Knowing What Children Believe: Believing What Children Know

*C.W. Sullivan **III***

Children's Folklore is an age-bounded folklore which circulates among children up to about age twelve. The official study of American children's folklore is generally considered to have begun with W.W. Newell, a president of the American Folklore Society and an editor of the *Journal of American Folklore.* Early studies by Newell *(Games and Songs of American Children,* 1883) or Alice B. Gomme *(The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland,* 1894-1898) and those who immediately followed focused first on games and game rhymes, and the study of children's folklore expanded slowly from that beginning. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the study of children's folklore has expanded more rapidly and now includes examinations of all of the genres or sub-genres identified as folklore and has also expanded to include the folklore of adolescents. But the collecting of children's folklore presents some problems unique to that subject matter and the informants from whom it is collected, problems which stem from the fact that, for the most part, it is adults who are doing the collecting.

In "Children's Folklore," chapter 5 of Elliott Oring's *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction,* children's folklorist Jay Mechling comments:

> The white, male folklorist recognizes that he will never really know what it means to be a black woman, but we all think that we know what it means to be a child. (91)

The implication, here, is quite significant. Mechling suggests that folklorists who collect from children—or, perhaps worse, those who collect from other adults their memories of what they did when they were children-fail to recognize that they are collecting materials from members of a significantly different culture and must proceed accordingly. And while many children's folklorists have, like Mechling, commented on this situation, no one has, thus far, attempted to delineate the ways in which or the reasons why the adult culture has become and is now separate from that of the child. I want to examine this situation and the assumptions upon which this and other comments Mechling makes in his article are based.

Cultural worldview is something into which members of a

culture are educated, not something that comes with birth; and it takes only a few examples to illustrate the assertion that children see the world differently from adults. Children's literature critic and reading theorist Peter Hunt recounted to me [although he wrote it up differently] an evening's reading to his daughter, Felicity, of Shirley Hughes' *Up and Up*. One page was divided into three separate vertical panels: the first showed a little girl holding a bunch of helium balloons, the second showed her being lifted off the ground, and the third showed the balloons being burst by an over-hanging tree branch. Felicity studied the page for a moment, pointed to the second panel, and said: "That girl still has her balloons!" Where the adult reader saw a continuum of events happening to the same character as the text moved from left to right across the page, the child seems to have seen three discrete pictures about three different individuals. As I have commented elsewhere, "most adults in Hunt's position would have misinterpreted Felicity's reading as a mistake rather than what it actually was—an alternate interpretation of an available text" (18). In western culture, we are *taught* to read from left to right, and that is true for a series of pictures as well as a series of words; Felicity had not yet *learned* that reading skill.

Not only do children have to be enculturated into the process of reading literature, they also have to learn how to interpret the literature they read. Once, when our older son was small, my wife read him a story about a little duck with a misshapen leg. The duck was, of course, an outcast for much of the book but won his acceptance in the end—a traditional story pattern. My wife, thinking this a good opportunity to discuss tolerance and physical handicaps, asked Jason what he thought of the little lame duck in the story. Jason, after thinking a moment, commented that having a leg like that must have caused the duck to swim around in circles. The point that the author had intended and that my wife had seen was lost on this child who is now working on a masters degree in engineering.

The third example comes from children's traditional play. A number of years ago, when our younger son was a second or third grader, a neighbor called with what she thought was "a funny story." It seems that Aaron and her daughter had been playing house, and after "breakfast," her daughter "went off to work" while Aaron "stayed home and took care of the house." As a folklorist, I found the story interesting—and understandable. My neighbor had seen the children's playas a violation, perhaps, of the norm as she understood it; I, however, knew the source—at least from my son's point of view. At that time, my wife was teaching in a county school and carpooling with three other women. As a result, she left the house as the boys were getting ready for school. I made sure they were ready for school and got them onto the bus. Then I went to teach my classes at the university. I had also

arranged my schedule to allow me to return home before the public schools let out for the day, and so I was there when the boys came home. My wife came home later. My son was, thus, playing what he saw at home: his mother going off to work and his father staying home (even though he *knew* I worked at the university). What sense it made to Angela, his playmate, I do not know.

The enculturation process not only educates children into the ways in which their culture views the world as they grow older, it also seems to encourage them to forget however they saw the world when they were children. There is a great deal of evidence that a lot of adults do not remember what it was like to be a child (or, perhaps, had much more protected childhoods than most). When the Opies were collecting material for their landmark *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), they were in a school lunchroom and heard one child respond to the question, "What's for lunch?", with the answer, "S.O.S!". Recognizing folk speech, they asked what "S.O.S." stood for and were told, "Same Old Slush" (162). Even though that is the proper interpretation for a child to give to an adult (authority figure), most contemporary children's folklorists would not have been satisfied with that answer, as the Opies appear to have been, knowing that alternative meanings include "Same Old Slop," "Same Old Stuff," "Same Old Shit" and "Shit On A Shingle" and that those meanings are available to and circulate among grade school students.

There are other and more sinister situations of adult forgetfulness, ignorance, and, perhaps, idealism. The *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter* recently recounted two. *ACFN,* in reporting the situation to be discussed next, reminded its readers that Ian Turner's *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* (1969) was initially declared obscene by an Australian postal official, and for a time, the publishers were not allowed to use the normal book preferential postage rate (2). More frightening still is *ACFN's* account of Phil Burrows, whose photographs of girls playing "F1intstones, Flintstones," in which three of the five girls flip their dresses up to show their underpants when the rhyme says, "Pebbles shows her knickers," caused him to be charged with "three counts of indecent dealing, suspended from teaching, and smeared [in the press] as an actual or potential child molester." After six months, the case was brought to court and immediately thrown out. Borrows was paid back salary, but at last report was still on "sick leave" (1-2). Closer to home, when the *Children's Folklore Newsletter* published Gary Alan Fine's collection of Little League Baseballers' folk speech in the 1980s, a public school superintendent wrote administrators at the editor's university criticizing the university for supporting a publication which distributed such obscene materials to children *(CFN,* 11.1 through IV.3). In each of these cases, the adults doing the accusing failed to realize two things: first, that this material was being

distributed to other adult scholars for whom it would have intellectual interest and value; and second, that this material was the property of the children themselves, collected from them and not being distributed to them.

This separation of childhood from adulthood is a relatively recent phenomenon. To some extent, the Romantic movement was an initiator of this attitude, and the locus for it may well be Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" in which he depicts the child entering life nom heaven and "trailing clouds of glory" (line 64) and in which the child loses that connection with heaven but gains knowledge of the world, Wordsworth's "philosophic mind" (line 186). The overriding perception of human development as a movement from innocence to experience, as Blake first articulated it for the Romantics, was one of the central tenets of the Romantic movement and could certainly be interpreted as a part of the move from childhood to adulthood. Later in the same century, folklorists and anthropologists studying children followed the Romantics' lead and added to it the influence of the Darwinian evolutionary model; they saw children as a separate culture, a culture representative of the early stages of human and societal evolution. As Mechling argues, "Consequently, the study of children had the same rationale as the study of American Indian cultures-namely the collection and preservation of the representatives of the savage stage in human evolution" (92). This combination of Romantic and the Darwinian elements, however, has led to a view of childhood as a time of innocence and to a view of children as the innocent; as Romantic innocents, children have no knowledge of good and evil, while as Darwinian innocents, they have no knowledge of what are considered the more advanced stages of civilized development. From there it is but a brief step to seeing children, as most people do today, as innocents who must be protected nom the "real world." How often do we tell children that this or that activity or topic is "for adults" or that they will "learn about that when they are older"?

The division of material into what is acceptable for children and what is not, a division perpetrated by adults, of course, explains why there was such official shock at the materials in *Cinderella Dressed in Yella,* Phil Burrows' photographs, and the *Children's Folklore Review.* There is, however, a great deal of traditional material passed on by and among children which adults might fiind offensive and which has only recently been available in such collections as Herbert and Mary Knapp's *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976), Sandra McCosh's *Children's Humour* (1976), and Simon Bronner's *American Children's Folklore* (1988), among others. These three collections alone illustrate the wealth of what adults would call offensive, if not outright obscene, material circulating among the children. And the children know how adults feel about this material, and so they do not often allow adults—who

seem to have forgotten it-to know of its existence. This ignorance, then, reinforces the adult belief that children are innocent or, at least, that *their own* children are innocent of such material.

This view of children as innocents, especially, has also led to what Mechling calls the "trivialization of childhood. . . trivial, in this view, to the extent that it is merely an indication of the past or a potential for the future, not something whole and meaningful in its own right. This 'triviality barrier' continues to plague the inquiry into the nature of children's folklife" (92). Mechling might have gone on to say that this triviality barrier pertains to virtually every aspect of the intersection of professional adult activities and the lives and culture of children. Certainly children's literature is as trivialized as children's folklore and childhood itself. As Ursula K. Le Guin comments, "There is seldom big quick money in kiddylit. . . . But the economic discrimination is only an element, as usual, of the real problem; a reflection of a prejudice. The real problem isn't the money, it's the adult chauvinist piggery" (44). The same is true of elementary school teachers; how else can you explain the fact that elementary school teachers are among the most overworked and under-paid professionals who deal with children? The situation for day care and preschool workers is even worse. And it is almost pointless to discuss the way that the social and economic evaluation of someone who "merely" stays home and takes care of children has changed in the last four decades. It is only in medicine, a sacred cow of another kind, where those who deal with children have a status in the general society equal to the status of their peers who deal only with adults. They are "doctors," after all.

Not only does our culture see childhood as a trivial time and time of innocence, it also sees it a stage which must be out grown and left behind. The attitude is evident in our folk speech and in the way we speak to children. We tell our children: "Don't talk baby talk," "Act your age," "Grow up," "Stop acting like a baby," "You're not a baby anymore," "You're older now, and you've got to start taking more responsibility," "That's kids' stuff," and "You're too old for that." Sometimes, we give them mixed signals, telling them that they're old enough to be responsible for cleaning their rooms but too young to go to the beach for the weekend with their friends. Moreover, our society has made a number of privileges age-related rather than awarded by ability or responsibility; and many of those privileges-especially those having to do with cars, alcohol, and relationships with members of the opposite sex-are much anticipated. Children, themselves, recognize this necessity to age and castigate an unfortunate peer who acts, in their estimation, younger than his or her years, using "baby" or "cry baby, cry" as derisive terms. It is unfortunate, as C.S. Lewis says, that we imagine growing up as a train which leaves one station for the next (26).

How well does the adult remember the child that he or she was? The recent t-shirt which proclaims "The older I get, the better I was!" suggests that we do not remember all that well, and Jay Mechling argues that folklorists must "approach children's folk cultures as [they] would any unfamiliar culture" (93). My comments in this paper suggest that the problems adult collectors have with both the collecting and publishing of children's folklore stem not only from misperceptions of a folkloric nature, but from misperceptions within the culture as a whole. In fact, I believe that it is safe to say that the adult cultural worldview, into which children are educated, also educates them out of their own cultural worldview-and out of their own culture. Thus, it is not just the study of children's folklore which is made difficult by this naive adult view of children as innocents, it is virtually every aspect of adult-child relations and some aspects of adult-adult relations as well. It can be quite difficult, then, to really know what children believe and believe what children know.

East Carolina University

NOTES

This article was read as a paper at the 1995 American Folklore Society meetings and is a distillation of three hours of lectures I gave at the Fife Conference, Utah State University, June 1995.

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