

Status Quo, Current Trend and Hot Issues of Children's Literature Study: An Interview with Professor Maria Nikolajeva

Wang Xiaolan

Abstract: Professor Maria Nicolajeva is the director of Cambridge-Homerton Center for Children's Literature, and the former president of International Research Society for Children's Literature. Specializing in children's literature research for over 40 years, she published more than ten monographs on children's literature, including the widely read works such as *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, *Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature*, and *How Picturebooks Work*. Owing to her great contribution to children's literature study, she was granted International Brothers Grimm Award for lifetime achievement in children's literature research and Distinguished Scholar Award of International Association for the Fantastic in Arts. Wang Xiaolan interviewed Professor Nicolajeva during her visit to the University of Cambridge as a visiting scholar from September 2013 to August 2014. This academic interview covers such topics as the trend of children's literature, approaches to children's literature, status quo and hot issues in children's literature research. Professor Nikolajeva holds that children's literature study must necessarily take into consideration the unequal social and cognitive position of the adult author and the child reader, and that all great art, for children or for adults, is educational in the sense that it tells us something about the world and about ourselves, but it is more important for young readers who so far do not know as much as adults.

Key words: Maria Nicolajeva; children's literature; status quo; trend; hot issues

Author: Wang Xiaolan is professor at School of Foreign Languages, Nanchang Institute of Technology (Nanchang 330099, China), and Ph.D. candidate at School of Chinese Language and Literature, Central China Normal University (Wuhan 430079, China). Her academic interest is British and American literature, and she is currently focusing on British children's literature research. Email: xlwang@nit.edu.cn

标题: 儿童文学研究的现状、趋势和热点——玛丽娅·尼古拉耶娃教授访谈录

内容摘要: 玛丽娅·尼古拉耶娃教授是剑桥大学剑桥-哈默顿儿童文学研究中心主任，曾任国际儿童文学研究学会会长。在她长达 40 年的儿童文学研究生涯中，出版了十几部儿童文学研究专著，包括《儿童文学中的人物修辞》、《儿童文学的美学方法》和《绘本如何说故事》等被国际儿童文学界高度认可的代表作。因其在儿童文学研究领域的杰出贡献，她曾先后被授予格林兄弟国际儿童文学研究终身成就奖和国际奇幻艺术学会杰出学者勋

章。2013 年 9 月至 2014 年 8 月,王晓兰应邀在剑桥-哈默顿儿童文学研究中心访学,并在访学期间对尼古拉耶娃教授进行了学术访谈。该访谈对欧美当代儿童文学现象、儿童文学研究方法视角、儿童文学研究趋势、当下儿童文学研究热点问题等进行了广泛的探讨。尼古拉耶娃教授认为,儿童文学研究必须考虑成人作家和儿童读者之间那种不平等的社会与认知地位;不管是为成人还是为儿童创作的所有伟大艺术,都因其传递有关世界和我们自己的知识而具有教育性,但因儿童的认知能力比成人弱,所以儿童文学比成人文学更具有教诲价值。

关键词: 玛丽娅·尼古拉耶娃; 儿童文学; 现状; 趋势; 热点

作者简介: 王晓兰,南昌工程学院外国语学院教授,华中师范大学文学院博士生,主要研究领域为英美文学,近年来主要从事英国儿童文学研究。

Wang Xiaolan (Wang for short hereafter): Foreign children's literature study is a comparatively new field in China, for most Chinese scholars who can read in foreign languages are engaged in general literature research. It is out of balance that when millions of Chinese children are fascinated with the flood of foreign children's literature works such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* and *Hunger Game*, the academic research of these influential texts is limited. I think there are two main reasons that explain the inadequacy of scholarship on foreign children's literature in China: one is the language barrier, and the other is the difficulty in gaining access to reference books. The situation, however, is improving in recent years, when some young scholars and students began to show an increasing interest in foreign children's literature. I am very happy to have the opportunity to interview you so that the Chinese young scholars and students have opportunity to know something more about children's literature and its research in foreign countries.

Maria Nikolajeva (Nikolajeva for short hereafter): Compared with the general literature research, the history of children's literature research is also short in European countries, and the number of scholars engaged in children's literature is much fewer. I have looked briefly through your questions, and some of them would need a book to address, but I will try to answer them to the best of my ability.

Wang: You have been working in the field of children's literature for more than 40 years, and we know you are a well-recognized scholar in this field. What's more, you have been invited to be the judge of some important children's literature awards like ALMA.^① We believe that you may have a general picture about contemporary children's literature in the world. Can you introduce or comment briefly on the current trends of contemporary children's literature in European and American countries?

Nikolajeva: It is hard to generalize the current trends because the current trends in the UK are different from those in the Netherlands. Also, even in the UK alone, more than 10,000 children's books are published every year, so no one can have a full picture, and it is impossible to generalize the trend from the diverse publications. That said, the part of children's literature that gets attention of critics and practitioners definitely shows clear trends toward complexity, both in terms of treatment of difficult topics and the ways stories are told. After *Harry Potter*, no

one can still claim that children only like short books, with few characters and a straightforward plot. Many children's and young adult books today are read by adults – the phenomenon known as crossover.

Wang: You mention it is impossible to generalize the trend of western children's literature, but I notice there appears in the past decade a dystopian boom, which becomes a hot topic among young readers. In the fictional world of dystopias, the society itself is the antagonist, working against the protagonist's purpose and desire. This dystopian oppression is generally enacted by a totalitarian or authoritarian government, resulting in the loss of civil liberties and unsustainable living conditions. Can we say that dystopian fiction is one of the current trends in the past years?

Nikolajeva: There are, indeed, many dystopian fictions that were published in the past decade, and they attracted successfully readers' interest and critical attention as well in the past years. The most typical is Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*, which is considered to be the most widely read young adult fiction after *Harry Potter*. Sally Gardner's newly published dystopian fiction *Maggot Moon* won not only the Costa children's Book Award but also Carnegie Medal, the most prestigious children's books prize in the UK. It seems that the dystopias have drawn sufficient attention in the past years. Just as the success of *Twilight* stimulated a lot of stories about vampire or zombie, so the success of *Hunger Games* may stimulates a group of followers to write dystopian fiction. Personally, this kind of genre might be short-lived, and dystopian writing as a literary phenomenon is almost over, even though there will definitely be some dystopian narratives that are or will be published.

Wang: Now I agree it is hard to generalize the trends of children's literature, but it seems possible to observe and summarize the current trend of its research, for I know you published a book entitled *Voices from Far Away: Current Trends in International Children's Literature Research* in 1995. Has the trend in children's literature research changed from the time when you published this book? What is the current trend in children's literature research?

Nikolajeva: Concerning research, it is nowadays widely accepted as an academic field, with research centers, masters and PhD programs, conferences, professional organizations and networks. Even though we can find the essays on children's literature criticism as early as in the 18th century, but the really serious and systematic children's literature research did not begin until 1970s, when some important journals on children's literature research and International Research Society for Children's Literature were established, which greatly promote academic research and scholarship into children's literature, and enable researchers in different countries to exchange information, share discussion of professional and theoretical issues. We had some milestones in developing children's literature theories. When the book you mentioned was published 20 years ago, we mainly borrowed the theory from general literature research, cultural studies, pedagogy or psychology to approach children's literature. We nowadays, however, have been developing our own children's literature theories, and we are more specializing in specific genres such as picturebooks and young adult fiction.

Wang: Children's literature study is misunderstood by some people to be simple and easy, not as complicated and difficulty as the adult literature, but I find it is not the case after I

entered this field. It is even extremely difficult to define the basic terms that people are taking for granted. In fact, we still have quite different or even conflicting definitions for such basic terms as “children’s literature”. We may simply define children’s literature as the works written for children and read by them, but there should be some unique qualities or features that separate children’s literature from the adult one. What do you think are the defining qualities or features that are inherent to children’s literature? Compared with adults’ literature, can we say, for example, that children’s literature is simpler in style, more educational in function, more optimistic in tone?

Nikolajeva: To begin with, children’s literature, just as general literature, is not homogeneous. There are hundreds of children’s books that are simple, educational and optimistic, but there are similarly thousands of adult books that are simplistic, ideologically manipulative and predictable. For me, the definition of children’s literature must necessarily take into consideration the unequal social and cognitive position of the adult author and the child reader. The best children’s authors turn this seeming disadvantage into an aesthetic challenge. Good authors, who holds definitely a stronger and higher social and cognitive position, give up their advantaged position by empowering the child, that is, they give voice to the children.

Wang: You have been studying children’s literature for 40 years, and have written more than ten monographs and edited quite a few books on children’s literature, many of which are widely read by scholars all over the world, including Chinese scholars. In these works, you approach children’s literature from quite different perspectives, including aesthetic and cognitive perspective. But it is a pity not everyone is lucky enough to have the opportunity to read all of your important books. Can you summarize briefly the main methods and perspectives you have employed to study children’s literature?

Nikolajeva: I have explored aspects such as the construction of time and space in children’s fiction, the construction of characters, the narrative voice, the issues of power hierarchies, and most recently, the way children’s fiction stimulates young readers’ cognitive and affective engagement. I have borrowed methods and analytic tools from many literary theories: narrative theory, feminist and queer theory, some aspects of psychoanalysis. Mikhail Bakhtin’s comprehensive theory of the novel has been the most influential source for me. I have also written extensively on picturebooks, focusing on how a story is created through the interaction of words and images.

Wang: In your past 40 years of children’s literature research, I think you might have ever met some problems and then happily found solutions to them, for I always meet different problems. As a beginner in this field, I am frequently puzzled by some phenomena and problems, which always take me a long time to find explanation. Is there any problem that puzzles or perplexes you for a long time in your past research? Have you solved it and how did you solve it?

Nikolajeva: I am still puzzled and perplexed by the definition of children’s literature, and I am not the only one. There are so many factors to take into consideration: sociohistorical, aesthetic, educational. And new books all the time make us re-define and re-draw boundaries of children’s literature. In the process of my research, I have different problems or puzzles, which are the starting point of academic programs. Most of my books and articles started with a problem or

a puzzle, and then I explored it until I found a solution that at the moment felt satisfactory.

Wang: The editor's comment from *Children's Literature*, the official journal of the Children's Literature Association, claims that this journal publishes theoretically-based articles that address key issues in the field. What do you think are the current key issues or hot topics in the international children's literature research?

Nikolajeva: I cannot answer this question satisfactorily now, but I may be able to tell you the answer better the next year, for I am invited to make a key-note presentation about this issue in a 2015 conference. The research topics we have just done include cognitive literary studies, visual literacy etc. We are exploring place-based identities through reading and writing, and examining the place, space and its embodiment in children's literature. Cognitive poetics for children's literature, research on digital publications and crossover children's literature are some of the interesting topics our PhD students are addressing.

Wang: There have always been debates concerning the nature or attribute of children's literature, i.e., whether children's literature is essentially aesthetic work or educational vehicle. Many scholars assert it is educational, but very few take pains to address how children's literature achieves its educational purposes, that is, how the young readers learn from children's literature. I am very excited to learn that in your newly published monograph *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* you are examining the cognitive mechanism of children's literature, that is, how children's literature helps readers to acquire the necessary knowledge about the world, the people and himself by means of cognitive criticism. Can we say that reading children's literature helps child readers greatly in their initiation or socialization?

Nikolajeva: Yes, definitely, and as children's literature scholars, we have always known it, but with brain research we now have hard facts to refer to it. All great art, for children or for adults, is educational in the sense that it tells us something about the world and about ourselves. But it is more important for young readers who so far don't know as much as adults. Both adults and children gain knowledge and vicarious experience from excellent narratives, which enrich our life and help us understand ourselves and the world around us. Children's literature is more educational, for children need this kind of experience better.

Wang: You tried approaching children's literature by means of cognitive criticism in your newly-published work *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*, which is undoubtedly the pioneering scholarship in this field. I believe cognitive criticism is a highly useful method to approach children's literature, and will stimulate other scholars to analyze or interpret children's literature texts with cognitive criticism in the future. Can you illustrate its strength and weakness compared with other literary criticism methods?

Nikolajeva: No method or approach is comprehensive; each approach opens a different dimension of a literary text. For me, cognitive criticism has illuminated some of the problems and puzzles I mentioned earlier, namely, the problems about the nature of children's literature. It offers interesting possible answers to some questions, but it can never answer all questions. The weakness, as with many methods, is that it may be tempting to apply it too mechanically, merely using a new set of terminology rather than exploring new aspects of texts.

Wang: I notice you mentioned the ethical aspect in your *Reading for Learning*. When we discuss the ethical issues, it is necessary that we use social norms or moral norms, in which we have some basic concepts of virtue and vice. But we always have empathy with or identify with the fictional heroes such as Harry Potter and Lyra in *His Dark Materials* who sometimes cheat, lie, steal or break rules to fulfill their purposes. In this case, how can a fiction convey the right ethical knowledge to readers, namely, how can readers learn ethically from the fictive role model? If ends justify means, will child readers learn to fulfill their purpose by means of stealing, lying or cheating in actual life as their much admired heroes do in stories?

Nikolajeva: I certainly have problems with this, because ethical knowledge is not inherent, but learned, and young readers may not yet have any firm ethical values. Books can promote such values, but they can also promote or imply values that we as adults do not endorse. Children's writers can be unethical, either subconsciously or consciously, for some purpose, for instance, commercial. But literature also has the power of teaching children to distinguish between fictional characters' values and real-life values. If a reader identify totally with the fictive protagonist, he find that everything the protagonist does is good, and the same action the antagonist takes is unacceptable. But if the reader detaches himself from the characters, stepping back from the fictional world, he begins to understand that no one is absolutely perfect. Teaching the children to detach themselves from the fictional world is the mission of the parents and teachers.

Wang: Thank you for sharing your understanding of children's literature and research experience with us, which, I believe, is greatly beneficial for many scholars or students in the field of children's literature. Can you say something to the young scholars like me as kind of concluding comments?

Nikolajeva: As scholars of children's literature, we have a mission and a responsibility. Unlike practitioners, we do not have any pragmatic goals: to teach children to read, or to teach them to extract morals from stories. As scholars, our goal is to explore the mystery of children's literature: what appeals to young readers and why; what is beneficial and what is potentially dangerous for the unstable young mind; how do adult writers re-create the experience of a young person; how has children's literature developed historically; how it differs within different cultures and why, etc. Reading fiction is a part of children's rights, and as scholars we must try to persuade politicians that reading fiction is valuable.

Note

① ALMA (The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award) is an international children's literary award established by Swedish government in 2002 to honor the Swedish children's writer Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002). The award is presented every year, and the prize is SEK 5 million, making it the richest award in children's literature and the second or third richest literary prize in the world.

责任编辑：四 维