The initial impetus for this panel was an email discussion between Perry Nodelman and me that began after Perry sent his book chapter “Discovery: My Name Is Elizabeth” to me after its publication. In response to that chapter and to his subsequent review essay in *Jeunesse* entitled “The Disappearing Childhood of Children’s Literature Studies,” I told Perry that I thought he was misrepresenting my positions on children’s agency in those essays and he suggested that we organize a panel for ChLA to explore these disagreements. After some back-and-forth email exchanges, we decided to propose our panel and to invite Marah Gubar and Sara L. Schwebel to participate with us in it. Our aim was to present short position papers and to allow for a lot of time for discussion at the panel.

**Introduction: Disputing the Role of Agency in Children’s Literature and Culture**
— Richard Flynn

The papers in this forum were first presented as part of a panel entitled “Children’s Agency: A Panel Discussion on Divergent Critical Models,” hosted by the Children’s Literature Association (ChLA) and held at the University of South Carolina on 18 June 2014.

**Divergent Perspectives on Children’s Agency**
Various circumstances conspired to derail our plans. First, Marah had to withdraw from the panel in order to move from Pittsburgh to her new position at MIT. Then, thanks to United Airlines, Perry was unable to attend the conference in Columbia, SC. I ended up reading both my paper and his, and Sara and I conducted the lively question and answer period that followed. In the course of that discussion period, an audience member suggested that perhaps our differences had to do primarily with our competing definitions of agency. Reading our revised and expanded contributions to this forum, each of us having had the opportunity to engage with one another’s essays, it seems to me that sometimes we are talking about the same thing and sometimes we are not.

In her contribution to the forum on “Keywords and the Cultures of Young People” published in the previous issue of this journal, Kristine Alexander argues that “‘agency,’ a term embraced by child and youth scholars from a range of fields, needs to be rethought and used far more critically” (120). Alexander notes a tendency among childhood studies critics to equate “agency” with “resistance,” an equation that perhaps is too easily assumed in the implicit definitions of agency in our essays here. Likewise, her fellow contributor Lisa Weems advocates rethinking the use of the term “[r]esistance” (134) by paying attention to the concept of “intimacy,” drawn from affect theory, “as an analytic category [that] lends itself to the study of affects, logics, and structures that includes—but does not stop at—the level of individual (interpersonal) identities” and that extends to “spatial relations between bodies, systems, and environments” (137). “Resistance,” Weems argues, “needs to be reimagined and nuanced in relation to an understanding of the dangerous, productive, and seductive nature of power. Resistance not only is about fighting an outside oppressive force but also includes dealing with the affective dimensions of difference, conflict, and the struggle of everyday life.” Advocating “intimacy” as a potential “tool to analyze textual and visual representations of childhood and youth as ethnographic subjects, literary characters, and historical figures” might help us “complicate[] notions of power and agency beyond the binaries of oppression/resistance or fear/confidence that structure nostalgia and protectionism” (144).

My fellow contributor Sara Schwebel has pointed out to me that discussions of “agency” are far less common in children’s literature studies than they are in childhood studies. She points out, for instance, that while a recent book by Florian Esser and his collaborators on agency and childhood studies begins with the notion that “[a]gency is, without question, one of the key concepts, possibly the key concept, in Childhood Studies” (17), there is no entry for “agency” in Philip Nel and Lissa Paul’s Keywords for Children’s Literature. The contributors to this forum are all primarily literary scholars whose main objects of study
are not children but literary texts and contexts. Our differences seem to arise from the ways in which we view implied or actual child readers in their relation to adult-shaped discourse and the ways in which we view children as active or passive in their relationships with literary and cultural texts. Some of us are more confident than others about how easily the construct “childhood” (or “adulthood,” for that matter) can be defined, whereas some of us are more comfortable than others about defining “children’s literature” as a distinct genre.

There is certainly some tension between “childhood studies” and “children’s literature and cultural studies.” Nevertheless, as Lynne Vallone points out, “a number of different [literary] scholars, including Richard Flynn, Elizabeth Goodenough, Nina Christensen, Kenneth Kidd, and Thomas Travisano, among others, have begun a vigorous discussion about the productive relationship between children’s literature and childhood studies” (243–44). As far as I know, my own short essay “The Intersection of Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies” was the first to propose such a relationship. According to Vallone, however, the relationship between the humanities and the social sciences has produced a “fissure in childhood studies” analogous to that between those “who study living children” and those whose research involves historical and cultural “representations of children or children’s culture” (244). Some of the contributors to this forum are relatively comfortable with this “fissure,” as Schwebel suggests in her contribution; others are not.

The forum begins with my response to the two aforementioned essays by Nodelman, in which I defend my argument and the arguments of other critics, including fellow contributor Marah Gubar, that children may participate in the making of their own cultures. Embracing Robin Bernstein’s critique of a “top-down understanding of children’s culture” (28), I reject Nodelman’s caricature of this position as a form of Pollyannaism and his charge that I am engaging in wishful thinking and of believing “that children’s literature is primarily benign because children can resist its efforts to grasp them” (Nodelman, “Discovery” 52). In my response, I argue that Nodelman selectively quotes me and other critics, ascribing implications where no such intentions exist—in my case, he takes me to task for my remark that, in addition to recognizing the ways in which children are interpellated by adult ideologies, we should pay more attention to the ways in which children can be both capable and resisting readers. He characterizes this position as constituting a “disturbing” rejection of criticism that “point[s] out the extent to which texts might influence children repressively” (52). As I argue in my essay, rather than reject criticism that points out the repressive aspects of texts, what I reject is the automatic and, to my mind, the numbingly repetitive insistence on suspicious readings of children’s
texts to the exclusion of other kinds of analyses. I do not include Nodelman as a practitioner of this sort of criticism. Nevertheless, I would say that the proliferation of formulaic political approaches to children’s literature as fundamentally oppositional is perhaps an unintentional consequence of his insistence on the binary nature of children’s literature.

In his contribution to this forum, Nodelman clarifies his positions and also articulates his objection to recent trends in children’s literary and cultural studies that fail to emphasize the ways in which texts “can manipulate readers in ways that readers may not actually approve of” but instead invite agreement about forms of obviousness that their authors and their authors’ cultures take for granted. He is especially critical of the recent turn in literary studies against suspicious or symptomatic reading, as proposed by critics such as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their essay “Surface Reading,” and he insists that criticism is “a form of political activism,” “disputing [their] implication that literary criticism does not effect change.” While I would dispute that the children’s literature critics he names (including me) dismiss “ideologically oriented critical practices” to “simply” focus “on positive examples of young people responding creatively enough to texts to avoid being . . . affected by them” in ways that are “less negative, more comforting and more optimistic,” it is apparent that Nodelman sees a widespread trend in children’s literary and cultural studies toward readings that “imply that children’s literature itself might be more benign than it actually is” (“Disappearing” 158). One of the virtues of his present essay is that he makes explicit the implicit argument of The Hidden Adult that the “potentially resisting child reader” was the reason behind his writing the book in the first place. It is precisely through the critic’s suspicious reading, Nodelman argues, that the “hidden child” might be taught modes of reading that will foster his or her agency.

Questions of agency are certainly central in the field of childhood studies. In her introduction to The Children’s Table, Anna Mae Duane writes, “As an endeavor that focuses on children with the intent of locating and studying their agency, childhood studies defies the easy divisions of biology and culture, body and book” (3). “Actual children,” she adds, “raise uncomfortable questions that complicate the stance that authority is inherently oppressive and that subversion and resistance are unqualified positives” (7). From her perspective as a historian, Schwebel expresses skepticism about the possibility of studying and locating children’s agency, not because such agency does not exist, but because “the evidence of this agency is particularly difficult to locate and particularly challenging to interpret.” This is a problem with the available sources that document children’s interactions with texts, interactions that, Schwebel argues, are generally highly mediated by adults.
and adult institutions. Since it is difficult to access "children’s genuine ideas about the books they have read," it is preferable to analyze what we do have access to, “the way in which adults consciously and unconsciously shape children’s interactions with books.” Like Nodelman, she sees this activity as fostering children’s agency rather than denying it.

Nodelman takes issue in his essay with Marah Gubar’s earlier formulation of “the kinship model” that she introduced in her manifesto “Risky Business: Talking about Children in Children’s Literature Criticism.” In her contribution to this forum, Gubar elaborates on this theory, drawing on both the insights of childhood studies and the philosophy of childhood. While she does not dismiss “the important work of analyzing how adult-authored children’s texts disseminate ideologies that might prove harmful to minors,” she calls on critics to make room for other important work, such as children’s writing, collaborative work with adults, and their transformation of received texts to generate their own texts. She argues not for a rejection of ideological criticism in favour of benign criticism, but rather she argues against the hegemony of “a paradigm that characterizes youth involvement in youth culture as negligible, largely inaccessible, and virtually impossible to analyze.”

Since I am on record in my contribution as being sympathetic to Gubar’s kinship model, I will not pretend to be disinterested here, but I believe that, while there are real differences among the four of us in this forum, we also share kindred values or, at least, related concerns. When I asked the contributors to offer questions or observations about common themes that I might raise in this introduction, they raised important questions. What is the nature of the distinction between children and adults? What do we mean when we say that children have voice or agency? If criticism is a form of activism, what sort of activism should it undertake? While I am not sure that I agree entirely with Nodelman’s sense that recent theoretical trends in children’s literature criticism promote a kind of political quietism, he raised in his response to my request an important question that perhaps readers of these essays will explore in the future. Elaborating on the question of the agency of the critic discussed in his contribution, he raises the question of the current crisis in the academy. In present times, when our labour is undervalued, increasingly impermanent, and contingent on the whims of institutional and national discourses, are we being rendered more timid as scholars, forced to deprive ourselves of the agency to promote change? Schwebel finds this question particularly resonant as she and her colleagues are finding their curricula increasingly subject to state mandates and rubrics that dictate the pedagogical focus in their college classrooms. Whatever different emphases each of us might take in helping children become more capable, increasing their agency, all of us share the concern that true education—which,
while imperfect, once encouraged inquiry, play, critical thinking, creativity and pleasure—is increasingly being displaced by state-mandated testing, officially approved syllabi, rubrics, and corporate "content." In my own view, then, the kinship model is not inconsistent with ideological concerns and a commitment to activism. While we may not talk about agency in the same terms, each of us aims to use our criticism to advocate for children’s well-being. For all of our differences and misunderstandings, each of us has a good-faith commitment to empowering young people and helping them negotiate an increasingly difficult culture. We hope that the lively debate that follows will generate further complication and contention and, more importantly, that we can turn that contentiousness toward conversation.

**Works Cited**


