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**Perceptions of authenticity in the production of Australian children's picture books**

Abstract:

Issues of authenticity in children's literature are highly contested and discussions surrounding it tend to reflect the deeply held beliefs and values of those involved in producing, disseminating, and critiquing children's literature. It is important to critically examine these terms in a way that accounts for various approaches to authenticity in children's literature.

Most discussions of authenticity have focused on authorial intention, textual analysis, or reader-response, with many claiming it is something you can only know when you see it (Bishop 2003: 27). However, Elizabeth Howard argues that authenticity can be explained when universal and specific details converge so that "readers from the culture will know that it is true, will identify, and be affirmed, and readers from another culture will feel that it is true, will identify, and learn something of value about both similarities and differences among us" (1991: 92).

Taking this notion into account, it can be argued that children's picture books "reflect society as it wishes to be, as it wishes to be seen, and as it unconsciously reveals itself to be" (Hunt 1990: 2). As humans we construct our reality according to our experiences, beliefs, values, and our temporally and spatially specific social and cultural location. As a result, this reality becomes a normal and naturalised part of life to the members of that society, to the extent that we often forget that reality is constructed at all. Children's picture books, perhaps more than any other texts, are therefore fundamental in developing this reality.

In discussions of authenticity concerning the production of picture books we must take into account the 'continuous human effort that goes into manufacturing and maintaining a sense of "authentic grounding"' (van de-Port 2004: 10). As such, the responsibility for the portrayal issues of how authenticity is negotiated, constructed and maintained in children's picture books lies with everyone involved in the production of children's literature. This paper will examine how authenticity has been perceived in Australian children's picture books and propose a confluence approach that accounts for the author, the text, the reader and their contexts together in a system of mutual influence as an effective way of understanding authenticity.

Biographical note:

Chloe Killen is a PhD candidate in Media and Communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research examines the creative process of contemporary Australian picture book authors, illustrators, agents, publishers, booksellers and other field operatives in an attempt to demystify creativity myths. Her PhD is a case study titled 'Investigating creativity in the production of Australian Children's Literature'.

Keywords:

Authenticity – Australian picture books – Cultural production.

All social reality is constructed. We construct our reality according to our experiences, beliefs, values, and our temporally and spatially specific social and cultural location. As a result, this reality becomes a normal and naturalised part of our social life to the extent that we often forget that reality is constructed at all (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 2005: 59). Authenticity is one such socially constructed trope that is used to valorize particular beliefs and points of view. This can be seen in children's literature where debates around authenticity have, at different times, prioritised certain elements of the author-text-reader equation over others. While these broad arguments around authorial intention, the text, and the agency of the reader hold merit, they are unsatisfactory in their singularity of focus. Instead an alternative approach to constructing authenticity in children's picture books is necessary that takes into account a confluence of influential factors in a systemic relationship. For, as Peterson suggests 'authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a social[ly] agreed-upon construct' (1997: 5).

The term authentic originates from the Greek "authentēs", 'which carries the dual meaning of "one who acts with authority" and "made by one's own hand"' (Bendix 1997: 14). The term has a complicated history consisting of definitions that are often in opposition to one another. For example, in the arena of art and antiques, authenticity 'refers to the clear identifiability of maker or authorship and uniqueness of an artifact, relying on the "made by one's own hand" etymology' (Bendix 1997: 15). Yet within the realm of folklore '[I]ack of identifiably authorship, multiple existence over time and space, [and] variation of the items' (Bendix 1997: 15) are the markers of authenticity. Today the term authenticity has many meanings that span multiple disciplines, but generally we take it as a reference to something considered original or genuine. Speaking about authentic cuisine Appadurai claims authenticity is a normative trope that 'measures the degree to which something is more or less what it *ought* to be' (1986: 25). He suggests it is important to determine who has the voice of authority (Appadurai 1986: 25) and, as echoed by Bendix (1997: 21), how authenticity has been used and why.

According to MacNeil and Mak, 'authenticity is best understood as a social construction that has been put into place to achieve a particular aim' (2007: 26). As a result, notions of authenticity are constantly under negotiation according to circumstance and power (MacNeil & Mak 2007: 44). These shifts in the meaning of authenticity are not random, but the result of a continual 'struggle in which the goal of each contending interest is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity' (Peterson 1997: 220). This power struggle is important as '[d]eclaring something inauthentic legitimated the subject that was declared authentic, and the declaration in turn can legitimate the authenticator' (Bendix 1997: 7). Labeling something as authentic affects the cultural capital of an item, which influences the perceived value of it. As Bendix explains, '[o]nce a cultural good has been declared authentic, the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value' (1997: 8).

It is therefore the position of this paper that authenticity is constructed on multiple levels, by a range of people, across multiple time periods, in multiple social and cultural contexts – it cannot belong to just one person or group. It is an ever-changing notion that is determined by people in confluence with one another and through their

engagement with texts in the act of making meaning. Authenticity is a construct that is shaped by the social and cultural context it exists within. However, the fact that it is a construct does not negate it from being an important and ‘real’ phenomenon. According to Alexander we often ‘make the mistake of believing that arguments about socially constructed ideas imply that such ideas are false or unreal. This is not the case’ (2003: 293). Instead socially constructed ideas ‘are extremely important and they have real consequences in the social world’ (Alexander 2003: 293).

### **Author approach**

The most common way of perceiving notions of authenticity in children’s literature has been through the examination of authorial intention. Within this paper the term author will be applied to writers *and* illustrators as recognition that both are equally important in the production of picture books and the construction of authenticity. Author-centred theories generally take a biographical approach to look for clues in an author’s life to explain their writing. The author is seen to be ‘confiding in us’ (Barthes 1977: 143) and their work is an expression of themselves that we must somehow dismantle in our quest to understand the truth. The work is viewed as a way of unlocking the author’s self to find the ultimate meaning of a text.

Thus one approach in ascertaining authenticity has been to examine an author’s motivation for writing a particular book. Bishop (2003), speaking specifically about cultural authenticity in African American children’s literature, proposed that examining an author’s intentions and ideology can clarify the ‘kind of story that author really seeks to write’ (Short & Fox 2004: 379) and why. Henry Louis Gates Jr. also claims that ‘[n]o human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world’ (in Short & Fox 2003: 10). The corollary of this is that ‘differing intentions result in different stories for different audiences and different evaluations of authenticity’ (Short & Fox 2004: 379). In Australian picture books learning about an author, for instance Jackie French, can add a perceived layer of authenticity to their work and encourage the reader towards a particular reading.

Jackie French and her husband Bryan live in the Araluen valley near Braidwood in country New South Wales. Their stone house, complete with homemade and self-installed solar panels, sits on a 4-hectare property at the edge of the Deua wilderness area. The sprawling garden bursting with roses boasts over 270 different kinds of fruit on over 800 trees: the perfect habitat for Australian native animals and French often blogs about her interactions with the local wildlife. French has spent most of her life informally studying the wombats in her valley and refers to herself as a ‘wombat negotiator’. As the director of The Wombat Foundation, French is instrumental in raising funds to support research into the preservation of the endangered northern hairy nosed wombat (French 2011a).

Taking an author-centred approach to French’s unique biography, one can perceive clues from her life that might help in deconstructing and explaining her writing. Additionally, it is possible to make assumptions about her authorial motivation behind writing certain stories, particularly her picture books about wombats (including *Diary*

*of a wombat* (2002), *Baby wombat's week* (2009) and most recently *Christmas wombat* (2011b) all illustrated by Bruce Whatley). It can be argued that her involvement with wombats for the past three decades and her role as director of The Wombat Foundation mean that she has a particularly strong interest in the preservation and protection of wombats. By writing stories about a familiar part of her life, French gives her stories the title authentic, which deems her work authentic.

The fundamental problem with the primacy of authorial intention is the importance placed on the author at the expense of the reader, or indeed the text itself. The author is deified and we expect that they are sharing some secret of themselves when they produce. We take the story to be real because we assume that the author experienced it. While this may be the case for French, it does not necessarily have to be. If it were required that an author experience a story for it to be true, much of the information we have in the world today would be invalidated. A story is a construction of an experience that can hold truth for an audience even if it is entirely fictional. Although we want to trust that what our authors are saying is truthful, we also have to acknowledge that their story can only ever be but *one version* of the truth. By seeking an authorial explanation of their work, it is presumed that there is one true meaning of a text that can only be determined by and accessed through the author. This is a very singular and determinist perspective that cannot be sustained in the face of the postmodern consideration of meaning making as plural and polysemic (Fiske 1991: 59; Procter 2004: 66; Van Zoonen 1994: 27; McQuail 2010: 73).

### **Text approach**

As a radical departure from constantly searching for an author's definitive intention, Roland Barthes argued for 'the complete removal of the concept of authorship from analysis' (Wolff 1981: 118). According to Barthes, by examining the text as an entity in itself it can be seen that 'every text is eternally written here and now' (Barthes 1977: 144). In this view, once an author creates a work, regardless of their intention, the text assumes a life of its own to be reiterated and understood infinitely, as the origin of meaning lies exclusively in language itself.

There have been several approaches that focus only on the text, suggesting that anything that anyone needs to know is within the text itself. The most prominent of these is close reading. Under the banner of New Criticism, close reading 'involves a focused attention on literary texts and a rejection of practices based on any extrinsic, extra-textual sources, especially biography, history and sociology' (Stephens 2010: 215). In relation to authenticity, close reading suggests that a text can be read separate from the author and objectively by the reader to locate authenticity within the text itself. 'Thus, the possible range of meanings of a particular text is always present within the text itself (i.e. meaning is intrinsic)' (Stephens 2010: 215-216). As an example of the text-centred approach to authenticity we can look at *This is the mud* (2009) written by Kathryn Apel and illustrated by Warren Crossett. This approach prioritises the textual content with the belief that authenticity is inherent and it resides objectively within the work itself.

Within *This is the mud* specific terminology is used to portray an experience of life on an Australian cattle farm. Particular linguistic (and illustrative) details are used to convey the Australian nature of the story. For instance, the setting of the story is a property instead of an American ranch; a red beef cow is prominent in the illustrations instead of a black-and-white dairy cow that are typically portrayed in farmyard illustrations; the story alludes to a drought, and someone drives a ute. While some of these things obviously exist elsewhere, together these elements provide clues, along with the dry, dusty, brown landscape, to rural Australia, and are typical of an Australian farming experience. Speaking about the importance of language selection in picture books as a representation of reality, Apel says, ‘everyone needs to find themselves in their reading. Which is not to say that that’s the only thing that they will read about, they will learn about other cultures as well, but there needs to be stories where they can see themselves’ (*interview with Kathryn Apel by Jodie van der Wetering* 2011).

This approach is problematic, however, as it assumes that a text exists independently of an author and of any context. Even though the primacy of the author has been dismissed, ‘it cannot be said that art works give birth to themselves by some parthenogenic process’ (Zolberg 1990: 114) as ‘every book must have an author’ (Ryan 1992: 45). Schirato and Yell explain that ‘words do not function as labels that can be unproblematically attached to things or acts or experiences’ (2000: 19). The meaning of a text cannot be fixed; instead it must be acknowledged that the meaning of these words (or texts) is relative and ‘usually a matter of negotiation, disagreement or conflict’ (Schirato & Yell 2000: 19).

In the example of *This is the mud*, both the author and illustrator made choices about the textual and visual content appropriate in representing a specific landscape. They encoded the textual and visual narrative of the book with particular meanings for an audience to read. However, if the audience does not share at least some of the assumed knowledge then the decoded meaning will be different to, and sometimes even the opposite of, the intended meaning (Hall 1973 & 1980; Morley 1980). Instead a constructivist approach is more useful in acknowledging that the ‘subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning’ (Crotty 1998: 9) and meaning is constantly shifting. This suggests a confluence approach is necessary to take into account the relationship between the author, the text and the reader in the construction of meaning and authenticity.

### **Reader approach**

Barthes’ radical cry for the death of the author redefined the process of meaning making ‘as one in which the receivers (readers) engage in a continual process of interaction with and interpretation of the work of art or literature’ (Zolberg 1990: 113-114). These ideas have been echoed in reader-response and reception theories that see the reader as paramount in the construction of meaning and perceptions of authenticity within a text. Barbatsis explains that ‘reception theorists direct attention to the interaction that takes place in what they call a text-reader or medium-audience nexus’ (2004: 271). Audiences are perceived of as active and meaning is no longer

restricted by the author's single existence in time and space, but instead constructed in the relationship between the reader and the text. With this view, the intentions of the author are inconsequential as 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of author' (Barthes 1977: 148). This approach has been most popular within children's literature as it is 'a species of literature defined in terms of the reader rather than the authors' intentions or the text themselves' (Hunt 1990: 1). It is acknowledged that the concept of the reader in children's literature is problematic as there are always two audiences: the child and the adult. For a detailed discussion of the readership and the mediated experience of reading children's literature see Melrose (2002 & 2011).

We can examine the critical reception of *Requiem for a beast*, by author, illustrator, and composer Matt Ottley, as an example of a reader-centred approach to authenticity. When it won the Children's Book Council of Australia's (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award, *Requiem for a beast* was a controversial winner. Many libraries, schools, bookshops, parents and so on use the CBCA list as an informal purchasing guide and were surprised to find the book was aimed at an older audience: the story contains mature content including a graphic illustration of a bloodied axe, two references to suicide and five incidences of the f-word. *Requiem for a beast* has 'notoriously become the most complained about book for young people in Australian history' (Ottley in Coughlan 2009) and people returned the book en masse. There was a public debate about the CBCA's decision to award a book that many considered to be too advanced in content for children. The CBCA responded by reasserting that the Picture Book category has 'an "implied readership" of up to the age of 18' (CBCA 2008) and Ottley confirmed that his picture book was 'for young adults, not for little children' (in Coughlan 2009). Since that time, audiences have responded positively with sales increasing once more and the book receiving serious literary attention. Regardless, in most schools the book is held behind the library counter away from general browsing to only be accessed with permission.

What this debate illustrates is that audiences are rife with internal disagreements and they will furiously dispute issues of authenticity. The two audiences, those who purchased the book without knowing anything about it and those who were more informed, had certain expectations relating to content and what constituted a picture book for children that were contested and either radically destabilised or reinforced when they actually read it. In a landscape that had typically been defined by its child audience, reading *Requiem for a beast* forced people to reconsider the picture book as a medium for communication to audiences other than the very young. CBCA president at the time, Bronwen Bennett, said 'the picture book is no longer just a category for pre-readers. It's now a genre in its own right and includes the graphic novel (image-driven novels often aimed at the teen market)' (Neill 2008).

This also illustrated the problem of uncritically using the CBCA list as a marker of authentic children's picture books to inform purchasing decisions. Many parents were outraged when their children read *Requiem for a Beast* and claimed that if they possessed prior knowledge of the content they would never have given it to their children. Both Matt Ottley and the CBCA expressed concern over parents giving books to their children without a precursory glance. The CBCA acknowledged that some of picture books were for mature readers and emphasised that 'it is the

responsibility of those selecting books for children to assess whether they are suitable for their particular needs' (CBCA 2008).

This reader-centred approach is problematic as 'amputating initial creation distorts the sociological project of understanding the relations of society and art as much as does ignoring reception' (Zolberg 1990: 114). If an author cannot be separated from the baggage of their intended meaning it is equally impossible for the reader, which was evident in the *Requiem for a beast* example as beliefs about what constituted an authentic picture book influenced each group of readers. As Bennett succinctly summarises, 'Barthes replaces the controlling, limiting subjectivity of the author with the controlling, limiting subjectivity of the reader' (2005: 18). The corollary of this is an acknowledgement that authors, texts, and readers are contextually bound (Wolff 1981; Zolberg 1990: 9).

## Conclusion

Context is an extremely important factor to consider as it relates in unique ways to all three of the elements outlined above. Schirato and Yell claim that 'meanings are not to be found or understood exclusively in terms of acts of communication, but are produced within specific cultural contexts' (2000: 1). Context consists of both social and cultural influences as they shape an understanding of the world and authenticity will be perceived and evaluated differently by different people according to the specific contexts they inhabit and operate within. These contexts do not exist in a vacuum; the author, the text and the reader each contribute to the creation of the context in which they exist as much as the context creates the author, the text and the reader. Therefore, an approach is necessary that acknowledges the equal importance of these multiple foci and sees each element engaged in a systemic relationship of mutual influence.

While each approach to perceiving authenticity in children's literature above illustrates important factors in the author-text-reader relationship, a perception that only accounts for one singular factor is far too limiting for a full and comprehensive understanding of authenticity. Instead it is crucial to consider a confluence approach to authenticity and meaning making that takes into account, equally, the author, the text, the reader, and the contexts in which they operate as 'all writing and reading takes place within the context of larger cultural systems of meanings' (Nodelman & Reimer 2003: 218). These systems provide frameworks that affect the texts we construct, the ones we preserve, how we make meaning from them and how we use this to construct and perceive authenticity. Peterson claims that 'authenticity in a living art form can have a number of meanings' (1997: 220) and as such, agreement on authenticity is always locked in a process of negotiation.

Therefore authenticity cannot be seen in absolute terms but must always be seen as relative to the contexts we exist within. Smolkin and Suina (1997) suggest that no culture is monolithic, so no single member of a culture can issue a final assessment of the cultural authenticity of a text. It is therefore the position of this paper that authenticity is a social and cultural construct that is determined, negotiated, and maintained by multiple forces operating at once and throughout time. The notion of

authenticity does not belong to one group/individual or another; it is created through the engagement of multiple forces in a system of operation. Therefore the responsibility of who should be accountable for the perceptions of authenticity in Australian children's picture books lies with not with one supposedly causal factor or one group of people but with everyone involved in the production, dissemination, and reception of these texts.

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