

Not Safe for the Nursery?— Toni Morrison's Storybooks for Children*

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Abstract

In recent years, Toni Morrison and her son Slade, collaborating with two artists (Griselle Potter and Pascal Lemaître), published five books for children that received mixed responses. The Morrison team's project in the field of children's literature offers pertinent cases for us to reconsider critical issues involved in this field—readership, censorship, power relations, didacticism, genres and forms, etc. In this paper, I would like to start with a discussion of adult feedback on these storybooks to see what expectations parents, teachers, librarians, reviewers hold for children's books in general. Then, I will set to examining how the norms and ideologies children's literature in the past two hundred years have been codified. Finally, with a brief analysis of these storybooks, we may come to a tentative evaluation of the authors' and artists' collective contribution to children's literature in the new millennium. Generally,

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Toni Morrison and her partners write not only for children. These five picture books and fable comics adopt the strategy of Aesopian writing: they are written ostensibly for young readers, however, under playful banter they communicate nuances of meaning to an audience composed of both children and adults. In these subversive texts, the Morrison team tries to make heard the voices of the child/the weak/the colonized. There are many spaces between the lines, and between word and image, enabling readers of all ages to arrive at different levels of interpretation.

Key Words: Toni Morrison, children's literature, fable, the picture book, illustration