

Writing By Children, Writing For Children: Schema Theory, Narrative Discourse and Ideology

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This article is an early attempt to use schema theory to analyse texts written by/for young children. I would now use a different language in some places: e.g., I would simply use *script* and *schema* instead of *macroschema* and *microschema*. See John Stephens, "Schemas and Scripts: Cognitive Instruments and the representation of Cultural Diversity in Children's Literature" in Kerry Mallan and Clare Bradford (eds.) *Contemporary Children's Literature and Film*. London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2011: 12–35.

People still seem to find the article of interest (especially in relation to the more recent 'cognitive turn' in children's literature scholarship), but it can be rather hard to track down.

John Stephens

Writing *By* Children
Writing *For* Children
Schema Theory
Narrative Discourse
and Ideology

John STEPHENS

When readers read, their understanding of a text is a combination of the text and the prior knowledge, experiences and cultural situation of those readers. What readers bring to the act of comprehension results in variations in interpretation, but the process of interpretation is based on a large body of shared knowledge. If it were not, nobody would understand anything. With relatively young and inexperienced readers, we are perhaps on more uncertain and unstable ground, given some inevitable limitations in their knowledge and experience. At the same time, though, it can also be argued that, especially for young readers, the conceptual frames, or schemata, made available through shared cultural and linguistic knowledge are a key enabling element in the construction and decoding of narrative discourse. Cognitive research carried out with children as young as three and four has indicated that they already organise their knowledge and experience of the world and their understanding of typical narrative forms by means of such schemata (Thorndyke and Yekovich : 1980 ; Mandler, in Hudson and Shapiro : 1991 ; Crawford and Chaffin : 1986), though it is much later before they are able to use schemata to generate their own fictive stories.

In an earlier study (Stephens : 1992, p. 8), I argued that « A narrative without an ideology is unthinkable : ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language. » As elements of discourse, schemata inevitably bear an ideological freight, but one which is focused far less significantly in the writing of young children than in adult writing for children. In particular, young writers may be apt to elaborate the components of a schema for reasons which do not accord with notions of adult significance, so that ideological loading may seem more a matter of accident than substance. In order to explore this difference, this paper will examine two examples of writing by children (Bridget, aged seven, and Raphael, aged eleven) ⁽¹⁾, looking at how they manipulate both broad narrative schemata (macroschemata) and more specific narrative or social schemata (microschemata). I will then go on to compare these with a short story written for children.

Simple stories conform to a common macroschema which children recognise and reproduce after a couple of years of schooling, and which is evident here incipiently in Bridget's text and fully developed in Raphael's. The schema is :

(1) Both are « found » stories, in the sense that they were independently written for pleasure, not elicited as a task of any kind. I owe special thanks to Bridget and Raphael for permission to quote and discuss their stories

- (a) An onset (or orientation) in which the main characters are introduced ;
- (b) A complication, usually in the form of a goal to be achieved or problem to be overcome, which is dealt with in one or more episodes. Episodes may be linked causally or sequentially, and characteristically pivot on new problems for the main characters to overcome ;
- (c) A resolution

The stories we give to or read to young children present a cognitive model which accords with this macroschema, but which also invariably inscribes within it particular moral structures grounded in social ideology. Both examples of writing by children follow the conventional structure of story-schema, but with a crucial difference. When children tell or write their own created stories, they tend to draw on other factors : personal experience of everyday life ; television ; video ; imagination and fantasy. Schemata are employed more eclectically in Bridget's story than in Raphael's, and — most importantly — although she uses schemata to frame her narrative discourse her macroschema lacks the clear ideological shaping evident in his story. Here is the opening segment of Bridget's story :

The Ireland Treasure

Long, long ago in Ireland, before people, there were such things as leprechauns. Leprechauns are little, little people that disappear so quickly that you don't notice them ! These leprechauns always have treasure, and this story is about pirates stealing the leprechauns' treasure. The leader of them all is... CAPTAIN HOOK ! ! ! Now let's begin.

One morning a leprechaun skipped across the wet sand near the sea. Then, a pirate jumped out and grabbed the leprechaun, and then he tied the leprechaun up. Poor old Happy. Happy is his name. Happy was brought to the pirates' awful ship. Captain Hook walked towards Happy. Happy got very scared ! Don't know how he could take it.

Meanwhile, back inside a rock where Happy lived, all the leprechauns in Ireland were together inside that main rock. The leader of the leprechauns said, « Where is Happy ? » Everyone stopped and stared at the King of the leprechauns. Then suddenly the entrance flew open. Happy rushed in. Happy had escaped from Captain Hook's awful, awful ship. But a pirate was chasing Happy ! So that is why he ran. The King of leprechauns said, Where have you been ? » « Captain Hook tied me up and then he took me to his ship and I ran because a pirate was chasing me, » replied Happy. The Queen of leprechauns heard what happened and said to Happy, « Oh dear, Happy ! Let's get you to bed, » said Queen leprechauns. « But, dear, » said the King, « he hasn't had his dinner. » « Oh, all right, but go right to bed when you have finished, » the Queen said. So Happy ate his dinner and went to bed (which was a pile of gold). Then all the other leprechauns did the same.

Meanwhile, inside Captain Hook's ship, Captain Hook was walking around saying, « Why didn't you get him ? » Sme replied, « Captain, we will get all the leprechauns in Ireland. » « Well, Sme, if we are going to do that we will have to find their rock, » said Captain Hook. « Captain, said Sme, « I have already found their rock. » « Really ? » said Captain Hook. « Yes, really, » said Sme. « Here is my map, or could I say, plan. Here it is. Do you like it ? » asked Sme. « Like it ? Like it ? I love it ! » said Captain Hook. « Let's go to bed, Sme, » said Captain Hook. So they went to bed.

In the morning, Sme and Captain Hook got ready for their plan. ...

When this paper was written, Bridget's story was as yet unfinished, still generating its complication as a long series of episodes. It is, however, not important that an

audience lacks a perspective from the close, since each episode has its own narrative integrity and any anticipated outcome is only implicit as a story function, not as a thematic or ideological teleology. Thus the propensity for the story to unfold as a sequence of localised moments has implications for the functioning of schemata because it reinforces a process whereby ideological effects are already randomised.

As knowledge structures which provide the framework for understanding, schemata shape our knowledge of all concepts, from the very small to the very large, from the material to the abstract. Within this range some schemata are minimally marked ideologically: the object schema « the wet sand near the sea », for example, serves as a « boundary »-schema, situating the leprechaun on the boundary between land and sea, between leprechaun and pirate territory, though it may actually originate in the practical, everyday knowledge that this firm, smooth surface is the best place to skip on a beach. The schema specifies spatial and functional relationships, and has few if any ideological overtones. Schemata shaping our knowledge of personal and social relationships are much more obviously marked, as in Bridget's assumption that societies are hierarchies of authority, whether these are leprechaun or pirate societies. As is suggested by the incident in which Happy is sent to bed, these societies are here implicitly mapped onto notions of everyday human behaviour. In contrast to this tacit inscribing of ideology, in representing the literary schema « pirate » Bridget is quite overt in confirming that it is marked for villainy: (2) narrative point of view is sympathetic with the captured leprechaun, and the repeated descriptor « awful » indicates an appropriate audience attitude. Each of these three schemata illustrates a variation on how schemata function as aspects of memory, whether experiential (as in the first), textual (as the third), or the second's more complex assimilation of textual to experiential. A schema normally consists of a network of constituent parts, and when, as audience, our memories activate part of a schema the stimulus evokes the network and its interrelations, especially what is normal and typical about that network. Schema-theory suggests that as we read we call up schemata which are likely to be the most salient fit for the data we're processing. Bridget evidently builds her schemata in a similar, associative way, but is apt to combine isomorphic schemata, thereby transferring ideological freight from one to another.

Ideological variation can also occur within a schema because of the propensity for schemata to have both constant and variable components. Bridget begins her story by specifying a number of components or « slots » which make up the « leprechaun » schema :

(2) The inspiration « literary » in the sense that Disney movies are obvious and evoked pretexts for Bridget's story. *Peter Pan* is not only the source for Captain Hook but also for the conceptualisation of the leprechauns' subterranean hall and the conflict between pirates and leprechauns. Empathy with Happy is established through the association with the « lovable » dwarfs of *Snow White*.

1. « Leprechaun » — Schema

Irish

little

rarely seen (disappear quickly)

treasure keepers

objects of empathy

monarchic social structure

The first four components are constant attributes, derived from textual memory : that is, the slots are always filled in the same way and constitute the fundamental schema. Audiences may already be able to supply these components or « subschemata » as *default values* in response to the simple cue *leprechaun*. On the other hand, any reader without previous knowledge of leprechaun stories would now have a fairly well-developed leprechaun schema. Bridget's first two components are not especially salient to the story which is about to unfold, but some redundancy is acceptable in an orientation. The last two components are variables, introduced perhaps in part by analogy with fairies, who are normally represented as having a monarchic hierarchy, and in part by analogy with social structures in *Peter Pan*. Crucially, however, they replace normal subschemata of the « leprechaun »-schema — unsociability and deceptiveness — and so frame the narrative as an unambiguous conflict between heroes and villains.

A fascinating narrative aspect of Bridget's story is her varied use of the « going to bed » schema. A reader constantly makes and evaluates hypotheses about the most plausible interpretation of a text — that is, decides which possible schemata are the most salient possibilities. Readers are then said to have understood the text when they are able to find a configuration of schemata that offers a coherent account for the various aspects of the text. The process is made obvious here in the *encoding* when Bridget writes that « Happy ate his dinner and went to bed », and we would normally respond by defaulting to some kind of typical « bed »-schema. In this case, however, Bridget promptly cancels the general schema network by defining the bed as « a pile of gold », an unusual subschema more salient for a leprechaun network. On the other hand, in her uses of the « going to bed » schema as an action, Bridget relies entirely on default values, presumably because the schema is so experientially familiar. At the level of specific subschemata, we might activate concepts such as undressing, teeth-cleaning, turning out the light, and so on — a host of actions implicit in the « going to bed » schema which we might randomly assume or think of. But the schema also has several mutually exclusive subschematic variants of a more conceptual kind :

2. « Going to Bed » — Schema :

(a) everyday occurrence

(b) response to illness or stress (Happy)

(c) punishment for transgressive behaviour (children in general)

(d) to refresh oneself in preparation for the next day (Hook)

- (e) to make time pass faster (Hook ?)
- (f) [for sexual purposes]

These tend to be more thematically salient than the action subschemata, so when the Queen insists that Happy should go to bed, and subschema *b* is thus implicitly activated, the schema is grounded in complex social assumptions. Subschemata *b* and *c* are a sub-set which express power relations, specifically the authority of a « parent » over a child, and as such are ideologically marked. The King's insistence that Happy have dinner first suggests that Bridget is constructing *b* as the appropriate subschema here rather than *c* (though *c* itself may be further broken down into the variants « without dinner » and « straight after dinner »), in which case the ideological burden is embedded as a sub-subschema — that is, well below the surface level of text.

Stories by young writers may not develop a strong thematic or teleological structure because they tend to favour temporal markers rather than cause and effect as elements of text cohesion, and this is another use to which Bridget puts the « going to bed » schema : as a temporal transition, it closes off episodes of the story. She does this at the end of the third paragraph and again at the end of the fourth. When Captain Hook says « Let's go to bed, Sme », readers might therefore simply activate a narrative schema (« time passes »), or in addition they may activate subschemata *d* or *e*. Adult readers, however, may read transgressively, reading against the text and activating subschema *f*. In normal reading we might treat that particular schema as a rejected hypothesis.

The randomness of ideological marking is clear in the operation of default values, because a young writer will still be feeling her way with this principle. An example where a schema is overspecified rather than evoking its default value is seen in Bridget's use of a « pursuit » schema. Both the narrative and the dialogue explain that Happy ran because he was being chased by a pirate, though of course most readers would postulate a « pursuit » schema from the context — the previous capture, and the information that Happy « rushed in » and that a pirate was chasing him — and so the fact that Happy was running would be part of the schema's default value. Hick (1990, p. 99) has observed that in oral storytelling children tend to use a higher proportion of phonological stress than in other genres, and perhaps the tendency to over-articulation here is a written equivalent. Nevertheless, the emphasis remains a story function and does not have special thematic or ideological implications. It might thus be said of Bridget's use of schemata that the « leprechaun » schema is quite fully articulated because it is new, interesting, plot implicated and part of the story's opening movement ; that the « pursuit » schema is over-articulated because of a narrative urge to express tension and excitement ; and that the « going to bed » schema is *not* articulated because it is an aspect of everydayness with accessible default values.

Schema theory envisages any particular schema as a pyramid, hierarchically organised so that the more inclusive and more abstract concept is at the top and subcategories of more specific information are embedded at lower levels. It does not

follow, however, that ideological aspects of text are organised into a comparable hierarchy, because they may be inscribed at various subschematic levels. Nevertheless, a narrative which moves to a highly thematised resolution may organise ideological effect more hierarchically, and this seems to be the case with Raphael's story. The general structure of Bridget's story follows the macroschema for stories outlined above : she begins with an orientation, and formally closes it off with « Now let's begin » The next three paragraphs are episodes which develop the complication. Each begins with a temporal marker — « One morning », « Meanwhile », « Meanwhile » — and each is clearly closed off : the first by authorial intrusion, « Don't know how he could take it », and the next two when the respective characters go to bed. On the other hand, though, the repeated « going to bed » motif draws on aspects of everyday experience rather than conventional narrative schema. This is one reason why adults may find its use here disruptive. Within a few years, a skilful young writer will have assimilated the adult schema, as seems evident in Raphael's story :

Shivers ! It's My Turn

I usually like swimming because I'm the best in my class, but I hate diving... oh dear, I'm getting carried away with myself. My name is Frederick — not Fred because Fred is too boring. My friends call me Freddy the Fish because I'm a good swimmer. My friend is Jake. He isn't a very good swimmer, but he's very clever. My worst enemy is Martin Mashagan. We call him Martin Orang-outang, because he looks like one. He is the second best swimmer in the class and he's getting better... fast ! Pretty soon he could be better than me. My girlfriend is Suzie Studebaker, and I always show off in front of her so that she'll like me. Anyway, enough of orientation. Let's get on with the complication.

It was the school swimming carnival and I had been trying for weeks to try and perfect my diving. I already knew Martin Orang-outang was very good at diving, so I had to polish up. Anyway, the big day came for the swimming carnival, and when I looked at the order of age races I saw all the 12 year olds were last — and I am 12 !

We waited for hours watching all these people from younger classes swim. Then came the 12 year olds' turn for the diving. You didn't have to try it, but I knew that if I didn't try everyone would call me a chicken and Suzie wouldn't like me, so I *had* to do it.

We waited in a queue and Martin Orang-outang was before me and did the best dive ever. I was going to need a lot of help. Suddenly it was my turn. I broke into a cold sweat. I knew I couldn't do it, but maybe I could. Just then I saw Martin Orang-outang laughing at me. He knew I couldn't do it, but then I saw something else : it was Jake and Suzie holding hands. I was so shocked I slipped off the diving board and did a triple somersault into the water. It was the best dive the judges had ever seen from a 12 year old. I won the diving medal, but then I saw Suzie. She walked up to me and said, « I don't like show-offs. »

The End

In Raphael's classroom stories are already pre-shaped by the tenets of a genre theory based on a functional model derived from systemic linguistics. Part of his narrative sophistication is his ability to play with the conventional form he has been taught, and he flags this playfulness by citing two of the key technical descriptors as a way of ending the first paragraph. The story is very self-consciously organised around the narrative schema of orientation-complication-resolution, a point made immediately obvious by the way the opening sentence declares itself to be a wrong

move because the contrast between « like swimming » and « hate diving » has propelled the story straight into a complication, and the story-teller overtly interrupts and redirects the discourse. Sentence two thus begins with a classic orientation utterance, « My name is », and continues by introducing several characters and defining their essential qualities and relationships. From the perspective of the end, of course, we see why Jake's cleverness and relationship to Frederick are specified and then not activated until called on to prompt the resolution — « I saw... Jake and Suzie holding hands ». Arguably, the narrative self-consciousness functions as an important cue for readers to grasp that the narrator is constructed as an object of gentle ridicule.

The link between orientation and resolution is only one element in a tightly-woven narrative form. Other crucial elements are the pervasive use of temporals to effect narrative cohesion throughout the complication — « for weeks », « the big day came », « We waited for hours... Then », « We waited », and « Suddenly » — and the climactic sequence dealing with Frederick's sense of how to impress Suzie, which motivates all three parts of the structure :

Orientation : I always show off in front of her so that she'll like me

Complication : if I didn't try... Suzie wouldn't like me

Resolution : [Suzie] said, « I don't like show-offs »

Finally, Frederick's improbable victory in the competition is both undeserved and Pyrrhic, and these factors combine not just as a comic effect but to draw attention to the moral schema which frames the narrative : it is socially undesirable to flaunt innate gifts. That this articulation of a particular social ideology as story closure is achieved through an apparently conscious awareness of schemata seems evident when Raphael proposes and dismantles an « overcoming fear » schema : « I broke into a cold sweat. I knew I couldn't do it, but maybe I could. » That is, this schema is evoked in order to challenge an ideological principle especially applied to boys, that they must face up to and overcome the fears associated with risks and danger. It does so by subsuming the schema first into the contrary « accidental accomplishment » schema, which is more characteristic of broad comedy, and then into the final narrative twist. The story's relationship to social ideology is thus quite interrogative, able simultaneously to question and affirm the ideological freight of various schemata.

I remarked above that Bridget's manipulation of the « going to bed » schema indicates that she draws on aspects of everyday experience rather than conventional narrative schemata. Raphael's writing shows how a slightly older writer has fully assimilated the adult narrative macroschema in both its expressive and ideological functions, and is at least intuitively aware of the ideological freight of particular microschemata, whereas Bridget's articulation of the components (or subschemata) of any particular schema appears to be independent of the story-schema. In contrast, adults writing for children around Bridget's age employ schemata very elaborately

both as structural and as ideological aspects of text. The example considered here is William Mayne's « Hob and Eggy Palmer », one of his *Hob Stories*. Here, the components of a particular schema are distributed across the story, so their coming together in itself imparts a sense of shapeliness and completeness, and is profoundly ideological in effect. Episodes also tend to be linked by causal succession rather than by temporal succession (as in the children's narratives). Mayne's stories about Hob were written for children a year or two younger than Bridget, most of whom will have a much less accomplished grasp of narrative schemata than she does. « Eggy Palmer » is one of a set of twenty stories published in 1983-84. Each is only about 400-460 words long, so there is little space for developing character or setting in any one of them. While each is a self-contained narrative, they contain cross-references and draw on a common pool of conventions — structures, themes and motifs — which Mayne has largely derived from folk-tale ; the repetition of these conventions as narrative elements from story to story constitutes them as a set of schemata which a child audience aggregates through successive readings of a number of the stories. When, ten years later, Mayne published a novel-length story about Hob, the character sketch in the first chapter included a « Hob »-schema much more detailed than Bridget's « Leprechaun »-schema — one section alone was 134 words long — but it was nevertheless a schema easily derived from the earlier *Hob Stories*. This is the schema for « Hob » that a child would construct from the *Hob Stories* :

3. « Hob » — Schema

1. Benevolent house spirit
2. Nocturnal
3. Visible to children and animals (and some adults)
4. Banishes small troubles
5. Trickster
6. Rewarded with small gifts, BUT leaves if given clothes.

All of these subschemata are activated in the course of this story, with the first three evoked in the orientation, the fourth and fifth in the complication, and the sixth in the resolution. This distribution in itself imparts a sense of narrative shapeliness and completeness. In contrast to Bridget's multiple episodes, but like Raphael's simpler structure, this story follows the orientation-complication-resolution schema with only one substantial episode in the complication. It is much denser at any given point, though, as the beginning illustrates :

Boy and Girl know that Hob is there. The family feels complete when he comes out to sit with them.

Tonight he shyly squats on the hardest cushion, furthest from the fire. All the cushions are hard tonight.

« He's here, » says Girl. She does not look in case she frightens him.

« He's there, » says Boy. He does not point. It would not be polite. « Nonsense, » says Mr. « And it's time to go to bed. »

Boy and Girl go to bed. « Good night, Hob, » they say.

As well as evoking some components of the « Hob » schema, this orientation does three other things : it foreshadows that something is wrong in the statement that « All the cushions are hard tonight », which makes a mismatch with a reader's « cushion »-schema ; it establishes that the bond between Hob and the children is one of mutual consideration — he gives them a sense of completion, and they treat him with respect ; and it continues a running joke about the father's inability to see the mystery in everyday things. The orientation concludes when the father sends the children to bed in an assertion of parental authority which is structured as a stifling of the children's imagination. There's an extraordinary subtlety and delicacy about these seven lines, which we respond to because we are activating a large number of quite complex schemata : in addition to those already mentioned, « the complete family », « furthest from the fire », « staring » and « pointing » are all ideologically fraught. Further, though, these schemata compound into an ideological complex, a moral world-view, in a way we would not expect in Bridget's actual childlike storying. Mayne's childlike simplicity is ultimately an illusion, because it conveys an intensely literary and intellectual body of thought, and because of the way its schemata are so ideologically marked. The complication in « Eggy Palmer » proceeds with the immediate announcement that « a problem » exists :

Hob thinks there is a problem in the house.

« Did you lay an egg, Budgie ? » he asks, when they are alone.

Budgie blushes. « Not me, » she whispers.

« Good, » says Hob. He knows there is an eggy problem.

The problem is identified in a two-part sequence : it is not caused by Budgie ; it is caused by Eggy Palmer. The antagonist is thus introduced, and while we may have a schema which fits the blob of egg-white which turns up in a saucepan when a boiling egg cracks, it isn't a schema which constructs that blob as an anthropomorphic kitchen villain. That schema has to be developed by modifying a schema for kitchen disasters, and in doing so suggesting that those apparently random things that go wrong are really subschemata. In other words, Eggy Palmer comically represents a top-down explanation, a suggestion that if we think in certain ways we can make the world more coherent than it often seems. There could hardly be a greater contrast between this over-determination of meaning and Bridget's randomly occurring ideological significances.

The story reaches its resolution through yet another schema : Hob, like many small supernatural creatures, is something of a trickster, a game-player, a trait these stories introduce in his affectionately teasing relationship with Budgie. Hob exploits this trait to get rid of Eggy Palmer, so the story closure can be a return to normality :

Hob goes home. He eats his gift, a roasted apple. There is something knotted in the middle. It is the core. Budgie eats the pips.

Restoration of order is marked by Hob taking the gift he has earned and by the apple-schema, since of course the lumpy bit in the middle of an apple is supposed to be there — it doesn't signify a *spoiled* thing.

By his humorous making strange of everyday schemata, Mayne encourages his audience to think about how things are, what makes them cohere, and how they can go wrong. By combining this with his « Hob »-schema, he has been able to use narrative to represent with remarkable simplicity some major philosophical issues about being, knowing, imagination, the existence of supernature, the problem of temporal decay, and the sources of fear (see Stephens, 1988). Through Hob's presence and actions some of the almost insignificant aspects of existence become invested with intention and desire, and the power struggles they enter into in conflict with Hob suggest that the everyday world is an exciting place whose equilibrium exists under constant threat. The outcomes of struggle, though, are usually benevolent, something very clear in this story insofar as the problem is solved and equilibrium restored in a way which leaves everybody happy.

Mayne, of course, is not consciously using schema theory. It can be easily identified in what he does because it is a convenient way for talking about how we organise knowledge and narrative. When we do look at the story in the way I have, we can see that it is very schemata-driven in a balance of familiarity and newness which offers a very young audience three things : familiar objects, situations and structures ; models for thinking in new ways about the familiar ; and models for constructing new schemata. In this sense, schemata render a narrative more readily accessible to a young audience and facilitate their movement through it. When children move on to longer texts these principles still apply — Jan Mark's *The Twig Thing* is an excellent example. This is an easy-to-read story, of around 2.500 words, about moving house and growing a plant from a twig to a bush. At the same time, it develops its micro- and macroschemata into a thematic movement from displacement and anxiety to settlement and emotional stability and, by implication, coming to terms with losing a parent.

I remarked that the schemata in the orientation of « Eggy Palmer » were very ideologically marked ; needless to say, the larger story schema — and especially its outcome — is also profoundly ideological in its depiction of the nature of being and experience and in its benevolence. Like most other representational strategies in children's literature, this one is intrinsically double-sided : it enables texts to be written and read ; it also tends to inscribe ideological significances within the process itself.

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