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A Novel Approach: The Sociology of Literature, Children's Books, and Social Inequality

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Abstract

This article discusses the complexity of literary analysis and the implications of using fiction as a source of sociological data. This project infuses literary analysis with sociological imagination. Using a random sample of children's novels published between 1930 and 1980, this article describes both a methodological approach to the analysis of children's books and the subsequent development of two analytical categories of novels. The first category captures books whose narratives describe and support unequal social arrangements; the second category captures those whose narratives work instead to identify inequality and disrupt it. Building on Griswold's methodological approach to literary fiction, this project examines how children's novels describe, challenge, or even subvert systems of inequality. Through a sociological reading of three sampled texts – *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, A Wrinkle in Time,* and *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* – readers learn how these analytical categories work and how the sociology of literature might be enriched by attention to structural forms of inequality within literary fiction. This essay investigates children's books in order to reinvigorate the discussion and use of novels by sociologists.

Keywords: childhood, fiction, gender, literary analysis, literary narrative, power relations, social inequalities, Sociology, Sociology of literature

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Introduction

The question of what books children should be reading, and what those books should accomplish, is one that continues to fascinate and sometimes trouble cultural observers. This debate's American origins are found in the mid-1950s with the now-infamous controversy over *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955), but has more recently been elaborated in the pages of *The New York Times.* In an article titled "Online, R U Really Reading?" (Rich, 2008), parents and literacy scholars discuss whether it's reasonable for today's young people to read websites rather than books. The article refers frequently to reports issued by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which regularly chart the reading habits of Americans. The NEA's somber reports on reading are referenced in most such discussions as they consistently describe flat or declining national reading test scores among teenagers along with a slump in the proportion of adolescents who say they read 'for fun.'

It is interesting to note, however, that the authors, parents, and scholars participating in these discussions do not seem to be concerned with whether or not children and teenagers are reading their biology books or whether they understand the instructions that came with the latest version of the iPod. This is not simply a conversation about literacy any longer; it is a conversation about recreational reading, about fiction, about reading 'for fun.' What does it mean that American young people are not only reading fewer books, but also that they are reading fewer books 'for fun' than they used to? What is in those books, and especially the 'fun' ones, that we want them to know?

It is certainly possible that adults simply want today's young readers to be familiar with the joys of fiction and with the cultural referents that communities share as a result of having *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 2006) and *The Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1995) in common. It may simply worry adults that children and teenagers seem to prefer the internet to the library. Other research projects will investigate the complex social anxieties and desires that motivate such national surveys and newspaper articles. As a sociologist, I believe that works of fiction are important because – through them – readers are exposed to more than the details of Jane Eyre's tortured love life; I find that novels can expose readers to information about social systems, about inequality, about gender stratification and racism. It is for these reasons, I would argue, that young people should be exposed to literary narratives—because those narratives can show young readers how the world is organized.

This essay is embedded in a larger research project, in which I build on Wendy Griswold's (1992; 1994; 2000) combination of humanistic and social scientific methods in order to study American children's novels and their production contexts. Concomitantly, I integrate the theoretical ideas of Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey so that my analysis – like theirs – might better understand narratives that challenge or even subvert systems of inequality. Ewick and Silbey's work examines the oral narratives that individuals tell about their experiences with the judicial system. They find that some of these stories do more than simply describe a legal or judicial experience; some of these stories, they argue, allow the listener to understand how the legal or judicial system works, and how it can be negotiated with or challenged (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). My research focuses on the literary narratives of American children's books, and asks whether some of the narratives contained by children's novels might similarly allow the reader to understand how social systems work and how systems of inequality might be negotiated with or challenged.

In order to better understand the narrative content of American children's books, I have done something both obvious and unusual. I have analyzed a random sample of children's novels

written between 1930 and 1980 in order to collect the kinds of data that are only accessible from within their pages. Since I want to know how American children's novels have dealt at different moments in the 20th century with issues of inequality and power, I have had to find a way to think of novels as sources of sociological data. Leaving aside my other analyses and findings, this essay will describe and interrogate my approach to this sample of novels in order to reinvigorate the discussion of and perhaps the use of novels by sociologists.

Sociology and Novels: A History

Sociological studies of literature and literary practice seem to have bloomed during the 1970s and crested in the 1980s, with the publication of a collection of essays on the subject (Desan, Ferguson, & Griswold, 1989), but there seems to have been little sociological research on literature or novels before or after. With the exception of Griswold, who contributed to the Desan collection and who continues to write about the sociology of literature, few sociologists currently look to novels – at least, in a systematic way – for data on social practice or social change.

In 1992, writing in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, Griswold described the sociology of literature as being "like an amoeba: it lacks a firm structure, but has flowed along in certain directions nevertheless"(Griswold, 1992, p. 455). Noting that it had produced impressive theoretical findings, she could not help but mention her longstanding impression that the field was not organized around key questions or debates like "a proper field ought to be"(Griswold, 1992, p. 455). When I began my own research project, some fifteen years later, I found myself agreeing with Griswold's observation. Certainly, there has been wonderful work done on the topics of popular culture and cultural production. Theorists have illustrated the various ways that cultural industries and markets work: DiMaggio and Stenberg (1985) show how changes in the innovation and diversity of performances in resident theaters depend on each theater's size, location, and funding environment; Peterson and Berger (1975) demonstrate how changes in recorded music are influenced by the market concentration of record companies; and, Powell (1985), moving into the realm of book publishing, illustrates how the birth and subsequent life chances of an academic manuscript are critically affected by the dense web of social interactions between editors and key members of the academic community. Yet none of these prominent cultural sociologists is using books, much less works of fiction, to ask sociological research questions. I am tempted to argue that, through the early 1990s, the some of the most sociological research on novels can be found in the work of Janice Radway, a professor of literature (1991).

Around the same time, Griswold (2000) herself was using novels to explore the impact of production systems on the content of literary work. Her research suggests that British publishers are more likely to publish Nigerian novels with a 'traditional' village theme than those with an urban theme, even though Nigerian novelists write greater numbers of books that focus on contemporary urban social problems. Because publishers are selecting books for British and American audiences in this specific way, she argues, the impression that these readers have of Nigeria is of rural communities struggling with problems of tradition and modernity. Such themes do not represent the experiences of Nigerian novelists so much as the preferences of British publishers. Both Griswold (2000; 1992) and Radway (1991) suggest that there are valid and productive reasons to think sociologically about works of fiction. Their works argue that Nigerian novels and American romance novels, respectively, contain information about the social lives of their readers and publishers. Related to the work of reading novels to surface sociological information, though, is the need to distinguish descriptions of social inequality from challenges to it.

Griswold's work lays the groundwork for mine, yet is not motivated by the same set of research

questions. She reads novels to understand whether they reflect the lived experiences of Nigerian people and novelists, or instead the abstract and mediated expectations or preferences of foreign, formerly-colonialist book publishing organizations. My work, in contrast, looks to American children's novels to investigate how, and when, books might contain narratives that reflect or challenge notions of inequality and power. While her study of Nigerian novels creates space for my study of American children's books, hers is a single study on a different set of research questions. There is some methodological overlap, certainly, but it is important to note points of departure as well. It would be naïve to imagine that a single research study might provide my work, or the work of others interested in the sociology of literature, sufficient support.

There are other sociologists whose work involves the analysis of texts, of course. Marjorie DeVault's "Novel Readings" (1990) explores how novels might be used as sources of sociological data, but is interested in how different readers of a single novel might create a collective understanding of that novel, alongside the meanings that the novel's creator might have intended. DeVault's work illuminates the processes of interpretation that produce different accounts of the meanings of cultural works, like novels. Her analysis influenced my approach to reading children's novels, but my study does not attempt to measure, in any way, the various ways that different readers might make sense of the children's novels sampled. Questions about reception are beyond my project's framework. Working with a more analogous group of research questions, Sharon Hays (1997) uses parenting guides to investigate how dominant ideologies of intensive mothering are articulated. While her interest in ideology affirms mine, Hays does not explain in detail how she read the parenting guides she is analyzing. It is this methodological step that has become most interesting to me, and which I want to articulate here.

In Search of Subversive Stories

This essay, then, is rooted in the tradition of sociologists who have studied the novel as a source of data. Like Griswold and Radway, I look to the novel for information about social ideologies and structured representations. Unlike them, however, I focus on a text's willingness to resist reproducing dominant social arrangements that are based upon inequality.[1] Interested in how children's books might be subversive, how they might contain narratives about social inequality and especially about gender stratification, I look first to previous studies of children's books to see how others have studied such things.

Previous sociological studies of children's literature often code the gender content of stories according to how many girls play active roles and what kinds of occupations their mothers are described as having (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). These studies focus on individualistic notions of feminism and childhood, assuming that a book which describes a girl making choices or a mother with a professional job is a better, more feminist book. The authors of these studies argue that children's books contain stories about girls who do not determine their own destinies. Their attention to depictions of girls and women in children's books was notable and exciting when these studies were published, since few other sociologists were paying such close and scholarly attention to children's books. Their depiction of sexism within their sampled picture books, though, remains at the level of the individual (Hubler, 2000) and is not linked to systems of dominance within our society. The books may or may not portray the behavior of boys or of girls as stemming from a specific material and ideological reality, but the sociologists reading them seem content to focus on questions of individual attainment or character.

In contrast to analyses that focus on individual-level change or characterization, Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey have found a way to identify stories that recount and celebrate either an

exposure or a reversal of power (1998). Their project defines a subversive story as "a narrative that challenges the taken-for-granted hegemony by making visible and explicit the connections between particular lives and social organization" (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 220). Ewick and Silbey's sociological study of legal narratives uncovers the ways that some stories of resistance even work to create or inspire social change. Less interested in how the story's protagonist is characterized, they propose a different kind of analysis: an analysis of exposed power arrangements within a story.

Based upon their innovations, I claim that a subversive story for children will include not only strong role models at an individual level but also connections between social power and inequality; in other words, I blend narrative analysis with a sociological imagination. In my reading and discussion of children's books, I ask questions about the characterization of the protagonists and their narratives, alongside questions about whether, and how, the texts make visible connections between the protagonists' lives and the social arrangements within which they are embedded. I establish a different way to think about what counts as a subversive children's novel by identifying stories that implicate social structures in their representation of stratification. While a few other theorists have also conceptualized children's books as potentially subversive, I find Ewick and Silbey's ideas most useful.

Reading Children's Books: Methodological Considerations

The old-fashioned notion that an author simply imparts, by writing words on paper, ideas and information to a porous reader has been replaced with an argument about an 'implied reader,' who does not absorb a text so much as work to understand it. Reading is commonly understood by literary theorists to be a process whereby readers search for 'consistency' within the text (Iser, 1974). Because I read and analyzed my fifty sampled children's texts – and since I cannot think of myself as simply absorbing an author's words – I needed to understand more about how implied readership would affect my analysis.

The fact that there are enough adults interested in children's literature to warrant academic journals dedicated to the subject suggests that what I initially imagined to be obvious – that children are the implied readers of children's books – may not be so. Most of the people who select and purchase children's books are adults. Adult writers create them, adult publishers edit and market them, adult librarians and teachers select them for their collections, and adult parents buy them and bring them home. It is likely that writers and publishers recognize that adults serve on award committees and stand in line at checkout counters, and it is possible that they provide things within children's texts for adults to engage with. Indeed, a number of theorists believe that children's literature characteristically has not one but two implied readers. In a similar way, movies for children seem to address both the children and the adults who might be watching them; both *Shrek* and *Finding Nemo*, for example, contain jokes and references that most children could not possibly appreciate but which are included for the entertainment of grown-ups in the audience. Like such films, Jill May (1983) argues that "children's books are read by adults and children, so the books do not have one meaning. As texts with dual (or multiple) audiences, children's stories hold more than one meaning"(May, 1983, p. 55).

Commenting that "the children's writer is perhaps the only one who is asked to address one particular audience and at the same time appeal to another," Shavit (1986) also proposes that children's books have "two implied readers: a pseudo addressee and a real one. The child, the official reader of the text, is not meant to realize it fully and is much more an excuse for the text rather than its genuine addressee" (p. 71). Nodelman and Reimer (2003) interpret this argument to mean that the actual adult reader of a children's book knows more than the official child reader

the book implies. These texts, then, address adult readers who have literary repertoires of knowledge and strategies the child reader does not posses.

While I am not convinced that children are "more an excuse" (Shavit, 1986, p. 71) for children's books than their actual audience, it is interesting to consider children's books from this point of view. It is possible that aspects of children's texts are intended for adult readers and not for child readers, who are unlikely to know how to make sense of the texts but who might simply enjoy the text's cadence. A problem with arguments of this kind, though, is that they depend on generalizations about childhood and children that both sentimentalize and underestimate what it means to be young (while overestimating, I think, what it means to be old).

A consideration of implied readers makes it clear, however, why children's texts are different from other texts. If these texts potentially have more than one implied reader, then a thoughtful analysis of them will take this potential for complication and multiplicity into account. Whereas reference books eliminate doubt and uncertainty, literary texts rely upon uncertainty and surprise. If the author of a literary text does a good job, according to Iser (1974), then the implied reader is sufficiently tantalized into making predictions but is never disappointed to find that their predictions require revision (Stibbs, 1991).

This active and demanding model of the reading process appeals to me because it takes into account the subjectivity of the reader and the performativity of reading, but it reminds me how complicated it can be to try and read fifty books the same way. Reading is an active, and interactive, process but sociological studies require some measure of reliability. In order to infuse my reading of children's books with reliability, I have tried to more fully operationalize reading strategies, so that I could apply them in reliable ways to the different books in my sample. That reading is an active and subjective enterprise, however, cannot be ignored.

Sampling Decisions

Using conventional methodological tools in service of my larger research study, I randomly selected fifty novels from (a) the list of Newbery Medal winning children's books, and (b) lists of widely distributed children's books, all of which were published between 1930 and 1980. This time frame was selected for specific reasons: by 1930, the largest children's book publishing divisions had been established within American publishing companies; after 1980, the publishing industry began to prepare for and be radically affected by the emergence of online sales. Each book in this study was popular in its day, but these lists – the study's sampling frames – capture different forms of popularity. Each of the novels was then analyzed using both literary and sociological approaches, in order to investigate how these texts represent or trouble notions of social inequality. It is this process of reading that I would like to focus on, but I will briefly review my sampling decisions first so that my approach to reading will be that much more transparent.

The sampled texts were written for middle readers, a distinct group of young readers recognizable to most children's librarians and publishers. While the categorization practices of children's book publishers have changed over the years, it is common practice to sell books for early readers, books for middle readers, and, more recently, books for young adults. Middle readers tend to be between the ages of nine and eleven, although some librarians and publishers would include eight year-olds or twelve year-olds as well. My sample includes a range of books, from the very long and dense to the relatively short and straightforward. The average sampled book contained 188 pages and 16 chapters.

For the purposes of this project, I wanted to sample both critically acclaimed books and widely distributed books in order to consider texts that are held up as the best in their class as well as books that sell well. Both types of books would likely be emulated by publishers, since books that win awards also sell widely and are well respected, while books that are best-sellers are important to the financial status and success of children's book departments. There is theoretical precedence for this kind of sampling in cultural studies and film studies. The list of Newbery Medal winning books accounts for the critically acclaimed part of the sample.

There is widespread agreement that the Newbery Medal is the giant among children's book awards; awarded yearly since 1922, it is also the oldest. One of the advantages of the Newbery is that it confers immortality on a book: winning it virtually guarantees that a title is kept in print in perpetuity. Consequently, a Newbery Medal winning book published in the 1920s is still available to today's young readers. Awarded by panels of children's librarians, the Newbery Medal confers upon a children's book a measure of prestige unlike any other.

While book prizes are a source of endless disagreement, in that there are always other books which might have won and skeptics who second-guess award committees, it is clear that awards do sell books. In the United States, even the inclusion of a book on the Honor list (for runners-up) makes an immense difference to sales, as well as status. One Newbery Medal-winning author remembers, "when I won the Newbery my publisher informed me that traditionally it had a more positive effect on US sales than a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, or even the Nobel Prize for Literature!"(Allen, 1998). It is for all of these reasons that this population of books served as a portion of my sampling frame. I generated a random sample of twenty books from the list of award winners, two books per five-year sampling cluster.

Newbery Medal winners are one important source of influential children's novels but notably missing from this list are best-sellers such as *Charlotte's Web*, which never won the Newbery Medal but clearly had an impact on American children's books. I included such books in this study through an additional sampling process, using two separate sources of information about which books were the most widely circulated in their day: the American Library Association's lists of *Notable Books*, and the *Publisher's Weekly* list of bestselling children's books. The American Library Association has published such lists of children's books since 1919, created by children's book librarians to help libraries make institutional purchasing decisions; these lists were published in response to requests by working librarians and were used to buy a tremendous number of books for public lending and school libraries. Such books, as a result, were consumed by young readers on a large scale.

Given that this project focuses on the fifty years between 1930 and 1980, and given that I had already established five-year sampling clusters in order to work with the list of Newbery Medal winning books, I used those same sampling clusters and randomly selected two specific years per sampling cluster. Next, I consulted the American Library Association's lists of *Notable Books* for each of those years, entered the total number of eligible books into a random number generator, and selected the two books from the list of *Notable Books* that the number generator identified. In this way, a list of twenty children's novels was randomly generated which spans the fifty year sampling period, with two widely distributed novels per five-year sampling cluster. In combination with the sample of twenty award-winning children's novels, this study's sample now included forty children's books.

Finally, I created a third random sample from the much shorter *Publisher's Weekly* list (of children's novels, only); ten books were selected, two per ten-year period. The *Publisher's Weekly* list is certainly not without its flaws, but it is a useful source of information about a small

number of children's novels which have been widely circulated. As a result of these sampling decisions, fifty books were selected at random and evenly distributed across the historical period, so that they might most accurately reflect the larger population of books they are, to some degree, standing in for.

Learning to Read as a Sociologist

Although I acknowledge the methodological problem that researchers have when they summarize or interpret literary works, I do not think that sociologists should surrender such analyses. Griswold (1992) argues that being methodologically self-conscious should not require avoiding analytical techniques. To take seriously my responsibility in analyzing sampled children's novels, I have dealt with the problem by comparing my summaries of the books to standard summaries and reviews, by discussing my understanding of the texts with teachers and librarians very familiar with them, and by making clear what my purpose in reading the books is.

In order to improve the reliability and validity of my analysis, I developed a reading schema and subjected each text to it. I read each children's novel in the same way: first, I read the text from start to finish, taking very general notes; reading it a second time, I responded to a lengthy questionnaire – which I had previously developed – about the book's literary content. I took note of each book's publication date, publisher, and author, and of the basic elements of narrative texts. For each sampled book, I answered questions such as: "What is the book's setting?"; "Who is the primary character?"; "Is there an implied reader?"; and "What is her/his implied body of knowledge?" In my notes, I briefly described the text's plot and themes in my own words. Finally, I subjected each text to a set of questions intended to surface, in consistent ways, sociological information.

Hollindale's (1998) work on ideology and children's literature has been especially useful. He believes that all works of fiction contain ideological information, and that this ideological information is both inevitable and disguised. In order to identify this hidden material Hollindale proposes questions that a reader might ask herself, and which I used to systematize my readings of these children's novels. His questions include the following: "What happens if the components of a text are reversed? Does examination of the opposite scenario illustrate unexamined assumptions in the published work?"; "Is it possible that a book is testing and undermining some of the values that it superficially appears to be celebrating?"; and, "Who are the people who do not exist in a story?". Taken together, Hollindale suggests, such questions are meant to "lift ideology 'off the page'" (Hollindale, 1998, p. 22). These questions, I hoped, would help me begin to identify ideological information in the children's books sampled, and to consider ideology in children's books not so much surprising as variable and potentially patterned.

Ideology, however, is only part of what I was trying to uncover and discuss in my analysis of children's novels. More than the ideological material contained in each text, I wanted to think seriously about what Ewick and Silbey (1998) illustrate through their analysis of legal narratives: that stories can contain information about social structure and process. Referencing de Certeau, who argues that "whereas history recounts in the past tense the strategies of instituted powers, these 'fabulous' stories offer their audience a repertoire of tactics for future use"(as cited in Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 220), Ewick and Silbey suggest that some stories support challenges to the status quo by illuminating a set of tactics for future use. Their study uncovers the ways that stories of resistance work to create or inspire change, by recounting and celebrating either a reversal or an exposure of power.

Their research led me to believe that it would be possible to read children's books sociologically

by focusing on how these books sometimes make claims both about power and also the possibility of evading it. Their work advocates a different kind of literary analysis: an analysis of exposed power arrangements within a story. My study of children's novels borrows heavily from Ewick and Silbey's arguments about subversive stories, in order to shift the focus of children's book research projects away from individual – and for the purposes of this essay, I am focusing on the subversion of gender stratification – will include not only strong female role models but also explicit connections between characters and social arrangements. A subversive children's novel, then, will expose the ways that power and inequality work within a social setting, albeit fictional, and might even offer readers information about how one might challenge the status quo.

Status Quo Books and Subversive Books

In order to explain in more detail how I operationalized these theoretical ideas, I will describe my analysis of two sampled texts, one of which successfully represents a subversive story while the other does not. The first is an example of a children's book which does not do what Ewick and Silbey's legal narratives sometimes do, instead steering clear of information which might be used to challenge inequality. I call this category 'status quo' books. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, written by Judy Blume and published in 1972, is a book that represents the status quo. With its focus on the Hatcher family – a white middle class family living comfortably on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the same era – it characterizes the family as conventional, patriarchal, and conservative in its organization. Mr. Hatcher works for an advertising company, and his manager and coworkers are also white men (as portrayed by the book's illustrations). Mrs. Hatcher does not participate in the paid labor market, and is primarily interested in and responsible for the care of her sons. The story is told from the perspective of the Hatchers' oldest son, Peter, who worries that his brother is getting more attention than he is. Despite Peter's anxiety, though, both boys seem to have more (toys, parental attention, affection) than enough. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* is a story about family dynamics and sibling rivalry. It presents whiteness and male privilege as typical, implicit, even mundane.

Peter Hatcher, who narrates *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, gains powers primarily through his parents. He describes himself as a good kid, and he feels certain that he deserves to be recognized and rewarded for how patiently he copes with his younger brother, whose nickname is Fudge. He is, ultimately, rewarded: when Fudge eats Peter's turtle, their parents give Peter a dog to compensate him for his loss. Notice how this really is not about power in a structural sense: Peter gets a present, and feels vindicated and acknowledged, but is not any more powerful than he was before. (He was already pretty powerful.) He feels entitled to things that he ultimately gets. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* supports the prevailing social system, since nothing about Peter's story or experience challenges or changes the way his life or his family is organized.

In thinking about how this type of descriptive novel – the 'status quo' book – is identified among the sampled books, it is additionally helpful to consider how other sampled children's novels fail to meet its criterion. Madeleine L'Engle's (1962) work of science fiction provides an interesting counterpoint. Like *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, A Wrinkle in Time* also tells a domestic story about an American family during the second half of the twentieth century. It certainly represents some domestic social relationships that reflect conventional forms of privilege and inequality. Like *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, A Wrinkle in Time* describes characters who are all white, despite the opportunity presented by conventions of science fiction to portray characters of various races and ethnicities, and the book represents family members occupying roles that are strikingly gendered. While Mrs. Murray – the mother of the family – is characterized as a brilliant scientist, it is she who cares for the children while her husband is away doing top-secret work for the government. Her office is connected to the house through the

kitchen, which seems to represent both her connection to the family and the reality of her 'second shift' schedule (Hochschild, 1989). Further, when the children travel to the planet of Camazotz and observe the way society is organized there, they find familiar divisions of labor: this planet's men also work downtown and hold positions of power; its women spend their days in private homes caring for children. Even the other-worldly beings the children meet on their travels, who have no inherent human form or gender, take female identities in the children's imaginations because they care for the children in maternal ways. The connection between gender and divisions of labor are not disrupted by this text.

Despite these similarities, though, there are striking differences between the two books. Unlike *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, which describes minor domestic battles that are mediated by adults, *A Wrinkle in Time* describes a battle wherein it is women and children who have access to the most powerful and transformative weapons. True, the text's men have structural power that the text's women do not have; the men are professionals, both on Earth and on Camazotz, and they have political authority over armies and governments. But within *A Wrinkle in Time's* internal logic, only the women and children can save their planet (and the children's missing father) from a dangerous darkness, because only women and children have access to the most authoritative source of power.

Furthermore, the children and especially the protagonist, Meg, can see through the lies of the powerful men they encounter. Meg recognizes, and articulates, how the forces of darkness can deceive: that sameness is not the same as equality; that the absence of sadness is not the same as contentment. The text not only portrays the children, and especially Meg, as rebelling against these forces of authority and control, but also as triumphant. Meg discovers both how powerful she can be and that her power can be used to create change in the larger social world. Unlike Peter Hatcher, Meg Murray is a character whose story, told from her own perspective, allows a reader to learn – alongside her – how specific inequalities might be challenged within familiar social landscapes.

It is through this comparison that we can perhaps most clearly identify the ways in which books like *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* fail to challenge systems of power that are widely criticized as unfair. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* does not trouble relationships grounded in inequality, but instead presents them as natural or neutral. It is beloved by children and parents for its nostalgic and sometimes-charming portrayal of American family life, but it does not expose the ways that power and privilege work, nor does it critique or challenge social inequalities.

Within my sample of American children's novels, I did find a subset of books (like *A Wrinkle in Time)* whose plots reveal and whose characters either enact a subversion of social inequalities or make visible moments of vulnerability within the organization of these inequalities. I call these 'subversive' books. Such books not only represent social inequality but also identify the power structures behind them and make some effort to challenge them or make them vulnerable. To further illustrate what I mean by this, I will briefly describe another example of a 'subversive' book.

Hitty: Her First Hundred Years was written by Rachel Field, published in 1929, and contains the memoirs of a small doll ('Hitty') carved out of a piece of wood in 1830. The idea that Hitty herself has written her memoirs from atop a desk in an antique shop, having lived for one hundred years with different human owners around the world, requires a different kind of imagination than does Peter Hatcher's story. This fictional memoir describes Hitty's own travels over a period of more than a century, and documents great changes in American history.

Readers are repeatedly shown evidence of Hitty's good humor, sharp wit, and powers of

observation. She comments wryly on social conventions, chronicling her surroundings in great and fond detail. Hitty is frequently described by the people she meets during her travels as honest, pleasant, lucky, and brave; furthermore, her own reports point to the validity of these descriptions. When she finds herself on an island in the South Sea with native people who decide to worship her as a deity, she describes the island and the native people, along with their customs and their treatment of her, and then matter-of-factly comments, "It is rather lonely to be a god for days on end"(Field, 1929, p. 83). She is most often an observer, whose experiences and sensibilities inform the reader's own sense of American history and social development.

Through her memoirs, Hitty is able to speak directly to her readers; she is, like Peter Hatcher, a protagonist-narrator. Unlike Peter Hatcher, however, Hitty's tone and perspective reveal her to be more adult than child. Although she was 'born' in Maine in 1830, her descriptions and voice are reliably steady throughout the book; she speaks to her reader as an adult observer and social critic despite variation in her chronological age. She uses complicated sentence structures and vocabularies from start to finish, and does not seem to age even while noting the passage of time. Her readers come to know her as a consistent source of information, description, humor, and introspection.

Unlike Peter's, Hitty's story describes and then comments on gendered social conventions in a way that makes them apparent. The way that she observes change in American gender arrangements over time allows readers to consider how these arrangements might be social rather than natural. She provides evidence that girls can live on their own, drive a car, and run a business; that they do not always do these things seems rooted in their society rather than their nature. Additionally, Hitty's travels, both abroad and within different regions of the United States, and her hundred-year time frame add to her ability to provide a useful perspective on inequality, power, and social change. Hitty describes a social landscape that is constantly shifting, as emerging technologies and social experiences influence individual expectations.

In addition, Hitty judges the people she meets along her travels according to relatively un-gendered criteria; she describes people as cheerful, bossy, stern, old or mischievous, but rarely as ladylike or unfeminine. In fact, when one of her human owners, an eight-year-old named Isabella, is confronted by a band of boys waving sticks and demanding her doll, Hitty describes the scene this way:

> I could see from this that she had abandoned all hope of help from anyone but herself. Isabella was no coward. I hardly think many girls would have stood up alone against that wild-looking troupe as she did. But of course she was no match for them… I had a [last] glimpse of Isabella standing at the head of the alleyway… Her hat with its red feather lay in at least six different bits, one sleeve was torn off at the shoulder, and the snow was falling on her disheveled hair and flushed face. I never saw anyone look quite so beautiful or quite so furious. (Field, 1929, p. 165)

Hitty's description of Isabella and her struggle against the "wild-looking troupe" of boys with sticks does not indicate that Isabella ought to have acted differently, according to conventional Victorian standards of behavior for girls. Hitty responds, not in outrage over Isabella's unconventional rage and aggressiveness, but rather by being proud of Isabella's strength, independence, and courage.

This story, and others like it, illustrates Hitty's conviction that there is no fixed standard by which girls are judged, that courage and justice are more important than gender norms, and that Isabelle only lost because she was outnumbered. According to my elaboration of Ewick and Silbey's (1998) definition, *Hitty: Her First Hundred Years* can be seen as a 'subversive' children's book.

On the one hand, it describes the ways that social arrangements are gendered, and offers an empowering vision of girls as social actors who more often than not determine their own fates. More important, though, it also exposes the ways that power and inequality can work within different social settings, and even offers readers information about how the status quo can change, and be changed, over time.

Conclusions

Alison Lurie, in *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*, argues that children's books sometimes contain a subversive power. In this work, she defines such a text much differently than I do. She finds, through her literary analysis of a few key texts, that some books advocate a kind of rebelliousness not found in all children's books. She argues that,

> These books, and others like them, recommended – and even celebrated – daydreaming, disobedience, answering back, running away from home, and concealing one's private thoughts and feelings from unsympathetic grown-ups. They overturned adult pretensions and made fun of adult intentions, including school and family. In a word, they were subversive, just like many of the rhymes and jokes and games I learned on the school playground. (Lurie, 1990, p. x)

Given her study of books like *Tom Sawyer* and *Alice in Wonderland*, this conceptualization of subversiveness endows her chosen texts with a new sense of play.

I think that Lurie is right that children's books can be subversive – but I define a 'subversive' children's book differently. Building on Ewick and Silbey's (1998) more sociological definition of a subversive story, my research unmasks differences between Peter Hatcher and Hitty, between 'status quo' and 'subversive' children's books. I propose that subversive stories make claims about power within social arrangements, and contain information about the possibilities of evading that power. This notion permits a more nuanced analysis of these books, drawing attention to those stories that not only describe inequalities within social relationships but also encourage readers to think critically about these social relationships.

My analysis of illustrative sampled texts illustrates how these analytical constructs can be successfully and suggestively applied to children's novels. Clearly, some children's novels do little more than describe social inequality while others illustrate how social inequalities might be challenged or even transformed. This analytical model extends existing sociological research on books and allows for the collection of new forms of socio-literary data. By creating a way to identify stories that implicate social structures in the organization of social inequality, I have been able to re-think what counts as a subversive novel. This project answers an increasingly demanding call that cultural analysis be empirically and theoretically grounded.

Clearly, people are thinking about children's literature and what children's books might say about our world; they are also thinking about whether or not children are reading, and what it means for children to read 'for fun.' Most of the conversations about children's books that are swirling around in newspapers and lecture halls, though, are relatively under-theorized. I, too, think that reading matters, and that young readers can learn from works of fiction not only how their social worlds are organized but also how to challenge and transform the inequalities embedded within them. Some of these books clearly contain what de Certeau called "fabulous" stories, which offer young readers "a repertoire of tactics for future use"(as cited in Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 220). I hope that this paper has begun to conceptualize a new way of considering children's books as potentially subversive in deeply sociological ways. I expect that people might sometimes disagree

with my conceptualizations of power within narrative, or my portrayal of beloved stories, but I will enjoy the conversation that emerges when people begin thinking about how books describe the ways that social power is organized and the ways that inequalities might be improved.

Notes

1. In this essay, I focus exclusively on notions of inequality and power that are gendered, although my larger research project also considered other systems of inequality.

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