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**Maria Nikolajeva**

*Reading for Learning. Cognitive approaches to children's literature*

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**Reviewer**

**Janice Bland**

Cognitive criticism sees literature as a powerful and versatile instrument of human thought. Maria Nikolajeva discusses in her monograph *Reading for Learning. Cognitive approaches to children's literature* the essential role fiction plays in the cognitive and emotional development of readers. As a fast-developing preoccupation of international children's literature research, cognitive criticism is interested in all aspects of cognition and young people's engagement with literary texts, including emotion, empathy, ethics, knowledge of the world, ideology and social justice issues. Just as the subject pedagogy of ELT brings together scholarship from a number of cognate fields including applied linguistics, literary scholarship, cultural studies and education, so Nikolajeva's book is a cross-disciplinary investigation involving narrative theory, neuroscience, semiotics, reader-response theory, multi-modal theory and education theory, connecting all to the children's literature scholarship for which the author is internationally renowned.

Literary cognitive criticism, also known as cognitive poetics, focuses on how readers process the language of texts and is thus related to stylistics, while also examining how texts engage readers, recalling reader-response criticism. However, in her introduction, Nikolajeva clarifies how literary cognitive criticism moves decidedly beyond reader response: 'while reader-response theories deal with *how* readers interact or transact with fiction, cognitive criticism also encompasses the question of *why* this interaction/transaction is possible' (p. 8, emphasis in the original).

The author sets the scene in the introduction, 'What is cognitive criticism and what's in it for children's literature research?' (pp. 1-20). On the one hand the relevance of the book for education is made clear from the outset:

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I will take a closer look at the very nature of the educational merit of children's literature, in a broad sense. If literature is, as it is claimed, a powerful implement for enlightening the reader, for conveying knowledge, for building citizenship, how exactly does this work [...]? (pp. 2-3)

On the other hand, Nikolajeva emphasises that her study examines cognitive criticism as 'a theoretical rather than an empirical field' (p. 7). Consequently this is a book that provides an important conceptual examination of the use of literary texts aimed at children and teenagers in educational contexts, and '*the ways literary texts are constructed to maximise, or perhaps rather optimise reader engagement*' (p. 4, emphasis in the original). The book does not, however, provide support for a selection of texts for particular educational contexts, which must, necessarily, bear the needs of specific target groups of children and teenagers in those particular contexts in mind.

Whereas intercultural competence, arguably including intracultural competence (see Bland, 2016), is a central goal of dealing with literature in language education with children and teenagers, Nikolajeva, from her position as a children's literature scholar, provides evidence that literacy education fosters above all empathy and Theory of Mind (the ability to understand that others have mental states such as beliefs and knowledge, wishes and perspectives that are different from one's own). With support from recent advances in neuroscience, the author contends these skills can and should be enhanced and trained, as 'fundamental social skills that enable interpersonal communication' (p. 18). Moreover it is illustrated how '(o)ur engagement with fiction is not transcendental; it is firmly anchored in the body' (p. 10).

Following the introduction, the chapters offer alternatively theory (Chapters 1, 3, 5 and 7) and applications of the theory to specific texts (Chapters 2, 4, 6 and 8), using cognitive criticism as a critical tool. The applications of theory are restricted to narrative fiction, for example the picturebook, fantasy, time-slip fiction and dystopias. The chapters that deal with specific texts provide fascinating reading. However the situations and circumstances of real-life young readers are not brought into the discussion, but rather there is a focus on the way the selected texts can promote the educational development of any inexperienced or novice reader. Consequently, the ideas cannot easily be transferred: it

is far from clear how to map the discussion of texts such as Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*, Oliver Jeffers' *Lost and Found*, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Susan Cooper's *King of Shadows* or Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* onto any concrete educational context. However the theoretical chapters more than justify the need for teachers and teacher educators to carefully study the arguments of this book, with its illustrations of how children's literature can expand children's cognitive abilities and 'indeed makes us better human beings' (p. 228).

The first chapter, 'Knowledge of the world', considers the epistemic value of fiction. It is outlined in this chapter how one of the purposes of fiction is to convey experience 'refracted through an individual consciousness' (p. 40). Nikolajeva considers not only that a 'non-mimetic mode may be a more truthful representation of reality' (p. 46), but also that the social knowledge that is to be inferred from fiction may be more complex and challenging than factual knowledge, and requires attention, imagination and memory. Not only do we use our real-life experience to understand the narrative, the storyworld itself helps illuminate and explain the real world, so that 'cognitive engagement with fiction is a two-way process: life-to-text and text-to-life' (p. 25).

The next theoretical chapter, 'Knowledge of other people' explores engagement with characters in fictional texts, as training for changing perspective – this is an aspect of dealing with literature that is well studied in language education. Citing recent experimental research on the advantages of fiction for the development of Theory of Mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013), Nikolajeva explains that the brain responds to emotions in fiction exactly as if it were real life. The author devotes several pages (pp. 84-88) to demonstrating the danger of encouraging readers to identify with characters in books, which she calls the 'identification fallacy'. This can lead to an uncritical alignment with a fictional character, and delays the development of Theory of Mind and empathy: 'To be a successful mind-reader, you need to be detached from the mind you are reading' (p. 86). This argument is highly important, also in language education – as Nikolajeva writes: 'If empathy is acquired gradually and is not fully developed until late adolescence, and if fiction is to serve as a training field for the social brain, fiction should logically offer challenge, not comfort' (p. 87).

The third theoretical chapter is 'Knowledge of self', and revisits the arguments and outlines the role of fiction in helping readers acquire knowledge of themselves. This is particularly complex during adolescence, due to the development of the social brain and sense of self during this period of human life. Young adult novels are not always unproblematic in this respect, as the author shows. However, they are differentiated from adult narratives: 'First-person narratives of childhood, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, never intended for a young audience, contain dimensions that may perhaps be understandable and even enjoyable for novice readers on the plot level, but far beyond their comprehension in terms of social and cultural knowledge, psychological complexity and narrative irony' (p. 145).

The last of the theoretical chapters focuses on the opportunities for gaining 'Ethical knowledge' through children's literature. Once again, Theory of Mind is pivotal in the argument. For fiction offers vicarious ethical experience when it 'puts its characters in situations where ethical issues are inescapable, and moreover, in fiction these issues can be amplified and become more tangible' (p. 178). Thus the process of deep reading involves the ethics of response more than any (apparently) ethical content or teaching of a moral, for there is 'a radical difference between offering a moral lesson and encouraging readers to contemplate a moral or ethical issue' (p. 178).

The conclusion is brief and bold, 'reading is indispensable for our human existence' (p. 225), essential for our intellectual, emotional, ethical and social development. For children's fiction considers the needs and abilities of its audience and adjusts to their cognitive and emotional level. In sum, 'successful children's fiction challenges its audiences cognitively and affectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other elements of mental processes' (p. 227). *Reading for Learning. Cognitive approaches to children's literature* establishes with clarity that the tendency in education, whether in the L1 or L2 classrooms, to teach and explain literature to novice readers rather than to allow them to (critically) interact and transact with a narrative suited to their level is entirely counterproductive to the cognitive development challenging literature can afford.

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## References

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