

A murder of darlings: the editor, the experience gap and children's authorship

Editor's note: To preserve the quirky and whimsical nature of the fiction, this paper crosses the borders of some editing conventions and of the house style used for the proceedings.

Kevin Price

There is a sign above Art Lazaar's door, originally fashioned in glyptic letters but now rendered virtually unreadable beneath a cake of industrial grime, announcing that he is in possession of a *poetic license*, a duly notarised certificate long lost to the bottom drawer of his desk, which lends him charter to delve into great mysteries. He is versed in such things as oriental mysticism, out-dated literary theories and why women read more than men—the kinds of things that help him bring resolve to those who have lost important theoretical devices.

The client introduced himself as Harry Stetman. Art shook the man's hand and studied him as he dusted off a seat in his client lounge. He was a funny little man whose ear lobes looped down and anchored on his mandible like Paul Simon's, and whose blue eyes were of such intensity that they seemed not so much to see Art while he listened, as to watch his mind.

'The problem,' the client said, his voice clear and crisp, and devoid of affectation, 'is that without it, I find it impossible to function.'

Art jotted a note on his pad. 'I see,' he said without looking up. 'Please describe it.'

'It is ... an *experience gap*.'

'Right.' Art dragged the 'i' a little further into an 'r' than he intended. He drew a picture and continued his line of inquiry. 'And this has been ... removed?' The other nodded. 'What remains in its place?'

Stetman stared. 'What remain—? What do you expect remains when an object is taken?'

'But it is not an object,' Art said. 'If anything, it is a non-object; therefore I would expect that something remains where once your experience gap appeared. If your gap had a historically real function, then I would expect that what remains is its inversion, its ideological production.'¹

The man simply looked blank.

'Foucault,' Art said.

'I'm sorry, did you just tell me to fu—'



About the author

Kevin Price, a musician and former music producer, began writing for a living in 1988 as a magazine columnist. After completing his first novel in 2005 he developed a program teaching primary and secondary students key techniques of fiction writing and story craft. He has since mentored over 400 students writing narrative fiction and has edited and published 35 volumes of student work, to be found in over 50 WA school libraries.





‘No, I said Foucault—a name, a proper noun.’

‘So, you are suspecting this person ... Foucault?’

‘No, what I said; it is from Foucault ... he wrote about the disappearance of the author, but it seems to me that the disappearance of your gap may be the same thing.’

‘Oh. How so?’

You are an editor, right?’ Stetman nodded. ‘And you edit that which is written for young readers?’ Again, he nodded. ‘This gap you speak of is the difference of experience between your author and your reader ... ’ another nod. ‘What has changed?’

‘It is hard to say, possibly the author.’

‘You think the author is somehow important in this?’

‘Well, of course, the author produces the work.’

‘And that is just the point. The author, he is creative and a genius. The child-reader, on the other hand, she is learning and exploring; and they are brought together because of you ... ’ Stetman beamed at Art’s insight. ‘But your author only provides your child-reader with part



of the journey, he limits and chooses what it is he thinks the child-reader should know, should learn. He is assuming he is in a superior—'

'Well, he is awarded—'

'Yes, of course. Perhaps what he and you both fail to recognise is that "children ... extract what they want from a book and no more."² Gillian Avery said that. Perhaps your gap has disappeared behind the work and the child-reader has taken charge.'

Art showed Harry Stetman to the door and began sorting his facts into loose clumps. Staring down the barrel of a long night of reading, he pulled the first clump toward him; the one labelled, *The Author*.

When, much later, he finally stumbled home, he had arrived at only one conclusion. The editor, he decided, is afraid that the author has lost his meaning and his missing *experience gap* is an indication that no meaning is being produced by the work; he fears that the author has been replaced. This was an important clue. What he was not prepared for was how far into the abyss this investigation would lead.

The following morning, Art Lazaar met his client at a coffee shop known especially for its atmosphere of intellectual discourse. 'Tell me,' he asked, 'from where do you think this experience gap materialised?' It had long been a practice of his to ask questions to which he already had an answer.

'Andrew Melrose made a point of it,' Stetman replied, 'when he said, "nowhere else are power structures as obvious as they are ... in the culture adults produce for children."³

Art was impressed. 'But he also credits Jacqueline Rose, does he not? who raised it in *The case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, in which she says: "Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) but where neither enter the space in-between."⁴ It is this space in-between that you seek, but I'm not convinced that it is necessarily a void not entered by either the writer or reader as Rose puts it.'

'Seems pretty clear to me,' the other said. 'The author has the ideas, the reader receives and reinterprets them—makes sense out of them—which is why there's a gap. That is what the reader is looking for: the experience that comes from outside.'

A dollop of coffee crema quivered on Harry Stetman's bottom lip as he lowered his cup to its saucer.

Art dived in. 'But so-called children's literature does something different. The child is an outsider to it, not party to its making or choosing, but is somehow taken in and framed within the work. In any case, it has to be said that the author is of little consequence.'

'Of little consequence? That is ridiculous—authors with whom I have worked have awards for children's literature.'

'I know. In fact I have a picture of one of your authors receiving one,' Art said, flipping through images on his smart phone and holding it up for Stetman. 'But I do not see any *children* awarding it to him. Tell me, how do we know J.K. Rowling?'

The other sipped his coffee. 'Through Harry Potter, of course.'

Art gestured with his hands cupped upward. 'So it is only the work that matters. And if Rowling's recent foray into adult fiction is anything to go by, it may prove a point.'

'Oh?'



Art Lazaar dug into a bright green folder and riffled through a sheaf of papers, eventually extracting the one he sought. ‘Here, Juliet Marillier wrote a criticism recently of *The Casual Vacancy*. Get this ... she wrote: “Rowling would have got her point across more effectively with defter storytelling and a lighter touch—we did not need the authorial sledgehammer.”’⁵

‘Curious,’ Stetman said, picking up Art’s thread. ‘Is Marillier suggesting the author is trying to assert an identity outside of the work for which she is known?’

‘I would say an identity and an ideology, Harry.’ He shrugged, pausing to let his point sink in. Then he continued.

‘But this is much more. Here we have an author who has raised millions of readers from children into adults. However, as Melrose has pointed out, children who read usually only do so with work written for them by adults —people like Rowling. But, tell me, what say do children have in claiming what is their literature?’

Stetman shrugged. ‘None, I guess. But how could they? They cannot know what is good reading.’

Art waved the page he was holding as though it held all of the answers. ‘Of course they cannot, because their literature is written for readers who are not them.’

Harry Stetman’s confusion showed in the furrows on his brow. ‘For readers who are not them?’

‘Exactly,’ Art said, looking down at his page and reading from it. ‘According to the Association of American Publishers, Children’s-*stroke*-young-adult fiction was the fastest growing category in publishing last year. In its report, the Association noted the prodigious growth in popularity among adult readers.’ He looked into his client’s blue eyes. ‘Adult readers, Harry. Jack Zipes said it back in two thousand, in *The Phenomenon of Harry Potter*, or *Why All the Talk?* He says, ‘given the purchasing tendencies of Americans, we can assume that adults are buying the books for children *and* themselves.’⁸ My point, Harry, is that the real reader is not a child at all, but an adult who speaks for the child: initially, you as editor and the publisher for whom you work, but following from there, a parent, grandparent, teacher, librarian—those who make purchasing decisions and reading recommendations. These are the first readers, and in the case of the very young, they are the mediators; the storytellers, where the adult’s voice substitutes for the author’s. Above all, they are the ones who buy your author’s book, mostly as a gift, so they have to believe in its worthiness ...’ Art was thoughtful for a moment before continuing. ‘But to find your missing gap, we still need the ideal reader’s response.’

In a small meeting room off his local library, Art faced a coalescence of thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds harvested from local schools, twenty-eight per cent of whom were boys. He learnt quickly that the child-reader, as Nicholas Tucker pointed out, was far from a cut-down version of the adult one.⁹

‘Why do you read fiction?’ he asked.

‘To gain knowledge,’ was the first answer.

Art’s interest soared. ‘Really? Where do you find knowledge in fiction?’

‘Where the story takes you.’

Insightful, Art thought, immediately reminded of Mary Burchard Orvis’s¹⁰ and Norman N Holland’s¹¹ theories, and the argument that the more proficient readers become the more they make use of the symbols in a work to replicate themselves and the particular fantasies that are personally characteristic.

‘What knowledge do you get from fiction?’ he asked.



‘How the world works,’ one child offered, ‘especially parts that are different from your own.’

The discussion that followed unveiled important aspects of the child reader’s response to what she considered a world different from her own. In the end, it seemed clear to Art that the story, at least in the minds of his audience, should take the child-reader to a place in which they can aspire to greater self-determination, be embedded with symbols by which they can recognise themselves, and be given the opportunity to become part of the solution to the problems encountered by the hero. Which is what he told his client when they met, once again, the following day.

He passed over a page with a number of graphs on it.

Stetman zeroed in on one particular headline figure. ‘Only twenty-seven per cent choose a book because of the author’s name or reputation?’

‘So it seems,’ Art said. ‘Although the sample is too small to be statistically significant, it does seem to support the suggestion that your author may not be as important to the child-reader as the cover or title.’

‘It is similar to research carried out in nineteen-ninety-six by the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature in the UK,’ he continued. ‘But research carried out by Rosemary Hopper¹³ six years later among children of a similar age to our group identified prior knowledge of the author as the main driver of choice.’

‘Could that be the Harry Potter phenomenon?’ Harry asked.

‘It could be,’ Art replied. ‘Along with *Alex Rider* and *Lemony Snicket*. Series fiction for young readers was growing rapidly and these in particular were made into movies. Global celebrity started to become the fast track to sales success.’

When Art and his client parted that afternoon, they were both feeling somewhat upbeat about their progress. Art noted the irony of his observation that the gap of understanding between him and his client appeared to be narrowing. The feeling may have been short-lived.

The following day, Art met again with Harry Stetman at their favoured coffee shop.

‘I think childhood is in danger,’ he said, dragging his chair along the floor like a kid with a toy box.

‘You think? In what way?’

‘Hijacked, kidnapped ... maybe even murdered.’

‘Murdered?’ Stetman exclaimed. ‘That is a big statement, what makes you say that?’

‘I get the impression that it is in the interests of some for children to exit childhood as soon as possible and remain in teen-hood for as long as possible. It means we get children whose experience of childhood is packaged and homogenised, sheltered and stunted, and young-adults for whom the idea of adult responsibility is impossible.’

‘Are you sure you are not making it up?’

Art was a little surprised at Stetman’s surly tone but, like a rock on the riverbed, he let it wash over him. ‘Let us consider a couple of theoretical positions,’ he said. ‘Frederick Jameson made the point that postmodern society seeks the commodification of culture and that late capitalism depends on the reproduction of artefacts rather than the creation and production of them. He says, “The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles.”¹⁴



‘And second, in *the Cultural Homogenization of American Children*, Jack Zipes argues that certain cultural practices, reading among them, “send contradictory messages that are bound to undermine [the child’s] capacity to develop a sense of morality and ethics ... their autonomy will be governed by prescribed market interests of corporations that have destroyed communities and the self-determination of communities.”¹⁵ It seems to me that we have a dire situation in which any possible freedom associated with childhood has been summarily removed in pursuit of “transforming cultural practices into consumer addictions.”’

Stetman’s furrowed brow took Art to the brink of suggesting a treatment of Botox. ‘Are you saying that the publishing industry offers the child-reader nothing new in terms of an experience?’

Art Lazaar leaned forward on his elbows, and stared above his glasses into the mirrored blue of Harry Stetman’s eyes. ‘Winnie-the-Pooh made five-point-six billion dollars in two-thousand-and-four, the second-highest earning fictional character in that year.¹⁷ When A A Milne first published him in nineteen-twenty-six, he was a fresh voice based on tales and poems that Milne reportedly told to his own child. So unique and vivid was this character that Kenneth Slesinger put him to work selling china-ware, clothes and board games and he has not stopped since. Today, Disney creates new stories “framed in false authenticity by being wrapped up in the ever same tirelessness ... of *classic* stories for children,”¹⁸ doing precisely what Rose tells us: “soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction”¹⁹ of children. Now is this telling you anything?’

A legacy of years spent editing financial pages had bequeathed Harry Stetman a quick mathematical mind. ‘That if every child in the world had paid for a single Winnie-the-Pooh experience that year, it would have cost that child two dollars and ninety-five cents.’ He paused before asking, as though for his own ears, ‘Where is the story experience?’

Then his finger stabbed toward Art’s chest across the table. ‘But I get the feeling that you are saying the experience the culture industry is peddling has nothing to do with a knowledge experience—which is where the gap I’m looking for should be. You seem to be saying it is more to do with an experience of homogeneity, of belonging, of being part of the same club.’

‘Exactly,’ Art said, sensing the penny drop. ‘In order to maintain its audience, the culture industry manipulates a difference between desire and denial. The more it generates a desire for its products and the more it creates temporary apparent denial of fulfilment—which is really the way series fiction works—the more control it exerts over the cultural product and its consumption. It is how they guarantee that children “buy” into their products long before their availability.’

The editor raised his hand to call a pause in the discussion. ‘I need to digest some of this, Art. Can we meet again tomorrow?’

The next day, over a lunch of Fremantle prawns and Harvey salads, and a crisp Swan Valley Chardonnay, Art Lazaar listened as his client summed up his understanding.

‘So, we have three distinct stages in the reader experience: at one end, young children, and at the other, young-adults, but in-between, our reader—the child-reader. The experience gap for the young child is clearly based on the notion that the child has not yet learnt to read and the author is introducing that child to the idea of reading and investigating the wider world through it. The author is immaterial in this relationship except that if Mum likes Madonna, she will possibly be inclined to buy Madonna’s book and read it to her child.

‘The experience gap for the young-adult is more along the lines that the young-adult reader is becoming adult and engaging in adult-like experiences. Vanessa Harbour seems to think the young-adult moves in to occupy the in-between space.²⁰ But the middle gap seems less obvious. Why?’



Art cracked a prawn shell and fed the tail into his mouth and swallowed. He dunked his fingers in the finger-bowl and dried them on his serviette.

‘From our conversations we have learnt that the young reader is looking for a good read—that is, a read that gives them a knowledge experience. This they get through structure, right?’ Harry Stetman nodded. ‘But if the story lacks structure, or the structure is not apparent to them, they close the book. This comes not from the presumption of a gap in the experience but, as Judith Langer has pointed out, from a lack of commonality in knowledge.’²¹

Art took a pen and drew on a paper napkin and held it up for Stetman to see. In one half, he had drawn two separate circles; in the other, a type of Venn diagram that showed the two circles overlapping. He continued to explain.

‘Melrose said, “if adults took more time to meet children at the cusp of their knowledge and experience, story would be all the better for it.”²² To my way of thinking, this mirrors Marilyn Adams and Bertram Bruce’s point that “the goodness of the match between the knowledge the author has presumed of the reader and that actually possessed by the reader”²³ is possibly the major determinant for a good read.’

Stetman nodded.

‘So I asked our young readers how they would feel about reading works written by authors who were their peers, child-authors of the same age, where the knowledge base is of a similar character. They told me—and they were pretty much unanimous in this—that they would welcome works written by authors of a similar age because ...’ Art fished for a page in his tattered green folder and read from it: “because it would be relating to your own experience ... we would be sharing the experience at the same level.”

‘Impossible,’ Stetman blurted. ‘The child is not capable of articulating a story—of providing the structure—in the way the child-reader would find acceptable.’

‘Do not be too sure, Harry, I may have a surprise or two for you. But, let us take Melrose’s point that “children understand more than they can articulate.” Apart from saying that I think this is true of all people, child or otherwise, it holds a valuable clue. I say we give the child the tools to be the author. There is a creatively critical and critically creative way to increase their powers of articulation. And it has results.’

Art once again fished in his tattered green folder and drew out several slim volumes. He opened the first at what appeared to be a randomly chosen page and read:

‘By four in the afternoon, Cassie Milligan had skipped breakfast, failed a maths test, fallen off a balcony, and died.’²⁵

‘That is a fourteen year-old writing,’ he said. ‘Here is another, this time an eleven year-old:

It was early in the morning. Neiko and LooGoo sneaked out carefully and quietly, making sure nobody heard or saw them.

“I think it’s safe now,” Neiko said. “I just don’t want my father to know that we’re going because I’m not allowed to go very far without him supervising. And I’m sure he’d screw it up.”²⁶

‘And another, this time a thirteen year-old:

Butch had been giving me trouble ever since I arrived at the orphanage but Damion was always there to help me. Butch was scared of him because he was younger than Damion. That and because of the time he put Butch in hospital with a nice broken nose and [an] inflamed butt from an atomic wedgie.’²⁷

‘One more,’ Art said, ‘Just to leave you with a taste:



*There is a rule in the Christmas Handbook, written eons ago, that every one-hundred-and-fifty years, the current Santa must stand down and choose a successor.*²⁸

Harry Stetman sat with his mouth agape. ‘Are children getting to read this work?’

‘Some,’ Art Lazaar replied. ‘I believe there are some forty to fifty school libraries with this collection. I spoke with one teacher-librarian at a well known Catholic college who had a year-six class read this series of publications and told me that the students enjoyed the work very much, suggesting that it gave them a sense of what they could aspire to in their own writing. An English teacher who used the *Romance* and *Fantasy* volumes from this series for genre studies with his year-nine class, said the group’s readership level was very high; he felt the class engaged readily. I was invited to witness a class of upper primary students in their silent reading time and these books were selected from the classroom shelves—apparently they often are. The students told me afterwards that they enjoyed reading them because the stories were short and they were interesting. The librarian at a girl’s school showed me borrowing records that indicated a period throughout the year when the books were rarely on the shelf.’

‘So this is child-centred authorship,’ Harry Stetman said, ‘with no experience gap. How is it edited?’

‘At a technical level, at least,’ Art replied, ‘the work has to stand spine to-spine with any other work the child-reader responds to. But, unlike a lot of stories written for the child-reader in which the voice, the language, is self-consciously child-like, in these works the voice of the author rings loud and clear. It is not child-like, but *of* the child. So the editor, as first reader, needs to be hearing the voice of the author.’

‘But, still, the children are not self-selecting them entirely.’

‘Of course,’ Art said, ‘the network of gatekeepers between the author and the reader, all adult, still has to be negotiated. But that is an investigation for another time.’

They parted ways at the end of the lunch after a warm handshake and a promise to keep in touch. Stetman, Art thought, of course, a man who likes to keep things just as they are. I wonder if he will find an experience gap between the authorship of my account and his reading of it. He smiled and practically skipped along the footpath, heading back to his dingy office beneath its sign of poetic license cloaked in industrial grime.

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