

Captain Underpants Is My Hero: Things Have Changed—or Have They.

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Roderick McGillis

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Captain Underpants Is My Hero": Things Have Changed—or Have They?

Roderick McGillis (bio)

First an anecdote. On Saturday 16 June 2001, I happened to be in a McDonald's restaurant in Red Deer, Alberta. I hadn't been in one of these fast food places for a long time, probably three or four years. Anyhow, as I entered and passed through the restaurant to the counter, I noticed the play area. It did not look the way I had remembered such play areas. I remember the colorful plastic scenery with small slides and hoops and such, alongside the enclosed pen of many-colored hollow plastic balls in which kids burrowed and flopped. Apparently, these mini-playgrounds are now a thing of memory, and in their place is a "Play Station," a central hub with a number of computer screens. I couldn't help reflect on the irony: we in North America are a culture of obesity, and here in this mecca of calories and carbohydrates, we have a space for a bit of physical effort on the part of kids replaced by a space for them to sit and gaze at the ubiquitous screen.

Things have changed. Or have they? Baudrillard reflects on the city of New York as a "world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence." And yet, he says, he "cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe" (23). I feel something of what these words portend when I reflect on McDonald's and its "Play Station." And I reflect that what Baudrillard says describes things pretty much as they have always been. We have always felt ourselves on the threshold of a world evermore about to be. Oh, brave new world that holds the old world in its arms.

Change and renewal: the more things change, the more they remain the same. Or do they? Have books for children changed these past so many years? Has the way we deliver stories to children changed? Do we really value reading or do we just think we do? Are we reconfiguring our notions of the child or does she play as usual? Who is this "we" anyway? Can we speak as a collective? Should we speak collectively? Does globalization manifest itself in children's books, or does the "children's literature in different countries," as Maria Nikolajeva argues, have "little in common" (43)? Is homogenization of the child and child culture the

danger Jack Zipes says it is? Has criticism of children's books changed along with the books produced for the young, or does it remain the same, anchored in its concern for the child's moral and social well being? How far have we come, really?

To focus that list of questions, I'll turn the glass to Captain Underpants, superhero for six to ten year-old children, mostly boy children, or so they say. This diaper-clad defender of the world, this waistband warrior, appears in a series of books by Dav Pilkey, and I intend to ask whether the Captain Underpants books can help us approach answers to some of my questions. I'll use these books to address questions of change and renewal under the following headings: audience and narrative voice, the figure of the child, multiculturalism, and the question of socialization. These four headings ought to bring us into the vicinity of the questions I posed above. But before I begin to address each heading, I am going to slip in a comment on the books as examples of the only clear-cut change in children's literature these past ever-so-many years. I refer to their existence within a literary system that no longer exists solely of books.

A glance at the Captain Underpants books will reveal that they are acutely aware of themselves both as products in an economic system and as products that inhabit a world in which dialogue between media is the condition of survival. Like a book such as *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, the Captain Underpants books have covers that draw attention...

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Change and renewal, the more things change, the more they remain the same. Or do they? Have books for children changed these past so many years? Has the way we deliver stories to children changed? Do we really value reading, or do we just think we do? Are we reconfiguring our notions of the child or does she play as usual? Who is this “we” anyway? Can we speak as a collective? Should we speak collectively? Does globalization manifest itself in children's books, or does the

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