A JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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Source: *English Studies in Latin America*, No. 14 (January 2018)

ISSN: 0719-9139

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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English Studies in Latin America
ISSN: 0719-9139
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An interview with Dr. Philip Nel

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1 Andrea Casals is currently a postdoctoral fellow at U. Católica (FONDECYT #3170134), with a research project on environmental awareness in contemporary Chilean illustrated literature for young people. She teaches at the English program in Facultad de Letras (U. Católica) and is one of ESLA's editors.

Dr. Philip Nel is Director of the Children's Literature Program at Kansas State University, author of *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017) and *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dodged the FBI, and Transformed Children's Literature* (2012) and co-editor of *Keywords for Children's Literature* (2011) with Lissa Paul and *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* (2008) with Julia Mickenberg, among others. Last August he was invited by the Chilean Ministry of Education to open the *Seminario Internacional ¿Qué leer? ¿Cómo leer?: Lectura e Inclusión* held at Universidad Católica with a keynote called "Was the Cat in the Hat Black?". The local audience responded to his arguments with a big round of applause. Reading children´s literature as a boy himself, he became a lifelong reader, yet professor Nel does not romanticize children´s books, actually, he takes them very seriously, and that was made clear during his presentation in Santiago. In this brief interview he offers us further insights to his arguments.

Andrea Casals: During your recent participation at the seminar "Lectura e Inclusión" held in Santiago, Chile, you received a spontaneous round of applause for your opening statement apologizing for your country's partaking in the Chilean *coup d'etat* in 1973. You also pointed out the current irony that now your country is led by a government that has possibly been elected with the aid of foreign intervention. Do you think such insight is shared among other fellow citizens?

Philip Nel: When most Americans think of September 11, they think of 2001 and not 1973. We should think of both — the terrorist attack on the US, but also our country's terrorist attack on Chile. Both are crimes against humanity. In 1973, the US was committing the crime. In 2001, we were the victims of the crime. When we remember the traumas of our 2001, we should remember the traumas our country inflicted on Chile in 1973. You ask is it a personal conclusion? I can say only that it is my conclusion. I'm sure it's shared by some of my fellow citizens, but I do not know how many.

Many more of my fellow citizens understand that Russian interference helped Trump win in 2016. Every day, we discover more evidence of his campaign's collusion, of hacked voting machines, Facebook ads from Russians posing as Americans, and so on. Indeed, during his presidential

campaign, Trump directly asked Russia to hack Hillary Clinton's emails: "I will tell you this, Russia: If you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press." I cannot recall any other presidential candidate who has openly invited another country to engage in espionage to support his candidacy. So, on the subject of Vladimir Putin assisting the Trump campaign, my opinion more closely aligns with that of other Americans — though more with Democrats than with Republicans.

AC: Your talk in the seminar "Was the Cat in the Hat Black?" was very inspiring and enthusiastically received, despite the fact the audience was not very familiar with the books you were discussing. Though Dr. Seuss is such a North American icon, what would you say are the threads that bond your main points in this talk to the broader audience?

PN: Thanks again to you and everyone for their generous response to my talk! Though I would not claim that Chilean racism and American racism operate identically, I would say that — anywhere in the world — structural oppression can be invisible, subtly woven into the culture we consume. So, in children's books, some examples could be the persistent influence of racial caricature, the relative scarcity of people of color, fewer female heroines than male heroes, the invisibility of trans people, or any other way in which marginalized communities get further marginalized. Inasmuch as my talk resonated with the audience in Santiago, I would guess that's why.

AC: Your essay "Radical Children's Literature Now!" (2011, co-written with Julia Mickenberg) and the anthology *Tales for Little Rebels* (2008, co-edited with Mickenberg) highlight "progressive tales, old and new" that can inspire the next generation "to create a better future for everyone" (*Tales*. . . 5), important as this may be, as a literary critic, how do you deal with the balancing aesthetic value and ideological concerns in children's literature?

PN: I think the key is to recognize that aesthetic value and ideological concerns are interdependent and, for that matter, mutually constitutive. For example, if your lived experience differs from the experience of a novel's narrator, you might find his story less credible — and thus not as strong. On the other hand, a picture book's racism might distract you from the fact that it is well-written

and beautifully illustrated. So, I think we must always be mindful of how our own assumptions and experiences might shape our response to a book.

In terms of radical children's literature, I tend to be a bit more willing to forgive a work's weaker aesthetic values if it is (for instance) promoting peace, equal rights, or environmental justice. But I am also aware of my bias, and, of course, my forgiveness has limits. I will say that, in "Radical Children's Literature Now," we chose books that we thought were aesthetically strong, too. That claim is generally true of *Tales for Little Rebels*, also, but part of the goal of that book was simply to establish the existence of a corpus of radical work for children that had been ignored (and in some cases denied).

AC: In the "Forward" of the book *Tales for Little Rebels*, Jake Zipes argues that when authors explore the "roots" of the lived experiences being portrayed [in children's literature], they became "radical" … if these authors are honest, then these radical narratives are "sad" because many children live under deplorable conditions. Along these lines, how have the experiences lived by children in indigenous communities in the US been represented (or are they underrepresented)? In your search for radical children´s books, have you found Indigenous writers and/or Indigenous protagonists? Would you say these are honest representations? or have authors romanticized such experiences as in what Greg Garrard calls the "ecological Indian" myth (in *Ecocriticims* 2004)? I have read Sherman Alexie´s "The joy of reading and writing: Superman and me" and I know he has written for children, but I am unaware of anything beyond that essay... so I am truly looking forward to what you can say...

PN: Children's experience in indigenous communities are underrepresented in children's literature — both in general and in the US, specifically. The best person to answer your question would be Debbie Reese, whose *American Indians in Children's Literature* is a good place to begin. I've developed some expertise in African American children's literature. Though I have read some Native American children's literature, I know far less in that area than I would like and so don't feel comfortable offering a definitive answer on the subject.

You might check out the "Top 100 books by Indigenous Masters" http://blogs.slj.com/afuse8production/2014/02/26/top-100-books-by-indigenous-masters/# , a list she co-wrote. Or take a look at this page with resources on "best books by or about American Indians". https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.cl/p/best-books.html

Since you mention Alexie, his *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) — a semi-autobiographical novel — is widely taught in U.S. schools. I have taught it myself. It tackles lots of myths about indigenous peoples, including the ecological Indian myth (though that particular critique is not a dominant theme). Regarding Jack Zipes' comment about radical children's literature being sad, Alexie's novel is a mixture of both heartbreak and humor. As to whether Alexie's novel is radical, I would argue that it isn't because (without giving away too much of the plot) the protagonist's solution helps himself but not his community. It does expose the structural racism that his community experiences, but its path out — for the main character — does not address larger systemic inequalities.

AC: In Chile, over the past decade, children's literature has become increasingly popular in the publishing sector, yet in the essay "Radical Children's Literature Now!" (2011) you and Julia Mickenberg discuss texts that promote less consumerism as a strategy for environmental well-being. How do you see these two forces coming to terms?

PN: Recycling only gets us so far. Actually using less, being less wasteful will have a more profound impact on the planet — and our survival as a species. While recycling is good, it nonetheless expends energy; not generating the recyclable material in the first place is even better. To point to two books discussed in the article, Jonah Winter's *Here Comes the Garbage Barge* (2010) dramatizes the problem of what to do with the waste we generate, and Thomas King and Gary Clement's *A Solstice Tale* (2009) satirizes the impulse to consume.

AC: In Chile, children's and young adult literature is a field that has received little academic attention beyond pedagogical concerns. As Head of the Children's Literature program at Kansas State University, how do you envision the future of research on and scholarly interest in children's and young readers' literature?

PN: I think the future of research in the field will be in the following areas. Not surprisingly, I'm encouraged by scholars who focus on the many kinds of experience represented in (or omitted from) books for young readers. I'm looking forward to reading Marilisa Jiménez Garcia's book on the formation of Latino/a literature and media for youth, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' forthcoming *The Dark Fantastic*. A second area will address how technology shapes the way young people read — transmedia narratives (that is, stories that unfold across multiple platforms), enhanced e-books, and whatever other new technologies of reading may emerge. A third will include children's own voices, as both readers and creators of stories. If we agree that children's and young adult literature is defined by its audience, then we need to pay more attention to that audience. Fortunately, we can via fan communities (and the fan fiction they create) and via listening to young people's experiences of reading.

AC: And along these lines, would you share with us how your own dive into children's literature as an academic interest developed?

PN: Children's literature is the reason that I became an English Professor, but I did not realize that until well after I earned the Ph.D. Children's literature made me a reader. Since I liked reading, I became an English major. Realizing, as a college junior, that reading books and writing papers was far more appealing than seeking a "real job," I applied to graduate programs in English. Though I enjoyed writing an honors thesis on William Faulkner, the books of early childhood were more important: they instilled in me a love of reading.

A chapter of my dissertation was on Dr. Seuss. That chapter — "Dada Knows Best: Growing Up 'Surreal' with Dr. Seuss" — became my first conference paper (1997) and, in its revised form, my first published article (1999). Until I wrote that chapter, I had not been aware that one could do scholarly work on children's literature. (Though there are more opportunities for graduate study in children's literature now, many of us in the field are autodidacts.)

My move into children's literature began by chance, but became pragmatic. With the exception of the Seuss chapter, my dissertation was on American literature and music for grown-ups. So, when I got the degree, I thought I was a twentieth-century Americanist.

But I couldn't get a job interview as a twentieth-century Americanist. So, I reasoned, if I market myself as both a twentieth-century Americanist and a Children's Lit specialist, then I ought to increase my odds of finding that elusive academic gig. This decision to publish and present in both fields seemed to help. Three years after receiving the degree, I landed a tenure-track job at the university where I still teach today.