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Metafiction for Beginners: Allan Ahlberg's *Ten in a Bed*

Many children and even some adults talk about fictional characters as if they were real persons. However, it is generally agreed that mature readers, though engaged by the story, nevertheless read with a more reflective and detached awareness of how the processes of fiction are operating as they read. They are simultaneously caught up in the story and standing back from it, watching it work.

This awareness has been described in many different ways. D. W. Harding called it the role of the onlooker: "a non-participant relation which yet includes an active evaluative attitude." James Britton, following him closely, referred to the spectator role and said, "Freedom from a participant's responsibilities allows a spectator to evaluate more broadly, to savour feelings, and to contemplate *forms*—the formal arrangement of feelings, of events and . . . of ideas, and the forms of the language, spoken or written, in which the whole is expressed."

D. W. Harding, "Psychological Processes in the Reading of Fiction," p. 59

James Britton, *Language and Learning*, p. 121

Arthur Applebee took a different approach and looked at how children's ability to process story develops in the early teens to a level where the reader is capable of "*analysis* of the structure of the work or the motives of the characters; understanding through analogy"; and finally, in the late teens, to an ability to draw generalizations from the work. Jack Thomson, taking a similar developmental view, created a model with six stages. The last three are "reflecting on the significance of events (theme) and behaviour (distanced evaluation of characters); reviewing the whole work as the author's creation; consciously considered relationship with the author, rec-

Arthur N. Applebee, *The Child's Concept of Story*, p. 124

Jack Thomson, *Understanding Teenagers' Reading*, p. 360

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ognition of textual ideology, and understanding of self (identity theme) and of one's own reading processes."

Thomas G. Devine, *Teaching Reading Comprehension: From Theory to Practice,* p. 263

Others are tackling the question of "understanding . . . one's own reading processes" under a different label: metacognition. "Researchers in recent years have begun to study the relation of metacognition to reading comprehension." Teachers have been urged to discuss with their students just how the text is working, to call students' attention to the text and the ways in which it is organized: "Texts are structured by writers. Readers who are aware of ways texts are structured tend to be in a better position to understand what writers are doing."

The common theme in all these different approaches to how readers read fiction is the issue of some sort of distance between reader and story. The reader is engaged by the story but is also aware of how it is working with a greater or lesser degree of explicitness. Such an awareness seems to be seen by all these writers as essential to full adult reading, however they choose to express it.

Without necessarily subscribing to every detail of the developmental models of Applebee and Thomson, it is evident that they offer helpful pointers to the way in which children's reading ability alters as they grow up. If we accept that developing some element of detachment is an essential part of reading growth, it might be helpful to consider how this advance can be fostered.

L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society,* p. 86

Here, as in so many other areas, Vygotsky's insight into the awkwardly named zone of proximal development has much to offer. This zone "is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. . . . The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state."

Reading differs from some of the other areas discussed by Vygotsky in one way at least. In many areas of intellectual growth, the helpful adult under scrutiny is a parent or a teacher or an outside researcher. With reading, there is another adult to be considered in this process: the author.

Margaret Meek, *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*

This is hardly a new suggestion. Margaret Meek sums it up in the title of her monograph: *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn.* Peter Hunt has pursued this line of approach, taking just one paragraph from Janni Howker's *Isaac Campion* and examining it inten-

Peter Hunt, "What Do We Lose When We Lose Allusion? Experience and Understanding Stories," pp. 218–219

sively to see how it uses codes and conventions to encourage the reader to generate and explore expectations. "Understanding a text requires two skills," he says: "understanding what the language signifies—what it refers to—and understanding the rules of the game—how the text works." Allusions to how texts work, he says, "are the most important and neglected of literacy features."

Some writers for children are particularly good at increasing metacognitive awareness of how the rules are working, through the construction and texture of their own prose. How does the second helping adult—the teacher—make best use of these writers without reducing them to utilitarian classroom fodder? Is there a case for tackling their books on a level of explicit instruction, or does their alchemy work best on readers without interference?

These are not new questions and there are no easy answers. However, it is possible that reading a metafictional text—a fiction about making fiction—might foster awareness of how a story works without intrusive didacticism. It might be interesting and useful to look at a book for children which exemplifies this approach and to consider how it could affect the developing reader.

Allan Ahlberg, *Ten in a Bed*

Allan Ahlberg, *The Jolly Postman*

Allan Ahlberg, *Each Peach Pear Plum*

Connoisseurs of children's literature will not be surprised to learn that such a children's book has been written by Allan Ahlberg, that master of intertextuality and metafiction. In fact, however, *Ten in a Bed* has received nothing like the attention given to other related books of his such as *The Jolly Postman* and *Each Peach Pear Plum,* which both won major awards. *Ten in a Bed* was published in 1983 by Granada Publishing but was actually out of print for much of the late 1980s; and it only reappeared, published now by Viking Kestrel and with new illustrations, in 1989. In North America it seems to have made very little impact, on publication or later.

Yet *Ten in a Bed* has so many useful qualities, even at the lowest common denominator of teacher pragmatism, that it deserves much wider circulation. It is funny. It is easily divided into its separate chapters for reading aloud. There are even two excellent tape recordings of the entire book read with great verve by Carole Boyd (produced by Tellastory).

On top of all these utilitarian classroom virtues, *Ten in a Bed* is a story about making stories, and that is a category for learning readers which we too often undervalue.

Between the ages, say, of eight and eighteen, readers learn a huge amount about the process of reading, but much of what we (and they) assume about what they are learning is either implicit or

expressed in very general terms. A book like *Ten in a Bed* offers one kind of window on readers' learning more about reading because it puts so many of the codes themselves on display. The way stories are put together is the nub of the whole joke of the book; and to read it at all, readers must deal with story making on a level simultaneously basic and sophisticated.

The plot is very simple. A little girl called Dinah Price, who in all other respects leads a life of utter normality, goes to bed night after night and finds her bed occupied by characters from fairy tales. These bears, witches, cats, giants, and so on refuse to leave until Dinah has told them a story. So, of course, she tells the bears the story of the three bears; tells the wicked witch a wonderful conglomerate story involving a witch, a cheeky boy who needs fattening up, and a charming prince; discusses with the cat different cat roles, ranging from the three little kittens to that summit of cat participation in fairy tales, Puss in Boots; and so forth. Unfortunately for Dinah's storytelling efforts, however, the characters persist in having a say in their own stories, and she has to struggle against all kinds of sabotage to bring each story to an acceptable conclusion. Once the story is told, the intruder climbs out of the window and down the drainpipe, and the normal evening regime of a little girl prevails once more.

For a developing reader who either hears these stories or reads them privately, this book offers a route into more complex reading with a number of handholds on the way. First of all, two aspects of the book are completely familiar. The frame story of Dinah Price is magnificently coherent. The geography of Dinah's neighborhood, the daily routines of Dinah's life, both at home and at school (which she has been attending for a couple of terms), the security of Dinah's family—all are made very clear and reassuring. In addition, the fairy tales are very well known, even to many beginning readers. The Ahlbergs of course have played many jokes on nursery rhymes and fairy tales and this is simply the most sustained.

The young readers, therefore, are given a secure frame structure and a set of characters about whom they may feel comfortably knowledgeable. In addition, Dinah herself makes an admirable companion in the wilderness of such crazy stories as ensue when heroes and heroines start fiddling with their own plots. Dinah is brave, clever, resourceful. She remembers successful strategies and tries them in different contexts; for example, having discovered that the three bears are made very uneasy by the mention of hunters, she tells the wicked witch next evening that her visiting uncle is a hunter—and succeeds in bringing a worried look to the witch's

eyes even though she pretends not to care. Dinah is a great improviser; she calls on all her previous experience of stories, read, told, or seen in pantomimes, for helpful corroborative detail.

There are eight chapters in this book, some of which include more fully developed stories than others. With some characters, such as Puss in Boots and a giant who never speaks aloud the name J.A.C.K., Dinah holds more of a debate about the stories and the actions of the characters. With others, like Sleeping Beauty and the wicked witch, Dinah sets out to manipulate them out of her bed with a full-blown story as her only weapon.

The wicked witch, for example, is the visitor on the second night, and Dinah who "knew a bit about witches" is not too sure of her ground to start with. She persuades the witch to leave after hearing a story, if the story is good enough; but the witch does not settle down like a good child and listen to what Dinah wants to tell her. It is difficult to pick a brief quotation out of the layers of different stories involved, but perhaps this sequence gives some idea of the way the interweaving works. Dinah is trying to tell the story of Esmerelda, the beautiful witch, who is fattening up a naughty boy kept in a bird cage in her kitchen:

Ten in a Bed

"Well, Esmerelda kept feeding the boy up, day after day, and he kept eating and drinking everything he was given and whistling through his teeth, and rattling his stick along the bars of the cage; but the funny thing was"—at this point Dinah had an idea for saving the boy—"the funny thing was, he never got any fatter."

The witch, however, was ready for her. "Yes, he did. He got fatter all the time: fatter and fatter!"

"All right, then, he got fatter. Fatter and fatter and fatter! So fat he couldn't whistle any more or rattle his stick along the bars of the cage."

"I should have took that stick off him," said the witch.

"So fat"—here Dinah had another idea—"so fat that Esmerelda couldn't get him out of the cage."

"Yes, she could," said the witch. "She smashed it open with an axe."

"It was made out of iron."

"Cut it with a hacksaw!" shouted the witch.

"She hadn't got one."

"Pulled it to pieces with her bare hands!" screamed the witch.

By this time the witch was sitting bolt upright in the bed. Her hat had fallen off. Her hair was sticking out like straw. "What's going on here? I'm offering a good story, and all I get is aggravation."

"You keep butting in, that's the trouble," said Dinah. "Whose story is it, anyway?"

"That's what I want to know!" The witch leant over the side of the bed. She picked up her hat, which was on the floor.

At that moment a voice called up in an angry whisper from the hall. "Dinah! You stop that noise and go to sleep, do you hear?" It

> was Dinah's mum. "You wake little Maurice up and there'll be trouble." Then there was the sound of a door closing and—after that—silence.
>
> Dinah looked at the wicked witch and the wicked witch looked at Dinah. Both had guilty expressions on their faces.

"Whose story is it anyway?" is a question taxing literary theory on many levels. Does the story belong to the author or to the reader or (as the witch would argue) to the characters? Who is doing what to whom? Ahlberg never belabors the answers, but he does make the question visible to readers as young as five.

Meek, *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, p. 10

Margaret Meek suggests that the implications of this question are crucial to the five-year-old in any case: "To learn to read a book, as distinct from simply recognizing the words on the page, a young reader has to become both the teller (picking up the author's viewpoint and voice) and the told (the recipient of the story, the interpreter). This symbolic interaction is learned early. It is rarely, if ever, taught, except in so far as an adult stands in for the author by giving the text a 'voice' when reading to the child." *Ten in a Bed* is not exactly teaching this principle, any more than all stories do, but it does make it accessible for observation.

That is not all that is made visible in this book. *Ten in a Bed* is to stories what the Pompidou Centre in Paris is to architecture: all the pipes and fixtures are displayed on the outside. A textbook of approaches to reading could be constructed around the conventions which Ahlberg plays with here.

The issue of narrator and narratee is a condition of the original joke. The narratee is also the hero or heroine of the story being told. Quite young children will know that this is not the usual arrangement of stories in books (though of course it may be a regular feature of stories *told* to children about events in their own lives). Ahlberg foregrounds the question of audience and similarly highlights the question of point of view. Dinah and her visitors, in fact, struggle to be the one with the power of the point of view.

Questions of genre and convention are also on the surface in this book. Prediction and expectation are confounded when the wicked witch marries the handsome prince, but how is it that we all know this is not supposed to happen? What makes it a joke? Children may not spontaneously put it in abstract terms to themselves, but they know very well what is going on.

Ahlberg even puts suspension of disbelief into the plot. Dinah is feeling quite out of her depth the night she is visited by a wolf. Uncle Jim is visiting and Dinah makes her usual reference to his

identity as a hunter, but the wolf takes this news very coolly and simply says, "I might eat him up as well." The wolf and Dinah, following the standard pattern, are negotiating their way through a story of Red Riding Hood when the wolf, "perhaps carried away by the part *he* was playing," gets ready to leap upon Dinah. Dinah shouts for help and Uncle Jim replies from the landing.

Ten in a Bed

> Quick as a flash, the wolf leapt from the bed and dived into the wardrobe. He was only just in time. For then the bedroom door opened and Uncle Jim stuck his head in. "Is everything all right?"
>
> "Well," said Dinah. "I have got a wolf in my wardrobe."
>
> "Ah!" said Uncle Jim. He looked across the darkening room to the wardrobe. Its door was shut. The wolf had closed it behind him. "Which one is it; *Red Riding Hood* or *Three Little Pigs?*"
>
> "*Red Riding Hood,*" said Dinah.
>
> "Ah!" said Uncle Jim. "So what would you like me to do—shoot him?"
>
> Dinah sat on her bed and thought for a minute. "I'm not sure."
>
> "Or I could run him over maybe—with my motor-bike."
>
> "It depends," Dinah raised her voice. "It depends—*how he behaves himself*!"
>
> "Ah!" said Uncle Jim. He advanced into the room. "Nice place you've got here." He took a yoyo from the toy-box, had a go with it and put it back. After that he whistled briefly and glanced out of the window. Then he said, "Well, I suppose you'll want to be getting to sleep now."
>
> Dinah did not reply. She was uncertain what to say. All the same she got into bed and allowed herself to be tucked in. Uncle Jim gave her a kiss on the top of her head. He smelled of petrol, she noticed, and had a pencil behind his ear.
>
> On his way out Uncle Jim said, "I'll leave the door open a little. If that wolf starts acting up again, just call." Then he was gone.
>
> Dinah Price lay in the bed—and waited. She could hear the birds twittering in the tree outside the window, and an ambulance siren a long way off. She could hear her own breathing, her own heart beating. She could hear—just faintly—the jangling of coat-hangers in the wardrobe.

The wolf is routed by Uncle Jim's coolness and departs, muttering to himself, "Run over by a motor-bike—that's a *new* version!" With almost every sentence Ahlberg is putting questions of fictionality on display. Perhaps the one point about reality and fiction left out of this quotation is that Dinah herself, with her breathing and her beating heart, is just as much an invention as all the heroes and heroines in her bed.

There are many parodies of fairy tales, but in this book Ahlberg goes one stage further. He is raising questions about what makes such stories work. How can teachers make best use of this kind of material?

Children aged about five onward have greatly enjoyed this book

and certainly appreciated the joke. Nevertheless it seems likely that the most useful time to consider raising the issues which Ahlberg so skillfully puts on display would come at a much later stage—maybe even not until secondary school. It would be good to think that the return of *Ten in a Bed* to the bookshop shelves means that many more young children can enjoy it in the uncomplicated way it invites. The role of such a book in the development of older readers is a very intriguing issue, and one about which we know too little. What does seem clear, however, is that a story so funny and so sophisticated will continue to appeal to readers who think themselves far too old for ordinary fairy tales; secondary teachers should not dismiss its potential out of hand, though it may need careful introduction.

Anyone's reading ability is created, at least in part, by the books which that person has read. *Ten in a Bed* is the sort of reading experience which can sharpen any reader's eye for how fiction works. This type of metafictional story offers teachers a different kind of reading lesson.

It is arguable that young readers can and should assimilate what this book has to offer without much adult intervention. Perhaps it is enough for teachers to be aware of what such a book can offer and to make it available to children of many ages for shared enjoyment. Certainly it is all too easy to picture ways of killing the goose that lays the golden egg, of overlaying the metafictional structure with such a weight of teaching apparatus that all pleasure is destroyed. Assuming we can avoid such a deadly extreme, however, teachers should give serious thought to how we can make best use of such an engaging ally.

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