Dr. Mavis Reimer talks about literature, basic education and the formation of young readers of literature

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A Professora Doutora canadense Mavis Reimer tem uma longa e importante história como pesquisadora e professora, tendo assumido em sua carreira cargos de direção de instituições de grande relevância no Canadá e internacionalmente. Dentre esses cargos, ela preside estudos de graduação, é professora de inglês e dirige o Projeto *Asiniskow Ithiniwak*: Reclamation, Regeneration, and Reconciliation, na Universidade de Winnipeg. Ela foi a presidente de pesquisa canadense sobre textos e culturas a respeito de jovens, entre 2005 e 2015, e editora-chefe do periódico *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, entre 2009 e 2015. Entre 2001 e 2015, foi presidente da *International Research Society for Children's Literature*. Mavis Reimer é presidente fundadora do *Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures* (CRYTC), da Universidade de Winnipeg e também fundadora da Associação de pesquisa canadense em culturas e pessoas jovens. É organizadora de cinco coleções de ensaios acadêmicos e coautora, com Perry Nodelman, da terceira edição do livro *The Pleasures of Children's Literature,* tendo publicado também mais de trinta ensaios e capítulos de livros sobre o tema culturas e textos a respeito de jovens.

Nesta entrevista, ela aborda temas de grande interesse sobre literatura para crianças e jovens, formação de jovens leitores, os desafios de ensinar literatura na educação básica, gênero, jovens como pesquisadores, temas tabu e qualidade em literatura para jovens e crianças. É com grande prazer e gratidão que apresentamos a excelente entrevista que Mavis Reimer concedeu ao professor Newton Freire Murce Filho e às professoras, Layssa Gabriela Almeida e Silva Mello, Letícia de Souza Gonçalves e Roberta Carvalho Cruvinel.

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1. When did you first get interested in children's and youth literature?

I was an avid reader as a child and young girl, so I could say that I've always been interested in children's and youth literature! I would happily take up almost any reading material that fell into my path. When I'd finished the books I'd brought home from the library myself, for example, I'd turn to the volumes my siblings had collected (such as the Tintin comics my brother liked to read) or to novels on my mother's shelves. For a long time, my favorite reading was the Nancy Drew series of detective novels, which I read and re-read many times.

As a scholar, however, I became interested in children's literature after the birth of my first child, when I found myself puzzled at how to select good literature for her, since most of the ways in which I'd been taught to evaluate the quality of literature didn't seem to apply to the books for children I found in libraries and bookstores. (I've talked about this before, in chapter 1 of *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, the third edition of which I co-wrote with my University of Winnipeg colleague Perry Nodelman.) I was at the end of my M.A. studies at the time I became a mother and unsure of whether I wanted to continue my graduate work and to seek a Ph.D. degree. The questions that I found myself asking were very basic ones – What is good children's literature? How is it the same as and different from literature intended for adults? – but returning to such foundational issues fueled a renewed interest for me in literary studies and in theories of reading. Throughout my doctoral studies and in the first decades of my scholarly career, I often counted on my conversations about books and films with my three children to send me back to think again about assumptions I was making about their abilities and inabilities as young people to read and to understand difficult language or themes.

2. In your opinion, what would be the main school's role in the formation of young readers of literature?

I consider myself fortunate to have been raised by a mother who loved to read and who delighted in talking about books with her children. There is no substitute for learning the pleasures of literature at home alongside all of the other things you learn as a young child: in this situation, reading simply becomes an ordinary and essential part

of your life before you've thought a lot about it. But, of course, not all children grow up in homes where this is the norm and public or state-sponsored school systems typically exist to ensure that all children, whatever their domestic circumstances, have access to training in fundamental skills, such as reading.

To answer your question directly, then, I would say that I would hope that schools would do more than only train students to read, in the sense of decoding, texts. Ideally, they should also seek to foster a love of reading in young people. In order to do this, I believe, they need, as much as possible, to replicate the circumstances that children introduced to reading by avid readers encounter. If I think back to the factors that led to my own love of reading in childhood and extrapolate from those, I would say that this would include ensuring that classes have access to a large and varied collection of books of different genres and styles and for different reading levels; allowing children to select their own reading material from that collection and to set their own reading pace; encouraging teachers to model engaged reading in the classroom; and inviting children to have conversations about books they have read. What fostering a love of reading likely would *not* include would be answering lists of comprehension questions after completing a book!

3. *What would be the biggest challenges in teaching literature to young readers in basic education today?*

There are many more modes in which readers encounter narrative today than there were when I was young. I was in middle school before my family even acquired a television, so, for me, books were certainly a principal source of story, although I also heard lots of family narratives about individuals and events in our community past and present.

While a challenge in one sense, young people's access today to many forms of narrative – on television and in film, in video games, through digital texts such as ebooks and apps and Internet texts, in addition to printed books and oral stories – can also be seen as a benefit. I think it would be wise for teachers to emphasize what all narratives share: for example, the sequences of cause-and-effect events that structure many stories; the cast of conventional characters or character functions that appear in

many stories; and the ways in which different settings establish the mood of a story and permit or limit particular actions or choices by characters. To this can be added the questions of how stories are told: by a first-person narrator, by someone involved in the story or at a distance from it, in plain language or through metaphors and other figurative language, among other things. If young people can be given the tools to think about the commonalities of narratives across many platforms, the variety of stories they encounter can support and augment the classroom teaching of literature.

I would also recommend that teachers show young people how to extend their understanding of the power of narrative (the power to secure people's interest and to motivate their actions, for example) to the analysis of such other discourses as those of politics or marketing.

4. *How do Digital Technologies in Information and Communication contribute to and/or disrupt the relationship between literature and children's and youth readership?*

There is no doubt that digital technologies engage young people. Indeed, much recent commentary refers to the addictive qualities of digital technologies, particularly of social media. But I think it's important to remember that the basis of digital technologies is text: arguably, many young people are reading and writing more because of their access to the Internet. One example would be the fan-fiction sites on which young people respond to narrative texts, sometimes on discussion boards, sometimes by creating new episodes with the characters from those texts, and sometimes by critiquing other readers' writings and rewritings of texts. As American media scholar Henry Jenkins observed many years ago, young fans are not only readers and viewers, but also writers, critics, and theorists of texts.

Teachers can build on these kinds of engagements with texts as they introduce literature in the classroom. Perhaps students could be encouraged to imagine scenes that have occurred between the ones shown in the text. Teachers could provide opportunities for unguided discussions about the books in student groups. Peer editing could be useful for students on both sides of the editing process. If teachers spend some time on fan

sites, they will no doubt find many other kinds of activities that young readers intrinsically find pleasurable that they could adapt to their classrooms.

5. *How can literary texts contribute to the discussion about gender with children and teenagers?*

There are increasing numbers of books available – from picture books for the very young child to young adult novels – that depict gender-bending and gender-nonconforming young people. Such books obviously foreground the opportunity to discuss gender with children and youth, and often pose questions within the story that can also be considered in contexts outside the texts.

Books with more conventional characters, however, can also be interesting prompts to such discussions. In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Nodelman and I list a series of questions that Australian feminist critic Bronwyn Davies suggests readers can ask about characters. These include such questions as what kinds of "subject positions" are available to characters; what happens to characters in different "subject positions"; what emotions and desires are relevant to each kind of character; what means are there for each character to fulfil these desires; and what kinds of "props" – personal attributes, attitudes, or possessions, for example – are necessary for a character to be recognized as a particular kind of subject. If you substitute "gender" for "subject position" in Davies' questions, you can easily see how any narrative can be used to discuss gender roles and representations with young people.

A simple way to have quite young children begin to think about some of the issues Davies raises is to ask them to reimagine and rewrite a story by shifting the gender of the main character. What other changes do they need to make to the story for it to continue to work once they do this? This can be a particularly interesting exercise with a story that features animals as main characters since these stories often seem, on the surface, to evade questions about such cultural categories as race or gender.

6. *There are studies in the field of children's literature about children as active researchers, as in Mary Kellett's "Children as active researchers: a new research paradigm for the 21st century?" What is your thinking on projects on literature which involve children and teenagers as active researchers?*

As my answers to some of the previous questions have already demonstrated, I think that involving young people in the formulation of the questions they ask about texts and about the activity of reading is a key to fostering their love of reading. Extending this principle to finding ways to bring young people into the formal process of research is a logical development, in my view. Indeed, to teach the research process to young people, as Kellett proposes to do, is really to teach them how to ask good questions and how to find good answers to those questions. At its core, research is a version of discovery learning, a pedagogical method that has much to recommend it.

7. *The theme of the upcoming Congress of the IRSCL (International Research Society for Children's Literature)[1], in Sweden, is "Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature", which suggests that certain subjects considered taboo would be among the themes discussed. Do you think that these themes (such as war, disease, death, sex, violence, among others) have been on the increase in children's and youth literature? If so, do you recognize any significant differences among publications in different countries?*

Many people have suggested that the understanding of childhood that was developed during the Industrial Revolution and enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – which can be summarized as a view of the child as belonging inside a domestic space governed by emotion and outside economic activities – is changing in contemporary postindustrial societies. I have also made such claims, in, for example an article on films about street children I published in the journal associated with IRSCL. Scholars dispute the reasons for these changes and the nature of these changes, of course, but one outcome clearly is that the themes that writers believe are appropriate and, even, essential to address with children are also changing. Some of the themes you mention may well be among those that are increasingly present in children's and youth literature, although I suspect that a close study of collections of texts from other times would also reveal an interest in many of these topics.

There are undoubtedly interesting and significant differences in what is deemed taboo in different countries and I would certainly expect that the limits of what can and cannot be said openly in a given society would become obvious through a comparative

[1] Na ocasião em que a entrevista foi concedida, este Congresso ainda não havia sido realizado. Ele aconteceu entre 14 e 18 de agosto de 2019, na cidade de Estocolmo, na Suécia.

study of the children's literature of different countries. This is the case because children's literature typically is closely aligned with national projects, in part though the linkage of children's books with school systems. I have not undertaken such a comparative study and so would not want to speculate on specific differences. I think, however, that you've identified an interesting topic for a panel proposal for the upcoming conference in Sweden!

8. *In Brazil, the reading and teaching of literature is mostly left to the school and is done in large classes of 30 to 40 students. Considering that the reading of literature is very often done in silence and individually, would you have any suggestions for the possibility of successful experiences of teaching literature to large groups of young students at the basic education level?*

I can't think of anything I have to add to suggestions I've already made in my responses to previous questions.

9. *Considering the fact that diversity, in its various aspects, has been represented more often in recent children's and youth literature, do you think that such representation has been made with aesthetic quality? Could you spell out what quality means, or should mean, in children´s and youth literature nowadays?*

I said earlier that one of the questions that drove my interest in the scholarly study of children's literature was the fundamental question of what is good children's literature. The question you're asking me now is a version of the same question. The fact that I was motivated by this question, however, does not mean that I feel I've fully answered it for myself.

To go back, once again, to *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, in the first chapter, Nodelman and I produced a list of "old certainties" and, beside them, a list of the "new questions" that had been generated by decades of poststructural critique, lists that we thought helped to explain the basic stance we were taking in this textbook. One of the "old certainties" was this: "The good literary texts are good, and therefore worth studying, for two main reasons: they are wise and they are beautiful." The questions that we presented as more current – and more useful – ways to think about literary texts were these: "Who decides what is wise and what is beautiful? Why should their judgement be trusted? Might they have some vested interest in identifying certain ideas as wise, or a certain kind of beauty as desirable?" The double list we produced goes on

at some length, but the upshot of this opening gambit in the book is to make the point that the old certainties of literary study have been replaced by questioning rather than by new certainties. I continue to think that any answer to the question of what "aesthetic quality" is needs to take into account the context in which the question is asked and needs to be a contingent answer, recognizing not only that the answer reached will not be the same for everyone but also that you are likely to change your answer to that question many times as you experience more of life and of literature.

At this point in my life and career, one of the answers I'd give to your question of "what quality means, or should mean, in children´s and youth literature nowadays," is a text that is open to multiple readings and re-readings and that opens toward its outside, that is, to the shared life of people outside the text.

10. *As foreign language teachers, we are very often preoccupied and sometimes frustrated about the difficulty of teaching literature in a foreign language, as language can be a barrier between the reader and the text, and sometimes between teacher, student and text. Would you have any suggestions as to how this difficulty could be eased? Do you think that encouraging students to read literature in a foreign language as a path to their own production of creative writing could be a possible tool to motivate them to become literature readers in a foreign language?*

I am not myself a foreign language teacher and only read other languages with the help of good dictionaries, so that my first response to this question is simply to admire readers and teachers who have developed the fluency to understand literary language in more than their mother tongue. It makes sense to me that reading and writing are parts of the same kind of exploration and that pursuing both avenues to learning a foreign language would lead to mastery more surely. I would, however, have to demur to teachers with experience in this regard.

11. *According to a postmodern perspective, the subject has multiple identities and these identities are continuously constructed by the subject himself/herself. In this sense, how do you think literary reading can contribute to the construction of identity in post-modernity?*

The questions about "subject positions" posed by Bronwyn Davies come from an article in which she discusses how young people use the resources of imaginary narratives to "take themselves up" as particular kinds of gendered subjects in what she

calls their "lived narratives." I think that her questions can also be used to think through possible subject position with regard to race and ethnicity, or nationality, or sexuality. Exactly because the postmodern subject is now understood as a constructed subject, reading – not just of literary texts but of all kinds of discourses – can be seen as contributing to the range of possibilities for each of us as subjects. This makes the role of the teacher of reading to young people one of profound significance!

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Biographical note: Mavis Reimer is Dean of Graduate Studies, Professor of English, and Project Director of the Six Seasons of the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak*: Reclamation, Regeneration, and Reconciliation Partnership Project at the University of Winnipeg. She was the Canada Research Chair in Young People's Texts and Cultures between 2005 and 2015, lead editor of *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* between 2009 and 2015, and President of the International Research Society for Children's Literature between 2011 and 2015. She is the founding director of the Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures (CRYTC) at the University of Winnipeg; founding President of the Canadian Association for Research in Young People's Cultures; an editor of five collections of scholarly essays; co-author, with Perry Nodelman, of the third edition of *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*; and author of more than thirty scholarly essays and book chapters on the subject of young people's texts and cultures.