


Nodelman, Perry. *A Completely Different Place*. New
At the outset, I have to admit what might appear shameful to readers of this journal: unlike Perry Nodelman, I do not love reading children’s books. Or rather, I love some children’s books, but when I look at the stack of pleasure reading that awaits me once I have finished writing this essay and have finished the term in mid-May, there is not a single children’s book in the stack. I see several volumes of poetry, a couple of books about music, and several novels: the one I most want to read, because I think *Oryx and Crake* is a masterpiece, is Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*. I doubt I would have read Perry Nodelman’s children’s fiction had I not been asked to write about it here. Having read it, I can report that Nodelman’s fiction clearly satisfies many of the various criteria for children’s fiction delineated in his recent book-length study *The Hidden Adult*, but I cannot read it without thinking constantly of the shadow text of Perry Nodelman the critic and what I know of Perry Nodelman the person.

In *The Hidden Adult*, Perry Nodelman is scrupulous about describing his subject position: “male, short of stature and slight of build, more or less masculine, and more or less heterosexual,” of “Central European” origin, “Jewish but not religious,” “Canadian,” born in the 1940s into a culture of white male privilege (82). He does not identify himself as a writer for children except in his bio note on the back cover, or rather he does not draw explicitly on his experience as a writer for children (primarily those between the ages of eight and twelve or ten and fourteen, according to his publishers). *The Hidden Adult* is not children’s fiction, of course, but a work of “Literary Theory and History” (according to the book jacket) in which Nodelman unfolds an extended argument that children’s literature may be defined by its generic characteristics—that, indeed, it constitutes its own genre. It is a provocative, learned, monumental work by one of the most important and thoughtful critics in the field. It is a work I find endlessly
fascinating and consistently useful for my own writing and thinking about childhood and children’s literature. It is, as Beverly Lyon Clark’s jacket blurb announces, “arguably [Nodelman’s] magnum opus.” I confess that I felt somewhat intimidated when I was asked to write this review essay, as I have read *The Hidden Adult* many times and find it of inexhaustible value in ways that I cannot always fully articulate: one of the book’s main virtues is that its arguments cannot be easily summarized.

*The Hidden Adult* is such a rich text because it draws on Nodelman’s career-long devotion to the field of children’s literature; indeed, as a field of academic study, children’s literature owes a great deal to his work as a critic. Nodelman is that rare critic who is comfortable as both a theoretical critic and a practical critic: he was also for many years an exemplary editor of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* and more recently of *CCL/LCJ*, the precursor to this journal. I have been an avid, admiring, and sometimes contentious reader of Perry Nodelman the critic since the mid-1980s when I was still in graduate school, even before I found myself somewhat accidentally but willingly transformed into a children’s literature scholar. Because I have long admired Nodelman’s devoted critical attention to the work of other writers and critics, I welcomed the opportunity to honour his work by paying close attention to it. I was not familiar with his work as a writer of children’s fiction, however. Now that I have become familiar with it, I remain somewhat uncertain of the wisdom of discussing the creative work alongside the critical work. I am reminded of Randall Jarrell’s anecdote about critics at a Wordsworth conference being patronizing to “poor Wordsworth.” “The critics could not help being conscious of the difference between themselves and Wordsworth,” writes Jarrell; “*they* knew how poems and novels were put together, and Wordsworth and my [novelist] friend didn’t, but had just put them together. In the same way, if a pig wandered up to you during a bacon-judging contest, you would say impatiently, ‘Go away, pig! What do you know about bacon?’” (283–84). Nodelman has put together a considerable number of novels but seems to maintain an informal boundary between his critical writing and his creative writing. I am unsure of why Nodelman maintains this separation between critic and creative writer in *The Hidden Adult*, especially since he discusses his first novel *The Same Place but Different* (and a young reader’s response to it) in his 2000 essay “Pleasure and Genre,” in which he rehearses many of the ideas that he elaborates in *The Hidden Adult*. As a poet and a poetry critic myself, I do understand the ways in which writers tend to see a conflict between their critical work and their creative work. I also know first-hand that writing criticism about writers that one considers exemplary can shake one’s confidence in one’s own ability. Immersing myself in the work of Elizabeth Bishop, as I have lately, I have often exclaimed...
about my own poetry, as Jarrell once remarked about poets’ reactions to Auden’s technical mastery, “Well, back to my greeting cards” (273).

While I do write poetry, I am not a novelist and I have never tried to write for an audience of children. I look at those who do with awe and wonder because I think it has to be a very difficult thing. So perhaps it is no surprise that, when Nodelman discusses his inspiration and creative process, he invests it with a mystery that is more typical of authors’ than of critics’ explanations. Recounting the inspiration for his first novel, The Same Place but Different, for instance, he tells us that he kept hearing the narrator Johnny Nesbit’s voice in his head after reading Katherine Briggs’s Encyclopedia of Fairies (“About”). As a writer, I understand the ambivalence (and sometimes the paralysis) engendered by the critical/creative binary; reading The Hidden Adult in light of Nodelman’s children’s fiction, I could not help but think that the adult/child binary that undergirds his theory was perhaps analogous to the critical/creative one. In any event, thinking about how the process of creative writing might or might not differ from the process of critical writing raises questions about Nodelman’s taxonomy of children’s literature, which I will address later in this essay.

Nodelman has been a published children’s writer since 1994, but he has been working on defining children’s literature for much longer. In a 1980 review essay in Children’s Literature titled “Defining Children’s Literature,” Nodelman advanced the kernel of the thesis of The Hidden Adult:

E. B. White’s Charlotte’s Web and Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings are fantasies; Louise Fitzhugh’s Harriet the Spy and James Joyce’s
“Araby” depict young people facing the limitations of a real environment. But *Charlotte’s Web* is more like *Harriet the Spy* than like *Lord of the Rings; Harriet the Spy* more like *Charlotte’s Web* than like “Araby.” Beyond anything else, *Charlotte’s Web* and *Harriet the Spy* are children’s novels; and saying that they are children’s novels gets closer to describing their special qualities than saying that one is a fantasy and one is not. (184)

Beginning *The Hidden Adult* with an exhaustive analysis of six texts—Maria Edgeworth’s “The Purple Jar” (1796), Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Hugh Lofting’s *Dr. Doolittle* (1920), Beverly Cleary’s *Henry Huggins* (1950), Ezra Jack Keats’s *The Snowy Day* (1962), and Virginia Hamilton’s *Plain City* (1993)—Nodelman argues that this “diverse group of texts” all “have one thing in common: most people would identify them as ‘children’s literature’” (2). His discussion of these texts (and indeed the method of the entire book) is, happily, exploratory, in keeping with the pedagogy that he and Mavis Reimer employ in *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*. In *Pleasures*, the reader observes the authors teasing out the strands of their arguments, inviting disagreement, and even arguing with themselves along the way; Nodelman employs a similar method here.

The most important insight of *The Hidden Adult* is that children’s texts “invite child readers to share [adults’] nostalgia . . . to view their own current childhoods nostalgically as something to value for its relative innocence and simplicity. In a sense, the text invites child readers to develop a double consciousness—to be both delightfully childlike and separate from that childlikeness, viewing and understanding it from an adult perspective” (46). While adult writers are ambivalent about childhood (and indeed it is just such ambivalence that may lead adult writers to write for children), children’s texts invite child readers to share this ambivalence. If every children’s text has its hidden adult shadow text, it is one that child readers are aware of to varying degrees: “the dichotomous ambivalence of children’s literature is so thoroughgoing that an awareness of it is invited from all its implied readers” (185). “For children,” Nodelman writes, “to be ambivalent about childhood is, exactly, to be ambivalent about oneself—to have a divided sense of what one is or ought to be. Children’s literature not only expresses ambivalence about childhood, but also, and perhaps most centrally, invites its readers to share it. It is characteristically a literature that addresses a divided child reader” (185). Nodelman argues further that the implied adult reader of children’s texts may not be all that different from the implied child reader:

the single implied reader of these texts, whether a child or an adult, is expected to experience a double awareness of the events described, seeing
them simultaneously or, perhaps, in turn, in both “childlike” and non-“childlike” ways. What distinguishes these texts is not necessarily that they can be read in one way or the other but that they seem to invite a reading by both child and adult readers with an awareness of both. (209–10)

In “Readers: Characterized, Implied, Actual,” her editorial to the Winter 2010 issue of this journal, Mavis Reimer cites David Rudd and Anthony Pavlik’s introduction to the special Fall 2010 issue of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, “The (Im)Possibility of Children’s Fiction: Rose Twenty-Five Years On,” in which they argue that prior to the 1984 publication of Jacqueline Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan* “critical discourse often stopped at ‘celebrating the aesthetic and literary qualities of texts’ on the way to ‘finding books suitable for children of different ages and backgrounds’” (1). I do not know about the “celebrating” part, but I am interested in the aesthetic and literary qualities of texts, even as I recognize that aesthetic judgments and literariness are hardly transcendent or sacrosanct qualities. Frankly, I am more interested in them than I am in the project of defining children’s literature.

Reimer’s insight into the relationship between implied and actual readers of children’s texts illuminates at least one misgiving I have about *The Hidden Adult*, however. As Reimer notes, the assumption that the “[a]ctual or ‘real’ readers who respond with engaged pleasure to a text are usually assumed to be taking up the role of the implied reader offered to them” (5) (what Aidan Chambers calls the “implicated reader”) is not necessarily true. The implicated reader is not the only possible position that actual readers may assume. One possibility is that a child reader may be a resisting reader. More often than not, Nodelman seems to equate the implied reader with implicated actual ones. Nodelman argues that the implied reader of children’s texts is an “intuitive reader,” while the resisting reader (the position he assumes as a critic) is largely a member of an interpretive community of other adult scholars. Near the conclusion of the first section of Chapter 2, “Reading as an Adult,” however, he does insist that this “adult” mode of reading is or should be made available to children:

I believe that children, too, can share these modes of reading and understanding and might also be better off for it. Many children, not educated otherwise, might be intuitive readers. . . . But I have no reason to believe they must be intuitive readers—that they are incapable of being anything else, that they cannot become resisting readers and think at odds with the intentions of the texts. (90)

I wish there were more moments like this in *The Hidden Adult*, more discussion of children’s potential agency, but I fear that Nodelman’s insistence on the
child/adult relationship as inherently binary and inherently oppositional precludes or at least obscures such an emphasis. While I endorse wholeheartedly Nodelman’s belief “that awareness is both beneficial and pleasurable—and that despite the quite different sort of pleasure they offer, intuitive readings are well worth sacrificing for awareness—even or especially for children” (90), I wonder if these are our only choices.

In a response to the prototype essay “Pleasure and Genre,” Margaret R. Higonnet raises issues that I believe Nodelman did not adequately address in his response essay, “The Urge to Sameness,” and that remain problematic in The Hidden Adult. By focusing primarily on narrative, Higonnet suggests, Nodelman misses identifying “the multiplicity of pleasures that children’s literature affords”:

There is no disputing the pleasure of narrative. But it is accompanied by many others—a pride not of lions but of pleasures.

Children’s literature accompanies the transition from preverbal to verbal childhood. It accompanies us through the rest of our lives, a point that Nodelman makes forcefully. If we focus on the moment of language acquisition, we can see why puns, homonyms, rhymes, nonsense terms, metaphors, or even catachreses cause such delight. (34)

Higonnet points to “pleasure in acquiring language, . . . in probing character, in recognizing familiar tones captured in dialogue, in atuning all one’s senses. Whereas most narrative tends to drive toward closure, other aspects of verbal art expand within the reader’s mind, producing not a pride in superiority but a pride in growth. These, too, are the pleasures of those who read children’s books” (36).

Like Higonnet, I do not buy Nodelman’s insistence that children’s literature is essentially children’s narrative fiction. To be sure, he anticipates objections like mine and explains his insistence on clinging to the “dangerous assumption” that “fiction is the essential, typical form of children’s literature and that poetry, drama, and nonfiction are marginal subforms with specific distinguishing characteristics of their own” (95). I am not persuaded that the best way to define a genre is to reject sub-genres that trouble and complicate one’s generalizing. In any event, Nodelman’s focus on such things as point of view, ideological dissonance, and narrative plot lines cannot account for forms that emphasize language, play, and performance. As impressive as his definition of children’s literature is, it is incomplete.

In her book Radical Children’s Literature, Kimberly Reynolds makes a compelling case for children’s literature as a site of literary innovation and experiment. “Children’s literature,” argues Reynolds, “contributes to the creation of new genres and kinds of writing” and
fosters “aesthetic and social innovation and transformation” as well
a “generic hybridity” (19). Nodelman cites her book, but I believe
he does not grapple fully with this fundamental insight. He engages
with what he sees as misguided arguments by Eliza Dresang and
Maria Nikolajeva, who discuss what they see as radical innovation
in recent children’s texts by “postula[ting] that the changes
children’s literature undergoes with the passing of time” are both
evolutionary and revolutionary (276), but he does not fully contend
with Reynolds’s argument that children’s literature has always
demonstrated a capacity for innovation. Nodelman would, I am sure,
concede this point, but in his wish to “account for the underlying
sameness in texts for children produced in different times and
places” (248), he has downplayed the centrality of language play for
both writers and readers of children’s literature and, consequently,
downplayed the variety and difference of children’s texts (including
genres outside of fiction) in favour of discovering sameness. While
I am not denying that what Nodelman memorably calls “the binary
obsession at the heart of children’s literature” (231) is powerfully
present in many texts or denying the ambivalence of the implied
readers of children’s literature, I do want to say that an insistence
on the generic qualities of children’s fiction as representative of
children’s literature as a whole tends to obscure the importance of
children’s texts that are not works of fiction, and it cannot account
for aesthetic innovation—or aesthetic judgments—in particular.

Nor do those generic qualities account for much of what gives
me pleasure as a reader, and this may be the key to my ambivalence
about Nodelman’s own fiction for children. Crafting a successful
novel involves planning, plotting, revising, revising again, as well
as working with an editor and sometimes, in Nodelman’s case, with
a co-author. It involves playing with (and struggling with) language. I take Nodelman at his word that it was language—a voice inside his head, a voice that evolved into the character and narrator Johnny Nesbit—that inspired him to write fiction, and I will go out on a limb and speculate that imagining a character and his language preceded Nodelman’s thinking about a specific audience of children. It is not surprising that a person who loves to read children’s books (as Nodelman does) should want to write children’s books, but I imagine that the process of creating child narrators like Johnny Nesbit or Bradley Gold or Sally Cohen is, for their adult creator, complicated in ways that Nodelman’s theory would have trouble accounting for fully.

In his discussion of the forty-five common features of his six exemplary texts in *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman notes that, while their “focalization is childlike, the texts are not first-person narratives. They report the protagonists’ perceptions by means of third-person narrators who often report or imply perceptions at odds with those of the protagonist” (77). The novels Nodelman wrote as sole author are first-person narratives. As he notes, however, “the hidden adult” is equally present in books with first-person child narrators since “it seems unlikely that the children imagined as readers even for [those texts] are expected to actually believe a child wrote the words” (212). As I read the novels, I tried to imagine myself in the position of a child reader who enjoyed the texts because, probably more than most readers, I found it hard to enter the fictional universe of the two male narrators, Johnny Nesbit and Bradley Gold, who both seem to share the smart, often sarcastic, wonderfully opinionated style of Perry Nodelman. Call it a failure to muster a willing suspension of disbelief, perhaps, but I was also unable to occupy an adult reading position fully because I was distracted by my awareness of the artificiality of the narrative voice. I was also distracted by thinking of Nodelman as a critic of children’s books, and whenever I spotted what I thought might be an allusion to thinking about other children’s literature, I was further distracted by speculating, rather unfruitfully, about whether Nodelman’s allusions were deliberate. While reading *The Same Place but Different* I thought of changeling tales and specifically about why a text like Maurice Sendak’s *Outside over There* both fascinates and scares the bejesus out of me. I wondered if Nodelman named his character Johnny Nesbit after E. Nesbit; although her works are not the specific intertexts he mentions in his author’s note, their magical realism resembles that in Nodelman’s children’s books, particularly *A Completely Different Place* and *Of Two Minds*, both of which feature magic that has unintended consequences. In “Pleasure and Genre,” Nodelman describes this sort of magical realism as characteristic of the children’s fiction he most enjoys. I share his taste in this, so why did I have a hard time reading Nodelman’s books for fun? Perhaps the blend of humour and horror does not
work for me (although the same blend works very well in the more formulaic Ghosthunters books). For some reason, I have had trouble imagining any perspective other than an adult critic who writes about children’s literature, among other things. Because I tend to worry about language more than plot, what I perceive as false notes may loom a lot larger for me than they would for most readers. For instance, I did not much like Johnny Nesbit’s habit of concocting clever, sarcastic similes, such as “Mom gave me the look she always gives me when we have this conversation. Sort of like the queen of England watching a skunk spray one of her corgies [sic]” (Same Place 2). Nevertheless, I tend to think that this must be a shortcoming on my part, since I feel like Kay in Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Snow Queen”: surely there is some splinter lodged in my eye that is preventing me from seeing clearly. My adult, non-childlike side expected the pleasures of literary fiction and my imagined childlike side expected to be absorbed in the narrative, perhaps to experience it more intuitively.

I probably would have liked these books when I was a child. Like Johnny and Bradley, I was bookish, geeky, not particularly athletic, and not particularly popular. I read fairy tales and science fiction, the Oz books, the Narnia books, and Edward Eager. I often felt at odds with classmates, and with teachers and other figures of authority. Perhaps my failure to be captivated as an adult stems from my insufficient doubleness. I have a hard time locating exactly what “childlike” and non-“childlike” positions I am to assume in order to appreciate the Nesbit books truly. Perhaps because I am very fond of academic satire, I found more to enjoy in Behaving Bradley. Yes, Brad employs the same sort of annoying similes as Johnny—“Yeah, sure—and next week Attila the Hun will rise from the dead and make a million-selling single about peace and brotherhood” (27)—but he seems to me to be a better developed character. The novel is a good illustration of children’s fiction’s tendency “both to confirm adult culture and subvert what it confirms, both to be subversive and to subvert its own subversions” (Hidden 187).

Brad ostensibly sees through the hypocrisy and incompetence of adults, like his Language Arts teacher, Mrs. Tennyson, as a smart-arsed eleventh grader, but considering the number of college students I have had to disabuse of the high school commencement exercise reading of Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” I suspect that it is the hidden adult primarily responsible for the amusing send-up of well-meaning, but rotten, teachers like Mrs. T. And, of course, there is the conservatism of the satiric fiction genre at play here. Like most academic satire, Behaving Bradley mounts a scathing critique of the institution (high school, in this case) and ends with the institution remaining remarkably impervious to change. “I’m beginning to notice a pattern here,” Brad observes near the end of the novel. “The pattern is that having a Code of Conduct...
hasn’t changed any of the conduct. The pattern is that everyone around here behaves just as badly as they always did” (225). Similarly, the critique of consumerism in A Meeting of Minds (in which the protagonists interact with authors Carol M. and Perry N.) reveals the hidden adult agenda. Leonora and Coren’s horrified response to the Winnipeg shopping mall does not strike me as typical of the responses of most teenagers.

I was surprised to find that I enjoyed some of the more formulaic books, such as those in Matas and Nodelman’s Ghosthunters series, more than the “literary” fiction; I preferred the Ghosthunters books to the more prestigious Minds books. I was even more interested in Not a Nickel to Spare, which is presumably the most formulaic, since it was written according to a publisher’s formula: the Dear Canada series guidelines. I suspect the reason for this is the transparency of the designs of formula fiction on me and on what I perceive to be the implied child reader (which the publisher tells me is a child between the ages of nine and twelve—in the case of Nickel, the implied reader is a girl as well). Nickel is geared primarily toward instruction—and instructed I was, in that I had known next to nothing about the severity of the Great Depression in Canada and had no idea that anti-Semitism was as virulent in Toronto in the 1930s as it was in the USA. I did notice that a lot of the girls who comment on the Dear Canada books tend to love them all and that they seem to value them because they reflect either their own tween angst or their developing empathy. Eleven-year-old Jessica comments on the Scholastic Canada website: “Not a Nickel to Spare was a really good read. I loved the detail and it was also very sad but I will never forget the story. That is how you know when you read a good book.”

The Proof that Ghosts Exist is geared primarily toward delight and is well-written, light entertainment that mixes horror with humour. With its brother and sister protagonists, it is apparently designed to appeal to both boys and girls. Logical Molly and overly imaginative Adam try to protect their father from a family curse—male Barnetts die on the eve of their thirty-fifth birthday—encounter the ghost of their grandfather, and contend with various malevolent forces leading up to the promise of a sequel. In the first sequel, The Curse of the Evening Eye, the children accompany their father to a film festival in Palm Springs, ultimately to embark on a treasure hunt that will continue in the third book, The Hunt for the Haunted Elephant. These novels celebrate supernatural pyrotechnics, culinary wish fulfillment, and family solidarity.

As in the literary novels, the children in these series novels are innocent and wise at once, are both threatened and protected by adults, gain insight (about prejudice, poverty, and violence in the case of Sally, about the supernatural world in the case of Molly and Adam), but retain the wonder and potential of their childlike selves. Not a Nickel to Spare follows the Dear Canada formula by providing an epilogue that accounts
for the narrator’s adulthood and a historical note with documents; these call attention to the fact that, in the novel proper, the narrator/protagonist remains a child—the narrator with whom the child reader presumably identifies is sequestered from the “Where are they now?” ending and the educational apparatus. Sally’s adult life, the epilogue tells us, turns out to entail both disappointments and joys. Some of her ambitions are thwarted, people marry, work, die—the usual adult stuff.

To the extent that the adult content in these books is manifest rather than hidden, the opposition between childhood and adulthood, especially in the more formulaic books, seems obvious rather than ambivalent. Quoting his own 1985 essay “Interpretation and the Apparent Sameness of Children’s Novels” in his discussion of repetition, Nodelman says, “Most children’s books are ‘simple,’ undetailed, and consequently so similar to each other that their generic similarities and their evocation of archetypes are breathtakingly obvious” (233). Near the end of this 1985 essay, Nodelman speculates that “interpretation as we usually practice it [in writing about adult literature] can only show that a children’s novel is indeed a children’s novel[,] it cannot tell us what we still want to know, and what it does often seem to tell us about adult books: how unique books are unique” (“Interpretation” 20). Since he suggests that our usual assumptions about interpretation may be flawed (“Interpretation” 6), perhaps Nodelman is no longer interested in “uniqueness,” but, at the end of “A Comprehensive Statement?” in the concluding section of Chapter 3 of *The Hidden Adult*, he also suggests that “when specific texts don’t match the description [of children’s literature as a genre] their divergence from it tend [sic] to be what is most interesting and most thought-
provoking about them” (243–44). Thought-provoking texts—such as Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, all of which Nodelman discusses in his final chapter—distinguish themselves from run-of-the-mill children’s books because they “reveal an awareness of and account for the entire spectrum of contradictory possibilities” inherent in the binary nature of the genre itself. They have the “uniquely comprehensive ability to imply the scope and subtleties of children’s literature as a whole” (326). Enjoyable, entertaining, and instructive as they often are, Nodelman’s children’s books for the most part do not seem to me to have the same “uniquely comprehensive ability” and for me they fall short of being truly “thought-provoking.” For this actual adult reader, they illustrate the characteristics of children’s fiction that Nodelman discusses in *The Hidden Adult* and *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature* in that they give pleasure to their dual adult and child implied readers, but they fall short in that they do not provide the satisfying language play of texts such as Potter’s.

As I intimated earlier, this may be my failure as a reader and a critic as much as, or even more than, a failure of the novels themselves. Like the critics at the bacon contest, I have never put a novel together, nor have I put together a grand and very persuasive meta-theoretical definition of children’s literature. Even though he does not often bring his experience as a creative writer directly to bear on his critical work, it now seems apparent to me that Nodelman’s creative practice and his entrance into the marketplace of children’s literature has allowed him insights into the relationship between children’s books and their implied and, indeed, their actual readers. Foremost among those insights is how complicated the transaction between writer and addressee is in the writing and reception of seemingly simple children’s books. At the end of a recent essay in which he reassesses the impact of *The Case of Peter Pan*, Nodelman writes, “In a perverse way, [Rose’s book] may even have shown me how to have more pleasure in other, less obviously subtle, books, by opening a door to ways of perceiving their actual subtlety and understanding their part in the fascinating if often unsettling phenomenon of adults writing for children” (“Former” 241). I am sure that his own participation in that “fascinating if often unsettling phenomenon” of writing for children has enriched the subtlety of his criticism as his recent essay in the pages of this journal, “The Mirror Staged: Images of Babies in Baby Books,” so ably demonstrates. Near the beginning of this essay, I questioned the wisdom of considering Nodelman’s creative work alongside his critical work, but, as I draw to a close, I am convinced that becoming a novelist has made Nodelman’s sharp critical eye that much sharper. Furthermore, attempting to account for my ambivalence about that creative work has helped me to articulate both the value and some of the limitations that I perceive in the criticism. Nodelman writes in *The
Hidden Adult that his “passion for [children’s] texts is not predicated on or committed to blindness about them. I want to love them in the context of an awareness of their qualities and effects. I start with the assumption that they can withstand scrutiny” (90). All in all, my increased awareness of Perry Nodelman’s work as both critic and creative writer affirms that it does indeed withstand scrutiny.

Notes

1 Nodelman dates the story 1801, but “The Purple Jar” first appeared in the first edition of Edgeworth’s first book for children, The Parent’s Assistant (1796) and was later removed from that collection when it was published in Early Lessons (1801). See Myers, “Socializing Rosamond” 56n3.

2 For accounts of Nodelman’s creative process, including his use of first-person narration, see his commentary on writing fiction on his website (“Fiction”), especially his discussion of his first novel (“About”). See also his contribution to an archived Childlit discussion on first-person narration in children’s books (“First”).

Works Cited


