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The Reader in the Book: Notes from Work in Progress

Aidan Chambers

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

The Reader in the Book Notes from Work in Progress by Aidan Chambers (1) Two to say a thing . . . There is constant squabble about whether particular books are children's books or not. Indeed, some people argue that there is no such thing as books for children but only books which children happen to read. And unless one wants to be partisan and dogmatic — which I do not, having had my fill of both — one has to agree that there is some truth on both sides and the whole truth in neither. The fact is that some books are clearly for children in a specific sense — they were written by their authors deliberately for children — and some books, never specifically intended for children, have qualities which attract children to them. But we must go further than that truism, which helps us very little to deal critically with books or to mediate them intelligently and effectively to children. We need a critical method which will take account of the child as reader; which will include him rather than exclude him; which will help us to understand a book better and to

discover the reader it seeks. We need a critical method which will tell us about the reader in the book. For it seems to me that all literature is a form of communication, a way of saying something. Samuel Butler once observed that it takes two to say a thing, a sayee as well as a sayer — a hearer as well as a speaker. Thus, if literature is a way of saying something, it requires a reader to complete the work. And if this is so, as I am convinced it is, it must also be true that an author addresses someone as he writes. That someone has come to be called "the implied reader." (2) The implied reader Let me defend myself against an obvious objection. I am not suggesting that, as an author writes, he necessarily has in the front of his mind a particular reader. P. H. Langman in a useful article, "The Idea of the Reader in Literary Criticism," puts it this way: I do not say we need to know what readers the author had in mind. An author may write for a single person or a large public, for himself or for nobody. But the work itself implies the kind of reader to whom it is addressed and this may not coincide with the author's private view of his audience. What matters for the literary critic is to recognize the idea of the reader implied by the work. Not only correct understanding but also evaluation often depends principally upon correct recognition of the implied reader. (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, January 1967, pp. 84-9) I would go further. I would say that, until we discover how to take account of the implied reader, we shall call fruitlessly for serious attention to be paid to books for children, and to children as readers by others than that small number of us who have come to recognize their importance. What has bedeviled criticism of children's books in the past is the rejection of any concept of the child-reader-in-the-book by those people who have sought most earnestly for critical respectability. And they have done this, have set aside the reader-in-the-book, in the belief that mainstream criticism requires them to do so, when in fact literary criticism has for years now been moving more and more towards a method that examines this very aspect of literature. If children's book critics look for parity with their colleagues outside the study of children's books, they must — if for no other more valuable reason — show how the concept of the implied reader relates to children as readers and to the books they read. The idea of the implied reader derives from the understanding that it takes two to say a thing. In effect it suggests that in his book an author creates a relationship with a reader in order to discover the meaning of the text. Wolfgang Iser, in *The Implied Reader* (Johns Hopkins, 1972), puts it this way...

The Reader in the Book
Notes from Work in Progress
by Aidan Chambers

I

(1) Two to say a thing . . .

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But we must go further than that truism, which helps us very little to deal critically with books or to mediate them intelligently and effectively to children. We need a critical method which will take account of the child-as-reader; which will include him rather than exclude him; which will help us to understand a book better and to discover the reader it seeks. We need a critical method which will tell us about the reader in the book.

For it seems to me that all literature is a form of communication, a way of saying something. Samuel Butler once observed that it takes two to say a thing, a sayee as well as a sayor — a hearer as well as a speaker. Thus, if literature is a way of saying something, it requires a reader to complete the work. And if this is so, as I am convinced it is, it must also be true that an author addresses someone as he writes. That someone has come to be called "the implied reader."

(2) The implied reader

Let me defend myself against an obvious objection. I am not suggesting that, as an author writes, he necessarily has in the front of his mind a particular reader. F. H. Langman in a useful article, "The Idea of the Reader in Literary Criticism," puts it this way:

I do not say we need to know what readers the author had in mind. An author may write for a single person or a large public, for himself or for nobody. But the work itself implies the kind of reader to whom it is addressed and this may not coincide with the author's private view of his audience. What matters for the literary critic is to recognize the idea of



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