Introduction

Clémentine Beauvais¹

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The articles in this special issue, 'Any Signs of Childness?', were adapted from papers given at a symposium of the same name, held at the University of York (UK) on May 5th, 2017, 20 years after the publication of Peter Hollindale's *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997). The idea for the symposium came from my then-recent appointment to that university, which had prompted several senior colleagues in the field of children's literature to ask me, "Have you seen Peter Hollindale yet? Does he ever come on campus?" Peter Hollindale, who worked at York for many years, had retired long before I arrived, but when I mentioned his name to my new colleagues, some of them remembered him fondly and informed me he was still living in the city. It was some time before I found a reliable email address with which to contact him, and by then I had a cunning plan to tempt him out of retirement and onto campus for one special day. It was the 20th year anniversary of the publication of *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*: a sign in itself that some celebration was needed.

The tutelary figure of Peter Hollindale felt like an invisible blessing, as I had always admired and used his work; conveniently, *Signs of Childness* in particular. Hollindale is better known, or at least more often cited (over twice as often, says Google Scholar), for *Ideology and the Children's Book* (1988), a highly quotable text which still provides a methodological and theoretical framework for investigations of ideology in children's literature. But his coinage and discussion of "childness" and the "childly" features of children's literature are more theoretically compelling,

Clémentine Beauvais is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education, University of York (UK). Her research interests revolve around children's literature theory, the philosophy and cultural sociology of childhood, and translation theory. She is the author of many articles and book chapters on topics such as politically committed children's literature, child giftedness in literature and culture, and Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy of childhood. Her monograph *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature* (John Benjamins, 2015), presents an existentialist reading of contemporary children's literature. She also recently co-edited *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017) with Maria Nikolajeva.

✉ Clémentine Beauvais
clementine.beauvais@york.ac.uk

¹ University of York, York, UK

touching on the kind of essential, frustratingly complex problems of children's literature that account for much of the scholarly fascination for that field of study.

Hollindale's crucial act in *Signs of Childness* was to reclaim, unapologetically, some of the mysterious qualities of the reading event of children's texts, and attempt to make those qualities available to theory. Under the compass rose of Jacqueline Rose (1984), we have been (rightly) cautious to avoid talking "romantically" about childhood reading; to eschew glamourised, nostalgic descriptions of our own childhood reading, or of the children around us. We have been made aware, as children's literature scholars (authors, teachers, mediators, etc.), that entertaining such visions contributes directly and indirectly to the territorialisation of childhood for the fantasies of more or less well-hidden adults (Nodelman, 2008), engaged in strengthening the normativity of adulthood (Nikolajeva, 2010). These hermeneutics of suspicion have been crucial to the maturity of children's literature criticism. They made theoretical naivety obsolete, and greatly dynamized scholarly debates; from then on, anyone attempting to talk about benevolent adults in children's literature, or about childhood reading as a source of pure wonder, or about children as powerful agents, had better develop some seriously solid arguments. Some of the most conceptually subtle branches of children's literature scholarship, such as Marah Gubar's emphasis on the ethics and aesthetics of kinship between adults and children (2013, 2016), emerged at least in part in reaction to that model.

Yet in 2011, in the midst of that energetic debate, Hollindale allowed himself to write the following, in *The Hidden Teacher*:

One January afternoon many years ago I was window-gazing in the shopping streets of Cheltenham. It was my teacher-training year... In the window of an art shop I saw a picture of a boy, lying on his bed, reading. He was dressed in pyjama bottoms, spread-eagled over the bed in an attitude of rapt and intense involvement in his book. At the time I knew nothing about "body language", but the artist had vividly caught the physicality of excited imaginative concentration. "*That*," I thought, "is what I want to produce. If being an English teacher is about anything worthwhile, it's about producing *that*." (Hollindale, 2011, p. 13)

There is no naivety in that extract; Hollindale knows perfectly well that this scopophilic description would make Roseans recoil in horror. It is the kind of writing that children's literature scholarship has long attempted to expel, tolerating it only, at best, as an object of study in itself, in the literary non-fiction of the likes of Francis Spufford (2003). Yet there is something undeniably compelling about this extract, and that is because it is simply true. Any children's literature scholar who is also a teacher, who takes part in events with children, who is an author, will know that there are moments, in a reading event—either reading out loud to children, reading with a child, or seeing a child read—when everything *clicks*; where an encounter takes place, gratifyingly exact, between child, book, and, more often than not, adult. It is, to a great extent, that *click* that Hollindale tries to elucidate in *Signs of Childness*, reclaiming for theory a phenomenon that we tend to assume can only ever be of the remit of art.

Rereading *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*

Being first an “exercise in definition” (Hollindale, 1997, p. 7), *Signs of Childness* reviews the then-not-huge corpus of definitions of children's literature, and pinpoints the necessity for a composite definition: one that takes into account not just the properties of a text, or a reader, or an author, or a reading event (including publishing and distribution), but everything at once. Hollindale's definition is as follows:

Children's literature is a body of texts with certain common features of imaginative interest, which is activated as children's literature by a reading event: that of being read by a child. A child is someone who believes on good grounds that his or her condition of childhood is not over yet. (p. 30)

Immediately after, he specifies:

This definition recognizes a doubleness we have to live by, namely that children's literature is characterized both by textual status and by readership, and its uniqueness is evident at the point when they meet. (id.)

Hollindale's tranquil assertion that we have to (and can) “live by” that paradox of children's literature, and even recognize as “evident” that click between child, book and situation, is part of the appeal of his definition, and also what allows him to move on to the core of his “exercise in definition”, namely the identification of the binding agent in that encounter: childness.

Childness, Hollindale proposes (borrowing the word from Shakespeare), is a “property” (p. 47) of a text and of a reader, which allows for those two entities, in the best of reading events, to become resonant with each other. Childness is composed of a multiplicity of features of childhood, some biologically or physiologically determined, some socially and culturally constructed. Where childness is different from childhood as a concept is that it is fundamentally a self-concept, experiential, lived from the inside; it characterises some degree of metacognition, though not necessarily consciously articulated, about childhood as a defining feature of the self. It is childhood looking at itself; taking itself as an object of interest; recognising itself. It is also always embodied, contextual, situated and dynamic. As such, it is phenomenological. Whatever value childness may hold for sociology or for psychology, as a concept it tips over very quickly into philosophy and poetry. This is part of the strength, and also of the fragility, of childness as a workable tool for theorists.

Childness is a constantly negotiated, ever-shifting property. It jars as much as it clicks, because its features are shared and also disputed by many agents, who have vested interests, both as individuals and as collectives, in those features:

For the child, childness is composed of the developing sense of self in interaction with the images of childhood encountered in the world... For the adult, childness is composed of a grown-up's memories of childhood, of meaningful continuity between child and adult self, of the varied behaviours associated with being a child, and the sense of what is appropriate behaviour for a given age, of behavioural standards, deals, expectations and hopes invested in the

child as child. ... This compound of cultural and personal attitudes is articulated in a text of children's literature, and the *event* of children's literature lies in the chemistry of a child's encounter with it. (p. 49)

And because of the dynamism of those encounters, the childness of both text and reader can be modified by them. A child may confer some of its childness upon a text; a text's childness may contaminate a reader. These phenomena Hollindale explores in more depth in the later parts of the book, with particular case studies.

Before doing so, he also proposes a long series of workable questions (pp. 79–83) that seek to clarify what visions of childhood are hegemonic, or in tension, within a given time and society, in works of art, politics, schooling, culture, the economy, and so on. Hollindale posits that answering those questions will go some way towards understanding why particular texts “click” with particular children in particular reading events—or fail to do so. These questions are interdisciplinary in nature, implicitly inviting insights from social psychology, education studies, literary theory, media studies, medicine, and more. This is where Hollindale's work implies that children's literature studies is akin to childhood studies, that energetic hodgepodge of epistemological positions and methods that asks of its scholars an encyclopaedic knowledge and a lot of intellectual flexibility. The exchanges between children's literature and childhood studies were celebrated at the 2017 IRSCL conference, but Hollindale had long sensed their *de facto* kinship.

A striking dimension of *Signs of Childness* upon rereading is its thread of pessimism. More than once, Hollindale points out—in that respect quite consonant with the rise in the 1990s of discourses on the so-called “death of childhood” or “crisis of childhood”—the risks of potential mismatches between a child's childness and the visions of childness given to them in children's texts and more widely in society. If such mismatches exist, “then we can hardly be surprised if we find that children are disorientated, rootless and confused” (p. 49). Threats of identity crisis, loss of wonder, existential unrest and even physical insecurity permeate *Signs of Childness*:

In the reading events of children's literature the childness embedded in texts transacts with the childness of the child, and in present-day society this crucial transaction appears to be socially endangered, not only in the field of children's literature but more widely. (p. 58)

It would be wrong to interpret such statements as conservative bemoaning of a more idyllic, and entirely imaginary, time when children and texts encountered each other in glorious accord at every reading event. Hollindale, in fact, talks about the dullness of such encounters, “mirroring, conservative and confirmatory” (p. 47), where child and text already agree. There may be a click, but there are no sparkles. Instead, Hollindale's worries are intrinsically progressive; he urges mediators of the children's book, and especially authors, to fight against the annexation of childhood by market imperatives, political pragmatism and (more controversially as far as this reader is concerned), new technologies. For this, authors need to “re-imagine childness... to present a meaningful childness to the child while still engaging openly with present-day realities” (p. 59). This is an agenda of change, hope and progress rather than stagnation.

By presenting meaningfulness as the ultimate aspiration of a childly text, Hollindale presses authors to see their work as aesthetic, ethical and spiritual in nature and to reclaim it as such. We are talking here of a value beyond market value, and this is not a small discussion to be having twenty years later, in the ever more elasticized speculative bubble of children's and young adult publishing. Hollindale invokes a vision of writing for children as committed, where the purpose of a work of art is to signpost escape routes from the pseudo-neutrality of conventions, especially the toxic pragmatism of the market. The recent rise in politically committed children's texts, especially striking in the Anglophone world after a couple of very quiet decades, testifies to the revivification of such ideals.

Closing *Signs of Childness* again, it feels somewhat of a wonder that the central concepts have been, overall, so little used and discussed. Certainly, the book is often acknowledged reverently, especially in British literary criticism (not so much in other Anglophone countries), but the uses and issues of the theory at its core have mostly been left alone. Childness is, in many ways, a problematic concept. It is tentacular, stretching across so many fields of knowledge and so many orders of reality and fictionality as to threaten constantly to collapse. Childness has a lot in common with some of the central coinages of so-called French theory, in that it “rings true” and is poetically seductive, but remains frustratingly impractical. Like Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, one of the central difficulties with “childly” writing is its implied dependence both on some kind of biological essentialism, and on the fluidity of social constructions, a difficulty compounded by the existing structures of oppression that make *écriture féminine* (and childness) a political concept by default. Like Roland Barthes' *jouissance*, a successful childly encounter with a text is very much an I-know-it-when-I-see-it sort of event, non-existent until it is activated (and not actually easily observable even when it is indeed activated). I could go on.

But, precisely because it is so, well, imprecise, one could have thought that childness would be picked up and played with a little more than it has been.

The Articles in This Issue

The hope, then, in sending out a call for papers for the symposium, was that some scholars of children's literature might take up the challenge of picking it up again and playing with it a little more. At first, I thought the call would meet the interests or pique the curiosity of a devoted but niche fan audience. But interest for the symposium went well beyond expectations, attendance was high, and the level of scholarly debate quite stellar. The quality of the presentations and exchanges was telling; clearly, there was indeed some virtue in revisiting that canonical text. Papers by both leading and emerging scholars in the field showed that childness had in fact never ceased to intrigue children's literature critics, if only from time to time, and the symposium gave them an occasion to give shape to whatever thoughts had been lying dormant.

In this issue we present five expanded papers from the symposium, and an additional one that was not given on that particular occasion. Another output from the

symposium is Liam Maloy's work on a Childness Quotient in songs written for children, recently published in *IRSCL* (2018).

The first two papers in this issue critique Hollindale's concept from two radically divergent positions. David Rudd's contribution, "Childness or Child-less: Signs taken for Wonders", accuses childness of biological essentialism and of reinforcing a Romantic view of childhood. By contrast, Maria Nikolajeva's article, "What is it Like to be a Child? Childness in the Age of Neuroscience", takes an anti-constructionist stance, re-evaluating Hollindale's concept in the light of modern developments in brain science; there are in fact, she believes, good grounds on which to assert that there may be something inherently *childly* about—well, children, and therefore, perhaps, about their literature.

The next contribution, Debbie Pullinger's " 'The Words of Poems are Who You Were': contradictions and continuities in *Signs of Childness*", is also influenced by neuroscience, but informed, too, by poetics, and makes a case for the complexity of childly positions in children's poetry.

The next two contributions show the extent to which childness may be redynamized when it comes into contact with other theories, or indeed other research methods. Sarah Hardstaff, in "The Symbolic Economy of Childness in Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming*", shows the potential for childness to be used as a conceptual lens in close reading of children's books; in this case, in a fruitful encounter with a Marxist reading of Cynthia Voigt. Childness, she argues, can be thought of as a form of currency both within and beyond the children's book. My own article, "Is There a Text in this Child? Childness and the Child-authored Text", influenced by theories of juvenilia, looks at the adult discourse surrounding works written by children—real and fictional—and argues that this adult discourse, as if deformed by the presence and proximity of a child's voice, ends up performing childness and, so to speak, conferring it on the child's text.

We close the special issue with Eve Tandoi's article, " 'It's Not *Just* Writing': Constructing and Negotiating 'Childness' in Children's Literature through Performance", which provides an opening onto uses of the concept of childness for empirical research with children. Loyal to Hollindale's idea that childness is always situated, and might participate in an exchange between child and adult participants in a reading experience, Tandoi explores the dynamics of that exchange in the context of school performances.

All the authors in this special issue have engaged with childness, revisited, rebuilt and critiqued the concept, and, in doing so, highlighted its potential and its limitations. The aim is not so much to rehabilitate childness, or even to re-introduce it to children's literature scholarship, but rather to investigate the new and interesting frictions that it can cause to current thinking about children's texts. Like childness itself, the concept of childness is context-dependent, and twenty years after its creation, it has acquired its own patina, and new sounds when it is struck against contemporary children's literature criticism. All contributors to this issue were keen to test those new acoustics, and it is hoped that this special issue might make other scholars want to try, too.

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