

## Introduction Philip Nel *and* Lissa Paul

Since about 1970, scholarship in children's literature has brought together people from the fields of literature, education, library and information science, cultural studies, and media studies. "Children's literature" itself has become a kind of umbrella term encompassing a wide range of disciplines, genres, and media. One of the challenges of children's literature studies is that scholars from disparate disciplines use the same terms in different ways. As a result, meanings can be blurred and cross-disciplinary conversations confused. Drawing on the expertise of scholars in many fields, *Keywords for Children's Literature* responds to the need for a shared vocabulary by mapping the history of key terms and explaining how they came to be used in conflicted ways.

As Beverly Lyon Clark points out in *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (2003), the (often male) "professoriate" in English literature departments treated librarians "more as handmaidens than as fellow scholars." Academics working in education and schoolteachers working with children were regarded with equal suspicion. Yet viable critical vocabularies—including words and phrases such as "postmodern," "censorship," "reading," "liminality," and "young adult"—were being put into use in several disciplines. Separate vocabularies were also developing in other fields that intersect with children's literature, including American studies (from the 1950s on), cultural studies (from the 1960s on), and

African-American studies and women's studies (from the 1970s on). The canon-expanding efforts of both cultural studies and feminism were especially influential in bringing terms such as "modernism," "gender," "ideology," and "body" into scholarly conversations about children's literature and culture.

In *Keywords for Children's Literature*, we consciously sought scholars from many disciplines and encouraged them, all experts in their own fields, to move into often-unfamiliar territory and explore their words in other disciplinary contexts. As with all evolving things, individual keywords enter the lexicon and slip away, and we have encouraged authors to follow the growth patterns of their words. In the spirit of Raymond Williams's original *Keywords* (1976/1983a), our book is a snapshot of a vocabulary that is changing, expanding, and ever unfinished.

"Keywords" itself is a case in point. Its definition depends on the discipline. For librarians, a "keyword" is a search term that identifies the main content of a document. For educators, it means a high-frequency word. In 1964, Ladybird Books in England launched the "Key Words Reading Scheme" book series, based on the premise that just twelve words make up 25 percent of the words we speak. The books, say the editors, introduce children "to the most commonly used words in the English language (Key Words), plus additional words necessary to tell the story." (Forty years later, the Key Words reading series is still in print and



has sold over 90 million copies.) Raymond Williams, we suspect, might be horrified to learn that words are more important than story; on the other hand, he might be jealous of the sales figures. *Keywords for Children's Literature* follows in the spirit of Williams's influential *Keywords*, in offering "an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion." Through an inspired adaptation of the term "keywords," Williams unlocked discussions of society and culture that have endured into the twenty-first century, even as the words and their definitions have shifted.

Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler tracked shifting interpretations in the context of a particular field in their edited collection *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2007), a volume in tune with our general ideas. We adapted their format to our purposes, inviting a range of scholars—all with disciplinary stakes in the field—to write about a particular keyword for the study of children's literature and culture. We asked them to address specific questions about the kinds of critical projects enabled by their keyword, the critical genealogies of the term, the ways of thinking that are occluded or obstructed by its use, and the ways other potential keywords constellate around it. We invited attention to the ways individual terms came into common use, the ways those uses vary over time and place, and the ways terms are contested and/or conflicted. The forty-nine entries in this book vary in their emphases, but each maps meanings vital for those who read, teach, and study literature for children.

We say "maps meanings" because the goal of *Keywords for Children's Literature* is not to fix meanings in place, but rather to delineate tentative boundaries of a shifting conversation. In this sense, our book's aims depart from those of Göte Klingberg, who in 1970 began an ultimately unfinished "Nomenklatur-Projekt" in order to develop a common vocabulary for children's literature scholars of different languages (Müller 2009). Although they are used as translations of one another, the German "Märchen" (little story), the English "fairy tale" (translation of the French "conte de fées," thus "a story told by the fairies"), the Danish "Eventyr" (adventure), and the Swedish "saga" (something told) are quite different: Klingberg hoped to "introduce genre concepts which can be strictly defined" (Klingberg 2008). This is not the aim of *Keywords for Children's Literature*—and it also explains why terms such as "nursery rhymes," "fairy tales," "chapter books," "alphabet books," and "poetry" are not included. Although some genre concepts are keywords, these have not fostered the necessary degree of critical debate. As Williams said of his project, we say of ours: it is "not a dictionary or glossary," nor is it "a series of footnotes to dictionary histories." Instead, it is "the record of an inquiry into a vocabulary"—in this case, a vocabulary about children and children's literature. As Burgett and Hendler say of their volume, our *Keywords for Children's Literature* is not intended to be the last word on the subject; rather, our hope is that the book will be generative, launching scholars (whether beginning or advanced) on to new fields of inquiry.

Although we have listed the words in alphabetical order, we encourage readers *not* to start at the first entry and read through to the last. Instead, each reader should follow the associations suggested by each keyword. “Innocence” might guide you to “Audience,” a word that may steer you to “Young Adult,” “Crossover Literature,” or “Multicultural.” “Home” may inspire a look at “Domestic,” which might entice you to read “Girlhood,” and on to “Tomboy.” And so on. To read *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, pick a word and follow the signifying chain wherever it leads you.

Many of the keywords come from disciplines unmarked as either “children’s” or “literature.” With the growth of children’s literature scholarship beginning around the last quarter of the twentieth century, fields with particular vested interests—including education, literature, and library sciences—began to develop their own specialized vocabularies. As each discipline settled within its own comfort zone, it began to treat outsiders with suspicion. Classroom teachers regarded literary critics, with their focus on analysis and theory, as being disconnected from real children reading real books. Librarians, with interests broadly including access to books, classification systems, and bibliographic histories, were often critical of what they saw as the narrowly defined expectations of classroom teachers.

We have chosen words we think crucial to the study of children’s literature and culture. Readers will likely have alternate lists of words that are important and that they have observed being used in, as Williams

says, “interesting or difficult ways.” That last criterion is particularly important and explains, for example, why “Latino/a” is included but “Native American” is not. Both are vital identity categories that inform the production of and responses to literature for children and adolescents. However, in the field of children’s literature, a richer and more complex critical discourse has developed around “Latino/a”: as Phillip Serrato explains in his essay, there is debate about the term’s meaning, and it gets used in conflicting ways. The degree and complexity of conversation enveloping the term “Latino/a” has not yet happened with “Native American.” However, this is a relatively new and burgeoning field. Were we to undertake a revised *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, the conversations may by that point have elevated the term to “keyword” status.

On a few rare occasions, a word we had hoped to include (notably, “Agency,” “Family,” and “Genre”) either did not find someone willing to undertake it or the formerly willing volunteer found it necessary to withdraw from the project. All other choices reflect our judgment of which words were a vital part of the conversation. In a few cases, experts suggested words that we had not considered—Philip Pullman (“Intention”) and Michelle Abate (“Tomboy”), to name two.

It is the nature of a book such as ours to engender further debate and conversation. As Williams was, we too are “exceptionally conscious of how much further work and thinking needs to be done,” and we follow his lead in adding that much of it “can only be done



through discussion,” for which his book and ours are “in part specifically intended.” We too welcome “amendment, correction, and additions.” *Keywords for Children’s Literature* strives not to resolve all critical questions about children’s literature, but to draw a provisional map. We hope it will inspire you to continue the conversation.