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# Border crossings: Carrie's War, children's literature and hybridity.

David Rudd

*University of Bolton*, [D.Rudd@bolton.ac.uk](mailto:D.Rudd@bolton.ac.uk)

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## BORDER CROSSINGS: *CARRIE'S WAR*, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, AND HYBRIDITY

DAVID RUDD

In her groundbreaking work, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), Jacqueline Rose propounds that children's fiction is impossible, not because it cannot be written, but because it is based on a contradiction, purporting to be about children, when it is really about adults, who figure the child for their own purposes, as a space where the anxieties of adulthood can be held at bay. Against the insecurities of sex, language, identity, and existence, the figure of the child stands as a bulwark: a secure point of origin that occludes doubt. While I agree with the main thrust of Rose's case, I would take issue with her that Peter Pan is exceptional in exhibiting this impossibility, in 'going too far' (Rose, 1984: 70). In other words, the notion that '[w]riters for children' should not disturb any 'psychic barriers ... the most important of which is the barrier between adult and child' (p70), rests on a disavowal that is regularly troubled, I would argue. It is precisely because of a knowledge of the fragility of their adult selves ('who they are') that writers for children seek to shore up the psychic barriers; but the 'faultlines', to use Alan Sinfield's helpful term, are still there, to be read by either party.

The shift in emphasis that I am suggesting parallels the response that Homi Bhabha (1994) made to Edward Said's work on colonialism. In children's literature, Rose herself uses the notion of the child as a colonised being to capture the way that children's literature is imposed on the young reader, seeking to secure him or her. Perry Nodelman (1992) has also noted the parallels, showing how readily 'the child' can be substituted for 'the orient' in Said's *Orientalism* (1978). However, Bhabha gives Said's work a more psychoanalytical emphasis, suggesting that the relation between coloniser and colonised is less secure, in that the former is always troubled by the relation between the two (see Rudd (2004) for details).

I shall use Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973) to exemplify my case, not because it is special – as Rose sometimes seems to suggest of *Peter Pan* – but, rather, because it is more representative. This said, *Carrie's War* is certainly a rich text, as work by others has shown (e.g. Lissa Paul, 1998), and stages clearly the issues I want to consider. Bawden is also fascinating in that she herself has repeatedly expressed her interest in the tension between adults and children: 'Since it was the adults who had written these [children's] books', she recalls thinking when young, 'it was reasonable to assume that they didn't want to give themselves away; show themselves to us children, to their *enemies*, as they really were.' Adults she saw as 'uncertain, awkward, quirky, *dangerous* creatures', whom she wanted to '*expose*' (1974: 7). Of course, it might be argued, there is a certain duplicity here, given that Bawden herself writes from an adult perspective. But this is irrelevant to my point, which is concerned with the staging of cultural difference, something that Bawden's novel enacts.

Briefly, *Carrie's War* is the story of the eponymous Carrie and her younger brother, Nick, dispatched to Wales as evacuees during World War II, where they are reluctantly housed by Councillor Evans and his younger sister, Lou. Their lives become richer, though, when they meet Evans's older sister, Mrs Dilys Gotobed, her simple-minded adult relation, Johnny, and their housekeeper, Hepzibah Green, with whom another evacuee, the studious Albert Sandwich, is staying. The enmity between Councillor Evans and his older sister causes Carrie great distress – something that she 'carries' into adult life, and which is only resolved (partially) when she returns to Wales with her own children.

Though the war that Carrie experiences is obviously external, it is more significantly psychological, involving warring impulses that Carrie not only suffers as a child, but which continue to distress her. In the first chapter, we see the adult Carrie wrestling with these issues, eventually regressing before her own children's eyes, so that she has less the 'tone ... of a grown-up' (1973: 13), becoming 'more like a cross girl' (p18). Her 'talking cure' then commences, as she enters 'the zone of occult instability where the people dwell', to recycle Fanon's phrase (Bhabha, 1994: 35). And as Bawden depicts it, this repressed zone also offers resistance, akin to 'pushing through a forgotten forest in a fairy tale. The tangled wood round Sleeping Beauty's castle' (p10).

This realm is 'the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of

everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations' (Bhabha: 34). All these divisions are certainly contested, the last between Welsh- and Englishness, but so too is one other division: that between adult- and childhood. We enter an area where certainties are left behind, an area of hybridity, where 'the symmetry and duality of self/ other, inside/ outside' breaks down, where 'the settler-native [sic] boundary' becomes 'anxious and ambivalent' (Bhabha: 116).

From the outset the children are unequivocally depicted as subalterns, arriving with 'their names on cards round their necks. Labelled like parcels ... only with no address to be sent to' (p20); then told to '[s]tand ... by the wall', where 'someone will choose' them in a 'kind of cattle auction' (p23), as Albert describes it. Parallels with slavery are also evident:

Someone had stopped in front of her [Carrie]. Someone said, "Surely you can take two, Miss Evans?"  
"Two girls, perhaps. Not a boy and a girl, I'm afraid." (p24)

Carrie is the vortex round which these warring tendencies whirl, she herself experiencing a sense of inauthenticity. As her name suggests, Carrie is forever a go-between, mouthing, or mimicking, the voices of others. She is a hybrid being, neither adult nor child but an '*in-between* space', which 'carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (Bhabha: 38); this is also, potentially, a traumatic space: 'I feel *torn* in two' (Bawden, 1973: 130), as she complains at one point. And focalised through Carrie's interstitial consciousness, the novel interrogates each of these terms, adult and child, showing that neither is authentic, neither is securely grounded.

Because of the dynamic, unsettled nature of his project, Bhabha deploys various terms to express the colonial relationship – 'ambivalence', 'stereotype', 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' – each containing its own 'ambivalence' in the psychoanalytic sense of experiencing conflicting tendencies. In Carrie's case, her sense of selfhood, normally confirmed by her mother, has been removed, and she finds her identity in doubt. Her being has no core; emptily she 'carries' the words and actions of others, speaking 'in a grown-up voice like her mother's' (p21), then imitating new voices around her, like Mr Evans's: 'She said, "Then want must be your master, Nicholas Peter Willow"' (p64). Mimicking them, however, does nothing to help her discover a voice of her own; in fact, it leads her to question the authenticity of others'.

Mr Evans is presented as a self-important coloniser, his name in capitals over his shop front. His sister, Lou, informs the two children that 'he's a Councillor ... a very important man' (p27). His authority derives from a number of institutional sites, whose discourses he espouses. Certainly he is a patriarchal figure, who bullies not only his sister, to whom he's 'more like a father ... than a brother' (p34), but also 'the women who came into his shop' (p31); in fact, he's annoyed that his evacuees aren't exclusively female: 'I told her, you fetch two girls now' (p32). Because of his importance, Auntie Lou (as she asks the children to call her), advises them to address him as 'Mr Evans'. His patriarchal power is endorsed not only by his status as councillor, but also by his religion: 'he is very strong Chapel.' (p26) In the children's room is a framed notice in black, stating 'The Eye Of The Lord Is Upon You' (p26), punning on Evans's status as an all-seeing eye/I, itself reinforced by the intimidating 'pictures of dead, bearded Chapel Elders looking down from the walls' (p38) of the local chapels. However, as Bhabha says, although 'the authorities ... keep an eye on them [the colonised], their proliferating difference evades that eye, escapes that surveillance' (1994: 112). Here, there is a distinct evasion, in that the chapels are being used as schools with English, non-chapel teachers, thus separating out education and religion, such that Carrie finds school '[m]ore *fun*' (p38) in Wales.

From the children's arrival, then, Mr Evans finds his authority under threat, despite his attempts to make the children like Naipaul's 'mimic men' (Bhabha, 1994: 88) giving them Bibles for presents, having them help in his shop, and even seeking to enlist Carrie in his surveillance work, to spy on the Gotobed household: 'it might be a good idea to get her to go there sometimes, keep her eyes open' (p67).

Theorising this sense of anxiety and the slippage caused in the process of trying to produce like-minded beings, Bhabha draws on Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, where a subject, seeing their own image, experiences an exhilarating sense of wholeness, which the other reflects. In Evans's case, this narcissistic feeling is furnished by his sister Lou, with the community playing its own supporting role. However, as Lacan makes plain, this wholeness is an illusion: it is but an image, an 'Imaginary' wholeness. Aside from narcissism, then, 'aggressivity' is also produced, in that the image is '*the same but not quite*' (Bhabha, 1994: 89) and is, therefore, 'possibly confrontational' (p77). The colonised

other (such as the child), can accentuate this difference, being only a *'metonymy of presence'* (p89). Like a fetish, the child is reassuringly similar to the adult, providing an image of uncastrated completeness, a figure of 'pure origin' (p77). But simultaneously, the child's presence masks difference: it is *not* an adult; it behaves differently – which, of course, threatens the adult's wholesome identity. In this way, 'the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence' (p89).

Nick is particularly effective in showing 'the 'signs' or 'marks' of authority' as nothing 'more than 'empty' presences of strategic devices' (p113). Evans thus finds his own authoritative discourses developing an unfortunately ironic tone, as, for instance, when he lays down the rules of the house:

“... no shouting, or running upstairs, and no Language.” Nick looked at him and he went on – quickly, as if he knew what was coming, “No *Bad Language*, that is.” (Bawden, 1973: 33)

When Evans raises the issue of bed wetting, Nick retorts, '[t]hat's a rude thing to mention', effectively upbraiding the adult for using inappropriate 'Language'. Evans, we are informed, 'looked startled – as if a worm had just lifted its head and answered him back' (p32). When Evans leaves the room, Nick capitalises on his victory in front of Auntie Lou: “[y]ou don't mind Language, do you? I mean, I don't know the deaf and dumb alphabet” (p33). Evans does not intimidate Nick because Nick has noticed that this authoritative voice comes from between 'false teeth that clicked when he talked.' As Nick says, “[y]ou can't really be scared of someone whose teeth might fall out” (32). So, when Nick upbraids Evans for his rudeness, it is of note that 'Nick's gaze was fixed on Mr Evans's mouth' (p32). This makes Aunt Lou's remark that her brother's 'bark's worse than his bite' (p33) more ironic. Evans's false teeth, fetish-like, cover (and uncover) his symbolic castration; that is, his awareness of his own flawed identity.

As Bhabha says, '[i]t is not that the voice of authority is at a loss for words. It is, rather, that the colonial discourse has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the *presence* of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert' (1994: 112). With the help of Nick and Carrie, the browbeaten, childlike Auntie Lou also starts to resist, as demonstrated by her response to Evans's protests over her singing: 'We're supposed to make a joyful noise unto the lord, aren't we, Samuel?' (Bawden, 1973: 99) Evans finds his words returning from a new social location, disrupting their authenticity and querying his own presence. Not only is she using the empowering discourse of 'the lord', familiar to Evans, but she is also empowered in self-image, aided – unbeknownst to Evans – by her American boyfriend. Evans's subsequent awareness that she has chosen the American over him cements his downfall. Previously, brother and sister had a typical master-slave relationship, captured in Carrie's description of Lou's 'thin squeak' of a voice in contrast to Evans's 'roar'. It's '[l]ike a mouse answering a lion' (p30), as she puts it. But, just like the lion in Aesop's fable, Evans learns how dependent he has been on Lou's narcissistic presence. Significantly, the morning after her departure, Carrie mistakes Evans's scratching noise for 'rats', then discovers him complaining that he has been made to 'look small' (p147). He is not quite 'at a loss for words', but he has lost the self-assured rhetoric of the adult coloniser. He sits at 'the dead fire' (p145) of their hearth, realising that the worm has indeed turned, that Heim has turned *unheimlich*. Soon after this, we are later informed, Evans dies.

Being closest to the colonising discourses of power, Evans is most susceptible to their disruption. But there is a doubling here, and further slippage. For Evans is himself a mimic man, displaced by earlier colonisers. In Bhabha's terms, Evans is not so much 'confronted by' as 'tethered to ... his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that ... breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being' (1994: 44). Evans is from a Welsh, working-class background, originally working as a miner, the job that killed his father. The colonial dimension is foregrounded because Evans's older sister, Dilys Gotobed, married not just an Englishman, but a capitalist, mine-owning one. The doubling is made more explicit when Evans shows Carrie a picture of his sister and him, commenting, 'I'd be ten years, about, Dilys a bit older' (Bawden: 147) – the same age as Nick and Carrie, in fact. There are other parallels, too. Nick, for instance, accuses Carrie of going over to the enemy – that is, to the coloniser, Mr Evans – which is just what Evans accused his sister of doing.

Druid's Bottom, where the Gotobeds live, functions as Evans's unconscious, the name itself conjuring up notions of primitive, repressed material – the antithesis of both his 'Chapel' and its 'Language.' The

Gotobeds' colonising background is made explicit, too. 'They made their money out of sugar and slaves' (p59), we learn. There is a skull, reputedly of a slave boy, still in the house which, for superstitious reasons, is not to be removed, for fear of something bad ensuing. Its uncanny presence becomes particularly significant for Carrie, who eventually hurls it into a nearby pond, thereby holding herself responsible for a fire that all but destroys the house (there are echoes of *Jane Eyre* here, too).

What Bhabha refers to as the subject's fantasy of occupying 'the master's place while keeping his [subaltern] place in the slave's *avenging* anger' (p44) is played out for the reader in the course of the book, partly through Carrie's action, but also through Albert's (as we learn towards the end). Albert repeatedly refuses to classify people by age: 'I don't see what difference it makes, people's ages', he says, treating Nick as if he 'was a boy the same age', and also making friends of Hepzibah and the 'ancient' Mrs Gotobed (pp76-7). Age is still an impediment for Albert, though, when it comes to establishing Hepzibah and Johnny's right to go on living in Mrs Gotobed's house after her death. Despite his rational interpretation of events he cannot implement anything because he is a child, lacking adult rights and status. He imagines what would happen if he took the issue to a solicitor:

"I could just hear Mr Rhys saying, *Run away, little man, back to your comics!* [...] I wish I was grown-up [...] It's a fearful *handicap* being a child. You have to stand there and watch, you can never make anything happen. [...] If I was grown-up, I could stop *this*." (pp128-30)

Children are indeed 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1994: 89). But if adulthood can be so effectively imitated, as Albert shows, it raises the question of what is so special about it in the first place, particularly when we look at the far-more childish behaviour of some of the grown-up characters. Evans and his older sister, Dilys, are prime examples, but there are others, like Evans's adult son, Frederick, who is shown to be a greedy bully, especially in the scene where he taunts Johnny Gotobed. The latter, of course, is an adult in body and strength, but a child in mind. It is certainly ironic that Albert has to wait until he is an adult before he can finally do something to help Johnny and Hepzibah.

Parallels with the World War, evident elsewhere, are particularly noticeable here in the marginal status of these two migrant figures: the 'witch' (as she is known), and the simpleton. Both of these celebrated types have been persecuted in European history, the latter falling within the remit of Hitler's 'final solution'. Frederick's bullying tactics, taunting and assaulting Johnny, arguing that a 'vicious loony like that' should be 'locked up' (Bawden: 104), are obviously meant to bring these parallels to mind. Which brings us back to Bhabha and the dangers of essentialist notions of gender, race and nationhood; not only dangerous, such 'hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable', too (p37). This is why Bhabha insists on the neologism, 'DissemiNation', which emphasises that nations are 'internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.' (p148) In other words, not only Hepzibah and Johnny but the child refugees, too, are seen to have an impact on the Welsh community, just as did the English mine-owners, the slaves, and the Druids.

Bawden's novel is a complex work, and I have only really scraped its surface. What I have tried to do is show how the book destabilises a number of fixed categories: of gender, class, and nation – all of which are interlinked. But also, centrally, it troubles the adult-child binary. Using Bhabha's notion of hybridity, I have sought to show that the children's novel is an area where this uneasy relation, this tension, is frequently played out.

Bhabha's claim that 'the fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his [sic] place in the slave's *avenging* anger' (p44) is something we find in many children's books, especially those of popular writers like Blyton and Dahl. But Bawden's novel is more subtle than most, in having the narrative itself stage this process. That is, although it concentrates on young Carrie and her peers, it also deals with their adult selves, through whose agency the children are/have been avenged. Knowledge of this state of affairs arrives like a prolepsis (a flashforward) although, in fact, it is the state of childhood that is really the flashback, the analepsis. In this way, adult and child categories are dislocated, and a general sense of in-betweenness is fostered, where identities 'are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries' (Bhabha: 219). So, while adults might seek to colonise the child through 'children's literature', their ability to fix the child, let alone to secure the adult, remains remarkably tenuous.

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Gabriele Thomson-Wohlgemuth's *Children's Literature in Translation from East to West*, takes children's literature under the East German regime as the subject. Whilst Dominique Sandis' *Proposing a Methodology for the Study of Nation(ality) in Children's Literature*, engages with questions of methodology. Most helpfully, for the thematic nature of this review, David Rudd's essay is entitled *Border Crossings: Carrie's War, Children's Literature and Hybridity*. Here David Rudd fluently and most interestingly discusses Bawden's novel from a position of the colonisation of the child and childhood, engaging in debate with the work of Jacqueline Rose, and drawing on theoretical perspectives proposed by Perry Nodelman, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said.