

# WRITING POSTMODERN FAIRY TALES AT MAIN STREET SCHOOL: DIGITAL NARRATIVES AND EVOLVING TRANSLITERACIES

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**ABSTRACT.** At an elementary school in inner city Toronto, I am working with the principal, a kernel group of primary teachers, and the school's technician to develop children's digital literacies. Main Street School is dedicated to the pursuit of social equity for its population of grade K-5 students who are characterized by high multiculturalism and low income. The school achieves this goal through the promotion of digital learning. Our project experimentally writes the children of Main Street School into dynamic postmodern digital versions of traditional European fairy tales, and showcases the evolving transliteracies children are navigating in the pursuit of emergent literacy.

**RÉDACTION DE CONTES DE FÉE POSTMODERNES À LA MAIN STREET SCHOOL : HISTOIRES NUMÉRIQUES ET LITTÉRATIES NOUVELLES**

**RÉSUMÉ.** En collaboration avec le directeur, un groupe d'enseignants et les techniciens d'une école primaire de la grande ville de Toronto, je travaille au développement des connaissances numériques des enfants. La Main Street School se consacre à la poursuite de l'équité sociale chez ses élèves de niveau K-5 qui se distinguent par un multiculturalisme marqué et de faibles revenus. L'école réalise cet objectif en encourageant l'apprentissage numérique. À titre expérimental, notre projet campe les enfants de la Main Street School dans des versions numériques postmodernes et dynamiques de contes de fée européens traditionnels, et montre comment les enfants de cultures différentes évoluent vers une culture émergente.

## *Introduction*

**D**uring 2003, when I was on sabbatical leave, I observed and participated in classes at an inner city elementary school in Toronto. My agenda was ethnographic research into emergent multiliteracies, tapping how children learn to read and write life in the 21st century that folds multilingualism, multiculturalism and multimodalism into literacy development and practice. During one of my regular chats with the principal on research progress, she mentioned in passing that she would love to have someone just read stories to the kindergarten children, many of whom come to school without benefit

of the middle class Canadian socialization that includes ritual story book reading. Furthermore, many children lack exposure to and competency in English. Story reading would give them an opportunity to catch up on hearing English and learning what a story is in this culture. It was easy to spend a period reading stories to children in a kindergarten class I was observing, so I volunteered.

And so began our project to rewrite Goldilocks. Susan, the junior and senior kindergarten class teacher, was very flexible and suggested that I pull out children for individual story reading during their activity time. She nudged some of her print-recalcitrant learners my way and we started weekly story reading on a one-to-one basis, some children selected by pedagogical recommendation, and some, just curious. It was a period of non-threatening reading in the library corner, where each child selected a story to be read. Squashed into a tiny plastic chair, I sat side by side with each child in the library corner and read stories aloud.

At first, children did not know what to make of this. Freddie, a delayed junior kindergarten boy with a Caribbean background, didn't really know what any of this was about for the first few weeks, and he would drift off while I was reading, looking at the room around him, totally unaware of the story unfolding in the pages in front of him. Three little Cantonese speaking girls, who regularly made plasticine pizzas and cookies at the nearby play dough station, slowly gained enough trust to sit with me individually for story reading. One day, one of the tough big boys in the class tried to bully his way into our library corner to sit and listen, too. Our library corner was becoming popular. Recognized as the "story lady," I was often approached for a story as soon as I walked into the classroom. One day, Freddie took my hand and led me to the library corner for a story that he was starting to understand. It was a breakthrough.

But it was one of the little Chinese girls, Victoria, who inadvertently kick-started the Goldilocks project. On this day, part way through the academic year, I asked her which story she would like to have me read to her. In the blink of an eye, she grabbed *Goldilocks and the three bears*, and with an indication of more materials to come, she rooted through a basket for cardboard figures of the three bears. I started to read, and, in the appropriate place, Victoria chimed in using her biggest 5 year old voice: "Who's been eating my porridge?" or a reasonable facsimile, marked more by gusto than actual articulation. Soon we had to fight off a veritable scrum of children waiting to pinch the other little plastic seat in the library corner to hear the story. On one occasion, I had to send Victoria to the bathroom: she was hopping around, clutching herself, obviously needing to go, but for fear of losing her seat in the library to one of the waiting big boys refused to acknowledge her body's pressing message. It was a close call.

Goldilocks quickly emerged as a class favourite. I started to wonder what made Goldilocks so attractive to these children. She was presented in the story as a rather naughty little girl with pretty blonde hair, a colour I noted to be conspicuously absent in the gene pool of the children attending Main Street School. She was walking alone in the woods, an absolute no-no for urban children, who are often locked in their high rise apartments with the television on when parents are not available. What did a lonely cottage in the woods look like to children who lived in high density, publicly subsidized housing? They would not have seen a bear in Toronto, though the city is plagued with urbanized raccoons. And what on earth is porridge?

I asked the teachers what the children might understand of Goldilocks and her life in the woods, and the common link was thought to be the break-and-enter theme of the traditional tale. Rather horrified, but unsure of whether this was ultimately good or bad, I decided that it was time to digitally edit Goldilocks, to bring her into the 21st century of contemporary urban Toronto.

*Context: Main Street School*

Main Street School, the context of this research, is an ideal laboratory for the study of new literacies and the creation of digital narratives. It is situated in a neighbourhood of mixed housing in north-western Toronto (formerly known as North York), surrounded by discount shopping strips, wholesalers, and light industry. The subsidized, high density, high rise housing development which is home to most Main Street School children attracts a high proportion of recent immigrants to Canada; many live jointly with relatives and their families in small, cramped apartments. At home, the majority of children speak a language or a dialect other than the English used at school. Though the area is economically poor, it is culturally rich: its diverse population provides a tapestry of languages and ways of understanding the world. The highly multicultural community at Main Street School is representative of a large percentage of the school population in the Toronto District School Board which accommodates a significant percentage of newcomers to Canada, and consequently, to Ontario curriculum expectations. For most children, English is a second language.

In effort to boost opportunities for social equity for the children of Main Street School, many of whom enter elementary education in such a different place from the middle class Anglo-Canadian children imagined in provincial curricula, the school has committed to a culture of technologically enhanced learning. Children learn everything from literacy to mathematics to music in a digitally supported learning environment. The school has achieved international recognition for its innovative incorporation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) (Granger et al., 2002; Lotherington et

al., 2001); and many teachers at the school as well as the principal have won prestigious awards for outstanding achievement in education.

*Theoretical orientation: Emergent multiliteracies*

The conceptual framework underpinning our project to rewrite Goldilocks is *multiliteracies*: a framework for action collaboratively developed by the New London Group in the mid-nineties (1996):

We decided that the outcomes of our discussions could be encapsulated in one word: 'Multiliteracies' – a word we chose because it describes two important arguments we might have with the emerging cultural, institutional and global order. The first argument engages with the multiplicity of communications channels and media; the second with the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity. (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5)

The concept of multiliteracies invites a pedagogy that engages multiple worlds communicated in multiple ways, folding into the teaching of emergent literacy the diverse cultural and linguistic worlds of the children attending Main Street School and the school's approach to achieving social equity for its population through technological innovation.

Literacy as conceptualized on provincial EQAO<sup>1</sup> assessments – mandatory high stakes province-wide tests written in grades 3, 6 and 10 – is encapsulated in a Modern era paper world of Anglo-centric Canadiana mediated through written English. Many of the children of Main Street School (as in many other schools in the Toronto District School Board where children from diverse cultural backgrounds enter school without the cultural capital [Bourdieu, 1991] assumed in high stakes provincial tests that will certify them as educated) need exposure to the fairy tales that background the narrative culture of early childhood education.

Fairy tales have been continually rewritten and adapted across their oral and literate lives: European and Asian fairy tales in late twentieth century film have transformed the Little Mermaid perched in the Copenhagen harbour, and the Arabian Genie released from Aladdin's magic lamp, into Disneyland Americana. Given the cultural appropriation of fairy tales in film genres, perhaps, we, too, could retell and redraw traditional folk and fairy tales for the current and future generations of children who are changing the face of Canadian culture.

*Who is Goldilocks?*

As I looked around at the heads of glossy black hair in Susan's kindergarten class, and back at Goldilocks' pretty blonde curls, I began to wonder who Goldilocks was. Where did she come from? Why do we pretend that this little European girl is somehow Canadian? Who is Canadian? What does that mean?

I went to the Osborne Collection at the Toronto Public Library, where the librarian researched and prepared chronological and critical resources detailing the history of Goldilocks from her unlikely birth as a fox in a cautionary Scottish folk tale to the original 1831 manuscript of *The story of the three bears* (Mure, 1967/1831) to the little girl we recognize as Goldilocks.<sup>2</sup> I realized with some degree of embarrassment that Goldilocks might well be one of the best children's story pretenders to a Canadian identity. Though the story had been written in England, based on the narrative thread of a Scottish folk tale, the beautiful hand-written and watercolour-illustrated manuscript was permanently housed in Toronto, having migrated in good twentieth century Canadian fashion as part of Edgar Osborne's boxed bequest of heirloom children's books donated to the Toronto Public library.

In the earliest recorded version of the story now known as *Goldilocks and the three bears*, Miss Eleanor Mure (1967/1831) handwrote *The story of the three bears* as a birthday present to her four-year old nephew, Horace Broke, retelling in verse form the ancient cautionary Scottish folk tale of the three bears, who eat a she-fox that has invaded their home (Bettelheim, 1976). The dedication is as follows:

The  
celebrated nursery tale  
of the  
THREE BEARS  
put into verse  
and embellished with drawings  
for a  
Birth-day Present  
to  
HORACE BROKE  
Sept: 26: 1831.

In Mure's handwritten version, the vixen is interpreted as an old woman (Bettelheim, 1976) who is rudely turned away when she tries to visit her new neighbours, three bears, tired of pastoral life in the woods, who have made an upwardly mobile move to a manor patterned after Mure's father's home: Cecil Lodge in Hertfordshire. Though there is a "little" bear, the three bears are depicted as being more or less the same size, and there is no indication of gender difference. Nor are they given clothes, despite the urbane anthropomorphism. The old lady, who morphs into Goldilocks in future reincarnations, invades the bears' house, after she sees them go out, in retribution for her rebuffed welcome visit, and vandalizes the house in the scripted manner, finding, and spewing/dumping/drinking three bowls of milk, then breaking three chairs and beds. The beginnings of the bear's comparative chants of discovery that inspired Victoria's spontaneous narrative embellishments are seeded here:

They went to the drawing-room; where the first bear  
Roar'd, "Who, without leave, has sat down in my chair"?  
The second, astonished, more mildly did say,  
"Who's been sitting in my chair, when I was away"?  
The little bear madly cried; "What shall I do?  
"Who has sat in my chair, and the bottom burst thro?"  
(Mure, 1967/1831, stanza 11)

In this version, the bears discover the old lady hiding fearfully in a closet when they return, and go to extreme measures to punish her.

The first commercially printed version of this tale is Robert Southey's *Story of the three bears* published anonymously in 1837 (Southey, n.d./1837) as a story included "for the benefit of the nursery" in the 4th volume of a collection of essays entitled *The Doctor* (Opie & Opie, 1974, p. 199). In this version the three bears, all male and wearing clothes, live together on their own in a house in the wood. They are of different sizes and this is indicated by font colour, capitalization, size and italicization. The protagonist is still a little old lady, though more pathetic and vulgar than vindictive. She does not break into the bear's house as it is not locked, but she enters uninvited:

So the little old Woman opened the door, and went in; and well pleased she was when she saw the porridge on the table. If she had been a good little old Woman, she would have waited till the Bears came home, and then, perhaps, they would have asked her to breakfast; for they were good Bears, – a little rough or so, as the manners of Bears is, but for all that very good-natured and hospitable. But she was an impudent, bad old Woman, and set about helping herself. (Southey, n.d./1837, p. 15-16)

The story proceeds as in the accepted modern version: she encounters the proverbial three bowls of porridge, which may reflect the Scottish roots of the original story, three chairs, and three beds. The bears' responses are surprisingly resonant of modern versions:

"SOMEBODY HAS BEEN AT MY PORRIDGE!" said the GREAT, HUGE BEAR, in his great, rough, gruff voice.

"Somebody has been at my porridge!" said the Middle Bear, in his middle voice.

"Somebody has been at my porridge, and has eaten it all up!" said the Little, Small, Wee Bear, in his little, small, wee voice. (Southey, n.d./1837, p. 21-22; emphases original)

The bad old lady falls asleep in the baby bear's bed. Upon discovery by the three bears, she jumps out the window. The bears rather cavalierly do not seem to care what happens to her after this:

OUT the little old Woman jumped; and whether she broke her neck in the fall; or ran into the wood and was lost there; or found her way out of the wood, and was taken up by the Constable and sent to the House of

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Correction for a vagrant as she was, I cannot tell. But the Three Bears never saw anything more of her. (Southey, n.d./1837, p. 32)

Not until the Aunt Mavor's Picture books version, published in 1856, is the main protagonist transformed into a little girl. She is named Silver Locks in the text, which is divided into syllables: "Be-cause her curly hair was Shi-ning" (Anon., 1856, p. 1). The bears are now a family of three: Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and their wee Darling, living in a house in the country. Silver Locks, a country girl, is being mischievous in her break-in, which she thinks the gardener will appreciate. The bears have left rabbit soup. Silver Locks finds one bowl of soup to be hot, the second to be lacking bread, but the third to have the right condiments. The inherently comparative notion of porridge being 'too hot', 'too cold' and 'just right' are yet to insinuate themselves as germane to the story.

Neither does this version of the story showcase the repeated chants of the three bears, which Main Street kindergartners liked to voice:

Then the Big Bear with a voice like thun-der, said, "who has been in my chair and put it out of its place? and the mid-dling siz-ed Bear cried, "Look! who has been sit-ting in my chair and left the cush-ion all a-wry? but the Little Bear was very an-gry in-deed, and he sob-bed and cried, "who has been sit-ting in my lit-tle chair, and bro-ken it down to the ground? (Anon., 1856, p. 7)

The bad little girl is dealt with less harshly than her predecessors, though the original cautionary emphasis on respecting people's property is still clearly in place:

You see this lit-tle Girl was near-ly eaten by Bears be-cause she would touch things which did not be-long to her. (Anon., 1856, p. 8)

The shift to the little girl protagonist sticks after the transformation of the old lady into a child named Silver Locks, and Silver Locks reappears in an early American version of the story (Anon., n.d.). The name Goldilocks does not emerge until 1888 in an American version of *The three bears* published in New York (Anon., 1888) where the character heretofore known as Silver Locks becomes blonde. According to McGrath<sup>3</sup> the character Goldilocks changed to match her name, having brightened considerably from the dark Victorian cautionary tale of victimization and crime (as did Little Red Riding Hood, who was originally eaten). As the audience for fairy tales diverged from adults towards children, the stories were softened considerably in tone. Goldilocks as a character is variously named into the 20th century, e.g., Goldenhair (Anon., circa 1901).

### *Rewriting Goldilocks at Main Street School*

The fairy tale has always been a critical site for shifting perceptions. (Wolf, 2004, p. 180)

At Main Street School we have been engaged in rewriting Goldilocks for children living in urban, multicultural Toronto in the 21st century.<sup>4</sup> Our experimental literacy project aims to introduce children to traditional narratives in English (as a second language) and, by positively engaging their worlds of cultural knowledge and sense of agency, teach an understanding of what a story is in this culture. Our collaborative aims include teaching narratives to children in the primary grades, experimenting with digital texts and literacies, and contributing to a more literary embodiment of multiculturalism. Our project invites children into traditional narratives as listener first, then reader, then writer of a personalized digital version of the story.

Susan is teaching grade two this year. She has been reading different versions of *Goldilocks and the three bears* to her class, and talking about the elements of a narrative. Children are working towards creating a digital revision of character and setting. In this way, they insert their 21st century experiences into the plot of this much loved and much adapted story.

In class, the grade two children are learning about the setting for the story of the three bears. Susan has identified particular rooms in the bears' house, and they have made beautiful posters, drawings and dioramas of the kitchen, living room and bedroom, showing the repeated threes of the story: bowls of food, chairs, beds. Today, the children are collaborating as a whole class to create a collegial version of the kitchen setting in which the bears have left three bowls of vegetable soup cooling. They have selected a new protagonist: a dog rather than a little girl.

Using the Wiggleworks software program for early literacy development by Scholastic, the children then move on to creating their own settings for a personally adapted version of *Goldilocks and the three bears*. The software provides a good elementary platform for the children, who can follow a scripted plot line, and combine drawing and stamps to make their own pictures. However, they are having problems: changing the setting and the characters affects fundamentals of the narrative that are causing them confusion.

One of the overarching intentions of our project is to collaboratively engage a community of educators in the pursuit of multicultural literacy education. The intention is to invite children's growing, complex multicultural identities into the rewriting project, and to offer their recontextualized stories as a new multicultural literature: one that provides a sense of multicultural Canada rather than a Canada composed of people from "other" cultures.

But I have underestimated children's understanding of culture, which in this era of globalization is highly mass media-saturated. With a free reign to insert their chosen settings and primary characters, many have adapted their story contexts to accommodate pop culture icons, rather than the surrounding community I had imagined. The electronic world our research



group is investigating pedagogically in this project is, after all, an important part of 21st century culture, too. One little boy has made his Goldilocks protagonist Teen Titan. He is surprised that I do not recognize Teen Titan and I am promptly informed that he is on YTV after school.

The teachers had warned me of the possibility of the children resorting to other ready tailored narrative contexts and characters, especially those from pop culture media. In bringing in another visual setting with its primary characters, they have inadvertently imported other aspects of the narratives, and this is creating confusion. I notice that many of the girls have chosen to use an undersea setting with a mermaid as the protagonist. This is an interesting twist to be sure, though it brings in obvious confusions in plot lines as the children try to accommodate the characters they have clearly borrowed from the Disney version of *The little mermaid* into the Goldilocks story line. I also observe confusion with the role of 'three' in the story, which, as Bettelheim (1976) notes, is a significant symbol in the Goldilocks story, as in many fairy tales (*The three little pigs*, *The three billy goats gruff*, etc.), relating to aspects of the mind, sexuality, mysticism, and Christian doctrine. What should be in threes in a rewritten Goldilocks? In one case there are triple protagonists rather than triple victims. I begin to see how difficult it is to deconstruct and to reconstruct a narrative. How separate is the setting from the character from the plot? How fused do these become in the mind of the reader, especially the early reader?

Nonetheless, good across-the-curriculum issues come out of the children's rewriting. What would Goldilocks or her new improved version eat? Carrots, beans, vegetable soup are all possibilities in action and I am impressed with how healthy these alternatives are. I encounter a funny problem with one little girl who has revised Goldilocks as a mermaid entering the abode of three goldfish. What would the goldfish be eating that Goldilocks would want to eat? She offers the answer with a giggle: fishfood. I ask her whether Goldilocks would be enticed to eat fishfood? Her answer is brilliant: given that Goldilocks is a mermaid and this is a "Once upon a time" story, it could be that mermaids in fact like fishfood.

### *Emerging transliteracies in the elementary classroom*

Many of our concepts about print, reading, writing, and even instruction have not kept pace with the changing nature of print. (Kamil, Kim & Lane, 2004, p. 157)

The grade two children at Main Street School are showing me with their revised versions in progress of *Goldilocks and the three bears*, how difficult it is to learn what a story is. While we are engaged in updating Goldilocks in keeping with changing national dispositions, complex cultural identities and new media possibilities, we are also trying to honour the basic narrative of the original folk tale in which a property disrespecting protagonist, no matter

how enticing the character wrapping has become over the centuries, tries to rip off innocent beings, and is caught: an enduring moral lesson.

Our explorations into the emerging multiliteracies of the 21st century will help to inform us on how to educate children to function in and to co-create the social worlds they will eventually enter as literate adults. Our project merges modern literacies (i.e. Industrial Revolution inspired paper-based, print centred texts) with postmodern literacies. (Information era inspired screen-based, image-centred texts) and looks at how children negotiate these worlds of encoded information. The multiple literacies children are developing as a matter of 21st century socialization portend much-needed educational reform.

The link between old and new literacies is the story. Our transliteracies project is held together with narrative glue. We are looking to bring into the story line more of the reality of children's lives to create culturally inclusive stories: turning Goldilocks into Dreadlocks.<sup>5</sup> Eventually these stories will take on digital directions of their own in terms of how they are created and read. So far, children's postmodern narratives seem to be revolving not around themselves but around the pop culture characters, many digitally inspired, that they relate to Goldilocks as a mermaid; perhaps Goldfishylocks. These are brave 7 year old beginnings into multicultural digital narratives (Ryan, 2004).

#### NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1. Education Quality and Accountability Office, the mandate of which is to "assure greater accountability and contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education in Ontario. (<http://www.eqao.com/>)
2. I am very indebted to Leslie McGrath, Osborne Collection librarian, whose immense scholarly knowledge of children's literature was a tremendous support to my study.
3. Personal communication, Leslie McGrath, librarian, Osborne Collection, January 2004.
4. I acknowledge with gratitude the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the project: Rewriting Goldilocks: Emergent transliteracies.
5. To read a selection of the children's rewritten Goldilocks stories, go to: <http://schools.tdsb.on.ca/joyce/main/goldilocks/index.htm>

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