuate the author trying to write down to the reader—be it the child or the narrator. Authors like J. M Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, on the other hand, wrote to multiple audiences through the same texts. He writes to children in a childish manner something like, " all the world is made of faith, trust, and pixie dust" and at often times, it would seem like he is narrating to an adult reader when he said something like, " And thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless"—referring to the children as an external being, not something that would include themselves, adults. When Barrie, talks about the white men and the redskin who attacks in *Peter Pan*, explains with a sophistication about the ' savage warfare' (Barrie 149) that one cannot expect a child to

comprehend. This is where the relationship between the narrator and the child can be brought out. The manipulation of the text by the narrator using the words of the author brings out the intimate and intricate relationship the child will possess to have with the reader.

The books, an instrument used by the narrator is a tool which he uses to invoke a moral conscience on the child. The author of a work of children's literature is more likely to write a piece of work where the internal voice in the story can be easily relatable for the external narrator or reader. He or she would strive to create a relationship with the narrator to delve into the text more, for a better understanding, not only for the narrator but for the listener and child himself. Because an author can never understand if a child would understand a certain text and that is where the narrator mediates. However, when a child has reached the point of being able to read the books on his own he will position himself or herself as the reader wherein he is able to formulate the text on his own. For the purpose of this paper, I have expressed the close connected relationships of the author, narrator and the child. It was most often always the narrator who could invoke any kind of empathy in both adults themselves and children. The narrator also observes the child's views and then manipulates the text according to it. He or she may also express his or her own views while narrating the story such that it often becomes a part of the narration. The external voice of the story, through the narration, allows itself to look back and analyze the text from a more adult perspective and also helps him/her look into their own childhood through the child.

What I hoped to have brought out through this paper, is that an adult can never read as a child and his or her opinion on children's literature should be considered irrelevant. The question that would need further exploration then is who decides what is relevant to a child? Is it not inevitable that the parent is the decider in what their child reads or what is read to them? The relationship of the author with the narrator and the audience also proves to be a questionable one. The author/writer who writes for the child has a more understanding relationship with the narrator rather than the child because of his or her dependence on the narrator or the adult in reading the book out to the child, in explaining the themes and the ideas expressed by the adult in a manner that would be understandable to the child. The relationship between the three relies simply on one's dependence on the narrator—the author on the narrator and the child on the narrator. For it is his or her voice, the narrator's insight into the text that gives it meaning which makes him the actual voice in children's literature.