



We are familiar with what critics and enthusiasts say about children's books. Less familiar to us is what children say. At Goldsmiths, University of London, we've devoted a module on our MA in Children's Literature to this very subject. Students devise projects which investigate how children respond to children's literature. Over some ten weeks or so, they try out various 'interventions' which aim at producing responses from children, whether that's in talk, writing, drawing, drama or whatever way seems appropriate. Then they analyse what the children have said or done using a mix of tried and tested methods or applying new ones. Some of the best examples of these studies are in this book. They are superbly informative reads just as they are, but we hope that they will also inspire others to do the same.

The more the better!

-Michael Rosen



Cover design by Georgia Cowley



CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ACTION

Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN



Editors:

Richard Charlesworth

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Goldsmiths
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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ACTION

**Edited by Richard Charlesworth, Deborah Friedland
and Helen Jones**

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Professor Vicky Macleroy

Children's Literature in Action

To the team at Goldsmiths for reigniting my passion for Children's Literature; to my parents for starting the spark.

Richard Charlesworth

To Elliot, Rose and Jesse – thank you for the many wonderful hours we spent reading stories when you were little. And for two cute bear cubs, Maya and Orin, who are continuing the family tradition with me.

Deborah Friedland

For my dad, for showing me the power of action research and lifelong learning. For my mum, thank you for giving me my love of children's literature. And for Martin, Sophie, Louisa and Alice, thank you for your patience and participation!

Helen Jones

And, of course, for Julia Hope,
for all her inspiration, support and guidance.

Children's Literature in Action

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CONCLUSION

VICKY MACLEROY

Reflecting back on the vision of this book and its contribution to new ideas and ways of knowing in the field of children's literature, it is apt to consider the spaces we create for new meanings and possibilities. What do we understand by 'in action'? All of these chapters grapple with the messiness and complexities of 'children's literature in action' and how children surprise us with the unexpected, the taboo, humour and a deep sense of empathy. The research studies presented across all these chapters allow us to see, read and interpret children's literature differently. Pahl (2022) in thinking about 'imagining otherwise' talks about freeing language and therefore literacy from its fixedness, taking risks, and recognising that 'children as active researchers and investigators of their world are a key part of this enlarged way of seeing research and practice as intertwined (ibid., p.319).

The chapters in this book are full of children's thoughts, voices and responses to children's literature. This is a testament to the way these MA students have opened up their practice and research to reflect deeply on the issues, tensions, contradictions of working with children's literature and researching with children. It is not easy to research with children and move beyond the response they believe is expected from reading and engaging with children's literature. These MA researchers have been creative and rigorous in setting up their projects and documenting the research process at each stage. Sharing and critiquing their research with peers has enabled their research to remain dynamic and cutting-edge and for these students to slowly gain the courage to step back and allow the children space to put forward their thoughts and build on their ideas. Andrews and Almohammad (2022) talk about how we can create welcoming learning environments through creative arts approaches. This is evident in the chapters in this book where the researchers have opened up the reading experience to multimodal forms of expression and interpretation.

In my own research, I argue that 'children are often forced to chase after an illusory fixed literacy that seems distant from their own rich and noisy experience of language in its multivoicedness' (Macleroy, 2021, p.205). The research projects presented in this book enable us to tune into what children think about children's literature. The researchers have worked hard to create inclusive and collaborative reading spaces where readers can take risks and come up with their own ideas. The varied contexts and sites of learning where reading happens in these research projects demonstrate how children can and do read differently. The exuberance and excitement of these children as they read and share stories is palpable and resonates long after reading the transcripts of children's talk within these studies.

It is powerful for children to 'actively imagine other lives through literature, films, role-plays, photos and art' (Mercer, 2016, p.104) and there is a lack of research into children's 'collaborative construction of new meanings through imagined experience' (Cremin & Maybin, 2013, p.281). The research projects in this book contribute to understanding how children develop ideational fluency and create meanings in and around stories and poetry collaboratively, creatively and critically. Children are given the tools to dig deeply into ideas held in stories, images and poetry and ask new questions about these texts. This type of research is full of contradictions and tensions because it captures the notion that children's literature is a reflection of our lived and imagined experiences and engages with a concept of culture that is steeped in tradition and experience, complexity and weight, and 'humming with life' (Phipps & Gonzales, 2004, p.51).

The research methodologies advocated and fostered through the 'Children's Literature in Action' module are a vital part of decolonising researcher methodologies to listen to children from very diverse backgrounds, cultures and languages. In drawing on an action research approach, many of the new researchers in this book demonstrate how research interacts with practice and both are changed through this process. The chapters are written by teachers, deputy headteachers, creative writers, illustrators, poets, editors, lecturers, and people working for book clubs and the National Literacy Trust. These research projects are

important as they help to bring about real change in thinking about how children respond to and read children's literature and the books they enjoy reading and why. These projects bring reading in from the margins in thinking about how a comics club can push for new library spaces in a school or how spoken word poetry transforms the way young people talk about their cultures and use language. Picturebooks used with older children demonstrate the sophistication of how they read multimodally and engage with hard and difficult emotions. Researchers interrogate what happens when you move reading relationships online and have to navigate these new digital spaces.

The 'Children's Literature in Action' book demonstrates 'in action' what happens when you have a MA Children's Literature programme that values the different aspects of children's literature that make it such a varied and vibrant form of study. The programme has 3 pathways (Issues and Debates; Creative Writing; Children's Book Illustration) and this book shows the creative collaboration and work that emerges from these different ways of thinking about children's literature. Playfulness, humour and curiosity bound out from the illustrations and lead us into the different sections of the book. The illustrations connect our reading with the physicality of learning to be literate. This shows how movement is deeply connected to the act of developing literacy with the freedom to roam, to explore, to get lost and to learn to map real and imagined worlds. This draws on the work of Mackey (2010) who developed the notion of 'foot knowledge' or 'reading from the feet up' as many children learn to read 'just at the same time they are beginning to move through their own world more significantly' (p.325).

Research findings from the chapters in this book lead us into new paths of discovery and avenues for children's literature. The research captures the ideas of children from as young as 3 years old to adolescents of 15-16 years old and across different sites of learning (school classrooms, after-school clubs, libraries, drama studio, pupil referral unit, home and online). These children's literature projects are about children and young people developing autonomy as readers, and researchers having a responsibility for making things happen. Researchers in this book

uncover the importance of providing children with opportunities to jointly construct meaning, consider multiple interpretations, and deepen their understanding of a range of different perspectives. They show how children change during the course of the project and start to see themselves as 'readers' in every sense of the word. Children experience different forms of reading across the projects and researchers engage with how this develops their agency in reading and writing. The research also reveals how children need strategies for choosing books to read so they can access reading for pleasure and a wider variety of books. The researchers talk about what happens when children can journey into a text and what happens when researchers challenge children's perceptions of what is possible within children's literature. Findings also open up important questions about stories and how real and imagined narratives become blurred and lives rewritten. Finally, researchers think about the lasting effect of these small-scale research projects. Hopefully, the research in this book is starting to connect these different spaces where children read.

In conclusion, this book is framed by the concept of 'children's literature in action' and thus it advocates opening up spaces for children to play with, respond, enjoy, navigate, critique and create children's literature. This book contributes to a view of reading and children's literature that is transforming how adults and children interact with texts including, *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure* (Cremin et al., 2014) and *Reflecting Realities* (CLPE, 2021). We hope you build on the research shared here and create new communities of readers across languages, cultures and contexts.

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