VARIEIES OF CHILDREN’S METAFACTION

"It's because she wants it told," he thought, "so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth." 1

So ruminates Faulkner's brooding Quentin Compson as he listens to the aged and tiny Miss Rosa Coldfield tell him of the demonic Thomas Sutpen's violent struggles to establish a dynasty and to beget an heir no matter how. Quentin does not quite have it right. The point for Miss Rosa, as it is later for Quentin and Shreve as they piece together the fragments of Sutpen's saga, is not just to "get it told" but in the telling itself. Quentin and Miss Rosa struggle to tell their stories in an effort to make sense of their lives and the histories of their families. Quentin serves as both teller and intense listener in Faulkner's powerful novel which is more about the process of making story than it is about Sutpen's tragedy, more about the telling and the listening and finally getting it told. As critic Barbara Hardy writes in Tellers and Listeners: "Humankind cannot bear very much abstraction or discursive reasoning. The stories of our days and the stories in our days are joined in that autobiography we are all engaged in making and remaking, as long as we live, which we never complete, though we all know how it is going to end." 2 Miss Rosa knows the end all too well; that's one compelling reason why she has to tell it to a sensitive listener.

Many novelists have been acutely concerned with the process of creating narrative and with the narrative forms of ordinary life which are embedded throughout fiction. The nature of narrative itself often becomes the real concern in novels and stories. So too, many children’s writers have created stories about the making of stories. Why characters tell stories and how they tell them, as well as to whom, become major themes in Paula Fox's How Many Miles to Babylon? (1967), Natalie Babbitt's Knee-Knock Rise (1971), Charles Dickens' A Holiday Romance (1868), and E. Nesbit's The Story of the Treasure Seekers (1899). To a greater or lesser extent all of these books may be considered as "metafictions," works in which the imagined process by which the story is created becomes a central focus of the book. This

metafictional quality is implicit in the first two works and explicit in the last two, as both *A Holiday Romance* and *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* actually feature fictional child authors as narrators.

How stories within stories interlace to form an overarching structure; how characters function as both tellers and listeners; how children's writers choose to end their stories; and how they conceive of the process of storytelling itself through their fictional child authors are literary issues which recent narrative theory has addressed in significant ways. Paula Fox is deeply interested in how her protagonist, James, uses story to endure emotional trauma, learns to tell stories to an audience other than himself, and thus somehow comes to terms with the unrelenting grim realities of his life. Natalie Babbitt reveals her fascination with the abuses of narrative and with the nature of endings in *Knee-Knock Rise*. Finally Charles Dickens and E. Nesbit have created rare examples of children's metafiction, in which fictional child authors must struggle with difficult narrative and rhetorical choices as they create their stories. In the case of both the Dickens and Nesbit books, the investigation into the nature of narrative raises important questions about the specific nature of children's writers—adults who must somehow address child readers. Both Dickens and Nesbit are concerned with creating a new kind of children's story, different in mode and manner from pious Victorian children's literature.

Fox calls attention to the nature of narrative and examines its effect upon ten-year-old James, the hero of *How Many Miles to Babylon?* A ten-year-old black child who lives in one room with three aged aunts in a tough New York ghetto, James is happiest when either telling a story or listening to one. His engagement with story in fact becomes the only way that he can endure the rather harshly realistic story of poverty, abandonment, and kidnapping which his author creates for him. The stories within stories in the novel become a significant way whereby Fox shapes her fiction and achieves a satisfying sense of closure at the end. When James returns from his ordeal with the dog-napping street kids, Stick, Blue, and Gino, he is able at last to connect inner and outer story when he tells his neighbors his adventure.

In James' neighborhood most of the stories are sad; even the beginnings are sad, probably the reason why these stories are seldom finished. As Mr. Hedge remarks to James, "I've gotta story that'd wring your heart. . . . They broke my wheel. The man backed up his big ugly car right into my wheel. Smashed it. . . ."3 James does not hear the end or Mr. Hedge's story, nor does he expect to: "Stories were always beginning in his building, loud

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stories that filled up the halls with shouting and then fizzled out like damp firecrackers” (p. 4).

In the shabby and cramped room, rendered ghostly and strange by the flickering television set, James lives with three great aunts. Aunt Grace tells him “awful warning” stories about the dire actions of truant officers if he does not go to school. But James likes Aunt Paul’s tales about the three aunts’ childhood in the rural South—long ago, far-away stories about the regular and dependable rhythms of farm life that connect James to his family’s past and to nature as well. He can repeat the story himself like a comforting litany: “On Mondays we washed... On Tuesday we ironed. On Wednesdays we scrubbed the floor with potash...” (p. 6). Aunt Althea, however, discourages stories about the past. She is far more interested in the story of James’s future. From the surging details of ghetto life and the serene scenes from his family’s past, James gathers narrative materials. Going downstairs, he hears fragments of conversation “like pieces of string he could tie together” (p. 7).

James’s ability to piece together stories helps him to endure both emotional pain and boredom: “He was a good walker. He had discovered that if he told himself stories, he could cover a lot of ground without noticing how much time it took” (p. 19). Listening to his inner stories also intensifies and clarifies James’s experience. Each time he tells himself a story, he can “remember more clearly what things had felt like and tasted like, how they had looked... whether they had really happened or not” (p. 23).

Standing squarely in the midst of unrelenting gray pavement and surrounded by images of waste—the skeleton of a car, heaps of junk, and wasted people, James knows the sad story of his father’s abandonment. Haunted by the vision of his mother standing by the window and sadly whispering, “Gone, gone, gone...,” James realizes that his mother had to go into the hospital. But this is one sad story which James cannot bear. Because his author has created a story too harsh for him to endure, he counters it with an inner story of wish-fulfillment. Like Scheherazade, James’s very survival depends upon the story he can tell, one which he can also listen to, one that he desperately needs to believe: “James had discovered another story hidden just beneath it. It was different from the first, but if he felt it, wasn’t it true?” (p. 25).

James imagines that he is a prince in disguise, left by his regal mother with three old aunts. His mother had gone to Africa to prepare a place for him, “to fix everything.” And she would return and take him there, dressed in feathers and robes.

Situated in an unendurable present, James must imagine stories from the past and from the future. Although the story he imagines is not literally true, it is nevertheless a fantasy which ultimately contributes to his identity and security. When the right time comes, James will be able to let go of the
fantasy and to tell another that integrates the actual conditions of his life
with his wishes and dreams. This dreamlike fantasy, inspired by a magical
ruby ring and enacted in the basement of an abandoned building, allows
James to come to terms with the history of his race and to right the wrongs
of the people who "had been made to march for days and weeks through the
wild forests, with their hands chained and their necks in ropes, until they
came to a river where they were put in boats that carried them across the
water" (p. 27).

The sad story of the captured Africans is significantly the only story his
mother had ever told James. Aunt Paul's story, then, connects him with the
past of his family, while his mother's story puts him in touch with the social
history of his race. Both of these tales exert a moral, social, and psychologi-
cal force upon James and help him to shape an identity for himself, a life
story he can bear to tell himself and to tell others. His central problem is to
connect his fantasy identity which restores him both to his true mother and
to his true homeland with the setting and situation of his actual existence.
The narrative materials he needs to revise his story come to him when his
ritual in the deserted house is interrupted by Stick, Blue, and Gino.

Stick and Blue inject their own vivid elements into James's story. They
call him a "dwarf" and refer to the mysterious figure on the wall as a
"cardboard Sandy Claus." Inventive abusers of narrative, Stick and Blue
tell imaginative lies in the interest of perpetuating their dog-napping scam.
To protect his inner story from these tough boys, James experiments with
new forms of narrative: he must make secret plans; he must learn to lie
inventively; and he learns to select details for withholding from his listener.
James also learns that he cannot escape from all problems by telling himself
stories: "He wished he could make a story out of what was happening to
him right now—pretend he was just walking home to his Aunts, to his bed
in the corner . . ." (p. 43). James's fake ruby ring becomes an evocative
emblem of James's failed attempts at narrative: "The ring! In his pocket, it
was magic, but lying in the dusty corner, it was just what Stick had called it,
a candy-box ring, good for nothing" (p. 44). Likewise James's fantasy
about his mother's preparing an African kingdom for her son James, the
Prince, loses its rich and resonant luster outside the dark shelter of the damp
basement. James's terrifying adventure with Stick, Blue, and Gino force
James to revise his visionary "song of himself." At the same time, the
dangerous encounter provides him with enlarged narrative possibilities. First
these new characters inspire him to perceive reality through arresting
figurative language: "Gino's eyes looked like holes burnt in oilcloth" (p. 59).
And "Everytime Gino spoke it was as if a door with a rusty hinge was
swinging in the wind" (p. 34).

More significantly, James encounters a new and exciting setting. On his
adventure to Coney Island, he sees the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. The
ocean's vastness overwhelms him and causes James to question his cherished story: "How could she have taken enough food to last her? As for her getting her own boat, no little rowboat could get all the way to the other beach on the other side" (p. 72-3). As a storyteller, James must thus come to grips with the necessity for narrative plausibility.

As James revises the story of his mother's African journey, he apprehends a truer sense of her emotional situation. She is not a regal African queen preparing a home for her son. Her actual story is closer to her own tale about the captured Africans. Weighed down by poverty and responsibilities she cannot handle and abandoned by her husband, James's mother had collapsed in a corner, succumbed to a nervous breakdown, and entered a hospital. When James looks out over the Atlantic Ocean, he thinks "of it rolling all the way to Africa and breaking into waves on another beach" (p. 72). As he contemplates her journey, he thinks, "It was terrible to think of his mother out there in the black night bobbing around on top of that water, by herself" (p. 73). The revised story which James imagines provides him with a vivid symbol of his mother's lost emotional state; she is indeed temporarily at sea in the black abyss of a nervous collapse.

Exploring these new possibilities for story enlarges James's sympathies not only for his lost mother but also for the kidnapped dogs. Lost in the darkness of a "crazy funhouse in the middle of the night, he felt he cared more about Gladys than anything in the world—except his mother" (p. 81).

When James rescues the dogs and runs away from Stick, Blue, and Gino, he heads home, trying to invent a story convincing enough to tell his aunts, recognizing at last, "No story was good enough. He would have to tell them what had really happened" (p. 114). When he arrives at home amid the joyous reception of the entire tenement, James narrates the story of his adventure:

"They wouldn't let me go," said James as loud as he could. He looked up the stairwell where all the people were, dressed in their nightclothes, leaning over the railing, looking down, "They made me ride for miles. I went to Coney. I saw the Atlantic Ocean. They stole dogs. Listen, all of you. They kept watch on me. But I got away even though there were three of them." (pp. 115-116).

In the new story of his life, James does not function as both teller and listener. James, the teller, addresses an audience deeply interested in his story. Moreover, he does not function as a passive character waiting for his mother to solve the problems. He has used his powers of invention to solve his own problems. In his new story he conceives of himself as the resourceful and successful hero of a dangerous adventure, one who saves both himself and the helpless homesick dogs.

In the final scene of the novel James must revise his story still further. He
had pictured his mother as a tall and regal queen with long black hair in white robes. In reality she is a tiny woman with short hair in a dark dress. Looking at her, he thinks, "Why she was hardly any bigger than he was! How could she be his mother?" (p. 117). He also thinks, "Who am I? I'm not a prince. How can I be a prince? Who am I?" (p. 117). As if she had heard his thoughts, his mother speaks to him, "Hello, Jimmy," she said" (p. 117).

In pronouncing James's true name, his mother helps him to find the best of all possible endings for a children's story—reunion with one's mother, a safe return home, and a sure sense of identity. James's story, however, does not merely end. The novel achieves what narrative theorists refer to as "closure;" as one critic expresses the notion, "the sense that nothing necessary has been omitted from a work." In How Many Miles to Babylon? this sense of closure is achieved through a process described by Marianna Torgovnick as "circularity." That is, the ending of the novel clearly resembles the beginning: James is at home with Aunt Grace, Aunt Paul, and Aunt Althea. Once again the family gathers around a boy who tells a story. In the beginning, however, one significant character was missing. The mother's presence at the end achieves the effect of circularity, but it also suggests an "open" ending. The reader has a sense that James has acquired the skill to revise his story in the future.

Perhaps an even more pronounced version of a children's metafiction is Natalie Babbitt's Knee-Knock Rise, which announces its concern with the nature of narrative in its prologue:

Facts are the barren branches on which we hang the dear, obscuring foliage of our dreams.

In a "countryside that neither rolled nor dipped but lay as flat as if it had been knocked unconscious," the people of the village of Instep have invented a monster, a Megrimum, around which they can create deliciously terrifying stories. Narrative in many varieties appears in Babbitt's spare little

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4David Richter, Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
5Marianna Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 13. Torgovnick presents several geometrical terms to describe endings. In "circularity" the ending clearly recalls the beginning. In "parallelism," the grouping of characters, language, or situation refers to several significant scenes within the work. "Incompletion" denotes that one or more elements is omitted to achieve either circular or parallel closure. When a new topic is introduced so that the work "opens out" (E.M. Forster's term), Torgovnick calls it a "tangential" ending.
fable: gossip, superstition, fantasy, dream, narrative poems. The book also examines the intricate collaboration between tellers and listeners necessary for stories.

When the central character, Egan, arrives in Knee-Knock Rise to attend the autumn fair, he meets his haughty cousin, Ada, who delights in befuddling him with terrifying tales: "‘Uncle Ott ran off up there and the Megrimum ate him!’ She smiled rapturously and pointed again" (p. 15).

For the first half of the narrative, then, Egan functions as attentive listener. He hears Ada’s inventive tales about the Megrimum. When Ada’s father, Uncle Anson the clockmaker, brings home a cunningly-made clock with feathered knee-knock birds on it, Sweetheart the cat pounces on it and destroys it. The incident is puzzling. What has it to do with Egan’s quest for the Megrimum or Ada’s scary tales? Apparently Babbitt wants her readers to see that Uncle Anson is an excellent clockmaker, but he is no storyteller. His wife and daughter do not give him the chance. The fact that he cannot tell stories accounts for his inability to predict outcome. As Ada importantly explains, "‘I guess he forgot about Sweetheart’" (p. 26). When Aunt Gertrude asks Anson to "‘tell’ Egan why the incident had happened, the poor clockmaker can only utter a ‘strangled noise’" (p. 26). While her father struggles with his inarticulateness, Ada quickly fills the silence with her tale about knee-knock birds, cats, and, as always, the Megrimum.

Babbitt suggests that Ada misuses her narrative powers: she establishes her superiority over others and imposes her will through her stories. She warns Egan, for example, "‘The Megrimum likes cats.... And if people are mean to a cat, the Megrimum comes down and eats them up’" (p. 27). In the end Ada uses her inventive powers to deceive herself and others and to undermine the only story Egan tells. Like Uncle Anson, Egan is rendered silent. His attempts to attain heroic identity through story fail. Even his account of climbing the Rise and finding no Megrimum fades in the radiance of Ada’s colorful imagined explanation.

Like her young daughter, Aunt Gertrude possesses powerful storytelling abilities. While Ada concentrates her narrative energies on the Megrimum, Aunt Gertrude’s specialities are gossip and superstition. When Aunt Gertrude sees the Megrimum at the window, she cannot wait to hold "‘court to a stream of eager visitors’" (p. 32). Like Ada, Aunt Gertrude also knows how to capture her audience by including terrifying details. Listeners, Babbitt implies, delight in mysteries and terrors.

Before his climactic (or rather anticlimactic) journey up the Rise in search of the Megrimum, Egan encounters two other important sources of story: he reads Uncle Ott’s verses, and he experiences a prophetic dream. Uncle Ott’s verses mostly recount stories of disillusionment. In one poem the speaker climbs a hill to find the secret at the top only to discover "‘Another hill’" (p. 44).
Egan's dream represents a microcosm of the entire story. In most literary works, Barbara Hardy observes, "Dreams... are images which express the waking lives of the dreamers more lucidly and rationally than the real dreams of our sleeping lives outside fiction." In Egan's case the dream foreshadows the story he eventually enacts.

Egan's next experience with story appears in the form of an inner fantasy. Egan imagines himself at the center of a traditional hero tale: "'What would it be like,' he wondered, 'if he himself were to climb to the top and slay the thing that dreamed there?' He would come down again with its head on a stick and they would be so proud of him. He would be famous'" (p. 43).

However, when Egan reaches the top of the Rise, he finds no Megrimum—only Uncle Ott, who explains that the moaning is nothing more than a hot spring whistling through the narrow hole in a cave. Egan does not immediately realize the significance of his discovery. If there is no Megrimum, the tiny town of Instep has no story, no identity, no way to relieve the tedium of its existence. Egan still cherishes the fantasy that he is a hero. As he makes his way back down the Rise, he whispers, "'I'll be famous'" (p. 91).

Egan's inner story, however, never coalesces with reality. One of his difficulties is that he fails to engage his audience. When Ada, Aunt Gertrude, and Uncle Anson finally hear him out, Ada counters at once with a far livelier tale: "'He didn't want you to see him... He hid in the cave in the mist!'" (p. 98). Egan, like Uncle Anson, lapses into bewildered silence, his attempts at narrating having failed. Babbitt thus underscores the necessary collaboration between tellers and listeners. Listeners like secrets more than revelations and embrace tantalizing questions more than flat bland answers.

As Egan's attempts to kill the Megrimum end in disillusionment, so too do his efforts at storytelling. At the end of the book the reader finds Egan once more in the cart with the chandler. Although the situation contains elements of a circular ending, the pattern is incomplete. In the beginning Egan had hoped to climb the Rise and to make discoveries. At the end, however, he knows no more than he had at the beginning. The force of Ada's telling has not only silenced him; he also doubts his own experience. Poet Robert Frost admonishes us to "'Provide, provide..." or someone else will do it for us. So it is with stories; Egan lacks the power to tell his own story and must accept Ada's instead. He is dissatisfied because the adventure has not ended as he had hoped and expected. Closure appears to be incomplete. Indeed this sense of incompleteness invites readers to question their own assumptions about narratives and their endings. Babbitt has aroused her readers' expectations only to deflate them. In so doing she

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7Hardy, *Tellers and Listeners*, p. 33.
appears to assert her independent powers as a storyteller, her rebellion against the constraints of convention.

If Babbitt fails to deliver the promised story, however, she has provided clues which point to the novel’s ending; that is, she presents narratives within the narrative whose endings are structurally parallel. An alert reader, Babbitt thus implies, would have predicted the outcome correctly. Finally, Babbitt suggests, the most powerful story will prevail even if it isn’t true. Though Ada and Gertrude abuse their narrative skills, they do tell more interesting stories than Egan.

Babbitt also seems to call into question the usual assumption that children’s stories exhibit happy endings. She has herself argued that “the happy ending” is perhaps the most universal identifying characteristic of a children’s story. In distinguishing a story for children from stories written for adults, she explains:

And yet it seems to me that there is a tangible difference when you apply one rather simple sieve to the mass. It does not work for every children’s story, but perhaps it does apply to all that we remember longest and love best and will keep reading aloud to our children and to our children’s children as a last remaining kind of oral history, a history of the essence of our own childhood. I am referring, of course, to The Happy Ending.⁸

It would almost seem that Babbitt’s ending contradicts her opinions on the importance of a happy ending in a children’s story. At the same time, perhaps she implies that the saddest stories are those in which a dream dies. Egan after all almost has his belief in the dream restored. Babbitt implies, then, that we need the inventive liars like Ada to keep the dream alive and to titillate us with tantalizing terrors.

Perhaps the most extreme examples of narratives concerned with the nature of story are those works in which the process of creating the story becomes a central theme. How Many Miles to Babylon? and Knee-Knock Rise deal with the making of story, with the relationships between tellers and listeners, and with the uses and abuses of narrative. In the following examples of metafiction, however, the “primary concern is to express the novelist’s vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making.”⁹

Metafiction appeared early in the history of the novel. One finds evidence

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of it in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In Sterne's novel, the fictional author struggles, sometimes comically, with essential narrative problems: the narrator's role and function in relation to the story and the reader, matters of literary conventions, and rhetorical choices. In works of metafiction the function of what critics have called "implied authors," narrators, narrative, and "implied readers" are self-consciously explored. According to Christensen, this concern in metafiction assumes a larger significance: in the author's investigation of the essential narrative situation—the complex and intricate collaboration of narrator, story, and reader (or listener), the work of metafiction explores the nature of human communication in general.

Although many children's books have explored the development of a child author—Alcott's *Little Women*, Mollie Hunter's *The Sound of Chariots*, Eleanor Cameron's *Julia* books, among many others, relatively few can actually be said to concentrate upon the process of their own making. In the two examples discussed here, both Dickens and Nesbit seem anxious to explore the nature and function of children's literature generally as they reveal their child authors in the process of creating children's stories.

A nineteenth-century example of children's metafiction is Charles Dickens' *A Holiday Romance* (1868). In this work Dickens portrays the conversations of four young children—Alice Rainbird, William Tinkling, Robin Redforth, and Nettie Ashford. Alice Rainbird, the most sensible, intelligent, and inventive of the group, suggests that each child tell a story to educate adults who write stories making children ridiculous. According to Alice, educating the grownups will be presented under a ""mask of romance,"" while ""pretending in a new manner"" means that children will no longer pretend to be grownups:

""We will pretend,"" said Alice, ""that we are children.... We will wait ever constant and true till the times have got so changed as that everything helps us out, and nothing makes us ridiculous, and the fairies have come back.""  

Dickens reveals the children in the process of creating stories not for their own amusement but for didactic purposes; he thus slyly reverses the more usual procedure of adults writing for the moral education of children. At the same time, Dickens fails to convey a genuine and spontaneous sense of the child's voice. Ironically, he succeeds in making his child characters ridiculous (except for Alice Rainbird). William Tinkling, Robin Redforth, and

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Nettie Ashford tell silly and uninteresting stories. Tinkling coyly recounts the details of his marriage to Alice, vainly insisting that his story is the best and the most important. Redforth narrates the adventures of Captain Boldheart, dwelling on the pleasures of pursuing and punishing the Latin Grammar Master. Nettie Ashford describes a country where the children are in control. The children spend their time eating sweets and punishing their foolish "children," adults who make silly speeches in parliament and who refuse to smile as they dance. Tinkling, Robin, and Nettie, Dickens suggests, abuse storytelling just as much as adult writers for children. Once they possess the power to create their own stories, they make them just as silly and contrived as the stories they wish to reprehend and to correct. Only Alice Rainbird succeeds in creating a coherent and interesting story. In this way Alice, the fictional child author, resembles in some respects the historical author, Dickens. Just as Dickens had advocated the fairy tale as the best kind of children's story and had written essays in *Household Words* defending the value of the form, so Alice chooses the fairy tale for her tale, "The Magic Fishbone." At the same time, Alice treats some fairy tale conventions with humorous irony. Both Dickens and his child narrator are aware that the usual "fairy business" may sometimes be silly: the magical talisman in Alice's story is not a golden apple, a cap of darkness, a ruby ring, or an enchanted purse, but a lowly fish bone. Prince Certainpersonio is not a dashing handsome hero, but a shy, passive young man who sits by himself, "eating barley sugar, and waiting to be ninety." Dickens and his child author modify romance with a little realism. Alice, a sensible narrator, understands her conventions and manipulates them for the desired effect upon her audience. Dickens, then, reveals both Alice and her story as superior to the other children in *A Holiday Romance* and the tales they tell.

By underscoring the processes by which stories are created and by emphasizing the character of the teller, Dickens invites his reader to examine the nature of children's stories in order to conclude with him and his child author that fairy tales are the best of all possible stories for children. When Alice promises to "pretend in a new way" and "to bring back the fairies," she echoes her historical author's words written fifteen years earlier:

We may assume that we are not singular in entertaining a very great tenderness for the fairy literature of our childhood. What enchanted us then, and is captivating a million young fancies now, has, at the same blessed time of life, enchanted vast hosts of men and women who have done their long day's work, and laid their grey heads down to rest. It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels.  

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The best and most famous instance of children’s metafiction is E. Nesbit’s *Bastable* series, including *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), *The Wouldbegoods* (1901), and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904). Nesbit had undoubtedly read Dickens’s *A Holiday Romance*, and she adopts his rhetorical device of a child narrator who is also the child author. Her narrator also pretends to conceal his identity and then proceeds to give it away almost at once.

Nesbit’s child author-narrator addresses his reader directly and explains his narrative choices. Throughout the three books Nesbit reveals her child author in the process of discovering his technique as a writer. Oswald Bastable, who learns much of his craft from a mentor, Albert’s Uncle, affirms the principle of careful selection of incident, noting that he will omit dreary prefaces and description. He experiments with tone and diction, at times deliberately imitating “goody books” often given as school prizes, only to give up such elevated language for his own casual colloquial idiom, which includes such expressions as “It was Al….” or “It was no-go.”

In revealing Oswald’s struggles to become an author, Nesbit perhaps shows herself in the process of finding her own role as children’s writer and in developing an appropriate tone and voice to address her child reader. Oswald’s narrative choices may also reflect Nesbit’s attempt (a successful one) to create a new and modern kind of children’s story.

One of the choices Oswald defends is his method of ending *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. After the Bastable children have explored several unsuccessful ways to restore their fallen fortunes, they find that the financial problems of their family are finally solved by a wealthy maternal uncle. The novel ends with a bounteous and cheerful Christmas scene at the uncle’s comfortable mansion. Oswald admits that his ending resembles that of a fairy tale or a Dickens novel but argues that it is nevertheless what happened, noting that life is after all sometimes “rather like books.”

Oswald’s assertion that life is “rather like books” suggests some important characteristics shared by these four examples of children’s metafiction. By its nature metafiction underscores the distance between actuality and fiction, between nature and art. To one degree or another each of these works explores perennial critical issues of narrative theory. Is literature an imitation of nature? Is the literary imagination a mirror or a lamp?

Indirectly Paula Fox comments upon this controversy in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* The story James narrates at the end undoubtedly reflects the actual conditions of his life more accurately than his imaginative romance about ruby rings and African Queens. The new story, however, somehow lacks the imaginative energy of James’s earlier story. Fox thus adroitly dramatizes the tensions between psychologically realistic fiction and romance. She manages to show, however, that as both kinds of story enable James to resolve his emotional conflicts, so human beings need both the
mirror and the lamp. Babbit, on the other hand, apparently rejects the mimetic function of narrative. Ada’s imagined version of reality becomes more “real” than Egan’s actual experience. In the end even Egan starts to believe her vivid and dramatic story rather than his disillusioning experience.

While Fox and Babbitt embed their critical concerns about the nature of narrative in the dramatic and emotional conflicts of their characters, Dickens and Nesbit self-consciously explore these matters through their fictional authors. Dickens’ child narrators do not imitate nature; they imitate other stories. Only Alice Rainbird, however, is wise enough to choose the right literary model. In imitating silly stories, Robin Redforth, William Tinkling, and Nettie Ashford fail to reach their child audience.

Nesbit’s child narrator and fictional author relies upon many literary models as he makes narrative decisions. Oswald’s example of blending the structure of the fairy tale with the texture of realistic children’s stories was to become one of Nesbit’s major contributions to the history of children’s fiction. Nesbit’s metafiction reveals both herself and her child author in the process of discovering their identities as children’s writers and of discovering conventions and techniques which would influence many children’s writers in the twentieth century. Oswald’s exploration of literary convention, his awareness of his relationship to the implied reader, his use of diction, tone, and his process of selection and arrangement become ways by which Nesbit herself explores the nature of children’s stories. Nesbit’s self-conscious use of metafiction, however, produced a classic of children’s literature, a work which was to usher in modern children’s literature. Most critics of Dickens’ fiction, however, emphasize how slight A Holiday Romance is in comparison with his great novels. Most readers detect a condescending tone in Dickens’ treatment of the childish cuteness of his narrators; his attempts to render the child’s voice strike many readers as affected and strained. Critics praise Nesbit’s authentic presentation of the child’s voice through Oswald as narrator.

Both Dickens and Nesbit clearly use these children’s metafictions to explore the nature of children’s fiction. Writing much earlier in the nineteenth century than Nesbit, Dickens composed A Holiday Romance at a time when the moral tale still dominated British children’s literature. Also by this period British novelists were creating few metafictions. Part of Laurence


13Christensen, p. 11. Christensen writes that nineteenth-century English novelists were concerned with history and with presenting a coherent vision of life, while eighteenth and twentieth-century novelists have been concerned with craft and technique.
Sterne’s task in creating *Tristram Shandy* was to convince the reading public of the novel’s validity as a literary form. Similarly Dickens clearly felt that he must justify the kind of children’s story he was writing. Apparently *A Holiday Romance* fails as literature because of Dickens’ confused sense of audience. The book clearly does not address the child reader; rather Dickens admonishes the adult critic of children’s literature to embrace fairy tale, romance, and the imagination and to avoid moral and matter-of-fact tales. Perhaps his needs as a critic divide and thwart his creative purposes.

Nesbit was writing at the very end of the century when the influence of pious Victorian literature had already diminished considerably. While she wished to explore the nature of children’s fiction through her child author, she did not need to make her case so vehemently as Dickens since the battle for imagination and the fairy tale had been won. Oswald explains that he is simply trying to write the kind of story he would like to read. He knows his literary models thoroughly. He understands the tensions between romance and realistic fiction. Chaotically comic realistic episodes which imitate “life” and which strive for mimesis, do not easily come to an end. Human beings must blunder through such episodes until nature provides its own efficient and definitive ending. But literature, specifically the fairy tale, provides Oswald with a way to end the Bastables’ ineffectual attempts to restore their fallen fortunes. Oswald explains his reason for choosing a fairy tale ending: “...I think it was much jollier to happen like a book, and it shows what a nice man the Uncle is, the way he did it all’” (p. 190).