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## Risk, Safety, and Control in Young People's Reading Experiences

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*Young people read for many reasons. It is a great paradox that reading can provide a safe environment for experimenting with moral and psychological risk. Alternatively, reading may provide a safe haven in a world of real-life risk. Either way, the reader needs to feel a sense of control over his or her reading matter. Adults who work with young people need to be clear about the importance of this control and to realize that by attempting to wrest that control away from the young reader, they may devalue the power of reading in that person's eyes.*

Reading, as we all know, keeps children off the street and out of harm's way: one more reason to think of it as a Good Thing. Yet as they sit safely snuggled in a corner with a book, their minds are roving freely and perhaps penetrating the murkier corners of the human psyche or exploring the many imaginative ways people can damage each other. For many adults dealing with child readers, this paradox is troubling: reading is safe, yet dangerous. For professionals such as librarians and teachers, there is the extra pressure that perceived danger to a child reader can lead to challenges to the adults who let it happen, or worse, who actually encouraged encounters between children and books that gave them bad ideas.

Issues of control over reading loom large in contemporary culture. Some people cherish the idea that you can encourage real reading without handing over that sense of real personal control that is precisely the reader's most important asset. But such a notion is too contradictory to sustain itself. Real reading is a voluntary activity that involves the power to say Yes or No to a book.

When we create programs that reduce or eliminate that power of choice, we create self-imprisoning reading opportunities that wind up repackaged as docility tests. The Accelerated Reading program is a good example of such a docility test. In this scheme, there is little if any room for reading for its own sake. Children are offered only pseudo-choices of titles, and even then they are not left alone with a book, but always tethered to the relentless emphasis on being accountable. The more they read, the more quizzes they write. The consequences of such approaches would be farcical if they were not so tragic in their genuinely negative impact on reading for the love of it. Librarians and teachers say to children, in effect, "You must read, but you may read only on my terms—levelled, quizzed, and confined to the playpen of 'safe'

materials." If we taught children to walk on these terms, they would spend their lives in wheelchairs because they would not see any advantage to using their own legs.

At the same time as many adults inhibit or eliminate any form of genuine risk-taking in reading, they also discourage reading for safety, a real need for nearly every reader at least some of the time. "You're not reading *another* book from that series are you?" "You're too old to be reading those baby books now." "You need to stop always picking books with pictures in them now you're [insert age here]."

In other words, too many adults want children to read, and read with enthusiasm, without conceding to them any vestige of the sense of real control that is one of the social and psychological triumphs of reading. Children, who are trying to "win at growing up" as Beverly Cleary's (1984, p. 182) Ramona so succinctly expresses the challenge, are being given a false passport that lets them only into a fenced-off field.

And they fight it. They may resist reading altogether, they may develop the cynical art of going through the motions, or they may find ways of subverting adult limitations through all the resources they can muster. The list of such subversive resources is actually quite lengthy and includes friends' stacks of forbidden comics or of the disparaged series books, the legendary smutty book behind the bike shed, the surreptitious Web-surfing camouflaged as "research," and many other tools of the trade of becoming adult.

Not all children are equally bold. There are certainly readers who value the security of the book corner. But bland safety is not a tempting option for many other young people, and parents, teachers, and librarians would do well to consider the role of risk-taking in their reading programs for children.

Russell Smith, a young Canadian novelist, provides a thought-provoking perspective on young people's reading. He is quoted at length in a book about Canadian young people and their reading tastes and habits. In this section, he is talking about why young readers might or might not particularly choose Canadian fiction.

To sum up: what turns off young readers? A moral approach to literature. A lack of clever wickedness. And an outdated belief in an outdated version of Canada.... Books that are good for you. Canadian cultural nationalism is the literary equivalent of Sunday school, and young people won't sit through it. (Wright, 2001, p. 156)

The specifics of Canadian culture are one issue, but Smith here is touching on a much larger question, the idea of reading as a risky and subversive activity.

The majority of book people in Canada are not really interested in literature as I am; they are interested in what is socially progressive or responsible, in what is good for you.... And the well reviewed books are the ones that end up on reading-club lists, which are the books that your Mom reads and which confirm in

any young person's mind the utter boredom and banality of all literary endeavour. (pp. 155-156).

It is an interesting question: is there anything exactly wrong with books that are good for you? Can the question even be asked in those terms? The answer is complicated, but I think Smith is right that at least some readers would rather decide for themselves how they are to be "improved," and their radar for sensing that a book is valued just because it is socially responsible is well developed.

### *Reading as Risk*

Concerned adults fret over young people's perceived lack of interest in reading, predicting all kinds of dire intellectual and social outcomes as society is "dumbed down" and kids blank out over video games and stupid television rather than honing their wits on reading. Yet much of the well-meaning advice concerning young people and their reading takes no account of (or perversely blocks from consideration) the idea that young people are looking for moral and aesthetic challenges, preferably real ones that involve some genuine imaginative risk.

Authors who recognize kids' enthusiasm for subversiveness are often wildly successful. Lemony Snicket's perverse accounts of the Baudelaire children, to whom nothing good ever happens (*A Series of Unfortunate Events*), may seem repetitive and predictable to adults, but children clearly enjoy the topsy-turvy moral universe. These books are seriously unsafe; there is never going to be a happy ending. A companion volume, Snicket's *Unauthorized Autobiography* (2002), is gleeful in its appeal to the antisocial and the anti-social-responsibility in children. Warning them that it could be disastrous for the wrong people to see them with this book, he provides a reversible dust jacket and exhorts his readers to disguise their objectionable tastes by switching the cover. The sanitized alternative cover (entitled *The Pony Party! Book #1!* of a series called *The Luckiest Kids in the World!*) is cynical in its saccharine overkill: "Hey, Kidz!" warbles the back blurb, "Reading is fun, cool, and educational, and this book is one of the most exciting ever!" The book, coos its "author," is "delightfully appropriate," and she herself is described as someone who "loves children, cupcakes, pretty songs and sunny days.... She often works as a volunteer teaching children to skip."

Nobody would call this subtle, but it does manifestly strike a chord with many young readers. Clearly they recognize the didactic discourse of the false cover—as indeed they should, because this language of "appropriate" and "educational" is certainly widespread. The week after I acquired *The Unauthorized Autobiography*, I read the following plaudits in my local paper for some "levelled" readers produced by Dorling Kindersley: "These latest Dorling Kindersley Readers combine history with simple, yet challenging vocabulary and innovative storytelling.... The intertwining of historical information and photos with the details of Ali's life create an enticing, educa-

tional read.... The story [of Anne Frank] not only includes appropriate historical background, but also offers insight into Anne's fun-loving personality" (Van Daltsen, 2002, p. D11). Van Daltsen's fence-posts are clearly marked: she is in favor of challenging vocabulary, educational reads, and appropriate history. I am personally not against any of these qualities, but I cannot think of any of them as a reason to pick up a book under any circumstance except utter duress.

### *"Clever Wickedness" at Work*

In contrast to this sanitized safety zone, what kinds of "clever wickedness" do young people seek out? In fact there is a lot of it about, at almost every age level, and certainly in all comers of contemporary culture. Let us explore a few popular examples.

The works of Roald Dahl, beloved by innumerable children and disturbing to many adults for their misogyny and cruelty, are high on the list of risky reads. Dahl's books have topped lists of popular choices for many years, but his treatment of the characters he doesn't like is vicious, and children know they are dicing with danger in dealing with some of the emotions he evokes.

In North America, *MAD Magazine* for many years has epitomized several forms of rebellion at once: it is composed in the comic-book format that is so often frowned upon, it is rude in many senses of the word, and it draws attention to how youth culture exploits young people. It is probably not as clever as it used to be, but it still holds an honored place in the pantheon of risky reading.

Parody is *MAD's* trademark, and parody opens many doors to clever wickedness. Terry Pratchett's popularity is undeniable. His sales figures are utterly remarkable. He is cited as the most shoplifted author in Britain, an extraordinary testimonial and one far removed from the playpen of "safe" reading. A contemporary joke even suggests that British trains are not allowed to leave the station unless at least one passenger is reading a Pratchett novel. Pratchett's parodies are models of clever wickedness. No element of contemporary society is spared his withering humor. Adolescents embarking on the thought experiment of wondering what would happen if *nothing* were sacred will find a comfortable fit in the *Discworld* books, now up to 27 and still counting.

Even books for the very youngest can raise risky questions. A fascinating example from a complex longitudinal study of early readers shows 6- and 7-year-olds demonstrating evidence of a deep understanding of questions of social acceptance and rejection (Chittenden & Salinger with Bussis, 2001). These beginning readers read aloud to the testers a book called *Blackboard Bear*, in which some older boys will not let a younger child join in their play and the smaller child establishes a creative revenge.

Several interesting things happened with *Blackboard Bear*. First, every child recognized the theme of rejection and retribution, even though the text does not explicitly state that the little boy is getting even with the older boys. Children's comments when reading or retelling the story indicated that they knew how the boy felt...

As a rule, the less proficient readers would begin reading an unfamiliar book (which *Blackboard Bear* was for all the children) with some degree of caution, as if they wanted to "feel their way" into the text. Some typically negotiated unfamiliar books at a deliberate, almost word-by-word pace. Yet many of these same children read the first short line of the book ("Can I play?") with uncommon ease, and everyone in the group read the line fluently on the second encounter. The children also picked up other phrases during the course of the reading and uttered them with appropriate expression: "Of course not." "You're too little." "You can't." "He only lets me." Although the last page of text does not contain these phrases, the less proficient readers tended to continue reading accurately and with greater fluency than was typical of them. (p. 49)

It is hard to think of a sentence more redolent of potential risk than "Can I play?" Every child knows that the answer of No can be devastating. It is interesting—and telling—that the emotional charge of this challenge seems to have improved the interpretive capabilities of the less proficient readers in this study.

### *Risk and Safety in Nonprint Materials*

Young people today, of course, are not confined to print for their fictional and philosophical explorations. They have access to many alternative forms of fiction that may invite serious reflection on emotionally and intellectually challenging questions. Just a few examples highlight the range.

- movies such as *The Matrix*, which questions our understanding of what is real;
- television programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which conjures up the agents of darkness and battles them in a high school setting;
- computer games such as *Black & White*, which offers the player the alternative of growing into a benevolent or an evil ruler for its virtual universe.

These texts provide young users with interesting and intelligent experiments concerning the moral limitations of our daily understandings. It is a mistake to think we should or can protect young people from such explorations, and it is shortsighted to assume that reading always and automatically involves a higher level of thinking and a more substantial moral engagement than engaging with any nonprint text. Finally, it is a major tactical error to think that, given the perils of movies, TV, and digital games, we can at least make sure that young people's reading choices are sanitized. Young people will quickly establish that reading is not worth the trouble under such constrictions and will conclude that the really interesting questions about life are better dealt with elsewhere.

Computer games have received a bad rap as mindless and violent, but in fact many are much more complex than non-players give them credit for. Chris Turner (2002) raises a number of real moral questions that arise from *Grand Theft Auto III*, a violent game designed for PlayStation 2.

GTA3 [is] not just a great game but something verging on art. Using just the right mix of cartoon carnage and real-world detail, the game manages to be fun and disturbing simultaneously: fun because it is such an unabashedly ultra-violent fantasia; disturbing because it sprinkles in enough realistic touches (a main character that gets winded if he sprints for too long, better-than-real-life radio stations, Michael Rapaport) to remain recognizably set in our world. In so doing, it forces us to acknowledge uncomfortable truths about ourselves—that we can find depravity exciting, that amorality can feel liberating, that unmitigated license is intoxicating—and does it so well that even some think-tank wag on a fact-finding mission can't deny it. And because videogames are so adept at closing the distance between the viewer and the screen, it challenges us in ways that few Oscar-winning films can. (p. 78)

You do not have to like the sound of this game to recognize that it manifestly operates in the risk zone, and that "safe" reading alternatives may well appear bland and un compelling in contrast. Part of adolescence is finding out where the limits lie: the real limits, not Mom's limits. Plenty of reading material also deals with moral risks and limits; adolescents are hungry for such material.

Gerard Jones (2002) describes the adolescent's need to explore these limits in the following terms:

Offensive violence has many functions: it can express hostility, put scary thoughts in perspective, intensify a power fantasy, test machismo, and provide an exciting shock. In our permissive popular culture, it's also one of the few sources remaining to young people of truly, shockingly bad taste. And bad taste is a way to accelerate, test, and take some control of the process of social change. In blatantly presenting what was previously forbidden, offensive entertainment says that the old ways are breaking down. It sets kids apart from their parents' values and connects them with their peers [sic], shows them that they're plunging into new territory. The more it appalls the adult world, the more exciting it is: this is their turf, the world they're making whether we like it or not. (And bloody violence is one thing that today's adult world is almost guaranteed not to like.) Then comes the relief: they break into the new territory and discover it's safe. The forbidden deed is done, adults are shocked, everyone gets used to it and moves on. The parents are still there, and the world still works as well as it ever did. Periodic assaults on established taste help people play with change and be reassured that it'll be okay. (pp. 142-143)

Jones is describing a benign outcome of playing with fire in this example; his sample teens "break into the new territory and discover it's safe." That happy result does not necessarily happen. Some adolescents may become preoccupied with the "risk zone," returning obsessively to their violent text

until they can find a way of coexisting with its terrors. Such obsessions can be troubling to contemplate or to live through; and the risk that a young reader may become unhealthily fixated on the darkness of a nasty story is a real one. But that is part of the point. A risk has to be real or it isn't a risk at all; and teenagers know this truth at some level.

Jones (2002) is interesting on the consequences of such cultural risks, both the good and the bad.

Every successful assault on taste changes standards.... What was once offensive becomes accepted. The cost of that is a coarsening of popular culture. Entertainment becomes less deft, less graceful, less subtle. Those of us who prefer more polite and suggestive aesthetics find less to like and more to steel ourselves against.

The gain, however, is that we are reminded what really matters. Our world isn't kept out of barbarism by concealing ugly realities or suppressing shocking images. The bonds that hold us together are empathy, acceptance, and a mutual desire to make the real world better, not a fragile web of constraints and controls. (p.143)

Today's teenagers, surrounded by many media, know that the world is a cruel and terrible place. Yet they have to find ways of becoming adult in this world. No wonder they test themselves on texts that tax their moral limits.

### *One Teen and Her Reading Choices*

Readers' advisory work with teenagers is a complex and delicate operation. It must be founded on genuine two-way respect; teens are particularly adept at sniffing out any pseudo-substitute for the true article. Often, and with the best intentions, I think we may err by underestimating the capacities of the reader. I will never forget my work with 17-year-old Jenny, who volunteered for a study of reading with me (Mackey, 1991). Her teacher made it clear that Jenny seldom lived up to either expectations or capacity in her English class. But Jenny taught me a great deal.

"From when I could read and comprehend things," said Jenny, "then I just always like things that, like, thrilled me and excited me and stuff like that." She is a slow and impatient reader, quick to cast a book aside if it doesn't catch her interest. If she becomes caught up in the story, however, she engages thoroughly.

I put myself in every character possible and I try to feel, like I try to feel how I would feel in that situation.... If it's a story where one lady is narrating it from her point of view, I'll put myself in her point of view and then when she comes to a conversation where she's talking to someone, I'll keep myself in that, like, in her position. And then just read on or whatever. But then I'll think about it after and I'll put myself in the other person's point of view and just see the difference there and compare it.

Jenny was less than impressed with many of the novels she had read for school. "I've never liked anything we've read in school. They always pick, like, the dumb—well, not dumb, just, just, like, you know, the morally inclined stories." Yet she approved of the moral themes of *The Pigman*, so it is not morality per se that turns her off. My own reading of her responses is that she likes her moral questions to arise out of real and serious moral threats.

Jenny was a volunteer in a complex project. One element of this study involved participants responding to the first pages of 18 novels selected from a relatively wide range of age appeal and interest. The question I asked was simple: given the opportunity, would you keep reading this book? Why or why not? Jenny's answers were illuminating. She rejected 14 of the 18 titles without hesitation. Her favorite put-down was that something would drag on; her most positive qualification was that something might possibly pick up as you read further. Her comment on *Pride and Prejudice* speaks volumes about her instant take on books. "Boring," she said. "Just—who cares? It's one of those ones." Similarly, she immediately rejected a *Sweet Valley* title: "That seems sappy. It, I don't know, you can tell this mystery that her dad has, or whatever, it's going to be something dumb!"

Yet Jenny's interest was piqued by a children's King Arthur story, so it was not just the childishness of *Sweet Valley High* that she rejected. She also recognized and commented favorably on *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, a considerably less childish story that recognizably deals with troubling issues. Her other two positive choices surprised me. She responded favorably to the abstract discussion of time that begins *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood (1988). The opening page starts off uncompromisingly:

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once....

But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (p. 3)

Jenny observed,

Actually I kind of like that. It, like, really gets you thinking and you see if you can relate to that, like if you agree with it basically about time and stuff. I don't know, I don't think it would pick up but it kind of seems really philosophical— is that the word?

And although she was dubious about Dickens' *Bleak House*, she did perceive a small spark of potential in an unlikely phrase. Our discussion ran in full as follows.

*Jenny:* Didn't grab me. It dragged on. I don't know, it might pick up. It's just like every, I don't know, a lot of books are really descriptive in, like, the first page

and maybe a page or so later it might get more exciting. But that was kind of boring.

*Interviewer:* Is there any hint there that it might liven up?

*Jenny:* Well, the end part. "Most pestilent of hoary sinners, hold this day in the sight of heaven and earth"—I don't know, there's just, like, a comparison or whatever there and it could, I don't know, something from there could be brought out and made exciting, I don't know.

*Interviewer:* Just a little trace of potential

*Jenny:* Yeah. Little. Really small! (laughs)

It is possible that Jenny here is merely lighting on the lurid (which in Dickens is always somewhere to be found), but it is more respectful of her lively take on the world to consider that she might be exploring what she perceives as an element of moral challenge in this otherwise dusty page. True respect in relation to such adolescents involves asking them what it is about such issues that calls to them, rather than assuming that it is simply a mark of their inherent depravity. Too many adults seem all too ready to assume that there is automatically a bad reason for young people to like a text that the adults don't approve of. To me, it seems much more constructive and productive to let young readers (or viewers or players for that matter) sample freely, and then to make room for them to talk about what they find disturbing in their choices. If they think that adults automatically despise their selections, they will have nowhere to turn with their questions, and if they are taking risks, then they may well have questions.

Since I met her, Jenny has stayed in my mind as a reminder that sometimes we fail to find books that connect with adolescents because we underestimate their taste for complexity. We assume that if they don't read much, they must be in need of simple books. With the best of intentions, we insult them, and we may even cause them to rule out reading as a way to answer their serious questions about the world.

### *Censorship, Self-Censorship, Religion, and "Inspirational" Books*

Some of the most interesting questions about young people and their reading are played out in the contested territory argued over by librarians and religious parents. It is not as if conventional religion does not know about asking the disturbing questions. All the major religions provide robust examples of stories of moral risk. To take a single famous historic example, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (first published in 1563 and a staple of young Christians' reading even centuries later) exposed countless youngsters to the horrors of this world even as it promoted the delights of the next. At a less sensational level, many religious stories are *designed* to raise and discuss issues of serious moral risk.

Yet much of the pressure that some contemporary religious individuals and communities place on public and school libraries is in opposition to any

kind of vigorous moral exploration. The demand is for "inspirational" books, which often define virtue merely in terms of what it excludes rather than what it conquers. Unfortunately, this is often a recipe for sanitary and insipid writing. Instead of confronting the powers of darkness, however defined (and often expressed metaphorically in stories of witches, vampires, aliens, and other agents of the occult), many religious parents and pressure groups simply want to evaporate wickedness by pretending that it does not exist. Teachers and librarians who try to avoid trouble by never drawing attention to the power of books to disturb the mind should not wonder if many of their young patrons decide that reading must not be worth the trouble.

Sometimes concerns about contemporary realistic fiction deal not with religious, but with psychological peril. Contemporary books are depressing and pessimistic, and thus damaging, according to this argument. Moira Redmond (2002), writing in the online journal *Slate*, talks about the "new Gothicism" of contemporary children's books and says,

To be sure, children's books have always terrorized their readers—but with mostly happy results. Monsters, space creatures, and dark, lonely houses are all designed to provoke healthy shivers and to let kids excise some of their darkest, least rational fears. Likewise, children's literature has long featured strong moral overtones. But the most beloved and durable of these tales dress up their lesson plans in entertaining metaphors and fables. The new agents of fear—drugs, death, disease—are just plain terrifying, with no entertainment or allegorical value, (n.p.)

Redmond calls these gloomy books "Dreadlit" and her accounting for the popularity of Lemony Snicket is that the woeful stories of the Baudelaire orphans are satires of such stuff, as they undergo "a hilariously gothic pileup of miseries."

It is certainly true that a book can offer some form of provocative moral challenge and still be a bad book (although I am not persuaded by Redmond's (2002) particular examples, a number of which seem to me to be much better and more complex stories than her analysis allows for). Some stories marketed to young people are indeed ghoulish or prurient or exploitative, and I would certainly make little effort to recommend them. On the other hand, I am not surprised when I see young people daring to engage with them. If as adult citizens, we have accepted a social arrangement where supporting free enterprise is a major priority, then our children have to learn to handle the consequences as part of growing up.

Today's children live in a world where the perils of the free market represent another risk they need to find ways to understand, although you will seldom see the challenge represented in this way by the proponents of censorship. Contemporary young people are perpetually being *sold to*; and many of the commodities being sold are of extremely poor quality; books are not as different as we might hope. The reality of the contemporary market place in which young readers are growing up is that they are invited to

become consumers of books as well as (or even instead of) becoming thoughtful readers. The risks of being consumed by consumerism seem to me to be as real as many other contemporary perils, although I am aware that not every North American would agree with me.

### *Safety in Reading*

I am in danger of sounding as if I think that reading matters only if it experiments at the moral limits of the universe. That is most certainly not my view. Franz Kafka's famous description of reading as taking axes to frozen seas (1904/1977), as exploring the difficult and the forbidden, is only one aspect of reading. All I am arguing so far is that if we exclude books that raise these dangerous questions—exclude them both from our collections and from our curricula—we should not be surprised if morally adventurous young people look elsewhere in the culture to satisfy their curiosity about the real limits of good and evil.

However, I am also committed to the need to preserve opportunities for young people to find safe reading. There is probably less consensus about what constitutes a truly safe read, and it may be a question that can be answered only by one reader at a time. A book that describes a completely safe world runs the risk of sounding dishonest, at which point it ceases to feel safe. The paradox is substantial.

One kind of safe read is a book that allows for moral battles, but mitigates the consequences. I risk disagreeing with large numbers of people and suggest that the *Harry Potter* books are actually safe indeed by this definition. Harry is on the side of virtue, he is possessed of amazing powers, he is a brilliant athlete at Quidditch, yet he manages to remain modest and unassuming and to retain the aura of an ordinary boy. Neither brutalization by the Dursleys nor adulation from his peers and his elders can undermine his ordinariness. Hogwarts presents thrills and genuine dangers, but the orderly rule of Dumbledore prevails reliably, and although the orphan never truly finds his parents, he knows he is in a place where his parents were recognized and respected. This is having your cake and eating it with a vengeance. Harry is gradually winning at growing up, and he is doing so with knowledgeable and sympathetic support from the important adults in his life.

As Judith Robertson (2001-2002) describes it, "The family romance is a satisfying daydream in which the child plays out his or her interest in being the best, the most dear, a person born to do special things and therefore unaccepting of passivity or prudence" (p. 207). She goes on to say,

The Harry Potter series thus builds on a wish structure that is quintessentially rooted in childhood experience (and possibly in the life of humanity), a fantasy in which one must imagine oneself to be a foundling in order to work through the tricky obligations of growing up. What better platform for performing this work than through the figure of a magical boy abandoned by his mother who perished saving him? It makes perfect sense to child readers that Harry Potter's

dreadful archenemy, Voldemort, will *never* be able to understand or counteract the power of such love. Rowling's consummate narrative feels delightful to children because it simply prolongs the delay of having to give up the wish for ecstatic containment: "to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin" (Stone 216). (p. 208)

The many psychological safety nets of the *Harry Potter* books make possible a far stronger and more strenuous exploration of the challenge of maturing than the shallow and preposterous negativities of the Lemony Snicket books. Harry's universe is certainly not a secure one, but the emotional underpinnings made possible by the Hogwarts framework do supply a safe haven—and a correspondingly different kind of reading experience from that supplied by *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

And, of course, plenty of books are both safe and shallow. Nancy Drew, for example, operates in a consequence-reduced zone that is in some ways similar to Harry's. She is plucky and resourceful under pressure and intelligent in pursuit of wrongdoers, she is pretty and owns her own roadster (or its equally desirable successor), and she is treated with the utmost respect by important adults. Yet she retains close female friends of her own age (who also admire her) and has an adoring boyfriend as well. She gets to be perfect and ordinary all at the same time, a safe kind of fiction to inhabit. What Nancy Drew never does, of course, is grow up or even make the attempt. She is perpetually 18 and perpetually has it all. She never aches for her mother as Harry yearns for his. Yet her capacity to personify the paradox of having to rely on herself in the face of danger while remaining permanently safe is appealing to many young readers. Anne Scott MacLeod (1994) expresses Nancy's appeal succinctly:

In short. Nancy transcends youth, moving through life with assurance and without struggle. Though she courts adventure and faces threats, she never has to contend with the humiliations, self-doubt, and uncertainties common to her age; she never has to plead, bluster, or fight for her independence. She is always right—the hallmark of adulthood to a child—always effective. Only villains, dumb policemen, and the nouveau riche ever oppose or dislike her. All socially acceptable people, rich or poor, powerful or suitably grateful, admire her and accept her autonomy, (p. 41)

Secure in the knowledge that Nancy's remarkable capacities will always be respected by people who count, the child reader can relax even in moments of thrilling tension.

A different kind of safe reading is a rereading. Small children are famous for wanting their repeats to be word-perfect, but older children sometimes run into grief for wanting to revisit fictions that they already know practically by heart. Yet there is sometimes a need—sometimes a need that lasts for quite a long time—to find a world where all threats have been laid low

through sheer familiarity. Adults who despair that their charge will ever begin to mature as a reader can give such a child a hard time.

It is indeed difficult to be sure of where the adult responsibility lies. We too, at least for the most part, want our children to win at growing up (though the appeal of having them remain forever children is insidious and powerful). To see them treading water, marking time, repeating and repeating the same literary experience can be frustrating. The world is undeniably full of wonderful books for children, and it seems a shame for them not to encounter as many as possible. And anyway, can they possibly know what's best for them? They're only children. They don't know what they don't know, they don't know what they miss when they adamantly refuse our most inspired book recommendations and turn to the foolish perversities of *MAD Magazine* or the eighth reread of a series book instead. Although I argue for taking account of children's needs, I do not want to romanticize the invariable rightness of their instincts concerning their reading. Sometimes they are just being pig-headed! But if we believe that independence is part of what makes reading worthwhile, we must acknowledge their prerogative to be stubborn and to consider that they may actually know what they are doing at a level so deeply buried that neither we nor they have articulate access to it.

### Conclusions

The crux of my argument is the need for a genuine respect by adults for the young readers who happen to be in their charge. Aidan Chambers (1993) has probably best summed up the optimal response to a young reader (or, as I argue, young viewer or player): "Tell me." Tell me what satisfies you about your choice. Talk to me about what troubles you in this story. Not "Justify to me" or "Defend," just "Tell." Chambers argues strongly that asking "Why did you like this book?" is a question more likely to close conversation than open it. Instead, he relies on the simple "Tell me."

The qualities we liked about "Tell me ..." are that it suggests a desire for collaboration, indicating that the teacher really does want to know what the reader thinks and that it anticipates conversational dialogue rather than an interrogation. (p.49)

And it is essential to realize that some of this telling will involve issues of moral experimentation and exploration. An adult who sees danger everywhere in the world (even in the fanciful creation of a school for wizards) may find this conversation difficult. Nevertheless, it is important for that adult to listen to the child as well as explaining what it is that they find so objectionable about Harry Potter, for example. It is perhaps even more important for adults to listen to what young people have to say about their video games, because this is a textual world into which many more young people venture alone or with their peers, completely without adult engagement or company.

We live in a scary world, even those of us who inhabit its more comfortable corners. Growing up is a daunting and sometimes overwhelming experience. Being able to explore the scale and nature of the very real moral and aesthetic challenges that surround them within the security of the fictional boundary, the *as-if* world that is created in the mind's eye, is important to young people. Overlooking or denigrating their real concern to find out where the limits truly lie is not fair to the force and power of the needs that compel them. It is also a route to ensuring our irrelevance to their most profound concerns—and if we, and they, are unlucky, they will dismiss reading altogether as a helpful tool, as one way to hold their fears in their hands and confront them. In a culture with so many alternative routes to the pleasures and values of fiction, they do not need the novel as they once did, and adults will do well to acknowledge the reality of this new cultural universe. If we want reading to be important to young people, we must not eviscerate it of its most important qualities.

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