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Review

At Arms Length: A Rhetoric of Character in Children's and Young Adult Literature. Mike Cadden. University Press of Mississippi, 2021.

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Mike Cadden's *At Arm's Length: A Rhetoric of Character in Children's and Young Adult Literature* provides practical tools for examining character: that aspect of literature which is most familiar and yet can be challenging to discuss theoretically. In his preface, Cadden states that character is "arguably the most emotionally significant and affecting aspect of literature" (ix). This apt description is reminiscent of Christian Metz's statement about the challenges of film theory: "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand" (69). Similarly, the ease with which we 'understand' character – or at least the speed with which we emotionally respond to character – can make its discussion as rhetoric challenging. Cadden responds to these complexities by providing his reader with an accessible theoretical approach to exploring character and characterisation in young people's literature and culture, which builds rewardingly upon Maria Nikolajeva's examination of the "complexity" of the "seemingly simple matter" of character in *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (5). Cadden acknowledges his indebtedness to Nikolajeva's work, describing it as "a

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taxonomy for the possibilities for character in children's literature" (x). Cadden breaks new ground, however, with his concentrated analysis of how authors manipulate character and characterisation rhetorically and his examination of the possible effects of author choice for young readers.

In Chapter One, titled "A Rhetoric of Character", Cadden introduces his aim to explore how authors communicate and manipulate a balance of distance between character and reader – both drawing the reader in and keeping them "at arm's length", as the book's title describes. Cadden acknowledges that other literary devices, such as plot and point of view, can work as techniques to create or diminish distances between author and reader. However, he argues that characterisation is "a particularly important and useful communication technique in children's literature" (19). Cadden establishes the character types around which he structures the remaining chapters using a 'character dial' diagram. The dial includes three types: the larger-than-life character who might inspire awe or wonderment; the life-sized character who is likely to draw sympathy or an empathic response; and the smaller-than-life character who might inspire pity and incite humour. The dial offers a useful way to classify character types, and Cadden shows how these types can be identified across age and genre. For example, Cadden states, "we can accept as 'real' or sympathetic in equal measure characters in the genres of realism or fantasy [...]. It doesn't matter if the character is a hobbit; what matters is that the choice of artistic depiction is sending us a message about accepting that character as worthy of sympathy" (65). He gives examples of character types throughout the book with a wide range of historical, contemporary, and canonical works of children's and young adult literature and popular culture. The dial provides a way to analyse how the characters in these texts move or change from one type to another – providing the basis for Cadden's analysis of authorial modifications as rhetorical devices.

"Between Life Sized and the Larger than Life" is the title of Chapter Two. In this chapter, Cadden explores how authors invite us into the space between real and unreal: between life sized and larger than life. Cadden is interested in character movement between the realistic and the mythic, supernatural, or larger-than-life character. He explores how authors might use larger-than-life characters for moral or didactic purposes, as Nikolajeva argues (33). Cadden's analysis of growth and change concerning a reader's connection to, or identification with, a character is the most compelling part of this chapter. Throughout the book, he argues "against the notion of character 'growth' in favor of the idea of 'change'" (90). For Cadden, "growth" is change conceptualised as growth and ought to be recognised as a rhetorical manipulation by the author to satisfy reader and genre conventions. For example, Cadden challenges the idea that Max's decision to return home at the end of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are (1984)* can be perceived as growth, arguing instead that Max's move from "larger than life (King of the Wild Things) to lifelike (Max)" is change – a change that adult readers find gratifying (40). Cadden uses characters from well-known YA texts, like Ponyboy Curtis in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders (1967)* and Jonas in Lois Lowry's *The*

Giver (1993), to demonstrate how characters who modulate from "life sized" to "larger than life" have become a recognisable "cultural favorite" (43-44). These are set alongside examples from less well-known YA texts, like Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising (2000)*. Set during the Great Depression, Ryan's novel sees its eponymous protagonist, Esperenza, become more real when, following her wealthy land-owner father's murder, her family is forced to leave Mexico for America and live in poverty. Cadden uses this text to illustrate how characters can be "modulated between the real and unreal along the different continua of wealth, humanity (in the case of anthropomorphism), magic, age, and others that offer differences of degrees that can be changed" (62). As with other chapters, examples are plentiful and drawn from a broad range of genres and forms.

Chapter Three, "Between the Life Sized and the Smaller than Life", centres on tensions between sympathy and laughter and explores characters crafted with the rhetorical goal of making the reader feel superior to a character or find a character delightful or funny. As Cadden states, "identification is not always the goal, after all" (64). In the first half of the chapter, Cadden focuses on how genre, character, and illustration work together as rhetorical tools to "hold readers back or invite them closer" (65). He discusses how various visual approaches, including cartoon, realist illustration, surrealist illustration, and folk-art simplification, can combine with the story, genre, and character to create different effects. For example, exaggerated cartoonish characters provide "too little humanity for the child reader to feel conflicted" about laughing at them (71) and can also create a comfortable distance from which the young or adult reader can encounter social difference (74). Cadden offers clear examples of how authors employ visual distance as a rhetorical choice. He describes how Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis (2000), a graphic childhood memoir about growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, is particularly effective in how it employs minimalistic folk art to "temper connection while still teaching [the reader] about hard things" (68). The second half of the chapter explores how character sympathy can be modulated through narration and authors' use of other characters. Staying true to the scope of the work, Cadden explores how contrasting and simultaneous modes of appeal can allow one text to address a dual audience of both adults and young people. His attention to how transitions between character types operate distinctly within the YA form will be useful for those seeking to distinguish writing for children from writing for young adults. He argues that the "direction on the dial of rhetorical modulation—from life sized to smaller than life—is clearly a YA convention and not something authors typically offer to young readers" (89). Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War (1974)* and M. T. Anderson's *Feed (2002)* provide examples of YA literature where characters' modulation from admirable hero to object of pity is particularly complex. Because Cormier's character Jerry does not have a reason behind his challenge to order, the reader is let down and left with a message of irony: "Disturb the universe, but have a plan" (91). Cadden makes an effective argument that this kind of unsettling character modulation is less common in fiction for children because it

"demands a sense of pity or loss or disappointment that only older readers can experience without condemning this depiction of humanity as 'wrong' or 'against the rules' of the triumph even of tragedy" (89-90). The chapter concludes with an extended close examination of Gene Luen Yang's Printz's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese (2006), which* will appeal to YA scholars and critics.

Chapter Four, "No Man's Land", explores the relationship between the awesome and the absurd. Cadden describes this part of the dial as "where empathy goes to die in books, movies, and television shows for the young (105). Once again, Cadden succeeds in presenting the potential for modulation that certain character types have through the use of clear examples from well-known texts. His focus here is on how awesome characters with the potential to be fearsome, like the Wicked Witch of the West in Frank L. Baum's The Wonderful *Wizard of Oz (1960)*, are most often modulated "in one of two directions: pathos or bathos" (110). The Wicked Witch is made ridiculous by being defeated by Dorothy with only water. Of course, the child or young adult's defeat of greater power is familiar in youth literature. As well as being often defeated or made foolish, Cadden shows how these larger-than-life characters can remain static and thus disposable, like groups of well-known 'baddies' such as *Star Wars* stormtroopers or Zombies, or changed to become more sympathetic. Thinking about such characters within this structure, Cadden reveals different consistencies in youth literature, such as how difficult it is to think of an example of a character being "modulated from the smaller than life to larger than life without moving through the life sized or sympathetic" (115). Cadden argues that if the absurd character ascends to power without any appeal to shared humanity, they will not become awesome again. He says he finds it "reassuring that authors for children reassert that truth to their readers" (116). Closing this chapter by asserting that this modulation aligns with a singular truth is somewhat counter to most of his criticism throughout the book, in which he presents character modulations as having more to do with constructions of 'truths' in line with author, reader, or genre expectations.

In *At Arm's Length*, Cadden examines well-trodden ground with his exploration of "the rhetorical exchange between adult and child" and the "authority and ethical responsibility adult authors claim in that relation" (17). He examines the pressing issue of the "implications for representation of diversity to and for different audiences" when extreme or exaggerated characterisation is present (30). His work provides a valuable structure for exploring issues central to the study of children's and young adult literature: authorial power and ethical implications of representation. I have found that the framework creates much debate and discussion among students and is beneficial as a 'way in' to explore the broader issues mentioned above. Most rewardingly, Cadden succeeds in defining how character operates in children's and young adult fiction in a way that sets it apart from other forms of literature. He does this by acknowledging a central facet of concern within all aspects of youth literature:

"the notion of manipulation" and applying it to an analysis of how "rhetorical and textual manipulation happens through one story element: character" (8).

REFERENCES

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