

MARIA NIKOLAJEVA
**READING FOR LEARNING:
Cognitive Approaches to Children's
Literature**

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Maria Nikolajeva's *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature* (2014) makes a compelling argument for the usefulness of cognitive literary theory in the analysis of children's literature. Nikolajeva positions her work as an effort to bridge the disciplines of educational theory and literary study, asking this: "If literature is [...] a powerful implement for enlightening the reader, for conveying knowledge, for building citizenship, how exactly does this work; what is the mechanism of the epistemic value of literature specifically targeting an audience that purportedly has a different cognitive capacity than the sender?" (3). Nikolajeva believes that cognitive criticism helps answer these questions. She defines cognitive criticism as "a cross-disciplinary approach to reading, literacy, and literature that suggests rethinking the literary activity as such [...], including interaction between readers and works of literature, but also *the ways literary texts are constructed to maximise, or perhaps rather optimise reader engagement*" (4, italics in the original). Within this paradigm, cognitive literary criticism involves not only the interactions between readers and authors, but also "the relationship between representation and its referent in the perceptible world" (4). She acknowledges that "while reader-response theories deal with *how* readers interact or transact with fiction, cognitive criticism also encompasses the question of *why* this interaction/transaction is possible" (8). Key concepts throughout the book interrogate representation, perception, temporality, memory, and other aspects of cognition, including emotion, dreaming, and ethical decision-making. That cognition is an embodied phenomenon is also a foundational assumption in this work: "Our engagement with fiction is not transcendental; it is firmly anchored in the body, both within the body and the body's position in space and time" (10).

Rather than refer to “child” and “adult” readers, Nikolajeva uses the more useful (and less age-bound) terms “novice” and “expert” reader—since many children and adolescents can, indeed, be expert readers themselves, while adults new to literacy can be novice readers. In four major sections, Nikolajeva examines novice readers and cognition as she alternates between chapters that advance the theoretical apparatus of cognitive literary criticism and those that are more applied cognitive readings of children’s texts. The first section investigates how children’s literature interacts with children’s cognition in helping them gain “knowledge of the world”; the second involves how children’s texts help children gain cognitive “knowledge of other people”; the third involves “knowledge of self,” and the fourth involves “ethical knowledge” (v-vi). In all cases, Nikolajeva is asking both educators and literary scholars to perform close readings specifically focused on cognitive activities, such as knowledge acquisition, emotion and empathy, or ethical decision-making. The work is highly interdisciplinary in bringing together scholarship from the following fields: cognitive psychology, linguistics, childhood development and educational theory, semiotics, and literary theories—including but not limited to children’s literature theory, narrative theory, reader-response theory, and multi-modal theory. The result is a way of thinking about children’s literature that is both sophisticated and complex.

Nikolajeva, for instance, pays close attention to how literary texts evoke emotions. How do stories convey emotion? What do stories teach children about emotion? How do picturebooks and novels convey emotion differently? By way of example, her reading of *The Secret Garden* demonstrates how cognitive theory helps provide an interpretation that differs from previous readings of the novel. She acknowledges that *The Secret Garden* is typically interpreted as a plot-driven novel focused more on external events than on the interiority of the characters. As Nikolajeva points out, Mary is too old for the type of self-talk that dominates much of her interior dialogue, “but it is a convenient narrative device” (133). Far more important, Nikolajeva asserts, is the way the text depicts emotionality as hard-wired: “In *The Secret Garden*, the protagonist’s emotions are represented rather than explicitly stated, and are frequently connected to body movement, vision, tactile and olfactory perception” (134). Mary—and by extension, readers—experience more complex emotions, too, which Nikolajeva labels “social emotions” (134), and the text allows us access to Mary’s mind, fostering “Theory of Mind”—the “ability to understand other people’s thoughts independently of

one's own" (17). Some of Nikolajeva's strongest work involves her analysis of Theory of Mind at work in children's texts.

Nikolajeva also demonstrates how children's literature specifically challenges Genette's narrative model "due to the position of the implied reader, who can cognitively align with young protagonists and young narrators, but not with adult narrators, even when they focalise young protagonists" (142-43). Because the cognition of child narrators is limited to an implied st(age) of development, child narrators demonstrate narrative cognition in unique ways. Nikolajeva also debunks myths about authors relying on childhood memories, and she delineates the ways that narrators in children's fiction are bound by conventions that are perhaps more cognitive than literary in their origins.

Throughout, Nikolajeva analyzes children's literature as a tool that teaches children, not in a didactic/moral sense, but as an ethical encounter that has the potential to expand children's cognitive abilities. "We cannot perhaps claim with confidence that we become better individuals through reading (although as educators and reading promoters we certainly make such claims); but we are undeniably affected by interaction with literature and the arts, which all philosophy of art, from Plato and Aristotle to the present day, has been concerned with" (179); she concludes the work with these words: "In plain words, reading indeed makes us better human beings, which as mediators of children's literature we certainly must seize upon" (228). Reading changes us, Nikolajeva asserts, and her study interrogates both why and how, with the emphasis more on *why* than *how*. She insists – acknowledging that others might interpret her claim as being over-stated: "To put it a bit grandly, [reading] is essential for our survival" (226). She perceives children's fiction to be a special category because "children's fiction, at its best, takes its audience into consideration and adjusts the form and content of fiction to the cognitive and emotional level of its implied readers [...]. [S]uccessful children's fiction challenges its audiences cognitively and affectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other elements of mental processes," including ethical decision-making (227).

One of the most intriguing aspects of Nikolajeva's work includes a certain anti-Lacanian sentiment when she asserts that "emotions are, unlike language, non-linear, unstructured and diffuse, and therefore language is an inadequate medium to represent emotions" (134). Although Nikolajeva never says so directly, she seems to be implying that the unconscious is *not* structured like a language – an intelligent

and sensitive insight for which I applaud her. Her emphasis on the neurological aspects of thought, emotion, language and a variety of cognitive activities are thorough, convincing, and timely.

Nikolajeva identifies four ways that cognitive literary studies can positively affect the study of children's literature: first, by arguing for the importance of reading and literacy, including "intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical" literacies (227); second, by acknowledging the unique cognitive position of the implied reader (and by extension, narrators in—and real readers of—children's fiction, too); third, by providing new readings that allow us to think about texts differently, as for example, Nikolajeva demonstrates when she analyzes Lyra's relative affect-lessness in the *His Dark Materials* series: no one in her culture needs empathy because daemons visibly perform emotions, obviating the culture's need for Theory of Mind; and fourth, by "confirm[ing] claims that [...] reading fiction is not only beneficial, but indispensable for our cognitive and emotional development" (228). Nikolajeva's study of cognition is methodologically rigorous, logical, and astute. The arguments she makes based on her study of cognition thus offer sensitive insights into childhood reading and its importance to the human condition. The work is a brilliant and convincing homage to the role of cognitive literary study within children's literature.

At a May 2014 conference in Cambridge on cognitive theory in children's literature, some of the senior scholars in attendance derided cognitive literary criticism as "the Emperor's new clothes," arguing that this methodology is nothing but a new name for reader-response theory. Anyone who reads Nikolajeva's work will recognize the anti-intellectual nature of such a dismissal. Nikolajeva has elegantly demonstrated how the biologically-embodied human brain interacts with a text to learn, to change, perhaps to grow. She succeeds admirably in answering her initial question that asks not *what* a reader experiences during the reading process but *how* the reading experience is even possible and *why* that interaction matters.

Roberta Seelinger Trites
Distinguished Professor of English
Department of English
Illinois State University