

Back to where we came from: evolutionary psychology and children's literature and media

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Lesnik-Oberstein, K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4970-0556> and Cocks, N. (2017) Back to where we came from: evolutionary psychology and children's literature and media. In: Wesseling, E. (ed.) Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys, and Contemporary Media Culture. Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the present. Routledge, London, pp. 318-336. ISBN 9781472474124 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/69362/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Back to Where We Came From: Evolutionary Psychology and Children's Literature and Media.

Neil Cocks and Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, University of Reading.

In 2010, *The New York Times* ran an article which announced that 'the next big thing in English [Studies]' was 'using evolutionary theory to explain fiction'.¹ This announcement may be considered somewhat belated, given that the interest in the potential relevance of evolutionary psychology² to literary studies might be traced back to a considerably earlier date than 2010.³ Joseph Carroll first published on the subject as far back as 1995, and by 2002 Steven Pinker could claim that 'within the academy, a growing number of mavericks are looking to Evolutionary psychology and cognitive science in an effort to re-establish human nature as the center of any understanding of the arts'.⁴ Nevertheless, *The New York Times*'s announcement may be taken as a measure of an increasingly visible trend in both popular and academic thinking.⁵

Nostalgia

What we will be arguing in this article is that this trend is motivated specifically by *nostalgia*, or the longing for a past which seems forever lost. Tom Panelas writes in his review of Fred Davis's 1979 *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, the 'first full-length treatment of nostalgia by a sociologist', that

Davis also insists on precision in using the term *nostalgia*. Properly invoked, the concept applies only to memories of lived experience; it must therefore be distinguished from what Davis terms 'antiquarian feeling,' the latter being longings for a prebiographical, legendary past that one knows only through representations in folklore, history books, films, etc. One can-not be truly nostalgic for places one has never seen or events that one did not live through. Fair enough, but left this way the discussion fails to acknowledge the similarities between the two kinds of experience. It

ignores the extent to which the prebiographical past may be made to feel eminently personal, and also the fact that lived experience may be selectively reconstructed in ways that resemble the selective reconstruction of the distant past. Cultural practices, rituals, and representations create powerful collective archetypes which put the individual in close emotional contact with her or his cultural history and evoke feelings of attachment to these periods which may be experienced as vividly personal. At the same time, culture can re-present personal experiences in so many different ways that auto-biography and history may both come to be seen through a similar retrospective lens, one which refracts, distorts, and magnifies in accordance with current circumstances and the prevailing mode of socially constructing the past.⁶

Panelas's argument here importantly questions the possibility of assuming a 'personal experience' as apart from cultural discourses of memory and identity, instead suggesting that the personal is produced *within* culture.

Panelas's point is of special importance to the focus of our article on considering how and why the interest in evolutionary psychology has also appeared in relation specifically to childhood and children's language and children's literature and media.⁷ For at the heart of the issue of the relationship between this field of research and children's literature and media lies the question of whether childhood is understood to be *outside* of culture, retrievable, present and observable, and thus only subject to nostalgia in terms of the individual adult's longing for their *own* past, or whether childhood is understood as a *product* of culture, where the attempts of evolutionary psychology to account for this childhood can be seen, as Panelas proposes, as the product of a nostalgia for something that is nevertheless irretrievable by definition, something that is created, as he puts it, when 'auto-biography and history may both come to be seen through a similar retrospective lens, one which refracts, distorts, and

magnifies in accordance with current circumstances and the prevailing mode of socially constructing the past.'

Childhood, Children's Language and Children's Literature

Evolutionary psychology is called upon in relation to childhood to provide accounts of child development, including child language, and, in line with this, children's literature and media, in terms of how and why children engage with them, much as the field is called upon to account for an engagement with art and literature more widely (also by adults, in other words) as Jonathan Kramnick explains:

Whereas the humanities believe in an infinitely plastic human nature, so the literary Darwinists claim, the biological and social sciences have discovered that the mind evolved many thousands of years ago in response to an environment we no longer live in. Their goal is to show how our evolved cognition can explain particular features of texts or facts about writing and reading.⁸

In relation specifically to children, David S. Miall and Ellen Dissanayake argue that our stylistic analysis of babyltalk for its metrical and phonetic features reveals an elementary poetics that, in turn, contributes to understanding the deep-rootedness, if not the origin, of human aesthetic and emotive responses to the temporal arts [such as literary language and music].⁹

Although Miall and Dissanayake here refer to 'the deep-rootedness' and 'not the origin' of these responses, nevertheless their stated aim is still explicitly to 'challenge predominant views in evolutionary psychology that literary art is a superfluous by-product of adaptive evolutionary mechanisms or primarily an ornament created by sexual selection.'¹⁰ In this sense, the nostalgia of Miall and Dissanayake's arguments, and those of similar arguments about the innateness of language, the literary, and childhood, is invested in childhood and its attendant language as an identity that is universally retrievable, stable and

transcendent, as Olga Solomon points out when she summarises that ‘the question about the role of caregivers in human development goes to the core of the social-sciences debate about the sources of linguistic and cultural competence.’¹¹

In this respect, a second aspect of this nostalgia will also be discussed in this article to do with the way that we will argue that this supposedly ‘new’ area of research repeats exactly a long history of prior claims of many eminent children’s literature critics with respect to ideas of childhood, language and children’s literature and media. Despite the repeated, insistent claims of several of the Literary Darwinists, including Miall and Dissanayake, but also, for instance, Joseph Carroll, one of the founders of this way of thinking, that they are working in heroic opposition to a dominant, obscurantist and anti-science ‘literary theory’,¹² we will argue here that in fact there is a high degree of convergence between the claims made about childhood, language and children’s literature in Literary Darwinism and much children’s literature criticism. We therefore see Literary Darwinism and (children’s) literature studies as not being in any sense about an opposition or separation between science and literary or humanist studies, but about a convergence underpinned and driven by the *same* nostalgia for a singular, stable, uniform and universal past, leading to a singular, stable, uniform and universal present, as can be seen reflected in the title of Dissanayake’s most recent article, ‘Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative’.¹³

The Politics of the Nostalgia for Affect

Finally, we suggest that it is not just in these two fields in which this nostalgia operates, but that this can currently be seen in sub-streams within many disciplines – in both in arts, sciences and humanities -- as a founding, powerfully *political*, driver.¹⁴ Modernism scholar Daniela Caselli indicates what is more widely at stake when she writes in 2010 in relation to ‘affect theory’ within Literary Studies that:

Childhood emerges as a theoretical tool at a historical point when feminist theory, and theory in general, are focused on a process of self-criticism aimed, on the one hand, at questioning past methodological rigidities identified as the attachment to epistemology over ontology, the centrality of estrangement over affective identification, and the alleged dogma of constructivism, and, on the other, at engaging with areas of thought perceived as having remained for decades no entry zones, such as science (in particular neuroscience) and affect [...] In this way, art becomes the space of the encounter of affect as a surprising, *apersonal*, *transhuman* way of responding to matter around us [...] This space ‘beyond’ words [...] closely resembles [certain conceptions of a] pre-verbal space of infancy [...] the ineffable romantic joy of experiencing something one thought ineffably lost.¹⁵

Significantly, Caselli adds that ‘The elusive quality of affect [...] is essential to its promise of transcending notions of otherness, both within and without the self. Affect promises – creatively – to go beyond what theory – boringly – has been able to examine so far, and brings with this the allure of immediacy [...]’: it is at this conjunction that childhood makes its appearance.¹⁶ Caselli argues, then, that ‘affect’ is a *political* concept, which she sees as being deployed ‘at a historical point’ to assert a trans-historical, natural, spontaneous and universal emotional dynamic in opposition to what Caselli analyses are retrospectively defined as the ‘past methodological rigidities’ of ‘epistemology’, ‘estrangement’, ‘and the alleged dogma of constructivism’. Affect and childhood are, Caselli is arguing, invoked as this natural, universal and spontaneous in order to constitute “the new” in critical theory,¹⁷ yet this rests on a denial of historicity and cultural moment when, as Caselli points out, feminist scholars ‘Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell in the late 1970s and early 1980s were already illustrating the problems encountered in attempting to theorize femininity as beyond the symbolic.¹⁸ In other words, not only can claims to the natural

and transcendent be seen as themselves inevitably historical and cultural, but so too the specific forms they take.

Miall and Dissanayake's assumptions about childhood, language and literature follow Caselli's descriptions to the letter, for the key assumption for all their work (and later work also (co-)authored by Dissanayake) is that

From the baby's perspective, of course, the lexical content of the topics is incomprehensible. The verse patterning by topic must be seen as a device adopted by the mother to hold the baby's attention, to vary the nature of the interaction, or as a response to the baby's behaviour: each topic, in other words, is primarily a resource for effects at the level of sound – i.e. the intonation, rhythm, and phonetic color afforded by the words and phrases of a given topic. We assume it is through these features that the baby's attention is captured or reengaged.¹⁹

Meaning – 'the lexical content of the topics' – is here seen as not relevant in and of itself, but as only 'a resource for effects at the level of sound'. The 'literary', or 'poetics' here is therefore centrally about an *effect* which is itself known and predictable and therefore itself not subject to interpretation: the mother and the baby are assumed as separate entities with different capacities in some senses (the mother comprehends 'lexical content', but the baby does not), but with an identical capacity to recognise and respond with 'attention' to 'the intonation, rhythm, and phonetic color afforded by the words and phrases of a given topic.'

As Brian Boyd, another prominent Literary Darwinist asserts, 'In art we do or make things simply in order to engage our attention, for the *sake* of attention.'²⁰ Nevertheless, Miall and Dissanayake's sound-effects are 'afforded by the words and phrases of a given topic'. So although the words and phrases' 'lexical content' is 'incomprehensible' 'from the perspective of the baby', the sound-effects *do* derive specifically from words and phrases somehow and

the baby according to Miall and Dissayanake does know and recognise these sound-effects as the *appropriate* kind of sound-effects to ‘capture or reengage’ its ‘attention’.

Attention and Orality

Since ‘attention’ is then at the heart of the matter, the question must be what this is about.

According to Miall and Dissayanake, ‘Liam’s mother’s utterances are simplified (formalized, regularized, stereotyped), repeated, exaggerated, and elaborated (varied). Such operations serve as a kind of “foregrounding” – that is, they attract and sustain attention, in both humans and other animals.’²¹ In this idea, ‘utterances’ in and of themselves are not sufficient to ‘attract attention’. Instead, ‘operations’ need to be carried out upon the utterances, whereby the mother already knows how and what to select from the utterances and then what to do with that in order to ‘serve as a kind of “foregrounding”’. ‘Attention’, here, is something always potentially available, but only called-up and engaged further by appropriate, matching, stimuli. In other words, ‘attention’ assumes that both baby and mother have an identical, innate mechanism for recognising and responding to these stimuli, but the baby is the ‘passive’ participant in that despite this ability it needs to have the mother actively ‘feed’ it these stimuli in order to ‘attract and sustain’ its attention. The only issue around ‘attention’ then seems to be that the baby must be ‘trained’ in to doing more and doing for longer what it can already always do with what it always already knows.

It may be noted with respect to these assumptions about what attention is and what the stimuli are for achieving this repetition and extension of attention that, remarkably for a paper that claims a scientific status of some kind for itself, there is an admission in the paper itself, in a footnote, that all its confident assertions about the universality of ‘babytalk’ and its function, are based ‘on a 1-minute utterance by one English-speaking mother’.²² In Dissayanake’s later work there is almost no further empirical or other evidence supplied in support of such assertions either. The problem is that however ‘commonsensical’ it may seem

to Literary Darwinists such as Miall and Dissanayake that mothers talk to babies in special ways and that this may be thought to have functions of some kind (which in turn they simply assume must necessarily be evolutionary functions indeed), this wholly ignores extensive scholarship on the historical, cultural and linguistic variability of ‘babytalk’; on the shifting historical and cultural ideas about child raising; on the different ways in which ‘poetics’ are attributed to literatures; the entire debate about what constitutes ‘oral’ features in literary texts (there is hardly any discussion at all in Miall and/ or Dissanayake’s work of history, folklore studies or anthropology); the complex questions about whether the brain has ‘inbuilt’ and determinate ‘modules’ which recognise discrete cultural or artistic expressions; or the complex questions around whether, how and when literature or art can be assumed to ‘affect’ people (including children) and the multiple and various implications of such ideas.²³

To take just one aspect of all of this: if an innate attention-mechanism is matched to innately known and recognised sound-effects, then a paradox is generated by Miall and Dissanayake’s argument that the sound-effects are ‘afforded by the words and phrases of a given topic’. For if the ‘words and phrases of a given topic’ ‘afforded’ (or are a ‘resource for’) the sound effects, then this implies that the ‘words and phrases of a given topic’ must have come *first*. Miall and Dissanayake are therefore arguing on the one hand that language and the literary ‘content’ as they define it came *later*, because (as Dissanayake formulates it in a later article) ‘archaic humans probably made and responded to music-like and emotionally motivated vocalisations that preceded speech by many hundreds of thousands of years and helped enable it’.²⁴ But, on the other hand, there is an implication that language as ‘content’ came *first*, and we take this implication to be generated by the inherent difficulty of separating out what in fact constitutes the difference between ‘emotionally motivated vocalisations’ and ‘speech’. It may be noticed straightaway here that this is, of course, not a paradox limited to Miall and/ or Dissanayake’s work, but the pervading problem of all studies

around orality and the written.²⁵ And this is because, as Dissayanake repeatedly states herself in her own work, the ‘prelinguistic and preliterate substrates’ must be *written retrospectively*, simply because they have an ‘*unrecorded history*’.²⁶

Although Dissanayake claims repeatedly in her article on the ‘Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative’ ‘that linguistic theory, the philosophies of mind and language, and modern literary theory [...] may forget that language as spoken also has crucial “oral” and paralinguistic properties’,²⁷ it is hard to see how this claim can possibly also apply to children’s literature criticism. Children’s literature critic Barbara Wall writes, for example, in her book *The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*, that

In life, overhearing a conversation in the next room, we readily deduce from the kinds of information and explanations being given, that an adult is talking to a child. And even if the words are inaudible we might still make the same deduction because we recognise some almost indefinable adjustments in pitch and tone. These difficulties, when adult speaks to child, translated, sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, into the narrator’s voice, can be observed in fiction for children. Such subtleties of address define a children’s book.²⁸

But for all that Wall, as with Miall and Dissayanake in this respect, assumes a general ready agreement with this idea that adults speak to children through ‘almost indefinable adjustments’, her judgements based on these perceptions of what type of ‘narrator’s voice’ therefore make books (good) ‘children’s books’ can no more constitute ‘proof’ than any other kind of claim when compared to any other critics’ judgements. When Wall finds herself disagreeing, for instance, with Aidan Chambers and Charles Sarland’s view that William Mayne’s novels exhibit ‘a cold detachment in his attitude to readers’ and employ ‘a subversive, even unfriendly, narrator’, Wall can only resort to asserting that she

believes ‘the contrary to be true [...] Mayne’s narrator is constantly and benignly close to his characters and his narratee’.²⁹

Similarly, to take another example, Roderick McGillis concludes his book *The Nimble Reader* by asking

Do we really encounter prose before we encounter the old woman who lives in a shoe? Do children not babble and coo before they speak in sentences? Do children not chant and sing in the schoolyard and on the street at least as early as their first encounters with prose? Too soon they give up their singing ...³⁰

But whatever these children’s literature critics see as the outcome of this specialised language for (young) children, this cannot stabilise their judgements about which aspect of that language belongs innately to children and how and why. Although Miall and Dissanayake might object that their interest is not in the language of fiction, as it is with the children’s literature critics of whom Wall and McGillis are but two examples, nevertheless the assumptions about an innate, special language of childhood outside of fiction are shared, as well as the idea that this language, although of childhood, is nevertheless also still known by adults too and can be employed by them at wish to educate the child in the correct manner, whether through speaking or in singing or in the fiction that is seen to incorporate these salient aspects. The difficulty therefore remains that nobody can agree on what those ‘salient aspects’ actually are, let alone on which of them would, in whatever way, be the result necessarily of evolutionary processes.

Ontogeny and Phylogeny

It can be considered yet further how these claims from children’s literature criticism and Literary Darwinism converge in an article by Brian Boyd which explicitly sets out to apply Literary Darwinism to children’s literature, specifically Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who*. Jonathan Kramnick has recently extensively questioned the arguments put forward by many

of the Literary Darwinists, including Brian Boyd.³¹ We find Kramnick's argument to be rigorous and wide ranging, and only turn now to an early essay by one of the authors he considers because of its specific interest in Children's Literature. As this is a field of study not otherwise widely discussed by the authors Kramnick engages with, it is one that is understandably passed over in his discussion. Yet, as Brian Boyd in 'The Origins of Stories: *Horton Hears a Who*' understands Children's Literature to offer an excellent opportunity for establishing the facts of early human adaptation, it is an area that is worth reading in some detail.

In the introduction to his essay, Boyd sets out his methodology and the reasoning behind it:

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, or at least sometimes helps us retrieve it, and since we have no printouts of Pleistocene potboilers, I will colour in the outline by way of Dr. Seuss's children's classic, *Horton Hears a Who*, contrasting a sample evolutionary analysis of a single work of fiction with the kind of response typical of Cultural Critique.³²

A broad theory of recapitulation is offered, and it is in this that the nostalgic turn can be located. There is in this account a desire for the recovery and restitution of that which is lost, and this lost, moreover, is seen being of key importance to retrieve and heal.³³ However, the question of what is lost, and what will aid 'retrieval', and why this retrieval is so central, is surprisingly difficult to answer. Take the claim that *Horton Hears a Who* is a 'children's classic'. Although there is a claim of ownership on the part of the children, it is of a text not authored by them. In one reading, the claim to ownership is not that of the children either; a claim is made that children own that which is generally understood to be a 'classic'. Alternatively, this is a 'classic' for children, not a 'classic' in general, the 'children's classic' being of limited value, their claim less than universal. The child is thus either disenfranchised

from the text, or from a wider system of value. If these seem marginal points with which to begin a reading, we suggest that they are necessary, in so far as they result in an ‘ontogeny’ constructed not, for example, in terms of the child but as that which is written for the child, or that which the child owns, or an externalised understanding of what the child owns. What this ‘recapitulates’, moreover, is not the condition of early humans, the specifics of adaptation, but the absence of a ‘potboiler’ within the Pleistocene. This, then, is the central thesis of Boyd’s argument: a book written by an adult, and uncertainly ‘owned’ by the child, recapitulates one that never existed.

The relationship between ‘ontogeny’ and ‘phylogeny’ can be further disrupted. According to Boyd, the former allows the ‘retrieval’ of the latter. Yet *Horton Hears a Who*, which is positioned as ‘ontogeny’, also allows the colouring in of an ‘outline’. In one move, phylogeny is ‘outline’, something already present, with ‘ontogeny’ as an absence that must be filled, whilst, in another, ‘phylogeny’ is the absent subject that must be ‘retrieved’ through a study of a present ontogeny.³⁴ At any given stage of the argument, the presence of each term is dependent on the absence of the other, limiting the possibility of a full recovery. As such, Boyd’s argument suffers the disappointment of nostalgia, the impossibility of fulfilling its fantasy of retrieval.

Within this introductory quotation, then, a failure can be read through the demands of equivalence. Terms are collapsed in a way that fails to overcome their constitutive difference. Most obviously, perhaps, the narrative of retrieval offered here requires ontogeny to be other than phylogeny whilst modelling it precisely. This impacts on the subsequent appeals Boyd makes to ‘precursors’ of human art in animal behaviour and ‘narrative’ in human social interaction.³⁵ Indeed, this move can be read even within this quotation. *Horton Hears a Who* is read as filling an absence, or, rather, ‘recapitulating’ an absence, and this is because the absence of language is actually the presence of something else; as with Miall and/ or

Dissayanake, language is understood as a continuation of a pre-linguistic structure. For Boyd, Dr. Seuss ‘draws on [...] long traditions of printed storytelling, of refining economy, sequence and pace, but at the same time he returns to the origins of stories’.³⁶ These origins, it is claimed, not only pre-date printing, but language itself. Again, the nostalgic move can be seen in Boyd’s argument as precisely the ‘return’ of these elements to a reading of text. For Boyd, the encounter with *Horton Hears a Who* results in the past being there before us, and loss overcome, in the certainty of an unchanging and present sense. It is to one example of this nostalgic narrative of return that we turn now.

Play

Boyd’s evolutionary account is set against the kind of historical reading he claims to be the standard textual approach, which he names ‘Cultural Critique’. This is understood to involve a symbolic or allegorical reading, in which the text is constructed as having a stable, one-to-one relationship with a historical and biographical situation. Thus the standard reading of *Horton Hears a Who* is, for Boyd, one that claims the text reflects Dr. Seuss’s personal experience of post-War Japan, and his investment in the promotion of democracy there. When Boyd attacks readings that are problematic because focused on the ‘limited and suspect perspectives’ of a particular culture, these are distant objects of study.³⁷ There is no possibility of an ideological reading, only a reading of a skewed ideology. The ‘choice’ on offer is one between the objective study of either a limited culture, or that which transcends the particular. It is Boyd’s investment in such transcendence that leads him to the question of children’s play.

It is suggested that *Horton Hears a Who* has a ‘universal’ appeal because Dr. Seuss’s succeeds in ‘feeding’ cognitive needs shared by all humans. In addition to a ‘craving’ to understand the intentions of others, stories are part of a ‘need’ on the part of adults ‘to coordinate activity and attention’ in children, that ‘develops into all kinds of rhythmic cross-

modal interplay between elders and infants, into bouncing and clapping and babbling and singing, into peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake'.³⁸ It is this play activity that *Horton Hears a Who* enacts; Dr. Seuss 'engages children so well because he appeals to their pleasure in play and their early developing capacities for shared attention'.³⁹ In this formulation there is no possibility of doubt, yet, equally, there is no corroborating evidence. It is taken as a given that all 'children' are, indeed, engaged by this particular text. Moreover, all 'children' are understood to have their own pleasure in play. This pleasure exists prior to Dr. Seuss's engagement with it. This appeal to the separate nature of the pleasure of children can also be read in the notion that 'children know that these games are for their pleasure'.⁴⁰ Again, there is no evidence for this, and no attempt to qualify what 'children' are here; questions of age, culture, or gender signify nothing. Neither can there be any notion that this pleasure might be bound up in adult desire; the child knows the separation of its pleasure, and thus knows the intentions of the adult and the nature of its pleasures. The certainty of the child's knowledge, and its separation from external, adult investment, can also be read in the notion that Dr. Seuss's texts amounts to 'a parcel of pleasure, a gift of attention'.⁴¹ This constructs *Horton Hears a Who* as an object, a static item of exchange. The parcel exists in its certain state prior to reading, and the child does nothing to it. Within this process, it might be that the child receives its own, established pleasure as a parcel sent by another. If this is the case, the independence of that pleasure must be under question. Alternatively, the 'parcel of pleasure' might be something other than the child's pleasure, one separate from its experience. Already, there is a conflicting account of the child and its reading; it must be kept separate from the adult, yet knows absolutely the intentions of that adult. The text it receives must be a hard-impacted identity, as an appeal to reading or interpretation will problematise the notion of the text's universal meaning and intent, yet part of this already-resolved parcel is the pleasure the child must be understood to have prior to the adult's gift.

What may be taken as a construction of reading as a stabilised interaction becomes increasingly problematic as Boyd's argument develops:

[Dr. Seuss] feeds children's consciousness of and delight in the fact that it [*Horton Hears a Who*] is just a story, that it cavorts away from the real, and that they can scamper after in imagination wherever the tale heads. He captures children's attention through a spirit of shared play, a kind of controlled communal surprise.⁴²

The 'spirit' of 'play' is read through a notion that the text is 'just a story', and children are conscious of, and delighted by this. Again, there is no evidence for this being a universal response of all children to this text. Within this formulation, every child responds in the same way, meaning that the response of any given child can be known before their encounter with the text. Their response that it is 'just a story' is a correct response, as this is a 'fact', but one verified only by its being a repetition of what has been claimed to be the children's initial response. If there is an attempt to situate the text, and play, as a move 'away from the real', it is one that is nevertheless simultaneously dependent on an appeal to the real. The appeal to that which is '*just a story*' (our italics) limits signification, producing, again, a certain object of knowledge. Moreover, the notion of 'cavort[ing] away from the real' situates text, in the first instance, with the real, and as the children cavort after the text as it moves away from the real, they also begin in its position. Boyd's argument, then, constructs the narrative of play as establishing both the primacy of the real and the certainty of the child's knowledge of it. The idea of the child 'scampering after' the tale may be read as developing the limited capacity for intervention and invention this can be understood as offering the child. The child cannot change the course of play, only follow an already established path, never reaching the originating tale. Its reading is not concerned with meaning so much as a joyful, bodily movement. In this, the child does not have to dwell on destination, or anything other than the physicality of following the tale. All that is in consciousness is the 'true' thought that this is

‘just a story’, that the child is safe, and is so because it knows so well the intentions of the other. Yet, as this is only a fact of ‘imagination’, the child is doubly protected; there is no chance of it encountering anything beyond itself, certainly no hope of it accessing the body of the tale. Finally, the limited position granted the child may also be read in the notion that play is a matter of it being ‘captured’. The ‘communal’ activity on offer is, then, of a limited kind. Rather than a matter of a negotiation of meaning, for example, it is a holding of the child, a pathway accurately followed, a consensus as to fact.⁴³ Moreover, just as the narration of the ‘children’s classic’ problematised the notion of the child’s independence and agency, so here the child’s action is constructed in terms of its narration of another; its ‘scampering away’, for example.

There is also a move to suggest that the child is captured by specific aspects of prosody:

In traditional verse around the world, the need to focus and refocus attention has led to the use of a rhythm and a line length of about three seconds, in instinctive reflection of the fact that three seconds is the span of the human auditory present. But Dr. Seuss returns through this adult norm to the element of childhood play behind it. He selects a four-foot dactylic rhythm that unlike the iambic stands out from natural English intonations [...] He chooses couplet rhymes to demarcate the lines in often amusingly obtrusive fashion, often with the aid of nonsense words patently and obviously for the sake of the rhyme [...] His language, in other words, is a verbal equivalent of the play-face, the gambolling gait, the rhythmic romp.⁴⁴

A narrative of ‘return’ is offered, where breaking with the ‘natural English intonations’ within the text allows access to the ‘element of childhood play’ behind the ‘norm’ of adult language. This break allows access to the non-linguistic conditions of all language, and this, it would seem, is what allows this language to be the ‘equivalent of the play-face’. A

questioning of this account might begin with the suggestion that this text has a universal appeal to children because it engages a condition of play enjoyed by all children, and necessary to all narrative, and that this can be read in the ‘a four foot dactylic rhythm’.

Horton Hears a Who is, in point of fact, written in anapaestic tetrameter, not dactyls. More important, perhaps, is the suggestion that this metre is universally accepted as playful when this play is dependent on English intonation being understood as a norm.⁴⁵ This returns to the problem of ‘cavort[ing] away from the real’, as analysed above; there is a claim to consensus about what the norm is. Yet, even within this account, it is unclear what constitutes a norm. Take, for example, the notion of the equivalency of ‘the play face’. This is not the normal face; it stands out, just as the metre stands out from normal language. It is a performance, because it marks a difference from that which has been established. Yet normal language, within this formulation, also partakes of performance, as it has ‘behind it’ an element of childhood play. The play-face is an origin *and* a deviation. Either way, its ‘equivalence’ to language allows the latter to be understood once again as action, physical, present and unchanging. As such, Boyd, in his construction of the mutually understood, can be seen also not to engage with the same paradoxes we read in the work of Miall and Dissanayake.

Agency and Intention

In this section we will address a further, related claim about the nature of the pre-linguistic origins of language, and how this impacts upon a reading of *Horton Hears a Who*. It is Boyd’s contention that ‘for its expression, narrative usually needs a verbal and often a visual medium. But in its core elements, character, plot, perspective, it draws on aspects of life that predate verbal and visual art.’⁴⁶ There are, then, ‘core elements’ to a narrative. These are obvious, it would seem, and do not require reading to identify them. They are separable from the ‘medium’ of the narrative. In drawing on ‘aspects of life’ to form its core, the narrative is rooted in a ‘real’, one that, moreover, predates representation. For Boyd, the first of these

‘aspects of life’ is a universal ‘Theory of Mind’, originally gained in the Pleistocene, and one that children to this day acquire before any cultural or linguistic coding.⁴⁷ Even before the emergence of language, in terms of both ontogeny and phylogeny, this has granted us a ‘craving’ for understanding the intentions of others. Narrative fiction allows us to ‘keep track of others’ without the concerns about absolute fidelity, and the possibility of boredom, that can disrupt our enjoyment of gossip.⁴⁸

The child’s investment in intention joins its socially constructive pleasure in play as occupying a position behind and before narrative. As Kramnick argues, for all its declared commitment to the specifics of metre and rhyme, ‘the focus on motive, “reproductive success,” and adaptation pushes Darwinian criticism towards the thematic and allegorical and away from form or the counterintuitive or simply the surprising’.⁴⁹ Here, then, is another expression of the nostalgia we read in Boyd’s text; it is resistant to the disruptive return of the future, to the unexpected and the transforming.⁵⁰ The result is a reading of *Horton Hears a Who* that, as argued above, is every bit as symbolic as that offered within ‘Cultural Critique’; the text as the missing ‘potboiler’ from the Pleistocene.

There is a further aspect to the appeal to intention.⁵¹ Because intentions are here claimed to be known, and we are claimed to be so predisposed to understanding them, and they, and our knowledge of them, are claimed to be non-linguistic, they do not have to be interpreted. We can, therefore, according to this position, know exactly what the intentions of an author are. It follows that it is known that Dr. Seuss was not as concerned with Japanese politics as with keeping the attention of his child audience. Because the intentions of the author are assumed to be clear, their intentions towards the child must be similarly clear, and because the child is defined as a human, with the gift of correctly ascertaining intention, the child also must know precisely what these intentions are. Individual subjects are known

absolutely, then, as are the narratives that pass between them, bringing representations of intentions. Boyd sums up his argument with the claim that

[...] an evolutionary model of fiction [...] should focus on ways storytellers, as active individual strategists, maximize the attention of their audience by appealing to features that have evolved to be of interest to all human minds, to our shared understandings of events, our shared predispositions to be interested in and engaged by what others do and our sheer readiness to share attention.⁵²

Creativity is a matter of strategy, a rational decision to engage that which already exists.⁵³

Within this model, the individual is the natural unit of the human. The author, as individual, exercises choice free from any supplementary structure of culture or language. Indeed, ‘Evolution sees individuals as problem-solvers coping with their situation as they assess it’; evolution itself has a vision and an agency, and it looks at individuals, and sees them in a certain way.⁵⁴ Any threat to stable, centralised meaning that might stem from such a construction is met through the appeal to a ‘shared’ community of understanding. Individuals enjoy their condition in the same way, and the author is thus free to meet their universal need for attention by addressing the readers’ universal and unchanging need for specific cognitive stimulation. What it requires according to this argument, and what the author grants it, is something older than language. Because ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’, the child has a special relationship to that which is ‘behind’ language, and the author is claimed to bring this to the fore of the narrative, making it part of the representation, and making the representation equivalent to the non-linguistic. The child here shares with the adult only in as much as they follow them, are captured by them, and receive the objects they are given. The author’s strategy is not only guaranteed success with children, however, as because ‘he makes false belief epistemologically and ethically urgent [...] the child in us wants to cry out to the animals: “But can’t you SEE? There ARE Whos there!”’⁵⁵ This, then, is the ‘compact’:

an intended, inevitable reaction.⁵⁶ It would seem that, for Boyd, just as the adult norms of language allow a nostalgic return to a child play that is always before and behind it, concealed and unchanged, so there is a recoverable child in ‘us’ adults. Within this development narrative, the original identity is never lost, only produced as a difference, and spatially separated. The nostalgic turn produces our childhood as an equivalent, as it were, to the Pleistocene in relation to modernity, or intention in relation to narrative. It is, in the formulation offered by Caselli, ‘the ineffable romantic joy of experiencing something one thought ineffably lost’.

In the last quotation from Boyd, however, something has changed. The child in us ‘wants’ to cry out, but cannot. Its intentions are thoroughly known, but it cannot act on them. The project of recovery, return and persistence results in an object silenced, ineffectual, and enclosed. This is, perhaps, to be expected of a text committed to the narration of a shared experience with the other, for, it can be concluded, this nostalgia for -- and *as* -- being able not just absolutely to know, but even to be the ‘other’, not for the first time relies on a belief that ‘[l]ike affect, childhood seduces us into thinking we may do without perspective’.⁵⁷ We have analysed here, however, that instead ‘we were holding [a perspective] all along: [...] childhood] is all about tracking and appropriating an experience of history that can only be a history of experience.’⁵⁸

¹ Patricia Cohen, 'Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know', *New York Times*, March 31st 2010, accessed online at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/01/books/01lit.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

on 5th April 2012.

² 'Evolutionary psychology' sometimes includes or draws on 'cognitive science' and/ or 'neuroscience'. In this article we will be focussing on the claims made for each of these fields within specific arguments rather than offering generalised definitions of any of these areas.

³ It is not within the remit of this article to debate exactly from what time this interest did originate, as this origin can – and has – been located at many different points, ranging from nineteenth-century ideas of heredity and phrenology, to Charles Darwin's writings in and of themselves, to developments in evolutionary psychology of which Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose wrote in 2000 that they had 'grown dramatically' '[o]ver the last ten years' (Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose, 'Introduction' to Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose (eds), *Alas Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 1-14, p. 1), to Jonathan Kramnick's observation that the '[a]cademic year 2008–2009 was something of a watershed moment for literary Darwinism, marked by the twin publication of Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York, 2009) [...] and Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009).' (Jonathan Kramnick, 'Against Literary Darwinism', *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2011, 315-47, 315).

⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Blank State* (London/New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 417.

⁵ This *New York Times* article is mentioned as a 'sign of the times' in this sense by Jonathan Kramnick in his interview on 29th February 2012 for the Blog site 'New Apps: Arts, Politics, Philosophy, Science', see at: <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/02/new-apps-interview-jonathan-kramnick.html> accessed on 5th April 2012.

⁶ Tom Panelas, 'Review of Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*', *American Journal of Sociology*, 87:6 (May, 1982), 1425-1427, 1426-7.

⁷ An indication of the growing interest in these areas specifically in relation to children's literature may be gleaned from the forthcoming, new series (from 2012) 'Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition', edited by Nina Christensen, Elina Druker, Bettina Kümmel-Meibauer and Maria Nikolajeva and published by John Benjamins in Amsterdam.

⁸ Kramnick. 'Against Literary Darwinism', 316-17.

⁹ David S. Miall and Ellen Dissanayake, 'The Poetics of Babytalk', *Human Nature*, 14:4, 2003, 337-64, 340, 338.

¹⁰ Miall and Dissanayake, 'The Poetics of Babytalk', 337.

¹¹ Olga Solomon, 'Rethinking Babytalk', in: eds Allesandro Duranti, Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin, *The Handbook of Language Socialization*, series Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 121-50, p. 121.

¹² Joseph Carroll and other Literary Darwinists repeatedly make claims of this kind. Just one small example is when Carroll reflects on how 'I had already been working for a couple of years at reconstructing literary theory from the ground up-trying to rescue it from the postmodernists' in 'What is Literary Darwinism? An Interview with Joseph Carroll', *Neuronarrative*, February 27th 2009, accessed on 13th April 2012 at:

<http://neuronarrative.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/what-is-literary-darwinism-an-interview-with-joseph-carroll/>

¹³ Ellen Dissanayake, 'Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative', *Poetics Today*, 32:1, Spring 2011, 55-79.

¹⁴ See, for a further elaboration of this argument, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, 'Motherhood and Evolutionary Psychology or: The Triumph of Capitalism', forthcoming.

¹⁵ Daniela Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory: Childhood, Affect, Critical Thought', *Feminist Theory*, 11:3, 2010, 241-54, 243-4 (italics in original).

¹⁶ Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', 244.

¹⁷ Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', 241.

¹⁸ Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', 247, referring to Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982).

¹⁹ Miall and Dissanayake, 'The Poetics of Babytalk', 344.

²⁰ Brian Boyd, 'The Origin of Stories: *Horton Hears a Who*', *Philosophy and Literature*, 25: 2, October 2001, 197-214 (italics in original)

²¹ Miall and Dissanayake, 'The Poetics of Babytalk', 343.

²² Miall and Dissanayake, 'The Poetics of Babytalk', footnote 4, 357.

²³ It is not possible within the scope of these footnotes to reference entire fields of research, so I will necessarily have to limit myself here to giving some salient examples. See for the issues around 'babytalk' for instance: Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin, 'Language Acquisition and Socialization. Three Developmental Stories and their Implications' in: eds Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine, *In Culture Theory. Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 276-320; Solomon, 'Rethinking Babytalk' op. cit.; for issues around the oral and the written, *Journal of American Folklore*, Special Issue: The European Fairy-Tale Tradition between Orality and Literacy, Special Issue Editor: Dan Ben-Amos, 123: 490, Fall 2010; for childhood studies, Jens Qvortrup, *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994); Jens Qvortrup (ed.), *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture* (Hounds mills: Palgrave, 2005); Chris Jenks (ed.), *The Sociology of Childhood: Essential Readings* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1982); Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (series: Key Ideas, series ed. Peter Hamilton) (London: Routledge, 1996); Allison James and Alan Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: The Falmer Press, 1990, second edition 1997); Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985, republished with a new preface by Princeton University Press, 1994); for critiques of the brain as modular: Annette Karmiloff-Smith, 'Why Babies' Brains Are Not Swiss Army Knives' in: eds Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose, *Alas Poor Darwin. Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 144-57; Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself. Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (London: Penguin, 2007); for a critique of genes as determinate and 'innate': Nessa Carey, *The Epigenetics Revolution. How Modern Biology is Rewriting Our Understanding of Genetics, Disease and Inheritance* (London: Icon Books, 2012); for debates about what constitutes 'literary' language or 'poetics', Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1986); Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, revised edition 1975, orig. pub. 1956); Colin MacCabe, 'Language, Linguistics and the Study of Literature' in his *Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 113-31.

²⁴ Dissanayake, 'Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative', 56.

²⁵ See for one example of the ongoing debates playing out around this paradox: *Journal of American Folklore*, Special Issue: The European Fairy-Tale Tradition between Orality and Literacy.

²⁶ Dissanayake, ‘Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative’, 55 (our italics).

²⁷ Dissanayake, ‘Prelinguistic and Preliterate Substrates of Poetic Narrative’, 69.

Dissanayake’s claim of the relative neglect of this field contrasts notably with that by one of the founders of the field of orality studies, Erik Havelock, when he writes that ‘readers of Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (1982) who consult the extensive bibliography of that work will notice the meager list of relevant publications in this field preceding 1962 and the flood that then sets in in the years following.’ Erik Havelock, ‘The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind’ in eds David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, *Literacy and Orality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 11-27, p. 12.

²⁸ Barbara Wall, *The Narrator’s Voice. The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction* (Hounds-mills: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 2-3.

²⁹ Wall, *The Narrator’s Voice*, p. 207.

³⁰ Roderick McGillis, *The Nimble Reader. Literary Theory and Children’s Literature* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 206.

³¹ Jonathan Kramnick, ‘Against Literary Darwinism’ and ‘Literary Studies in Science: A Reply to my Critics’, *Critical Inquiry*, 38 (Winter 2012), 431 – 460.

³² Boyd, 197.

³³ There have been attempts to read Darwin as embracing recapitulation theory, see Robert J. Richards, *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin’s Theory* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) and ‘Ideology and the History of Science’, *Biology and Philosophy*, 8 (1993), 103–8, but these remain controversial, see Peter J. Bowler, *Life’s Splendid Drama: Evolutionary Biology and the Reconstruction of Life* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also B. K. Hall, ‘Ontogeny Does Not Recapitulate Phylogeny, It Creates Phylogeny’, *Evolution and Development*, 13:4 (2011), 401–4. Not only does Boyd fail to engage with this debate, and the question of recapitulation within Darwin’s work, he seems to regard it as an accepted fact within contemporary science.

³⁴ Problematically, ‘outline’ and ‘colour’ are themselves implicated in the evolutionary narrative. It is suggested that what is attractive in art is precisely the outline, whilst red, black and white and one primary colour are attractive to children, because the first three were utilised by early humans. See Boyd, 204.

³⁵ See Boyd, 198 and 199-200: We understand the notion of the animal precursor to art to be particularly problematic in its formulation: ‘Corvids [...] enjoy a kind of aerial acrobatics that Lorenz unashamedly labels art’. If there is an ‘enjoyment’ of ‘acrobatics’, then, of course, there is little shame in labelling this ‘art’. And if Dolphins are understood to engage in ‘a kind of rhythmic gymnastics in which they deploy air bubbles from their blowholes like gymnast’s ribbons or hoops’, then there is no reason for this to be understood as anything but an artistic precursor (Boyd, 199).

³⁶ Ibid., 203.

³⁷ Ibid., 197.

³⁸ Ibid., 203.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 204.

⁴² Ibid. Boyd refers to 'Dr. Seuss', 'Theodor Seuss Geisel' and 'Ted Geisel'. Although, at one stage Ted Geisel is used as a personal, rather than authorial name, we do not read this distinction to be sustained, so have chosen to stay with Dr. Seuss.

⁴³ The 'spirit' of play is also worth considering. We read the spirit as what cannot be contested, as that which is not written. It is, according to the narrator, simply known by all involved in 'play'. For an example of a comparable appeal see, for example, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein's analysis of the Lutheran 'Spirit of God' in Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon: 1994), pp. 56-65.

⁴⁴ Boyd, 204.

⁴⁵ This also assumes book-reading itself as a universal. For problems with this, see, for example, Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (Second Edition, (London and New York: Routledge: 2008), p. 192.

⁴⁶ Boyd, 205.

⁴⁷ See, for one of many examples, Boyd, 200.

⁴⁸ Boyd, 201.

⁴⁹ Kramnick, 'Literary Studies in Science: A Reply to my Critics', 434.

⁵⁰ Here we are thinking specifically of the reading of the future in Jacques Derrida (trans. Peggy Kamuf) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵¹ There are a number of further issues here, in point of fact, although it is beyond the scope of this article to engage with them all. First amongst these, perhaps, are the notions of predisposition and precursors. Again, this is an area that Kramnick analyses at length. He argues, for example, that his

original essay looked more at the claim that a disposition to attend to or create stories or fictions or in looser formulations, imply literature, is itself an adaptation. My argument was that literary Darwinism had a difficult time specifying what about this disposition conferred a reproductive advantage long ago. The trouble was a kind of limit in principle. Literary forms exhibit design of all kinds, of course, but only the weakest analogy would maintain that such design has the features of a trait selected for survival. We have no sense if any feature of literary design responded to any selection pressure, in the Pleistocene or after. As evidence for this, I pointed to the scattering of arguments for adaptive function provided by evolutionary inclined critics themselves. No one function appears to agree with the other, and all could be performed by something else. (Kramnick, 'Literary Studies in Science: A Reply to my Critics', 445).

⁵² Boyd, 201.

⁵³ If the evolutionary imperative is sometimes hidden, if our action are sometimes 'compulsive', (Boyd, 199), and certain stimuli can 'grab us instantaneously, like a reflex', (Boyd, 200), it is also that which works on the surface of the mind, a matter of strategy, that which, indeed, is known even as compulsion.

⁵⁴ Boyd, 203.

⁵⁵ Boyd, 207.

⁵⁶ The ethical turn is read in detail by Kramnick: 'in place of [...] explanation literary Darwinism often shifts register to the thematic or moral, whether that is reading for content that would comport with its view of human nature or defining the function of literary fictions as virtuous or ennobling', ('Literary Studies in Science: A Reply to my Critics', 436).

⁵⁷ Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', 251.

⁵⁸ Caselli, 'Kindergarten Theory', 251.