

Gerald Early

*on literature
& childhood*

The book that most deeply affected me as a child was *David and the Phoenix* by David Ormondroyd. First published in 1957, the book is about a boy who becomes friends with a wise and sometimes wisecracking phoenix, until it burns and dies and then rises again, leaving the boy forever. The phoenix was especially appealing to me, since it personified resurrection, thus making death not death at all, but some sort of cosmic learning experience. (One feature of some American children's literature is its third-rate Emersonianism, its remarkable mixture of childhood angst and the regenerative power of pluck:

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Americans seem to insist, more than they have any right to, that even the most tragic situations must yield to a frightfully unreasoning optimism, so that all boats, in the end, are 'uplifted.')

My mother had bought *David and the Phoenix* for me at a store in Philadelphia called Laura's, a second-hand shop that was down the street from our home. It cost ten cents. I don't know why she bought it. Maybe Laura suggested it as something "your kids might like," as she was wont to say to my mother about certain items. My mother knew nothing about the book except that it was written for children. That fact alone seemed to make it acceptable, and potentially even 'educational.' My mother did not read books, but she respected them, as the unlitrary sometimes do, as a kind of talisman, conferring some strange virtue of mind.

I remember first reading Ormondroyd's book in the third grade. It was a big step for me. Until then, I had mostly read picture books, things like Maj Lindmann's *Flicka, Ricka, and Dicka* and *Snipp, Snapp, and Snorr* series, and – my favorites at the time – H. A. Rey's *Curious George* books. By contrast, *David and the Phoenix* was a chapter book, with perhaps one picture per chapter instead of one per page. It looked like a novel (a very thin novel), not a kiddie book, so I felt rather grown-up when I tackled it, even if I was a little daunted.

At the time, I was quite sick and out of school. (I suffered several severe bouts of illness during my days in elementary school.) For many weeks I lay in bed with glasses of 7UP on a tray next to my bed, beside a small stack of my favorite comics and *David and the Phoenix*.

In between contemplating the patterns in my bedroom wallpaper, I read *David and the Phoenix* over and over again. With each reading, I became more skilled as a

reader and was more moved. Indeed, the book's charms seemed to magnify the more I read it. *David and the Phoenix* was not only my favorite book – it had become my favorite possession.

Years later, having developed a scholarly interest in children's literature, I learned that *David and the Phoenix* was a popular book. Until then, I had thought of it as *my* book, which is not unusual with certain things from our childhood. Even though modern childhood in the United States has been turned into a training ground for adult consumers, we are shocked to find our solipsism violated by the reality of marketplace culture and mass audiences.

Perhaps consumption is why no one, in the end, really escapes childhood in our culture. We simply learn how to prolong it, and reenact it. What was once, before the nineteenth century, a rather negligible phase of life, and for most people surely not an especially pleasant period, has now become something that everyone has a right to enjoy, and is thought to be the best time of one's life. Just as reformers wept about child laborers in the nineteenth century, we weep today when we hear about the murderous child soldiers in Liberia and the Congo who have been denied a childhood; they inhabit societies that lack the structures to support childhood as we understand it.

On the other hand, Americans don't mind trying children in our courts as adults when they commit some heinous or grotesque crime, which, of course, raises some questions: What separates a child from an adult? How does a child cross that line? How can childhood end while one is still a child? Can a child, through his or her own acts, lose the right to a childhood? To what extent is a child responsible for his or her acts?

These are large questions. But studying books like *David and the Phoenix* and the audiences they attract may help us to answer them. If we could understand, in some measure, what 'children's literature' is supposed to be, then we might understand a bit better what 'childhood' is supposed to mean.

We sometimes suppose that books aimed at children are more imaginative than those aimed at adults. But when I was a child and wanted to read something imaginative, I didn't go to a children's book – I struggled with an adult work, or read pulp fiction. I thought James Bond and Dickens novels were the most thrilling stuff, far and away, that I read as a kid. And while Dickens produced some of the most memorable children's characters in the history of English literature, his work, by and large, was not intended for children. (The less said about my juvenile taste for Ian Fleming the better.) And some imaginative literature that is given to children to read, like traditional fairy tales, I found more puzzling and disturbing, but not more imaginative, than reading many adult books. In fact, has not experience taught us that adults are more susceptible to make-believe than children, and far more skilled at creating it? What is it that Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" is supposed to tell us, if not about the willful self-delusion of adults and the literal-mindedness of children? In any case, it is generally not children who create so-called children's literature.

That is surely one reason why children's literature is not always *simpler* than literature aimed at adults, although it may be easier to read. There are a good many formulaic books for adults (romance novels and many mysteries, for instance) that are less complex and less

intellectually challenging than a book by Roald Dahl or Madeline L'Engle or E. B. White.

Some may wish to speak of children's books as more *innocent*, or as appealing to, or reflecting, the putative innocence of children. This formulation assumes a characteristic about children that largely exists as a psychological tangle in the minds of most adults. Some of the children I went to school with were far more brutal, petty, and cruel than any adults I have interacted with – and some of the adults were pretty bad. The one comfort I take in thinking about my childhood is the assurance that I will not have to re-live it and be at the mercy of children again – and I think my childhood was pretty good and I have no especially bad memories or traumas to speak of!

As a child one rather expected the adults to be an arbitrary and disappointing lot: always resorting to the power of their size or the power of their purse when everything else failed, and generally acting with the whimsical authority one expects from a paternalistic ruling class that both loves and feels terrifically inconvenienced by its subjects. I often think it is a great misfortune that children have to be reared by beings who used to be children. No one has more confounding views of childhood than former children. Nearly all of our ideas about how to relate to children as adults stems from the experiences we had as children and from our efforts to 'correct' mistakes or to replicate the way we ourselves were raised or think we were raised.

In short, I don't believe we can specify useful criteria for defining children's literature by describing how it differs from literature meant for adults.

But of course a children's book is not an adult book. We understand the cus-

oms and practices of the genre so well that we can usually spot a children's book without having to be told: it is a particularly remarkable and peculiarly conventionalized form of intergenerational communication, of intergenerational art, that has become an especially important form of expression, of education, of consumption in industrialized countries. It paradoxically socializes children by granting them a degree of independence in their powers of discernment and in the indulgence of their taste.

What it says *to* children is as important as what it says *about* children as a reading public and about the adults who make this literature for them. Children's literature is profoundly important – both sociologically and artistically. At their best, the books aimed at children express how adults feel conflicted about their childhood – and how this feeling reflects an ambivalence that children also feel about childhood.

That is why this literature speaks to adults as well as to children. As adults – at least if our rearing was reasonably normal – we never outgrow childhood. We learn to live with what our childhoods have made us, as we learn to live with the idea that, as Wordsworth suggested in his "Intimations Ode," "The Child is the Father of the Man."

In the early 1970s, more than a decade after my infatuation with *David and the Phoenix* had faded, I was sitting in a friend's college dorm room one night, listening to a song by Doug and Jean Carn called "Power and Glory." Doug, a pianist and songwriter, and Jean, a singer, had put out a series of black consciousness jazz albums on the Black Jazz label. Often they wrote and recorded lyrics to famous jazz tunes like Coltrane's "Acknowledgement" section

from the suite “A Love Supreme,” or Horace Silver’s “Peace,” or Wayne Shorter’s “Infant Eyes.” Their music was a frothy blend of black consciousness and Emersonian uplift that characterized the Black Power movement as I experienced it – something wonderfully and richly aesthetic and moral. (When I was younger, I sometimes wondered if black power wasn’t partly explained by the yearning of black people for a golden childhood for the race itself.)

In a spirit of racial holiness, I heard Doug and Jean sing, “Those that were lost shall surely be returned” – and out of nowhere I recalled *David and the Phoenix*. I knew that book as well as I knew my own name, but as a child I could not, for the life of me, explain what it meant to me. But when I heard Doug and Jean’s song, I realized that *David and the Phoenix* had taught me two contradictory yet complementary truths about childhood. First, that some things about childhood are lost beyond recovery, and we are pained rightly or wrongly by the loss. Second, and more profoundly, that most children’s literature is about lost children returning home. So childhood is about the hope of recovery, how everything that is lost is returned. Haunted by loss and return, who can simply bid farewell to childhood? As Raymond Chandler wrote in another context, no one has learned a way to say goodbye to *that*.

Richard Stern

on a writer’s endgame

Haven’t I given specimen clues, if no more? At any rate I have written enough to weary myself – and I will dispatch it to the printers, and cease. But how much – how many topics, of the greatest point and cogency, I am leaving untouched!

– Walt Whitman, “Last Saved Items”

In January of 2002, I retired from fifty-three years of teaching, forty-six of them at the University of Chicago. For tenured professors of my time, the decision to retire is one’s own. I won’t go into the pros and cons that weighed on me for more than a year. One pro, though, was that there would no longer be the slight-

Richard Stern’s most recent novel is “Pacific Tremors” (2001). His fifth ‘orderly miscellany,’ “What Is What Was,” was published in 2002. This year Northwestern University Press will publish his collected stories, “Almonds to Zooof,” and reissue three of his novels, “Stitch” (1965), “Other Men’s Daughters” (1973), and “Natural Shocks” (1978). Stern has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1995.

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