

The Embedded and Embodied Literacies of a Young Reader

Abstract: This article argues that if we paid attention to the local situation of a reader the way we attend to the life story of an author, we might gain a very different understanding of children's literacy. It explores the literate approaches of a single child exploring a single theme – the settler culture as represented in a variety of materials accessible to her in the 1950s – across the discourses of television cowboy shows, school and recreational texts featuring settlers and indigenous people, and a British children's novel about claiming the land. The article suggests that this kind of miscellaneous intertextuality is a larger feature of early reading than we sometimes assume.

Key words: early literacy, readers, play, space, intertextuality

Authors create books within their own historical, cultural, and social contexts. We read biographies of authors and literary histories of particular eras or milieus with a view to making sense of how a work relates to the world from which it sprang.

How would our understanding of literate and literary development be altered if we paid equivalent attention to individual readers' social, cultural, and historical contexts? Beginning readers in particular are invested in their own time and space, and also in their own bodies in relatively singular ways. Reading and other forms of media use will help them to transcend their own circumstances but first they must use the affordances of their own local settings to help

them understand how to make sense of narrative spaces that are different from the one they inhabit every day. In a complex but under-reported bootstrapping operation, children use their newly developing awareness of their own world to make sense of their texts, and then use their texts to help them observe their own world with more sophisticated eyes. In the course of this project, they make use of whatever intertextual juxtapositions – however motley and unlikely – may come their way.

I have been exploring this complicated process through an intense study of my own literate history. In order to advance beyond the pleasures and self-deceptions of a simple memoir, I have assembled as broad a collection as I can today acquire of the texts with which I became literate in St. John's, Newfoundland, in the 1950s. As I investigate these materials through the lens of fifty subsequent years of literate experience, I am surprised to find that the importance of "St. John's, Newfoundland" and "the 1950s" seems equivalent in psychological weight to the importance of the texts themselves, a phenomenon I reported in an earlier article (Mackey, 2010). In this paper, I will pursue further the significance for her developing literacy of one child's location in time and space and in a grounded body. I will investigate the theme of settlers and indigenous peoples as it played out in my life through a variety of texts.

This account is based in the past, but tells a story that happens to include the incorporation of a new medium, television. Deborah Brandt's account of "accumulating literacy" suggests that past literacies linger and affect newer forms; she also observes that the incorporation of new forms of literacy is part of contemporary life.

The piling up and extending out of literacy and its technologies give a complex flavour even to elementary acts of reading and writing today. Contemporary literacy learners –

across positions of age, gender, race, class, and language heritage – find themselves having to piece together reading and writing experiences from more and more spheres, creating new and hybrid forms of literacy where once there might have been fewer and more circumscribed forms. What we calculate as a rising standard of basic literacy may be more usefully regarded as the effects of a rapid proliferation and diversification of literacy. And literate ability at the end of the twentieth century may be best measured as a person's capacity to amalgamate new reading and writing practices in response to rapid social change (1995, p. 651).

Fifty years ago, young literates incorporated the new medium of TV into their understanding of the world, and developed their understanding of that medium and many others in part through physical play. The contemporary playground studies of Jackie Marsh and her colleagues suggest that these tactics are still operative today, that individual readers accumulate their own local text set, and that literate understanding is advanced and refined through physical, local play: “these processes . . . enable children to understand and come to terms with significant discourses in their lives” (Marsh *et al.*, 2010, p.3). Marsh and her team describe playgrounds as “sites where culture is practiced, produced, reproduced, regulated and negotiated” (*ibid.*); they are also spaces in which received culture is made local, housed in children's own bodies. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) suggest that many metaphors have their origins in our bodily awareness of the world; in these games children are often *working out* those relationships in physical ways.

The idea of exploring the materials of childhood literacy is certainly not new. In this project, however, I hope to achieve a rounded investigation of my textual influences, rather than concentrating on a single medium such as books (Spufford, 2002), movies (Walsh, 2003), or

music (O'Brien, 2004). By including official school materials and much daily ephemera, I hope to offer a broader perspective even than Michel Tremblay, who devoted separate volumes to the drama, novels, and movies of his youth (1998, 2002, 2003), or John Sutherland, who covers a variety of media in his memoir (2008). All of these authors focus on a form of personal reflection that is not my main aim in this project (though I am sure it cannot be completely eliminated). Rather than aiming for the personal memoir, I am more invested in examining the advantages of *particularity* that can arise from an intense focus on a single example.

Place and literacy

I begin with a strong assertion: all reading is local. Ron and Suzie Wong Scollon have defined the concept of *geosemiotics* as follows:

Geosemiotics is the study of the meaning systems by which language is located in the material world. This includes not just the location of the words on the page you are reading now but also the location of the book in your hands and your location as you stand or sit reading this. (2003, p. x)

The idea of location is not something static, as Doreen Massey observes:

Conceiving of space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system and so forth are all ways of taming it. They enable us to ignore its real import: the coeval multiplicity of other trajectories and the necessary outward-lookingness of a spacialized subjectivity. (2005, p.59)

Space, says Massey, is “the contemporaneous existence of a plurality of trajectories, a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (2005, p.59). Gabrielle Cliff Hodges *et al.* helpfully gloss this account with a reminder that these trajectories are not neutral: “Places are situated on a web of historical and contemporary interconnection, and that interconnection usually entails a power dimension” (2010, p.191).

Location is not neutral and it is not abstract. Alistair Pennycook says language is always local, and I suggest that we can substitute the word *literacy* for *language* in this quotation and it will still hold true:

What we do with language in a particular place is a result of our interpretation of that place; and the language practices we engage in reinforce that reading of place. . . .To look at language as a practice is to view language as an activity rather than a structure, as something we do rather than a system we draw on, as a material part of social and cultural life rather than an abstract entity. (2010, p.2)

A local space is also the temporary accommodation for the assembled trajectories of an assortment of texts, more or less randomly accumulated according to the tastes and the access to appealing materials that a particular household may afford. The ecology of the domestic library (complete with its access to the outside world of other people’s choices through library borrowing, friends’ loans, gifts, and the like) is an important part of the local setting of a child’s developing literacy that I want to consider here.

The ingredients of the project

My intention on beginning this auto-literacy project was to assemble as broad-ranging a collection of materials from my youth as I could locate: media, modalities, provenances all to be as comprehensive as possible. Some elements have escaped me; for example, I have not yet worked out a way to track down the few children's audio-recordings we owned when I can remember only individual songs and not any album titles. Overall, however, I have been surprised and very pleased at how easily the affordances of contemporary networks make it possible to retrieve a significant assortment of materials. I present my current "data set" here, simply to indicate the scale of the project. Space considerations do not allow me to address every element in this list in this article, and I have chosen to follow a single theme through the assortment of materials I have now collected. Many different such themes could be pursued through this collection; my point is the significance of what could be described as the relatively random forms of intertextuality in a young reader's life.

My current set of assembled materials includes the following, in no particular order:

- a small group of picture books, some inherited, some re-acquired
- somewhere between 200 and 300 children's novels and series books, many from the excellent repositories of children's series at the University of Alberta Library
- two children's annuals, a couple of anthologies, and some novels from the 1920s and 1930s, previously owned by my mother
- a small group of even older books passed on from my grandparents' childhood
- a few adult novels from the 1940s and 1950s, including bestsellers and *Readers' Digest* condensed books

- some adult classics, particularly the work of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens whom my parents greatly admired
- a comprehensive archive of the relevant school textbooks, held in an exemplary historical collection at Memorial University of Newfoundland's curriculum library
- a sampling of school yearbooks and school newspapers from the 1950s and early 1960s
- copies of magazines from the 1950s, both children's and adults'
- archived radio programs of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, both children's and adults'
- DVDs of a number of popular American television series from the 1950s, supplemented by a few video cassettes of single programs not available in DVD
- church and Sunday school materials from the Archives of the United Church of Canada in Toronto and the local archives of Gower Street United Church in St. John's
- documents and photographs from the Archives of the Provincial Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador in St. John's
- a small set of recorded music: classical, popular, and some local (Newfoundland's famously rich folk culture includes a magnificent range of songs)
- sheet music learned for piano lessons
- knitting patterns
- a few examples of personal scrapbooks and writing samples.

Revisiting these materials has been a labour of love but also of revelation. Many of the items testify evocatively to their era, but almost none of them (with the exception of a few school textbooks) speaks of the place in which I read them.

The history of Newfoundland and Labrador is complex. The island was sparsely populated with Aboriginal Nations. Vikings established a colony on the island about a thousand years ago. Sir Humphrey Gilbert claimed the land for Queen Elizabeth I in 1583, but the climate was hostile and it suited the commercial interests of the many European nations that fished the Grand Banks not to permit permanent settlement. For a long time, therefore, Europeans sailed across for the fishing season and returned home for winter. Gradually over-wintering took hold, and small, isolated communities built up around the coasts, completely wiping out the indigenous Beothuk people in the process. The British and the French fought over fishing rights off various parts of the island and the Labrador coast; and such rights, defined by coastal boundaries, changed hands in the great European treaties. In the nineteenth century Newfoundland became a self-governing Dominion of the British Empire, with its own currency, postal system, and so forth. In the 1930s the Dominion of Newfoundland declared bankruptcy (in part because it was unusually conscientious in paying off war debts), and for a decade and a half it was ruled directly from London. In 1948, a referendum was held to determine its future and, by a very narrow majority, the vote decided in favour of union with Canada. On March 31, 1949, Newfoundland, which describes itself as Britain's oldest colony, became Canada's newest province.

Thus the 1950s marked the start of a new era for Newfoundland, the beginning of Confederation with Canada. It was a very particular historical moment, but, of course, to me it was simply what the world was. My own relationship to this culture was that of an

immigrant from nearby Nova Scotia; at the time of my birth in late 1948, Newfoundland was still a separate country. My classmates at school were the last group to be born as Newfoundlanders rather than Canadians, and were highly conscious of their special status, which I, as Canadian-born, did not share.

In the 1950s, Newfoundland stood in the cross-currents of at least four different national cultures, politics, and ideologies: its own, an emerging Canadian culture, the over-riding American influence, and the historic remnants of close ties with Britain. For many years, the Union Jack was the provincial flag, and we sang the “Ode to Newfoundland” and “God Save the Queen” in school assemblies, but never “O Canada,” the national anthem of our new country. We also inhabited the Cold War ideologies and gender determinacies that pervaded all of North America. Newfoundland’s education system paralleled Canadian traditions of schooling segregated on religious and sometimes racial grounds (although, because the Beothuk were extinct, there was no issue of local residential schools for Aboriginals to be addressed; on the other hand, the denominational divides in our school systems were very fine-grained). Our television was largely American, though the shows were framed and presented by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the local station CJON; our government, churches, justice system and other institutions were Canadian; our reading material was a mix of American, British, a bit of Canadian, and a small amount of local matter (most of which, like the daily newspapers, was ephemeral

As North Americans, and indeed simply as western children of the 1950s, we also participated in a sweeping mythology of cowboys and Indians. I will explore this example further as a way of illuminating the role of the local in a larger, ideologically driven form of literacy. This example also allows me to explore the idea of children’s literature taking its

place among a host of other literacies, materials, and cultural influences at the *reader's* end of the encounter with texts. The children's fiction that attracts the close attention of journals such as this one is only one component of a panoply of textual materials that affect and inflect children's lives.

Settler culture for children

Perhaps I should not have been, but I was surprised when I scanned my collection of materials to see the ubiquity of the settler theme in a variety of formulae. As novice television viewers (TV was brand new to us in the mid-1950s), we watched *Roy Rogers*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Annie Oakley*, and many more. These programs offered differing ideological perspectives on issues of settlement, Aboriginal claims, land ownership, racism, and related questions. *Roy Rogers*, for example, has little in the way of an Aboriginal presence (though the dialogue is conventionally racist from time to time), and the land is largely contested by ranchers and farmers. *The Lone Ranger* features the noble Tonto, but the traitor who organized the ambush of Texas Rangers, of which our hero was the sole survivor, was a "half-breed" who is presented as self-evidently untrustworthy by his very genetic composition. *Annie Oakley* presents a different ideological perspective, which acknowledges previous harm to the Indians but perceives that the government has now righted all prior wrongs.

But I brought many other discourses to my television viewing over the course of my childhood. This accumulation of stories was local and particular, and I will look at it in some detail as a way to explore what weight we might attach to the role of the reader. This story is

very personal but my intention is to treat it (with all possible reservations) as another kind of data source.

I was seven when I first saw a television, eight when we acquired our own set. At about the same time, I began to make frequent visits to the local museum on the way home from my weekly outing to the library (they occupied the same building). Here was told a starkly different story of Aboriginal claims and cultures. The museum displayed a variety of exotic Beothuk artifacts, such as stone flints and caribou bone needles. There was also a skeleton on display, which I recall as being that of a specific, named Beothuk woman, but so far I have not been able to locate any records that will allow me to confirm or deny that identification. The year I turned ten, I studied Newfoundland history in school and the story of the extinction of the Beothuk in the island of Newfoundland was more clearly spelled out to me.

The Grade 5 history book presented a mixture of historical guilt (like *Annie Oakley*) and conventional racism (like nearly all the cowboy shows). The very last Beothuk died in captivity in 1829, under an English name, Nancy, though her real name, Shanawdithit, was well known. The textbook firmly refers to her as Nancy and says she “was the last of her tribe and she died of tuberculosis although everything was done to help her. We have much to feel ashamed of in our treatment of these shy, brave people” (Briffett, 1954, p.22). But just three pages earlier, the book describes the Beothuks in the following terms (the context is a recorded meeting with European would-be settlers):

In many ways these people were like children. They loved to dress up. When the chief was given a towel, he put it on his head and then he and his friends joined hands and laughed and sang.

Like children, too, the Indians were ready for a picnic on the beach. (Briffett, 1954, p.19)

Today's museum has removed the skeleton to be dealt with more respectfully, and the provincial exhibits now include Shanawdithit's own lively drawings of Beothuk culture, which she made for her captors during the last months of her life, thus providing at least a small opening for a Beothuk point of view. I have not investigated how contemporary school history books present the tragedy of the Beothuks, but I suspect the use of that complicit "we" might be less in evidence.

The Beothuks painted themselves with ochre, and were the first to be called Red Indians, a name they may have unwittingly donated to a whole continent full of First Nations. But although they thus served as a prototype for centuries of careless racist references, they were wiped out during the first third of the nineteenth century. The island of Newfoundland, especially on the east coast where I lived, was, in the 1950s, a society with virtually no Aboriginal presence of any kind, far less than most North American settings. Dismissed by the history book, exoticized in the museum, they occupied a very remote and "othered" corner of my conceptual universe. The "we" of my schoolbook was as clear as the "we" in any cowboys-and-Indians show, and just as literally presented.

Other school textbooks continued this theme of us-versus-them. The Grade 3 language book, a Canadian publication, was perhaps the most blatant. At the beginning of a 50-page

chapter on complete sentences, correct capitalization and the like, the Marshall twins beg their grandfather to tell their favourite story. It involves the time that Father was away from the family home in the woods and the Indians arrived. Mother sent the children to hide upstairs and bravely spoke to the Indians:

“Eat,” said one of the Indians in a loud voice.

Mother was afraid. But she did not let the Indians know. She told them to come in. . . .

Mother brought the Indians some food. They ate it, but they did not say a word to her.

Then one of them shut his eyes and said, “Sleep.” (Stoddard, Bailey & Lewis, n.d., p.4)

The moral of the story is made grammatically and ethically clear in the subsequent sections:

USING SENTENCES

When the Indians came to the door, one of them said, “Eat.” He had never been to school, or he might have said, “We want something to eat.” When the Indian said, “Eat,” did he say something you could understand?

What did he mean when he said, “Sleep”?

The Indians did not know many of our words. How did they show Mrs. Green what they wanted?

After the Indians had gone, the children came down into the room. All were talking at once.

“All gone,” said Baby, who was just learning to talk.

“Yes, they have gone,” said Mrs. Green.

“Father will be home before night,” said Sam in a happy voice.

“Home,” said Baby.

You and your friends do not talk like Baby. But once in a while boys and girls say things that are hard to understand. Most of the time this happens because they say only part of what they mean.

If we had heard only what Baby said, what would we have thought? We might have thought that Mr. Green was at home then. We understand Sam’s whole thought, “Father will be home before night.” Sam used a sentence. A sentence always tells a whole thought. It is something that we can understand.

What did Baby mean when he said, “All gone”? (Stoddard, Bailey & Lewis, n.d., pp.6-7)

There is a brief acknowledgement that the Indians are speaking a foreign language but the strong implications created in this passage are that the Indians are ignorant because they have not been to school and childish because they speak like Baby.

Not surprisingly our recreational reading also conveyed ideas concerning the inherent superiority of the white settlers. Aboriginal characters were either a threat or a decorative extra. We subscribed to an American children’s magazine, *Jack and Jill*, and I have a few copies from the late 1950s in my possession. The August 1958 cover, credited to Ruth and Charles Newton,

shows dressed-up white children, bedizened with many fringes and feathers, playing Indians in a tree house. The November issue of the same year supplies a very sentimental account of the first American Thanksgiving, in which the whites “borrow” a stash of Indian seed corn that they find buried, but then search honourably for the tribe that buried it (to be identified by their distinctive storage baskets). After a long hunt, they locate the group responsible for inadvertently saving their lives.

The Pilgrim men then went to the common house and chose gifts for the Indians. From their sea chests they took colored cloth and knives and beads, and other goods. These they brought and placed before the Indians. “We give these gifts to you in exchange for your corn which we found and took on Cape Cod,” the governor said. “Without your corn we could not have grown food to live. We are grateful for it, and we hope you will be our friends.”

And that was how those early American settlers paid their first debt to the Indians.

(Hays, 1958, p.14)

Author Wilma Pitchford Hays describes this work as a “true story” but she does not pursue the historical details far enough to tell us how the Indians survived the winter when their crops had been reduced by the disappearance of their cache of seed corn. The word “stolen” does not appear.

Lengthier fiction sometimes offered a somewhat more subtle perspective, though the point of view I read was always white and always American. *Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol Ryrie

Brink, for example, offers at least a modicum of context to a lurid stereotype. The book is based loosely on the author's conversations with her grandmother.

Chapter 11 is entitled "Massacree!" and starts off grimly, aided, of course, by its status as a largely "true" story:

In those days the word massacre filled the white settlers with terror. Only two years before, the Indians of Minnesota had killed a thousand white people, burning their houses and destroying their crops. . . Other smaller uprisings throughout the Northwest flared up from time to time, and only a breath of rumor was needed to throw the settlers of Wisconsin into a panic of apprehension .(1935/1990, p.118)

Brink, however, provides a more nuanced approach than most of my television series and offers greater complexity than the little stories of *Jack and Jill*:

The fear spread like a disease, nourished on rumors and race hatred. For many years now the whites had lived at peace with the Indians of western Wisconsin, but so great was this disease of fear that even a tavern rumor could spread it like an epidemic throughout the country. (ibid., p.119)

The fear-mongering is slaked by that small dose of realism about "race hatred," but the perspective is still very much that of the settlers. Caddie and her father are friendly with Indian John, the chief of the local Indian tribe and Caddie heroically sneaks away to warn him that some settlers are planning a pre-emptive strike. The notion that Indian John is a "good Indian,"

however, is still very much a case of white judgement. It was not a position it occurred to me as a child to question; all Indians, fictional, historical, or preserved in the museum, were alike framed as alien to my world.

Developing local understanding

I was a specific and located child reader. I learned the official and unofficial discourses about the First Nations and the settler cultures of North America in a place where the history had played out differently from the continental norm but where casual racism remained a textual given. At the same time, I learned to read first and to watch television later, though, when I began to watch this new medium, I was still a child acquiring basic insights into how to interpret my own and a variety of represented worlds.

Like most North American children of the time, my brothers and I played out our fictions on the ground, and we particularly played cowboys. It is possible to accumulate a set of rich hypotheses about the causes that led to the ubiquity of that particular form of play in the 1950s: it enacted a binary divide between good and bad, or, alternatively, it tapped into the deep ethical uneasiness that caused a culture to assert and re-assert its moral rightness in so many different iterations of the settler/indigenous-nation story. It allowed children to delve into a picturesque, highly costumed world (Roy Rogers in his fringed and flamboyant shirts and the Lone Ranger in his iconic mask are dressed every bit as exotically as the most highly ornamented chief). It provided an outlet for violent gestures in ways deemed socially appropriate at the time. (I found re-watching old *Roy Rogers* shows quite a startling experience in terms not just of the gunfights but also of the fistfights: at any first small hint of disagreement, there is an instantaneous escalation to overt aggression. I had forgotten just how violent it all was.) It provided a

mythology of asserting one's own territorial rights for a society that was newly mobile after the war, a society where children were much less likely to live and play where their grandparents had grown up. It offered a way to establish a deep relationship with the land on which we stood as we played out the act of *claiming* it over and over again. No doubt many other factors were also at play (as we say).

I also suspect that we were enacting some forms of literacy learning as we played our games. My brothers and I were all new to the act of watching television, and we had almost no access to the cinema so it really was our first experience of comprehending moving images. Mark Reid, of the British Film Institute, has suggested a streamlined approach to media literacies, that is useful to consider here:

It seems clear to me in fact that there are a small number of language systems or modes that together constitute what it means to be literate in the 21st century – and that they were pretty much the same for the 20th century too. The modes are: speech, writing, pictures and moving pictures, music, and the dramatic modes of performance and gesture and the “mise en scène” of theatre design. (2009, p.20)

At our specific historic moment, my brothers and I had already learned about speech, writing, still pictures, and music. We had some modest multimodal experience: words and still images in our picture books and our church windows, words and music on radio and recordings, and, of course, in the songs we sang ourselves. Once we began to watch TV, however, we needed to learn to interpret moving pictures, their accompanying music, the diegetic soundtrack and dialogue, and the dramatic modes of performance, gesture, and *mise en scène*.

We exercised some of these developing skills, night after night, as we played cowboys in a very particular part of our back yard. We galloped along the base of a little hill, alongside an overgrown patch of ground where an abundance of thistles stood in nicely for cacti. We learned to *perform* as cowboys; we adopted the (fairly basic and primitive) gestures of Roy and Annie and the Lone Ranger, drawing our guns, mocking up our fist fights, swarming through the grass on our stomachs.

In our case, our games never included Indians as part of the plot. We were simply cowboys. At most we imagined some “bads” and had mock battles with non-existent villains who were never more than bad, and who had no explicit racial qualities of any kind (though I am sure we were unconsciously imbibing and endorsing racially inflected stereotypes nevertheless).

The game called to us over and over again. I cannot now reconstruct why the Indians were missing from our scenario but I can speculate on a variety of plausible reasons. *Roy Rogers*, our favourite program, had no Indians. Newfoundland itself had no Indians as far as our books and our experience taught us. Our priorities were differently based.

I think now that much of what we were doing was playing out the newest literacies we needed to acquire as novice viewers of the moving image: an understanding of performance, gesture, and *mise en scène*. We were practising the physical exigencies associated with these language systems.

At the same time, I do believe that I, at least, was also enacting the process of claiming the land by galloping over it, taking possession of it with my feet and my gun (or my gun-mimicking hand), co-opting the narrative of the American west and acting it out on the rocky east-coast island of Newfoundland. My brothers, all younger, may or may not have cared about this issue, but I was playing a game of outsider-insider that reflected my alien Canadian status

among my classmates. The cowboys were asserting their ownership of their territory, and at least part of the appeal of this game for me was the opportunity to play out that affirmation in my own space. The assertion of white ownership was a continent-wide preoccupation in the 1950s; in my own way (and oblivious to any political implications of my own white skin but aware of my local status as incomer), I made my personal form of emotional claim on the land through the activities of my feet.

Yet before this scenario falls into place (so to speak) as quite tidy and clear, I want to intersperse an idiosyncratic intertextual connection that offers its own illumination on the random nature of many children's literate development. This notion of claiming the ground through walking it forms a major plot component in a book I read more than once as a child, a book that baffled me in its details but resonated in terms of its emotional elements. It is hard to imagine how a book could be further removed from cowboy stories, though there is a certain pioneering element in the genteel-family-on-hard-times plot. *The Islanders* was written by the strangely named Theodora Wilson Wilson (1865-1941), a Westmorland pacifist, feminist, Quaker, and author of children's and adult books. It is not dated, and the best information I have been able to locate is on a sale list for Alibris.com, which suggests that its sequel, *Five of Us*, was published in 1925. This book came from my mother's childhood and still lurked about our family bookshelves.

The imperative of walking the land to claim it is explicitly laid out by the nobly-born Joan de Renegil, older sister of the rascalion Sir Bobbie (home from Eton for the school holidays, a marker of *bona fide* aristocracy that was utterly lost on me till I re-read the book as an adult):

It is the Boundary Riding – the great event that happens every hundred years, to keep the de Renegil rights as Lords of the Manor. We are arranging it as a grand wind-up to Bobbie's holidays. We start at eight in the morning, and follow the old boundary, right up the face of the scar, down on the mosses, along by the river, and, in fact, wherever the boundary runs. Last time it was ridden the estate lost thirty acres, because a corner was missed! And there will be sports, of course, and tremendous feeding, and a whole roast ox, and fireworks. (n.d.,p. 36)

The Boundary is in fact walked rather than ridden and those who arduously complete its circumference are awarded a medal and permitted to sign the Deed. This act of territorial assertion provides the climax of the book.

The random interaction of cowboy shows on the new medium of television and the medieval throwback of Wilson's romance for young people is probably meaningful only to me; I am most likely the only person in the world whose personal and psychological needs as an incomer were so precisely met by these two particular categories of text, acted out, explicitly or tacitly, on a specific stretch of ground. But such motley meetings-up and random intertexts are exactly what makes the act of becoming literate so very local. Even my co-cowboy brothers would not have read Mum's book; it is very much addressed to girls. And I would not say it informed my games directly – but the background resonance was important to me in ways that led me to place a particular value on fiction and its role in my life.

Intersecting complications

As we played out our commitment to the story of the cowboys in the desert landscape, we were achieving a number of complex ends. Children do invest their play in the cause of grappling with the complexity of textual worlds:

A text that is known to a child does not remain in its original state or even in a steady, stable form; instead, the child rewrites it. Texts become transformative stock to which young readers can return again and again as they figure out their own roles, words, actions, and critiques of their current situation. (Wolf & Heath, 1992, pp.109-110)

Wolf and Heath describe the role of children grappling with the import of the textual world; my sense of our own play is that in addition to playing out the significance of the territorial claim, we were also practising ways of dealing with the novel interpretive challenges of a new medium. Much of our time we were playing a *mise en scène* game, reiterating to ourselves the new significance of scenery and setting, placed vividly and concretely into the frame of the television story through deliberate decision-making and design, rather than abstractly laid out in black marks on the pages of a book. We practised narrative *gesture*; we *performed* the story as opposed to spectating. We transformed our understanding of the cowboy stories; we also transformed our relationship to our own space.

In addition, although we overlooked any issues of race and power, at least consciously, we did actively play out questions of gender and power. Although I was older than all three of my brothers, Roy Rogers always rode ahead of Dale Evans and the conventions of the text overrode even my implacable theories of the rights of primogeniture. Fortunately for the cause of equity, *Annie Oakley* offered an alternative scenario: Annie always led the way. Without this

textual support, I would have lost the day, because it was clear that you could only play the story within the story's own rules. Models of gender equity were rare in the 1950s, but Annie Oakley was a true heroine as far as I was concerned.

Other children played out the cowboy scenario in different ways. Rod McGillis also sees the gender performance as paramount, but from a boy's point of view, suggesting that cowboy roles present hegemonic versions of the "continuing notions of the man as steadfast, independent, resourceful, self-reliant, aggressive, rational, and controlling" (2009, p.1). The license to perform certain kinds of ritualized violence in a kind of contained transgressiveness was surely important for many children (certainly including me). The uneasiness about the settler/Indian conflicts would have resonated variably across the continent, and, indeed, in other countries where children played cowboys. The simplicities of the surface story disguise a much more complicated hinterland, and children select from that hinterland the themes that matter to them; they incorporate them into their games within the narrative terms of the originating story, and then read the stories in the context of their physical play.

For our own game of cowboys, we were incorporating Doreen Massey's "plurality of trajectories" and "simultaneity of stories-so-far" in multiple ways. As we played, we moved through the settler-Aboriginal history of Newfoundland; the separate Canadian history that operated on a much stronger basis of law-enforcement than the "Wild West" of the United States; the interlocking and sometimes contradictory plots, characters and ideologies of different versions of the settler story that we knew from print and TV; the nascent conventions of television as a new medium; our own family status as newcomers to the society in which we grew up; and our own separately developing awareness of literacy, with our own predilections as

interpreters, our individual notions of what was salient to act out, and the live gender constructions that we worked out and played through.

For me, the issue of exploring and claiming the territory held particular salience. This attitude may reflect a broader Canadian priority. According to Northrop Frye, the great Canadian question for a long time was not, “Who am I?” but rather, “Where is here?” (1995, n.p.) Perched on the eastern edge of North America in our rugged, rocky space, I tried to establish my own place in relation to the stories I read and watched. Interpreting and then playing the *mise en scène* served me as a significant interpretive strategy for some of the questions that mattered most to me, a charged and powerful version of text-to-life and life-to-text. This play then fed back into how I read my many different texts about settlers and pioneers.

Finding embodied ways to perform plots, characters, and themes from media programming continues to be a lively and vivid part of children’s lives, even in today’s more complex mediascape. Marsh and her colleagues, studying those playground games in the first decade of the twenty-first century, located very similar forms of play.!

For example, role-play has long been a staple feature of playground activity, but in this study we have observed role-play related to television talk shows (*The Jeremy Kyle Show*) and reality TV/ talent shows which involve audience participation through telephone voting (e.g. *X-Factor*, *Britain’s Got Talent*). We are finding a large variety of forms of ‘pretending play’ (using the Opies’ category), some of which we can trace directly to media (for example, acting out particular scenes from *Mama Mia*) and some of which are based more loosely on forms of superhero narratives. . . [T]he superhero play often involves families and/or dual identities (staple forms of historical and current

superhero narratives from Greek myths to *Ben Ten*). Finally, we have evidence of “pretending play” which we might categorise as more ephemeral which evolve around particular physical features on the playgrounds (eg. coloured markings, drain covers).

(Marsh *et al.*, 2010, pp.10-11)

Cowboys *redux*

As it happens, I have a record of how our texts fed our play and emerged later as a new text.

Around the time of my twelfth birthday, I wrote a book of stories for my parents’ wedding anniversary, and they conscientiously saved it with the family documents, so that I was able to retrieve it decades later. Among the stories is one about our games of cowboys. Entitled “Unfortunate Cowboys” (Fig. 1), it sets out to provide a “humorous” [*sic*] account of those many childhood games that I perceived in 1960 to be so far in my past.

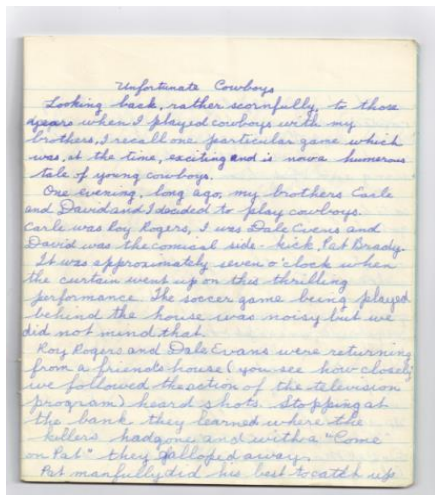


Fig. 1: the first page of my cowboy story

This is a story of playing cowboys, not a cowboy story *per se*. It describes a game of “Roy Rogers.” My middle brother, playing Pat Brady, the comical sidekick, crumpled early and was hauled off to bed. My oldest brother and I continued without him, even in the face of an

approaching thunderstorm that eventually supplied the “humerous” *dénouement*. All the words that follow, even the parenthetical comments, were written by me at the age of 12, looking back over the years to the time of our play:

Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were returning from a friend’s house (you see how closely we followed the actions of the television program) heard shots. Stopping at the bank, they learned where the killers had gone and with a “Come on Pat” they galloped away.

As the plot thickened, the game got more physical, but initially that physical contact was with the ground rather than with each other:

Meanwhile Roy and Dale were fast catching up with the bandits. They got close enough to their enemies to crawl on hands and knees and then on stomachs through the wet grass when the “bads” disappeared.

We wound up fighting with each other over who had killed the greatest number of these imaginary “bads” when a thunderstorm sent us running for home, where we got scolded for playing in the wet grass. The entire little story is about that intersection between our real world at the time (where we were only children, where the grass was wet, and the thunderstorm frightening) and the imaginary world of our play as we intrepidly disposed of the “bads.” The “humer” lies in the discrepancies.

The artifact of the little exercise book in which this story was written tells its own story of trajectories in space. Most of the fictional and instructional examples I have given in this

article are North American in origin, but the British history of Newfoundland never entirely disappeared (and the British novel from my mother's childhood testifies that some of the same regime held good in Nova Scotia as well). The school notebook I purloined for my anniversary gift was in commonplace use throughout my childhood and it tells its own local story.

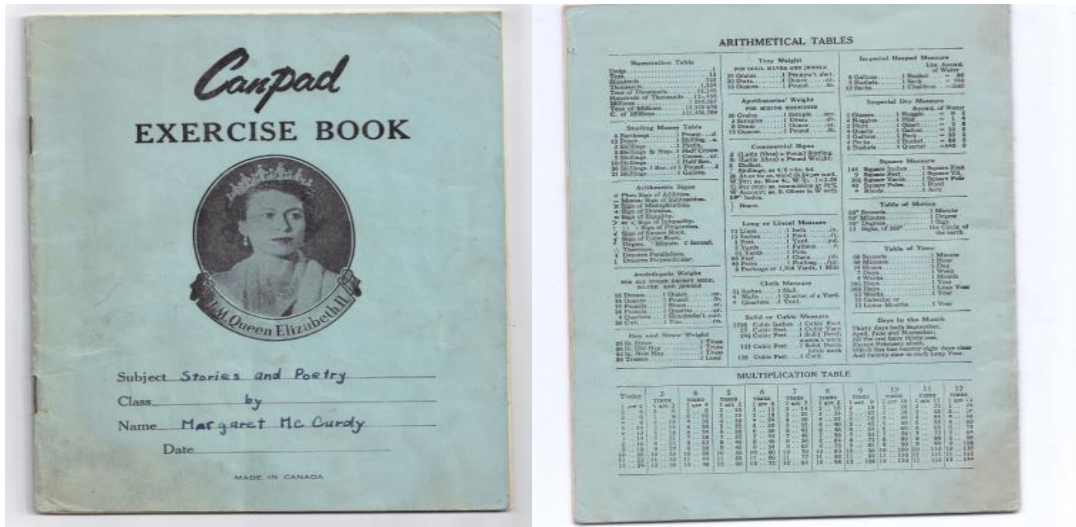


Fig. 2: My Canpad exercise book, 1960

The notebook (Fig. 2) is pale blue, and issued by a company called Canpad, who made all our school exercise books. It is made in Canada, but the front features a picture of the Queen, and the back displays those tables of weights and measures that are such a common feature of school exercise books. In this case, however, all the metrics are British. Pounds, shillings, pence, half-crowns, farthings, are all set in relation to each other – even though in every part of Canada, including Newfoundland, the currency was (and remains) dollars and cents. No dollar or cent showed up on these tables, however. Instead, perches, poles, hectares, and other obscurities are laid out in all their detailed relationships. Only the times table at the bottom was of any daily utility to us.

This little book embodies the intersection of many trajectories. The stories, written by a single and particular child to give to her parents on a family occasion in St. John's, Newfoundland, in early December 1960, are based in part on transmuting American storylines, drawn out of American priorities. The Canpad notebook captures a British connection that was waning. Does its presentation of foreign tables of weights and measures have a performative component to it, declaring the significance of Britishness in our lives? I moved to Britain just before the old currency converted to decimal, and was surprised to realize that I understood those pesky pounds, shillings, and pence better than I had anticipated. My exercise books over the years had perhaps been subliminally training me to take up my role as "British subject" (as it said on my passport), despite my conscious affiliation as a Canadian citizen, and my well-developed expertise in many aspects of North American culture.

Massey's plural definition of space allows me to "own" my own concatenation of discourses without displacing others. To this day, I "own" that little track along the base of the hill where we galloped, even though the house has been torn down and the site turned into a gravel parking lot. By Massey's reckoning, my act of claiming my territory need not rule out the validity and importance of anyone else's claim. My local and grounded literacy is just one version, lying alongside other literacies, equally local, equally grounded.

Literacy as local: towards a conclusion

"Texts teach what readers learn," said Margaret Meek (1988), and any particular assortment of materials is locally assembled, no matter how far-flung the original provenance. Only in Newfoundland would I have filtered my television cowboys through the tragedy of the Beothuk nation – and *vice versa*. While materials may be singly assessed, it is an almost inconceivable

reader who would be completely singular in her or his reading. (I did once interview a reader who resolutely read only one fiction author – Piers Anthony – but even this man sampled other kinds of non-fictional print materials, and was broad-minded in his film choices. [Mackey, 2007]) Readers, in their plural ways, absorb the different literacy affordances of their local environments. They bring locally developed schemas to bear on their texts. They mix and match the texts they encounter in ways that may be fruitful or counter-productive.

Of course, it is impossible to assess the multiplicity of trajectories that are held together within the body and mind of every single individual reader. In my own pursuit of my particular literate past, I have started with the advantage of a broader awareness of my range of texts than I could ever possibly assemble for any reader other than myself. I have devoted time, money, and energy to rebuilding some reasonable facsimile of the original, randomly accumulated set of textual materials to which I had access. I have re-read, re-viewed, re-considered many aspects of my early literate life. I have privileged interior access to a kind of psychological checklist that lets me assess whether some of my current interpretations *feel* true to my childhood experiences. And even so, there is much that I am missing.

So I am not offering this account as a prototype for how we ought to attend to readers other than ourselves. Indeed, my efforts to understand my own childhood literacy are designed to feed a research project rather than to create a practical toolkit for taking action in the field of childhood literacy. Nevertheless, I think there is value in layering up this complex, local, situated account of one child's literate awareness. For decades, I have joked that the all-purpose research finding is always, "It's all much more complex than we originally thought." But it *is* complex. Children out in the school playground, even today, are marshalling their physical, intellectual, and imaginative resources to sharpen their interpretive tools in ways that make sense

in their bodies as well as their minds. They adapt the stories they have inherited through all the myriad cultural routes now at their disposal to conditions as utterly local as the playground markings and drain covers.

Many children today live in worlds where their physical expression is highly constrained and externally organized. Are we closing off an important source of both physical and mental equipment that provides them with invisible ways of coming to terms with the stories that are most salient to them? If so, we may be creating new forms of poverty. Deborah Brandt, in her fascinating study of families “accumulating” literacy, points out that for one great-grandmother, “the ability to write the words of everyday life often marked the end of formal schooling, while for [her great-grandson] these same experiences served as a preparation for kindergarten” (1995, p.650). But if children are not allowed to find ways to make their stories their own, to place their understanding with their own bodies into their own local landscape, we may be moving backwards as well as forwards, in spite of our many media riches and the plethora of literacy toys piled up in many western homes.

The cowboy stories that mattered to my brothers and me do not stand up to critical analysis with any great success. Many of the TV and video game plots that today’s children enact when they play together are not major works of literature either. Yet, through my play with these stories, I developed interpretive skills that matured into literary understanding in other contexts, with other texts. At the same time, I learned that fictional narratives can be woven into your own sense of your life; for me, on that occasion, the salient act of *claiming* could be enacted over and over again.

My revisiting of my own experience leads me to suggest that we should not underestimate either the cultural work being done in these texts nor yet the sheer quantities of

interpretive *practice* that may be occurring. Practice, for me at that time, entailed engaging with an interaction of official school materials, recreational television viewing, casual magazine perusal, and intensive reading of books that happened to be to hand, either in the library or on the domestic bookshelf. A contemporary mix might well also include video games or children's websites or a broad range of mobile apps.

My embodied literacies grew out of happenstance, a random assortment of materials, as local as the markings on a particular playground. Any child's developing literacy offers an equivalent history of motley and individual intertexts and embodied interpretive practices. While it may be impossible to explore every child's background in such depth, it is important to take note of the role of such complexity in the reception of literature. The cross-section of trajectories that marks each child's place in the literate world is dynamic, idiosyncratic, and local, and we need to pay better attention to all its rich possibilities.

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