The fact of metafiction in nineteenth-century American children's literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book* and Elizabeth Stoddard's *Lolly Dinks's Doings*

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Abstract

This article examines two American books for children: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) and Elizabeth Stoddard's *Lolly Dinks's Doings* (1874). In both books, fairy tales or myths are framed by a contemporary American setting in which the stories is told. It is in these realistic frames with an adult storyteller and child listeners that metafictional features are found. The article shows that Hawthorne and Stoddard use a variety of metafictional elements. So, although metafiction has been regarded as a postmodernist development in children's literature, there are in fact instances of metafiction in nineteenth-century American children's literature.

Keywords: metafiction, children's literature, nineteenth-century American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book*, Elizabeth Stoddard, *Lolly Dinks's Doings*

My introduction, in 1996, to nineteenth-century American children's books and, subsequently, to the emergent research field of children's literature was Elizabeth Stoddard's quirky book for children: *Lolly Dinks's Doings* (1874).[1] The reason for more or less stumbling over this book was my interest in Stoddard's novels and nineteenth-century American literature in general. At that point, works of American literary history did not include many references to children's literature,[2] and there was virtually no literary criticism on Stoddard's *Lolly Dinks's Doings*. Indeed, Stoddard belonged to the group of nineteenth-century

[1] See Sarah Wadsworth's review essay (2015: 331) on the development of the academic study of children's literature in the last twenty years.

[2] See, for instance, Beverly Lyon Clark (2003: 68-69) on the "eclectic" *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988). Clark concludes: "By 1988 children's literature was, if anything, even more invisible in the academy than it had been in 1948" (2003: 69). She also notes that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "none of the literature of the [wide-ranging] *Heath Anthology* [*of American Literature*, the fourth edition,] is addressed specifically to children […]" (Clark 2003: 3).

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women writers that was being recovered by feminist scholars in the 1980s, and only her first novel, *The Morgesons* (1862), was readily available in the mid-1990s. However, Stoddard's foray into children's literature after writing three novels and numerous short stories for adults was not as unusual for a nineteenth-century American author as it first occurred to me. The period after the American Civil War is considered to be "'The Golden Age of Children's Literature' because of its pride of place in the culture" (Lundin 2004: 61), a time when renowned authors wrote for children. A well-known author who started to write for children even earlier, in the antebellum USA, was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote for children in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s.[3]

One of the aspects of *Lolly Dinks's Doings* that intrigued me was its metafictional features. In *Children's Literature Comes of Age* (1996), Maria Nikolajeva draws on Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984) to discuss what she sees as the increasing use of metafiction in late-twentieth-century children's literature. In Waugh's definition metafiction is "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 1984: 2).[4] Although Nikolajeva acknowledges that they "can be found in much earlier periods," she sees metafictional elements in children's literature as first and foremost a "feature of its postmodern phase," and most of the examples that she has found are "quite recent, primarily from the 1980s and 1990s" (Nikolajeva 1996: 190, 191). However, after having increased my acquaintance with nineteenth-century American books for children that can be categorized as books of fairy tales, I actually found metafictional traits not only in Stoddard's book for children, but also in Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851).[5] In what follows—twenty years after I first read *Lolly Dinks's Doings* and Nikolajeva published her comments on

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[3] For discussions of Hawthorne's writings for children throughout the three decades, see Laura Laffrado (1992) and Patricia D. Valenti (2010).
[4] Waugh points out that the term *metafiction* appears to have been coined by William H. Gass in a 1970 essay (Waugh 1984: 2).
[5] It was published under the title *A Wonder Book* in volume 7 of *The Centenary Edition* (1972), which is the edition referred to in this article.

metafiction in children's literature—I will revisit the concept and examine metafictional elements in these two books for children.[6]

To discuss metafiction in the context of fairy tales may seem like a contradiction in terms since metafiction is typically concerned with exposing the conventions and limitations of realistic representation in fiction. Fairy tales—including Hawthorne's retellings of Greek myths for children in *A Wonder Book*—are generally not expected to adhere to realistic verisimilitude and, thus, would not appear easily to lend themselves to metafictional effects. However, both Hawthorne's and Stoddard's books for children use realistic frames for the telling of their fairy tales. These frame narratives have a contemporary American domestic setting, and they include the storyteller and the narratee(s), the latter in the form of children or a child. It is in relation to these frames that I will discuss metafictional elements in these books.

Before a more careful examination of the narrative frames and some of the metafictional aspects of these two children's books, an update on metafiction may be in order. Reviewing the concepts of metafiction and metanarration, which are "umbrella terms designating self-reflexive utterances, i.e. comments referring to the discourse rather than the story," Birgit Neumann observes, "[t]he functions of metafiction range from undermining aesthetic illusion to poetological self-reflection, commenting on aesthetic procedures, the celebration of the act of narrating, and playful exploration of the possibilities and limits of fiction" (Neumann 2014). She argues that although these two umbrella terms are related and often used as synonyms it makes sense to distinguish between them: "metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative" (Neumann 2014). I will use both terms but try to make clear distinctions between them.

Focusing on the storytelling situation, the frames of the two books highlight the act of narration as well as the American setting in which the framed stories or fairy tales are told. In *A Wonder Book*, the storytelling

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[6] There is not a great deal of scholarly work done on these books: there is only one full-length book chapter to date on *Lolly Dinks's Doings* (Troy 2008), and relatively few articles and book chapters on *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, considering the academic interest in most of Hawthorne's novels and short stories.

situation, in which ancient Greek myths are retold for children, is set in an 1850s American landscape, more specifically in the Berkshires with named landmarks such as Monument Mountain and the Dome of Taconic. The frames are titled "Tanglewood Porch," "Shadow Brook," "Tanglewood Play-Room," "Tanglewood Fireside," "The Hill-Side," and "Bald Summit," which indicates where the storytelling takes place inside and outside the house. The apparently extradiegetic first-person frame narrator describes Tanglewood as a "country-seat" set in a pastoral American landscape (Hawthorne 1972: 5).[7] Each frame appears both before and after each story or myth that the storyteller, Eustace Bright, tells the children, which firmly locates the storyteller and his audience as well as the narrator and the reader in an American nineteenth-century setting, celebrating the landscape and the imaginative playfulness of American childhood and youth.

In Hawthorne's book for children, the storyteller's audience consists of a number of children whom the frame narrator gives the names of native plants such as Primrose, Sweet Fern, Clover, Huckleberry, and Butter-cup, which "might better suit a group of fairies than a company of earthly children" (Hawthorne 1972: 6). Making a metafictional comment that jolts the reader out of the realistic depiction of the surroundings and the children, the narrator states that the reason for doing this is that, "to my certain knowledge, authors sometimes get themselves into great trouble by accidentally giving the names of real persons to characters in their books" (Hawthorne 1972: 6). Eustace Bright is an eighteen-year-old student at Williams College, whom the narrator introduces by name by, again, metafictionally breaking the realistic illusion: "In the first sentence of my book, you will recollect that I spoke of a tall youth, standing in the midst of the children. His name—(and I shall let you have his real name, because he considers it a great honor to have told the stories that are here to be printed)—his name is Eustace Bright" (Hawthorne 1972: 6-7). These metafictional statements undercut the apparent realism of the

[7] The narrator appears to be extradiegetic throughout most of the frames, but at the end of the first "The Hill-Side" frame the narrator states: "As for the story, I was there to hear it, hidden behind a bush, and shall tell it over to you in the pages that come next" (Hawthorne 1972: 117). Here the narrative levels are collapsed: the narrator suddenly emerges as a character in the frame story but, at the same time, refers to the printed pages of the book in the direct address to the reader.

frame by commenting on the first sentence of the book and on the printing of the stories that are told by Eustace Bright, and by unsettling the boundaries between characters and "real persons" through the frame narrator's contradictory comments on the naming of different characters in the frame. These statements are metanarrational, too, in that they are instances of the narrator's reflections on the act of narration.

The storytelling situation in Elizabeth Stoddard's *Lolly Dinks's Doings* is also located in the USA, but in the 1870s, and most of it is set in a New York City apartment where the Dinks family live—when they do not vacation in the countryside in Massachusetts. Mrs. Dinks is the apparently intradiegetic first-person frame narrator and storyteller and her six-year-old son, Lolly, is the active and unruly addressee. However, exactly on which narrative level the narrator is located is made uncertain already by the title page of the book, which ascribes *Lolly Dinks's Doings* to "his mother, Old Mrs. Dinks *alias* Elizabeth Stoddard." The chapters of this book consist of a diverse collection of stories and sketches with unusual twists of plot and dialogue. The frame narrative is not as clearly set off from the tales as it is in Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book*, partly due to Lolly's intrusive responses during his mother's storytelling.

In both books, storytelling is a topic on which the storyteller and the narrator explicitly ruminate, sometimes with the help of the narratees. In the first "Tanglewood Porch" frame in *A Wonder Book* the question about storytelling and repetition is brought up as the children beg Eustace Bright to tell them a story. He replies that there is not one single fairy tale "which you have not heard at least twice over," but a number of the children cry, "We like a story all the better for having heard it two or three times before" (Hawthorne 1972: 8). The frame narrator then muses, "it is a truth, as regards to children, that a story seems often to deepen its mark in their interest, not merely by two or three, but by numberless repetitions" (Hawthorne 1972: 8). This comment is in line with one of Nikolajeva's general observations in *Children's Literature Comes of Age*: "The fascination of traditional children's books is based on their predictability, the 'joy of recognition.' It is also here that fairy tales and classics play their decisive role […]" (Nikolajeva 1996: 54). She suggests that "[l]istening to a folktale—or a children's book—is more like listening to a musical piece than reading a modern novel. It is normal to to listen to musical pieces more than once, under different

circumstances, and performed by different musicians" (Nikolajeva 1996: 55). In *Lolly Dinks's Doings*, however, the reader encounters a child narratee who incessantly demands new stories and shows the very opposite of "joy of recognition"; six-year-old Lolly Dinks always wants "a new story; not an old one you know" (Stoddard 1874: 32). As I have discussed elsewhere, his objections to "old" stories concern both form, and content; he also often has the last word on his mother's stories (Troy 2008: 156-57).

Twelve-year-old Primrose, the oldest member of the child audience in *A Wonder Book*, is Eustace Bright's worst critic until her father, Mr. Pringle, who is a classical scholar, insists on hearing one of the stories. His verdict is harsh: "Pray let me advise you never more to meddle with a classical myth. Your imagination is altogether Gothic […]. The effect is like bedaubing a marble statue with paint." Eustace Bright, however, defends his right to "re-model" these myths as they do not belong to the ancient Greeks but instead are "the common property of the world, and of all time" (Hawthorne 1972: 112). The storyteller's defense in the "Tanglewood Fireside" frame largely repeats that of the "author" in the preface of *A Wonder Book* where he claims that "[n]o epoch of time can claim a copyright in these immortal fables" and that "they are legitimate subjects for every age to clothe with its own garniture of manners and sentiment […]," while admitting that in the process of his transforming them into "very capital reading for children" they may "perhaps" have "assumed a Gothic or romantic guise" (Hawthorne 1972: 3, 4).

The question about the appropriation and retelling of stories is also brought up in the introductory "Bald Summit" frame in which Eustace Bright comments on the Catskills that he and the children see in the west when they have reached the summit of the hill: "Among those misty hills, he said, […] an idle fellow, whose name was Rip Van Winkle, had fallen asleep, and slept twenty years in a stretch. The children eagerly besought Eustace to tell them all about this wonderful affair. But the student replied that the story had been told once already, and better than it ever could be told again […]" (Hawthorne 1972: 142-43). According to Hawthorne's storyteller, then, American author Washington Irving's tales should not be tampered with—at least, one may presume, until they reach the venerable age of the myths that Hawthorne romanticizes and domesticates for an American child audience in *A Wonder Book*.

Since most of these ruminations on storytelling refer to the tales that are embedded in and are part of the world of the frames, they may perhaps be seen as metanarrational rather than strictly metafictional (Neumann 2014). However, as it to some extent complicates the relation between fiction and reality, Eustace Bright's reference to Irving's short story "Rip van Winkle" (1819) could be regarded as an introduction to more obviously metafictional elements in the "Bald Summit" frames that frame the retelling of "The Chimaera" at the end of *A Wonder Book*.

Both Hawthorne's and Stoddard's books for children metafictionally break the frames by blatantly bringing up the issue of publishing the stories that are told in those frames. After Eustace Bright's retelling of the myth of "The Chimaera," Primrose makes a laurel wreath and crowns him, while observing that nobody else is likely to do so for his stories. He tells her not to be too sure: "Mr. J. T. Fields (with whom I became acquainted when he was in Berkshire last summer, and who is a poet, as well as a publisher) will see their uncommon merit, at a glance. He will get them illustrated, I hope, by Billings, and will bring them before the world under the very best of auspices, through the eminent house of TICKNOR & Co." (Hawthorne 1972: 170-71). Here Eustace Bright names the illustrator of the first edition of *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, Hammatt Billings, whom Hawthorne mentions that he wants to employ for this purpose in a letter to J. T. Fields dated 23 May, 1851, in which Hawthorne presents his ideas for this children's book project (Idol 2014). Hawthorne is also unashamedly advertising his publisher—"the eminent house of TICKNOR & Co."—within the frame story.[8] This mention of the publisher draws attention to the double audience of children's literature (adult reader and child listener) and the fact that children's literature is, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, "an essentially adult trade" (1994: 88). In *Lolly Dinks's Doings*, the storyteller and narrator Mrs. Dinks's occupation as a writer, her "cogitating over Dinks material" with the purpose of publishing it (Stoddard 1874: 16), is highlighted very early in this book. When Mrs. Dinks tells Lolly the first story, she explains that it is not much of a story and that "all the editors, and the

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[8] Richard Henry Stoddard's *Adventures in Fairyland* was published by the same publishing house the year after Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*; and Richard, the first-person narrator and storyteller, brings up the publisher TICKNOR, REED, & FIELDS at the end of *Adventures in Fairyland* as a reliable provider of stories for children (1853: 236).

publishers, and the readers, and everybody but Lolly Dinks, will see as I do" (Stoddard 1874: 8), which means that the whole process not only of writing, but also of publishing is explicitly emphasized. Hence, the commerce of children's literature is brought to the fore in both books as an additional complication of the relation between fiction and reality.

There is, indeed, a high degree of self-consciousness about the fictionality or constructedness of the frame narratives in *A Wonder Book* and *Lolly Dinks's Doings*. In the closing "Bald Summit" frame, after Eustace Bright has told the children the story of "The Chimaera," he mentions a number of authors associated with the Berkshires, including the poets Longfellow and Holmes and "Herman Melville, shaping out his conception of the 'White Whale'" (Hawthorne 1972: 169). When Eustace enumerates the American authors, Primrose asks, "Have we not an author for our next neighbor?" and describes a "silent man" with two children whom they sometimes meet "in the woods or at the lake" (Hawthorne 1972: 169). Eustace warns her not to mention that man—whom the reader easily recognizes as Hawthorne himself—as he has the power to annihilate them all by "fling[ing] a quire or two of paper into the stove" (Hawthorne 1972: 169). Here Eustace Bright shows awareness of being one of Hawthorne's characters and alerts another character about this perilous state of affairs.

An equally obvious metafictional instance occurs in the third chapter of *Lolly Dinks's Doings*. This chapter starts with Mrs. Dinks commenting on Lolly Dinks's distaste for socially and morally educational books and goes on to describe the Dinks family leaving their city dwelling for the countryside and seaside in Massachusetts. In other words, this passage seems to be part of the familial frame narrative. However, on the fourth page of this chapter it is revealed to be part of a manuscript that Mrs. Dinks is reading to Lolly Dinks when he interjects with a factual correction: "'No, mother,' interrupted Lolly, to whom I read this paper, 'it was the spring sea. It was not summer when we went'" (Stoddard 1874: 29). Consequently, the first three pages of the chapter are not on the narrative and temporal levels that the reader has initially assumed, and these pages are surprisingly addressed to Lolly as well as the book's readers. This textual turnabout startles the reader out of any complacency based on what first appears as realistic representation of the frame narrative's here and now. It is a clear example of a metafictional move in that it draws attention to the discourse rather than the story.

To conclude, I would like to return to Nikolajeva's 1996 discussion of metafiction in children's literature in *Children's Literature Comes of Age* where she claims that "[m]ore and more children's books consciously pose questions about the relationship between the writer, his [sic] creations and his readers. Such texts have been named *metafiction,* books about books and the writing of books, books which somehow explain themselves, investigating the essence of writing by describing the creative process itself" (Nikolajeva 1996: 190). However, as I hope to have shown, the presence of metafictional elements in children's literature is not just a recent, postmodern development: Hawthorne and Stoddard use an impressive range of metafictional features in *A Wonder Book* and *Lolly Dinks's Doings*. Although their use of metafictional devices should not be taken as representative of nineteenth-century American children's literature in general, there are certainly other examples of metafictional moves. The very first lines of the most well-known book published during the Golden Age of Children's Literature, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), testify to the fact of metafiction in nineteenth-century writings for children in the USA. As the intradiegetic first-person narrator and protagonist Huck Finn puts it in his direct address to the reader: "You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter. The book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly" (Twain 1987: 17).

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