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The Lion and the Unicorn, Volume 40, Number 2, April 2016, pp. 144-162
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2016.0017>



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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: At the Core of a Child-Centered Critical Approach to Children's Literature

Michelle Superle

It is time to augment our approach to children's literature criticism by developing a framework that directly addresses contemporary childhoods. Ultimately, this approach should be accessible to all those involved in the field, including reviewers, librarians, educators, children themselves, and professional scholars of children's literature; it should respond effectively not only to textual representations of childhood but also to children's own creative and critical production of and responses to their literature in ways that existing approaches cannot.

Such an approach would update our work by incorporating current and diverse visions of childhood. In both our scholarship and the works of children's literature we analyze, we are influenced by and acknowledge many traditional images of childhood. These images explain a pervasive working assumption: that children's literature primarily provides instruction and delight. For example, the convenient "historical models of childhood" that Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella outline in *Reading Children's Literature* demonstrate how social constructions of childhood as "sinful" or "developing" portray child characters requiring instruction; however, when childhood is perceived to be "Romantic" or "radically other" the characters are more often portrayed as imaginative (15–29). In turn, these models elicit bodies of didactic literature or a plethora of texts that delight (and often both at once).

But a more recent social construction of childhood is also now at play—one that has been gaining power for decades. The near worldwide ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a legal construction responsible for advocating the concept of childhood as a time of rights and responsibilities, has helped to promote

this image: I refer to this model of childhood as “empowered.” If earlier views on childhood—which remain actively influential today—positioned children as blank slates to be filled with correct ideas so that they could fit into society, or imaginative redeemers whose innocence needed to be preserved so that they could rejuvenate society, then today’s growing image of the *empowered* child envisions children as active participants contributing to their society. The empowered child is often portrayed in contemporary children’s literature, and a body of “empowering” texts has developed to support such a vision of childhood; however, a holistic critical framework has not yet arisen in response.

The empowered model of childhood promotes children’s contributions to their own lives, families, and communities—not as an investment in the future but during childhood. It grants children the possibility of helping to shape themselves and their surroundings through their input, values, decisions, and actions. This image differs from its predecessors by encouraging a disruption of the status quo rather than its perpetuation in terms of social hierarchies based on age. Although indubitably still a social construction, the empowered child is the only image that creates genuine space for children’s authentic values and voices, sharing power with them. This empowered child underpins the UNCRC:

The Convention. . . . reflects a new vision of the child. Children are neither the property of their parents nor are they helpless objects of charity. They are human beings and are the subject of their own rights. The Convention offers a vision of the child as an individual and a member of a family and a community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development. (“FAQs and Resources” n. pag.)

Representations of the empowered child, as well as children agitating for empowerment, have long been central to children’s literature.

Several major shifts precipitate the need to change our approach to analyzing, discussing, and evaluating children’s literature: the aforementioned radical changes in the ways contemporary childhood is constructed, the related production of sophisticated contemporary children’s literature that defies earlier definitions of the genre (see Maria Nikolajeva’s 1998 article, “Exit Children’s Literature?”), and the emergence of an established body of children’s own writing and critical responses to their literature. By incorporating an awareness of the empowered child consistently in our scholarship through a focus on children’s rights, we can augment our assessment and analysis of children’s literature to update the field.

In this article I describe elements of my envisioned “child-centered critical approach to children’s literature” (CCA) and explore ways to implement this augmentation by using the UNCRC as its theoretical foundation. I begin by

pointing to the existing foundation of child-centered scholarship in our field, then make some suggestions for how a CCA might look and provide a demonstration of how we might continue with our core practice of textual analysis in a more child-centered manner, and, finally, discuss some advantages and drawbacks of my proposed use of the UNCRC to anchor this methodology.

*A Robust Foundation:
Building on Child-Centered Scholarship in Children's Literature*

My vision for a CCA did not spring forth from thin air. A robust body of child-centered scholarship has already been established in our field. However, there is currently neither a name for nor a unified approach to this work. I seek more coherence to facilitate wider adoption of these values and practices; one way to achieve this is by applying a rights-based methodology. Such an approach would build upon and depart from the existing child-centered work in our field.

Peter Hunt is our foundational child-centered scholar. He broke ground with his ambitious proposal for a "Childist Criticism" (1984). (Hunt used the term "childist" as we would now use "child-centered"). He was looking for ways to solve what he called the "child culture vs. adult culture" problem (42) and suggested that this might be done by considering books and/or child readers, proposing that "one rewarding way of approaching these difficulties would be to have a total rereading of texts" where adults "read as children" (45). He makes the crucial point that "[i]f we as commentators, or critics, or teachers are to say anything really useful about books, we have at least to take [children's] 'counter-reading' seriously; it may be the missing factor in children's book criticism" (44). Most importantly, Hunt identifies a central problem in the way children are guided into responding to their literature: "in playing the literary game children are progressively forced to read against themselves as children" (46) because "'successful' storytelling is a matter of changing something in the child" (47).

While the concept of this childist criticism is both idealistic and inspiring, it harbors a logical flaw: adults are no longer children, so how can they "read as children"? Further, although Hunt begins promisingly by recognizing that "until very recently, talk about books has been based on general assumptions about meaning, value, and acceptability—using, tacitly, the norm of the [adult] WASP male" (45), he wobbles by insisting "children cannot articulate" their reactions to their reading (49), a conclusion that smacks of prejudice against children. This conclusion has been subsequently disproven through varied research projects: for example, see Eliza Dresang's and Sylvia Pantaleo's work using "sophisticated" and post-modern picture books (conveniently

summarized in Dresang's "Radical Change Revisited," 2008), as well as Henry Jenkins's and Vandana Saxena's work using fan fiction (see Jenkins's *Convergence Culture*, 2006).

Hunt's suggestion to revolutionize the scholarship of children's literature has not taken hold. Sebastian Chapleau attempted to explain this lack of traction in "A Theory without a Centre: Developing Childist Criticism" (2004), concluding that both writing and criticism of children's literature "needs to rely on empirical investigations and both acknowledge and reflect the diversity that constitutes childhood" (136).

Taking a similar position, Mary Galbraith is as idealistic as Hunt. In "Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Children's Literature" (2001), she acknowledges that

those who see and wish to avoid these traps of adultism, including both post-modernists (Rose, Coats) and progressives (Hunt, Nodelman, McGillis), seem either unable to come up with a literary project that allows them to say anything of substance about children's literature in relation to the emancipatory interests of childhood, or see such a project as inherently delusional. (191)

Even the child-centered critics who "work in an emancipatory way using other forms of critique, including feminist (Trites), reader-response (Steig), Marxist (Zipes), and textual-cultural (Stephens) approaches, use arguments that," Galbraith claims, "cry out for a childhood-studies elaboration" (192).

Galbraith optimistically points to "emancipatory theories of childhood" (188) as a way forward. She argues that

this emancipation must be accomplished through adults transforming themselves and their own practices. . . . Whereas in a socializing model of childhood, adults try to mold children through training them . . . in an emancipatory model, adults look for ways to reenter and reevaluate their own childhood. (188–89)

The ultimate goal is noble: to "support, and negotiate conflict with children without oppressing them" (189).

Galbraith should be commended for drawing attention to alternate possibilities, no matter how nascent or difficult to implement her vision may be, and for refusing to accept the helplessness of child readers assumed by Jacqueline Rose and others of her ilk. Ultimately, though, Galbraith's proposal is plagued by the same flaw as Hunt's. Further, she largely relies on the comfortably established method of textual analysis: "I focus primarily on artistic . . . presentations of child self characters and on potent climactic scenes in which these characters cry out to be heard" (195).

Maria Tatar draws attention to the shortcomings of relying solely on textual analysis in the article "What Do Children Want?" (1995), when she critiques several children's literature scholars for their exclusive reliance on adult-authored texts. The central flaw in this approach, according to Tatar,

is that these scholars do precisely what they accuse children's writers of doing: "projec[t] feelings onto the constructed child without ever conferring with the real child" (742). Instead, she proposes, there should be space for "allowing [children] to destabilize the rigid lessons of a print culture through their own reshaping and retelling of stories," which would create "an opportunity to validate the fears and desires that are so often effaced in our books for children" (748). Unfortunately, Tatar does not offer much hope for a transformation of the field nor any methodology for how to confer with real children about their literature.

Significantly, Tatar's emphasis on the importance of real children's voices and values is the remedy Elizabeth Young-Bruehl offers for countering oppression in *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (2012): "By consulting children and considering their viewpoints, we can help them understand their own experiences and prepare them to participate in the struggle against childism and other prejudices" (12). Tatar's insistence on incorporating children themselves into the scholarship of children's literature is an important position, and one that I understand as crucial to a CCA.

Others seem to agree, as many subsequent scholars have undertaken exciting new research that includes various ways of including real children's views, values, and contributions: for example, see David Rudd (*Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature*, 2000), Marah Gubar (*Artful Dodgers*, 2009), and Robin Bernstein (*Racial Innocence*, 2011). However, I do not believe that a child-centered approach need do away with our old standby of textual analysis. Indeed, some of our most distinguished scholars have continued with pure textual analysis while simultaneously incorporating child-centered values. They include Peter Hollindale (*Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, 1997), Kimberley Reynolds (*Radical Children's Literature*, 2007), and Clementine Beauvais (*The Mighty Child*, 2015).

More specifically, other leading scholars explicitly focus on childism itself. Vanessa Joosen discusses childism using textual analysis in her important article "The Adult as Foe or Friend?" (2013). In a more sweeping examination, Jack Zipes discusses "Childism and the Grimms' Fairy Tales" (2012). Although neither Joosen nor Zipes incorporates the UNCRC, their work foregrounds textual representations focused on age-based prejudice against children—a crucial step forward in our scholarship. The CCA I envision leaves space for this kind of work to continue flourishing.

Two of the most interesting recent proposals for taking a more child-centered approach arise from David Rudd and Marah Gubar, although neither fully articulates how these suggestions could be applied. Rudd outlines a "heretical approach" in *Reading the Child in Children's Literature* (2013), with the explicit aim to "celebrate the 'energetics' of texts" and "reconnect,"

because “this is a model that seems more in keeping with the egalitarian ethos that the Internet and the new social media have inaugurated” (3). He does this by “dismantling such binary oppositions as child/adult and innocence/experience” based on his conviction that “a more fruitful way of discussing children’s literature is to push these artificial boundaries to their limits and . . . beyond” (9).

Rudd concludes that it is problematic “to talk about the literary and politico-cultural unconsciousness of a text while neglecting the more conscious young readers who populate the text, not as *tabulae rasae*, but as active addressees, for whom books are but one aspect of an extensive cultural landscape” (89). He points out that even among adults only a small minority of highly educated specialists are capable of critically navigating children’s literature the way scholars do and insists that child readers’ explorations of “a text’s implications and possibilities” may be “lateral” but are “no less valid”—indeed, they are “a legitimate way of pursuing the meanings and resonances of a text, but one that is . . . less adult-friendly . . .” (89).

Similarly, in “Risky Business: Talking about Children in Children’s Literature Criticism” (2013) Gubar points out the shortcomings of established children’s literature scholarship that “insist[s] that we can avoid all reference to young people” because this causes us to “drift back to old, discredited ways of talking about children” (450). Instead, she argues that we must replace outdated “deficit” and “difference” models of childhood with a “kinship model” (450). Gubar explains: “This model is premised on the idea that children are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar” and “indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity, uniformity, or equality” (453). This model shares much with the values underpinning the UNCRC.

While concepts such as Rudd’s “heretical approach” and Gubar’s “kinship theory” are compelling and important, they may be difficult to implement since they lack a fully articulated methodological approach. In view of the thirty-year-old discussion of, and enthusiasm for, finding ways to create space for child-centered values in the scholarship of children’s literature, I propose that we are overdue for a concrete next step that can be widely implemented. I believe this can be achieved by turning to the discourse of children’s rights, and more specifically by adopting the UNCRC—and the rights-based discourse surrounding it—as the theoretical core of a CCA.

*What Might a Child-Centered Critical
Approach to Children’s Literature Involve?*

A CCA would share much in common with other movements that have been welcomed into the practice of children’s literature criticism; just as feminist

literary theory incorporates assumptions about women's rights and equality, and queer literary theory incorporates assumptions about gay rights and equality, so too will a CCA incorporate assumptions about children's rights and equality. Whereas other approaches focus on gender, sexuality, class, etc., a CCA foregrounds age.

To date, the term *child-centered* has rarely been employed in discussions of children's literature. However, theorists of education use it frequently. They base child-centered approaches on the premise that "every child is a unique and special individual" and counsel teachers to proceed accordingly:

be respectful of and account for [children's] individual uniqueness of age, gender, culture, temperament, and learning style.

Children are active participants in their own education and development. This means that they should be mentally involved and physically active in learning what they need to know and do.

Children's ideas, preferences, learning styles, and interests are considered in the planning for and implementation of instructional practices. (Morrison, n.pag.)

Although my concept of a CCA certainly acknowledges children's heterogeneity and unique ways of creating meaning, it rests more specifically on the idea of children as individuals with rights and responsibilities—another reason the UNCRC is such a relevant document.

In my view, the main aim of a CCA is to disrupt childism in children's literature (as, for example, feminist literary theory disrupts sexism). Accordingly, my proposal to develop a CCA paradigm is a response to widespread ageist prejudice against children, and I position "child-centered" in opposition to "childist." Psychoanalyst Elizabeth Young-Bruehl has most thoroughly examined this prejudice in her groundbreaking work, *Childism*. Young-Bruehl identifies the origins of childism as a belief system enabling adults to harm children through actions such as abuse and the development of policies failing to meet their best interests (6)—but she also points to the belief itself as destructive, noting that for children, it is adults' "*attitudes* towards them that matter most" (15, emphasis original). And what is children's literature if not a reflection of societal attitudes? However, it also holds the potential to *affect* attitudes of both adult and child readers.

Childism describes the dangers resulting from how this prejudice is "built into the very way children are imagined" (4–5). Young-Bruehl carefully outlines the many forms childism takes, including corrosive attitudes which "construct children as wild animals that should be physically controlled" (20) and rest upon assumptions that they are illogical (25). Young-Bruehl explains that prejudices, including childism, require those who maintain the

prejudice to view the “other” as both different and inferior (23). Some of the most problematic ideas about children, for example “that they are possessions and lack reasoning ability,” date back as far as Aristotle (25) and continue to underpin harmful attitudes and actions by perpetuating “a desire for control and domination” (26). Such attitudes are sometimes present in children’s literature texts and scholarship, but so are the counterparts of these attitudes: the child-centered respect for children’s perfectly appropriate positions on the human spectrum, as well as recognition of young people’s many capabilities and contributions. Because children’s literature plays a powerful role in imagining childhood, examining texts’ childist and child-centered qualities is a crucial task; looking through the lens of children’s rights to do so provides a unifying conceptual framework.

According to Young-Bruehl, “[t]he moment is overdue for adults to rethink and reform their attitudes towards children” (9) in all fields. In the criticism of children’s literature, “rethinking” could emerge as a meta-frame for approaching the field: a CCA underpinned by children’s rights, aiming to problematize accepted notions that children’s literature is written by adults primarily to educate, socialize, and/or amuse young readers. The crucial difference is that within a CCA it can also empower.

My development of a CCA is in its early stages and currently distinguished by more questions than certainties. However, after considering the research of various child-centered children’s literature scholars, I have identified a set of core concepts that underpin the theory:

- Children’s literature is a unique and valuable realm of cultural production that deserves acknowledgment on its own terms; it is time to develop a critical approach specifically in response to children’s literature.
- Literary texts can aid in preparing the groundwork for a more empathetic and empowered childhood that helps enable children to be participants in their lives and literature, rather than relegated to the status of passive, protected recipients.
- Child writers have made—and are making—unique and valuable contributions to children’s literature (in both creative and critical work).
- Works of literature by and for youth will be assessed as valuable or dismissed and devalued depending on who reads them and the lens through which they are examined.

These core concepts have led me to create three guiding principles for applying a child-centered approach to children’s literature. Scholars working within the CCA frame should:

1. Consider how child characters are represented in terms of power structures related to age. Pay particular attention to texts that seem to portray authentic and diverse children's voices, perspectives, values, and variations of children's own culture. Analyze the degree to which the work represents child characters with agency, those who collaborate with adults to realize goals and intentions, those who seek to realize their rights and/or responsibilities, and those who demonstrate critical thinking and/or problem solving capacities.
2. Be open to placing a higher than traditionally granted value on child readers' critical and creative responses to their reading materials, and on works that children enjoy, even when adults believe these interpretations to be intellectually inferior or these books to be aesthetically inferior.
3. Be open to placing a higher than traditionally granted value on works written by children, even when adults believe they are of inferior literary merit.

While I am still pondering nuances of and strategies for applying these concepts, I am certain of one key principle: the UNCRC must be adopted as the core theoretical document anchoring a CCA. This children's rights treaty has been ratified by every country worldwide (except the United States), so it stands today as the one truly central text of childhood. Many critiques have been leveled against the UNCRC: that it projects a narrowly Western, prescriptive vision of childhood and attempts to make this universal; that it is comprised of difficult to apply principles; that many children are unfamiliar with the document. However, its relevance, ubiquity, and accessibility (even to the youngest thinkers and readers in its adapted "child friendly language" version) make it the natural foundation for a CCA.

In this article I have space only to begin discussing Principle One, and I focus this discussion narrowly on our core scholarly practice of textual analysis.¹ Accordingly, in the next section I provide a brief demonstration of how to apply this methodology.

A Case Study: Childism, Participation Rights, and The Goats

Although almost any work of children's literature could be examined through the UNCRC's lens, here I use *The Goats* by Brock Cole (1987) as my sample text for examining the representations of child characters and attitudes toward childhood using the concept of participation rights. The clauses relating to participation (in Articles 12–17) provide especially rich grounds for discussing children's literature because they make space specifically for children's authority over their own lives and decisions—concerns that have long been central to children's literature. Using the UNCRC enables scholars to share concepts and terminology in a focused manner conducive to developing a coherent new body of criticism. I chose *The Goats* because although

it has received extensive praise, its prevalent highlighting of and grappling with childism (although not named as such) receives no attention in reviews or analyses. This seems like a problematic omission.

The Goats was published to much acclaim in 1987. According to *Publishers Weekly*, it “won the Friends of Chicago Public Library’s Carl Sandburg Award and was named a New York Times Notable book, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults and an ALA Notable book, among other honours” and as of 1997 had “sold 120,000 copies in hardcover and paperback and [was] in eight foreign editions” (Alderrice 198). Critiques tend to focus on “the lack of ‘positive authority figures’” (Alderrice 198), an attack that reveals a common childist attitude toward children’s literature. However, Cole, a former philosophy professor, responded to such accusations by stating: “I don’t have too much confidence in authority figures . . . This notion that we always know what’s right—as far as kids are concerned—is such a joke” (qtd. in Alderrice 198). This statement reveals Cole’s child-centered attitude and opens the possibility for children to develop authority on their own best interests—as does the text itself. Such concerns are central to the UNCRC.

The plot of *The Goats* is bleak: two thirteen-year-olds (referred to consistently as “the boy” and “the girl”) are lured from their summer camp at night by their fellow campers and left blindfolded, naked, and alone on a small island across the lake. Humiliated and enraged by their treatment, once they find each other the children make a pact to survive their indignity, swimming away from the island to escape together. For the next week they take care of themselves, as they cannot trust the adults charged with their care to do so. By taking responsibility for their provision and protection rights the children regain dignity. The matter of dignity is crucial; the UNCRC mentions “dignity” a total of eight times. Throughout their struggle the children grow close, becoming determined to remain together in the security of their caring relationship. The girl’s explanation for their determination is simple, direct, and rights based: “We take care of each other. That’s why we have to stay together” (Cole 95). This statement is uttered in the UNCRC’s spirit of protection, provision, and participation.

The children’s peers—not to mention adult authority figures in *The Goats*—refer to their abuse and abandonment most often as a “prank,” albeit a “vicious” or “cruel” one. In fact, the camp director excuses the act in a childist manner: “It was, frankly, a practical joke that didn’t work out the way it should have. . . . it’s an old tradition at the camp” (Cole 64).

This lack of awareness of the children’s deep suffering and their rights also is reflected in both criticism and reviews. For example, several *ALAN Review* articles discuss *The Goats* using prominent theoretical paradigms: Scot Smith takes a psychoanalytic approach focusing on “quest for self-identity” (n. pag.),

while Cindy Daniels reads it through a gendered lens. Wendy Glenn comes closer to discussing childism, rights, and power dynamics by observing that Cole “respects the audience for whom he is writing,” concluding “this human quality . . . makes Cole’s characters, both young and old, people with whom we can empathize” (n.pag.), but she fails to sustain a focus on these elements.

This blindness to childism seems a widespread cultural phenomenon, as it is also present in book reviews. According to *School Library Journal*, “some kids just naturally become scapegoats,” but “[I]luckily an inner strength and an ability to survive sometimes surface, and these same scapegoats can confound their parents and acquaintances” (“Book Review” 114). *The Goats* is recommended because although “[n]either Howie nor Laura are initially likeable kids . . . as they grow so does one’s regard for them” (“Book Review” 114). In *The Horn Book*, Pat Scales reduces the situation to bullying: “Cole seamlessly weaves a powerful story of friendship that raises moral issues while celebrating the triumph of two loners who find a way to outsmart the bullies, including a cast of adults” (129). Scales misses the real point; the children are not bent on revenge but simply attempting to claim their rights to provision, protection, and, most importantly, participation. In this last matter they certainly do not triumph, nor does the text provide any real celebration.

In contrast to the aforementioned analyses, using the UNCRC as an anchor allows a direct, focused discussion of childism and rights. Article 12.1 proves particularly relevant to *The Goats*. This core participation clause assures children the right to be involved in decision making: “the child who is capable of forming his or her own views” has “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (n.pag.). Clearly, this last phrase is ambiguous and challenging to quantify—which reflects the general conundrum of the UNCRC’s participation rights. Laura and Howie take responsibility for their own provision and protection, thus proving their maturity, but their real struggle in *The Goats* is a plea for their participation rights through their request to remain together without returning to camp. However, they are unable to achieve this goal without adult support. Eventually they manage to convince one adult to respect their view on their best interests—Laura’s mother, Maddy.

Maddy is not initially convinced that the children have a legitimate complaint, and much of the drama in *The Goats* revolves around Laura’s ability to convert her mother from enemy to advocate. Maddy first dismisses her daughter’s pleas for help, blaming the girl for failing to make an effort to fit in: “Why couldn’t Laura adjust to camp? . . . She was a little rude, that was part of the problem. No wonder the other kids gave her a rough time” (Cole 36). However, after meeting with the camp director, Maddy concludes

that the children's treatment by their peers is "the most beastly thing" she has ever heard (66). Recognizing that the children have been maltreated and that under no circumstances do they—or anybody—deserve such treatment, she begins to shed her initially childist attitude.

Meanwhile, the children have become fixated on staying together, as they feel safe in their mutual commitment to listening to, accepting, and respecting one another—experiences they have never consistently enjoyed in other relationships. They are not confident this will be allowed, however. They speculate about the many rules impeding their goal, and the boy admits: "He knew what it might be like: adults holding them by their shoulders, talking over their heads. They might try to stay together, but he didn't think they would be strong enough" (101). Nevertheless, the girl puts her best effort into convincing her mother that their need is legitimate.

Maddy listens, recognizes their need, and respects it. She tells Laura that Howie can come home with them. Acting now as an ally, from her new child-centered position, Maddy commits to helping realize the children's participation rights. She concludes that "if you found someone you liked and trusted, you held on for dear life" (112). Maddy's proclamation positions the children as equals, respecting their judgement and need for safe, supportive companionship. She does not dismiss their relationship as temporary or trivial, as other adult characters do. In other words, she does not reduce its significance as inferior based on age or developmental status; instead, in alignment with Article 12.1, she gives "due weight" to the children's views.

Rather than providing a "celebration," as Scales promises, the ending of *The Goats* is unresolved. It is unclear what will happen to the children next. However, the boy "suddenly" becomes

very sure that everything was going to be all right. He wasn't a fool. He knew that there would be arguments and long-distance phone calls, and parents and camp counselors and policemen talking over their heads about things he didn't understand. . . . It didn't matter. They would think of something. (183)

The last words in *The Goats* are uttered by Laura, urging Howie to "hold on" (184). This statement clearly represents a commitment to their position and faith in its ultimate legitimacy.

Considered through the lens of children's rights, the conflict in *The Goats* appears different from scholars' and reviewers' classifications. There is much more to the story than identity or gender, and the characters struggle with much more than garden variety growing pains. Age is an equally—or more—important variable. Thus, the low-grade, insidious childism portrayed in the text requires serious attention. My brief discussion highlights these child characters' attempts to have their views on matters affecting their well-being not just considered respectfully but also acted upon.

In this, I have drawn attention to a slippery sort of prejudice about children—that they often fail to understand their own best interests. Acts of abuse or neglect can be easily understood as acute childism. But a much more subtle type also affects young people: beliefs or behavior that disrespect children's abilities and capacities to make decisions influencing their own life circumstances and/or meaningful contributions to their societies—the parameters of which are described in the participation articles of the UNCRC and focused in Article 12.1.

The Goats portrays a nuanced battle against such insidious childism. Significantly, the child characters objectively prove their maturity through taking responsibility for their own protection and provision rights. It seems reasonable that this would assure them some influence over what they believe best for themselves through their participation rights, but nothing in the text—as in real life—is so straightforward. Instead, they must agitate and negotiate. Their struggle, along with the many other child characters who struggle for participation rights in children's literature, is realistic and deeply important.

Laura and Howie do eventually make some modest progress in having their participation rights heard and enacted. While there are no grand triumphs, there is the suggestion that agitating for participation rights is worthwhile and effective. This child-centered attitude—and narrative conclusion—are especially empowering elements of *The Goats*. The text is neither prescriptive nor didactic, as works of traditional children's literature often are; instead, it is inspiring. It provides space for readers to imagine their own empowerment.

Connecting Children's Literature and Children's Rights: Possibilities and Limitations

I am not the first to suggest the merits of using the UNCRC as a lens through which to examine texts produced for young people. However, to date there is very little children's literature scholarship connecting children's literature and children's rights—despite Marian Koren's persuasive article, "Human Rights of Children: An Emerging Story" (2001). Koren describes how the UNCRC intersects with children's literature and suggests that

There are various ways in which human rights can be related to children and literature. Most important is to implement and observe the new paradigm introduced by the . . . [UNCRC], recognizing that the child is a human being with views of her own. This urges us to take a child perspective [*sic*] on the concepts and activities we are developing for the sake of children. (251)

Koren concentrates specifically on the educational potential of books to help children grow into their individual potential, as well as to learn about their rights.

Recently, Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham effectively demonstrated this capacity of literature to educate children about their rights (see “A Person’s a Person: Children’s Rights in Children’s Literature,” 2013). On educational and participatory levels, the UNCRC provides an effective foundation for a CCA because of its presence in children’s lives: the document forms the basis of policy, and its tenets are taught to many children in schools around the world. Building on this omnipresence creates a tangible way for children’s own responses to their literature to become a more integral part of our child-centered scholarship.

But beyond educational potential for children, the UNCRC also offers rich ground as a scholarly theoretical document—much as, for example, Freud’s ideas fuel psychoanalytic literary criticism and Homi Bhabha’s writings hold a central place in postcolonial literary criticism. And just as neither Freud’s nor Bhabha’s work is infallible, nor is the UNCRC a perfect document.

The UNCRC does, however, have many merits that make it suitable as a foundation for a CCA. For starters, it contains clauses to anchor every one of the central concepts I have theorized as important to a CCA. This is crucial, as my vision of a CCA positions textual analysis as a valuable tool. This familiar methodology has long been widely used by literary scholars, so my suggestion is simply that the UNCRC should function as the core theoretical document anchoring this work. Using the UNCRC, children’s literature scholars (and practitioners, and child readers) can adopt a practice used frequently when applying various familiar theoretical approaches such as feminist, postcolonial, queer, and more: we can examine textual representations—in this instance of childism and children’s rights.

Certainly this is not brand new; children’s literature scholars have been discussing child characters’ “agency” and morality, or lack thereof, for decades. Indeed, following in this established pattern, another scholar would be quite capable of drawing similar conclusions about *The Goats* as I did above. But in order to develop a new critical approach, core methodology, terminology, and values must be established. This is where the UNCRC can play a crucial role as the unifying element that brings together a CCA. In the practice of textual analysis, for example, grounding discussions of representation in a legal document devoted specifically to children’s emancipation and equality, rights and responsibilities, ensures the work will gain intensified meaning and traction.

Since textual analysis of literary representation is a fundamental part of the work we already undertake, shifting our focus to include age is an extremely manageable transition—a practical step that is simple to implement. Although pragmatism is often juxtaposed with theory, in the case of a workable CCA it is the necessary next step, as we have seen that existing

child-centered scholarship lacks unity and traction. The UNCRC is widely discussed, taught, and debated in many fields; although it has not yet become central in the scholarship of children's literature, it makes an ideal entry point that is accessible to everyone involved in the widespread field of children's literature, including publishers, reviewers, librarians, teachers, and children themselves. Indeed, a rich body of discourse on children's rights awaits fuller engagement from those invested in children's literature.

That being said, it is undeniable that the UNCRC is widely criticized and far from a perfect document. But despite extensive critique of the UNCRC's various shortcomings (for example, see Vandenhoe's *Routledge International Handbook of Children's Rights Studies*, 2015), it nevertheless remains the most central, referenced, and ratified document on children's rights in existence. While there are many examples of the UNCRC's positive impact, especially in the realm of policy implementation, Jones and Walker point out that there have also been

ambiguities, tensions, and omissions. These include the UNCRC's lack of enforceability unless it is incorporated through national law; the lack of promotion of children's participation through political rights; that definitions — such as that of the child's "best interests" — may be made by adults rather than involving children's own ideas and agency; and that it does not pay adequate attention to the ways in which forces such as poverty and structural inequalities within society and families affect children. (19)

More pertinent to examining textual representation within children's literature, the UNCRC has also been called into question for its potential to *disempower* children, particularly through its supposed homogenizing view of childhood and perceived attempts to universalize a single vision of childhood by holding up Eurocentric values as normative while infantilizing the global South. For example, see Karin Arts' "Twenty-five Years of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Achievements and Challenges" (2014) for a comprehensive summary of praise and criticism.

While many scholars from a variety of fields have raised concerns about the treaty, Arts insists that overall its success lies in the fact that it "has inspired ample international and national actions on children's rights" (268). Indeed, she counters the oft-leveled critique about homogenization by pointing out that one of the most important "accomplishments" of the UNCRC is its "comprehensive nature" and "the manner in which its provisions have shown to be suitable for accommodating the largely diverse contexts in which they are realized" by "introducing a nuanced system of provisions seeking to accommodate universal children's rights ideas and norms in culturally, economically, politically and socially sensitive and sensible ways" (270). Clearly the UNCRC has many supporters as well as its detractors.

I believe the treaty promotes a historically groundbreaking vision of empowerment in childhood—one that is characterized by breadth and heterogeneity. In my view, the UNCRC contains a wide enough scope to anchor a variety of discussions about childhood, children's rights, and children's literature. On the other hand, those more focused on what they perceive as its narrowness and homogeneity are also in luck, since they can use the UNCRC as a springboard to discuss issues of universalization.

It is crucial to acknowledge how the UNCRC is a fallible document that itself constructs childhood, perhaps akin to the ways that children's literature is an institution that also constructs childhood. The treaty remains, however, a central touchstone worldwide—and therefore a valuable anchor for a CCA. In the cacophony of discourses on children's rights, the UNCRC is the loudest "voice," the most established policy anchor, and the most hotly debated document. By adopting it as the foundation of a CCA, literary scholars can productively enter these current debates and establish themselves in an important contemporary area of children's culture. Currently there is no mention whatsoever of intersections between children's literature and children's rights in key texts such as *Children's Rights in Practice* (Jones and Walker, 2011) and the *Routledge International Handbook of Children's Rights Studies* (Vandenhoe et al, 2015)—although both acknowledge how various other academic disciplines have been affected by and are affecting this discourse. It is time for children's literature to catch up by adopting a CCA anchored with the UNCRC.

An important—and easily implemented—first step toward bringing a more coherent child-centered focus into prominence in our scholarship can be made by using the UNCRC as a core theoretical document. One of its key advantages is the ability to coherently support textual analysis that highlights childism and children's rights as central concerns in children's literature. In this way, child-centered scholars can begin to make the sorts of inroads that feminist, post-colonial, and queer literary theories have lately made in our scholarship. Having seen the success of these previous theoretical augmentations of our work, there is reason to be optimistic that a CCA can have a similar impact and widespread adoption. By developing and applying a CCA anchored with the UNCRC we will begin to shift both our pedagogical discourse and our methodology from socialization to empowerment.

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Note

¹For example, in November 2015, *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* invited contributions for a special issue on "another children's literature" — that created by children and youth themselves. Further, this issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* includes articles that discuss children's participation in the creation and criticism of children's literature.

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