

READING FROM THE FEET UP: THE LOCAL WORK OF LITERACY

Abstract: Children learn to read at approximately the same stage in life as they start to master their physical environment. This article argues that some of the same mapping and schema-building strategies inform each activity, and draws on examples from a broad range of children's books to support the idea that reading fiction and mapping one's local surroundings work in tandem among many young children. Fictional examples include *Ramona the Brave*, *The Moffats*, and *The House at Pooh Corner*. As children grow, and their understanding of their own world increases, their relationship with fiction may become more complex; this proposal is discussed in relation to the works of Carolyn Keene and Enid Blyton.

Key words: early literacy, schema building, mapping, reading, children's books

Reading from the Feet Up: The Local Work of Literacy



This picture shows a child who cannot yet read, though she knows about being read to. It gives us a glimpse of her in a particular time and place. Although I cannot be quite sure whether she is three or four years old, I do know exactly where she is standing: on a hill overlooking North America's easternmost city; behind her is the Atlantic Ocean, stretching all the way to Ireland.

I am, of course, being duplicitous with my pronouns, this is a picture of me, standing on Signal Hill overlooking St. John's, Newfoundland, sometime probably in

1952 (for family historical reasons, my best guess is somewhere around September 1952, a few weeks before my fourth birthday).

I begin in this self-indulgent way because I want to tell a story that can only begin from the inside out, the story of learning to be literate.

A photograph is a flat rectangle, and this narrative includes other flat rectangles: the pages of books, the screens of cinema and television set – and, of course, the computer screen on which it is being composed. But we all know that reading is not flat. Tim Wynne-Jones speaks of it in very non-flat terms; he calls it deep:

The deep-read is when you get gut-hooked and dragged overboard down and down through the maze of print and find, to your amazement, you can breathe down there after all and there's a whole other world. I'm talking about the kind of reading when you realize that books are indeed interactive. . . . I'm talking about the kind of deep-read where it isn't just the plot or the characters that matter, but the words and the way they fit together and the meandering evanescent thoughts you think between the lines: *the kind of reading where you are fleetingly aware of your own mind at work* (1998, 165-166, emphasis in original)

As well as being deep, Wynne-Jones' reading is also in motion; it involves dragging and meandering and breathing, and clearly it entails a kind of journey that happens over time. How do children learn to make that activity happen in their own minds? Obviously, in order to read independently, they need to learn how to decode, they need strategies for tackling unfamiliar words, they need phonemic awareness, and other good things. But, more importantly, they need to prime their imaginations to encompass places and events they will never see in their own small, real-life existences.

How do they learn to do that? What lets the flat rectangles of the page morph into stories that *move* through their minds in multi-dimensional ways?

I have been giving that question a great deal of thought in terms of my own experience, which is probably the only access I will ever truly have to such a primal development. As I teased away at the question, often leaving it to brew at the back of my mind, I was surprised at a recurring scrap of a nebulous mental image: it always involved feet.

I've learned to take such persistent imagery seriously, so I set about thinking more intently about those feet. I have long thought of reading as a manual activity; what we do with our hands is important to our attention span; and our *handling* of books, I believe, contributes importantly to Wynne-Jones' sense of being "fleetingly aware of your own mind at work." Feet don't seem to have an active role to play in that scenario; why was I thinking about them so constantly?

I think the answer lies in the other part of Wynne-Jones' description, that capacity to move through the story. Many children learn to read just at the same time they are beginning to move through their own world more significantly. They have graduated from the stroller; they interpret some of their world through the action of their own feet.

Legible environments

The first piece of this puzzle fell in place for me when I encountered Kevin Lynch's seminal study, *The Image of the City*. Lynch speaks of a "legible" environment, a city-scape that can be recognized, organized into a coherent pattern, imagined. "Legible" is a word with major cross-over potential (leaving aside any possible puns

involving the word *leg!*) between the physical world of the city and the imagined world of the story.

At the very beginning of his book, Lynch himself makes the essential comparison: “Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (1960, 3).

Lynch suggests that people think about their cities, create mental images of their cities, by means of five components:

- pathways
- nodes
- districts
- landmarks
- edges (1960, 47-48)

People most commonly envisage a city via the paths they use to go through it. Nodes are places where two or more pathways meet. Districts may be deliberately created or just evolve out of the activities of citizens. Landmarks help people locate themselves, and are even more definitive if they coincide with districts or edges. Edges (for example, rivers, railways, freeways) help people create boundaries to what they are picturing, though you do not have to be able to see every inch of an edge to know it is there.

St. John’s, Newfoundland, where I spent all my remembered childhood, is a city very easy to imagine in these terms. Signal Hill, seen beneath my feet in the photograph above, is definitely a landmark, standing between the city and that most categorical of edges, the broad North Atlantic Ocean, which marks the eastern boundary of St. John’s.

That photo does not show it, but the south-eastern edge of the city is delineated by the informatively if slightly misleadingly named South Side Hills. Behind me, out of sight in this image, is the iconic Cabot Tower, which is visible to the inhabitants of St. John's from many angles and perspectives. And the view that I was admiring when my photograph was snapped by my grandfather provides very clear information about paths, nodes, and districts; even at that very young age I would have been able to pick out our church and spot the more distant district where our house lay; I was already *reading the city*. That view remains compelling today; although some of the landmarks have changed since the early 1950s, the power of being able to perceive and thus re-imagine your pathways from a different perspective is still very potent.



Signal Hill is in the foreground of this 2009 picture; the South Side Hills lie to the left of the harbour in this perspective.

By the age of six, I was walking to school every day, and my route incorporated a path, a landmark, and an edge. Below is another recent photograph, this one of the street I traversed every day, twice in each direction; for much of the way, you can see Signal Hill and Cabot Tower in the distance. On most days, a sharp wind from the North Atlantic served as a physical reminder that the edge was not far away; it was always impossible to forget that the ocean set the eastern limit.



Even a very young child can learn to read a city that is so profoundly legible, and a major part of my informal and implicit education involved making sense of the pattern of streets, learning the forms of civic organization that made the traffic predictable, gradually acquiring information about my personal districts. Emergent environmental literacy allowed me to make tacit and then increasingly explicit sense of the local surroundings. My three main destinations throughout my childhood were school, church,

and library and they were all three located close together, about a mile from my home. They formed a district that simultaneously achieved two ends in my life: it served as a tangible, known, and present neighbourhood, and it housed the institutions that shaped my growing awareness of worlds other than my own city through my developing literacy.

Retrieving the schemas of childhood

Renowned literacy educator Paulo Freire corroborates the value of such a backward scan into a childhood effort to understand both world and print. “Recapturing distant childhood as far back as I can trust my memory, trying to understand my act of *reading* the particular world in which I moved, was absolutely significant for me,” he says (1987, 30).

The old house – its bedrooms, hall, attic, terrace (the setting for my mother’s ferns), backyard – all this was my first world. In this world I crawled, gurgled, first stood up, took my first steps, said my first words. Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity and therefore as the world of my first reading. The *texts*, the *words*, the *letters* of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, and signs. In perceiving these I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased. I learned to understand things, objects, and signs through using them in relationship to my older brothers and sisters and my parents (Freire & Macedo, 1987, 30).

Freire's book title, *Reading the Word and the World*, exactly sums up the overlay of real-world on fictional-world and fictional-world on real-world that small children must learn to sort out.

Further confirmation of this environmental route into literate understanding comes from David Malouf:

If you grow up in the kind of wooden house that I grew up in, and if your first sense of space is that house and the way its rooms are laid out, and if your first sense of dimensions is developed there, then that really is your first reading of the world and you go on to apply that to whatever else you look at. In one part of my mind, every city is a city of hills like Brisbane: where you go up and down and where, when you get to the top of the street, you see something new. . . . An Adelaide friend tells me that he grew up thinking cities were flat. He really did think that if you looked down a street you ought to be able to see all the way to the end of it. . . . I can't believe that we are not deeply determined by such factors (quoted in Hodgins, 2001, 73-74).

Malouf speaks of "a first place," which he describes as "the only place I know from inside, from my body outwards" (1985, 3).

My own memories, as evoked by that Signal Hill photograph (an image that definitely invites to me to recollect the past "from my body outwards"), move slightly beyond that baby stage of the very first sense of space. By the time this picture was taken, I had arrived at a point of development effectively described by Dorothy Butler in her account of the pre-school child who has been read to from a very early age. Butler

talks about exploration of print in ways that evoke the kind of exploration of the landscape I am doing in that picture.

Skills come apparently unbidden as the toddler advances into three- and four-year-old independence. Print is friendly and familiar for this child. She is already unconsciously *finding landmarks*, noting regular features, predicting patterns (1998, 8, emphasis added).

As I learned to read the city, through foot traffic and through overview from the hill, so I simultaneously learned to navigate the page of the book with increasing discernment.

Because reading, as Wynne-Jones so pertinently reminds us, involves *moving* through the story, it seems reasonable to posit that for the early reader, developing foot-knowledge, acquiring an embodied understanding of the local world, features in the development of literacy as it does in the development of language itself. Francis Spufford, in his inspired history of childhood reading, talks about the importance of “embedded language” (2002, 43) in the child’s growing awareness; I am proposing “embedded literacy” as a later and equally potent development. Spufford, who is certainly not averse to dramatic metaphors, proposes a link between the pathways through the world that we begin to understand and the pathways created in our very brains. The forest, he says, is

the place we begin, as individuals: which perhaps explains the permanent temptation to line up childhood and primitiveness together, to try and combine the early time of one human and of a society. It is the place a baby is, before the developing mind has built up a model of things that it can rely on. It is the place we are before structure. Before we master speech, and can wield the power of

names to distinguish the elements of the world – before we know for sure that our self has a boundary, and does not exist in a warm milky continuum with everything else – we are in the forest. We don't so much enter the wood as find ourselves there: knowing a little more that it *is* a wood, in fact, with each success at naming and placing. Gradually we recognize the dark uprights around us as trees. . . . [F]or the infant coming to him- or herself in the wood for the first time, the problem is cognitive. Think of the cross-sections through the brain that a medical scanner produces: those false-colour images of activity, red and violet, yellow and orange. They map a greenwood inside our heads. When we're born there are few paths established yet; the dendrites linking our neurons are a random tangle; the world is all to learn. From this forest, stories help to lead us out (2002, 33-34).

Spufford explicitly mentions paths and edges, and implies emergent landmarks. This baby is developing cognitive maps and schemas to assist in the grand project of sorting out the world. Having grown up in a world that included much heavily forested terrain, I find this passage persuasive. Yet when my class at the University of Alberta read this chapter, some students objected to his raising of the forest to such a level of primacy, even though they appreciated his writing. Born as prairie children, they were more comfortable with a different form of “first landscape,” and privileged (almost definitely in involuntary ways) the essential appeal of open spaces and wide skies. As Malouf says, your first place in many ways “constitutes your fortune, your fate, and is your only entry into the world” (1985, 3).

Mapping outer and inner worlds

Whether or not as a baby I mapped the greenwood of my brain's activity inside my head, as I grew a bit older I certainly mapped my own small corner of the city.

Nicholas Burbules outlines some of the significance of that operation. Discussing how people take a *space* and make it familiar, turn it into a *place*, he says,

A place is a socially or subjectively meaningful space. It has an objective, locational dimension: people can look for a place, find it, move within it. But it also *means* something important to a person or a group of people, and this latter, more subjective, dimension may or may not be communicable to others. When people are in a *place*, they know where they are and what it means to be there (2004, 174, emphasis in original).

Clearly, during my early childhood, I was turning the space of my corner of St. John's into a place, learning where I was and what it meant to be there. Burbules makes some helpful observations about the process of mapping, which is one way of taking ownership of a space and turning it into a place. Mapping, he says, involves "developing schemata that represent the space, identify important points within it, and facilitate movement within it" (2004, 175). It seems likely that such schemas would take account of paths, districts, landmarks, edges – crucial components of any map. A map, says Burbules,

always simplifies, selects, and schematizes the original, and it is the particular way in which this simplification, selection, and schematization occur that makes this version of the space a place. These are pragmatic activities; we make certain, and not other, choices because they allow us to do things in the space that are

meaningful and important to us. There can be multiple maps, and in this sense they constitute different *places*, even when they refer to the same space (2004, 175, emphasis in original).

From babyhood, according to Spufford, Freire, and Malouf, we are busy turning the space in which we unaccountably find ourselves at birth into some kind of place that is familiar and meaningful to us. In return, according to Malouf, this place shapes much of our early sense of the world and in significant ways never leaves us. As we are increasingly let loose into the bigger world outside our home, we apply the same process to recognizing and labelling the paths, landmarks and edges of this territory. Strikingly, Butler's account of the child learning to come to terms with print employs some of the same images. Schemas involve patterns, they provide some predictability in the vast unknown of space (the unmarked forest), whether that space be the world that surrounds us or the wilderness of black marks on a page from which gradually emerge patterns of sense and pathways towards the ending.

As we learn to disentangle meaning from the marks on the page, as we develop some sense of *imagining with words*, as we gain knowledge of worlds other than the one we inhabit, we start to create and explore overlapping schemas from our real and our fictional experience. We learn to infill gaps in the text with details from our own known, felt, and *mapped* daily existence. When we read, "John woke late that morning and had to run for the school bus," we often supply both the hasty breakfast and the length of the run to the bus stop from a schematized version of our own experience. We don't necessarily include last Friday's specific experience when the toast burned and we ran out of toothpaste on top of all our other problems; we very often opt for the generic, the

average, the schema. But we must infill the blanks with sufficient detail to make sense of this world, and so we import schemas from our own world.

In some ways it is fair to say that we are taking the *space* of a book as printed on the page, and turning it into the *place* of our own reading, invested with our own understanding of the world. This is a key elements in becoming a reader that is complicated to observe from the outside but essential to the development of a working relationship with the printed word.

David Malouf describes this overlaying of physical and mental schemas very eloquently, expressing an interest in:

how the elements of a place and our inner lives cross and illuminate one another, how we interpret space, and in so doing make our first maps of reality, how we mythologize spaces and through that mythology (a good deal of it inherited) find our way into a culture (1985, 3).

In this passage, Malouf does not include learning to read as part of learning to map, but there is no doubt he is crossing the same territory that I am attempting to explore in this article.

Learning to read inside a fictional world

It always surprises me how difficult it is to find children's books where the key intellectual enterprise of middle childhood, learning to read, is adequately described. Just as adult literature often leaves out the daily details of life at work, so children's literature regularly focuses on recess and after school, when more plot-oriented events can occur. Yet a huge swathe of children's daily lives is devoted to the large and important

enterprise of learning to read. It is worth looking more closely at a few intriguing examples of books that actually enter into the scale of that challenge.

Ramona

Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* is one child who learns to read, and Cleary has such respect for the scope of the operation that she spreads it out over more than one book. In *Ramona the Brave*, Ramona is six and deep into the challenge of mastering print, along with overcoming a variety of fears and insecurities. By the end of the book, having faced down a number of demons, Ramona has decided to take better charge of her own life. Cleary aligns territorial mapping with print mapping in ways that support their integral connection.

On this last day in the book, Ramona leaves for school feeling spunkier than usual. "She was determined that today would be different. She would make it different" (1978/1975, 110).

Ramona, "full of spirit and pluck" (1978/ 1975, 110), set out for school in relatively high spirits and

decided to go to school a different way, by the next street over, something she had always wanted to do. The distance to Glenwood School was no greater. There was no reason she should not go to school any way she pleased as long as she looked both ways before she crossed the street and did not talk to strangers (1978/1975, 110).

With her two inexorable safety rules, Ramona has mastered the necessary schemas for mapping a new route to school, and is enjoying the adventure:

Ramona skipped happily down the street The sky through the bare branches overhead was clear, the air was crisp, and Ramon's feet in their brown oxfords felt light. Beezus's old boots, which so often weighed her down, were home in the hall closet. Ramona was happy. The day felt different already.

Ramona turned the second corner, and as she hippity-hopped down the unfamiliar street past three white houses and a tan stucco house, she enjoyed a feeling of freedom and adventure (1978/1975, 112).

Ramona is choosing a different path, noticing different landmarks. Feet actually play a big role in her adventure because she is tackled by a big and scary dog and has to throw one of her shoes at him. But her resourcefulness (the dog turns away taking the shoe with him) increases her sense of control and by the time she gets to her reading group she is ready for conquest.

Workbooks were collected. Reading circles were next. Prepared to attack words, Ramona limped to a little chair in the front of the room with the rest of her reading group. She felt so much better towards Mrs Griggs that she was first to raise her hand on almost every question, even though she was worried about her missing oxford. The reader was more interesting now that her group was attacking bigger words. *Fire engine*. Ramona read to herself and thought. Pow! I got you, *fire engine*. *Monkey*. Pow! I got you, *monkey* (1978/1975, 125).

The relationship between mapping new corners of her world and mapping new words in her reader is relatively direct. Ramona's sense of gaining authority and agency in the two forms of pattern-recognition challenges that she faces is very clearly delineated.

Rufus

Rufus Moffat's first day of school also encompasses geographical and literary schema-building, though in different ratios. Eleanor Estes shares Cleary's respect for daily detail and provides a strong sense of the quotidian in her family stories. In *The Moffats*, Rufus, aged five and a half, is avid to go to school, and his sister Janey takes him on the first day, heading past "Mr. Brooney's delicatessen store at the end of New Dollar Street" (1959/1941, 52). There they meet Hughie Pudge, screaming that he doesn't want to go to school. At this inopportune moment, along comes Mr. Pennypepper, the new Superintendent of Schools. Mr. Pennypepper marches both little boys to school and whispers to Rufus that he must be responsible for Hughie until lunchtime, just in case he runs away again.

The first morning of school is momentous. Unlike those Kindergarten children who have no older siblings, Rufus has a few working schemas to get started with.

First the teacher asked all the boys and girls what their names were. Then she passed books around to all of them. Readers, they were. Rufus opened his. He liked the smell of the shiny printed pages. He liked the pictures, but goodness! would he ever be able to read those words? Now the teacher was writing on the blackboard. Occasionally the white chalk would squeak. She was making the letters of the alphabet. That Rufus knew.

Oh, he was enjoying himself hugely. All the new smells! First his new book, then the chalk dust whenever the teacher made lines on the board. And best of all this desk! All his own! Rufus liked it here (1959/1941, 57).

It is not difficult to see Rufus beginning to sort out further schemas to help him manage this new experience.

But disaster strikes; Hughie runs away, and Rufus must make a decision about where his priorities lie.

The seat next to Rufus where Hughie should have been was empty.

Rufus looked at the teacher. N O P Q she wrote in firm strokes. And at that moment, Hughie Pudge, who had been standing behind the big chart that had a picture of Little Bo-Peep on it, walked out of the door. Miss Andrews didn't see him, for her back was to the door. Many of the children saw him, but they thought nothing of it. Lots of them had the idea you could get up and go outdoors or even go home if you felt like it. Imagine! Of course they soon learned differently, but anyway, today – the first day of school – they saw nothing strange in a boy simply walking out of the classroom (1959/1941, 58-59).

Estes explicitly addresses the need to develop appropriate school schemas in this passage, and then moves on swiftly, as we shall see below, to more territorial forms of exploration and mapping.

The bell goes for recess and Rufus's class has several dry runs at marching out of class according to Miss Andrews' specifications. When they finally satisfy her requirement of keeping in unison, Rufus simply keeps on marching.

This time Rufus marched right past the desks, out the door, down the steps, and into the school yard with his classmates. But he didn't stop there. He kept right on marching out the school yard gate and across Wood Street to the railroad

tracks, for what he had seen up there from the classroom window was Hughie Pudge climbing into a freight car stopped on a side-track.

It wasn't easy, what Rufus was going to do, because Mama had warned all the Moffats never to go onto the railroad tracks. But that important man had told Rufus he must see to it that Hughie came to school. He hoped Mama would understand. He would be very careful (1959/1941, 60-61).

Rufus climbs on board with Hughie and when the train begins to move, he rehearses his schemas for managing his life.

Hughie was looking over the side of the freight car happily watching the school-house disappear.

"Lost," repeated Rufus to himself. And a prickly feeling ran up his spine at the word "lost." "Rufus Moffat, 27 New Dollar Street," he muttered to himself. This is what Mama always made him repeat to her when he went shopping in the city with her just in case he might get lost. "Age, five-and-a-half years," he continued and counted up to twenty.

That's what he would do and say if there were anyone to say it to.

However, he soon forgot to be afraid. He forgot about school and the shiny new reader and he began to enjoy the ride.

"You must be the driver and I'll be the conductor," he said to Hughie.

The two boys looked back. They had left the brown school-house, Wood Street, and Brooney's delicatessen store far behind. They were crossing the marshes that separated Cranbury from New Haven. Now they were crossing the long trestle over Mill River that emptied into the harbour (1959/1941, 64-65).

Rufus is moving outside of his mapped territory, a precursor of his upcoming literate life pre-enacted on the ground. When the train finally stops and a man discovers the two little boys, they are so far afield that Rufus's precious mantra of "27 New Dollar Street" has ceased to be effective. Fortunately he remembers the larger-scale name of Cranbury and the boys are returned on a different, much faster train, which stops especially to let them off. "The express whizzed over the tracks the freight train had taken so long to cross a little while before. Rufus and Hughie could hardly tell where they were" (1959/1941, 72). And they get back to school just in time to be sent home for lunch.

Christopher Robin

Unlike Rufus, Christopher Robin, in *The House at Pooh Corner*, is profoundly ambivalent about going to school, perhaps because, for him, it involves leaving home, and perhaps because he intuits some of what we now know about the social and psychological world of many prep schools. By the end of the story, he has been leaving his stuffed animal friends for day school on a regular basis, but he is now facing a more complete departure. Interestingly, he expresses some of his views about school to Pooh on an outing to an enchanted place that is explicitly described as inadequately mapped. Reaching this special place is directly linked with the mental spaces to be unlocked by school.

They walked on, thinking of This and That, and by-and-by they came to an enchanted place on the very top of the Forest called Galleons Lap, which is sixty-something trees in a circle; and Christopher Robin knew that it was enchanted because nobody had ever been able to count whether it was sixty-three or sixty-

four, not even when he tied a piece of string round each tree after he had counted it. Being enchanted, its floor was not like the floor of the Forest, gorse and bracken and heather, but close-set grass, quiet and smooth and green. It was the only place in the Forest where you could sit down carelessly, without getting up again almost at once and looking for somewhere else. Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was all the world over was with them in Galleons Lap.

Suddenly Christopher Robin began to tell Pooh about some of the things: People called Kings and Queens and something called Factors, and a place called Europe, and an island in the middle of the sea where no ships came, and how you make a Suction Pump (if you want to), and when Knights were Knighted, and what comes from Brazil. And Pooh, his back against one of the sixty-something trees, and his paws folded in front of him, said “Oh!” and “I didn’t know,” and thought how wonderful it would be to have a Real Brain which could tell you things. And by-and-by Christopher Robin came to an end of the things, and was silent, and he sat there looking out over the world, and wishing it wouldn’t stop (1957/1928, 307-310).

Christopher Robin is acquiring and processing schemas, both for an understanding of the world spread out before him and also for the kinds of facts that will be unlocked by literacy. Schooling will bring new elements of schematizing that he is beginning to foreshadow as he says farewell to the kind of free-range geography he has up to now been able to take for granted.

Flat rectangles and moral geography

Malouf rightly points out that some of our schemas about the world and about how we mythologize the world are inherited. Others are developed through what Barton and Hamilton call “vernacular strategies” (1998, 13). Rufus, Ramona, and I were all given some rules to be getting on with: cross the street when the light is favourable, look both ways, don’t talk to strangers, don’t go near the railway tracks. Much else was worked out through leveraging our own experiences (the vernacular route), and, as our literacy developed, comparing our local schemas with those that prevailed in the books we read (the inherited route).

Or not. Although I pre-dated Ramona’s 1975 experience and did not know Cleary’s earlier books, I was certainly aware that my world most definitely did not mesh with those of Rufus or Christopher Robin, both of whose stories I read and re-read as a child. There was still a railway line into St. John’s in my early youth but it travelled only into the wilderness of Newfoundland’s interior. There were no nearby towns of any significance; my schema of the city included a strong sense of urban isolation. Certainly I had no sense of how or why a child would leave home to go to school. American and British books alike said little or nothing to address my own circumstances, apart from drawing on the most basic and top-level schemas of environmental awareness.

As a child’s reading becomes more complex, these basic schemas give way to more complex and elaborate geographies. The mapping of life-to-book becomes less straightforward; book-to-life relationships become more freighted with value judgments. The child reader starts to acquire ways not simply of reading her environment but also of “reading *into*” that environment.

For example, Susan Brooker-Gross raises a very interesting question of the “moral social geography” (1981, 49) of popular fiction, taking Nancy Drew as her exemplar. I, of course, read Nancy Drew regularly, but could not make use of her landscape priorities to help shape my own. Nancy values rural settings – not too urban, not too wild.

The pastoral setting – natural but managed – is Nancy’s haven, her respite from the dangers of cities. Even more, it is a sanctuary from the uncertain treacheries of the wilderness. Wilderness implies an absence of human management and an uncertainty of events (1981, 61).

Nancy not only has personal preferences, she actually grounds (in many senses of that word) her detective instincts about character and moral fibre in the reading of landscapes.

A character’s high moral standards are indicated through his or her association with cared-for pastoral environments, while a lack of standards is demonstrated by association with an unkempt environment. . . .In the Nancy Drew stories, dwelling descriptions are used to establish social class and to separate the heroes from the villains (1981, 61).

“The use of landscape” in the Nancy Drew stories, says Brooker-Gross, “constitutes a sort of tutelage in moral geography” (1981, 63).

But the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland in the 1950s was not only poorer than any society ever encountered by Nancy Drew, it was also built on a harsh and rocky landscape, almost devoid of topsoil. Wildflowers do thrive there, and it is possible to cultivate a garden with some effort, but the kind of suburban neatness so esteemed by Nancy was a long way in the future for St. John’s, and the rural settings of the outports

were austere and dramatic rather than pretty. As a child of the 1950s, I learned from her to recognize and value a conventionally attractive landscape, but I saw little enough of such settings in my own surroundings.

Enid Blyton's series books were alien to me in different ways. Her landscapes, for the most part, are even blander than those of Carolyn Keene. At the same time they are charged with a kind of historical authority that Blyton completely took for granted but to which I could not gain ready access from my vantage point, standing on the rocks of St. John's. Here is a random choice of title from Blyton's *Famous Five* series, which I read avidly: *Five on a Secret Trail* (1987/1956).

Early in the book, George and Anne are exploring the common in preparation for camping out (Julian and Dick are off on a school field trip). Gorse and heather abound on the common; neither of them was familiar to me, *except* from other stories – and keen readers will already have noticed that I would have met them before in *The House at Pooh Corner*, where both are mentioned in the little extract above. My acquaintance with them as significant geographical phenomena was strictly book-to-book.

Anne and George meet a strange boy on the common and he acquaints them with another fact that established my place firmly on the *outside* of this world.

“I’m digging,” said the boy. “My father’s an archaeologist – he loves old buildings more than anything else in the world. I take after him, I suppose. There was once an old Roman camp on this common, you know – and I’ve found a place where part of it must have been, so I’m digging for anything I can find – pottery, weapons, anything like that. See, I found this yesterday – look at the date on it!”

He suddenly thrust an old coin at them – a queer, uneven one, rather heavy to hold.

“Its date is 292,” he said. “At least as far as I can make out. So this camp’s pretty old, isn’t it?” (1987/1956, 32)

To read this story, I would have had to call on some school-to-book knowledge; by the time I hit Enid Blyton we had begun history lessons with a textbook called *The Stream of Time*, and I would have known a little bit about Romans. I certainly would have known that Romans didn’t set up exotic camp in Newfoundland. Many years later, archaeologists established that Newfoundland had been colonized by Vikings, and I am sure I would have found such an alternative to be equally glamorous – but that discovery was in the future and offered me no satisfaction during my Blyton years.

Once I graduated from the Famous Five to the *Adventure* series, I had a better chance of identifying with the topography, at least in *The Island of Adventure* (1948/1944). Heroes Philip and Dinah live in Craggy-Tops, a house that inhabited a landscape whose surface features I would have recognized.

They drove through wild hills, rocky and bare. Soon they saw the sea in the distance. High cliffs bounded it except for breaks here and there. It certainly was a wild and desolate coast. They passed ruined mansions and cottages on their way.

“They were burnt in the battles I told you about,” said Philip. “And no-one has rebuilt them. Craggy-Tops more or less escaped” (1948/1944, 34).

And there, suddenly, was the roaring sea and Craggy-Tops standing sullenly above it, built half-way down the cliff. The car stopped and the children got out. Jack gazed at the strange house. It was a queer place. Once it had two towers, but one had fallen in. The other still stood. The house was built of great grey stones, and was massive and ugly, but somehow rather grand. It faced the sea with a proud and angry look, as if defying the strong gale and the restless ocean (1948/1944, 37).

The cliffs and the roaring sea were certainly familiar to me, but by this point in my reading life, simple physical geography was not sufficient to sustain my understanding of the story. I already knew from earlier encounters with Blyton that the moral social geography of her books was outside my experience. There was that inexplicable issue of boarding school and “hols” that made little sense to me. There was an ineffable sense of class judgment that I was not equipped to translate into my own surroundings. *The Island of Adventure* also featured a character whose geography and history were completely outside my experience: a black servant (a bit of a buffoon, needless to say – Blyton’s social schemas were reliably racist). I had to take all this social grounding on faith, take it as a kind of social and cultural axiom, essential for following and enjoying the events of the plot.

My complete exclusion from this world was vividly symbolized by the fact that all the Blyton books I initially read had the stylistic addition of her name as a signature, rather than in print form. Unable to decipher the handwriting, I often pondered over the deep unlikelihood of such a name as “Gnid.” I was rather put out when I finally saw it in

print as “Enid” and realized it was pronounceable after all. But by that time, my sense of estrangement from Blyton’s social and moral universe was too complete to be unpicked.

The vernacular strategies of the outsider

This alienation from the geographies of my stories skewed my development of vernacular strategies in ways that are now very clear to me, looking back. I drastically reduced my life-to-book dependency and acquired a set of book-to-book connections, interpreting British and American stories in the context of other British and American stories, reducing their connections to my own life. Such book-to-life associations as I developed were largely disparaging about my own surroundings. The “otherness” of the stories I read was complete – it was not a case of the familiar being rendered strange; it was all strange in the first place. The temptation for a young reader immersed in fictional universes that so completely exclude her own world is to regard her own surroundings as the real “other.”

I am not making a special case for my own alienation as a reader. My story is commonplace in its generic terms of colonial reading, but the specifics of different landscapes make any individual story both resonant and particular. Malouf testifies to the importance of the singularity of our childhood places and the ways in which we trace our later views about the world

back to the topography of the [first] place and the physical conditions it imposes on the body, to ways of seeing it imposes on the eye, and at some less conscious level, to embodiments of mind and psyche that belong to the first experience and first mapping, of a house (1985, 10).

Implications

Like Malouf, I believe it is valuable to explore and present my own story because its specifics help to enhance a broader and more generic understanding. We all learn to explore the world from the “body outwards” and our small child bodies inhabit particular spaces that we must learn to map and read. What general observations may arise from my story, and from the related stories of my fictional heroes and heroines? What are the implications for contemporary child readers?

Many young children today actually get very little opportunity to develop foot knowledge. If they pay attention from the back seat of the car, they may develop a different but also kinaesthetic sense of their local world. A left turn feels different from a right turn in the middle ear, for example. But many children do not pay that kind of close attention; they fall asleep or they are regularly distracted by DVD or GameBoy screen as they drive. Much more of their initial response, therefore, is of the book-to-book or screen-to-book variety. We need to know more about the implications of western children’s inability to walk their own worlds – implications for their capacity to map and understand mapping, implications for their ability to measure a story world by the scale of their own little bodies. It may be that pre-schools and daycares should be organizing more of those charming crocodile outings in which a string of children holding hands moves into the environment, acquiring at least basic exposure to ideas of path, landmark, and edge. It may be that outings to the park and the playground are even more vital to children’s well-being than we thought, that they offer potential for cognitive as well as physical well-being. Or it may be that my story offers only one kind of geographical and

historical entrée into the power of interpreting fiction, and that today's children explore the limits of their existence in different and dynamic new ways.

It will be interesting to see how the children's literature of the future describes the activities of reading the word and the world. As tomorrow's writers draw on their own sense of "first place" to provide examples of the felt awareness of learning to read in the changed circumstances of our contemporary world, it will be illuminating to explore their insights. Tomorrow's children will undoubtedly continue to learn how read the word and the world, but we will all benefit from a better understanding of the importance of learning about both from the feet up.

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