

Karen Coats

Pippi Longstocking and the father of enjoyment

In his essay, "Interpretation and the apparent sameness of children's novels", Perry Nodelman comes to a conclusion that seems to distress him. He asserts that interpretation should allow literary critics to figure out what makes good books better than not-so-good books, that it should bring to light those qualities that make a book unique or especially deserving of our esteem. Unfortunately, he finds that this is not the case with children's literature. Indeed what one uncovers when one interprets high quality, beloved children's books is not their thematic distinctiveness or originality, but their correspondences and similarities. Specifically, he says that children's novels "all balance the same set of opposites: home and exile, escape and security, the familiar and the foreign, the strange and the comfortable, fear and acceptance, isolation and togetherness, the disorderly and the patterned" and that "all in some way combine what one wishes for with what one must accept...and all create balances between these extremes" (Nodelman 1985, 18, 20). He concludes that we must find "other means of interpretation" if we wish to understand excellence in children's fiction (Nodelman 1985, 20).

A quick glance at one's bookshelves is really all it takes to discern the truth and the extent of Nodelman's claims. Book after book reveals children's coming of age process to be one of compromise and capitulation to social norms and straitjacketed identities that strip them of their distinctiveness and turn them into Foucaultian paradigms of docile, complacent members of their communities.

Then along comes a girl with hair the color of carrots and a monkey on her shoulder, walking backward with one foot in the gutter and one on the sidewalk, and all arguments about the "apparent sameness of children's novels" find the exception that throws the rules into sharp relief. To put it bluntly, Pippi queers children's literature.

My purpose in this essay is to analyze the conditions behind Pippi's queerness and consider their implications for the way we

think about childhood, children's literature and its interpretation. Pippi stands out as unique in ways that I find particularly revealing about the nature of reality and the structures that hold it in place. While interpreting Pippi may not fully answer to Nodelman's call to find alternate ways to interpret children's books, it may at least help us figure out the cultural contexts that are responsible for the sameness he finds in children's books, and see us through in some measure to what might be involved in the construction of a liberated child.

I have called Pippi queer, and I want to stress that I am using that word in a way specific to queer theory. Rather than being a generic, more inclusive term for non-normative forms of sexual preference and identity, queerness challenges the very idea of a norm. Queer theorist Michael Warner describes queerness' resistance to normativity in ways that seem particularly apt to a discussion of Pippi:

Organizing a movement around queerness also allows [queer theory] to draw on dissatisfaction with the regime of the normal in general. Following Hannah Arendt, we might even say that queer politics opposes society itself... The social realm, in short, is a cultural form, interwoven with the political form of the administrative state and with the normalizing methodologies of modern social knowledge. Can we not hear in the resonances of queer protest an objection to the normalization of behavior in this broad sense, and thus to the cultural phenomenon of societalization? If queers, incessantly told to alter their "behavior," can be understood as protesting not just the normal behavior of the social but the *idea* of normal behavior, they will bring skepticism to the methodologies founded on that idea. (Warner 1993, xxvii)

Pippi offers queer protest to every cherished social and political norm she encounters, from school to coffee parties to housekeeping to child welfare services to the rule of law.

Her attack on norms extends in directions that reveal conventions that we may not even consciously assess as such. For instance, her participation in the circus violates norms of spectatorship and performance. Criminality involves norms of fear and victimization that she thwarts through her embrace of the robbers who enter her home, and her subsequent payment of them for their "honest" labor promotes skepticism for the whole system of earned wages. She persistently violates norms of fiction and truth in her storytelling, and then chastens her listeners for either blithely accepting or not recognizing the distinction. When she attempts to collect the sleeping man and

add him to her collection of Things, she performs a queer protest against the philosophical categories of existence themselves. In so doing, she introduces an instability into the status of those categories not only as normalizing norms, but also as evaluative norms. In other words, that Pippi can see a sleeping man as a Thing to be acquired rather than as a fellow person with rights to freedom and autonomy reveals the arbitrariness of those rights, and their embeddedness in structures of power; if Pippi can carry him away, why shouldn't she? On the other hand, Tommy and Annika's reaction to Pippi's Thing-finding emphasizes evaluative norms, which rest on criteria for assessing the rightness or wrongness of an action; they are "utterly horrified" by her suggestion. Pippi, in her queer protest against all practices founded on the idea of normal behavior, capitulates to her friends' squeamishness, but isn't really bothered either way.

Quirky or queer?

It's important to stress that Pippi doesn't simply subvert normal behavior; such unconventionality might make her quirky, but not queer. Rather, Pippi questions the very idea or the conditions of possibility for there to even be a norm. She does this in her outrageous explanations for her behaviors and desires. In citing manufactured cultural practices from around the world whenever her own behavior is challenged, Pippi surfaces the methodology behind the establishment and continual justification of hegemonic cultural norms. The academic discipline of anthropology has redeemed to some extent the west's unsavory past of exploration for the purpose of colonization and exploitation by providing us with pictures of diverse cultural practices and calling us to recognize that what we take for granted as normal is in fact cultural. Still, it has yet to widely acknowledge that the thick descriptions it provides may in fact be grounded in fictions and rationalizations. Pippi forcefully brings that truth home to us. Her philosophy is thus not so much non-normative as it is antinormative; that is, she uses her admittedly fictionalized stories and explanations to display a disdain for the practices that contribute to normativity in the first place.

If Pippi's antinormativity calls into question the conditions of possibility for normativity, then what are the conditions of possibility for Pippi herself? What makes her queer rather than quirky, and what grounds and supports her continued resistance to assimilate into normative culture? It's not enough to say that she is simply a fictional product of a fecund imagination, and therefore she is not bound

to any rules of conventionality and can do what she wants. I say this because I have had many students, particularly in recent years, who believe in Pippi enough to feel sorry for her. They are on the side of “all the ladies and gentlemen in the town” who believe that a child of nine should not be allowed to live alone (Lindgren 1950, 38). Alternately, I’ve had students who really disliked Pippi, who found her “bratty” and “out of control”. Pippi obviously has enough reality to threaten these students’ sense of propriety. They know she’s a fictional character, but she bothers them more than other fictional characters, because she doesn’t play by the rules. What’s going on here?

Like many fictional characters, Pippi has a dead mother. Indeed, as inveterate readers of children’s books know, there is no more dangerous place for a mother than a children’s novel, as mothers have a remarkable high mortality rate in this genre. This usually leaves the child with the father as a problem. If we map the family romance onto Nodelman’s categories for sameness in children’s novels, we might say that when a dead mother becomes a lost home, the grieving father becomes the site of exile. Rather than fathers comforting the family and drawing it together in a time of loss, lost mothers come to represent togetherness and comfort, while fathers represent isolation and strangeness; mothers offer memories of acceptance and familiarity, fathers take on aspects of fear and the foreign. For where mothers in children’s books often die or leave, fathers tend to withdraw and become distant or in some way become a problem to be solved, rather than a rock on which to rest. Consider Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn-Dixie*, Burnett’s *The secret garden*, Klaus Hagerup’s Markus books, Cormier’s *The chocolate war*, Susan Patron’s *The higher power of Lucky*. Even when there is a mom in the picture, the dad is still often the focus of the child’s problem: Madeleine L’Engle’s *A wrinkle in time*, Hilary McKay’s Casson family books, Joan Bauer’s *Rules of the road*, Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet*. Even the robust Harry Potter has a father problem: his mother’s love might have saved him, but his father’s reputation and legacy is what he must strive to live up to. Children in books grow up in the shadow of sad, ineffective, absent, neglectful fathers, and the message is clear: in order to grow up properly, you must learn to value this person who doesn’t necessarily value you, at least not until you have done something worthwhile. That may sound a bit harsh, but I would contend that it is very rare to find a critically acclaimed, beloved book that features a strong, competent, loving, attentive father who supports his children in their struggles to grow up.

The father problem

The father problem expands rather nicely into an analogy of the patriarchal symbolic order in which children must find a place for themselves as adults. In a traditional heteronormative paradigm, the negotiation of identity takes place through the giving up of one's desire for life in a maternal space and the asserting of one's place in larger society. Freud, of course, formulated this negotiation through the story of Oedipus, but also through his appropriation of Darwin's notion of primal horde of brothers that rises up and kills the father that has forced them out of the group. Lacan further articulates this process: Every child begins life in a dual relation with the mother. Child and mother are a couple, each completing the other. The problem is that this sense of mutual completion is illusory. Were the illusion to persist, neither child nor mother would be able to move forward into the pursuit of her own desires, and the child, being the more vulnerable of the pair, would be completely consumed by the mother's demand that the child complete her as her object, rather than emerge as a subject in its own right. The intervention of the father is, then, a necessary one. He triangulates the system, turning a dual relationship into a structure where space can be negotiated for non-reciprocal desires. Lacan insists that the father in this structure is the symbolic father; he is a function rather than a person, and it is this symbolic father who underwrites the symbolic order itself, by separating it from the natural order. In the natural order of things, for instance, there is no incest taboo, because there is no biological reason why an offspring cannot mate with its parent; Oedipus teaches us that. The symbolic father, however, sets limits. He gives a child his name, calls him out of the imaginary dual relation with the mother and with his own body image and inscribes him in the symbolic order. By virtue of his relationship with the mother (he can have her whereas the child cannot) and by virtue of his power, the child identifies with him, wants to be like him. Hence he makes accession to the symbolic order attractive to the child, rather than a burden. "The true function of the Father /--/ is fundamentally to unite (and not set in opposition) a desire and the Law" (Lacan 1977, 321).

As a function, however, the symbolic father is also the dead father. In Freud's myth of the primal horde, the murder of the father results in the sons coming together to form a social order as a hedge against their own guilt. As a setter of limits, he inspires fear and admiration, but has no limits himself, and hence he cannot exist as real, because existence implies limits, at the very least, the limit of nonexistence

itself. But the story of him allows us to imagine the possibility of his existence, and all our social and cultural norms are built on that imagining. We imagine him in both his protective function and his prohibiting function, and our social interactions are alternately predicated on fears of reprisal and quests for approval that we translate into laws and norms that govern social functioning. If we follow the logic of much children's literature, our imaginings of the primal father who upholds the symbolic order are faltering. Fathers, as we noted above, are increasingly portrayed as lost, humiliated, distant, or physically and emotionally absent. The child's role in most children's novels, then, though it may be veiled or represented as coming of age or attaining a mature understanding, is really to prop up the system, to cover over its flaws by attending to one's own. Like Peter of Haarlem sticking his finger in the dike, child characters become the supplemental element that keeps the patriarchal system from collapsing.

This is where Pippi's singularity becomes evident. Certainly, she participates in the long tradition in children's literature where the death of the mother is the prevailing leitmotif for irrevocable separation of mother and child. But the fate of Pippi's father is more ambiguous:

Pippi had not forgotten her father. He was a sea captain who sailed on the great ocean, and Pippi had sailed with him in his ship until one day her father was blown overboard in a storm and disappeared. But Pippi was absolutely certain that he would come back. She would never believe that he had drowned; she was sure that he had floated until he landed on an island inhabited by cannibals. And she thought he had become king of all the cannibals and went around with a golden crown on his head all day long. (Lindgren 1950, 12)

Instead of dying to instantiate Pippi into the symbolic order as a poor pitiable orphan bearing the Name-of-the-Father but without his protection, instead of sticking around to inhabit a position as representative of a failed patriarchal symbolic order that needs Pippi to hold it up, Pippi's father moves into the impossible position of *the primal father himself*. A "stylish papa", indeed (Lindgren 1950, 12)!

The father of enjoyment

The consequences for Pippi of her father's predicament are fascinating from a theoretical perspective. Rather than coming under the

sway of a father of either protection or prohibition, Pippi is now positioned in reference to a father of radical enjoyment. The father of enjoyment in psychoanalytic theory is the obscene counterpart of the father of prohibition: where the father of prohibition says "No!" the father of enjoyment says, "You must!" Clearly, obscenity is an important element of Pippi's papa's personality. Pippi cheerfully casts him as a cannibal, or at least, as someone who authorizes a system of cannibalism, which may even be worse. But even before that, he was a pirate – a well-worn figure of debauchery, depravity, and revulsion (and hence, intense attraction). That Pippi exalts in his opposition to conventional morality is one of the points that my more conservative students object to. That he authorizes his daughter to do the same, by providing her with pirate's gold, unfettered freedom, and the will to enjoy her circumstances as a motherless child, is even worse. The



Lindgren, Astrid. Pippi Långstrump går ombord. Ill. Ingrid Vang Nyman. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1992. © Saltkråkan AB, Lidingö. Bilden återges med tillstånd. (Pippi goes on board).

father of enjoyment is demanding, he crosses lines, he knows no limiting injunctions; neither, it would seem, does Pippi. Indeed her great freedom and her predilection for enjoyment cause much anxiety for Tommy and Annika, which is precisely what too much enjoyment does for normative subjects. But for Pippi as a queer subject, enjoyment opens up avenues for joy, strength, and possibility that remain strenuously circumscribed within the symbolic order.

The fact remains, of course, that Pippi is a fictional character, so what can her expression of queerness offer a reader beyond a sort of wistfulness of would-that-it-were-so? Her way of being in the world is not possible, after all, and for many, not desirable. And yet, I do believe that Pippi's subjectivity has a role to play in the creation of the liberated child. Her critique of the methodologies founded on the idea of normal behavior can enable critics and writers to re-examine what we consider good children's literature, and even good children, by allowing us to see how deeply embedded we are in discourses and structures of power that reinforce patriarchal assumptions. Can we, for instance, learn to validate and support children's choices to resolutely *not fit in* to social orders that they find oppressive, and help them find and create, as Giorgio Agamben describes, communities based on nonbelonging rather than identity? Are we brave enough to imagine queer communities, communities based on enjoyment rather than prohibition, on rejections of normative behaviors rather than reifications? Pippi's call is addressed to us as much as it is to Tommy and Annika, even though it seems that, like them, we can "just barely hear" it. "'I'm going to be a pirate when I grow up,' she cried. 'Are you?'" (Lindgren 1950, 160).

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