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An Irish Interview with Jerry Griswold on Children's Literary Criticism

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About the Author: [Dr. Julie Anne Stevens](#) is Director of the Masters Program in Children's Literature at St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University. She is also a critic and publishes on Irish literature and the visual arts as well as children's literature. She published a book titled *The Irish Scene in Somerville and Ross* in 2007 and edited a book on the ghost story in 2010. This year, she has a chapter about the New York writer, Elizabeth Enright, coming out. Dr. Stevens has kindly granted permission to include this interview in *The Unjournal*.

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Emeritus professor and international critic of children's books, Jerry Griswold recently retired from lecturing in San Diego State University and tells me during our interview that for the first time in his life he could turn around and ask himself, "Okay, now what was it that I really wanted to do?" The question, his quizzical expression while asking it, and his slightly mocking but still implicit sense of expectation indicate Griswold's greatest strength as a critic – the strength of curiosity, a kind of penetrating and inherently self-aware wonder about life.

In his 2006 study of childhood and children's literature, [Feeling Like a Kid](#), Jerry Griswold speaks of the importance of lightness in writing for children. Lightness not only refers to weight or, more correctly, weightlessness, but also to characteristics such as fluidity, deftness, and humour. Humour especially. There is no doubt that Jerry Griswold sees humour as a 'high art' and in his book he speaks more generally of a 'Party of Lightness,' a group that resists having too much gravity in life, and with a kind of tongue in cheek humour he quotes Oscar Wilde, "Life is too important to be taken seriously."

Jerry Griswold belongs to the Party of Lightness in the sense that his criticism of children's books is graced with a similar deftness and humour that he deploys with such skill in his study of the writings of Mark Twain, Hugh Loftus, Robert Louis Stevenson, George MacDonald, or Pamela Travers. I mention mainly the nineteenth century writers because he is especially good when discussing their works and he makes them accessible for readers accustomed to the movie versions of the same. Indeed, Griswold also writes about film; he moves fluidly between the genres, like some sort of shape-shifting commentator. His writings about children's literature for the New York Times or the LA Times consider film, illustrated books, novels, and these newspaper articles and reviews are marked with the same grace and yet swift penetration we find in his longer studies like the award-winning [Audacious Kids](#) of 1992 or his study of the fairy tale called [The Meanings of Beauty and the Beast](#) of 2004.

I would like to say that the grace of Griswold's thought and prose comes from his Irish background but that would be relying on stereotype—just as likely is the impact of his growing up in Montana and his love of children's literature. The children's literary critic, Perry Nodelman, notes the "complexity of apparently simple books" in this field of study – "complex books that work very hard to appear simple." In a similar way, Jerry Griswold's criticism can be disarmingly charming but needing

much further consideration and thought. His book Feeling Like a Kid is like this. The Irish critic, Robert Dunbar, [reviewed the book](#) for the Irish magazine, Inis, in 2007 and noted the 'seductive thesis' at the heart of the critique – that children's literature allows us to "glimpse and come to comprehend (or recall) what it feels like to be a kid."

What do you think makes a good critic of children's literature?

Besides the usual (superior intelligence, infallible judgement, a "good ear," scrupulous honesty), it seems to me that the ideal critic of children's literature should have read everything. Everything. Not just children's books but adult fiction and nonfiction, the classics, literature, science. Boethius, Banville, Galileo, Pullman. Really. Everything!

On another note... I have noticed that the very top critics in this field are well dressed and have a sense of fashion. I don't count myself among them.

Do you think that literary theory should inform children's literary criticism and, if so, what do you think works especially well with children's books?

I think, inevitably, literary theory influences the way critics approach children's literature: I'm only sorry that it doesn't seem to work the other way, as well. As for literary approaches that I recommend, I think it's important not to put the cart before the horse. I'm from the use-the-right-tool-for-the-job school. Rather than coerce a text into some Procrustean theoretical mold, I think the work being examined dictates approaches that are apropos.

That said, let me add that a few years ago I gave a lecture in Massachusetts and at the end this scholar stood up and asked me where I got such and such an idea, where I had read it and what thinkers it had come from, I was flummoxed; I mean, really silenced for a minute or two. Finally, I said, almost apologetically, "It comes from my experience. See if the idea squares with your own experience and if it doesn't, throw it out." It says something about academia these days that she seemed puzzled by my reply.

To what extent does a good critic of children's books encourage good book reading?

To a great extent, and involuntarily. Enthusiasm is communicable. When we talk about this, we should use such terms as “outbreak,” “transmission,” “cluster,” and “virulence.”

Does the critic of children's books work within constraints of any kind?

Of course. There are many, many kinds of constraints. In February, for example, in a [passing remark](#) in the *New York Times*, I criticized the Tea Party for rewriting America's revolutionary history in nonsensical ways; shortly thereafter, a right-wing U.S. congressman from Florida had his staff investigating my university and the funding sources of the research center I was then directing. If you're talking about constraints, however, I'll tell you what's worse: Being told to review a book in 600 to 800 words. It used to be twice that, in the pre-Twitter era.

Does he/she need think of classroom requirements or moral questions?

Many of my students eventually become schoolteachers, but I never thought about that much. Then one day one of my own offspring came home from school carrying an obscure paperback that I had used in my children's literature classes years before, and it dawned on me that what I was doing had some effect on what was being taught in San Diego County. My former pupils had grown up, become teachers, and now made curricular decisions that affected the half million school kids in my county. To be frank, that realization paralyzed me: “How could I ever draw up a booklist for my classes again?” I finally had to put that idea out of my head and deal with things close at hand.

In that regard, just because your students are future schoolteachers doesn't mean that you need to offer a class of higher moral calibre or always be mindful of morality. I think something is off kilter when you feel you should ratchet up your rectitude before crossing the threshold into the classroom. Not to make too fine a point about it, simply to say what others have said, but being a good person seems to me an all-the-time thing – whether you're standing at a university podium or buying milk at

the Spar store on the corner. It's seamless. You bring your everyday life, and who you are, to class.

Do you think the critic guides public taste and influences book sales?

Well, it works both ways. Sometimes public taste and book sales influence the critic. I endured months and months of hectoring by friends and students before I went to a store looking for a book by someone called J.K. Rowling. That book, incidentally, had been on the bestseller lists for quite a few seasons. But sometimes the influence thing works the other way.

I was lucky to get the assignment to [review Kate DiCamillo's *The Tale of Desperaux*](#) for the New York Times Book Review. I loved the book and praised it to the stars. Some weeks later her offering won the Newbery Award, the top prize in American children's books and (like the Man Booker Prize, say) something that is immediately translatable into increased sales and oodles of dollars. Noting how this increase followed my laudatory review, my joke at the time was: "Where's my check?"

Of course, a critic can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and I couldn't have made something out of DiCamillo if she wasn't a genuine talent and real genius; indeed, from this promising debut, she has continued on to an illustrious career. I simply pointed out her gifts in a highly visible milieu, and others subsequently confirmed my opinion. But the story doesn't end there. Let me tell you the sequel.

A former student of mine has gone into publishing and met Kate DiCamillo at a convention. They started talking and put two-and-two together until DiCamillo realized the connection and said, "You know, that's the only review I ever framed. It's hanging in my house. Every author dreams of receiving, once in their life, a review like that." Of course, when that story got back to me, I was immensely touched. I didn't know what to do but I can tell you what my first impulse was: to call her up and propose marriage.