CHAPTER 4

READER RESPONSE TO TEXTS: THE READING EXPERIENCE

READER	READING	TEXT	*RESPONSE*	AUTHOR

4.1 Introduction

The central of focus of this thesis is on what the learner as reader is interested in and therefore **the reader and his needs are foregrounded** in this study. After having investigated his background in the previous chapter, the reader's response will be in the prime focus in this chapter.

Firstly, a brief theoretical perspective will be given on reader response before touching on the issues of what is known about reader response in general in order to identify the problem areas. As this is not only a theoretical study, however, but also a practical investigation, the focus is not on theoretical concerns alone, and the amount of discussion allocated to the theoretical concerns centring on Reception Aesthetics will therefore be limited to what is of immediate necessity for this study. The reader response section is divided into what children do not like, what they enjoy reading and what selectors such as parents consider to be suitable material for the children to read.

4.2 Theoretical explanation of response

Umberto Eco identifies the text as not self-focusing but also as ambiguous, adding the nuance that he deals with the reader from a semiotic perspective, dealing with the text according to duration and his own unusual kind of perception. The reader then gets a new perception of the world represented in the reading passage. It follows that **the reader,** as the proponent of Russian Formalism Roman Jakobson puts it, **is the addressee** who receives a message by means of the code as means of contact (Van Zyl, 1982:70-71). The reader engages in interaction and escapes into another world of experience by the written sign of the text, **influenced by his/her own political and semiotic ideological framework** (Van Zyl, 1982:80). Ideology is defined by the **Conceptual Dictionary** (1994:102) as "false or mistaken notions or ideas, false consciousness". It should further be noted that any story written is indeed a piece of art and the object of the artist is to make it unfamiliar by defamiliarising the text so

that the aesthetic experience may be prolonged as proposed by Russian Formalist Shklovsky (Visser, 1982:17).

The focus remains, however, on what Combrink (1983:125) refers to as the receptor in the chain of the trio of author, text and reader. **The reader** is seen to be co-operatively involved in the dynamic process of communication among the three components. It should in fact be noted that the reader can be elevated to the position of **manipulator** in this thesis, since writers of children's literature have to cater for their target group specifically with a special purpose of fostering a love of reading and likelihood of ultimately also selling his works. If the readers do not buy it, the author does not get a pay cheque and publishers will also be out of business. The author as initiator thus has a crucial task of organising his narrative discourse in such a way as to reach the implicit reader. Combrink (1983:126) asserts that the author should indeed take cognisance of the cultural background and ideological perspectives of the readers by acknowledging the fact that the **author has to bear in mind the South African context, prevalent values and political tension** in a country.

The notions of the **reader being textually anchored and text-implied** are central to the interpretation of what the term reader involves. It also follows that the pre-understanding of the reader later referred to in this chapter as the non-visual knowledge is also of paramount importance.

The aim of an **author should** be to communicate by means of signs and pictures as a network of signs in order to **gain the interest of the reader** by involving him in an aesthetic experience and by in fact familiarising the reader with the English language despite the fact that on another level the author is defamiliarising the text to sustain attraction. A few factors have to be borne in mind when trying to engage the reader in taking up the reading material as the initial part of the process of becoming a lifelong participant in the reading process and the enjoyment of literature at whatever level.

4.3 Response: Children's preferences for certain reading-books

4.3.1 Why sometimes little is known about responses to reading-books

The major problem with South African children is that they cannot really know whether they prefer certain books to others since there is **little to choose from** and they read whatever is provided by teachers who are also struggling to supply in the needs of the multicultural learners because of the shortage of African books and the already-underlined problem with finances (Heale, 1998:36).

Eveleth (1999:3) reports that some South African publishers recently turned masses of books into pulp such as textbooks, dictionaries, atlases and African storybooks. (It should be noted that no English readers are mentioned as being part of this exercise.) Taking into account that when there is a strong need for material anything can be used as reading material for a class, it remains lamentable that most **publishers pulp certain amounts of books** each year.

The problem arose because the publisher had relied heavily on the government textbook market and that it was hit by a declining state purchase. It dropped from about R850-million in 1995 to about R200 million in 1998/9. Kader Asmal arranged to address the issue and provide a possible solution. Distribution of books also seemed to be the problem (Eveleth, 1999:3), and maybe Karodia (1999:2) has a point in case when claiming that problems in communication are at the heart of our constraints on successful education in South Africa. He asserts that mass communication is a characteristic of industrial countries of Europe and that we should learn from them.

Whatever the causes, in summary: how will learners know what they like if they do not even have something to look at to see whether they like it or not?

Bridge (1998:19) posits that the government has been able to commit R200-million extra against the minimum R643-million shortfall on the cost of R855-million to provide twelve million pupils with textbooks for 1999. State expenditure on

textbooks has plummeted by about 80% since 1995 when R900 million was budgeted for textbooks. Staff costs take up 90% of the education budget, leaving very little to help fund the textbooks needed. Publishers were upset because they spent capital on textbooks ordered but many of those books were also cancelled at the last minute. These textbooks include reading-books, and the **provision of reading-books to South African schools remains a problem**. Van der Fort (1999:10) reports that schools were still experiencing a very constraining need considering textbooks at the beginning of 1999. Money has also increasingly become a problem. Compare the following statistics: The total amount of the government's budget for textbooks amounted to R212 million eventually, which amounts to R18 per learner in comparison with the R61 per learner for 1995-1996. It also highlights the problem of costs when it comes to reading-books and a shortage of money to provide in the learners' needs seems to be about the most salient problem to overcome. Town libraries have an important role to play in providing learners with reading material but are also constrained by the same type of problems as everybody else (although they are doing a fine job, generally speaking).

4.3.2 "Stuff that sucks": response, culture and texts rejected

The focus is on English as a second language and specifically the reading experience through holistic instruction of English. Schools in South Africa have lately shared the new movement of literature-based instruction and whole language teaching in order to achieve reading and writing across the curriculum (Palardy, 1997:67). This whole language teaching does not only imply the moving away from older conservative ways of approaches and teaching methods, but strives to involve as well the whole appreciation of people representative of all cultures.

According to the **Conceptual Dictionary** (1994:99) holistic teaching and thus holistic reading entails the all-inclusive approach according to which the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts. The method seeks interrelationships among all the parts in order to find a solution or to arrive at some or other interpretation. **Reading teachers should** therefore also **bear in mind cultural links** and cultural diversity

when choosing reading-books as the approach to tolerate all cultures and languages form part of holistic reading in the classroom.

Jenkins (1998:48) maintains that children's literary texts have been written in all the officially recognised languages as mentioned above but that the large bulk of literature is still written in Afrikaans and English. Since the African children also switch to English from one of their vernaculars from the early grades, the demand for leisure reading in their own languages seems to be small. Jenkins admits that indigenous culture in South Africa has had little recognition. Indigenous folktales published in English have at least to some extent served the purpose of building bridges in order for various cultural readers to take hands. Jenkins, however, regards it as unfortunate that the only African tales are aimed at juvenile readers and that the perception is that the African folktales are not intended for the more mature readers - creating the unfortunate impression that African culture is immature.

Van der Walt (1998:25) acknowledges the fact that culture is of paramount importance in the reading experience by studying the needs of Coloureds and reading-books in the Cape. His findings concerning Afrikaans books can be applicable to English books as well. Van der Walt (1998:26) claims that the Coloureds who read Afrikaans need to be able to read their books from a Coloured perspective. By saying this it can be gathered that English books must also be written for Blacks from a Black perspective and Afrikaans books from a suitable cultural perspective (keeping in mind the mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans). This proves that reading-books must be geared towards **respecting cultural issues** and containing the perspective of the racial group involved. New developments and movements have also seen the light with regard to cultural developments, as it is no longer appropriate for authors to write about the *baas* and the *miesies* in children's stories, as it is no longer a reality but for a few exceptional instances and the same can be said about the suitability of speaking of the *kafir* obeying the *baas*. This type of perspective is as outworn and outdated as is the submissive woman of the house who has to iron shirts and bake cookies as the prime aim of her life since emancipation has altered this misconception. It goes to show that it is difficult in some multilingual classes to teach reading, as it is preferable

to supply each person from a specific culture with a reading book written from his/her cultural perspective. Compare the following incident as proof of the former statement:

> A recent response to a reading book a teacher exposed learners to as according to him to be suitable reading material, caused much upheaval among Grade 6 learners at Cullinan Combined School. The teacher thought it to be an apt time to introduce the readers to their harsh past. He considered learners to be ready to have progressed sufficiently from their "plasticine worm-rolling stage" to be able to deal with the content of Bosman's *Unto Dust.* The cause of the vehement reaction of parents to learners' learning experience during a reading lesson was unexpectedly intense because of the use in the story of the word *kafir*. Parents interpreted the teacher's choice of reading lesson as a means of derogating and dehumanising their children and interpreted the teacher's involvement in the whole episode as racist. Parents were upset beyond the point where they could be reasoned with, in spite of the fact that the story had a strong satirical and moral intent and the use of the story had been intended by the teacher to demonstrate something of the hurtful implications of racism (Donaldson, 1999:22).

> Another unnecessary incident took place at the turn of the new millennium when **Theo en Blikskottel**, still speaking of *kaffertjies,* was delivered at schools as part of the new books intended for the purpose of OBE teaching. It caused quite an upheaval among teachers and principals who had to weigh the pros and cons of continuing with the book or not. It is almost incomprehensible that such a book can be delivered as part of a new system's reading material. The MEC remarked that the schools could order their own readers from a list of twenty books and that the case should be seen in that light. The word referred to here is the loaded word *kaffertjie*, which is really very unsuitable for especially Black learners who are humiliated and who will not approve of the use of such a word in their books. Engelbrecht (2000:1) reports that the book was referred to the panel who had to evaluate reading-books for multicultural teaching (Engelbrecht, 2000:1)

These two instances support the extreme levels of sensitivity surrounding the whole

issue of respecting cultures, being sensitive to other racial groups' feelings, **allowing room for tolerance without swamping one group with the other group's cultural reading heritage**.

Many factors, among which culture is of paramount importance, play a prominent role in this educational learning process and the prime emphasis is on reading as a skill to optimise second-language acquisition. Reading a book also has as its primary aim the encouragement to read a second language and also the broader aim of eventual communication in a second language.

When psychiatrist Robert Coles performed studies of South African literature, he discovered the fear among White South African children of Black people. He asserts that race rather than culture or language is the true mainstay of nationalist sentiment. He maintains that White South African children invoke vestiges of apartheid prejudices by staring at Blacks. He asserts that White power still rules in South African children's literature and that their dominant voices are welcomed by Great Britain and the USA. He is concerned about the fact that the African needs are mis-classified and mis-defined (Maddy & MacCann, 1998:27). The above-mentioned examples reinforce a plea for tolerance of culture and race. It emphasises the fact that various cultural groups must be catered for respectively when setting up **a reading programme tailored to the children's needs.**

Research done in the Johannesburg area has shown a predictable adherence to book imports by Roald Dahl, Enid Blyton, Carolyn Keene Franklin W. Dixon, Judy Blume and Francine Pascal. McMurray, who performed the informal library research, says that a noticeable swing to American literature could also be detected (Heale, 1998:37). Concerning Black second-language readers of English, it became apparent that they just accepted whatever was given to them and have not developed a reading taste for certain books and authors.

The Durban regional group of the South African Children's Book Forum (SABF) found that **many younger Black readers have not developed a specific taste yet,**

whereas the more prolific and mature readers with more formed opinions showed that there was a negative response to locally-written books, with readers complaining that they did not wish to read about the political past and present situation. There was even a reaction of protest to writings about squatter camps. One boy admitted, however, that after having read *The Hardy Boys* and *The Secret Seven* for a long time a book like Themba Mabuso's *The Village Rescuers* was particularly refreshing (Heale, 1998:38).

Obviously Blacks might feel unnecessarily exposed when reading stories about poverty and desperate circumstances – in a pursuit such as reading where escapism is also a strong component, the foregrounding of the daily grind might not be the strongest enticement to read!

Compare the findings of Van Vuuren (1994:15) when teachers had to evaluate books on racism in Cape Town. The book in question was *At the Crossroads,* which is all about children living in a squatter camp. The teacher maintained that the book did not reflect the way her pupils lived. She thought it to be absurd if not degrading to romanticise life in a squatter camp. One of the facilitators then defended the book by saying that the idea of the book was to show that people **can** live with dignity under any circumstances. The problem the teacher probably identified was that the book had been written from an outsider (possibly condescending) perspective. Maybe Tötemeyer's suggestion for Blacks to start writing from an inner perspective is what is needed:

> Although South African youth book authors have become quite progressive in recent years and tackled themes such as drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, parental rejection, illegitimacy, alcoholism and so on, these themes concentrate mainly on conflict-management at an inter-personal (micro-social) level, i.e. in the family, school and peer group. It has however, become imperative for authors to broaden their perspective to include conflict management on the macro-social level, i.e. towards peace and understanding between groups in society at large. In this respect it is necessary for more Black writers to start writing for children. Young White authors, who are products of apartheid, have lived separately from Blacks all their lives and cannot possibly write from experience about life in the township or the slum (Tötemeyer, 1988:87).

It follows that when attempting to write on cultural and socio-economic issues in stories, research must be done thoroughly before the author will be able to give a true reflection of the state of affairs, otherwise the finer nuances of the story will be lost and the reader will pick up the "artificial" effort of the author to write for his reader who might just brand it as "stuff that sucks", a diet not at all to the reader's liking.

The following pitfalls should be avoided by writers when considering the reader as target group:

- patronising the reader
- potential disharmony in mixing cultural images, structures and styles
- inconsistency, not ringing true
- lack of originality
- covering serious issues like death and racial interaction without providing some comfort and positive affirmation
- writing/illustrating to please a particular group, leading to the creation of stereotypes and characters that do not ring true (Baker, 1994:32).

Hepker (1990:26) warns writers against the urge to Europeanise, for example, a traditional folktale, since it can entail a clash of cultural style that can create disharmony and the same goes for Africanising European stories. If the challenge is not met successfully it can blow up in the author's face. She also **warns against patronising the reader, inconsistencies in the book, books that will make children feel uncomfortable, stereotyping and offensive characters and books lacking an appropriate style,** for example, fairytale characters who will need a conversational style and the more realistic stories which will make use of authentic realistic settings. She makes the following statement in connection with the South African situation:

> South African writers are disadvantaged because apartheid has ensured that they have contact only with their own particular group. Writers need to reflect stories that promote cultural tolerance. Stories that reflect a particular heritage must be tempered by something in the story that is universally true. In this way the fine balance between the

> particular and universal will have an enriching effect on al who read the story (Hepker, 1990:27).

Tötemeyer (1988:80) envisages a literature that can bridge the gap between the estranged and separated children of the country. A literature that should be able to promote inter-racial understanding will have to meet a proposed set of requirements. Stereotypes of Blacks sitting lazily in the sun and *kaalvoetklonkies* clad in tatters have made way for the also intelligent-looking Black child. Tötemeyer is of the opinion that persistence in maintaining covert racism has an underlying ideological motivation that has on its agenda the perpetuation of the status quo. To promote inter-racial understanding Blacks will have to be offered the chance of becoming characters sympathetically portrayed as individuals. The following authors have in fact produced positive portrayals of Blacks: Jenny Seed, Maretha Maartens, Freda Linde, Hester Heese, Rona Rupert, Alba Bouwer and Es'kia Mphahlele. Compare the following remark by Tötemeyer:

> In order to contribute to inter-racial understanding, South African juvenile literature will have to address socio-political issues, including the aspirations of Black youth and how this has affected their education (Tötemeyer, 1988:85).

Another reason for children's rejection of reading material is to be found in a forced reading experience by parents and teachers. According to Marcham (1989:8) children reject reading-books because of artificial barriers such as prescriptive reading by parents and teachers, causing them to associate books with unpleasant experiences and resulting in a sense of failure and ultimately inferiority. **Themes affecting the readers in a negative way** are found in books symbolising negative aspects in society (such as indoctrination) which **are branded as topics of immense boredom.**

Parents also play a profound role in the child's reading interest, because the parents' choice is often extended to the child. Children then keep on focusing on what they do not like instead of showing a positive attitude towards selecting reading material. Non-readers are also often those who had a bad experience of reading and familiar stories often work better than unfamiliar topics (Marcham, 1989:13).

Children dislike stories lacking a creative spark, technical competence, stories with weak plots depicting cardboard characters and insipid settings with no climax (Hill, 1997:60). It must be further noted that boys dislike stories in which females play the major part whereas girls are more eager to accept stories in which males feature as heroes (Hill, 1997:61).

This fact can possibly be linked with upbringing and society in which males are still seen as the protectors and old-fashioned values have not quite disappeared which is not necessarily a bad influence, since sex-typing is so fundamental for the sexes in order to perform their respective roles in society where certain values are ascribed to certain ways of acting. Learners are brought up to show a certain preference for certain material and are also influenced by their peers and the latest tendency on the world scene, almost like a reading fashion for readers. They are in fact also influenced by their emotional, cognitive and biological development opposing everything exactly what the parents want them to read because of the analytical development of the brain discussed in Chapter 2. They will start to like reading-books just because the parents do not want them to read them because of their critical and suspicious attitude of teachers and parents during their phases of development.

Compare the following statistics of stories unpopular with the target group: Only 8% of learners prefer fables and only 6% of learners enjoy adventures. Horror and ghost stories are ranked at 4%, whereas science fiction ranks at 24% on the children's hit parade of top priority (Hill, 1997:61). This brings us to the question: what do children really like?

Theron and Du Plessis (1994:21) resorted to Labov's six crucial elements to outline the elements that constitute a child's story. These factors were tested and are said to be essential ingredients of a good story for children. Should these factors be omitted, it would entail a negative attitude and elicit rejection from the readers. They are

- the announcement, indicating the start of a typical child's story like **once upon a**

time,

- the orientation which includes the context of the story which is often expounded by the narrator speaking at a place and time,
- the core narrative which forms the essential element of the narration,
- the evaluation which is the actual point that is made relating about a crucial experience and the elements that intensify the meaning of the story supporting a former mentioned fact or idea,
- the consequences of events which form the termination of the series and
- a coda often indicated by the formulaic convention: **and they lived happily ever after.**

Theron and du Plessis (1994:37-38) focus on these elements as imperative to successful manuscripts presented to publishers and it also came to light that many of the manuscripts that failed the test did not comply with these factors. They refer to Syd Field, a script-writer who is involved with scripts for television, and he identified specific moments that are of relevance to a good script. They are

- the beginning (that is, the set-up);
- the middle (in which the confrontation takes place) and
- the end and second plot revealing the solution to the problem.

Labov's distinctive elements can be seen as part of a success recipe for authors intending to write stories. Should these focal elements be absent, it could result in rejection and negative response.

4.3.3 Popular reading material: "hot stuff for kids"

4.3.3.1 Escapist reading

Once upon a time there was a parent who asked Einstein, the renowned scientist, what should be done to turn a child into a scientist. He responded by saying "'fairy stories, fairy stories and more fairy stories'" (Sisulu, 1999:21). The rather surprising answer

given by the well-known genius was enough to make one stop and consider why he would not rather prioritise Maths, Science or even Philosophy, but the unusual answer is important in that it emphasises the importance of inculcating and stimulating the imagination. What better way to capture the imagination than through a good storybook by means of which the learner can escape to an imaginary world?

Tolkien (1973:43) is of the opinion that the human brain is able to recall imaginative things that in fact do not exist. The basic ingredient of a fantasy is then just this element of the fantastic that exists just outside the normal perception of the ordinary. The reader is taken from the ordinary to the world of the extraordinary where secondary comprehension takes over. Everything is credible because it all ties in with the primary reality of the fantastic world. No wonder that Snyman (1983:142) compares the delicate art of writing fantasies to a soap bubble that has the quality and the suspense-inducing possibility of bursting at any moment.

Steenberg (1988a:77) comments on fantasy by referring to the secondary world that is entered by the reader. This secondary world does not relate to the real world at first glance, but indirectly it is also about human values and the constant struggle between virtuous and evil forces. Fantasy adds the touch of a deeper dimension, alluring the reader into an imaginative world of characters that surprise yet display familiarity, characters that the reader can relate to. Fantasy fights the cardboard effect of flatness and adds a certain roundness to a story.

According to Gallagher (1989:15) **one of the top selling genres readers enjoy to escape into is that of fantasy**. The explosion of science and technology dominating our world has led to its popularity. Learners want to escape the crude and violent reality depressing them, rather reverting to a fantasy world where characters take on a historical reality. Fantasies appeal to readers across the age barriers **focusing on universal concerns, for example the triumphing of good over bad, generosity over meanness and love over hate. It works on many levels, from the serious to the light and the humorous,** although it is a form of art often regarded with suspicion of possible forces that can do children harm.

According to Hill (1997:61), fables and adventures do not rank high when it comes to popularity. General reading material is enjoyed by 32% and thrillers by 20%. Science fiction is, however, enjoyed by 24%. How can Roald Dahl's popularity then be explained? He is known for using folklore characters often used in fables (with a popularity rate of 8%) in his stories like *The BFG* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.*

Roald Dahl is often criticised for his crudely delineated characters, his characters' vulgar language, violence, sexism – hating women, promotion of criminal behaviour and even occult overtones. Children, however, are so mad about this best-selling British author who died in 1990 that parents fear that their children will become stuck in the rut of only reading Dahl's books. What then is his secret?

Dahl follows the same approach time and again and the children are besotted with his stories. He uses categorisation, speculation, postulation, corroboration and implication. Dahl's characters are vividly portrayed with a generous helping of unpleasant characteristics. **Dahl uses gluttony, greed for power, and wealth, anger, violence and cruelty to attract attention, but the reader always enjoys the punishment of the cruel people in the story in the end** (Culley, 1991:59-60).

According to Culley (1991:66) Dahl himself admitted to being a fantasist who gives his characters such unusual attributes, but at the same time keeping them simple enough to remember and identify with because he sees himself as pre-eminently an author entertaining children. Many parents, in accordance with Culley's opinion (1991:66), believe that children should be shielded against such content. Adults find his language offensive and fear that their children will as a result resort to vulgarity and crude behaviour. Some critics, however, claim that a good author will take into account the wealth of potential child perception, response and insight. His daring use of crude characters and vulgar language proves that he throws his lot in with the reader and that is also a reason for his profound popularity for he is in some way satisfying the younger readers' subconscious needs (Culley, 1991:67).

In a survey carried out in Johannesburg, Dahl was placed as the most popular author in all the libraries in that area from the cosmopolitan (in other words multiracial and multicultural) Hillbrow to the quiet Emmarentia library, despite the criticism of adults that he is catering for the cruder end of childish taste of delighting in crudery and having a one-in-the-eye attitude. His preposterous exaggerations and portrayal of folklore characters stimulate the children's imagination, adding a pinch of entertaining humour and causing his books to be irresistibly attractive (Bester & Gouws, 1995:89).

The contrasting evidence provided by Hill's statistics and the popularity of Dahl's stories can perhaps be explained in terms of Dahl's innovative style of combining an unpopular type of writing such as fables with a popularity rate of 8% with science fiction which has a popularity rate of 24% in accordance with statistics provided by Hill on popularity of types of stories (1997:61). His approach and provocative style culminate in a process that combines childlike innocence with scientific inventions as in his glass elevator in *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory.* Dahl is thus incontrovertibly a firm favourite among young readers.

Rowling has recently attracted much attention and has consistently been in the limelight for her very popular *Harry Potter* books. Her character Harry has been hailed as the "fantastic Harry Potter" by Lockman (2000), the "magician for many" by Jones *et al.* (1999), but she has also been criticised and practically hunted down by parents concerned about their children's religious upbringing.

Rowling has become extremely popular, however, because of injecting the spark of popular fantasy into her books, gripping the reader's imagination and keeping him/her spellbound till the very end. Her characters can fly on broomsticks, cast spells and converse with animals. Lockman (2000) recommends Harry Potter as an excellent choice for young readers to study.

Rowling has been described as "the star of three of the most well-thumbed novels ever written - for children or anyone else" (Jones *et al.*, 1999). Five million of the books are in print and younger readers are perusing books fanatically. Rowling has had the good fortune of being dubbed a reputable author – and the money keeps on rolling in. Her stories are superbly constructed and her characters resemble people whom the younger set can identify with. Even adults are buying these books in large numbers. There is a downside to this as well, as seen below.

Gish (2000) identifies many red flags in the Harry Potter books and claims that for example the divination course in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is strictly forbidden in Deuteronomy. References to divination and wizards cause the books to become a serious concern for parents with strict religious codes. The portrayal of wizardry is done in a way that children would be fascinated by and might want to emulate, and parents who are concerned about their children and their religious education might well feel that they would not want their children to become interested in learning about practices that they might consider an abomination to God, even if it would help them to improve their language proficiency as these books will be avidly read.

Montenegro (2000:8) makes an attempt to arrive at some kind of balance in this debate. She asserts that while the *Harry Potter* books are extremely popular and are enticing children into reading again, there is a problematic area in that she feels that the element of sorcery that is so central in these stories cannot be approved of even though it is said to fight the evil forces. She mentions explicit examples of White and Black magic used in *Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone*. Central to the plot of the story is the sorcerer's stone, which is connected to alchemy, an occult practice that combined the exploration of minerals with Gnostic practices in order to attain an inner spiritual transformation. Alchemy is defined by the occultist as a process of purification and characters such as Flamel are said to be the only maker of the sorcerer's stone. Flamel is also mentioned several times in the well-known *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*. Montenegro therefore criticises and implicitly rejects the book by saying that fantasy is fuelled by the occult in this book. Harry

Potter glorifies the occult, but God condemns it and urges parents to deal with the increasing acceptance of occultism (Montenegro, 2000:9)

Maartens (2000:8) points out that in America there are 48 states that have decided to ban Harry Potter from school libraries. This clearly points to a serious concern on the side of parents and legislators and it makes one wonder whether these books are all that innocent. She asserts that witchcraft as backdrop is no ideal way to educate young children, and comes to the conclusion that the Harry Potter books are not healthy reading material for young children and warns against the possible adverse side-effects of reading these books.

Jackson (2000:11), a church reporter and journalist, says that he enjoys reading *Harry Potter* with his children. He recommends that parents should read the books with their children and guide them towards distinguishing between reality and fantasy. He claims that he recommends the books on the following grounds: The books are exciting and capture the reader's imagination, they are full of humour and generally have a gripping line of tension. He defends the books on the grounds that Harry is on the side of the good forces and generally praises the books for the wonderful and warm interpersonal relationships that are evoked, such as the friend inviting Harry into his room in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. He also asserts that to his mind the books do not have a hidden and possibly negative religious agenda.

Hobbs (1998:49) relates how she used the popular TV programme *The Simpsons* created by Matt Groening to revive her reading periods by comparing them with Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age*. In the opening scene character portrayal is already well on its way as viewers can deduce each person's individuality from studying the physical detail. Learners responded exceptionally well, especially when analysing ***The Simpsons* as a comedy pointing out the social criticism achieved by comically satirising the emotional pain of lying, the use of bribery, the worker-boss relationship and the newly acquired freedom of emancipated women.** They reacted positively towards Mark Twain's unfamiliar book because they could refer back to and compare it with *The Simpsons*.

It is very interesting to note that the stories the youngsters are reportedly fond of are stories that would not be exactly the parents' choice. Parents must reach a point where they have to decide whether they want to enforce reading of works by certain authors, guide them towards more acceptable literature, or whether they are going to allow their children to read what they prefer themselves. What is the most important issue - the child reading and learning through an enjoyable experience or the parent hampering reading avidity by a strict code of what is allowed? As long as the books do not contradict currently held values and mores or promote immoral sexuality, a few crude characters can do perhaps less harm if the books also teach the second language and help to create lifelong readers, who will read more intellectually acceptable and stimulating books later in their lives, but will have become literate and able to cope with communicating in English at this stage and using the texts available for the purpose.

Appleyard (1990:14) identifies five roles that the young reader assumes when "experiencing" the reading text, viz.

1. the reader as player engaged in a fantasy world that is sorted out and controlled;
2. the reader becomes the hero or heroine in the story when escaping into a dream world less ambiguous than the real pragmatic world;
3. the reader looks for role models to emulate. He will as adolescent scrutinise the passage to discover insights and meaning into life;
4. the reader assumes the role of interpreter who studies analytically;
5. the reader is a pragmatic and reads in several ways and uses the roles earlier mentioned as he needs them.

The roles discussed above also serve as an explanation for the reader's preference for certain stories and plots. Readers will look for escapist themes that will distract their attention from the harsh realities of life to offer temporary relief. Reading to escape reality often goes hand in hand with reading material that is stimulating to kids and not necessarily to parents, but it serves a therapeutic role (Nell, 1988:32).

Baker (1994:32) attended a workshop by READ and supplies the following information with regard to reading interests. The following are seen as sources of enjoyment being readers that allow and deal with:

- recognition of the self - both real and mythic;
- the feeling that reality can be changed;
- comedy;
- a story that moves the emotions;
- consolidation of what the reader knows;
- stories that reflect a familiar environment;
- stories that extend perceptions and reflect different environments;
- stories with strong atmosphere; and
- stories that stimulate curiosity.

Marchand (1992:28) refers to the following as popular genres. An example of each follows in brackets:

1. The detective thriller is popular (John Tembo's *Dead men don't talk).*
2. The pop music story which offers youngsters information on how to become a star and touching on issues such as discovery and fantasy (*Easy Starts* and *Rock Star - new discovery*).
3. The macabre in terms of which teacher and parents have to be very selective (the Chillers series).
4. Simplified classics (*A tale of two cities*).

Marchand's evidence on what is popular compares well with Hill's statistics obtained in 1997. Marchand (1992:28), as an assistant media specialist, claims that teachers reported that Black pupils specifically find books with an African background to be more popular than books representing other cultures. She asserts that these learners show a better comprehension of content and also that they gained a better level of

proficiency of reading. She mentions the Junior African Writers series as an example of such popular writing.

Reading-books shown to be **best sellers over many years can also be linked with the familiar and publishers keep on publishing the reading material that sells, which includes familiar books written** by, for example Enid Blyton and traditional fairytales that parents want their children to read. Reading material which ranks among the most popular usually takes into consideration the intellectual ability of the child, his emotional development and his social and intellectual maturity (Marcham, 1989:13).

Hepker (1990:25) asserts that sources of enjoyment can be linked with the language competence of the child and the complexity or simplicity of the text, the recognition of the self in the text, a sense of power to transform reality even though it is fantastical and temporary, exaggerations and comical portrayal of characters and stories that move emotions.

The comical element and **humour have also popped up as one of the most important sources of enjoyment and reading material containing these elements are said to be very popular** especially as a form of escapist reading. McMahon (1999:70) and Boerman-Cornell (1999:66) have both conducted research on the value of applying humour even when applied to books of less interest. Humour can thus also be used as tool by teachers to add a spark of enjoyment to a monotonous reading book.

McMahon (1999:70) utilised the invaluable tool of humour in her classroom, breathing new life into her English literature periods by pointing out the humour in, among other books, Shakespeare's plays. Even the epic *Paradise Lost* was approached by putting a sign up on the outside of her classroom saying "Welcome to hell!". This also stimulates curiosity and topics that would be of interest to teenagers such as the matter of hell and heaven as final destiny were discussed. If employing humour in such as way is so successful, a reading book containing elements of the

comic and satire must of course be an entertaining source of reading material. It also points out that the more creative the teacher is, the more exciting reading can become in a classroom.

Boerman-Cornell (1999:66) identifies a number of forms of humour to be made use of in the classroom. The first use of humour is for humour to be employed as a means to rivet attention to the book which is successfully employed by best-selling authors such as mark Twain, Jonathan Swift and Kurt Vonnegut. He further mentions Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as an example of a sarcastic narrator employing humour successfully. He warns, however, against humour at the expense of the book which may tend to be counter-productive, humour that puts someone down and advocates the employment of humour to build up and even shape identity.

According to Peters (1998):

> Children are born to laugh. In fact, humor is thought to be the first expressive form of communication. Good writers understand the value of humor when they write for children. Not only does humor entertain and amuse them, but it lures the most reluctant reader.

Peters illuminates humorous writing by means of the element of: surprise, exaggeration, word and language play, role reversal, nonsense, satire, playing on adolescent angst and a quirky take on life. Humorous writing in the end remains spontaneous and comes from within every persons' own wacky way of looking at life. Humour has power as we condone what we laugh at and never forget the narrow margin dividing light-spirited and mean-spirited material.

4.3.3.2 The role of pictures in response

> It has long been a commonplace that pictures say more than words: that a picture is not only worth a thousand words, but also speaks to everyone ... For pictures can sometimes ambush the mind, circumventing our logic and verbal defenses. Part of what makes pictorial language seem universal is its seemingly privileged access to the viewer's heart or soul (Heffernan, 1999:19).

We are all basically born with the ability to use our senses to discover and enjoy God's creation. Our eyes are the most wonderful gifts that we have in terms of perceiving the world visually, and ultimately reading. What is more visually appealing and stimulating than a picture of a deliciously decorated cake when one is hungry, or a plate laden with tasty appetising food? Apart from pictures in white and black, colour will definitely tickle our fancy and a spectacular scene will never go unnoticed. If learning to read involves the use of pictures to reinforce verbal concepts and help with word recognition (such as in the **look-and-say** reading teaching method) it stands to reason that pictures must have some significant functions in aiding second language reading development.

The visual is said to be man's most important sense. Colour is regarded as having played a pertinent role in the survival and social psychological and biological development of man. Neurologists classify our senses according to a specific hierarchy and accord the highest place to visual perception. Gestalt psychologists maintain that visual thinking is intimately linked with thinking (Schwarz, 1988:31). When one reads, visual perceptions leave a lasting impression on us. Television is said to embrace us, advertisements to beguile us and films to enchant us. Visual transmitters have gained a powerful position of becoming manipulative agents of our era. The communication of pictures by means of words and visual illustrations have become the mainstay of current communication (Schwarz, 1988:32).

Pictures of letters and pictures of objects are both items associated with the field of study called semiotics which deals with the Saussurean idea that the sign or the process of signification is given meaning by the linking of the signifier which is the conventional arbitrary image (in the reading book's case visual) and the signified, the meaning attached to the image (Van Zyl, 1982:68). The illustrator of books will have to make sure that in the creation of illustrations cognisance is taken of the semiotic cluster of signs called cultural diversity and take the reader into account by supplying pictures open to the reader's interpretation without complicating understanding. Pictures must be able to contextualise and draw on the reader's social frame of reference. This brings into play the matter of cultural concerns, for the signifiers may

signify various messages by means of the signified, for example a picture of a porridge-pot may signify daily staple food to one cultural group and braaivleis or a "potjiekos" to another. If one opens a reading book, or even looks at the cover, one can often infer which cultural group will prefer the reading book.

Schwarz (1988:34) gives the following definition of a picture-book by referring to it as the kind of book where verbal and visual narrations accompany each other. The text and pictures seem to interact by means of the pictures' decorative, descriptive and narrative qualities.

Books with pictures or picture-books imply just what the words say – that is, text and pictures used conjointly to impart meaning and to tell stories. Picture-books are different from comics in that the written text takes up more space in the stories than comics. The modern picture-book for children began in England towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. Edmund Evans, one of the pioneers of children's books, started with the mass-production of picture-books and developed techniques that made colourful pictures commercially viable. Walter Crane, Kate Greenway and Randolph Calcedott worked with him and Calcedott became world famous for his contribution to American picture-books (Green, 1988:44).

Green (1988:44-52) claims that picture-books have many functions such as:

1. Giving children a feeling of emotional security
2. Nurturing the child's curiosity that satisfying the child's need to know
3. Nurturing the child's inner world and imagination
4. Giving a sense of belonging to and what constitutes a family
5. Breaking down stereotype thinking
6. Giving a sense of competence
7. Nurturing a sense of wonder at the natural world
8. Giving a sense of history
9. Introducing children to other countries and cultures
10. Introducing children to literature

Simons and Elster (1991:86) identify four functions of pictures in reading-books. They seem to be:

1. enhancing interest in books and reading;
2. increasing word recognition, comprehension, and memory for text;
3. maintaining vocabulary control; and
4. providing children with a means of transition from oral to written language communication.

Giblin (2000) claims that publishing houses receive more picture-book manuscripts than any other kind and that of the 5 000 submissions as part of the screening committees editor, 4000 of these books were picture-books. They were then not publishing more than twelve picture-books a year and the competition in the field of picture-books is very fierce. According to Giblin (2000) of the type of picture-books in demand include:

1. Stories with an edge that would include the classic nursery tales;
2. Stories that lend themselves to bold illustrations and books that will attract they eyes of adults to buy them;
3. Brief simple books that can be turned into board books;
4. Stories with warm illustrations appealing to grandmothers and aunts because he asserts that it is basically the aunts and grannies who buy the books for the children;
5. Books with flashy illustrations which may appeal at first glance, but in the long run it is the books that appeal to the child's heart that will enjoy the list of publishers' priority lists;
6. Picture-books that have appealing characters, fast-paced action and generous doses of humour.


LIL WOLF
POOH
PLAYED A PARTY

Hepker (1990:26) claims that there is a terrific need for books without text, as visual literacy is often (mistakenly) assumed as being advanced and present. **Illustrations must also be appropriate to the context,** for example cute images such as teddies and monsters are more suitable to the European child. Cluttered pictures can lead to confusion and can miscue the second language readers. Learners should integrate the text with the illustrations and read the pictures in the same way that they read the text.

Marchand (1992:26) maintains that frequent illustrations which often appear in full colour in the lower grades must not be underestimated, as they have the function of breaking up the text, shedding light on the content, for example in Macmillans' *MacTracks* and Heineman *New Wave Readers,* for example *The Columbian Connection,* which even has an occasional break created by the insertion of a cartoon strip.

Pictures are said to generally alleviate the burden of vocabulary teaching in reading-books. Pictures can give more immediate and accessible information than the story and expand the readers' number of objects that have to be identified and named in the second language. Pictures, by supplying a similar context to the text, provide a face-to-face dialogue and the content of the storybook is thus reinforced by means of the pictures. Comprehension of the reading passage can also in many instances be dependent on the readers' ability to integrate the text and the picture information (Simons & Elster, 1991:87).

Ehlers-Zavala and Bakken (1997:46) focus on the functions of pictures in aiding the learning process in reading.

Pictures can

- provide the context for the story,
- emphasise information and
- direct attention to what is crucial in the story, enhance effective responses to the reading book,

- direct attention to relevant information, and
- guide cognitive processes in understanding the text.

Inclusion of pictures in a story-book which are suitable to the learners' ages and developmental needs, offers many advantages. Pictures can therefore enlighten learners culturally, enhance linguistic competence by teaching new vocabulary, promote excellent aesthetic response to reading material and furnish ground to build upon in fostering communicative competence. Colours and shapes will connect to the story and elicit direct responses. Pictures convey paralinguistic communication by showing the value of, for example, signs when greeting associated with unique cultural groups. Images portrayed can stimulate and enhance a sense of cultural identity.

Sisulu (1999:21) asserts that it is through the picture-book that the author can kill more than one bird with one stone. Picture-books are said to be especially important when it comes to bringing rich cultural folklore to the classroom. The complaint is that too often especially African children have to leave their culture at the school gate, something they cannot and should not be separated from. Sisulu (1999:21) maintains that it is this attempt to part culture and education that has led to the lack of a reading culture in education. Attending school would be a less intimidating experience if the child can be supplied with picture-books as an aid to learning by associating the content with the picture in order to facilitate a better understanding of what is communicated by the author.

Simons and Elster (1991:87-88) distinguish between picture-only and picture-dependent texts. Picture-only texts are characterised by text information supported by pictures where important information left out of the text is carried in the pictures and pictures carrying information left out of the stories completely. Picture-dependent texts are texts which use words that refer to information only recoverable from the pictures, for example exophoric terms referring to terms outside of the text where the referent is in the picture. In ordinary texts exophoric reference is absent or minimal and cohesion is achieved through the endophoric terms which refer coreferentially

with other words in the text. Referential forms in a non-illustrated text have to be anchored within the text itself because of the lack of the visual or physical situation. Picture independence is the more usual way of illustrating where pictures refer exophoric and endophoric reference takes place within the text. The text or the text can be used to identify referents.

Simon and Elster (1991:88-90) conducted a study investigating the role of pictures in the learning of a language by Grade 1 learners and came to the following conclusion: learners vary in degree to picture-dependence, and picture-dependence decreases from the beginning to the end of the first grade, but at different rates. The existence of picture-dependence appears to be influenced by vocabulary constraints. The most important conclusion they arrived at and that they have no empirical proof is that picture-dependent texts do not in assist reading acquisition and may even interfere with it. (When conducting the empirical research for this study learners will also be exposed to pictures to test whether pictures have a more positive influence than is expected.)

Nikola-Lisa (1991:247) investigated the role of graphics in picture-books done by E. J. Keats. Pictures are not mere scribblings even though they may at first hand appear to be just that. They are uniquely chosen decorations and form a part of a deliberately, meticulously selected web of information the reader is exposed to. Keats is well-known for his collage technique and he utilises graphic play to superimpose pictographic-like images, for example, like in the books *Pet Show* and *Maggie and the Pirate.* He employs self-reflexivity by playfully toying upon the often serious emotional characters and their predicament. He uses grid-like structures underlying children's games like hopscotch grids in order to create the required comic effect.

In cartoons pictures play an even more important role as they represent the shortened more succinct version of reading material in visual form, except for the fact that they are almost without exception making comical statements. Pictures used in the picture stories are more than the at-first-glance tic-tack-toe and hopscotch stripes; they symbolise various emotions and help the painter to achieve meaning. Illustrators

should in fact create picture additional illustrations and not only picture dependent illustrations. In other words pictures should supply a little bit more than the written text. Illustrations should in fact broaden learning by their exophoric value.

Marcham (1989:13) mentions that comics are so tremendously popular because of their tendency to pictorialise the unfamiliar concepts which make it so attractive for the slow reader, entertaining with its themes of action, excitement, episodic repetition and by helping the readers to overcome limitations imposed on the ego.

Baker (1994:40) found in her survey conducted among primary school children in two schools that one of the most significant elements in reader response is picturing. She found that some children who disposed of a proper reading ability enjoyed stories without pictures as much as books with pictures, saying that they enjoyed imagining things for themselves too. The first introduction a child has to a reading book is probably a very sensuous meeting when he/she is touching the book made of a certain paper. This focuses attention on the role that the cover, often illustrated, plays in grabbing the attention, encouraging the learner to open it on the first page. Baker (1994:49) confirms that in her study she found that readers judge books by their covers. A cover looking too factual and businesslike didn't interest many. She found that the lower the learners' level of development in English language learning, the more important pictures were to them. Hill (1997:63) comments on the fact that **pictures are essential in reading-books.** She admits, however, that it is difficult to get the balance between text and pictures right, avoiding the issue of pictures rendering the text unnecessary.

Robinson and Weintraub (1973:86) did research related to children's interests and assert that Amsden carried out research among very young children and found that illustrations with more colours were generally preferred to pictures with fewer colours and light and dark colours were preferred to bright saturated colours. Fanciful drawings were preferred to realistic pictures and from research it could also be gathered that pictures ranked more popularly than the text in the art of storytelling.

Rood (1995:39-41) stresses the importance of communication between the illustrator and the author of the book. The illustrator must in fact represent visually what the author has in mind in attempting to give dimension to the final product. The illustrator is also, however, influenced by his own frame of reference when illustrating and will as a result also add something of his unique experiences in life to the pictures he is drawing or painting. Colour and lines must follow the rhythm of the words, reinforcing text, depending on intuitive creativity. The highlights of a book are often subject matter for the illustrations and the illustrator will decide on the letter font and pages of illustrations. The pictures must also be in touch with the emotional level of the story as to render it essentially functional and to reflect the tone convincingly.

Retief and Potgieter (1989:14-18) discuss the criteria required for illustrations and books when publishing by HAUM and Human and Rossouw. They are:

1. Texts and illustrations must be integrated;
2. Illustrations must vary according to colour, shape and size;
3. The main characters must be vivid and should not be dominated by the background;
4. The atmosphere created by the text must be supported by the illustrations;
5. Stick to simplicity when illustrating;
6. Action must be represented and characters must move naturally;
7. Facts must be rendered originally as in text and may add detail;
8. Characters must be authentic and represent the characters in the text keeping same characteristics;
9. Illustrations should be applied meticulously and should not interfere with the interpretation of the text, leaving ample space for text on the pages in question.

Whether exophoric or endophoric, colourful or sketchy, pictures do present an undeniable visual pleasure and stimulate curiosity, an urge we all experience. Readers will go for material playing on curiosity and spectacle. A striking content is, however, a prerequisite for making a story successful. If a picture does not tell an interesting story, the book is left on the shelf to gather dust, or the publisher will

dump it on the slush pile and the book will not even reach the shelves of the library. Parents and teachers must think twice before calling cartoons junk – cartoons have evolved into a sophisticated and complicated art form.

4.3.4 Response, readers and gender – blue for boys and pink for girls

If one should see the following heading in a newspaper: "Boys' reading is in crisis", what would one's immediate reaction be? It will most obviously and probably be influenced by one's gender. Females would probably believe it and males would object, standing up for their gender. It is interesting to note the way **boys and girls respond differently to reading material.** Feminists also attack authors because of their catering for the males, making them the heroes and the main characters in books, giving the female characters the inferior act to play as for example Roald Dahl is often accused of (Gouws & Bester, 1995:89).

Small (1999:12) attacks critics and researchers for trying to supply evidence in support of an argument that boys do not read as extensively as girls, that they are more inclined to read comics and newspapers and that they take longer to read than girls. He opposes the perspective held by Dunne and Khan by arguing that the NFER Primary Reading results show that boys out-perform girls when it comes to reading tests. He also maintains that boys borrow books more often than girls (that may be the cause of not being able to record their every book read). He is of the opinion that boys read more fiction than girls and that their reading is not acknowledged and that their being non-readers is a myth. He also claims that the material boys are encouraged to read is often girls' material, fiction and poetry. He further asserts that the curriculum is loaded with reading material suitable to girls' interests. He also stresses that fantasy and science fiction are extremely popular with boys. Boys do not prefer books on emotions and relationships. He further concludes that in respect to reading what is source for the goose is not necessarily source for the gander and that the emperor should just be granted another fitting, he is not without clothes.

The fact of the matter is that females are soon attracted to romantic stories, a topic not of much interest to boys who are reportedly not interested in reading about "emotional stuff". Publishers tend to deliver pulp fiction to females because they sell so well. During the mid-teens 51% of romance readers acquire the taste for romantic stories, catering for the voracious appetite for reading Danielle Steele's stories. She has sold over 100 million copies of her novels in North America, grossing an estimated R25 million a year (Ricker-Wilson, 1999:57).

Romance reading offers the reader the opportunity to escape from a real world complicated by HIV and AIDS to a world of hassle-free romantic relations of escapist value, side-stepping the adversities of a real heterosexual relationship. It should be noted that the target group here includes readers from the formal operational stage which thus include teenagers and since development takes place at its own pace, many learners mature earlier than others and the following remark on secondary school readers can therefore also of relevance to the target group. Ricker-Wilson (1999:63) maintains that:

> The popular romance offers one of the richest imaginable repositories for exploring conflicting understandings of gender and sexuality. This exploration is desperately needed by my own secondary school students who cannot even speak the word "lesbian" when discussing *The Color Purple*; who rely on typically gendered endings for their own short stories, resolving their protagonists' problems either through romance or Rambo-like conquest.

A possible explanation for the popularity of romantic books can also be found in the girls' emotional development and the fact that girls are said to develop faster than boys emotionally, and the fact that females are more numerous than males. It can also be explained in terms of sex-typing where the child learns his specific role in society where certain behaviour is expected of the males and certain ways of acting by the female, a tendency referred to by Grobler (1988:126) as the **me Jane** and **you Tarzan** concept. Usually boys are supposed to fulfil the role of protector and provider in the needs of the family, therefore they may be more interested in books depicting this theme whereas the girls who have top give life to babies will be more interested in

care and love. Grobler (1988:134) observes the following hidden messages contained in a number of children's picture-books studied:

1. Lovely maidens and princesses usually have to wait passively for some prince to come along.
2. All females are ugly hags, witches or stepmothers (invariably wicked).
3. With the exception of the fairy godmother, none of the females do anything worthwhile.
4. Girls who try to be adventurous come to a sticky end.
5. Females are born to serve.
6. Beauty should be coveted, for beauty equals success which equals marriage.
7. Females rarely speak.
8. Females are rarely friends.
9. Happy endings are those in which the couple "got married and lived happily ever after".
10. Females depend on and wait for males to bring about any and all changes in their lives.
11. Females are seldom given an opportunity to make any kind of decision – they very seldom have a say in who their future husbands will be.
12. Males do all the rescuing, the brainwork and solve all problems. They are independent, strong, adventurous, brave, energetic, clever, leaders, active, and show a great interest in mechanical things. They have a vast knowledge of things such as space ships, submarines, aeroplanes, electricity and solar energy. They are competent, reliable, responsible and trustworthy. They never think in terms of growing up to marry or of becoming daddies.

Croker (1999:65-66) followed a very unusual but fruitful approach in dealing with gender in reading-books among high school pupils by making time for a gender-bender period in which the learners could voice their opinions on various reading-books and during which they could respond true to their sex without any prejudice. She helped them towards being set free of the limitations of gender stereotypes and by reading a hot topic from the *1990s - Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* by John Gray, guided them towards responding. She wanted them to see how backgrounds and gender affected points of view. Learners discussed situations in which they felt discrimination concerning gender and students responded by claiming that by watching *Baywatch* and *Beverley Hills 90210*, the ideal physical figures were held as position to attain, causing a lot of stress among them for not living up to and meeting these requirements, causing disillusionment with themselves. The discussion

developed into a discussion on dating and relationships during marriage and touched on issues like divorce. The students became alert to gender discrimination in reading texts and pointed out these instances. Reading sessions became enriched and learners became aware of differences between gender responses.

Robinson and Weintraub (1973:91-92) mention research done by Adams in which it was also found that Grade seven boys preferred action and girls showed a keen interest in romance and humour. They also assert in the same study that Elley and Tolley found that younger girls were interested in animal stories, fairy tales, make-believe and humour, but changed to people and romance from level four. Major interests of boys were detection, action and excitement. Research on non-fictional books also showed an interest of girls in beauty and boys in camping, fishing and sport.

When studying the articles and surveys done on gender response to reading material, one can come to the conclusion that television has indeed become a very powerful instrument in vying for the reader 's attention. Stories are also told through the visual medium but do not present the written text which is so necessary for learners to develop to be able to make higher grades and to go for tertiary training. By involving television in reading material and doing reviews on television programmes the reading teacher can thus manage to still attract the reader's attention, by sharing it with the medium of television. It can also be gathered from studying the response to reading material on gender that writers should indeed cater for boys and girls in the lower grades before they all become interested in relationships, because they have different choices and preferences for reading material (blue is for boys and pink for girls). Gender stereotyping can also be linked with cultural values and cultural, perspective. It still remains the parent's choice whether he/she wants to teach the child to act according to the principles of a specific cultural group she/he belongs to.

The fact of the matter is also that even authors are divided into the two gender groups, viz. male and females and the texts written will of necessity cater predominantly for either the males or the females. Girls will be girls and boys will be boys we are

inherently prone to like different books because of our biological destiny, our upbringing and our cultural conditioning. Few books written by the opposite sex will appeal to readers of both sexes and the author's ideological gender perspective will also influence the reading-books. Authors should, however, bear in mind the change in cultural development and assumptions over the years. It should be noted that women are nowadays allowed to become anything, for example engineers and medical doctors, occupations that had been reserved for the males only in the past. Women are no longer only cooking in the kitchens and sewing men's pants and socks. Feminists have gradually gained ground for women and females are no longer seen to take a back seat when it comes to certain strong qualities as taking the lead and earning the money. It also does not imply lesbianism if she takes the lead in activities such as governing a country or lecturing at the university. Pace and Townsend (1999:17) comment on the general perception of society to diminish the role of women in society:

> If we are female, we are bound by a weak nature from which we cannot emerge; we must wait frail and still along the margins, distrust our judgement, exist only inside of our sexual function. If we are male, we are bound by duty even if it seems irrational; it must override our affections, our need to be truthful, and our desire to live out our own lives.

Pace and Townsend (1999:18) launch a plea according to which society should start evaluating its perspective of the roles of boys and girls in society, for boys belong to the gender that is more likely to suppress his innermost feelings and who becomes addicted to alcohol and who is more prone to commit suicide. Society has to take stock of its own twisted gender perceptions and should guide boys to allow their feelings to surface and girls to be humans who needn't match their bodies to the idealised media models. Ricker-Wilson (1999:59) remarks that musculocentric works predominate all the way through school and that authors should therefore bust the textual bodices to substitute them for fair ones offering the female a proper role in society.

Inherently, women who are true women will be attracted physically to beautiful men

and vice versa. Authors should, however, also develop an awareness of what feminists are fighting for (as observed by Driver, 1982:212) and that is a deeper appreciation for women's achievements, for it is not the feminist's intention to undergo a sex change, but only to claim her rightful position in society and also in children's reading-books.

4.3.5 What mom and dad want them to read: parents and critics' choices

After having considered some of the secrets of the most popular reading material, not always to the parents' liking, children's English books selected by critics, and parents that are of literary value and that need recognition are: books written by Madeleine Murgatroid, Geraldine Eliot, Phyllis Savory, Hugh Tracey *(The Lion on the Path)*, and Diana Pitcher. Authors who have done much to revive storytelling are Bob *Leshoai (Iso le Nkhono: African Folktales for Children,* Nombulelo *Makupula (Xhosa Fireside Tales),* and Gina Mhlope (Jenkins, 1998:48)

Successful imitations of folktales include Marguerite Poland's prize-winning folktales in the African-style: *Sambane's Dream*, and *The Wood-Ash Stars.* Apart from folktales, books portraying the lives of African people, giving a more realistic picture of African and rural settings, are also published. They focus more on mainstream themes such as relations with siblings, parents and schoolmates as well as African fauna and flora. Children's verse, like drama, has also been scarce in children's literature. Examples are *My Drum* and *My Drum 2* compiled by Barbara Meyerwitz, Jenette Copans and Tesssa Welch. They contain poems, verses songs and games (Jenkins, 1998:50).

Dodge, as a writer of children's literature and editor of a children's magazine, claims that:

> Parents and community activists are perennially concerned with the safeness of the library and its collections. Adults' attitudes about children have certainly changed over time, and more librarians and child advocates are vocal about unrestricted access to collections in

> libraries; however, there is still an underlying desire to protect our children (Cockett, 1995:801).

It should be noted that there are parents and parents. Some parents are more liberal and less prescriptive when it comes to choosing reading material, but all parents would object to material exposing their children, for example, to reading-books promoting sexuality at a young age, stories containing violence and condoning immorality. It remains every parent's prerogative to decide what his/her child may be exposed to and what is not regarded as suitable reading material. Parents may also be influenced by their own cultural perspective in their reading choices for their children.

Cockett (1995:802) mentions the fact that it was found that librarians such as Lynch and parents would launch a plea for Bible stories and books such as the Psalms that are said to be a wonderful literary experience. Bible stories obviously make out part of a child's Christian education, but parents should supplement their children's reading material by reading to their children from the Bible before they go to bed. It is a habit followed by many disciplined adult readers throughout their reading experience as life-long readers. Maartens (1988:154), however, expresses a plea for religious literature that no longer needs to be kept to be read to children only in the evenings. She asserts that religious books are needed to change the conception that inferior human beings exist. She opts for an educational reading that would aid the equipment of the child with roots and wings by involving him in religious reading material. She (1988:156) warns against preaching by the author as it will be met with antagonism by teenagers. Maartens (1988:157) contends that

> I sincerely believe that religious children's literature no longer needs to justify its existence. Religion, spiritual needs, faith, God Himself, constitute the core of our very existence. Our children, however well-cared for, however neglected, are spiritual beings too. One thing religion can never be is moderately important. Life is too precious to not to be lived to the full. No single child can afford to miss his or her ultimate goal in life: to know God, to become a balanced and spiritually mature human being.

Studying television programmes like *The Simpsons* touches on another issue of popular reading material that is not always preferred by parents for their children and that is the issue of cartoons, also known as "junk food". Many parents feel that cartoons contain slang language and vulgarity which are not of any educational value and that might in actual fact be highly detrimental to a child's linguistic and other development. Cartoons are mostly read for their content, but also in many cases for their pictures. Teachers and parents who want their children to read will, however, most likely be compelled to come to the conclusion that reading pulp fiction or escapist trash is better than reading nothing. They will have to change their mindsets and allow learners to unstrap themselves of textual prescriptive clothes for the emperor in order to allow them freedom of choice in attempt to become literate, counting on their educational input when the child was still little and was taught certain values and exposed to proper judgement.

4.3.6 Non-visual information and reader response

Speech is silver but silence is golden. It is often not what is said but what is not said that counts. The same principle can be applied to reading. Pictures and texts are important but the non-visual information is even more important in the reader response chain. Smith (1978:178) refers to the prior knowledge as non-visual information that is essential to the reader who has to bring his **prior knowledge** into play in order to reduce the amount of visual information. The non-visual information lessens the uncertainty of the reader and helps the reader to utilise the visual information as economically as possible. The following reasons are given to underline the importance of the non-visual information.

1. The visual system can be overloaded. Non-visual information is said to reduce uncertainty and tunnel vision.
2. The short-term memory can also be overloaded and the non-visual information will ensure that the short-term memory is concerned with sense.
3. Long-term memory is said to function only efficiently when reading is meaningful and non-visual information forms the basis of effective recall.

4. Non-visual reading permits fast reading.
5. Non-visual information ensures that meaning is brought up to the text at the deep structure and avoids the reader to become enmeshed in the pointless detail of surface structure.

The South African situation with especially Black children leaves an enormous gap in reader response already at the beginning of the reader response chain because of the problem with access to an interpretation of non-visual information as a result of all the deprivation outlined so far in this thesis. People involved in reading should therefore bear in mind that unless the socio-economic circumstances of many readers should improve, all the efforts aimed at writing for children will be in vain, as their non-visual literacy levels need serious remedial attention.

Retrospectively, following a study of the most salient reviews on reading research in the classroom, it has become evident to me that teachers in America and Europe have been keeping up with research on reading among the primary and even secondary school learners in the light of focusing on gender and reading response. Little evidence could be found on research on the South African scene especially with regard to reader response to reading-books in South Africa, which necessitates empirical research on reading behaviour and reading response in the senior primary classroom also in the light of our high illiteracy rate in South Africa. It is impossible to solve the problems associated with the issue of the availability of reading-books and financial problems of reading materials in an instant, but if the needs can be identified and the readers' own choices recorded, the publishers and authors can take note of information in order to enlighten them as to the true state of affairs in the next millennium.

Recapitulation

Reception aesthetics has given the reader as receptor in the triad of **addresser**, **text** and **addressee** a prominent position in the reading communication chain. This emphasises the fact that the reader holds a far more active and co-constitutive

position, predicting and exercising control over what will be sold on the market. In the light of the pulping of material perceived to be of no use it is also important that the reader should accept what is put on the table. If he should wantonly reject it, the whole communication chain will have to be re-organised focusing on new aims and outcomes as (government) money is (mostly) at stake. Evidence so far has revealed that learners as readers show hostility towards racially aware books that delineate the crude and stark unpleasant reality (like life in a squatter camp). They also reject material not respecting their ideological awareness such as their cultural values. Readers do not wish to be humiliated and rather opt for escapist reading where they can imagine a whole and clean world untouched by the rude and unmerciful nature of man. It is also necessary to investigate the popularity of books with female characters for girls and male characters for boys to identify with. Girls develop faster than boys emotionally and show preference for romance, while boys generally have a more overt preference for adventure, science and action. There is little evidence to support gender preferences in reading-books and it is a field that still needs to be investigated. Parents and teachers should also be open-minded when it comes to the selection of reading material as the readers will just not take to reading if the texts do not interest them Teachers and parents also influence sex-typing and act as role models for young children in shaping their reading preferences. Pictures are central to act as an aid and a supporting meaning and can even help with vocabulary branching and comprehension of content as long as they do not dominate the written text or render it unnecessary. Reading exposure in the pre-school and primary school is central to the aim of creating life-long readers. Education and attitudes at home are also important influences and act as agents inculcating and developing the use of non-visual information in the process of developing a more sophisticated level of visual literacy, which is ultimately of enormous importance within the total notion of literacy.