



## Alice's Academy

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### Me and My Ladybirds: or "Mummy, They're All the Same!"

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As a parent, I thought I could cope with the Ladybird readers in my son's first grade class (in Toronto, where I live). There were other books in the classroom. In washbasins. Underneath the desks. But most of my son's friends were going to be in that class. And by all accounts the teacher was a good teacher, well-respected by her colleagues, and by friends of mine whose children had been in her class. I swallowed my doubts. I should have known better.

From the beginning, my then six-year old son Matt jibbed at reading Ladybirds. As a child who typically made bedtime requests for recitations of Blake's "Tyger, Tyger" and "Come on Into My Tropical Garden," by Grace Nichols, I really should have known that he wouldn't read Ladybirds. Matt's eclectic literary tastes ran to the collected works of Sendak, John Burningham, Phoebe Gilman, the Ahlbergs, Tim Wynne-Jones, Barbara Reid, Brian Wildsmith, and works for young children by Grace Nichols, Ted Hughes, Charles Causley and William Mayne. He also had a comprehensive collection of books about construction and transportation. And a large set of *Thomas the Tank Engine* books. He was not interested in lock-stepping through generically authored and illustrated Ladybirds. He was also not interested in entering a competitive race with his classmates through the colour-coded series. Our cosy family time of sharing books with our children (we have another son, Jeremy, two years younger than Matt), established at their infancies, was threatened.

Although Matt still liked having books read to him, he did not want to participate in the schooled Ladybird version of literacy. The nightly reading of Ladybird homework books became a chore all of us resisted. At first Matt complained that it didn't matter which way you read the books. I praised his astute observation. Even though Matt couldn't articulate it, he understood that Ladybirds violated one of the first principles of literate texts: the desire of an author to communicate with a reader. Because Ladybirds are essentially candy-coated word strings, it doesn't matter much if you read the first books from top to bottom or from bottom to top of a page or from back to front of the book or front to back. Night after night, we gritted through the prescribed Ladybird with Matt. My husband was better at it than I was. My dislike of the books was all too evident. As a specialist in children's literature (who publicly advocates the banning of basal readers), the hypocrisy of the situation was wearing me down.

Matt was progressing well enough--but he was quickly learning to dislike reading. He was also learning that pedagogical differences between home and school were not easily resolvable. [1] And finally, I was haunted by an article by Peter Traves, "Reading: the entitlement to be 'properly literate'", in which Traves recounts his own son's realization that he wasn't succeeding with a basal reading series. Traves acknowledges that his son's single year in the school "left a deep and scarring wound on him as a reader and a learner" (79). I didn't want that to happen to my son.

By the middle of his first term, Matt had reluctantly mulched through several colour-coded Ladybirds. As we were about to embark on another, he looked at me and said, "But Mummy, they're all the same!" He was right of course. Again I praised his excellent critical judgement. I suggested he ask his teacher why the books were all the same. He did. She told him it was because they were translations.

After I recovered from the shock of this misinformation, I explained to my son that the books were all the same because they weren't written by authors who had something to communicate -- but rather by



committees who decided what words beginning readers should know. It says so right in the introduction to *Ladybirds*, though the actual text of the message changes to reflect fashions in literacy education. The 1970s introductions to *Ladybirds*, in keeping with the dominant ideology of that time, focused on offering the lowest possible entry point to print, the first building block in an incrementally ordered system: "children who need reading practice will be encouraged by the clear type and relatively simple text. The books in this series of tales are graded according to reading difficulty" (*The Enormous Turnip*, 1970). The 1990s introduction defers to the current ideology dominated by the "Key Stages" in Britain's National Curriculum (the common North American equivalents to key stages are "benchmarks" or "outcomes" or sometimes "targets" -- though the system in Britain is much more formalized and there is national testing at several points in the system.)

The editors of *Ladybirds* pronounce on what words children "should" know. To that end, the books are designed so that children are introduced "to the most commonly used words in the English language (Key Words), plus additional words necessary to tell the story" (*Sleeping Beauty*). A word list follows. The suggestion that "Key Words" has something to do with "Key Stages" seems a shameless marketing strategy. [2] The worst part is that the rephrased introduction announces an unchanged *Ladybird* mandate: a corporate entity interested only in graduated word lists. The emphasis remains on "clear type," "simple text," and "commonly used words." Not making sense. Not pleasure. Not individual difference. That's why the stories are "all the same." *Ladybirds* are identifiable because of their sameness, their uniformity, not their difference. Which brings me to Bakhtin's notion of monologic and polyphonic texts.

The linguistic sameness common to *Ladybird* readers is exactly the sort found in totalitarian states. For Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian critic living and working through some of the major revolutions of the century in his country, totalitarian, single-voiced authority was a daily reality. In *The Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929), Bakhtin sets up an oppositional analysis of Dostoyevsky's discursive practices in his novels, against those of Tolstoy's novels. Dostoyevsky, according to Bakhtin's map, sets up a "polyphonic interplay" between the voices of his characters, while Tolstoy's characters speak with "monological" subordination to the authority of their author. What Bakhtin is really on about in his discussion of monologic texts, is an "authoritarian" language, something he elsewhere calls a "unitary language," which, he says, "gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization . . ." (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 271). He's talking about the way authoritarian monologic language, the language of totalitarian states (and *Ladybirds*) allows no dissenting voices. No questions. All is perfectly clear. Even though neither life nor literature is like that.

Though I'm not suggesting that *Ladybirds* bear the full ideological burden of Stalinist Russia, I do want to point out the dangers of monologic texts that lurk in Canada as well as in "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Over the years, we've been held by the ideological dreams of everything from Disney's *Snow White* (where the happy ending is determined by the coming of the prince), to the virtues of television situation comedy kindly fathers (in the "Father Knows Best" and "The Cosby Show" mould), to the cuteness of smart-ass cartoon kids like Bart Simpson. I've not lost my grip. *Ladybirds* don't have anything like that solid market clout, but they do tend to find favour among those who think any reading material at all is better than television. I don't think so. By citing specific textual examples which demonstrate the monologic quality of the *Ladybird* texts, I'll be able to demonstrate their ideological ground.

Though I've only referred to *Ladybirds* generically so far, I can't put off the moment of truth any longer. Ready? Here's the beginning of *Snow White*:

This is Snow White.  
She is a good girl, and she is beautiful.

More? This is from *Sleeping Beauty*:

Here is the princess.  
She plays with her dog.  
They have fun.

Are you bored yet? Is all that subject-verb-object, flat-footed prose making you sick yet? Is there anything in those passages that distinguishes *Snow White* from *Sleeping Beauty*? Not particularly. In the



Ladybird world, *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* are "good," "happy," and "[t]hey have fun." Jealousy, anger and a sense of injustice are banished from Ladybirds. So is anything that might be culturally or temporally explicit.

No wonder the stories are so boring. They are written in the "authoritative" language of totalitarian states. Bakhtin describes that language in the following passage -- but he might well be talking about the language of Ladybird readers:

Its inertia, its semantic finiteness and calcification, the degree to which it is hard-edged, a thing in its own right, impermissibility of any free stylistic development in relation to it -- all this renders the artistic representation of authoritative discourse impossible. (344)

That's what my six year old son resisted -- the inert, calcified, undifferentiated language of Ladybirds. He resisted their authority.

In Matt's (former) classroom, the Ladybird readers still occupy the privileged space reserved for approved texts. The Ladybirds are tidily housed in a set of custom-made elevated wooden book shelves in a front corner of the classroom (in contrast to the trade books stashed in washbasins, remember, under the desks). The Ladybirds are the same size, shape and page-length, so are virtually indistinguishable from one another. That is also why they fit so neatly on the shelves.

Ladybird illustrations are as monologic as the texts -- but Matt's teacher informed me that she thought children learning to read shouldn't attend to the illustrations anyway. She was obviously working on the premise that the only valuable kind of literacy was in the words, not the pictures. She apparently didn't realize the need to attend to the relationships between parts of a text. In fact it is probably impossible to make sense of a (literary) picture book without understanding the conversations between the word and the pictures. Even in an overtly 'simple' book like *Rosie's Walk*, the text of the hen going for a walk only makes sense in the context of the slapstick comedy of the pictures. As we live in an age dominated by films, rock videos, television and posters, the ability to make sense of relations between words and pictures is a crucial aspect of literacy education.

As the Ladybird pictures are as generic as the texts, there is little conversation going on. The people in Ladybird pictures belong to some indeterminate time and place. Ladybird editors don't appear to care much about authors or illustrators anyway. At least they don't name them on the covers of the books I've seen, though they do appear on the title page. The generic sameness of Ladybird books is more than just offensive. It is also dangerous. It promotes exactly the kind of uncritical thinking totalitarian states find desirable. It shackles interpretive possibilities. It shuts down questions. As teachers of children who have been raised on this stuff will tell you, the result is children who often read in flat monotones, ignore punctuation, inflection, and many of the speech patterns that make sense out of isolated words. The idea that children only learn to read through boring calibrated texts has been challenged coherently for years now, by literacy scholars. I like the distinction Liz Waterland (citing Elaine Moss) makes about the difference between "battery" books and "free range" ones. As Waterland points out, the basal (or "reading-scheme" material, as it is called in England), "is the product of a factory-like approach to literature, exemplified... in the fact that so much of it... comes in shrink-wrapped sets" (161). In *On Being Literate*, Margaret Meek explains the danger this kind of reading instruction poses to literacy:

In this model, learning is sequenced, linear, cumulative. It leaves little room for querying, dissent, alternative points of view.... The reader is at the greatest possible distance from the writer, there is no 'voice' in the pages.... It does not encourage thought or speculation, the important version of, 'Oh now I see.' (171)

Both Margaret Meek and Liz Waterland are, in effect, setting up the same kind of oppositions as does Bakhtin. Texts which close down dissent are not useful in the development of a literate reader. Literacy development requires challenges to textual authority. Ladybirds don't make the grade.

"Real" authors and illustrators, however, challenge the totalitarian authority of basal reading schemes. First reading books produced by people such as Pat Hutchins, Allan Ahlberg and Brian Wildsmith offer polyphonic armies of resistance. Their "free range" books stand in opposition to the totalitarian "battery" books of the Ladybird and basal sort.

At home we continued to offer Matt antidotes to Ladybirds. Very early in the term he learned to value Brian Wildsmith's books for beginning readers: *Cat on the Mat*, *The Nest*, and *All Fall Down* were among



his favourites. The word "Oxford" appears on the covers of the books, and he began to recognize the word as synonymous with "good" books. As Margaret Meek would say, he was demonstrating significant "literary competences." [3] Matt also learned to love *Red Nose Readers*, published by Walker Books, written by Allen Ahlberg and illustrated by Colin McNaughton. All the *Red Nose Readers* (and the Wildsmith books) are very much for children at the very beginning of independent reading, but they are also playful, polyphonic texts, produced by authors and illustrators who like having their names on the covers.

Take *Tell Us a Story* by Allan Ahlberg. It is a "carnavalesque" story, to use another of Bakhtin's terms (this time from Rabelais and his World). *Tell Us a Story* is a perfect example of Bakhtin's definition of carnivalesque: it is a polyphonic, multi-voiced story that invites laughter, resists limits, exploits boundaries, and delights in the bizarre. The central conceit of *Tell Us a Story* develops out an absolutely familiar scene, regularly enacted between parents and children all over the world. In *Tell Us a Story*, the Daddy tells a bedtime story to his sons. But they subvert him at every turn, resisting the tyranny of bedtime.

*Tell Us a Story*, is by its very definition, a polyphonic text. The central conversation between a tired father and his cheerfully subversive sons is played out against other conversations. There are obvious conversations between the narrative, the illustrations, and the cartoon balloon captions. But there are other, more subtle conversations going on. As the book contains four interrelated, very short stories ("The Pig," "The Cat," "The Horse," and "The Cow"), they are in conversation with each other too as variations on a theme. The whole book is in conversation with the lived experience of parents and children likely to be sharing the story at bedtime. And with the tradition of warning examples (against the sin of gluttony) from Aesop to Struwwelpeter.

The father's initial attempt at a bedtime story spins on a pig who gets so fat that he can't eat while sitting down anymore. So the pig stands while eating. The children object. And so begins the conversation of the second little fable, "The Cat":

'That story's no good, Dad,' the little boys said.

'Tell us a better one instead.'

'Right!' said Dad.'

'There was once a cat who ate too much and got so fat he split his fur which he had to mend with a sewing machine and a zip -- The End'.

The accompanying illustration of the cat, round as a ball, trying to zip his fur over his y-front underwear, is a perfect example of the "grotesque body," swollen beyond normal limits, that Bakhtin identifies in *Rabelais and His World* as characteristic of the grotesque. This is not an image that could ever exist in Ladybird land.

In the use of cartoon balloon words, the text itself of *Tell Us A Story* moves outside the limits of the main body of text. The oversize cow who ends the story, for example, has a speaking balloon "Moo!" that occupies most of a page. That would violate the Ladybird rule of "clear type." It also violates the Ladybird world of sameness.

When Matt reads *Tell Us a Story*, he is engaged in the play of it. So is our son Jeremy, and other children with whom I share this book. I'm likely to hear children chanting the poetry with me; doing the balloon words, shouting the loud "Moo!", laughing, and telling others about the jokes. *Tell Us a Story* is a perfect example of a polyphonic text. The pleasure of it stands in sharp contrast to the monologic, totalitarian tedium of the Ladybirds--where there is no shared laughter.

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#### Endnotes:

1. In the maternal literacies research (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) in which I participate, unresolvable conflicts between home and school turned up more frequently than we had anticipated. Parents repeatedly said that they were afraid to pursue concerns about pedagogical practices (my term, not theirs, but it defines the issues in play), lest there be 'repercussions' against their children.



2. There is a subtle irony here which I assume was unintended. One of the most significant Marxist scholars of the 20th century, Raymond Williams, wrote a well known book called *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976). As the book is about ideology he would be horrified to see how his title has been misappropriated.
3. I'm taking the reference from *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, but Margaret Meek has taken it from Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1977).

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