

Other Voices

Bookbird readers are invited to submit brief texts for consideration in "Other Voices" for our forthcoming issues on "Books for Children with Disabilities" (deadline June 1, 2000) and "Fathers and Sons" (Sept. 1, 2000). Article-length submissions (2,500–3,000 words) are, of course, invited as well.

Arthur's Agendas: An Aardvark Avatar Edutains

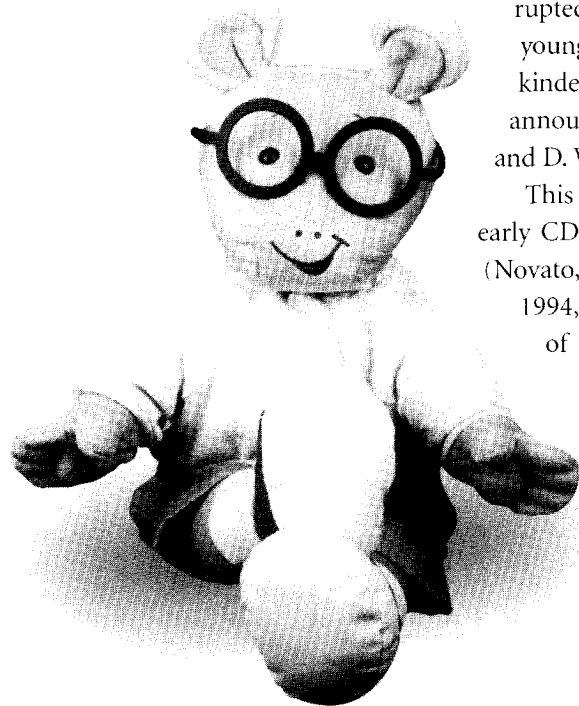
Margaret Mackey

The supporters of Arthur the Aardvark describe him as nonviolent, prosocial, and educational. It is all true. At the same time, Arthur the Aardvark also serves as a landmark in the history and development of children's literature, children's television, and children's computers. His financial, technological, and industrial role is probably as important as his imaginary life and adventures. As a pioneer, first of interactive picture books, next of public television sponsorship, and, most recently, of computer-based toymaking, Arthur represents the changing nature of children's fiction.

Arthur first saw life in 1986, as the hero of Marc Brown's picture book *Arthur's Teacher Trouble* (Boston: Little, Brown). Arthur's new teacher, Mr. Ratburn, is much meaner than all the other teachers, and Arthur is oppressed by homework from the first day of third grade. The main feature of the plot is the school spellathon, which Arthur wins, despite being regularly interrupted in his studies by his little sister, D. W., who is too young to have homework because she has not even started kindergarten yet. At the end of the book, Mr. Ratburn announces that he will be next year's kindergarten teacher, and D. W. receives her just desserts.

This simple plot made the story a perfect vehicle for an early CD-ROM in the Living Books series from Brøderbund (Novato, CA: Random House/Brøderbund). Copyrighted in 1994, the CD-ROM reproduces the words and illustrations of the book and provides the usual read-aloud embellishments. Its real genius lies in the animation of the pictures. Click on just about any item in any illustration and it springs to life, often in ridiculously incongruous ways. Click on the chocolate chip

Arthur talking to the photographer. Photos of ActiMate Arthur used with permission from Microsoft Corporation.



cookies, for example, and they leap up and sing a rousing chorus of blues. Click on the playhouse and a little stick man rushes out and grabs a taxi.

This anarchic approach helped to make the CD-ROM a huge success, and in 1996 the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), an educational television channel in the United States, began to air half-hour animated stories of Arthur and his family and friends. In a way that is perhaps more familiar with children's programs on the commercial channels, the debut was linked to the production of many associated toys, games, clothing, stationery, and so forth. This marketing blitz helped to underwrite the expenses of the animation, but caused some concern both to Marc Brown himself and to some observers of children's culture in the United States.¹ Arthur's success also led to a change in PBS's approach to financing children's programs. For the first time, corporate underwriting of a children's program was allowed. Libby's Juicy Juice underwrites Arthur and has its logo aired at the beginning and end of the program.²

Now Arthur has been reincarnated in a new technological format once again. This time, it is the giant company Microsoft that has taken advantage of his enormous popularity. Arthur is one of a very select group of fictional characters chosen for incarnation as an "ActiMate"—that is, a doll run by a computer. Add six batteries and do a little rudimentary set-up work and Arthur will tell you the right date and the right time, remember a child's birthday, engage in some simple games, and tell jokes. Furthermore, with the addition of a couple of plastic connectors, he can be linked to a computer or a television set and will interact with the Arthur stories presented on-screen, either in a TV program or on video, or on a special CD-ROM or on the Arthur website. Linked up in this fashion, the Arthur doll will make appropriate comments on his own television program. He will play hangman and many

other games on the website or on his own CD-ROMs, speaking to his friends on the screen. In playing hangman, to take a single example, he can suggest single letters or he can offer game-winning strategies; it all depends on whether you press his hand or his ear. The line between his existence as a fiction—interacting with his fictional friends on-screen—and his presence as a real talking toy—seated beside you and offering opinions on the story—becomes very blurred. As they usually manage to do, children will probably come to terms with the ambiguity of this situation in their own ways. Many adults find the whole experience very unsettling. To have a baby-sized doll on your lap, moving and speaking in apparent response to the screen in front of both of you, is a startling experience. The toy is actually pleasurable to hold, with an appealing lap-weight. His engagement with interlocutors, not surprisingly, is fairly stilted, but his capacity, at the requisite time of the year, to remember that your birthday is five days away is hard to resist.

Freestanding, the ActiMate Arthur boasts a vocabulary of 4,000 words; linked up with his computer connection, his vocabulary can rise to 10,000 words. His voice is recognizable from the television program, and he engages in a very limited repertoire of motions, wagging his head and waving his arms as he speaks. It is thus a formidable creation, and it is not surprising to find that Arthur and his add-ons come at a stiff price. In Canadian dollars I paid about \$100 for the doll and about \$75 apiece for the two connectors. Specially linked videos and CD-ROMs are extra again, though the doll responds just as well to a home recording of the television program or to the website as it does to a purchased video or CD-ROM game.

Not surprisingly, the rubric on all the packaging for these different items bristles with assurances that Arthur provides an educational experience. Nobody, apparently, expects parents and grandparents to pay out such large sums just for fun. The

games on the website and the CD-ROM that I looked at could indeed be described as instructive. However, the stories and games are educational in the reductive way that is unfortunately commonplace in the children's computer market—much in the way of drill and skill-testing; little of the anarchic liveliness that made the original CD-ROM of *Arthur's Teacher Trouble* such an uproarious experience. The doll himself often makes remarks such as, "Hey, this is fun!" but I suspect that most children will take rather more persuading than that.

Nevertheless, Arthur is undeniably compelling as an example of a fiction who has burst right out of his book covers. He raises complex and fascinating questions about what contemporary children may be learning about stories and story worlds. In reality he is a toy accessible only to a rich minority; on a more theoretical level he raises questions for all those who work in the field of children's literature to consider.

An avatar is defined as a "manifestation in bodily form."³ What is it that Arthur the Avatar is actually manifesting? He is not simply an incarnate form of a particular fiction, as Alice dolls, for example, have been for more than a century. This Arthur doll actually is able to engage with his own fictions and to provide commentary and strategies for making connections to a whole set of stories and games about himself. At this level, he represents an incarnate metafiction, a very complex idea indeed. At the same time, Arthur is a key figure in the "edutainment" industry, where no entertainment exists without its educational component. In this capacity, he represents a very didactic and, some would say, reductive approach to children and their games.

Perhaps it is too much to hope, at this early stage of technological development, that Arthur the Avatar could actually be dynamic as well as instructive, that the toy could find some way to embody the *joie de vivre* of that early CD-ROM. Even those who initially respond to Arthur with

amazement and delight will soon find themselves navigated to matters of instruction rather than play. While the toy remains so extremely expensive, the marketers may well feel the need to play safe and load Arthur down with instructional virtue. It will be interesting to see if avatars of children's literature become more interesting as they become cheaper and simpler to produce.

At the same time, Arthur the ActiMate doll is interesting almost in spite of himself. Whatever he does well or badly, the fact that he does it at all creates its own fascination. Some of his actual activities are mundane, but the complexity of the relationship between the story and the character commenting on his own story is compelling in its own right. The history of Arthur so far involves an interesting balance of commercial, technological, and narrative breakthroughs. The questions raised by the different versions of his little stories are important ones, and the consequences of the kinds of decisions made about Arthur over the years will be important in the broader field of children's literature and children's literacy. The expectations about literature that children develop are affected by the kinds of literature they come to know. Coming to know a multifaceted set of different manifestations of the same fictional world is an experience that surely develops a complex and plural approach to fiction in today's world; it will be interesting to see how that experience affects tomorrow's writers and readers.

1. C. L. Hays, "Arthur's Licence to Sell," *Globe and Mail*, 1 Oct. 1997, A12–A13.

2. S. E. Linn and A. F. Poussaint, "The Trouble with Teletubbies: The Commercialization of PBS," *The American Prospect* (May–June 1999): 22.

3. *The Gage Canadian Dictionary* (Vancouver: Educational Publishing Company, 1997).

For information about ActiMates see the following website: <<http://www.microsoft.com/products/hardware/actimates>>
For Arthur's PBS home page, see the following website: <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/arthur>>.

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Elton John, from Disney to Westminster Abbey: The Kingdoms of Power

Jean Perrot

Elton John has traced an astounding path during his long musical career, a path that led him in 1997 to sing "Candle in the Wind," written by his friend Bernie Taupin, in Westminster Abbey before a select "congregation" of kings and dignitaries mourning Princess Diana. Among a significant number of "hits," the songs he composed with Tim Rice for *The Lion King* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994) expound a personal mythology and shed a singular light on the celebration of the royals by the media, as an entertainment for mass consumption. The magic of royalty and the mystique of the quest are expressed by this singer of the Western world who is involved in the consecration of popular Anglo-Saxon culture beneath the threefold signs of childhood, the divine, and the mythical, through the wonders of the modern fairy tale. History in *The Lion King* recedes and fades off into the wings of the new media staging of fantasy, in which the child-king is the link, the token of transmission, just as the rose of "Candle in the Wind" stands as the permanent symbol of an enduring and long-lived hereditary dynasty. The enthroned heir holds his legitimacy from a dialog with a god-like father speaking from the blue in storms and thunder, whereas in Westminster the message is felt in the subdued tones of the faltering breeze.

The mythical revival of the monarchy is impressively sealed by the beneficial rain on the new Eden of restored conviviality and wild nature, just as the mild refreshing zephyr foretells a new budding light and illumination.

It is interesting to compare "Candle in the Wind," ringing out beneath the arches of the great Abbey flung open to the world's cameras for an instant by the representatives of British protocol, with "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," the final song in *The Lion King*, performed by Elton John as the film's closing credits rolled. This film is a clear demonstration that this is a worldwide exportation of the newly coined dual myth of the monarchy, based on a vision of a primal and sensory paradise, but linked to the mystical contemplation of the stars and heaven. In such a world, lions are indeed the expression both of the distance of immobile icons, conveying the traditional separation between those in power and the people—the king posed high on his crag as in a painting—and of the modern closeness of an ideal couple's intimacy: Simba and Nala are shown bathing, then innocently making love, as they disport on their natural yet royal couch, right under the closest camera's eye. The filmgoer, awed by the scene's towering power and sharing the throbs of the lovers' consuming passion, is granted the position of the inquisitive paparazzi spying on the celebrities' private lives.

And so, the implacable law of need (the hyenas) and greed (voiced by the comic gesturing of the joyful but sinister "bachelors" Pumbaa and Timon, reminding one of Prince Hal with Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, and by the lies of Scar, the treacherous, usurping uncle) is combined with a simultaneous symbolic exchange (between the royal family and their loyal friends) to create a focal point, a new court society, which eventually conjoins morality, family, and royalty. Simba, who feels guilty for the death of his father, has first to go and share, as the song says, "the wild