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Radical Children's Literature for Adults and *The Inner City Mother Goose*

Abstract: This article explores the radical possibilities of children's literature for adults, using as a case study The Inner City Mother Goose, a book of poetry for adults written by Eve Merriam and published, with "visuals" by Lawrence Ratzkin, in 1969. As one of the most frequently banned books of the 1970s, a period in which children's literature and childhood itself saw dramatic changes, The Inner City Mother Goose is a good representative of the children's book for adults, suggesting the ways in which parody, satire, and formal conventions of genres typically associated with children's reading (nursery rhymes, abecedaries, board books, picture books, etc.) can function as aesthetic and formal cues that call the boundaries of adulthood and childhood into question to humorous but also, at times, politically radical effect. In the slippage between audiences, especially as children mischievously embrace texts that invite young people in while implicitly or explicitly excluding them, children not only gain access to ostensibly forbidden knowledge but also gain insight into adult hypocrisy. Most importantly, they gain an incentive to act independently and autonomously so as to eliminate contradictions between the "truths" and values they have been taught and those they have discovered by reading a children's book that was ostensibly not intended for children.

Keywords: juvenile literature, satire, parody, audience, age in children's literature, adulthood, childhood, politics, radical children's literature, Eve Merriam, *The Inner City Mother Goose*

Appearing during a period in which children's literature and childhood itself saw dramatic changes, Eve Merriam's *The Inner City Mother Goose* (1969) was one of the most banned books of the 1970s.¹ Despite (or because of) the controversy it generated, *Inner City* – originally published, with “visuals” by Lawrence Ratzkin, as a trade book for adults – was also a book with surprising longevity, given the ways the book represents an artifact of its time: it was adapted and staged both on and off Broadway in the 1970s and 1980s, revised and reprinted in 1982 (in connection with a new dramatic adaptation, *Street Dreams*), and reprinted with new illustrations by David Diaz in 1996 (and an introduction by Nikki Giovanni), this time in an edition for “young readers.” Though now out of print, people regularly continue to reference the book.

Today *Inner City* is still relevant for many reasons, but here I want to discuss the text as an emblematic radical children's book for adults. The book reveals ways in which parody, satire, and conventions of genres and forms typically associated with children's literature (eg. nursery rhymes, abecedaries, board books, bedtime books, and picture books) can function as aesthetic cues that call the boundaries of adulthood and childhood into question. As several recent examples make abundantly clear, the children's book for adults is not inherently radical; in some cases, it might even be said to be anti-child. However, when children, especially older children, read a truly radical children's book for adults, they gain an incentive to act independently and autonomously so as to eliminate contradictions between the “truths” and values they have been taught and those they have discovered by reading a “forbidden” book that might as well have a sign on its cover that says, in *Alice-in-Wonderland*-fashion, “READ ME.” In the slippage between audiences, especially as children mischievously embrace texts that invite young people in while implicitly or explicitly excluding them, children not only gain access to ostensibly forbidden knowledge but also gain insight into adult hypocrisy. Adults, for their part, are uncomfortably reminded of the disjuncture between what we tell children and what is actually true.

This article explores the capacity of children's books for adults to inspire progressive and/or radical social transformation on behalf of, or on the part of, children. After reviewing relevant literature and discussing both recent and historical examples in an effort to unpack my terminology, I will use *The Inner City Mother Goose* as a case study for demonstrating the radical possibility of children's books for adults. I conclude by raising questions about the form's potential today, given the ways in which concern for profit often outweighs

concern for children as well as the increasing politicization of both children's books (for children) and children themselves.

Defining the Children's Book for Adults: Initial Speculation

In his extended attempt to define children's literature as a genre, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008), Perry Nodelman argues, "whether or not child readers do match how adults think about them, the children in the phrase 'children's literature' are most usefully understood as the child readers that writers, responding to the assumptions of adult purchasers, imagine and imply in their works" (5). Here Nodelman is discussing authors who write books for children, but his comment could also apply to writers of children's books for adults. These writers imagine a child who is the implied *forbidden* reader: even in the case of children's books for adults that are not wholly inappropriate for children, the form conjures a specter of an implied child non-reader. To be sure, following Jacqueline Rose, it can be argued that even children's books for children are actually books for adults. I am going to bracket this argument, but Rose's work reminds us that the categories of adult and child are always unstable and contentious, especially around the matter of intended readers and intended audiences; in the case of the internet and other mass-media forms that are easily accessed by young children, this is especially true. Nodelman defends the much-debated idea that children's literature is itself a genre, even as he acknowledges the challenges inherent in defining a genre in terms of audience. Quoting Torben Weinreich, he claims that children's literature is characterized by the fact of its containing "something the child should learn or be influenced by" and its *actively excluding* "something the child should be protected against or something society should prevent the child from finding out about" (Weinreich qtd. in Nodelman 159). However, apart from its "exclusionary and didactic" *content*, there are clearly certain *forms* and formal conventions that we associate with "children's literature."

Zohar Shavit's *Poetics of Children's Literature* (1986) is useful here: Shavit discusses texts ostensibly geared to children but read primarily (or even exclusively) by adults. Shavit defines "ambivalent texts" as those that depart from the norms of both the adult and the child "systems" but that, in doing so, can be accepted in each, opening the way for new models of literature (63-70). Emer O'Sullivan builds upon Shavit's analysis of ambivalent texts, emphasizing narrative communication (15-19) and form as well as any text's relation to the

adult or child “system” of publication and dissemination, or what Robert Darnton calls the “communications circuit” (67). O’Sullivan cautions against holding universalist conceptions of the child. However, in discussing various reasons why adults read children’s books, she notes that although an adult “may adopt the role of an implied child reader” for “regressive reasons,” they also, “aware of their adult status,” may “long for or look back to an idealized childhood, at the same time knowing how impossible it is to realize this longing” (18). O’Sullivan’s comment, despite her caution against universalizing, seems to imply that children’s books, almost by definition, reify idealized notions of childhood. Nodelman, Shavit, and O’Sullivan are not considering the children’s book for adults *per se*, but all help move us closer to a definition of that form. Certainly many YA books break the norm of showing childhood as an ideal state, but so do many children’s books for adults, while mirroring narrative conventions of texts intended for very young children. In the case of *The Inner City Mother Goose*, exposing the impossibility of an idealized childhood for many children (in decaying urban ghettos) was part of what marked the text as *not* for children, at least in Merriam’s mind.

Discussing the popularity of “Adult Children’s Literature” in the Victorian era – a period, like the 1970s, in which ideas about childhood were rapidly transforming – Claudia Nelson suggests that “such works do not constitute a genre, not because examples of the form are few, but because the phenomenon is so far reaching. It extended from sentimental fiction, romance, and adventure to inspirational non-fiction, humor, poetry and plays” (137), with *Peter Pan* as the ur-example of the latter. Nelson adds that “the children’s book for adults is often, but by no means always, about childhood [...] Its purpose wavers between offering readers a vacation from the burdens of the mundane world of adulthood and improving them” (137). I would add additional purposes beyond those Nelson mentions. Children’s books for adults also have the capacity to call social norms and practices into question by presenting them in distilled, simplified terms and in a didactic form that highlights the hypocrisy of those in power: would we, for instance, teach young children about police brutality – and its exponentially higher occurrence when police are dealing with African Americans – in such a way as to seem to normalize the phenomenon? If not, *The Inner City Mother Goose* implicitly asks, why does police brutality still happen, and why aren’t we doing more about it?

By appropriating or parodying the children’s book form (and, in many cases, the didacticism and moralism typically implied within

that form) using adult content, writers of children's books for adults play on assumptions about children's literature – and, by extension, childhood. If children's literature can be understood to condense a society's values down to their essence, the very act of putting “inappropriate” content into a form that emulates the conventions of children's literature calls that content into question, often to humorous effect, and sometimes with radical implications.

Recent Children's Books for Adults

The larger genre of children's books for adults includes recent works such as the best-selling and curse-filled illustrated board books *Go the Fuck to Sleep* (2011), written by Adam Mansbach and illustrated by Ricardo Cortés, and *If You Give a Kid a Cookie, Will He Shut the Fuck Up?* (2011) by Marcy Roznick, with illustrations by Miranda Lemming (subtitled, in case it wasn't obvious, *A Parody for Adults*). Related and equally inappropriate texts include Renee Charytan and Rick Van Hattum's *If You Give Mommy a Glass of Wine* (2016) and *You Have to Fucking Eat* (also by Mansbach, 2014). And, from the United Kingdom there is *Goodnight Keith Moon* (2011) by Bruce Worden and Clare Cross, a parody of *Goodnight Moon* (1947) by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd and a tribute of sorts to The Who's Keith Moon and his drug overdose-induced death: “Good night rock stars / Goodnight pills / Good night unpaid hotel bills.” At the far end of the bad taste spectrum we find works such as R. Swanson and Jess Jansen's *Nobody Likes a Cockblock* (2016) and *Do You Want to Play with My Balls?* (2012) by the Cifaldi Brothers and Santiago Elizalde.

The genre also includes books that may be acceptable for children but are more likely to be found in the humor section than in the children's literature section of bookstores. In this category we can include, for instance, *A Child's First Book of Trump* (2016) by Michael Ian Black and Marc Rosenthal; *Trump's ABC* (2018) by Ann Telnaes (marketed as “a children's board book for adults”); and *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (2018), a queer-friendly picture book about United States Vice President Mike Pence's pet rabbit. Published just a day prior to another children's book about Bunny of the United States (BOTUS) – a play on the acronym, POTUS, for President of the United States – by Mike Pence's daughter, the book by *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* staff writer Jill Twiss pokes fun at the vice president's anti-LGBT stance by turning his pet bunny into a gay-rights poster rabbit.² The number 1 bestseller on Amazon the day after its publication, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* has been popular with

adults and kids alike; Max Mutchnick, creator of the gay-friendly TV show *Will & Grace*, donated a copy of the book to every elementary school in Indiana, hoping to “provide positive role models and a story of inclusion for children in Pence’s home state” (Kilkenny). Mutchnick’s gesture confirms that *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* can be, and often is, classed as “juvenile fiction,” thus making it more an “ambivalent text” or an example of cross-writing (Myers and Knoepfelmacher). Still, the book’s very premise is an in-joke for adults.

Children’s picture books, though most often written for a child’s pleasure, are just as often meant to be read aloud by adults to children. Part of the humor in books like *Go the Fuck to Sleep* and *Do You Want to Play with My Balls?* is the possibility that they *will* be read aloud to children. And, in fact, Robin Bernstein has demonstrated that adults *do* read *Go the Fuck to Sleep* to children, sometimes skipping or censoring the f-bomb and sometimes, especially with pre-verbal infants, including it.

As with *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*, *Do You Want to Play with My Balls?* is actually cross-written so that young children could read the book without finding it to be funny at all. In the latter instance, however, the effect is far less benign. One two-page spread, for instance, shows a boy wearing a baseball cap, a sack filled with balls beside him as he stands in front of a friend’s house, waving; the accompanying text reads: “Hey Louie, do you want to play with my balls?” Another page shows two children on a playground, standing near a pile of colorful balls. One child is holding up a ball near her face, and the text reads, “Wow! Your balls are so big, I can’t even fit them in my mouth!” The illustrations are poorly conceived and unsophisticated, evidently meant to evoke childlike art but betraying an adult’s perception of what children’s art might look like; that is to say, they are childish and juvenile in the negative sense of those words, but not actually connected to children or real children’s culture. In this case the idea of an adult reading the book with a child and laughing at what the child fails to “get” strikes me as cruel to the point of abusive: a child reading the book with her parent can tell the book is funny but doesn’t know why; indeed, the joke is on her. Notably, the very notion of “adult” literature, like “adult” film, has a risqué connotation. But most books for adults are “not appropriate” for children because they would be incomprehensible to them, not because they are X-rated (i.e. what children “cannot know” rather than what they “should not know”).

Audience/Parody/Politics

Teresa Michals makes clear that when children's literature emerged as a distinct literary form in the middle of the eighteenth century, books for children represented the first "commercially significant age-specialized publishing," contrasting *not* with books for adults, but, rather, with novels intended for a mixed-age audience (2). Books written exclusively for adults emerged later, and books written for a mixed audience of adults and children continued in the form of chapbooks, dime novels, comics and a number of other forms, forms that typically reinforced a link between children and politically subordinated, less-educated members of the working class (4).

For centuries authors have employed formal conventions associated with children's literature in works not intended for children, doing so for comic and/or political effect. For example, discussing George Cruikshank's *A Comic Alphabet* (1836), Robin Hoffman notes that by the time of this book's publication, "there already existed a tradition of parodying nursery rhymes in satiric prints and radical propaganda, and ABC rhymes constituted a significant subtype" (137).³ Hoffman's discussion of Cruikshank's *A Comic Alphabet* is especially revealing, for the book emerged at a moment in which "conventions regarding the alphabet and its associations with children that are now taken for granted were actively emerging in contemporary texts and education" (137). As such, Hoffman argues, "Cruikshank's parodic interpretation of the alphabet book form reveals how Romantic and rationalist constructions of childhood helped gloss over the fact that socioeconomic conditions, rather than age, produced distinctions between 'innocent' pre-literacy and 'ignorant' illiteracy, and also constrained the character of what counted as literacy in the first place" (137). Hoffman concludes, "ultimately, *A Comic Alphabet* demonstrates that a satirical alphabet can manipulate publishing practices and formal conventions in order to evoke a child audience while primarily addressing an adult audience. And because the rules of alphabet book design are so tightly scripted, play with them extends to the literacy rules such books nominally teach, revealing the fragility of their authority" (138).

Although Hoffman suggests *A Comic Alphabet* is less political than other work by Cruikshank, it is almost impossible to view, for instance, the illustrations for letters D, "Dining Out," and E, "Equality" (picture 1), without reading the book as a commentary on class distinctions. However, precisely what that commentary is may not be easy to determine: is Cruikshank, in the former, mocking the lower



Picture 1. From George Cruikshank, *A Comic Alphabet*. Pentonville, 1836. Note the various ways this text can be interpreted, either as sympathetic to members of the lower class, or as mocking them.

-class person eating out or the limited options available to those without economic resources? In the latter, is he ridiculing the idea that these two figures should be considered equal, or is he illuminating conditions that make real equality between individuals impossible? In either case, the text evokes not just children (by virtue of its genre) but also members of the working class – that is, politically subordinate people, who are often associated with children.

Critical parody has also been employed in texts that are actually geared to children “in order to throw the notion of an innocent text and a unitary child reader back in question” (Richardson 124). Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) offers an obvious example, parodying, for example, Isaac Watts’ didactic and prescriptive poem, “How Doth the Little Busy Bee” with “How Doth the Little Crocodile”: as Alan Richardson argues, “the parody (taken as

a whole) undermines not only Watts' text and not only explicit didacticism but also the more perversely disciplinary stance of children's fiction as produced by adults" (124). Although works of children's literature can parody the conventions of children's literature itself, such texts, according to Richardson, are among "those most difficult to fit into prescriptive definitions of children's literature" (124).

Certainly the tradition of literary nonsense can function to parody conventions not just around children's literature but also childhood itself, exemplified by Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies; or, After the Outing* (1963), which, as Emily Petermann argues, uses nonsense, the cautionary tale (and a tradition of parodying it in verse), and the abecedary to mock the moralizing imperative of children's literature and, likewise, to highlight the amorality of the universe: bad stuff sometimes just happens. Notably, Petermann's otherwise excellent analysis avoids the question of Gorey's intended audience, or the fact that the book was originally marketed to adults, even if it was adopted by children.

"Knowing," or Not-So-Innocent, Child Readers

This point speaks to the fact that while children's books for adults are not always consciously cross-written in the sense of addressing both adults and children, they are, nonetheless, often read by both older and younger audiences, and perhaps especially by what Anne Higonnet has called a "knowing child." In this case I am not talking about a child whose (sexual) "innocence" is compromised by a particular violation but, rather, about one who realizes that the very notion of childhood innocence is a farce, especially in a society that fails to protect children in so many of the ways that matter. In this sense, the radical children's book for adults, which typically utilizes the conventions of children's literature for the very young, may implicitly address older children who, though lacking adults' power, at least have the power of insight into the ruse of adult infallibility, and, hence, the contingency of (adult) rules and norms.

Annette Wannamaker's observation of efforts "to vehemently police [the] imaginary border" between "what counts as a work for adults and what counts as a work for children" (68) would seem to suggest something innately subversive about the children's book for adults, given its apparent invitation to readers who are ostensibly not the book's intended audience. In some senses this is true. Shel Silverstein's *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book: A Primer for Tender Young Minds* (1961) for example, invites mischief rather than prop-

er civilized behavior with its “S is for Spit,” celebrating the long-distance spitting champion, who “SPIT ALL THE WAY FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE LIVING ROOM,” and asking “WHO WILL BE THE NEW CHAMPION?” and its “V is for Vacuum Cleaner” (“DO YOU THINK THE VACCUM CLEANER CAN PICK UP THE CAT? I DON’T THINK SO...”). Although the 1985 edition of *Uncle Shelby’s ABZ Book* labeled it “A Primer for Adults Only,” the original edition contained no such warning, and if this was, as Joseph T. Thomas Jr. has argued, a book not for children, it was also one that was “disguised as children’s literature” (“A Speculative Account” 32). In fact, as Thomas notes, “part of the book’s aesthetic effect lay in the child’s ability to recognize the con, for the astute child knows she’s being teased and can enjoy the humor nonetheless” (32). The text is hand lettered in Silverstein’s inimitably anarchic scrawl and accompanied by his familiar style of playful, jagged illustrations. Readers of the men’s magazine, *Playboy* (with its “tasteful” photos of nude women), would also know “Uncle Shelby” from Silverstein’s cartooning in those pages. The very fact that the same author/illustrator not only designed to produce work for the adult *Playboy* as well as for children, but also created a children’s book for adults, upended norms of children’s literature. As it happened, these norms were being threatened from within at around the same time, with texts like Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, published in 1963 (too scary for young children) and Louise Fitzhugh’s *Harriet the Spy*, published a year later (communicating questionable morals to middle graders), scandalizing critics and shaking up the field of juvenile publishing.

Somewhat more recently, “postmodern picture books” (Sipe and Pantaleo) – from *The Little Red Hen Makes a Pizza* by Philemon Sturges and Amy Walrod (1999), with lazy beatnik friends who clean up after eating Hen’s pizza, to *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* by Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury (1993) – which ends with a shared home that is made of flowers, remind us of the ways in which “children’s culture is set apart by its playfulness and vulgarity” (Fleegar 170). It thus challenges the dominant culture of adulthood, reveling in children’s position as “historically marginalized boundary crossers” (170), and reminding us of children’s literature’s inherent instability as a category.

Radical (Children’s) Literature

My own research on radical children’s literature, some of it in collaboration with Phil Nel, has emphasized work created by individuals

associated with left-wing political movements and especially material that “encourages [children] to question the authority of those in power . . . to take collective action to effect change, to trust their own instincts, to explore alternative social arrangements, and to use history to understand how and why today’s world has developed as it has” (Mickenberg and Nel, *Tales for Little Rebels* 1).⁴ Consider two pieces that Nel and I included in our collection of radical children’s literature, *Tales for Little Rebels* (2008): Art Young’s *The Socialist Primer* (1930) and *Mr. His: A Children’s Story for Anybody* (1939) by A. Redfield, a pseudonym for Syd Hoff, whose illustrious career as a juvenile author took off the year after *Mr. His* appeared in the Communist *New Masses*.⁵ The subtitle of *Mr. His*, “A Children’s Story for Anybody,” explicitly raises the issue of genre and audience. But both texts use the didactic imperative of children’s literature for radical – not simply subversive – ends, leaving open the question of audience.

As Claudia Nelson argues, “because literature for the young was considered to have a responsibility to be didactic, writers who wanted to preach to adult readers might take children’s works as their models” (141). Recalling the association of children with subordinated groups, especially the working class – in the sense of their subaltern status and their limited access to literacy – we can see such texts utilizing the children’s book form as a kind of in-joke for adult readers, allowing the simplified text and accessible imagery to be easily comprehended by less educated adult readers, who are reminded by the form itself of their political and economic subordination. By virtue of this signal they are also invited to question their subordination. They recognize that they are treated like children and they know that they are not children. By packaging these political message books as humorous parodies of children’s picture books, *The Socialist Primer* and *Mr. His* read less like propaganda (which is preachy and didactic) and more like humor. But the humor is decidedly political.

Kimberley Reynolds has proposed a more expansive (and compelling) definition of radical children’s literature by exploring the radical potential of aesthetic and formal innovations that can be found in a great many works for children: as she notes, “Children’s literature contributes to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by, for instance, encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change” (1). She goes on to point out that “many children’s books offer quirky or critical or alternative visions of the world designed to prove that ultimate response of childhood, ‘Why?’ ‘Why are things as they are?’ ‘Why can’t they be different?’” (3).

The Children's '68 and *The Inner City Mother Goose*

The Inner City Mother Goose is radical in both its form and in its content, not because of what it is designed to provoke in children – though children, from the time of its initial publication, did read it – but because the book exposed deep fault lines in social expectations around children, childhood and child protection at a critical moment in American history. Design historian Steven Heller argues that “the impact of *The Inner City Mother Goose* cannot be underestimated as both a polemic for the civil rights cause and a model of expressive, conscience-driven design” (85). He points to the fact that Merriam’s book was “one of the first ‘trade’ paperbacks” to criticize conditions in the urban ghetto (“inner city” itself being a common euphemism for violent, deteriorating, and predominantly Black/Latino urban areas) and to “lampoon the powerful” who were responsible for those conditions. He also highlights the ways in which Ratzkin “used photography and typography to communicate a poignant social message and frame Merriam’s Mother Goose send-up” (83), which draws upon conventions of nursery rhymes and picture books, as well as those of visual poetry and documentary photography.

What would go on to be the second-most frequently banned book of the 1970s (behind J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*) appeared at a pivotal moment in the history of adult-child relations and in the history of children’s literature. By the 1970s, as divorce rates skyrocketed, as authority figures (from the police to the military to the president himself) came under public criticism, as long-held assumptions about racial and gender hierarchies were attacked, and as crumbling inner cities exposed poor, urban, and minority children’s exclusion from the basic security and opportunity for growth we associate with a modern ideal of childhood, the very landscape of childhood shifted; several cultural critics even claimed childhood was “eroding” or “disappearing” (Polakow; Postman). Government-sponsored anti-poverty programs and legislation like Head Start and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – as well as grassroots efforts like a free breakfast program sponsored by the militant Black Panthers – focused on children who were being denied their “right to childhood.” At the same time, themes previously seen as inappropriate for young people increasingly made their way into children’s and especially young adult literature. As Maria Nikolajeva notes of this period, “Everything that had been taboo in children’s literature suddenly makes itself manifest” (68).

In their project on the "Children's '68," Sophie Heywood and a larger group of scholars throughout Europe and the United Kingdom have documented instances from around the world of children's books and other material for young people registering and participating in the youth revolts of the era. Heywood cites the "manifestoes for revolt" published in Scandinavia, books that teach children how to resist arrest, and a range of images like a child's raised fist, with or without a lollipop. The advent of the 1970s marked a break whereby the "permissive revolution altered what children can do, how they are listened to, and what adults can do to legally control them" (Thomson 1). This was the era in which, as Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer has discussed, the French-American partnership Harlan-Quist published a range of unconventional and confrontational children's books such as Marguerite Duras' *Ah, Ernesto!* (1971), about a seven-year-old boy who refuses to go to school because everything he learns there is useless, and works by the radical elementary school teacher Albert Cullum such as *The Geranium on the Window Sill Just Died, but Teacher You Went Right On* (1971) and *You Think Just Because You're Big, You're Right* (1976). Children's poetry, likewise, shifted "from the garden to the street," with more urban settings and with children and adults depicted in more realistic and less flattering terms (Styles; Thomas, *Poetry's Playground*). This era was also the beginning of a children's rights revolution: new laws affirmed children's right to protest in schools, to obtain birth control, and even to "divorce" their parents. That revolution encompassed a radical (and in some ways highly problematic) "child liberation" movement, which called into question basic assumptions about children's innocence and their need for protection, but which was also premised on a fundamental distrust of authority figures (Foster and Freed; Wilkerson; Holt; Vardin and Brody; Castle).

Eve Merriam (1916–1992), the author of *The Inner City Mother Goose*, was herself actively involved in left-wing politics and a pioneering feminist, but she was older than most prophets of the women's liberation and child liberation movements. At the time of *Inner City's* publication, Merriam was well-known as a writer for children: she had published three juvenile biographies, over a dozen poetry collections or picture books in verse for the young, and other works for children. However, her writing for adults, in poetry, prose and other genres, was widely known as well.

Merriam also had a history of questioning the very categories of "adult" and "child," the popular perceptions and treatment of children, as well as the conventions of children's literature. For instance,

in 1962 she had published the illustrated book, *Basics: An I-Can-Read Book for Grownups* (I Can Read Books being popular basal readers for children published in the United States), with poems like “Basics for Cocktail Parties,” “Basics for Existentialist Playwrights,” and “Basics for Bigots.” A widely-cited and reprinted essay Merriam wrote for *Ladies Home Journal* in 1964, “We’re Teaching Our Children That Violence Is Fun: A Closer Look at Toys, TV and Movies,” criticizes the violent nature of toys and mass media geared to children, asking, “does any other society teach its children that violence is a form of entertainment? What will *happen* to a generation raised upon such an idea?” (44). And a satire she published in the *New York Times* in 1971 mocks the insipid nature of much that passes for children’s “literature”: her description of the “Poohlitzer Prizes, or ‘Winnies,’ as they are affectionately referred to in the trade,” includes descriptions of (fake) books like, under the category Biography, “A NEW LIFE FOR JOANIE: Joan hears voices telling her to go forth and lead a great army, but after a successful ear operation she is content to be a simple shepherdess and housewife;” and, under Science: “LET’S FIND OUT ABOUT DOUGHNUT HOLES. Fascinating and information-filled. Answers to such questions as how do the holes get *inside*? What makes a doughnut hole *round*? Where do the holes go? Science, Science, Science Everywhere Series.”

Given Merriam’s history of writing for children – as well as the usual conventions of Mother Goose rhymes – it is not surprising that many readers were quick to assume that *The Inner City Mother Goose* was (inappropriately) published for children. In reality, the book was an artistic and satiric commentary for adults on our violent society and the hypocrisy of a system that claims to prioritize children but in fact devalues their culture and fails to provide for even their basic needs. *Inner City* explicitly draws upon the conventions of Mother Goose nursery rhymes and picture books in order to question the political and moral basis of a system that allows some children to grow up amid poverty, violence, corruption, and environmental degradation.

Both (Mother Goose) nursery rhymes and picture books are usually associated with children’s literature. However, both forms have complicated origins and have been known to contain content that is, arguably, inappropriate for children.⁶ They also have a history of being re-written for satiric and/or political effect, through a process that Bertolt Brecht (one of Eve Merriam’s heroes) and Walter Benjamin called “*umfunktionierung*,” or “refunctioning” (Zipes), involving attention to both the instruments of cultural production (for

example children's literature and publishing houses) and particular forms such as the Mother Goose tradition (Benjamin). Consider, for instance, verses in "Mother Goose on the Breadline" (Hap) published in the Communist magazine for children, *New Pioneer*, in the early 1930s, as well as 1970s parodies like *Nursery Rhymes for the Times: Ecology and Mother Goose* (Sparks), the latter quite possibly inspired by the success of Merriam's book.⁷

Lucy Rollin points to the parallels between nursery rhymes and jokes (and Freud's concept of "joke work"), the former sharing jokes' "plasticity of language and symbol, allusions, double meanings and absurdity [which] are all useful in expressing ordinarily hidden thoughts" (6). Jokes, of course, are also meant to be funny, and their humor is often subversive: for a child, getting a joke is a kind of victory, a show of mastery over language and powerlessness, as Karen Coats has argued in a discussion of poetry and humor (125).

Merriam's Mother Goose rhymes are often humorous but the humor of both the verses and the "visuals" in *Inner City* is decidedly black, an adjective that here has a double meaning: as Steven Heller notes in his discussion of the book's innovative design, "when the euphemism 'inner city youth' was used it was clear that it referred to young people of color and all this suggests" (83). Both Merriam and Ratzkin were white and Jewish, but some readers assumed that Merriam was African American, which she took as a compliment. Still, the Black poet Gwendolyn Brooks, though agreeing with Simon and Schuster editor Richard Kluger's use of "'extraordinary,' 'dramatizing,' [and] 'satiric'" to describe *Inner City*, and noting that she knew and liked Eve Merriam, expressed concern that African-American writers might interpret the book as one more incursion into what was rightfully their territory: "Some of the writers among them – those who care to be published by the New York white press (many do not) will decry the fact that white writers, today, can easily get these things published when black writers, many equally clever and wry WITH a richer fund of black knowledgeability to sustain and intensify the clever wryness, cannot."⁸

The book's frontispiece shows a blurred photograph of a locked gate; this image expands onto a two-page spread that encompasses the title page. Continue and the copyright page shares space with a black and white photograph of the White House, home of the president of the United States, behind an iron gate, also as a two-page spread, positioned as if underlying "The Nub of the Nation," a poem that serves as preamble to the book:

In that nation is a city
In that city is a ghetto
In that ghetto is a street
On that street there is a house
In that house there is a stair
On that stair there is a door
Through that door there waits a room,
In that room there is a chair,
On that chair there is a person
Sitting staring there.
Sitting staring there
On the broken chair,
Chair in the cockroach room,
Room on the worn-out stair,
Stair in the no-care house,
House on the drop-dead street,
Street in the ghetto rot,
Ghetto rooted in the city,
City spreading everywhere:
And this is the nub of the nation. (n.p.)

Here there are no indications or invocations of children other than the fact that the lines and meter themselves evoke a familiar nursery rhyme, but readers' expectations are quickly upended, their disorientation furthered by the contrast between the image of the White House and the content of the poem. The second poem, "Boys and Girls Come Out to Play," brings the children implied by "Mother Goose" directly to the forefront with biting satire. Merriam claimed to have placed this poem near the front of the book so that adults would immediately realize that it was not intended for children (Merriam, introduction to 1982 edition). By repeating exactly the first five lines of the original nursery rhyme, Merriam doubles the shock produced by the sixth line:

Boys and girls come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day.
Leave your supper and leave your sleep,
And join your playfellows in the street.
Come with a whoop and come with a call:
Up, motherfuckers, against the wall. (8)

This ending phrase, employed by student radicals in the 1960s, here emphasizes a link between disillusioned youth and the false pieties fed to children.

On the page opposite this one, with “Mary, Mary,” whose first words anticipate “quite contrary” and a growing garden, readers instead see the words enmeshed in a strangely evocative image of Barbies sporting 1960s party dresses but rendered garbage by the language framed within the image (picture 2):

Mary, Mary
Urban Mary
How does your sidewalk grow?
With chewing gum wads
And cigarette butts
And popsicle sticks
And potato chip bags
And candy wrappers
And beer cans
And broken bottles
And crusts of pizza
And coffee grounds
And burnt-out light bulbs
And a garbage strike all in a row. (9)



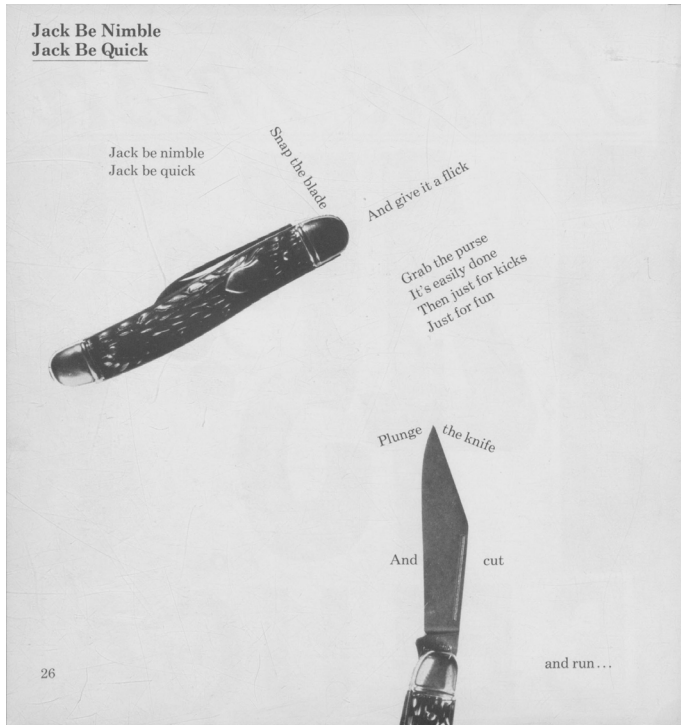
Picture 2. “Mary Mary.” From Eve Merriam, *The Inner City Mother Goose*, with visuals by Lawrence Ratzkin. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. Text copyright Eve Merriam, image copyright Lawrence Ratzkin, used courtesy Merriam and Ratzkin estates.

As Elina Druker has noted, photographic picture books tend to possess an aura of realism and authenticity, despite the fact that “the idea of objectivity in photography has long been a topic of debate” (175-176). Ratzkin’s photographic images do not serve as documentary images of the subjects in Merriam’s poems, but in many cases they read as such, as in the image showing part of two policemen’s torsos and framing the poem “Who Killed Nobody”: both men are in uniform and the man on the left visibly carries a gun in a holster on his hip. No wonder the book was called anti-police.

Besides the glaring f-bomb in “Boys and Girls” (a “motherfucker” being even worse than a simple “fuck” or “fucker”) other poems that drew particular ire from critics and would-be censors included a variation on “Jack Be Nimble Jack Be Quick” (picture 3) – a poem Merriam claimed was inspired by a neighbor’s having had her “pocketbook wrenched at knifepoint” (Merriam 1982) but which critics said would incite violence. Other poems criticize police brutality, corruption, racism, and environmental degradation. Ratzkin’s “visuals” include both jarring photographs (such as the picture of a dark-skinned doll caught in a mouse trap), and attention-grabbing graphic design that creates visual poetry or underscores the “urchin verse” quality of pieces like “Hark, Hark” (picture 4) or “Oh Where Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone”:

NO
DOGS ALLOWED.
BALLPLAYING.
LOITERING.
PEDDLERS.
SOLICITING.
BICYCLING.
ROLLER SKATING.
ENTRANCE AFTER DARK
EXIT
THIS IS PUBLIC PROPERTY (32-33)

The layout and graphic design in the latter suggest street signs and public spaces that might be for children if they were not unsafe and/or unwelcoming. Incidentally, in this instance, although children could quite easily pick up on the message of this poem, (even if not all the words are comprehensible to them), they would presumably miss the “No Exit” allusion to Sartre, which adds a whole new layer of meaning to the poem.



Picture 3. "Jack Be Nimble." From Eve Merriam, *The Inner City Mother Goose*, with visuals by Lawrence Ratzkin. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. Text copyright Eve Merriam, image copyright Lawrence Ratzkin, used courtesy Merriam and Ratzkin estates.



Picture 4. "Hark, Hark." From Eve Merriam, *The Inner City Mother Goose*, with visuals by Lawrence Ratzkin. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. Text copyright Eve Merriam, image copyright Lawrence Ratzkin, used courtesy Merriam and Ratzkin estates.

Despite critical acclaim and impressive sales (the paperback edition sold over 100,000 copies) *The Inner City Mother Goose* was widely condemned. Around the United States repeated attempts were made, often successfully, to ban it, and especially to keep it out of young people's hands. The book was called "anti-police, anti-law and order, and anti-government" (Jago); it was said to be obscene and to be promoting crime, decadence, drug use, and bigotry. Maryland State Senator Frederick C. Malkus Jr., a conservative Democrat, called the book "an insult to many residents of the Inner City and an unfortunate example of how public monies should never be spent" (Malkus), a reference to public and school libraries that had purchased the book; in Baltimore outraged citizens as well as the City Comptroller battled librarians at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, where the book remained on shelves thanks to ongoing efforts by several librarians there. The Knights of Columbus in Pennsylvania condemned the book's use in teacher training programs at Penn State, and a Pennsylvania state senator followed with calls to investigate elementary education curricula across the state.⁹ A teacher in California was even fired for giving a copy to a student (who had asked for it); the student's mother burned the book (Darling). The examples go on and on.

Although Merriam would adamantly insist that *The Inner City Mother Goose* was not for children (never before, she said, had she found herself telling people *not* to buy one of her books), part of the reason the book provoked so strong a reaction was that it *was* often shelved in the children's literature section and classified as a children's book; WorldCat, perhaps the premier database of material in research libraries, currently classifies it as such. Moreover, librarians, parents, and teachers shared the book with children; indeed, *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and *Scholastic Teacher* all recommended the book for older children (Darling). And children, as young as 8 or 9, used *Inner City* as a model for writing their own verses, verses that spoke to what were self-evident and jarring contradictions between an idyllic notion of what childhood is supposed to be like and the world that children, especially poor children of color living in inner cities, witnessed and experienced firsthand.¹⁰

The Inner City Mother Goose was reprinted in 1996 by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, with new illustrations by the artist David Diaz (who would later go on to win the Caldecott Medal) and an introduction by poet Nikki Giovanni; this edition also faced banning, but I have found far fewer instances, which is ironic, given that this time it *was* published for children. Perhaps by 1996 the book

was no longer so shocking. The 1996 edition contains some additional poems (written for an intended Bantam Books edition that had fallen through), and several had been taken out, but “motherfucker” remains, as do most, if not all, of the poems that caused offense in the past. Reviewing the new edition in *The Horn Book Magazine*, Betty Carter insists that “both the triumph and the tragedy of the collection lie in its power to evoke contemporary images of violence, distrust, and racism for a new generation of readers.” Carter does caution that the book is “not for young children” and is, indeed, most suited to children who already appreciate fractured fairy tales like Fiona French’s *Snow White in New York* (1986). Merriam’s rhymes are *not* didactic or preachy, Carter notes: “There are no answers here, no directions for living.” In that sense *Inner City* can be seen as both a radical children’s book for adults and an even more radical book for (older) children who refuse to accept that ignorance will protect them from the horrors of a situation adults created and repeatedly fail to confront.

Concluding Thoughts

Today we can find an increasing number of books for children on political subjects, as well as attempts to limit children’s access to these books (Russo). Such censorship is based on the same logic that, at least in part, makes children’s books for adults on political subjects seem funny: politics supposedly don’t belong in books for children.¹¹ (Incidentally, censors seem to more frequently target “political” children’s books than arguably more offensive children’s books for adults like *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, perhaps because a barely-disguised f-bomb on a book’s cover makes the intended audience more obvious.) A trend toward politically-oriented children’s books (for children) parallels the rise of groups like the youth-driven Sunrise Movement, which, in their fight against climate change, implicitly and sometimes explicitly make the case that adults have failed children by making profit a higher priority than ensuring a viable future for young people.

Adults wield both economic and political power and they have a moral and ethical responsibility to use that power in the best interest of children. What does that mean for the radical potential of children’s books for adults? Books *not* for children (or not really for children) that look like books for children because of the ways they mimic conventions of the genre are potentially controversial precisely because such books fly in the face of what Nodelman claims is a

defining quality of children's literature: that it protects children from what "they cannot or should not know" (158). Still, what children "should not know" is itself a matter of debate, and one with political implications.

The example of *Do You Want to Play With My Balls?* suggests that children's books for adults are not necessarily radical and can even be anti-child; indeed, this charge was leveled against *Inner City*. All books for pre-literate children are written with an adult as well as a child reader in mind, but the children's book for adults taps into the discomfort that adults (as well as children) sometimes feel when the barrier between adulthood and childhood is deliberately breached. That discomfort can produce humor (sometimes at the child's expense) but it can also produce critical insights. Children, like other subordinated groups, appreciate an opportunity to laugh at those in control and to gain the power that comes from having insight into hidden truths. Adults, meanwhile, are surprised – and potentially motivated to act – when material evoking or apparently addressing children reveals less than ideal realities.

By virtue of its simultaneously invoking, inviting, and forbidding young people, the children's book for adults has radical potential, both for the adult provoked into questioning the status quo, and for the older child who gains insight into adult hypocrisy. Indeed, rather than any genuine wish to protect children, it was arguably the book's exposé of uncomfortable truths about urban America that produced outrage about *The Inner City Mother Goose*. But those same qualities make it a classic radical children's book for adults.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank Robin Bernstein, Leslie Paris and Vanessa Joosen for inspiration and references; Elina Druker and two anonymous readers for invaluable feedback on an earlier draft; and Dee Michel, Guy Michel, and Andrew Ratzkin for permission to reproduce poems and images from *The Inner City Mother Goose*. Special thanks to Dee for reading a draft of this article and offering useful corrections. And special thanks to Wendy Nesmith and the Interlibrary Loan Services at UT Austin for Cruikshank's *A Comic Alphabet* and the scan of D and E and to Hanna Liljeqvist for careful copy editing.

2 The Library of Congress catalog entry lists the rabbit, Marlon Bundo, as first author, and so I have followed their lead in the sources cited.

3 Hoffman cites *The Political House that Jack Built*, by William Hone and illustrated by Cruikshank, *The Political "A, Apple-Pie," or the "Extraordinary Red Book Versified: For the Instruction and Amusement of the Rising Generation,"* (attributed to Cruikshank), *The Constitutional Apple Pie: Or Rhythmic Red-Book by "Master Jacky-Jingle,"* and *A New Favorite Royal Alphabet*

for the 17th of August by "Peter Pangloss," all published in 1819 and bound, by an "unknown collector," into a single volume now held in the British Library.

4 In addition, see Mickenberg *Learning from the Left*; Mickenberg "Radical Children's Literature"; Mickenberg and Nel "Radical Children's Literature Now!".

5 The story was published on its own as a small book the same year. It is this edition that I have cited.

6 Lucy Rollin maintains that all "nursery" rhymes began in folklore and oral culture and were "originally intended for adults" (4). Gloria Delamar notes that "the chants of childhood are invariably linked to the Mother Goose tradition," (2) but she also acknowledges that nursery rhymes often contain violent and disturbing images that have inspired protests from concerned adults since at least 1641. The fictional Mother Goose herself comes from French fairy tales, popularized with the frontispiece to Charles Perrault's *Contes du Temps Passé* (1697), in which a picture shows an old woman telling stories to three children with the words, "*Contes de ma mère l'oye.*" Ever since British printer John Newbery published *Mother Goose's Melodies* in 1760, the name has been associated in Britain and the United States with traditional nursery rhymes for young children. Even so, as Marina Warner points out, forms in the "Mother Goose" tradition can be traced back to *fabulae* or fables, "the late classical genre of comic folklore, in which the classical unities are broken, and humour, tragedy, the real and the marvelous dashingly combined in defiance of classical proprieties" (3-4). A number of scholars have written on the "crossover picture book" as well "picture books for adults" (which may or may not contain features that distinguish it as a children's book for adults). On the former see Beckett and on the latter see Ommundsen.

7 One verse from "Mother Goose on the Breadline" offers a decent sense of its tenor: "Yankee Doodle's in the shop / He holds to it like blazes / He lets his little wages drop / He gets his pay in praises / Yankee Doodle has a boss / High Hat Uncle Sammy / Uncles' profit is his loss / Cock-a-doodle, dam-me. . . ." (Hap).

8 Brooks' concern speaks to what was an ongoing debate at that time (still ongoing today) about whether it was ethical for authors to write about racial and ethnic groups that were not their own.

9 There is extensive material about attempts to censor *Inner City* in Eve Merriam papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, MC 650, box 9, folder 6 and box 36, folder 6.

10 For instance, a teacher at Eastside Elementary School in Denver Colorado sent Merriam verses by nine, ten and eleven-year-old students that were inspired by *Inner City*. In Eve Merriam papers, box 35, folder 10.

11 I have found only one instance of a concerned citizen questioning the morality of having Mansbach's book available in libraries, where children might discover it even if shelved with books for adults (Paschal). Indeed, Mansbach's successful parody of a children's book (for adults) led to several contracts to write books for middle-grade readers, including *Benjamin Franklin: Huge Pain in My...!* (2015).