All That David Copperfield Kind of Crap

Marah Gubar

I often think about how funny it is that I was drawn to the field of Childhood Studies given that I disliked being a child. No great tragedies marred my youth; I simply did not enjoy the basic condition of being powerless over the circumstances of my own existence. And I got bullied in school. The two modes of escape I found then continue to fascinate me to this day: reading and re-reading children's books and performing in children's plays.

I was (and still am) an obsessive re-reader. I read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* until it literally fell to pieces in my hands, and sought out its sequels as well. Series books, which combined the comfort of familiarity with a dash of difference, were my absolute favorites: Maud Hart Lovelace's "Betsy-Tacy" books, L. Frank Baum's "Oz" books, Noel Streatfeild's "Shoes" books, L. M. Montgomery's "Anne" and "Emily" books. In fact, my first academic publication, submitted while I was in graduate school, was an essay on the serial gratifications and frustrations of the *Anne of Green Gables* books.

But I certainly didn't set out to become a children's literature critic. Having had the luck to be part of a children's theatre company called "Acting Up," I wanted to be a musical theatre performer. Although I didn't know it at the time, the peak of my theatrical career came when I was about twelve: I played Rosie in *Really Rosie*, a musical based on some of Maurice Sendak's books featuring music by Carole King. Inspired by such experiences, I went to the University of Michigan and double-majored in musical theatre and English. I loved it, but there were lots of tough moments when cast lists went up and I wasn't on them. By the time I was a senior, I think I knew acting wasn't going to work out for me. But I decided to move to Chicago and give it a try because I had gotten work there as a singing waitress on a cruise ship that went around and around in circles on Lake Michigan.

It quickly became clear to me that I did not have the drive and talent—not to mention the waitressing skills—to continue pursuing a career as an actor. I decided to apply to graduate school in order to study and write about drama, but only to a few very fancy institutions that would pay my way so that I wouldn't have to go into debt. I knew the job market was tight in academia. But I figured that if I got into a top-tier institution, then it was meant to be; if not, I would do something else. (I really wanted to write for children's television, but I wasn't sure how to break into that business. I wished I had done internships whilst in college.)

To my delight, I got into Princeton University's English PhD program. Though I had planned to specialize in drama, the seminars offered on that subject did not excite me. But two classes on Victorian literature did, especially U. C. Knoepflmacher's course on the Victorian child. In that class, we read both children's literature and literature about childhood, but I decided to write about Juliana Horatia Ewing's children's story "The

Brownies"—partly because it fascinated me, but also because there had been so little written about it by previous scholars. Whereas texts by Charles Dickens and George Eliot had inspired stacks and stacks of scholarly articles and books, this story—even though the organizers of the girls' scouting movement used it as the basis for their "Brownies" group—had been almost entirely ignored by academics.

It was inspiring and enabling to write about such a neglected text. I still feel that thrill regularly in researching and writing about children's literature, and I always try to assign an important but under-studied text such as "The Brownies" in all my graduate courses, so that my students can experience that feeling as well. A much-revised version of my essay on "The Brownies" became an article that I used as my writing sample when I went on the job market several years later; working on Ewing had inspired me to write a whole dissertation on Victorian children's literature.

I found the dissertation-writing process hard, as many people do. I spent too long obsessing over the prospectus—since one never really knows what direction a big project will go in until it is written, it's silly to get stuck at this preliminary point. This slow start was not entirely my fault: my dissertation prospectus was flunked by an unsympathetic reader, so I was forced to re-write it. I *think* her objection was that the project was too brash and ambitious—but I really don't remember because (to my discredit) I was so defensive that I had a hard time listening to criticism. Now, writing from a much more secure position, I am incredibly grateful to get detailed feedback of any kind on my work. Then, I was so anxious that I could barely take in anything but praise. I must have been a truly frustrating advisee.

My dissertation committee strongly discouraged me from writing only about children's literature; they kept pressing me to add a chapter or two on Dickens or Henry James. They were worried that if my thesis focused solely on children's literature, I would not be considered for Victorianist jobs. And it turned out that they were right: the only positions I was offered were ones in children's literature. I did get one interview for a Victorianist position, but it was at a school that had listed "Children's Literature" as a desired secondary specialization in their job ad. So even though I considered myself a Victorianist, doing a whole dissertation on children's texts meant that I didn't come across that way to hiring committees—something to think about, considering that very few children's literature jobs appear on the MLA Job List each year. I was very lucky that some really good institutions were hiring in children's literature the year that I went on the market. This is not always the case.

Because of the scarcity of children's literature jobs, I give the same advice to graduate students interested in children's literature that my committee gave to me: maximize your chances for success on the job market by making sure that you are a credible candidate in at least two fields: children's literature plus something else (e.g. Eighteenth-Century Studies, American Studies, Performance Studies). There are different ways to do this besides adding dissertation chapters on non-children's writers: you can publish an article or give several conference talks on mainstream authors who wrote for adults, or frame

your dissertation as an intervention into scholarly conversations going on within *and* beyond the realm of children's literature studies.

So, perhaps the common condition of writing a dissertation about children's literature under the direction of advisers who are not experts in that field can be a benefit rather than a drawback, since they can help you make your project appealing and relevant to a wide range of scholars. The difficulty of entering into the field of children's literature without the guidance of a mentor from your own institution is also mitigated by the fact that the community of children's literature scholars is an unusually friendly and welcoming one, as you will see if you attend the annual conference held by the Children's Literature Association. Hope to see you there!

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