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כל הזכויות שמורות למכללה האקדמית לחינוך גורדון



תקצירי המסות והמאמרים

לקיחה וספרות ילדים

שרה גלעד

סדרת ספרי הפנטזיה של מרי נורטון, *הלקחנים*, מתמקדת על גזע דמיוני של יצורים דמויי אנוש שגובהם כשישה אינצ'ים. במונח "לקיחה" נוקטים הם לשון נקיה כאשר למעשה הם מתכוונים לגניבה. "לקיחה" היא אמצעי המחיה שלהם והיא מתארת מצב קיומי לא בטוח באופן מסוכן, שיש לו השלכות אפילו לבעיית הסוביקט המודרני והמנוכר. בהיותם תדיר על סף קטסטרופה טראגית או קומית, הלקחנים הם דמויות שוליות וחסרות שורשים. בדומה לאדם המודרני, הלקחנים אינם יכולים להעזר בנראטיב על או בגבולות שניתן לסמוך עליהם.

Abstracts

Borrowing and Children's Literature

Sarah Gilead

Mary Norton's fantasy series, *The Borrowers*, centers on an imaginary humanoid race of people, about 6 inches tall. "Borrowing," their euphemism for theft, is their means of survival and describes a condition of life that is dangerously uncertain, even implying the problem of the modern alienated subject. Perpetually on the verge of comic or tragic catastrophe, the Borrowers are marginal, rootless figures. Like modern humanity, no master narrative or reliable boundaries sustain them.

Opening Essay

Borrowing and Children's Literature

Sarah Gilead

The Borrowers is the title of the first book in a series of five fantasy stories for children by Mary Norton. Three books appeared in the 1950's, one in the 60's, and the last in the early 80's. The above phrase, "for children," is indeed in quotation marks, since children's literature, with rare exceptions, is by hence in some sense, for adults: written, edited, marketed, bought, and read by adults at each stage of production. This crucial built-in anomaly, to which I will recur below, largely defines the genre. The term, "Borrowers," names both the series and the imaginary humanoid race of people, about six inches tall, whose adventures constitute that series: "Borrowers" is what they call themselves. The human figures shift from book to book, but the Borrower protagonists remain constant, and include the members of a small (in both senses of the word) family, father Pod, mother Homily, and daughter Arrietty, who ages from 14 to 17 throughout the series, and whose life-history falls into the familiar pattern of the Bildungsroman – or, almost does. Our Borrowers are a respectable nuclear family living in what appears to be pre-World War I England. Pod is a skilled laborer and

handyman, Homily keeps house and cooks, Arrietty helps her mother and learns her lessons. Yet these Borrowers are in fact thieves, surviving by "borrowing" human-produced food, clothing, furnishings, and *objets d'art*. While Pod is a skilled and courageous provider for his family, his "work" is stealing, repairing, and reconditioning "borrowed" objects, and of course necessities such as food and clothing (or, material that Homily can fashion into clothing). The Borrowers themselves produce nothing, and "borrowing," their own euphemism for theft, describes a condition of life that is dangerously uncertain as well as morally doubtful. We recall that the first book in the series was published only a few years after the end of the second world war, and indeed the very titles of the books in the series emphasize the fact that the Borrowers are recurrent refugees and exiles: *The Borrowers Afield*, *The Borrowers Afloat*, *The Borrowers Aloft*, and, finally, *The Borrowers Avenged*. Even when "at home," they are more like secret, parasitical interlopers who must hide from human eyes behind walls and under floorboards, in the crannies and interstices of human homes. To be seen is to court persecution and death, or, at best, flight in the hope of finding a new hideaway.

Such marginalized figures appear frequently in children's literature, sometimes as child-figures. It is fairly obvious how many of the Borrowers' traits are "borrowed" from the general condition of children, dependent on adults who may be kind or cruel, but who remain large, powerful beings, at least potentially dangerous. However, to read the

Borrowers as fantasy representatives of children's psyches and lives would be to oversimplify. Most contemporary literary critics are well aware that the adult producers of children's literature construct figures of the "child" or of other "little people" that partly reflect, and partly challenge, dominant cultural concepts of the child, and "children's" writers may do so for a wide range of thematic interests beyond that of children and childhood. In other words, the adult writers and readers of children's literature are themselves borrowers of the literary terrain nominally "belonging" to children. The reverse is equally true, the adult "owners" of the genre allowing children to borrow it. Mary Norton, in hitting upon the multivalent term, "borrowers" - the title of the first book in the series, the whole series, and the species-name of the protagonists - has in fact quite wittily inserted a self-reflexive generic metaphor in the heart of her fantasy series.

Children's literature depends on several sorts of conceptual, generic, and intertextual borrowings just as surely as the six-inch characters depend on material borrowing for their survival. The Borrowers themselves are borrowed from Swift's Lilliputians from *Gulliver's Travels*, but even that borrowing is indirect - it is probable that Mary Norton borrowed the idea of borrowing the Lilliputians from a more recent precursor, T. H. White, whose children's fantasy novel, *Mistress Masham's Repose*, appeared in 1942, and more directly appropriates Swift. The little people of White's book are described as direct, familial

descendants of the Lilliputians, still living eighteenth-century cultural lives in World War II Britain. Borrowed, too, are the constant perceptual shifts generated by miniaturizing. Both Swift and Lewis Carroll brilliantly deploy such shifts - the small is small from the ordinary adult reader's point of view, but from the perspective of the small, the ordinary is monstrously huge; and the small, when we perceive it close up, is magnified, filling our entire field of vision. Such perceptual fluctuations underscore conceptual ones, whereby conventional categories of meaning (moral, spatial, temporal, existential) become fluid or ambiguous.

The Borrowers series represents the general condition of children's literature, its tendency to raid precursor texts (both adult and children's), and its own smallness: popularly, and even in today's canon-and-genre-challenging academic world, children's literature as a scholarly field remains smaller than the "big" genres, and is thought to be less serious, less important, less prestigious. Just as the physical smallness of the Borrower characters is an apt metaphor for this generic situation, and just as the Borrowers are abjected, distorted images of their larger human cousins, so children's literature remains afflicted with a "sizist" bias, its close kinship with "big" literature often unacknowledged. It is clear that children's literature does not just reduce or simplify "larger" texts or genres, but tends to parody, satire, and subversion. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, with its own metaphorical "smallness"

signaled in its very title, borrows Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Is the latter work merely a didactic, updated, secular version of Bunyan's Christian allegory, made suitable for the nineteenth-century child (girl) reader? A plethora of critical studies argues otherwise, and suggests that distortion, not to say subversion, may be an inevitable consequence of literary borrowing. Despite Alcott's respectful bowing to Christianity, in *Little Women* religious faith and practice are quite marginal to the four girls' "progress" – if indeed the "progress" of the girls toward the equivocal condition of growing into "little women" be "progress" at all. Of course, children's texts inspire, or inhabit, adult texts, too. Surprisingly, Andersen's Little Mermaid floats into Fay Weldon's darkly satirical *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and allusions to classic children's works appear throughout modern and contemporary poetry, film, pop music, advertisements, and so on. Borrowers can dwell all but unnoticed in any human nook or cranny, and just as they can live almost anywhere in human structures, so children's literature as a cultural force is surprisingly widespread, and has its own methods of penetrating discourses and media.

The Borrowers own nothing, but must borrow the very food they eat, the clothes they wear, the walls that shelter them. Hence, the relationship between Borrower and human is at once intimate and alien, familiar and horrifying. If we look closely, that is, through the Borrowers' eyes, at the most ordinary objects – an onion, a postage stamp, a

pencil, a matchbox – defamiliarization sets in. Human detritus becomes household treasures, and the reverse is equally true: the Borrowers' households and used objects are always collapsing into piles of trash as the Borrowers are repeatedly discovered and routed out of their secret places. The Borrowers' intimacy with the material, physical world of humans – eating their food (at times, partly eaten food), recycling human clothing and objects – does not mitigate the alienness of human beings, who remain dangerously unpredictable giants. The Borrowers wisely tell each other, you can tame a human, but one day he'll break out. And however fond some few humans become of the toy-like Borrowers, for other humans, Borrowers are mere things to be owned and exploited as freaks, or viewed as frightful pests and vermin who should be exterminated – and this, despite the evident appearance of the Borrowers as miniature doubles of human beings, capable of human speech, feelings, and behaviors.

Since Borrower and human are mirror images of each other, the uncanniness, the alienness of each to the other points to the problem of the modern subject as alien to itself, as an incoherent compilation of self-reflecting images, without essence. The metaphor of borrowing points to the problem of representing the human subject, as well as encapsulating the ways in which this problem energizes children's literature. Almost by definition, the "small" protagonists of children's literature are the "subjects" of adult storytellers, and as such they indeed inhabit adult

narrative and discursive structures. In the simplest sense, adult writers construct stories about invented children, and this activity may be thought to mirror or to participate in the cultural construction of childhood – whether Romantic, or Evangelical, or Freudian – the invention of childhood that forms part of the cultural construction of the subject. Those same stories may also function as sites of resistance to such constructions, frequently representing the arbitrariness of such. We recall Alice in the White Rabbit's house, somehow turned into Mary Anne, a servant – not at all her real self; but if her real self is Alice – who is she? Is she perhaps Mabel? And if not, why not? The caterpillar asks her, Who are you? In Wonderland – as often in children's literature – the answer is not quite forthcoming. In children's literature, adult writers and readers obsessively invent childhood, perhaps as a means of healing a felt breach in the self, but such inventions simultaneously expose that very breach, or at least the anxiety that it exists.

The Borrowers are obsessed with gathering human (that is alien) things – not only to survive, but to enjoy, to display, even in the absence of guests, audience, visitors, or society to display them to. The things they gather, even if they have no use-value – a chess-piece as parlor statuary, stamps as wall hangings, a plaster dish of tarts – help them define themselves to themselves. But how is self defined by non-self? For Borrowers, the things they collect are alien in multiple senses: not theirs to begin with, neither created nor

owned by them, and the products of beings who are at once like them and monstrously other.

Borrowing also implies narration itself. In the series, each new book and almost every new episode depends on borrowing, describes or dramatizes borrowing – the characters must borrow to survive, but borrowing exposes them to humans, such exposure also threatening their ability to survive. Once exposed, they must flee, re-establish themselves, and re-invent their borrowing methods. *The Borrowers* series relies on a strictly logical system of episodic repetition, as well as on the above-discussed intertextuality that defines all narratives as they raid prior cultural and literary genres, texts, and discourses. Borrowing figures the very act of literary production, transferring signifiers from one signifying system to another. Similarly, the way we define ourselves not only to others or to society but to our very selves, depends on "lendings" both material and ideological. Consciousness is only present to itself through the shifting and usually unacknowledged systems of borrowings, mirroring, and reflections. The Borrowers, like termites or cockroaches or rats, live hidden in the gaps and in-between places of what might appear to be solid human structures. The Borrowers' very existence effectively diminishes the reality of those structures, and reveals their solidity to be permeated with fissures and cracks. If the Borrowers' tiny home-spaces prove fragile shelters easily reduced to piles of trash, so do human cultural constructs rest on echoing emptiness. For

the Borrowers, no essences exist, no permanency. No systems sustain them, neither of metaphysics nor of community. If they mimic the modern condition, are they to be admired for their persistence and ability to adapt, or pitied for their unstable, fear-ridden, diminished lives? Do they serve as warning or as consolation? Their very mobility is poised between liberty and desperation, and their stories are perpetually on the edge of comic or tragic catastrophe.

Unlike many classic works of children's literature, the adventures recounted in *The Borrowers* series do not end in homecoming. The Borrowers repeatedly create, then lose, homes, and this recurs so frequently that the very concept of "home" is vitiated. In fact, even when they enjoy a long stretch of safety, their sense of being at home is illusory: as secretive, wary, frightened "guests" in human houses, they are never at home. In contrast, and despite some unavoidable interpretive ambiguities, we recall that Dorothy returns to Kansas, Alice wakes up in England, Bilbo comes back to the Shire, three of the March girls marry and establish families that resemble the idealized marriage of their parents – the narratives of such classic works end with some form of closure and return to the familiar. True, the once-familiar may be transformed in some way, or at least perceived differently by the returning protagonist, but at least the concluding "home" implies some shelter from existential dread, some investiture of final significance, some accommodation of self to world. Mary Norton

reminds us, through her first narrator, Mrs. May, that "stories never really end," just that "at a certain point, one stops telling them" (158). The Borrowers are always seeking home, are always homesick, and always homeless. The paradox, discussed above, of the familiar and the alien, seems to define their endless, yet never abandoned, search for home. The more complete – that is, human – the structures they attempt to inhabit, the more dangerous they are. In *The Borrowers Aloft*, for a time, though a very brief time, they live cozily in a perfect model home, part of an elaborate model railway and village: a home complete with all the modern conveniences, in what seems like an almost-true imitation of human life. Soon, however, they are discovered by unscrupulous humans, kidnapped, imprisoned, and very nearly placed on display for cash. The Borrowers are perpetually rediscovering that for them a human home is contaminated by its very perfection, and inevitably brings them under dangerous human surveillance, sometimes kindly, sometimes cruel, but always leading to danger and flight. Equal in force to their desire for comfort and stability is their desire for authenticity. Dependence on all-powerful human patrons makes them uneasy, yet some form of such dependence is necessary to their very survival, and defines who they are. Humans, to the Borrowers, are transcendent others; even when invisible, they are the providers of the means of life. At the same time, they are unreliable and dangerous.

For modern humanity, no master narrative, no authorized structures, no reliable boundaries define value, meaning, or personal identity. The concept of an ultimate author, other, or authority has become suspect. Yet without transcendence, life-histories are shapeless, without origin or end or final homecoming. The Borrowers obsessively seek and flee both human beings and human homes, improvising as they go along, perpetually at a new starting point. Mary Norton did say, in her Carnegie Medal address (1952) that her series “has something of the whole human dilemma – a microcosm of our world and the powers that rule us” (Kuznets 77),¹ but the series resists stable or specific allegorical interpretation. That, too, is appropriate. For us moderns, no reading is authorized, no interpretation possesses a text's meaning – we can make forays into texts, borrowing from them what we think we need, what we hope we will be able to use.

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¹ The reference appears in Kuznets' article (77) – “Notes 16 and 17 (76-77): Quoted in "Norton, Mary 1903" *Something About the Author* 18 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1980), 239.

