



## Activity 1

Aim: reflect critically on your own childhood reading

*This activity introduces some of the key debates in children's literature criticism, including the difficulties associated with defining children's literature and the problems caused by the power imbalance between adults and children. The task involves re-reading your own childhood favourites with a selection of questions to guide you towards a critical reading.*

'Children's literature' is notoriously difficult to define. Do we mean literature written by children? (There is some but not lots.) Or literature intended for a child/youth audience, as decided by publishers, parents, teachers and librarians? Or do we mean the literature that children themselves actually read? Many teenagers read Stephen King novels or 'adult' science fiction, while studying classic novels by Austen, Dickens, Hardy, etc, in school.

For the purposes of this resource, we will take the second definition of children's literature, that is, literature intended for an audience of children and young people. Overall, we will be less concerned with traditional preconceptions about quality and value, looking instead at recurring tropes and themes in a variety of genres.

More so than most other forms of literary criticism, the study of children's literature means taking an interest in readers and reading, which means it is necessary to look at the relationships between texts and readers critically.

One of the central ideas in children's literature criticism is *power*. It has been pointed out many times that all adults were once children. This makes the adult-child power dynamic very different to other power relations and conflicts such as those based on gender, race, class or ability. Of course, sometimes people are seen to 'switch' socioeconomic class, for example after going to university, or a previously able-bodied person can become disabled, but this is not the same as *everyone* in the privileged position having once had the status of the disempowered group.

In theory, this could mean that adults are especially empathetic to the position of children in society. However, as we have seen many times over, children are constantly mistreated. They are disproportionately affected by poverty and war and make up a disproportionate number of the world's refugees. Where children are offered protection, this is often based on adults' ideas about childhood rather than listening to the child in front of them. Our assumption is that children lack the capacity to make their own decisions and therefore need adults to make the right ones. Adults, through cruelty or stupidity, frequently fail at this responsibility. As we will see throughout this resource, food is one means by which power struggles are represented in children's literature

By taking children's literature seriously and, increasingly, listening to children's own voices, this field of study is also a potential tool for disrupting power imbalances. Children's literature criticism has to take into account the intended audience of texts, the effects a text might



have on them and what they in turn bring to their reading of the text. However, this is not without its pitfalls, for example, when critics make assumptions about how much children can understand in a text or when they fail to recognise the ways in which their own nostalgic view can affect their critical readings. As with any group, children have a plurality of experiences and this must be taken into account.

### TASK

The first assignment for students on the Master's course in children's literature at Cambridge is to write a critical reflection on their childhood reading. The purpose of this exercise is to help students realise how many assumptions and preconceptions we have about children, childhood and our own reading memories.

Re-read one or more favourite texts from your childhood. It doesn't matter whether it is simple or complex. It could be a picture book, novel, comic, poem, fan fiction or something else.

Reflect on the following questions:

- a) Firstly, would you characterise the text as children's literature, taking into account the debates mentioned above? Why/why not?
- b) How do you remember feeling about the text as a child? What was the context of your reading? School/home/online etc.
- c) How do you feel now that you have re-read the text? Do you notice anything that surprises you or is the text the same as you remember it?
- d) What critical remarks can you make about the literary value of the text? How has it been constructed? Are you surprised by how good/bad you think it is now?
- e) What critical remarks can you make about the nature of power in the text? Does the text rely on assumptions that adults will resume control, for example? Is it designed to instruct or delight? Does it use stereotypes or normative assumptions e.g. of gender or race?
- f) Reflect on the theme of this resource. Does food feature in your texts? What kind of food and how much? Is it associated with particular characters or settings? Does it seem to serve any symbolic purpose?