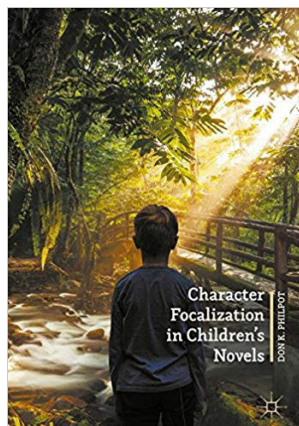


DON K. PHILPOT
CHARACTER
FOCALIZATION IN
CHILDREN'S NOVELS

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(314 pp.)



This ambitious study tracks and categorises the experiences of fictional child characters in ten examples of contemporary realism for children, with publication dates spanning fifty years, from Meindert De Jong's *Far Out the Long Canal* (1964) to Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Turtle of Oman* (2014). I use the word "ambitious" for two reasons: first, the scope of the work. Drawing on ideas and methods from narratology, children's literature criticism and systemic functional linguistics, Philpot maps what he terms "focalizing structures", structures within a text that "construe a personal or shared sensory experience or a personal emoting or cognitive experience" (45), across all ten novels. Philpot identifies over thirty distinct types of focalising structure, building up a picture of the multiple and complex ways in which the consciousness of his chosen characters is constructed through the representations of their seeing, hearing, feeling, wanting, thinking, vocalising and so on. This broad scope sometimes makes it difficult for the readings of the individual novels to scratch below the surface in terms of interpretation. Yet this descriptive focus has allowed Philpot to present a large number of findings which could form the basis of further interpretative work: for instance, his observations on Katherine Paterson's novels *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978) alone could be developed into a book-length study.

Philpot's other ambitious aim is his intention to reach a wide audience, including narratologists, children's literature critics, linguists and education researchers, and despite the necessary use of linguis-

tic conventions in the writing and presentation of the content, this book would certainly be of interest to many non-specialists. Philpot's literature review is selective and focused, which allows him to engage in more depth with key concepts from a range of fields. However, it is possibly a little too selective in parts: for example, I was surprised to see that Maria Nikolajeva's *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (2002) did not feature in the reference list. Perhaps as a result, the distinction between narrator and focaliser sometimes appears to be collapsed here, in turn eliding some of the most interesting tensions between the power and voice of the adult narrator versus that of the child character.

Following part one, which deals mostly with the technical vocabulary, classification of structures and methodologies employed in the study, part two focuses on perceptual and psychological development. It includes fascinating discussions of individual texts, characters and focalising structures. For example, in chapter 5, Philpot's discussion of perceptual structures – hearing and seeing – picks up on the range of forms of address used to call Jess in Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, while he identifies a range of patterns of emoting experiences in chapter 6, such as the way in which Lucky inventories her emotions in Susan Patron's *The Higher Power of Lucky* (2006). This section concludes with a chapter on cognitive experiences that highlights examples such as the use of questioning in free indirect thought in Cathy MacPhail's *Missing* (2000).

Part three explores focalising characters' understandings of themselves and others, and the ways in which they make sense of their experiences. Chapter 8, "Understandings About Self", identifies the patterns underlying focalising characters' shifting perceptions of their own identities and capabilities, such as Yolanda's growing confidence in her ability to control personal situations in Carol Fenner's *Yolanda's Genius* (1995), or Gilly's realisation that she sometimes needs help from others in Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Chapter 9 focuses on characters' "other-oriented thinking" (235), showing how they think about significant others – mainly caregivers in the examples provided by Philpot – in terms of a range of focalising structures that construe characters' behaviours, desires, recollections and more. Finally in this section, a chapter on understanding personal experiences presents four examples, each introduced with a "statement of personal understanding which encapsulates [each character's] fictional world experiences" (258). For Aref in Naomi Shihab Nye's *The Turtle of Oman*, for example, this statement is synthesised from the character's sensing, feeling and thinking about what

he must do before leaving Oman for the United States, in order both to remember and be remembered (259–264).

Alongside these readings of individual texts and characters, many of the book's comparative findings also offer exciting insights and the potential for further development, for example the "emoting profiles" that Philpot presents for each character (161). I was particularly struck by the fact that emotions like anger, anxiety and fear appear in the majority of the texts, yet that often-claimed stalwart of children's literature, "hope", does not. Similarly, the finding that half of the focalising characters in Philpot's sample "expand or reconfigure their perceptions of primary caregivers" (291), rather than these adults being viewed in a constant and consistent way either in their presence or absence, is intriguing and worthy of further attention.

However, I was occasionally left wondering about this study's engagement with the social context of the sample texts compared with that offered by key figures in the development of systemic functional linguistics such as MAK Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, who write with commitment and conviction about the relationship between language and society. For instance, the selection criteria for the ten novels in this study includes a balance between male and female focalisers, but no mention of race or class (3). There are glimpses here of Philpot's admiration for the resilience of the child characters, given the challenges that they must strive to overcome and the institutional and personal barriers placed in their way, but this does not appear to inform his analysis and interpretation of the novels to the extent that it might. Additionally, and perhaps inevitably given Philpot's focus on individual focalising characters, discussion of individual experiences takes precedence over that of shared experiences and collective action, apart from a brief section on shared seeing, hearing and cognitive experiences (124–125).

Philpot provides ideas for future research in his conclusion, suggesting that his framework could be applied to different types of text such as children's fantasy or fiction aimed at an older audience. There are also many useful tools here for critics like myself who take more of a magpie approach to other people's methodologies. Additionally I was intrigued by Philpot's suggestion that teachers could use parts of his framework in order to teach focalisation to school-age students and would be very interested to see this suggestion taken further and developed by researchers and practitioners.

There are many other implications and possibilities for further research along these lines beyond those noted by Philpot himself. An especially interesting overlap between Philpot's work and other ar-

eas of children's literature criticism can be found in current research on cognitive narratology, in particular those studies which focus on characters rather than readers, for example, Malin Alkestend and Christopher Owen's recent paper in *International Research in Children's Literature* (2018, 65-79). Philpot's framework, with its meticulous cataloguing of the rich interiority ascribed to child focalising characters, could make a significant contribution to this area of our field. This study could thus be a useful reference guide for cognitive narratologists looking for technical tools and vocabulary that have been designed for reading fictional minds, which may prove to be less problematic than the use of concepts lifted from neurological studies of real minds.

Overall this study represents a welcome application of systemic functional linguistics to the study of children's literature and provides many interesting ideas and practical tools for future research.

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