

**Narratives of Power: A Comparative Study of Ideological Conformity and Subversion in
Children's Literature**

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Summary of the Dissertation

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Szeged, 2025

Doctoral Program in Comparative Literature and Culture

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Szeged

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Children's literature, a genre often perceived as benign and solely for entertainment, is in fact a complex and profoundly influential domain where power, ideology, and cultural reproduction are exercised. This body of work is far from neutral; it exists within intricate structures that both reflect and reinforce societal norms, values, and hierarchies. This dissertation explores the multifaceted ways in which power is wielded through children's literature, and how these dynamics shape the narratives, the readers, and the societal roles of both children and adults. Rather than being a simple mirror of reality, children's literature actively participates in the construction of reality for its young readers, acting as a powerful cultural agent.

The analysis draws on critical frameworks, including Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and Michel Foucault's concept of power, to interrogate the imbalances inherent in the production, dissemination, and critique of children's literature. The dissertation posits that the field of children's literature criticism often, and perhaps even by its very nature, confirms existing theoretical paradigms rather than challenging them. This is a critical point, as it highlights how the scholarly discourse surrounding the genre can itself become a form of ideological control. As authors, publishers, critics, parents, and teachers, adults dominate its production and dissemination, leaving children as passive recipients of adult ideologies and values. This adult-centric approach dictates not only which stories are told, but also how they are told, which narratives are deemed appropriate, and which perspectives are foregrounded. This process ultimately shapes a child's understanding of the world in ways that frequently reinforce societal hierarchies, from class and gender to race and culture.

The foundational premise of this study is that children's literature is a key mechanism for the socialization of young people, serving to guide them into their pre-determined roles within a given society. This process, as analysed through the lens of Althusserian and Foucauldian theory, is not always overt or forceful; in fact, its power lies in its subtlety and apparent innocence. The narrative structures and characterizations within children's books work to normalize certain behaviours and attitudes, making them seem natural and desirable. The dissertation argues that the very act of reading these texts, particularly those deemed educational, is a form of ideological interpellation, where the child is hailed into a specific subject position that aligns with the dominant social order.

Furthermore, the dissertation's investigation into the power dynamics within children's literature extends beyond the relationship between author and reader. It also examines the economic and institutional forces at play. The commercial nature of publishing, for example, influences which stories are produced and distributed, often favouring those with mass market appeal that align with a capitalist worldview. The study also considers the role of educational systems in shaping the canon of children's literature, arguing that these institutions act as

powerful Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) by curating and promoting texts that serve a specific social function.¹ The power imbalance is thus a multi-layered phenomenon, encompassing not only the adult-child relationship but also the complex network of cultural and economic institutions that govern the production and consumption of children's books. The dissertation's analysis of this system reveals how seemingly simple stories become vehicles for sophisticated ideological work.

The dissertation explores the issue of power in children's literature across four primary dimensions. First, it examines the fundamental imbalance of power between children and adults, a dynamic in which adults completely control the production, publication, and dissemination of literature, thereby unilaterally influencing a child's worldview. Children are often presented as miniature adults to be shaped, a perspective that is now critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the child's own agency and unique cognitive processes. This adult-centric framework can be seen in how even supposedly progressive children's literature can still fall into the trap of telling children what to think rather than encouraging independent thought.

Second, the study highlights the stark disparities in access to literature between privileged and marginalized groups, underscoring how literature can be a tool of exclusion. The dissertation argues that the bourgeoisification of folklore, a process where folk tales are sanitized and adapted to fit the values of the dominant middle class, is a prime example of this. This process strips stories of their radical or rebellious elements, making them palatable for a specific audience while simultaneously erasing the cultural heritage of the working class and peasantry. Furthermore, the commodification of children's literature means that quality books are often priced out of reach for lower-income families, creating a cycle of literary and cultural inequality.

Third, the analysis delves into the imbalance between majority and minority cultures in the global exchange of children's literature. The study notes that translations often favour dominant languages and cultural narratives, marginalizing peripheral ones and reinforcing cultural hierarchies. The dissertation argues that this not only limits a child's exposure to diverse perspectives but also sends a powerful ideological message that some cultures are more valuable or important than others.

Finally, the dissertation investigates the interplay between text and illustration in picture books as another dimension of power, where illustrations can subtly shape interpretation and perform ideological work. This is particularly crucial in subversive works, where images can circumvent censorship and convey complex ideas that might be suppressed in the text alone. For example, an artist can use a specific style or colour palette to introduce an element of critique that the written words do not explicitly state. Conversely, in conformist texts, illustrations can reinforce a dominant ideology by simplifying and sanitizing complex themes. The relationship between word and image is not merely an aesthetic concern; it is a fundamental aspect of how a children's book produces and reproduces a particular worldview.

The evolution of modern childhood is intrinsically linked to the development of children's literature. The concept of childhood as a distinct stage of life, which emerged in the eighteenth

¹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Žižek, 100-140 (London. New York: Verso, 1994), 130-131.

and nineteenth centuries, coincided with the introduction of new forms of control.² For instance, compulsory education shifted authority over children from families to state institutions, raising questions about whether this represents liberation or a new form of subjugation. Within this context, children's literature became both a reflection of and a participant in these societal transformations. The modern idea of the child is also deeply indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pedagogical theories,³ which framed childhood as a distinct stage with its own value, a perspective that is central to both the conformist and subversive narratives examined in this dissertation. This new understanding of childhood as a separate, developmental stage created a market for literature specifically designed to educate and shape young minds, making it a powerful tool for social control.

This dissertation uses a framework that distinguishes between conformist and subversive literature, but acknowledges that these categories are not rigid and that many texts occupy a hybrid ideological space. The purpose of this distinction is to highlight the dominant ideological function of a text. The study defines revolutionary literature not as a call for political uprising, but as a literary strategy that fundamentally resists and challenges the dominant ideological structures within which it operates. This nuanced approach allows the analysis to consider both overt protest and the subtle ways in which children's literature can teach cooperation, negotiation, and sacrifice as forms of resistance.

The dissertation also clarifies the use of key terms. It distinguishes between children's books, which are the individual, material texts, and children's literature, which is the broader body of cultural production and the critical discourse that analyses it. While recognizing that children's literature and young adult literature are not interchangeable due to differences in their target audiences and content, the dissertation analyses them under a shared framework because they perform overlapping ideological functions. Both forms of literature position their readers within social orders, reproduce or resist dominant ideologies, and are mediated by adult gatekeepers such as parents, teachers, and publishers. The study differentiates between the implied child reader and the adolescent reader when questions of agency, resistance, or cognitive capacity are at stake.

The dissertation is deeply indebted to Althusserian and Foucauldian theories of ideology and power. Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is central to understanding children's literature as a tool of ideological reproduction.⁴ According to Althusser, ideology functions by interpellating individuals, or hailing them into specific roles and identities that align with the dominant social order.⁵ Children's literature plays a crucial role in this process by presenting narratives that socialize young readers into normative values and behaviours, such as obedience and industriousness. The dissertation primarily focuses on capitalism as a dominant ideology, arguing that its reproduction is foundational to the perpetuation of other social inequalities, such as racial hierarchies. Children's literature, as an ISA, works to shape children into future citizens who will perpetuate the existing social order. While Althusser identifies the school as the dominant ISA, children's literature's function as an ISA is often perceived as softer, but its power lies in its ability to operate on multiple levels—from the seemingly innocuous bedtime story to the required classroom text—each

² Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (Republic of Geneva and France: Jean Néaulme, Libraire, 1762).

⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", 130-131.

⁵ Althusser, 130-131.

working to interpellate the child into a specific social order. This process is particularly effective because it often presents itself as a form of moral education or simple entertainment, masking its underlying ideological function. The dissertation argues that the very structure of many popular children's narratives, with their clear-cut heroes and villains, reinforces a binary worldview that aligns with dominant power structures.

Michel Foucault's insights into power further illuminate these dynamics. Foucault views power not as a possession but as a diffuse exercise operating through a network of institutions, practices, and discourses. In children's literature, power manifests in the construction of narratives designed to discipline and normalize certain behaviours. For instance, the recurring home/away/home narrative structure reinforces the idea that deviations from societal norms are temporary and must be resolved within the established order. This narrative arc, common in classic children's tales, serves to discipline the child by demonstrating that the only successful path is one that leads back to established norms. Foucauldian "dividing practices", which classify individuals into categories like "good" and "bad," are evident in didactic texts that reward conformity and punish deviance.⁶ These narratives, while ostensibly designed to educate and entertain, serve as instruments of control, shaping children's perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. The dissertation acknowledges that the effectiveness of these messages is not monolithic, as the age and developmental stage of the child significantly impacts how they process narrative content. Ideological messages are thus adapted to the child's developmental stage, a crucial element in the successful reproduction of dominant cultural orders. The study emphasizes that the power of these narratives lies in their ability to make the child a willing participant in their own normalization, as they internalize the prescribed behaviours and values presented in the stories.

The analysis is structured through a series of interconnected chapters that explore both conformist and subversive literature. Conformist literature (Chapter 1) investigates how texts reinforce dominant ideologies, particularly in narratives concerning war and immigration. The study critiques the sanitized portrayals of war and refugees, which often avoid systemic causes of displacement and reduce the experiences of those affected to simplistic moral lessons. These narratives tend to promote a charitable perspective on the unprivileged, foregrounding Western humanitarianism while avoiding Western responsibility for the causes of displacement. Such books educate children in "corrective philanthropy" rather than genuine humanity.⁷ The dissertation also examines texts like David McKee's *Denver*,⁸ arguing that it subtly reinforces a capitalist worldview by promoting contentment and a justified definition of hierarchies. The analysis of books on war and immigration, such as Kate Milner's *My Name Is Not Refugee*⁹ and Francesca Sanna's *The Journey*,¹⁰ reveals how these texts can manipulate readers by creating an illusion of a world where conflicts are easily resolved and where Western charity is the sole solution, thus avoiding the deeper, more complex political realities.

In contrast, subversive literature (Chapter 2) examines texts that challenge power structures and offer alternative perspectives. These works resist normative narratives and centre

⁶ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 8, No. 4 (summer 1982): 777-795, 777.

⁷ Vassiliki Vassiloudi, "International and Local Relief Organizations and the Promotion of Children's and Young Adult Refugee Narratives," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 57, no. 2 (2019), 35-49, 46.

⁸ David Mackee, *Denver* (London: Andersen Press, 2012).

⁹ Kate Milner, *My Name Is Not Refugee* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Barrington Stoke Ltd, 2017).

¹⁰ Francesca Sanna, *The Journey* (London: Flying Eye Books, 2016).

marginalized voices, encouraging young readers to question societal norms and resist conformity. A key case study is the work of Iranian author Samad Behrangi, whose stories, such as *The Little Black Fish*,¹¹ critique social injustices and empower children as agents of change. Behrangi's work is a powerful example of literary subversion in a context of tight censorship. The dissertation also analyses Maurice Sendak's picture books, such as *Where the Wild Things Are*¹² and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*,¹³ for their ability to challenge societal norms and disrupt conventional notions of childhood. Subversive works are also found in allegorical animal stories, such as Martin Waddell's *Farmer Duck*,¹⁴ which addresses class struggle and the injustices of capitalism. The study argues that humour in subversive literature, as seen in the works of Roald Dahl, can be a powerful tool for questioning authority and promoting resistance by allowing young readers to engage with complex ideas in a safe space.

The dissertation is also a case-based inquiry rather than a statistically representative comparative analysis of Eastern and Western children's literature. This approach allows for a focused investigation into how ideological mechanisms operate within different contexts. For instance, the deliberate focus on Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish* is a choice to highlight a concentrated site of subversion under censorship, not to overgeneralize the Eastern tradition. Similarly, the analysis of war and immigration narratives from a Western corpus reflects the dominance of these themes within Western publishing trends, a pattern that is itself a crucial part of the ideological landscape.

Beyond the texts themselves, the study considers the complex nature of a child's lived experience with literature. The dissertation acknowledges that access to a child's experiences is mediated through pedagogical studies and institutional frameworks. It also addresses the impact of a mediatized context, noting that books migrate to digital platforms like apps and audiobooks, which preserve core ideological narratives while reshaping their form. The study introduces the concept of the "child as citizen",¹⁵ arguing that children are not merely passive subjects but active, rights-bearing individuals in the present. This is not about formal legal rights, but about the social and cultural spaces where children can exercise influence through acts of subversion and self-determination. This new understanding of the child positions them as active participants in their own narratives of resistance.

The dissertation also delves into the representation of violence and terror in children's literature (Chapter 3), considering how these themes can either disrupt or reinforce power dynamics. It recognizes the tension between protecting children from harsh realities and exposing them to the complexities of the world. The study argues that the use of violence can be a narrative device to either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies, and that the emotional impact of such content is significant, especially when based on real-life stories. The dissertation explores how some texts, by depicting sanitized or simplistic versions of violence, can normalize it and prevent children from understanding its true consequences. In contrast, other texts use violence

¹¹ Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish* [Mahi Siah-e Kouchouloo]. Illustrated by Farshid Mesghali (Tehran: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [Kānoon-e Parvareh-e Fekri-e Koodakān va Nojavānān], 2017).

¹² Maurice Sendak, *Where The Wild Things Are* (US: Harper & Row, 1963).

¹³ Maurice Sendak, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993).

¹⁴ Martin Waddell, *Farmer Duck* (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Giuliana Fenech ed., *Child as Citizen: Agency and Activism in Children's Literature and Culture* (US: University of Mississippi Press, 2025).

to expose injustices, challenge authority, and promote empathy by presenting the unvarnished realities of conflict.

Finally, the study addresses stolen (unheard) voices (Chapter 4), analysing the erasure of marginalized groups, including refugees, peasants, and children themselves, in both classic and contemporary texts. This chapter synthesizes insights from the erasure of refugee and immigrant voices, the bourgeoisification of folklore, and the silencing of revolutionary authors. It underscores how children's literature, a medium ostensibly for the young and powerless, can serve as a silent battleground for cultural hegemony. It also discusses how the original, often rebellious or subversive, elements of folk tales have been systematically removed to make them more palatable and safe for a bourgeois audience, a process that Jack Zipes has famously documented.¹⁶

The epilogue envisions a transformative future for children's literature, one that prioritizes inclusivity, diversity, and critical engagement. It calls for the reclamation of unheard voices to empower young readers to envision a more just and equitable future. The dissertation seeks to uncover the hidden power structures that shape children's literature and to highlight its potential to challenge dominant ideologies and empower young readers. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of the field that foregrounds the voices of children and marginalized communities and embraces the radical possibilities of storytelling. The brave new literary world envisioned here is one that recognizes children not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the storytelling process. It is a world where stories are not mere reflections of what is, but visions of what could be.

¹⁶ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann, 1983).

List of publications

Publications pertaining to the topic of the dissertation

- The Ideology of Conformist Literature for Children, *XXV. Tavaszi Szél Konferencia 2022, Tanulmánykötet I.* Budapest, 2022.
- "Children" and "Animals": Strange Strangers in Reality and Literature, *Among Texts 24: The Strange(r) in Literature, Art, and Culture*, Department of Comparative Literature University of Szeged, Szeged, 2021
- The Representation of War and War Zones in Contemporary Children's Picture Books, *finding one's voice, finding one's place: identity-building through creativity and craftsmanship in children's literature and culture*, Peter Lang, 2026 (Forthcoming)
- The Silent Frame: Visual Tensions and the Absent Mother in "Good Night, Commander", *Inclusive Learning with Challenging Picturebooks* eds. Åse Marie Ommundsen, Daniel Feldman and Björn Sundmark, Routledge Research in Education, 2025 (Forthcoming)

Other publications

- Alice's Journey to the East: Translations and Reception of an English Fantasy in Iran, the forthcoming volume *Interlingual and Intersemiotic Translations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, eds. Anna Kérchy, Bogumila Kaniewska, Riitta Oittinnen, Peter Lang, 2025 (Forthcoming)
- Shylock, the Undoubtable Other, *Reading the Past Understanding the Present*, Jagiellonian University Press, Krakow, Poland, 2021