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*Published in:*  
International Research in Children's Literature

Published: 01/07/2020

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
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[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*  
Druker, E., Sundmark, B., Warnqvist, Å., & Österlund, M. (2020). Editorial: Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature. *International Research in Children's Literature*, 13(Supplement), v-viii. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201148106>

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Editorial

## Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature

*Elina Druker, Björn Sundmark, Åsa Warnqvist, Mia Österlund*

*Music is the silence between the notes  
(Claude Debussy)*

'Silence and silencing in children's literature' was the theme of the 24 biennial congress of the IRCL held in Stockholm 14-18 August, 2019. For this special issue of *IRCL* we have chosen a handful of the articles presented at the congress. These texts come in different keys, modalities, and registers, and offer different responses to the theme, but all offer thought-provoking and stimulating insights, and are attuned to the original call. It is a small selection, admittedly, and it was difficult to choose from the more than 420 papers that were delivered, not least given our growing awareness that the process of selection itself can become a silencing strategy. As academics and critics we always have to ask which voices are heard, recorded, written, published – and be aware of our own roles.

Of course, already the vetting and selection of paper and panel proposals in the months leading up to the congress had shown us just how complicated the process of selection, evaluation, and clustering of the papers into themed sessions could be. The sheer numbers who responded to the call for papers was almost overwhelming! It showed us that the theme resonated with the community of children's literature scholars and critics, and that silence and silencing are central to children's literature and to the critical discourse about it.

One reason is the rich complexity of the theme.

To begin with, silence can be both positive and negative. Silence can be actual and real, as in the safe, silent space of the library. It can be silent solitary reading, or the experience of wordless, silent picturebooks. Silence, moreover, can be part of the fiction, as in numerous representations of voiceless characters in children's literature, such as the mute boy Bronze in Gao Wenxuan's novel *Bronze and Sunflower*, the Little Mermaid in H. C. Andersen's fairy tale, the ominous Groke in Tove Jansson's Moomin books, or the unresponsive silent adults in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*.

Silence can also relate to aesthetics and form. Karen Coats's article, featured here, carries the title 'Line Breaks, Page Turns, and Gutters: Formal Moments of Silence in Children's Texts' and explores silence in its formal dimensions, as a rhetorical and aesthetic choice conveyed through visual and verbal metaphors in various genres. Coats examines those 'moments in texts where words and sometimes images are suspended in favour of deliberately positioned or curated visual or oral/aural blank spaces.'

If *silence* is an ambiguous quality and condition – sometimes positive, sometimes negative – *silencing* is almost unequivocally associated with repressive disciplinarian ideas of childhood, or through censorship and repression. Many such silences and lacunae of children's literature were examined and voiced during the congress. Taboo subjects and banned children's books were brought to light. Some of the papers concerned the repression of languages and classes of people. Herdiana Hakim's article "'Unsilencing" Chinese Indonesians through Children's Literature' belongs to this category. It is about censorship and the silencing of Chinese Indonesian culture and traditions. Hakim studies the situation during Suharto's regime, which ended in 1998, and the subsequent 'unsilencing' of the Chinese in Indonesia. Hakim's analytical approach thus focuses on when the mechanisms of silencing are revealed.

Silence can also be the result of less nefarious policies than censorship and repression. It can be the absence of certain perspectives or topics, or simply the lack of access to literature, or the result of a combination of factors, such as monopolies, the logic of the market place, and playing it safe ideologically. Faye Dorcas Yung's article 'The Silencing of Children's Literature Publishing in Hong Kong' on the difficult situation for children's literature publishing in Hong Kong, deals with publishing under precisely such multiple 'silencing' conditions. She notes that 'the Hong Kong voice is all but a tiny whisper in the Hong Kong children's literature market,' and is able to show that the combination of demanding economic conditions, an indirectly state-owned monopoly, and publishers' small market mentality, have led to a loss of locally published children's books, a condition unlikely to be unique to that region.

From an educational perspective, children's fictions can often be seen as implicated in a widespread and deeply rooted discourse of silence and silencing, which draws on the idea that 'children should be seen but not heard.' Note, in this context, that even the most innocent of activities, the traditional lullaby (as well as other soporific children's genres), aim at putting children to sleep, to silencing them. It can, moreover, be argued that the discursive silencing

of children has been particularly influential in educational practices, even extending towards the regulation of 'free' time and after-school activities.

Children's fictions have been, and are still, implicated in this discourse. If Orientalism is a discourse that silences non-Western perspectives, and patriarchy is a discourse that works towards the disempowerment and silencing of women, one can certainly maintain that children are othered, disenfranchised and muted in similar ways. Hence, in traditional didactic children's literature we can find many texts that either directly or indirectly advocate that children should be silent. It can even be argued that reading itself may be an effective silencing strategy. A reading child causes no disturbance, an aspect of reading often overlooked and rarely critically examined.

But children's literature is not just a discursive practice for silencing children. It is also a tool for empowerment, a means of giving children a voice. Many of the papers presented during the congress focused on, for instance, loud and raucous children, child agency and voice, on music and sound. Thus, texts that challenge the silent child ideal are also key to unpacking the theme. Ultimately, all of the articles explore the ways in which silence and silencing (or their opposites, 'sound' and 'voicing') work in children's fictions through representations and reading practices. Anna Kerchy's 'The Acoustics of Nonsense in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Tales*' shows on the one hand how Carroll's classic text is preoccupied with noise and voice and sound, and on the other, how nonsense and narrative can serve to liberate children's voices and imaginings. Kerchy shows how nonsense invites child readers to interact with the text, to immerse themselves in the 'sensorial acoustic qualities of discourse.' Nonsense, moreover, stimulates children to:

picture sounds, imagine sign-language, talk with/as animals, and fantasise about the functioning of language beyond customary verbal registers of signification. These nonsense fairy-tale fantasies, then, outline an egalitarian agenda that makes heard the socially 'othered' whose voice and autonomy are often stifled.

Finally, Vanessa Joosen's keynote from the opening of the congress is reproduced here almost verbatim; it sums up and discusses many different aspects of silence and silencing. Joosen shows how silence, silencing and voice operate on various levels in the field of children's literature: thematically in children's books, as well as through aesthetic practices that shape the forms in which narratives for children are told. She then goes on to reflect on how efforts

to give voice have also transformed children's literature and children's literature criticism. She writes:

children's literature is enriched by a variety of voices, instruments, styles, and repertoires. Diversity of researchers, views, methods, and means is crucial to any scientific field, and children's literature studies should also cherish those voices that are not directly related to a political debate. That does not mean that scholars should not examine the field of children's literature studies as a whole, including its institutions.

Taking her cue from Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Joosen insists that it is not only a question of breaking silences, and giving voice, but that we must all become better listeners. The tell-tale sounds are already there. We as critics, especially, must train our hearing and pick up the sounds. Joosen adds that 'Woodson's memoir of growing up in the US as a black girl in the 1960s and 1970s is riddled with narrative silences. Some can be attributed to failing memory and childhood innocence; others to experiences and events that may be too painful to be put down explicitly, such as the murder of Martin Luther King.'

But we can know it, if we sharpen our hearing, for,

Even the silence  
has a story to tell you.  
Just listen. Listen.

*The 24th Biennial Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature on the theme of 'Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature', took place at Stockholm City Conference Centre in Stockholm, Sweden on 14–18 August 2019. It was hosted by the Swedish Institute for Children's Books in collaboration with the Department of Culture, Languages and Media at Malmö University; the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University, and the Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology at Åbo Akademi University, Finland.*