Serality and Texts for Young People: The Compulsion to Repeat

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Jo Nesbø’s books about Doctor Proktor, Martin Widmark’s about the Lasse Maja Detective Agency, J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books—a large portion of children’s literature is made up by series books. This is of course not a new phenomenon. When I was a child, I devoured not only Enid Blyton’s Five books but also Merri Vik’s 47 books about the young girl Lotta. In the introduction to Serality and Texts for Young People, the editors notice that there is “a curious gap” (1) in the research of children’s literature where these books are very seldom addressed. We have few studies on serality in children’s literature for a good many reasons, one of them probably being that these books are seldom seen as “worth” studying as series such as Blyton’s have often been seen as lacking originality. It is interesting to note that one of these few studies on serality on children’s literature is David Rudd’s Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children’s Literature from 2000 (a study that is discussed in the introduction), contesting the idea that Blyton’s books should not be an interesting topic for a scholar. Another reason for the lack of studies on serality might be that books such as Nesbø’s and Widmark’s are aimed at an age group whose literature have a tendency to be ignored. We have an abundance of studies on young adult literature and quite a few studies of picturebooks, but I find it difficult to find studies on books for children aged 9–12 and this might be because a number of books for this age group are series books.

Repetition is of course an important part of children’s literature with its connections to both fairy tales and fables, so the “curious gap” mentioned in the introduction is curious indeed. This collection of articles aims to remedy the situation by focusing on serality in children’s literature. The anthology is the result of a symposium, “Narrative, Repetition, and Texts for Young People,” that was held in June 2011 at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, and in many ways this collection of articles is breaking new and fertile ground. In the introduction the editors write:

It is the object of this volume to begin to explore the ways in which investigating serality as practice and form in the field of young people’s texts might point not only to the meanings of particular series texts but also to the cultural functions of series texts for young people and, more generally, for the ways in which young people’s texts function within
The aim of this anthology is to open up a new field of research in children’s literature and in many ways it does succeed in doing this. Using well-known theorists to discuss everything from the joy of repetition to the collector’s need to own every book in a series (yes, I own my own copy of all 47 Lotta books), these articles are both interesting and valuable contributions to the field.

There are, of course, both advantages and disadvantages to breaking new ground. The anthology touches on a great variety of texts and other examples of children’s culture from TV shows to music to computer games. This scope is challenging, as the articles include analyses that differ from each other, both in the “texts” (if using the concept of texts liberally) chosen for the analysis, and in the methods applied. As one of the aims of this collection is to show how well-known theoretical tools can be used to discuss seriality, this broad scope is hardly surprising, but it does give the anthology a bit of a kaleidoscope feeling. In one way that means that the anthology presents its reader with a broad spectrum of analysis and shows how we can think about seriality in many different ways. In another way, this collection of articles is a challenging read and not for the faint hearted. I have to confess to returning to my bookshelf on several occasions to reread a bit of Butler, Derrida, or Eliade to fully appreciate the analyses.

There is a great number of theorists present in these articles from Freud, Deleuze, Kristeva, and so on. Even if there is a certain kind of pleasure revisiting these theorists and exploring how their ideas can be transformed to tools useful in analysing seriality in children’s literature, I do, on a few occasions, feel that the theoretical discussion steals a bit too much thunder from the texts that are being analysed. This is of course a difficult balance, as the collection wants us to seek both new tools and new texts to focus on. But having said that, I must again say that I do think this anthology is, indeed, breaking new ground and the articles in it are all both well written and inspiring. Let me give a few examples.

The articles focus on both well-known phenomena from popular children’s culture to historical examples where the object under scrutiny is less familiar. Eliza T. Dresang and Kathleen Campana discuss Harry Potter in their article and in trying to understand why Rowling’s books are so popular and why so many children read them again and again, they discuss both intertextuality and intratextuality. Analysis focusing on intertextuality has become more and more common as we see a great deal of intertextual flirtation in today’s popular culture. I am growing a bit weary of students reading Lisbeth Salander as Pippi, for example. But the idea of intratextuality is not quite so often addressed. For many readers, rereading the Harry Potter novels becomes almost like a treasure hunt as Rowling gives away clues to both future character development and upcoming events. These readers become explorers, searching for new pathways in the saga of Harry Potter, and as they read these texts again and again, they become what Dresang and Campana call “astute readers.” Could this be one of the explanations of the huge success of the Harry Potter books? There is, of course, a comfort in returning to a book we have read before, but if we also discover something new in rereading it, that would of course heighten the experience and lure us into rereading it yet again. This feeling of pleasure in discovering new details in a text we know well can, of course, be made even stronger if shared by a community, and even if we have several studies on Harry Potter fanfiction and fandom, I cannot help thinking this is a trail worth pursuing.

Another kind of intratextuality is discussed in Laura M. Robinson’s article on the Anne of Green Gables series. In the later books, Montgomery not only connects to the earlier ones to create a familiar and safe environment for the reader to revisit but also includes critical comments on her earlier work that borders on parody. This becomes more apparent when we read the books in the order that they were written. Connecting to an earlier text in the series can serve several different purposes. Robinson says: “Ultimately, Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables series suggest that serial fiction can offer a critique of earlier work while at the same time trading on the popularity” (59). Robinson’s article points out how intratextuality can work in so many different ways.

Intratextuality is also discussed in yet another way in Brandon Christopher’s article on superhero comics, which focuses on Superman and The Swamp Thing, among others. Connecting to an older version of, say, Superman can be done in different ways by, for example, reusing an image such as the classic S on Superman’s chest or by alluding to a well-known fact (such as Superman in the traditional series always change in a phone booth) and then have our hero change behind a billboard depicting a phone booth. As I was reading the article, I immediately stumbled on
another example of a similar kind of repetition. In the new TV series The Flash (2014), Barry Allen’s father is played by John Wesley Shipp who played the Flash in the TV series from 1990, which also reads like the kind of repetition the article focuses on. Christopher not only discusses the nostalgia present in many superhero comics but also shows that these kind of intratextual connections serve not just as nostalgic reminders but also as a kind of slightly warped repetition that moves the storyline further on.

Some of the most popular books for children have a tendency to be transformed into everything from toys to colouring books to computer games, and so on. And popular computer games such as the World of Warcraft are turned into books. How should we understand these transformations? Jeff Kinney’s Diary of a Wimpy Kid is discussed by Margaret Mackey as she compares these books to the Roy Roger phenomena from the 1940s and 50s. We today tend to view examples such as that of Diary of a Wimpy Kid, which started out as a web page, moved on to becoming books, then transformed to a movie, to a computer game, and to several other products, as very modern, but Mackey clearly shows that there are several similarities to Roy Rogers where children could meet their hero on the big screen, on TV, in commercials, and in comics. Connecting this article to Kristine Moruzi’s, which not only discusses Atalanta, a magazine for girls first published in 1887 in the States, but also focuses on the joy of collecting is, in my eyes, very fruitful. In reflecting on this popular magazine that came out once a month, Moruzi not only discusses the non-human animal, into national packs”.

Smith, in her reading of the Victorian School Papers, compares how these texts through repetition slowly build the idea of the nation in the child’s mind, with the way we teach children the most basic skills, through example and repetition: “The process of belonging to a nation or an empire might be understood as a similar acquisition that is internalized within a child through habit” (134). Both articles provide challenging and interesting ways to think about not only what children’s literature says about the nation but also how it is said.

Why did I reread the 47 Lotta books over and over again as a child? Rose Lovell-Smith in her article turns to Kierkegaard to understand the joy of repetition. The Howl’s Moving Castle series by Diana Wynne Jones shows how certain elements in these books are repeated over and over again. Lovell-Smith raises an interesting thought. We have probably all experienced how children, especially young children, ask to be read the same book over and over until they know it by heart. Lovell-Smith discusses how reading both develops and sustains selfhood and asks:

Perhaps these children need to relive an earlier reading so often because it restores and confirms to them a recent past expansion of the self, a growth spurt of the soul caused by a certain book. (82)

Trying to understand both the need to reread a beloved book and the lure of reading a whole series of books where repetition is an important part of the story telling, this idea seems fruitful to pursue. And, I am very fond of the idea of how reading certain books causes our souls to grow.
There are several more articles in this anthology I have not discussed that focus on everything from L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* series to *Buffy—the Vampire Slayer* and they all, in different ways, return to seriality and to repetition. To repeat, says my dictionary, means to say or to do something again, to reproduce, to revisit, and to recapitulate. *Seriality and Texts for Young People* shows how repetition in children’s literature is a complex and interesting topic and their hope “that this volume will help shape a critical conversation in the field” is one that I am sure will be realised.

*Maria Nilson*