Perrault International Institute he referred to this haiku by a twelve year old Japanese child, Noboru Tooyama:

"In the blazing sky

A butterfly

Turned red and flew on..."

If, according to the principles of "chaos theory" the fluttering of a butterfly's wing off the coast of Brazil is capable of triggering off an earthquake in Texas, then we must assume that the brightness of the Japanese butterfly wing will have effects on our conception of children's illustration, as a whole.

Children's Literature and the Crisis of Childhood

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> *Childhood, placed at a tangent to adulthood, perceived as special and magical, precious and dangerous at once, has turned into some volatile stuff – hydrogen, or mercury, which has to be contained. The separate condition of the child has never been so bounded by thinking, so established in law as it is today. This mythology is not fallacious, or merely repressive – myths are not only delusions – chimeras – but also tell stories which can give shape and substance to practical, social measures. How we treat children really tests who we are, fundamentally conveys who we hope to be.* (Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters*, 1994, 35-36)

> *There is a growing consciousness of children at risk. But...there is also a growing sense of children themselves as the risk – and thus of some children as people out of place and excess populations to be eliminated, while others must be controlled, reshaped, and harnessed to changing social ends. Hence, the centrality of children, both as symbolic figures and objects of contested forms of socialization, in the contemporary politics of culture.* (Sharon Stephens in H.A. Giroux, *Stealing Innocence*, 2000, 9)

Scholars of children's literature have long understood that the images of children and childhood contained in the texts we study are constructs which both reflect the observed real lives of children and seek to mould those same children – the implied readers of the books, magazines and other reading matter created with a juvenile audience in mind. Since its beginnings, children's literature studies has also identified a tendency for writing for children to vacillate between dichotomous images of childhood – the demonised and the idealised – and equally divided theories about how to deal with children in society. The images and attitudes to children in children's literature have, of course, been closely linked to those

prevailing in society at the time texts were created, and one of the things which makes our field so rich is the potential it provides for documenting changing social attitudes to children, childhood, education, gender, play, adult-child relationships and many other areas over time.

Recently, debates about the condition of childhood in the west have been occupying disciplines other than our own. Looking at a range of current studies, it is as if the foundations which underpin much of the historical research into children's literature are being discovered by others for the first time, and the realisation that children and childhood are more complex and ambivalent than many adults had previously recognised is proving to be disconcerting to many. The consensus is that childhood is in crisis. For instance, art historian Anne Higonnet (*Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood,* 1998) has argued that childhood – not adolescence, which has long been recognised as a time of tension and instability, but the developmental stage before puberty and adolescence – is in crisis because western culture clings on to an overarching, out-moded and impossibly idealised construction of childhood based on ideas developed in the eighteenth century as part of the Romantic movement. This socially, sexually and psychically innocent child-construct, which Higonnet terms the Romantic Child, is at odds with the equally pervasive view of childhood encountered in films, on television, in advertisements, on the streets and in most manifestations of popular culture. While the Romantic Child is presented as effectively sexless, since the body is rendered unimportant and unavailable as a source of sensual arousal, its opposite, a contemporary phenomenon which Higonnet terms the Knowing Child, not only displays her/his body, but does so in a suggestive way, which problematizes the notion of childhood innocence. The body may be childish in size and form, but the pose, attitude and gaze suggest consciousness and therefore an implicit invitation.

When looking at the kinds of images Higonnet brings together to illustrate what she means by the term 'Knowing Child', it is important to separate the effect created by the artist, the response of the viewer, and the child who is represented. Whether an image of an actual child or a textual/visual evocation of a fictional child persona, the Knowing Child may in fact be no more worldly – may be no

more knowledgeable or experienced – than the Romantic Child. The 'knowledge' is likely to be ascribed – or repressed – by adult creators and viewers.

Blake Morrison makes precisely this point in *As If* (1998). In the chapter called 'Sex Marks', he gives an account of what appears to be the seduction of an adult woman. The narrator describes placing her on the bedroom floor as he removes her shoes, unbuttons her blouse, pulls off her knickers. As she lies naked on the floor he writes, 'I want to move her to the bed....I think of hoisting her on top of me, to ride and jockey me...' (182). In fact, it quickly becomes apparent that the female in question is his young daughter, who he leaves tucked up in bed with warm milk after their nightly bedtime story. The discovery that the 'woman' is in fact child and daughter makes this a powerfully disturbing account: it discloses assumptions and forces us to recognise the complex webs of desire (including desire for the child to be asleep and the parent's evening to begin) involved in interactions between children and adults. The boundary between perverse and parental pleasures is deliberately made to seem flimsy, forcing each reader to recognise how easily behaviour can be misconstrued / reinterpreted from different vantage points and contexts. We like the comfortable boundaries that separate children and adults, good and bad, moral and immoral, decent and indecent. In children's books, and especially those aimed at a prepubescent audience, these boundaries are for the most part in place and strongly defended, but elsewhere, they have been transgressed. Higonnet's study insists that we investigate the nature of such transgressions and their consequences for adult-child relationships. She is particularly alert to the role played by consumer society in reshaping our image of childhood. The Knowing Child, she says, is 'not a fringe phenomenon inflicted by perverts on a protesting society, but a fundamental change furthered by legitimate industries and millions of satisfied customers.' (Higonnet, 153).

Another recent study, educational theorist Henry Giroux's *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (2000), offers a similar critique of the effects of consumer culture on childhood, noting particularly the way the experience of being a child in America (and to varying degrees the west generally) differs according to wealth, race, ethnicity, and educational opportunity. Ultimately, he concludes, childhood – especially for some groups of children – is

in danger of being effaced; not least by legislation which takes away rights, safety nets and supports and, by ascribing responsibility even to children under ten years old, legitimates punitive regimes.

What most concerns Giroux is the slight of hand which systematically reduces opportunities for the young during the phase traditionally referred to as 'childhood' while simultaneously generating public furore over the threat to childhood innocence from paedophiles, single parents, popular culture – virtually anything the dominant culture (and corporate capitalism) suspects. What is being mourned, he says, is not really the loss of childhood or the victimisation of children, but 'a mythical view of nationhood, citizenship, and community that is largely projected onto another time when white middle-class values were protected…' (Giroux, 22).

Like Higonnet and Giroux, many of the contributors to *Children in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (2001) believe that childhood is under threat from the pressures of commercialisation, the mass media, new technologies, and changing patterns of family life. This book deliberately offers contrasting interpretations of contemporary childhood, and rightly points out that the past was not necessarily a better place in which to be a child. However, several of the essays call attention to the fact that today, children's lives and well-being are often at risk, while society often seems to construct children themselves as threatening, brutish, out of control and responsible for social disorder. Since the 1990s, following widespread media coverage of juvenile crime reaching a crescendo surrounding the murder by two young boys (ages 8 and 9) of toddler James Bulger in 1993, there has evolved what has been described as 'a "widespread belief" that children and young people "are in some way turning feral" (in Foley et al, 34 – 35). The result is a culture in which children and childhood are frequently demonised and made to stand not for natural goodness but its opposite. In her 1994 Reith Lectures, Marina Warner summed up this feeling: 'The child has never been seen as such a menacing enemy as today. Never before have children been so saturated with all the power of projected monstrousness to excite repulsion – and even terror.' (43) This attitude is not unique to the UK; according to sociologist Mike Males, the 1990s represent 'the most anti-youth period in American history.' (in Giroux, 23).

My final example of a text that debates current constructions of childhood is *Sticks and Stones* (2001) by Jack Zipes. Zipes, whose work on children's literature is informed by a long-standing interest in the culture of childhood and the processes of socialisation, explains why he is concerned about the current condition of childhood. Over the past twenty five years, he says, he has witnessed 'a growing regulation and standardization of children's lives' (x) and has come to recognise that , 'Everything we do to, with, and for our children is influenced by capitalist market conditions and the hegemonic interests of ruling corporate élites.' (xi) As part of a wide-ranging analysis of the treatment of children and the management of childhood Zipes claims that too many fundamental problems in society are laid at the collective door of childhood, and that the eruption of 'desk rage', tragically epitomised in the succession of shootings in American schools, is one of the many consequences of this practice. 'Children are expected to sort out the contradictions that are inevitable and intolerable in our society, and our vested interests drive them forward into hysteria, violence and bewilderment.' (xi)

While there is considerable agreement in all these studies about the pervading sense of crisis around childhood and adult-child relations, only Zipes considers the role of children's literature in the social construction of childhood and the socialisation of children. This is significant for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that children's literature represents a uniquely focused lens through which children are asked to look at images of themselves. Especially in the case of the under 10s, most images of childhood and children are created by adults for a general audience (viewers of mainstream films, television, magazines, greetings cards, and so on), or for an audience consisting primarily of adults (for instance parents, gallery goers, and collectors). While much children's literature – especially visual texts aimed at very young readers – is created to be shared by adults and children, by definition the implied reader is a child. Children's literature, then, is a primary forum in which children confront the ways adults think about and visualise them, and as a result, it must have consequences for the way they think about themselves; not least because children's reading is fundamentally linked to the education system and the socialisation process. Finally, texts for children are also one of the few areas where visual and textual images of childhood converge.

For all these reasons, it seems acceptable to assume that as a body of work, children's literature – and especially that aimed at younger readers – will encapsulate adult ideas about and anxieties and aspirations for childhood. In fact, the range of images of childhood contained in British books for this age group seems singularly divorced from the most strongly felt concerns about childhood contained in the studies discussed above. There is a significant silence in books for younger children about the problems and contradictions which infuse current constructions of childhood. There *have* been changes to certain aspects of the way children are asked to look at themselves in children's books; for instance, consistent efforts have been made to make writing and illustration for children reflect the ethos of equal opportunities and the virtues of multiculturalism. However, a survey of images of children and childhood typical of British children's literature over the last century would show that the image of childhood given to children in British children's texts is effectively a monolithic and unreconstructed version of the Romantic Child Higonnet places at the centre of the crisis of childhood. With very few exceptions, irrespective of the colour, country of origin, class, ability, health, sex, family composition, or religion of the children (or the characters such as animals and toys who represent children) in children's texts for the under 10s , they are innocent, well-intentioned, obedient, educable, appreciative, receptive, loving and loveable.

For Zipes, this is a virtue and a defining characteristics of children's literature. Time and again in *Sticks and Stones* he points to the way children's literature as a body of work and an academic discipline instils social values, encourages recognition of hegemonic structures, and lays down attitudes to taste in its implied audience (see particularly chapter 4) The purpose of this exercise is not to disagree with this view or to insist that it is necessary to change the orthodoxy. However, it is important to think about the discrepancy between adult debates about childhood and the images of childhood adults construct in children's texts. For instance, we should at least *consider* whether this image of childhood – simultaneously dominant and residual – is appropriate for children's literature in the twenty-first century, and also to think about what it currently signifies. It is with these aims in mind that I set out at some length the arguments about children and childhood taking place outside Children's Literature Studies. Given that evocations and explorations of childhood are the very stuff of children's literature,

it seems important to be alert to how other disciplines are thinking about it and to consider both how Children's Literature Studies and children's literature itself fit into current thinking and the discourses being generated.

Broadly speaking, there are four key areas of concern about childhood:

- The loss of traditional childhood
- The victimisation of children
- The demonisation of children and childhood
- The commercialisation of childhood

Contemporary British children's literature has very little to say about the final three areas in this list, though it takes a very clear, broadly conservative, line on the subject of traditional childhood. The relationship between children's literature and real childhood as set out in these new studies is revealing, as the following summary shows.

The loss of traditional childhood

'Traditional' childhood is usually associated with living at a fixed address in a two-parent family, with siblings, supported by a work-related income. Family life is based around an established routine including shared meals, holidays, homework support, time and space for play, and interest in extracurricular activities such as team sports, ballet, riding and music. This refers back to a 'golden age' of childhood which often features in children's literature in the form of the 'Beautiful Child' – morally good, generally well-behaved, interesting and insightful child characters (traditionally also attractive, white and middle-class). Zipes identifies these as representing the goal of the bourgeois civilising process, though others are more inclined to question the cumulative effects of such images. Giroux, for instance, points to the practice of 'innocence profiling' prevalent in the American social system. Children whose lives and images correspond most closely

to the ideal typified in much children's literature are likely to be constructed as innocent and to be privileged in legislative, economic and social systems, while those whose lives demonstrably depart from it (especially if their appearance does as well), tend to be ranked lower on the innocence scale. The effects of this, he says, are clear. In extreme cases of misconduct, for instance, the white, middle-class child from a family environment (Romantic Child) will be treated leniently and will often be diagnosed as ill and needing special support, while the poor child whose parents are not white and irrespective of family ties will be presumed to be a Knowing Child and treated as both perverse and accountable.

In the UK, children's literature has done much to challenge stereotypical views about family life in recent decades. Many books validate the experiences of children living in lone parent families, only children, children from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, children of divorced parents who live in reconstituted families and/or move between parental homes on a regular basis, children whose families have migrated to a new culture, children who have terminal diseases and so on. However, very few books (especially for younger readers) reflect the life experiences of the many children who live at the 'margins' of society: those, for instance, who have no fixed address, who have a parent[s] in prison, whose parents are mentally or emotionally unbalanced, or who live in 'alternative' communities.

Despite the progress made in this area, there remains a tendency to present younger children with images of family life and childhood that hark back to and reinforce the values of an earlier era, before microwave meals, televisions/PCs in bedrooms, and the trend towards two working parents. Childhood is often portrayed as leisurely, idyllic, middle-class, rural, and meaningful while in real life it is experienced as hectic, urban, consumer-driven, fragmented and confusing.

The victimisation of children

Children as victims (of, for example, famine, sexual abuse, neglect, disease, domestic violence, homelessness, and war) tend to be associated with charitable appeals. Through the association of childhood and innocence, they

become powerful signifiers for what's wrong in the world. Children's literature tends not to dwell on these areas, but when children are presented as victims, it is usually in these terms. By contrast, the media – where children are bombarded with images of childhood victims – tends to offer more complex and ambivalent views of child-victims. This largely stems from the fact that the media presents highly contradictory images of childhood: from the innocent children of family situation comedies through the 'knowing', sexualised children of beauty pageants, soap operas, commercials and music videos, to the 'evil' children accused of being 'crooks in short trousers', mini-bandits, hooligans and even murderers. The way particular images of childhood are constructed is determined to a large extent by an unconscious process of innocence profiling, creating a strong link between constructions of the child as victim and as villain. The same could be said of children's texts, which, almost without exception, offer only images of 'good' victims – in other words, those who score high on the innocence index.

But children do not read children's books in a vacuum, and at some level they must wonder why the children they see around them, the children they know, in some cases children like themselves are almost entirely absent from the pages of children's literature. Neither do the books they are offered always help them to understand the reasons why young people who are clearly ill and damaged are treated as reprobates rather than victims. Again, it comes down to the fact that a substantial section of children's literature (books for the pre-teenage reader comprise the majority of works published in the UK) largely refuses to give space to images of the Knowing Child, and so its pages are almost entirely free from images of children who are anorexic, physically abused, and paralysed from substance abuse.

Another kind of child-victim who rarely features in children's literature but who can be seen in all parts of the world is the over-burdened, over-responsible child. Occasionally children's books take a (usually comic) look at situations in which the parent-child roles appear to be reversed, but this situation is usually happily resolved and the protagonist's childhood restored. In real life, however, many children are trapped between the competing pressures of home, school, the need to work, and the law.

The demonisation of children

One of the most passionate areas of debate in Childhood Studies is the tendency to construct children as evil and the cause of social disorder. In mass media young people see themselves demonised in a variety of forums – including literally in popular films and television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Perhaps understandably – especially given fears about copycat behaviour – those creating texts for young readers have rarely ventured into this contentious area. When they do, as John Stephens (1992) has pointed out, the mode they take tends to be a transgressive version of the carnivalesque rather than a realistic study of the psychology and imperatives underpinning 'evil' acts. One notable exception is Anne Fine's *The Tulip Touch* (1996), published in the wake of the James Bulger murder; significantly, this is a novel with an intended audience of ten and up rather than younger readers.

The question at issue here is *should* children's literature and those of us who work on it be doing more to reconcile the contradictions between widespread social attitudes which construct children as key to social problems/discourses which demonise young people and the images they are given in the books they read? Are we abnegating our responsibility in some way by effectively denying that such images and attitudes exist and so failing to help children negotiate the conflicting attitudes to childhood they are likely to encounter? Or, by presenting predominantly Romantic views of childhood, is children's literature providing both a safe-house for children and a source of positive role models as defined by adults? Does the silence about negative attitudes to childhood undermine the credibility of children's literature as a domain and collude in the effacing of childhood? Or are childhood wrong-doers and the significance of recent policies affecting children actually more present in children's literature than is usually realised, but disguised or rendered invisible in some way? How do texts about 'little monsters/beasts/horrors/Wild Things' fit into this discussion?

The commercialisation of childhood

One way in which many children experience themselves as wrong and frequently arouse anger and antipathy in adults is in their desire for material possessions – often associated with lifestyles older than their years. Children's desire to consume and tendency to identify with manifestations of corporate culture (brand names, products) is regarded by many adults as a sign of degeneration. Modern children are often accused of being spoiled and avaricious, whereas in fact they are living out the roles required of them by societies organised around the principles of corporate capitalism. As Giroux observes, 'In a postmodern world, consumption rather than production drives the capitalist economy... Culture and commodity become indistinguishable, and social identities are shaped almost exclusively within the ideology of consumerism.' (67-68)

Where is the writing for younger readers that deals with the contradictory pressures on children to consume, to fit in, to engage with the modern world, and to adjust their desires to a level the adults who deal with them on an individual basis (as distinct from the adult culture that urges them to want and to buy products) will find acceptable? As a body of work, children's literature turns its back on consumerism and the drives that fuel it. The Romantic Child is a child of nature. S/he needs no Nike trainers or fast food or Emnem CDs. S/he has no hormones, gets no spots, grows no hair, and is content with the condition of childhood rather than restless to leave it behind.

The children's texts that do engage with consumerist fantasies tend to do so in a comic and exaggerated form with a very clear underlying message. An example is Hunter Davies' *Snotty Bumstead*, (1992) a 'home-alone' fantasy about a boy whose mother decides to take herself off for an unannounced, extended holiday leaving him with a large reserve of cash and her various credit cards. After a few deliriously indulgent weeks, of course, the joys of unlimited Coca-Cola, takeaway meals and no bedtime pall, and Snotty is more than ready for a return to regulation and routine.

There is an implicit assumption in the juvenile publishing world that the ostensibly less materialistic values of the past offer an antidote to the future; that by reillustrating *Milly Molly Mandy* or re-presenting *The Secret Garden* we are

offering children the kind of resource they need to step outside consumer culture and reinvent themselves as Romantic (or Beautiful) Children. But this is disingenuous on several counts. First, children's literature itself is not outside the consumer nexus. As publishing for children has evolved from a small and opportunistic, obviously value-laden body of work which few took seriously to a lucrative and often highly creative field that attracts fine writers and illustrators, and research and scholarship across a range of disciplines, its modus operandi has become less visible. Unlike many of their eighteenth and nineteenth-century predecessors, children's texts today now almost invariably present themselves as being on the side of the child, freedom, the imagination, and creativity. They seem to celebrate the potential for progressive change independent of market forces (if such a thing were possible). But are they really so different from other commodities, and especially those commodities specifically linked to childhood? According to Henry Giroux, '...childhood is being reinvented, in part through the interests of corporate capital... Capital has proven powerful enough to both to renegotiate what it means to be a child and to make innocence a commercial and sexual category.' (14-15) As critics (and consumers!) of children's literature, we need to think about what this means for the texts on which we work and the children who read them.

Through the insistently cosy – what Freud would call the heimlich – images of childhood they offer, aren't children's texts too selling a lifestyle and encouraging aspirations in harmony with the dominant ideology? How often do children's texts for this age group overtly offer critiques of society or a vision of other possibilities? What will the future look like, according to children's literature? Rather like the past I suspect.

The question is, does any of this matter? Should we be concerned that as a body of literature, writing for children offers its readers images of themselves that are often out of date and do not accord with their own experiences and observations? Is it appropriate to try to relate children's books and cultural constructions of childhood? Mitzi Myers (1988) argues that the dynamic between extraliterary cultural formations and literary practices

> make[s] things happen – by shaping the psychic and moral consciousness of young readers but also performing many more diverse kinds of cultural work, from satisfying authorial fantasies to legitimating or subverting dominant class and gender ideologies, from mediating social inequalities to propagandising for causes, from popularising new knowledges and discoveries to addressing the live issues like slavery and the condition of the working class. (in Zipes, 77)

For these reasons we, as adult readers and critics, *must* be alert to the interactions between children's literature and childhood as it is experienced, constructed and imaged. It seems to me that to do otherwise is to consign children's literature to an increasingly torpid backwater and to do children a disservice by pretending their lives are as we want them to be rather than as they are. This does not mean that it is necessary or desirable to impose an unrelieved diet of bleak and realistic images of childhood on our children, but that we should step back and think about how and why we offer them the images we do.

This is an area ripe for comparative investigation. Is the situation different outside the UK? Do the Internet and other child-operated media act like texts and if so, are they telling different stories from those found in mainstream children's literature? What role does children's publishing, with its current preoccupation with international co-editions, play in the globalisation of childhood? Are texts for children just another opportunity to consume? These are some of the questions that children's literature scholars may want to explore in the future.

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Still shocking after all these years?

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Junior Arsonist Burned to Death! Anorexic Child Dies Five Days after refusing to Eat! Young Thumb-Sucker Cruelly Maimed! These are not recent headlines concerning the darker side of childhood, but summaries of three stories from a classic children's picture book first published in 1845 and still in print today. It is of course Dr Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, known over here by its translated title *Shockheaded Peter*. In Germany it remains as popular and respected as Grimms' *Fairy Tales*. Opinion in Britain has always been more divided; at a time when there were far fewer picture books to choose from, some adults remember reading it when young as a terrifying experience while others will still hear nothing against it. In 1955, during the parliamentary debates that led to the banning of American Horror Comics, *Struwwelpeter* was mentioned three times as rivalling the lurid imports in question. After reading a leader in The Times referring to this by now infamous picture book, the Earl of Jowitt told the House of Lords that when his secretary went to buy a copy he was told the book was in heavy demand.

'The rush is on because many people imagine that the publication of *Struwwelpeter* will be stopped after the Bill becomes an Act.' This extraordinary work was once again in the news with the revival on the London stage of *Shockheaded Peter*, the brilliant 'Junk opera' adapted from it. Ostensibly aimed at children over ten years old, this show followed the original text in all its gory detail. Here, once again, were the stories of Cruel Frederick (eventually savaged by his own dog), Harriet and the Matches (who ends her tale as a pile of smoking ashes), Fidgety Phil (buried underneath the loaded table cloth he pulls off while falling from his chair) and Johnny Head-in Air (almost drowned because he never looks where he is going).

Most notorious of all, whether on the stage or within the original book, is *The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb*, in which Freud himself is said to have taken a