
The Children's Novel as a Gateway to Play

An Interview with John Morgenstern

John Morgenstern has taught literature and literacy at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for more than thirty years. He traces his interest in children's literature and play to his boyhood experiences: he read four novels a week—the maximum he could take from the bookmobile that served his Toronto suburb—and incorporated the stories into his play in the nearby Scarborough Bluffs. As an adult, he approaches children's literature with a more academic bent but remembers his boyhood responses to children's novels well. They inform his thinking in his *Playing with Books: A Study of the Reader as Child*, published in 2009. Noteworthy for its consideration of reading as play, the book is a short but sweeping volume in which Morgenstern explores the history of children's literature, literacy and the modern conception of childhood, the role of play in the psychological development of children, and narrative techniques in children's novels. In this interview, he discusses how children's novels serve as an entry point for play.

A*ERICAN JOURNAL OF PLAY*: As a child, you read as many novels as you could get your hands on. Which were your favorites and why?

John Morgenstern: I didn't really have favorites. I was a binge reader; I read hundreds of novels. Once I found an author I liked, I would read everything I could. But, if I had to pick one story that I remember as the most entrancing, it would be Edith Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet*. The reason why is actually very simple. It is a very funny novel about a flying Persian rug that takes children where they want to go; its humor is based on the nature of children's play.

AJP: When you were reading as a child, did you feel that you were playing? Is that what sparked your adult interest in literature? And is there a key book or author that had inspired you most as a scholar?

Morgenstern: By the time I was nine years old, I was reading four novels a week. So although I participated in various forms of communal play, reading was a major part of my play experience and clearly one of the reasons I became



an English professor. Only recently, however, I realized that what I was doing as a reader was playing. The most important book on my road to this discovery was *The Logic of Sense*, by the twentieth-century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. It's a philosophical study of the human condition—an exploration of sense and nonsense—that begins with an original reading of the works of Lewis Carroll.

AJP: Some adults and scholars view play and children's literature as lightweight pursuits, but you find meaning where they intersect. What would you say to those who do not?

Morgenstern: I'd say read *The Logic of Sense*; it is a profound work. In fact, any study of how we are constructed as human subjects must take into account the nature of children's play, and that is precisely what children's novels do. The notion that adult novels are superior to children's novels is based largely on the assumption that irony is superior to humor. That's an assumption we need to correct.

AJP: When you set out to examine the relationship between play and children's literature, where did you go, other than to Deleuze?

Morgenstern: When I began, I had no idea I was going to be dealing with play. I started with a historical study of the rise of literacy, and that led me to ponder what happens when children at the age of six are asked to give up their play in order to be schooled in literacy. Oddly enough, I don't think many adults stop to think about what children are doing when they play. I certainly hadn't, and it suddenly became urgent to find an answer to that question. After extensive reading, I discovered that social scientists are not exactly in agreement on the subject. But through Deleuze, anthropologist Gregory Bateson, folklorist and psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith, and several others in other disciplines, I managed to arrive at a conclusion that allowed me to develop a theory of the children's novel.

AJP: In your theory, you describe reading as "phantasmagoric" play. What do you mean by this? How are readers also players, or how are readers playing?

Morgenstern: All reading is phantasmagoric in that texts generate images. But I am also referring to a particular kind of play. Obviously, there are many different kinds of play, but I chose to concentrate on the phantasmagoric play of preoedipal children. In his classic work *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith describes this type of play as "the ludic construction and deconstruction of irreality." He goes on to observe that children's own play society "is



not about the direct representation of reality” but “is a deconstruction of that realistic society.” This is the kind of play that R. Keith Sawyer studies in his 1997 *Pretend Play as Improvisation*. He recorded children playing in a day-care center and discovered three play styles that correspond to three of the genres of children’s novels that developed in the nineteenth century: the domestic novel, boys’ adventure, and animal fantasy. The phantasmagoric play of young children gradually disappears as they get older, but it is also unnaturally suppressed by their beginning school. As they age, phantasmagoric play reappears in the form of the children’s novel, most specifically in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, which provide the formula for subsequent children’s novels. The children’s novel exists to provide literate children—and adults—a way to return to the phantasmagoric play that has been lost. I agree with Sutton-Smith in calling this play phantasmagoric because it connects play to dreaming and daydreaming. What young children are doing when they play is basically daydreaming out loud, so this connects that activity to the private, structured daydreaming that is involved in reading.

AJP: Can reading inspire daydreaming out loud?

Morgenstern: Reader-response theory, first posited in the 1960s and 1970s, maintains that readers must actively *perform* a text, and that any performance involves a certain amount of improvisation. But texts also limit improvisation by imposing rules. The play of literate children is clearly influenced by what they read, but I am more interested in how preliterate children construct narrative parodies when they play. They become, simultaneously, author, director, player, and audience. This play is not without rules, as Sawyer has demonstrated, but the rules are immanent in the performance itself. On the other hand, a book a child reads is clearly created by someone else with a certain fixed form. Deleuze invited us, however, to think of this thing not as a fixed representation but as a “machine” designed to create chains of percepts and affects. The writer creates this machine and invites the reader to play with it. This was the insight that led me to think of the children’s novel as a toy and to understand how this particular toy functions to create pleasure.

AJP: So, is a children’s novel a toy?

Morgenstern: It is *like* a toy in that it gives pleasure. It is a kind of humor machine. I also like to link the book with the toy because of the historical



implications. Most people don't remember that for thousands of years, children played without either, and in some parts of the world still do so. Both the book and the toy, in most instances, are manufactured objects we give to children to play with, and in both cases this is a fairly recent historical development.

AJP: Can reading be playful in an active and creative way?

Morgenstern: Yes. But it is clear that as children mature, they gradually lose the ability to play in the way I have just described. The fundamental difference I see between children and adults is that whereas children play, adults play games. But I also like to believe that the incredible creative spirit of children's play does not simply disappear but is kept alive in all the various forms of adult play including the play of reading.

AJP: How do the differences between the ways children and adults play affect the ways in which children and adults read?

Morgenstern: This is a crucial question, because I do not believe there is a difference in how children and adults read. Most people know the story of how Lewis Carroll came to write *Alice in Wonderland*, and most know that the protagonist is a seven-year-old girl who is right at the point of bursting out of the phantasmagorical dream of childhood. But many do not know that Alice Liddell, the narratee [the person to whom the narrator is nominally speaking—Ed.], was ten years old and already a fairly proficient reader. In the humorous children's novel, the narratee is always older than the protagonist or implied child, and in *Alice in Wonderland*, the narrator and the narratee collude in viewing Alice's adventures with affectionate amusement. They are both laughing with her and at her in a combination of nostalgia and satire that is the formula of the children's novel. Of course, it is possible to imagine an adult reader who is so stodgy that he or she has completely forgotten what it was like to play and views what happens as nothing but nonsense. And it is also possible to imagine that the child reader is more likely to get the joke because he or she is closer to the stage of development in the story. However, basically both the adult and the child are asked to enjoy the novel in exactly the same way.

AJP: To what extent can adults see reading as a form of play?

Morgenstern: In the most general sense, reading a novel is play in that it is not work. Reading helps us retain a connection to daydreaming. But even more than that, when you read a children's novel, you are vicariously participating in a form of play that you would never imagine performing publicly.



AJP: In *Playing with Books*, you use the phrase the “rhetoric of children’s play.” What do you mean by this?

Morgenstern: I am referring to the formal elements found in the phantasmagoric play of children. Early on in my research, I discovered the transcript of a very humorous episode of play between two four-year-old girls who are playing house. I love reading this in class because it always gets a laugh. One girl plays the mother who is trying to give a bottle to a baby who keeps denying it. A sociologist might assume that such episodes constitute practice for future social roles. But it is quite clear that the mother is the victim of vicious parody, and the relationship between the mother and child is entirely unrealistic. Also the scene sets up a tension between the adult and child subject positions. I wondered if these same elements could also constitute the rhetoric of the children’s novel. Indeed, they reappear in chapter 6 of *Alice in Wonderland* in which we see the Duchess nursing her baby in a manner likely to kill it until she flings it to Alice (who is clearly unhappy to have to play the mother role) and so is relieved when the baby turns into a pig. Now Carroll’s version is clearly an extended and exaggerated version of the original, but it shares the same elements. I do not know if any child playing house has ever conceived of the baby turning into a pig, but that is a conceit that any child could admire.

AJP: How does the rhetoric of play relate to literacy?

Morgenstern: Learning to read and write, unlike learning to speak, is hard work. There is no genetic predisposition to the former as there is to the latter. Universal schooling in literacy is probably the major historical development that gives rise to the modern conception of childhood. Putting every child in school at the age of six results in a curtailing of play and creates an unnatural discontinuity between the preoedipal and postoeidial child. As a result, the preliterate child becomes the innocent child and the object of nostalgia. This perception of a child’s innocence contributes to the invention of the children’s novel.

AJP: Have you taken criticism for your notion that literacy is unnatural?

Morgenstern: Yes. I once presented a paper to a group of school teachers in which I developed this argument. They weren’t too pleased when I compared the modern school to two other social institutions that also developed in the late eighteenth century—the factory and the penitentiary. Actually, I know that some educators are resisting the trend and trying to introduce more play into the school curriculum, especially in the early grades. But



in my view, there is only so far you can go in this direction if you want children to become literate. Of course, once children are literate, they can always return to play in the form of the children's novel.

AJP: You argue that Lewis Carroll was able to invent the children's novel "because he knew how to play like a child." Would you elaborate on this? How does Carroll's understanding of children's play contribute to his ability to write for children?

Morgenstern: Let me go back to Sutton-Smith. He has always resisted progressive theories of play—the view held by such influential thinkers as Jean Piaget, Lev S. Vygotsky, and Sigmund Freud—that play is a stage in child development that must be abandoned in favor of some superior competence. These three looked at the phantasmagoric play of children and saw anarchic perversity rather than a remarkable creative energy. If their view were true, there would be little reason for the existence of the children's novel. Certainly children who play are in the process of becoming adults, but it is also true that adults who play are in the process of becoming more childlike. Play plays both ways. Carroll seems to have had a very unusual ability to recapture childish play and actually did play with young children. Today, some people might characterize this as a sickness. Though his nostalgia was extreme, perhaps, he was quite aware of his odd situation, made jokes about it, and used it to construct the *Alice* books. The nostalgic Carroll thrusts his protagonist into the dream of childhood—the realm of phantasmagoric play—and the child just as sturdily resists as she demands to grow up to understand the rules of the game. The entire novel can be seen as an ongoing debate about the merits of remaining a child or growing up, a debate that Carroll is well aware he is going to lose.

AJP: What is Lewis Carroll telling us about the nature of play?

Morgenstern: Well, as I said, he knew he was going to lose the argument. Improvisation is unsustainable. Play always comes to an end. A reader may find the world he created more annoying than humorous, but the real Alice Liddell seems to have appreciated the joke since she asked Carroll to write down the story. Also the joke is complicated by the fact that he has inverted the real situation. The characters that invite Alice to play are all adults, whereas Alice herself is presented as something of a prig.

AJP: Does literature really inspire play? Are both play and literature about exploration?



Morgenstern: One result of the invention of the children's novel is that children began to use the novels as the source of scripts for their own play. A boys' adventure story, like Tom Sawyer's, or Huck Finn's, was particularly productive for both boys and girls because it was literally about exploration and thus supported the notion that both play and literature are a form of exploration, a way of experimenting with possibilities. This is also why I find the parody and fantasy of the play of young children so intriguing. They are not meekly conforming to the roles that society assigns them; they are playing with other possibilities.

AJP: You argue that the "didactic tradition" in children's literature is "fundamentally hostile to play." What are some examples? Is it possible for didactic literature *not* to be so hostile to play?

Morgenstern: The didactic is always a part of children's literature, and the children's novel is an idyllic-didactic machine. So what I really meant is that earlier forms of children's literature tended to overemphasize the didactic to encourage the end of play. The idyllic is the assertion of the value of play, and the didactic warns about the dangers of play in an article published in the Summer 2009 issue of this journal ("Orderly and Disorderly Play: A Comparison," 12–40). Thomas S. Henricks talks about orderly and disorderly play. Perhaps it would be useful to replace idyllic and didactic with disorderly play and orderly play in order to recognize that both are necessary parts of the play experience. For example, play, like a story, must always come to an end. If there were not a stop rule, play would quickly become unbearable, as Carroll recognizes when, for example, he has the portly Tweedledum pant: "Four times round is enough for one dance."

AJP: In your discussion of girls' books about family life, you state that "the whole point of the girl's domestic novel is to convince young girls to give up their play so as to become proper ladies and good wives and mothers." Is this true of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*? Does *Little Women* support play at all?

Morgenstern: Well, you could simply compare the freedom of a Tom Sawyer to the restrictions placed upon Jo March to get a clear sense of the difference between the genres. Boys are encouraged to leave home, and girls are encouraged to stay home. On the other hand, *Little Women* was a breath of fresh air when compared to its immediate predecessors. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) is a grim and humorless novel whose ten-year-old protagonist is only allowed to be happy when she is praying or



reading *The Pilgrim's Progress*. At least Alcott allowed her girls to play, and the novel nicely balances pathos with humor, which is one of the reasons it has remained a children's classic even though it might seem rather preachy for modern tastes.

AJP: At one point in your *Playing with Books*, you discuss children's reactions to a Bugs Bunny cartoon in which a character is blown up by dynamite and then springs back to his original shape. You suggest that the cartoon itself is "playing with dynamite." How do children respond to such playing? Why do they find it funny? Should we feel guilty when we laugh too?

Morgenstern: That analysis comes at the end of a chapter that I called "Children and Other Talking Animals," where I draw from psychoanalytical theory to help explain what it means for a text to be "simple." Briefly, here is the argument: Children like the way that "flat" characters suggest an integrity of the body and ego they have yet to experience. Cartoon characters are very flat; they are drawn without dimension. But they would not also be funny unless they gave some play to the abject, to the depths of the unsocialized body. So bodies do get blown up in cartoons, but then they spring back into shape. And this suggests the proximity of bodily danger while providing assurance of the body's integrity. The effect is both naughty and comforting. And the combination is funny. I expect most adults think this is nothing but violence; but if they get the joke, there is nothing to feel guilty about. The joke merely reflects the nature of the socialization process.

AJP: In your analysis of twentieth-century children's literature, you suggest that novels written after World War II become more hostile toward play. What contributed to this change? Is this hostility reflected in areas besides children's literature?

Morgenstern: I suggest that after the war, the children's novel takes a turn towards the didactic. Writers become less interested in the fact that children play and more interested in the fact that they have problems. We can imagine that the novels become darker because the world had become a darker place: think of the Holocaust, the diaries of Ann Frank, and impending nuclear destruction. And the trend has continued. Adults now seem more and more intent on imposing organized activities on children, thus leaving them with less time for free play. For example, playgrounds, where kids might play freely, are these days often empty because parents fear sexual predators may do their children harm. Whatever the cause, it seems that children no longer run



wild in communal play groups as I did when I was a child. Instead, children are too often cooped up in their rooms playing video games. It might simply be that there are not as many children to play with any more. Or, it might be that the change in children's literature reflects no radical change in the nature of childhood but simply a desire on the part of writers to adopt new techniques. After the war, writers began to imitate the classic adult novel in using the technique of centered consciousness, focusing on the consciousness of a single child. The result is to create an individual—a well-developed, three-dimensional subject. Once you have created such an individual, it is almost inevitable that you will give him or her problems.

AJP: Are there any other explanations?

Morgenstern: Probably the simplest is biological; kids today, especially females, may reach puberty as much as four years sooner than children who lived at the end of the eighteenth century. As a result, modern children are confronted with the problems of adolescence at a much younger age than before. In a sense, the classic domestic novel was the adolescent novel of the old adolescence. In Fanny Burney's *Evelina: Or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), the protagonist is sixteen when her story begins. Today she would be twelve.

AJP: Do you find that there are exceptions?

Morgenstern: Yes, surely. This turn towards the didactic is not universal. There are still many children's writers who continue to write humorous novels modeled on the formula developed by Carroll. Roald Dahl's mischievous novels, like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*, are the most famous examples.

AJP: In the conclusion of *Playing with Books*, you write that "the children's novel can rekindle in us the pure pleasure of the play of the text, a pleasure that can all too easily be lost in a rage for interpretation." How does an emphasis on interpretation undermine the pleasure that comes with playing with books? Can the thoughtful reader also enjoy books?

Morgenstern: Have I overstated my position? Obviously, as a literary critic, I have no problem with interpretation. I just think we should not forget that reading should be fun. I agree with Horace that literature should both please and instruct. And this might be just another way of saying it should be both idyllic and didactic, or again, disorderly and orderly.

AJP: Can adults take a child's pleasure in reading children's literature?



Morgenstern: As I said, in theory the pleasure should be much the same. I certainly enjoy reading children's novels, and my whole book is a celebration of children's play. Actually, though, in reality I must confess that as I get older, I find myself less and less able to bear the real thing. A whole day spent in a day-care center would surely test my resolve. But fortunately, I can always find my way back to play through the gateway of the children's novel.

