The Emergent Reader's Working Kit of Stereotypes

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Abstract: This article draws on a careful study of series fiction read in the 1950s to explore the working role of sterotypes in how a young reader learns to process stories in print. Five categories of stereotype are teased out: *embodied stereotypes*, understood through physical experience; *working stereotypes*, discerned through reading and then put to use over and over again in successive textual encounters; *recurring stereotypes* that appear in one book after another; *transient stereotypes* that are simply never remembered; and *subliminal stereotypes* that linger unvisited in the mind.

Keywords: stereotypes; series fiction; reading processes; emergent readers

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Understanding reading from the inside out

How can we understand the processes of reading? In significant ways, only one person's interior sense of reading is available for consideration: our own. But it is too easy to assume that what happens inside *one* person's head is a template for how *everyone* arrives at an understanding of printed text. Some readers create vivid visualizations in their heads; others have only a vague sense of generalized interactions occurring somewhere unspecific. Some readers are highly sensitive to the cadence and fall of the words on the page even while reading silently; others pay little heed to the aural tone of the narrative voice. There are many variations.

It is a mistake, therefore, to think that one process fits all. Nevertheless, much of what occurs when we read takes place inside the "black box" of our mind. To explore the internal activities of reading we must explore our own mind's work since we have no equivalent access to any other.

For more than twenty years I have interviewed other readers in systematic ways that take as much account as possible of the relationship between a particular reader and a specific text. Now I am embarking on a more introspective project. No matter how much I talk with others, I inevitably use my own experience of reading as an ineradicable measuring tape. Indeed, if I did not, I would fail to understand other readers, both when they tell me things that I recognize and also when they don't. In my new project I am endeavouring to articulate my own internal experience of reading while still acutely aware of the singularity of every reader.

I am exploring my own developing literacy between the years 1950 and 1962 in St. John's, Newfoundland. St. John's at that time was very isolated, a city at the easternmost point of North America overlooking the foggy North Atlantic. Newfoundland occupies its own distinct half-hour time zone, and joined Canada only in 1949, just before my auto-bibliographical project begins. Such departures from the North American mainstream represent deeper forms of distinctiveness; Newfoundland is now and was then, to an even greater extent, a very individual society. So my story is unique – but everybody's story is unique and probably only a small minority of readers feel completely at home in the mainstream.

This project undertakes to express particularities of one person's reading history and behaviours, acknowledging its singularity and its incapacity to represent general processes (if indeed such abstractions exist at all). Yet in exploring my own reading past, I am reluctant simply to write a personal memoir with all its inevitable limitations and blindspots.

Two words struck me as I searched for a way to discipline my recollections. "I'm reading" is considered to be a complete sentence, but, in fact, these words express an incomplete thought. I am never *just* "reading;" I am always reading *something*. The text contributes to the reading event in very important ways (Meek, 1988). I decided that a structured attempt to re-acquire as many as possible of my childhood texts (in all relevant formats) would give access to the textual partners that contributed so importantly to my early forays into interpreting print and other media. These texts represent the half of the interpretive partnership that has always existed outside the limits of my own skull – the half that has not changed over the

intervening decades. They therefore provide an important control, not to mention prompt, for my own personal memories. Re-exploring that partnership from such a temporal distance has made many elements of these texts and their associated reading experience newly visible to me.

Spatial constraints prevent me from discussing the full range of this project, which includes many multimodal materials as well as print. Earlier accounts of the work (Mackey 2010, 2011) present some elements of what has turned out to be a very large and complex undertaking. Here, I explore issues of learning *about* and *with* stereotypes, a feature of series reading in particular. I make use of a number of sample texts but also draw on my own phenomenological experiences of learning about reading through the agency of these particular stories.

Series books

Huge swathes of my childhood reading time were devoted to series books. These titles provided an important stepping-stone between having books read to me and being able to take on more complex literature on my own.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross, in a series of interviews with avid readers, suggests that the role of series reading, at the very worst, is benign. In actuality, it probably is much more positive than neutral, despite the fears of the librarians, teachers, and, to a lesser extent, parents. She describes it as a phenomenon of considerable significance in establishing a reading habit:

> Series books, together with books that had previously been read aloud, were frequently mentioned as the first “real books” that readers succeeded in

> reading on their own. This shouldn't surprise us when we consider that starting with something familiar makes the transition easier to reading on one's own. Psycholinguists point out that reading is more than a process of decoding sounds. Reading involves making sense out of the black marks on the page by using the "behind-the-eyes" knowledge of how stories work (Smith, 1978, p. 5). The more readers know about the story already, the less they have to rely on the words in front of them (1995, 218-219).

I have no doubt that series books provided an essential bridge for me. But they also offered much more: new ways (however hackneyed) of understanding the pleasures of reading, and new notions (however typecast) of the larger world outside my own experience. I emerged from series books as a reader.

Stereotypes and the new reader

We often sneer at stereotypes but their role in emergent literacy is complex.

Charles Sarland stresses the significance of series books and popular novels in the developing awareness of young readers (though he is mostly talking about adolescents and I will be mostly talking about myself at a younger stage). Sarland discusses "the ways in which fiction is a source of cultural information and the ways in which young people read for cultural information" (1991, 63). He investigates adolescent responses to popular culture and explores "the ways in which these forms offer sites of cultural typification and definition" (1991, 63).

"Popular fiction," says Sarland, "constructs generalities, values, and views of relationships which the young can use in order to begin to understand the world

and their place in it" (1991, 67). He is clear that stereotypes have the potential to provide some initial mapping of the world for young people:

> Such *essential* relationships are, of course, sites of cultural generalization and typification and as such constitute particular ideological formulations. Young people, in the negotiation of their own individual courses through the culture, need some signposts against which to chart their own directions (1991, 68).

Earlier, Perry Nodelman addressed a similar topic from a slightly different angle. Comparing Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* with Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, he discusses different relationships between reader and characters:

> Since Jessie's life [in *The Slave Dancer*] is so different from our own, we are forced to stand at some distance from him. The novel demands that of us. . . . it requires us to stand back from Jessie and understand who he is simply because we know enough about him to know that he is not like ourselves. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* prevents our consciousness of otherness. In fact, we cannot possibly understand the story unless we fill in its exceedingly vague outlines with knowledge from our own experience. Marcy Lewis has no life unless we give it to her; her town and her school have no physical substance unless we provide it. The book demands, not distance, but involvement (1981, 180).

In this article I explore characters whose limited existence resembles the kind of colouring-book outline that Nodelman describes. His distinction between the vague and typical characters and the detailed and distinctive characters is very

helpful. I am not entirely convinced, however, that we simply fill in the empty outlines with "knowledge from our own experience," at least not to any greater degree than we do with other kinds of reading. In my own case, my personal experience did not always offer the requisite raw material with which to infill the details of what I perceived as sophisticated character life. I suspect very often what child readers do is invest the vague outlines with their growing knowledge of stereotypes. Sarland is right that many readers benefit from using such shorthand in their early stages of learning to behave like a reader.

On the other hand, even at the age of six, as I started to read chapter books, I did bring a modest repertoire of life experience to bear. Looking back at the many different series I encountered, I am interested to interrogate them in terms of how they might have overlapped with my own sensory, social, cultural, and intellectual understanding of the world; and how that understanding began to be augmented by a growing set of stereotypical assumptions from the books themselves that gradually informed the new ways I was imagining myself into the world.

I mostly read girls' books, and many of the stereotypes and working assumptions I imbibed were associated with gender identity. The relatively rigid boxes into which the sexes were sorted in the 1950s did at least offer the advantage of providing one well-internalized route into learning to comprehend my series books. They also provided a collection of working assumptions that connected with my own life, where girls' and boys' universes were similarly dichotomized.

Looking back through the lens of many subsequent decades at large numbers of series books that I read between the ages of 6 and 10 has been a fascinating task.

Combing that vast text-set for its potential contribution to my readerly growth, I developed a set of analytical categories to account for some roles of stereotypes.

Here is my taxonomy-in-progress of the different ways that sterotypes fuelled my own increasing competence. As an emergent reader I made use of the following categories that I explore in more depth throughout this article:

- *embodied stereotypes* that I understood through my own physical experience;
- *working stereotypes* that I discerned through reading and then put to use over and over again in successive textual encounters;
- *recurring stereotypes* that appeared in one book after another;
- *subliminal stereotypes* that lurk in the basement of my mind unvisited, and provide a disconcerting sub-text to my reading activities even today; and
- *transient stereotypes* that I dismissed or lost at once.

Learning the ropes

Some recurring motifs of my series books resonated in meaningful ways and some left me completely indifferent. Perhaps mere personal idiosyncrasy made me cool to many ingredients of the heroes' adventures; I was always more committed to the domestic details of daily life than to the gypsies, kidnappers and sinister strangers who haunted my books. Maybe I was simply unadventurous, or maybe I responded more strongly to those details that I could infuse with some kind of recognition. Maybe I was just behaving like the girl reader described by Foster and Simons:

> The importance of domestic interiors, suggesting both enclosure and security, the recurrent references to private or secret places, and the linkage

> between the heroine and the natural world, have been read by both cultural and psychoanalytic critics as having a specially feminine resonance, and carry significant implications in reading the narratives of escape (whether overt or covert) which are intrinsic to juvenile literature (1995, 29).

At the very least, in Mary Leonhardt's useful distinction (1996, 112-113), I read for insights into relationships rather than for action and adventure. This very clear-cut preference has always dominated my reading life.

Even before I learned to read, I was being inculcated into many ways of being a socially acceptable girl. Furthermore (and perhaps ironically), it felt like territory in which I could exercise some autonomy. I could not imagine myself as living in the conventional geography or society described by many of my texts, but I could certainly invest myself into the standard tropes of girlhood as I encountered them in books. Given the many ways in which I felt excluded from the world of my fictions because of my distinctive and isolated life in St. John's, the ability to perform the limits and constrictions of my heroines' gender roles was oddly liberating.

Embodied stereotypes

This tacit knowledge of girlness both enabled my reading and was reinforced by it; in this major structural category, there was little discrepancy between my life and my books. Such coherence informed my reading in large ways, but it also provided a detailed entry point into many stories. For example, my delight in pretty clothes was shared by almost every heroine I encountered, and it provided one profoundly embodied route into inhabiting and animating the stereotypes of my

books. Here was a route by which my own physical and cultural existence and understanding could be transferred into the abstractness of the words on the page.

Dressing up

Early exposure to Honey Bunch gave me my first access to the mutable detail and enduring importance of descriptions of girls' clothing in series fiction. Being able to wallow in these accounts was one pleasure of learning to be an autonomous reader.

I was interested in girls' apparel from a very early age; something about "dressing up" and "good clothes" charmed me from toddlerhood onwards. At least partly as a result, I lavished a profoundly embodied form of attention on the garments of many fictional heroines.

Alice Major points out that we derive some of our understanding of the world through a "shared body plan" (2011, 14) with others:

> Our capacity for mapping the actions of other bodies in our own brains ultimately gives us a basis for assessing how well another has succeeded. Because we are designed for empathy, we have a basis for assessing differences (2011, 15).

Honey Bunch's little dress, described below, was very recognizable to me. The physicality of trying on a dress as well as the emotional surge of wearing nice clothes, all made sense to me at a very intimate and embodied level.

> Upstairs there were charming dresses for little girls and Honey Bunch tried on some while Mother and Aunt Julia watched her. The very prettiest of all was a blue linen, just the color of Honey Bunch's blue eyes. It was made with

> a little round white yoke which was hemstitched to the dress and the hem was hemstitched, too. Just above the hem were embroidered white daisies (1923b, 126-127).

Nobody would call Helen Louise Thorndyke a mistress of prose, but even banal writers can strike evocative notes, and, for me, Honey Bunch was only the first in a long line of literary heroines with highly specified wardrobes.

The sensory appeal of the clothing in all my stories was vivid to me. I am intrigued by the visceral call of these literary dresses, and I think at least a partial explanation can be found in contemporary neuroscience.

> Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is showing, stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life.
>
> Researchers have long known that the "classical" language regions, like Broca's area and Wernicke's area, are involved in how the brain interprets written words. What scientists have come to realize in the last few years is that narratives activate many other parts of our brains as well, suggesting why the experience of reading can feel so alive. Words like "lavender," "cinnamon" and "soap," for example, elicit a response not only from the language-processing areas of our brains, but also those devoted to dealing with smells (Paul, 2012, n.pag.).

Weber and Mitchell suggest that clothes are evocative for many women, and that talking about dresses can very meaningful:

> Ask women to talk or write about dresses, and without much prompting, they will regale you with detailed snippets from their lives, anecdotes that start out ostensibly about clothes, but end up being about so much more – events, family, community, relationships, body-image, feelings, aspirations, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts about all sorts of things. In the telling or writing of these autobiographical stories, an item of clothing becomes a springboard, an axis of rotation, or a structural grounding for a detailed account of life events (2004, 3-4).

I suggest that just as the word "cinnamon" may activate brain areas associated with smelling (and with affective connotations of the scent of cinnamon), so some of these details of clothing linked me into at least part of that network of connections and relationships that Weber and Mitchell describe so vividly. Dresses intersect in important ways with notions of "identity, body, and culture" (Weber and Mitchell, 2004, 4). They are also very physical. Their texture against the skin, their flow and drape in the air around the body, the sounds of crisp rustles or whispering skirts, the feel of fabric sliding under the fingers, the colours delighting the peripheral vision, these sensations and many more are instantly available in my brain for activation on meeting a evocative word about clothing. Tactile, sensory, and proprioceptive pleasures wait to be activated by relevant words on the page. The cultural and social appeal of wearing a dress that flatters you is also deeply embedded in the psyche and ready to be tapped at the first hint of description.

A sense of the potency of a dress haunted my reading. I am sure a number of elements in my brain lit up when I encountered a heroine with a compelling frock.

To my embodied understanding was added awareness of acute social status considerations. Understanding the dress, physically, socially, and semiotically, was one means by which I learned to *enliven* my reading in the most literal sense: to animate it, to inhabit the stereotypes and bring them to life in my mind. It is, of course, a highly transferrable skill. Once you learn that your own experience can vivify the words in front of you, you have taken a major step to becoming a reader.

Working stereotypes

The literary role of the dress, though certainly not universal in its acquired meaning, was accessible to me through the vehicle of my own lived experience. Other understanding I acquired in one book and transferred to others, by means of a kind of intertextual bootstrapping. Certain basic images became available to me in their most stereotypical format and I made enormous use of their transferrable qualities.

Making sense

One important example of how I learned some very basic stereotypes comes from *"B" is for Betsy* and its successors. These books by Carolyn Haywood provided a sequence of very domestic adventures featuring Betsy and her friends as they went to school in a very ordinary (if affluent) way.

An online biography of Haywood suggests that Haywood was creating what might be described as "a beginner's guide to stereotypes" with some deliberation:

> Harcourt Brace's juvenile department editor, Elizabeth Hamilton, met the young Haywood and gave her the direction of her literary career: "Write

something about little American children doing the things that little American children like to do" (http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Haywood__Carolyn.html, accessed April 7, 2012).

Haywood obliged, and the results, for me, served as a kind of Rosetta Stone to help me to translate American school customs into something I could process through my own Newfoundland experiences. Some of it was very familiar:

> Betsy was alone now in a strange new place. What a big room it was! One whole side of the room was made of windows. They were the biggest windows Betsy had ever seen. The walls seemed so far away and parts of them were black. In some cases there was writing on the black walls. And the ceiling – how high it was! It looked way, way off. So this was school! This great big room with the black walls and all the little desks was school. This was where she would have to come every morning. Betsy blinked her eyes to keep back the tears (Haywood, 1939, 10).

Other passages provided basic information that stood me in very good stead over many years. One example is a description of American Thanksgiving that even a beginning reader (one who is destined to read very many references to American Thanksgiving over the next few years) can comprehend and store away:

> Then Miss Grey told the children about the first Thanksgiving which was hundreds of years ago. She told them about the people who had come to America from away across the ocean, and how they had to cut down the trees to build their houses and dig big rocks out of the ground before they could

> plant their seeds. Miss Grey said that these people were called Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were so thankful to God for His care that they decided to have a special day just to say thank you to Him. "And that is the reason," said Miss Grey, "that we have a Thanksgiving Day every year" (1939, 78).

Miss Grey's account of Thanksgiving could hardly be more Eurocentric, but it served a utilitarian purpose for me, as I encountered American Thanksgiving over and over again in my texts. Canadian Thanksgiving comes in October and does not represent any grand pioneer narrative, being rather a mutation of the Harvest Festival of the church year. The fancier American version would have perplexed me considerably without this early primer to supply me with the starting point of that stereotype.

I was intrigued when I re-read *"B" is for Betsy* in 2012 to discover that it also helpfully provides a beginner's guide to the circus. To have even an amusement fair, let alone a full-fledged circus, visit St. John's was extremely rare, simply because the transport costs to this remote city were so enormous. I cannot remember when I finally did get to see a circus but I believe I was well into my teens.

Haywood came to my rescue in this regard as in many others; the obliging Miss Grey asks her class to talk about what they know of the circus. If she had said, "Now boys and girls, the readers of this book need some working stereotypes to be getting on with," she could hardly have elicited a more useful account:

> Nearly all of the children had seen the circus the last time it had come to town. So they had a long talk about the circus. First they talked about the barker. Billy said that the barker is the man who stands outside of the big tent and tells the people what they will see inside.

> Betsy told about the bare-back rider and Ellen told about the trained seals that play ball and bounce the ball right on the tips of their noses.
>
> They talked about the elephants and the lions, the clowns and the trained dogs (1939, 128-129).

And much more. As a working kit for an isolated reader who would wait a long time for the real thing, this description was little short of miraculously cogent.

Unlike the accounts of pretty dresses that I understood viscerally, I acquired such alien schemas and scripts in one book and simply imported them whole into others. When I could, I read my own body into the text, so that Betsy's account of far-away windows and ceilings and blinked-back tears on the first day of school had real emotional meaning for me and grounded some of the less familiar descriptions.

Recurring stereotypes

I read about girls like Betsy, but I also read about young women, and developed expectations about growing up through their experiences. I liked sequential series, partly because I felt they offered insight into the process of moving into society as an adult, a process that was otherwise almost completely opaque to me.

Reading about girls and their dresses gave me some authority as a reader; I could bring my own active repertoire to bear on the process. When it came to reading about older girls and their jobs and their boyfriends, I was on much more tenuous ground and had to take the author's word for most of what transpired. Nobody will be surprised to learn that the romances leaned towards the vapid and the career prospects tended to work out within a very restrictive framework of

possibilities. I suppose some compensation was that the lives of my series heroines did not seem entirely out of reach to me.

Growing up

As a reader with a preference for chronologically ordered series, I liked Judy Bolton (Sutton) and Beverly Gray (Blank) better than Nancy Drew, who, however talented and successful she may have been as a teen detective, was a complete bust at actually growing older as she continually recycled her late teen years. I liked Sue Barton (Boylston) and Cherry Ames (Wells) for the same reasons, but nursing held less appeal than sleuthing. The ballet stories of Sadlers Wells (Hill) also pleased me, but their British context, compounded by an utterly alien dance culture, rendered them exotic rather than more helpfully stereotypical.

What I particularly admired about Judy Bolton and Beverly Gray was the nonchalant way they took on the requirements of adult life. And with my inveterate preference for relationships over action and adventure, I was hooked by the network of friends and lovers that surrounded each of these heroines, regarding the mystery component of the novel as a kind of temporary framework on which the essential ongoing story was supported. It was the backstories that I enjoyed; clichéd as they certainly were, they represented new news to me as a child reader.

Judy Bolton was my favourite. Although she settled for secretarial life and married her lawyer boss (and old playmate), Peter Dobbs, she is a more interesting young woman than many of the others. She is pragmatic and smart; she takes on domestic life but relegates it to a modest role ("'I'm not a housewife,' Judy informed

him laughingly. 'I'm a homemaker. There's a difference'" [Sutton, 1947, 4]). She sees her role as helpmeet to Peter, but she is delighted when he tells her he appreciates her powers of deduction ("She would much rather have him tell her she had a logical mind than a pretty face" [Sutton, 1947, 16]). Judy grows up (we first meet her in high school), falls in love, marries, and *continues detecting*, a development that was immensely liberating to me, pathetic as that insight may sound in the 21st century. Most of my literature showed marriage as the signal for retirement from interesting life; in the terms of the 1950s, Judy is indeed a revolutionary.

Beverly Gray offered a different kind of breakthrough. Determined to make her own way in New York City, she turns down her parents' offer of an allowance after she graduates from college:

> "I'm – I want to do everything myself. I don't want money coming in just as though I didn't – need a job. I'm going to make my own living myself! Don't you see? I want to have to depend on myself – not somebody else!"
>
> Her mother smiled sympathetically, "I understand" (Blank, 1935, 21).

Having laboriously gained a job as a journalist, Beverly lives a glamorous life in New York, sharing an apartment with several chums and (daringly!) being in love with two different men over the course of the series. She was engaged to the second man by the time of the latest book I read – but still detecting.

The two nurse characters, Sue Barton and Cherry Ames, highlighted a quality shared by many of my series heroines: a dedication to being maximally competent within their field of expertise. The restrictions placed on these young women, so notorious a component of female life in the 1950s, were limitations on the number

of fields open to them. Within this constrained range of possibilities, however, these heroines exerted themselves to excel. Sue and Cherry studied hard, took their responsibilities very seriously, and appreciated that it was possible for them to make the world a better place through their own dedication.

I was very familiar with this ethos. At home and at school, the expectation was that girls must work hard and do their very best. The limitations (and they were certainly real) did not let me off the hook for achieving my utmost. At the same time, I was becoming a reader. How did stereotypes of one kind of femininity or another enable me to read of these books? What did girl readers like me learn that they could transfer from one book to another? What are the stereotypical patterns that could help us to decipher these plots and characters?

Issues of competence do loom large. Sue Barton is a good nurse both technically and humanly, right from the start. Here is a scene from *Sue Barton, Student Nurse*, where Sue is assisting with the removal of Miss Coleman's stitches:

> Miss Cameron's instructions rang in her ears as she turned the bedclothes down to the patient's waist and laid the sterile towel containing the surgical instruments on the folds, exactly as she had been taught. She removed the safety pins from the dressing, opened a package of gauze sponges, and dropped them on the opened sterile towel. . . .
>
> She laid a warm, reassuring hand on Miss Coleman's thin one. For an instant Sue felt that she was not herself but Miss Coleman. She could feel the weight of the bedclothes on her feet, the smoothness of the sheet beneath her, the tiredness of lying in bed for a long time, and the stir of apprehension

at the thought of stitches, and she looked down at the woman with such a warmth of understanding that Miss Coleman's fingers tightened gratefully about her hand (Boylston, 1939, 73).

Proficiency was not confined to nurses. The dancers who make it to school at Sadler's Wells operate on the same ethos of competence fuelled by hard work and a kind of imaginative investment in the final result that indicates how well worth doing it truly is. Here is Veronica, yearning to get to the Wells even though stuck in remote Scotland; she diligently keeps up her practice:

> Don't think I forgot about my dancing in all this. I practised faithfully every morning before breakfast, and often again before we went out. . . .
>
> [Fiona] watched me doing *plies, grands battements,* and *developpes*. Once Sebastian came, but I think he considered it rather on the dull side – all those exercises and no real dancing at all – but he was too polite to say so. Or perhaps he realized that plies and battements were like his scales and exercises at the piano – dull but necessary (Hill, 1988/1950, 125-126).

As with Sue Barton, there is the professional vocabulary to aid the sense of being an insider in a complex world. And as with Sue Barton's imaginative investment in her patient's well-being, so Veronica occupies her dancing imaginatively as well as physically. The following scene occurs during a village concert:

> I walked out into the wings and rose *sur les pointes*. The first notes of Tchaikovsky's music were falling on the air like drops of ice tinkling into a crystal goblet. I saw in my imagination the snowy woods round Bracken Hall on a winter's day . . . . All this I thought of as I executed the crisp, clear-cut

> steps of that wonderful dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy. I was a maiden of the ice; a snow queen; a frosted fairy of pink and silver, with a brittle crown of frozen dewdrops on my head. All this I tried to express in my dancing (1988/1950, 157-159).

I make no case for this passage as a piece of writing. What I do argue is that the stereotype of the girls' series heroine as represented in these books is more complex than our own contemporary stereotype of what these books are like. The heroines are certainly "feminine" in many conventional 1950s ways: they are attractive, dainty, girlish, and many other diminishing adjectives. Nevertheless they strive for their own version of excellence through passion, study, practice, and hard work – and they recognize the achievement of that excellence through a form of imaginative transformation. The limits on their achievement lie in the restriction of fields open to them, an external rather than an internal limitation.

These patterns appear in series after series, manifesting in different ways. Collectively, they bring to mind an observation by a young male reader: "I just like being good at it" (Smith and Wilhelm, 2004, 454). Smith and Wilhelm explore "the importance of competence in boys' literate lives" (2004, 454) but are at pains to point out that they did not investigate girls so cannot say whether it matters for girls too. The evidence of these books suggests that girls too like to be good at things.

As working stereotypes, such characters are purposeful and action-oriented, and I certainly recall feeling invigorated by proxy as I read these predictable stories – an embodied sensation in itself. And as I became knowledgeable about the pattern itself, I was increasingly able to pride myself on being good at reading as well.

Subliminal stereotypes

All girl detectives had preposterous adventures, but Beverly Gray's were probably the most ridiculous. I was surprised when I came to revisit these books at the ludicrousness of the plots (Mackey, 2006). Gypsies, insane hermits, wild animals, and any number of swarthy and sinister ethnic villains (including cannibals and head shrinkers) dog her every step. Over the years, I forgot every one of these horrific hazards and remembered only the romance of city life, the lure of journalism, the mystique of the two men dancing attendance, and Beverly's robust determination to make her own way. I will return to this issue of forgetting below, but first I want to take a sober look at what did not go entirely away.

If my filtering of the positive lessons from these silly books were "the end of the story," it would be a pretty metaphor for ways in which a child can extract what she needs from the most lurid and nonsensical raw material. Yet when I came to look more closely at the *Beverly Gray* novels, I discovered a depressing subtext lingering for decades in the basement of my own mind.

"Seeing" the world

Author Clair Blank wrote the first four books in the *Beverly Gray* series while still in high school and had them published within a year of graduation. Her own life reads much more like a pre-feminist stereotype than does that of her heroine:

> Unlike Beverly Gray, Clair Blank did not lead the exciting life of a newspaper reporter and traveling writer. Clair never traveled to any of the exotic places

> that she describes in the Beverly Gray books. Clair graduated from college, worked as a typist and secretary, and during World War II worked as a volunteer for a group that drove visiting Army officers around locally. Clair quit her secretarial job after she married, choosing to write and take care of her two sons (http://www.series-books.com/beverlygray/beverlgray.html, accessed March 13, 2012).

Blank, it would seem, was open to operating from stereotypes of "abroad" every bit as much as any of her own readers.

At the core of the series lies the yacht Susabella, owned by one of Beverly's rich friends. Beverly and her chums (plus a chaperone, since the pals include men as well as women) take a round-the-world cruise that lasts over several books and leads to many utterly implausible adventures. Three main titles dealing with this particular cruise are *Beverly Gray on a World Cruise* (1936), *Beverly Gray in the Orient* (1937) and *Beverly Gray on a Treasure Hunt* (1938).

Rereading these books many years later was a troubling experience. Beverly's high-minded determination to run her own life survived in a sunlit (if largely unvisited) corner of my mind. Beverly's melodramatic encounters and escapes seem to have discharged harmlessly, leaving no traces. But as I reread these three novels, I found myself uneasily recognizing old, murky stereotypes about the rest of the world that seem to have lingered somewhere in the recesses of my mind, offering dismayingly familiar resonances as I met them again.

In many ways I was not a curious reader. I took all my books on face value and pretty much assumed that any of them would necessarily include details that

made no sense to me. I had no interest in pursuing these confusions any further and regularly forgot plot details. I assembled as much as I could of what the book supplied me in the way of tools for reading it and simply ploughed forward. Where I had relevant life experience, I imported it. Where I had intertextual reinforcement, I acknowledged it. Where I had almost nothing in the way of extra-fictional support, I simply took the book's assertions at face value. I do not for a moment think I was unique in this attitude, though I know that different readers might have assumed a more investigative stance and at least found a map to follow the friends' journey. I did nothing of the kind and simply took Blank's descriptions of the world "as read."

The world trip takes Beverly to many places. Some are clean and inviting, like Switzerland:

> Beverly . . . . marveled at the serene calmness over everything. The fir trees and rooftops glistened with snow. Behind the valley rose high snow-tipped mountains, one behind the other (Blank, 1936, 144).

This world made sense to me as a reader of *Heidi* (Spyri, 2002/1880-81). Other scenes in the series are more exotic, and I had less repertoire for running intertextual checks. Egyptian scarabs that curse the person who removes them from the country? Why not? I knew nothing better. India, likewise, is described only in clichés. Still ruled by the British at the time of these novels, it offers scenes of native crowds, the white magnificence of the Taj Mahal, the exotic lure of elephants and polo matches, and the potential thrill of big game hunting (for the men). The comforts offered by the Raj are matched by native squalor:

> Benares, the sacred city, was literally the melting pot of all India. The sick came to visit the ghats and bathe in the holy water of Mother Ganges. It was the hiding and breeding place of criminals, the hatching place of conspiracies.
>
> What impressed Lenora were the fakirs, ragged, unkempt, ash-smeared objects that seemed hardly human. Their attitudes and positions which they chose to "acquire merit" were sometimes ludicrous, such as the prize fakir of them all who had all his bones painted in white outline on his brown skin. As Lenora remarked, it was like looking at a group of circus freaks (1937, 88-89).

China, of course, is even more mysterious:

> It seemed incredulous [*sic*] that anything of this sort should happen in such modern times. Many people had told her that the Orient is strange. Many things happen there that cannot rationally be explained or corrected. Places such as this, built in the times of the ancient East, still exist behind the veneer of civilization. Modern education, modern science, modern manners – all these cannot reach to every corner of the Orient (1937, 238).

And so forth. In these colonized countries, the adventurers alternate between the bright glamour of the British and American sectors and the native quarters full of crowded shops and interchangeable and unknowable people. There is nothing exceptional in these orientalist descriptions, nor in the racist indifference to any points of individuality among the indigenous populations. The books did not offer me stereotypes that were contradicted elsewhere in my reading and I did not really

give them much thought; they were the moving wallpaper of the story and I was much more interested in the relationships that dominated the foreground.

What surprised me as I re-read these pages recently was the access they provided to a long-ignored floor of stereotypical assumptions underlying my current mental sketch-map of the world. As it happens, I was unlucky with my geography lessons. Through a series of moves and historical accidents, I never took any course in world geography and it was not a topic that interested me enough to pursue independently. My ignorance in this area has always been an intellectual Achilles heel. I have always vaguely assumed that I really know very little about the eastern hemisphere. Instead of a reassuringly neutral "terra nullius," however, I discover, turning the pages of these books, that the stereotypes of Beverly's world trip still lurk recognizably at the very lowest depths of my mind. When I summon "enough to be going on with" about many places of the world, some of the base "knowledge" supplied by Clair Blank still seems to be hovering. Carolyn Haywood gave me a *working* schema of American Thanksgiving, one that I regularly revisited. It seems that Clair Blank gave me some *latent* schemas that are very troubling.

For example, I am not sure I gave the Taj Mahal a single thought at any moment between the time of reading *Beverly Gray in the Orient* sometime in the late 1950s and the occasion of Princess Diana's visit in 1992. I do remember explicitly wondering at that latter date how it was that I even recognized the name of this monument when I knew almost nothing about India. Now I know; I "visited" it with Beverly Gray, who invested it with the lure of the exotic orient. I am not defending

my ignorance, merely pointing it out as an unfortunate quality that made me vulnerable to some very suspect operational theories about the world.

These non-working, dormant schemas are probably even more insidious because they have remained unchallenged until now. I do now know better, of course, but the familiarity of these insidious images is distressing. Nevertheless, they are part of my reading history and it would be dishonest to ignore them.

I wonder if such idle and unthinking ignorance is even possible in the era of television and the Internet – but I suspect the main ingredient, a geographically and culturally incurious mind, is still all that is really needed. A diet of Disney movies and the more inane specimens of commercially protected websites would probably provide equally limiting fodder for basic schemas of the world. It is disquieting to observe my cherished childhood literacy fostering such a complacent worldview – and even more disturbing to realize the potency of some of these stereotypes lingering unmolested in my mind until the moment that I returned to my early reading experiences and discovered abominations among the treasures.

Transient stereotypes

Yet not everything lingers. Some information gleaned through childish immersion in series books lasted only as long as was necessary to fuel the reading itself, then disappeared without trace. I have referred earlier to my amazement at the degree to which I completely forgot the nature of Beverly Gray's stupid adventures. In some cases I dismissed even the working stereotypes that let me get to the end of a particular story. Over the course of this project, I revisited titles that I know I read

as a youngster but that have left no residue of any kind, not even a portable or buried stereotype. "Forgetting" is not a topic that lends itself to detailed expansion, but it is important to recognize that not all the tools acquired by a young reader survive to fuel another book. "Done and gone" is an important category of childhood reading, though one that is largely invisible by its very nature.

The live power of stereotypes

Stereotypes enable reading and they also constrain it. As building blocks they offer the potential to make steps and ladders and also the potential to create barriers. Pursuing this line of questioning through my childhood reading has been at different time exhilarating and chastening. To what extent did my early capacity to recognize and *feel* the appeal of a heroine's dress bind me to the whole idea of reading with ever greater loyalty – or to the whole package of "being a girl"? To what extent did my calculating importation of working stereotypes of other lives into my daily reading lead me towards the abstractions of an intellectual life? To what extent did (and do) those unrefreshed and unexamined stereotypes of foreign countries lie quiescent in my mind like landmines? And how irrevocably lost is a huge amount of my life of reading because of my apparently unlimited capacity for forgetting?

Regardless of all these questions, there is no doubt in my mind that reading these series books gave me the opportunity to develop fluency as a reader, provided me with a number of working understandings of the world (productive or pernicious), and introduced me to a form of pleasure that was paradoxically both

deep and very shallow. If I had read only these books, however, the shallowness would have prevailed.

If Nodelman's vague and empty characters help us to gather speed and automaticity as we learn to process print, they are serving a useful function. But the reader who stops at such colouring-book personalities misses out on confronting the individuality of more complex characters and runs the risk of reading only mirrors. Even Judy Bolton, the most individual of the characters cited here, provided me with a very restricted world-view. Despite the generic and highly prejudicial "otherness" ascribed to foreigners in many of these books, it was to the more challenging and literary books that I would have to turn in order to acquire the knowledge that the world is made up of people actually (and in individual detail) very different from myself.

But that is another story.

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