

Christiane Maria Binder

Childhood, Food and Fantasy

The Baggins and the Took Side of Life



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For my parents, Elfriede and Eberhard Binder,  
who inspired me with the love of pictures, stories, books and reading.



For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phoney, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom.

Ursula K. Le Guin





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## 1. Introduction

It cannot be denied that scholars, when engaged in a new project, are motivated and driven by personal interests of cognition and curiosity, whose links and hidden connections with the past, even with the formative years of childhood and adolescence, eventually reveal themselves only in the later stages of the enterprise. In this sense, the present study is the result of an almost lifelong commitment to a fascinating subject. Its origins date back to the 1970s when I was a student in the Eastern part of the still-divided Germany. My parents were graphic designers and illustrators, especially of books for children and young readers, among them many picture books. They inspired me with the love of pictures, stories, books and reading, and a deep interest in foreign countries, people, their cultures and languages. How could I combine these interests, study something that was important to me and make a meaningful profession out of this? The direction had been clear to me more or less since I was thirteen. So what could I love and also had the skills to do? Read and write, translate and interpret, work with children, teach foreign languages, communicate in them with people from abroad, write books myself, research, travel, become a mediator between my own and foreign cultures. And all this right in the middle of the Cold-War Era! Very high-minded and idealistic motives indeed. And what would this profession be called? Teacher? Okay then, fine with me! It was thus that I set out in 1973 to study two foreign languages, educational sciences and psychology, to become a future teacher of English and Russian.

The mid-1970s saw me engaged already in studies of Children's Literature. Inspired by reading socialization in a family of graphic designers and (children's) book illustrators,<sup>1</sup> I opted to first selecting a topic for my diploma thesis in Slavonic Studies on Russian and Soviet Children's Literature. I was tutored by two specialists: in the GDR at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, and in the USSR at the State University of Voronezh. The latter, where I spent a full year abroad, even had a special Department of Children's Literature already. After my return to my home university, I continued my studies for another year and successfully finished with a diploma degree and a state exam in 1977. Yet afterwards it turned out to be impossible to go on with a Ph.D in English Children's Literature. Politics was not responsible for that. Rather, both in the East and in the West of Germany, Children's Literature had not generally entered academia yet.<sup>2</sup> In English-speaking countries too, this field was far from being a fully fledged scholarly discipline yet. Worldwide it was condescendingly regarded at that time as not worth serious scholarly attention, as trivial or, at best, popular litera-

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1 Cf. C.M. Binder (2016a), "A Special Case of Intermediality: Interanimation of Text and Pictures in English-Speaking Picture Books", in *Praktiki i interpretacii: zhurnal filologicheskikh, obrazovatel'nykh i kul'turnykh issledovaniy* 1.4, 39-45.

2 Exceptions were some Departments of Slavonic Studies in the GDR, and some Departments of German Studies in both parts of Germany before re-unification.

ture. So the general circumstances were not very promising then to try to base your whole professional career on a field that did not exist yet and where you would not find a supervisor either. However, all this did not prevent me from continuing my research interests. 'In the meantime' I did my Ph.D. on English Renaissance Literature, and started work on my habilitation on Restoration Literature, still keeping an eye on Children's Literature, though I could not officially investigate or teach it. And I indulged in producing my very first picture book with my brother, who was preparing to become a graphic designer and book illustrator himself after having completed his studies at a College of Art.

Almost a decade passed by. It took the collapse of the Berlin Wall and a few more personal and professional changes before I was able to return to my former 'first love' with renewed forces and much more expertise in research and teaching in many other areas of English Literature. After beginning to teach English Children's Literature immediately after the 'Wende' in the early 1990s, still at my old university in the Eastern part of the reunited Germany, I eventually managed to 'climb' the political as well as the academic wall in 1994: by being appointed the very first professor of English Literature from the East, in the West of the reunited Germany. Dortmund University (now: TU Dortmund University) offered me new academic perspectives and better scholarly conditions for significant work in many of my varied research areas that, by now, were stretching over nearly a thousand years of literary history. And this, above all, in close exchange and cooperation with colleagues in Germany and various English-speaking countries, something that I had not been able to enjoy before 1989. We joined forces at once in the field of English-speaking Children's Literature. In Germany, at various English Departments, a handful of people, mostly newly appointed like me and eager to give English Studies in Germany a new direction, were courageous, enthusiastic and persistent enough to dare to establish Children's Literature Studies within British and American Studies in Germany. We held conferences, published essays and monographs, taught the subject in courses at the tertiary level, supervised Bachelor and Master theses, and later even dissertations and habilitations.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Cf. C. Bimberg (1993), "Mit Alice ins Kaninchenloch: Englischsprachige Kinder- und Jugendliteratur an Schule und Universität", *Mitteilungsblatt des Fachverbandes Moderne Fremdsprachen, Landesverband Sachsen-Anhalt* 2.3 (March), 13-15. – All publications under the name 'Bimberg' are written by the author of the present book.

Cf. also C. Bimberg (1994), "Geschichten aus dem Spiegelland. Über die Briten und ihre skurrile Art, Kinderliteratur zu machen", *UniReport der Universität Dortmund* 20 (winter), 21-28; C. Bimberg (1996a), "A German View of British Classics and the Need for an Interdisciplinary Discourse", *Para Doxa* 2.3, 332-36; C. Bimberg (1996c), "Teaching English Children's Literature at a German University – Why, What For, and How", in *Moving the Borders. Papers from the Milan Symposium "Teaching English Literature in a Changing World"*, Varenna, September 18-24, 1994, ed. by Marialuisa Bignami and Caroline Patey, Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 389-94; C. Bimberg (1998) "Changes in German Anglistics and Americanistics after the Fall of the Wall", *Proceedings of the International Congress "Building a Culture of Democratic Education in a Young Democracy"*,

Personal contact proved indeed to be a very inspiring source for all these activities. There were two special highlights and important landmarks in this respect: the Anglistentag held in Berlin in 2000, which was the very first in the history of this institution, where a special section was devoted to Children's Literature exclusively, chaired by my colleague Prof. Dr. Thomas Kullmann and me.<sup>4</sup> The other was the seminar workshop "Constructions of Childhood in British Children's Literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries" at a conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) held in 2002 in Strasbourg, which Thomas Kullmann and me also chaired together.<sup>5</sup>

After watching and shaping these developments for about forty years, I am very pleased and proud to say that these days no student has to excuse any more when wanting to devote time, energy and ideas to a subject in English-speaking Children's Literature. On the contrary, this is so much taken for granted these days that some freshmen do not even know that, a quarter of a century ago, the academic discipline they now engage in so enthusiastically did not even exist, or had just started to emerge. It is amazing for them to learn about its genesis, to see how much time and commitment it took by a few inspired scholars to create an academic discipline that generates so much intellectual curiosity, fun and amusement when practiced as a cross-over of diverse branches of expertise in scholarship and criticism. This is deeply satisfactory! Of course, even now, as a professor of English Literature at university, you cannot do courses on Children's Literature exclusively. A contemporary and appropriate tertiary education for students of English needs to offer many more things. Especially if you work as a generalist, you need to be able to teach English literature across a very broad historical spectrum. But the huge scope of my activities suited me well. I could teach literature from the eleventh century to the present. At the same time I identified my specific research interests in Children's Literature Studies and tried to integrate them

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University of Stellenbosch (in Zusammenarbeit mit der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung). Seminarreport, publ. by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Johannesburg, 181-87; C. Bimberg (1999b) "Zeitenwende in der Anglistischen Literaturwissenschaft oder Who's Afraid of Children's Literature?", *UniReport der Universität Dortmund, Forschungsberichte* 29, 23-26.

- 4 C. Bimberg and Thomas Kullmann (2000), "Children's Literature", *Anglistik. Mitteilungen des Deutschen Anglistenverbandes* 11.1, 59-61; C. Bimberg and Thomas Kullmann (2001), "Introduction to Section IV: Children's Literature", *Anglistentag 2000 Berlin: Proceedings XXII*, ed. by Peter Lucko and Jürgen Schlaeger, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 283-85; C. Bimberg (2001), "The Place of Children's Literature Studies in English and American Studies in Germany: Empowering the Young Generation to 'See Through'", *ibid.*: 321-31.
- 5 Cf. Bimberg and Thomas Kullmann (2006), "Introduction", in C. Bimberg and Thomas Kullmann, eds., *Children's Book and Child Readers. Constructions of Childhood in English Juvenile Fiction*, Aachen: Shaker, 1-5 and C. Bimberg (2006), "(Re)constructions of Edwardian Childhood(s): The Significance of the Food Culture as an Epitome of the Edwardian Period and Edwardian Children's Literature", *ibid.*: 47-74.

meaningfully (and felicitously, as I cannot but find in retrospect) within my teaching programme from Medieval Literature to Postcolonial Studies. I was thus able to assign Childhood Studies a prominent place in texts for adults as well as for children, and optimally interlink research and teaching in these areas, combining British Literary and Cultural Studies. In the long run this enabled me to play ping-pong intellectually with a whole millennium of English and New English Literature and, yet more importantly, use this creative potential for contributing to a sophisticated study of Children's Literature. In this way one can experiment with so many different terms, concepts, methods and critical approaches and develop unique research profiles. In addition, historical consciousness is a very important and helpful factor, if not a necessary presupposition when subtly dealing with phenomena of childhood – after all, childhood is time- and culture-bound.

So the huge enthusiastic input in research and teaching was nicely matched by an equally rewarding amount of inspiration from diverse and challenging areas, issues and methods. Engagement in various projects undertaken at different stages of my academic career – seemingly unrelated at the time, but turning out to be inherently affiliated – triggered lots of interesting results. Doubtless the central point of interest around which all my endeavours have been secretly and magically revolving, proves to be childhood – in its various historical and socio-cultural manifestations in the literatures and cultures of Great Britain, South Africa, Canada and the US, but also Russia.

The more concrete early beginnings of the present project date back as far as the 1990s, to papers given, conferences attended and held and essays published on English-speaking children's and adult literature. The immediate occasion for my special interest in food and meals was the invitation to give the keynote lecture of the conference "Phantastische Kinderliteratur" in Leipzig in 1999, held by my colleague Prof. Dr. Elmar Schenkel. After some time studying and enjoying British children's literature, especially the classics, among them numerous fantasies, it struck me that eating and drinking feature substantially and in great detail in them, acquire an extraordinary importance and serve the most varied purposes. Consequently, my keynote lecture focused on "The Importance of Eating and Drinking in British Children's Classics."<sup>6</sup> The subject continued to interest me after the conference was long since over.

But before the present monograph was realized, a number of other projects on childhood in adult literature creatively impacted and modified the initial ideas and concepts. The second, begun slightly later, but then running parallel to the first for some years, resulted in a monograph on (re-)constructions of childhood in the Victorian Age.<sup>7</sup> The third focussed on childhood in the Edwardian Period.<sup>8</sup> In both books,

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6 Cf. C. Bimberg (1999a), "The Importance of Eating and Drinking in British Children's Classics", *Inklings-Jahrbuch für Literatur und Ästhetik* 17, 10-34.

7 Cf. C.M. Binder (2014a), *From Innocence to Experience: (Re-)Constructions of Childhood in Victorian Women's Autobiography*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.

8 Cf. C.M. Binder (2016b), *Childhood and Food in the Edwardian Period*, Saarbrücken: Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften.

the issue of food as a cultural metaphor was a central concern already – in adult literature about Victorian and Edwardian childhoods. All this was complemented, from the mid-2000s to the present with essays expanding the perspectives employed so far. They addressed representations of childhood, food and meals, and, furthermore, issues of identity, urban space and city life, in adult fiction, e.g. Edwardian and modernist literature and the New English Literatures/Postcolonial Literatures (particularly of South Africa and Canada).<sup>9</sup> All these studies broadened my view of the significance of food and meals in various adult and children's cultures in different historical epochs and regions of the world, the complexity of the use of food as a cultural metaphor in fiction, the nature of childhood as a time-, place-, class-, culture- and gender-bound phenomenon. Especially the methodological interlink between childhood and food demonstrated the differentiated nature of childhood representations and food-and-meal-related issues as to historical period, cultural geography, the discourses of children's and adult literature and the mode of presentation/narrative transmission.

So, when I finally returned to the present project and the topic of fantasy and food I did so with renewed expertise and questions and aims in mind. The central outlines had been explained and published in two essays whose ideas are used for this title.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a closer examination in two monographs of the context of that literature, of Victorian and Edwardian society and their respective general and children's cultures (cf. above),<sup>11</sup> had given rise to some hypotheses as to why eating and drinking feature so prominently in the literature written for children and adults at that time. Now I wanted to solve that riddle!

The fact that the texts investigated here are all fantasies is of utmost significance. Fantasy is a very special narrative sub-genre indeed, characterized by specific features. It offers explorations of the fantastic/the supernatural/the magic – of what is beyond ordinary reality or things that are, at the time, seen as empirically possible (cf. ch. 4). It

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9 Cf. C. Bimberg (2007), "Perversions and Reversals of Childhood and Old Age in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*", *Connotations. A Journal for Critical Debate*, 15.1-3 (2005/06), 58-90; C. Bimberg (2009), "Childhood and Postmodern Identity Construction in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*: Body, Art, Biology", in *Textual Intricacies: Essays on Structure and Intertextuality in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Fiction in English*, ed. by Christiane Bimberg and Igor Volkov, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 125-53; C. Bimberg (2012), "From Childhood to Retrospective. Portrait of an Artist in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*", in *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Thing in British, Irish and Canadian Fiction after 1945* [= Anglistik und Englischunterricht 81], ed. by Anette Pankratz and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, Heidelberg: Winter 2012, 69-90; C. M. Binder (2014b), "Making up for Loss of Child: Ambivalences and Alternative Concepts of Mother-/Parenthood in J.M.Coetzee's *Age of Iron*", in *Narrating Loss: Representations of Mourning, Nostalgia and Melancholia in Contemporary Anglophone Fictions*, ed. by Brigitte Johanna Glaser and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 27-44.

10 Cf. C. Bimberg 1999a and 2006.

11 Cf. Binder 2014a and 2016b.

thus affects readers in ways that exclusively realistic or mimetic texts cannot do, though doubtless they fulfil other valuable functions with readers.

It is evident that in the chosen fantasies, eating and drinking feature substantially. Of course, the selection can only be seen as exemplary. Many more examples of the varied narrative uses of eating and drinking could be supplied. Just think of Pooh's unquenchable desire for 'a little something' and its far-reaching consequences in A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). Or of the famous tea party in mid-air in P.L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934). Or of the 'pedagogical' punishments (or forms of 'poetic justice') for disobedient children, through drastic educational measures including food, in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964).<sup>12</sup> However, the chosen texts allow for some degree of comparability and differentiation. They permit conclusions as to the role and function of food as a cultural metaphor in the fantasy genre in a decisive period of transition in conceptions of childhood and the history of children's literature.

A short remark on terminology/classification here: the four renowned fantasies selected for investigation can be termed according to the different 'modes of experiences' they offer according to Peter Hunt's classification: domestic fantasy, high fantasy and two types between them (Hunt 1994: 185; cf. ch. 4). Furthermore it is important to note that the four fantasies were written during decades that were crucial for the emancipation of English Children's Literature and especially fantasy for children. We are dealing here with Victorian, Edwardian/pre-World War One and inter-war contexts.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871/72) can be seen as Victorian forerunners opening the paradigm. Edith Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (1902) and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) are fantasies which further develop this potential in the Edwardian period. J.R.R. Tolkien's inter-war fantasy *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (1937) eventually exemplifies the fully developed form with generic conventions which have by now become characteristic and timeless.

The major aim is not, however, to develop an independent new theory of fantasy. Much has already been written about this type of text, which is newly considered here and made useful for the present study. And in a number of areas, the study has a few new aspects, modifications and critical readings to add, due to its methodological cross-over. Childhood and food are the central concerns, but they cannot be properly studied without taking into account their particular socio-cultural contexts. In each work of fiction, the relation between primary and secondary world (if existent or fully developed at all) is an individual one, yet in most cases the real world lurks somewhere behind the fantastic or shines through somehow. The fictive and the realistic/mimetic are interlinked either expressly or indirectly. The same is true for the use of eating and drinking in the texts. Food is treated here as a cultural metaphor that func-

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12 Cf. Bimberg 1994: 25, 27-28.



tions both at the realistic as well as at the fantastic level. These issues are methodologically embedded in their respective contexts: Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war representations of childhood. So in line with the narrative strategies of these texts, the focus of investigation is on the nexus between childhood, food and fantasy. The title is therefore very apt: *childhood*, *food* and *fantasy* are the leading categories, which are all interlinked with and comment on each other. The generic link runs through childhood and food.

All these considerations shaped the structure of the book. The major concern could be summed up as: the socio-cultural significance of food and meals in representations of childhood in Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war fantasy. The investigation of the practices, representations and functions of food leads to an exploration of the poetics and politics of food.

The monograph studies texts, but also pictures, illustrations and photographs, i.e. Visual Art. Methodologically, it employs a cross-over of Linguistics, Literary and Cultural Studies. Deconstruction, Intertextuality, Contextualization and Cultural Materialism are combined to explore the meanings of deeper layers of the narratives. Numerous cross-connections between the four fantastic narratives are revealed and a number of different critical readings offered.

The subtitle “the Baggins and the Took side of life” is an allusion to *The Hobbit*, of course. According to Bilbo’s initial view on life, the one shared by the (unadventurous) Baggins branch of the family, the normal order of things – expressed through regular, strictly punctual and substantial meals – is in danger of being upset by adventures that the Took branch loves so much. Well, let’s just plunge into *The Hobbit* later on to find out whether this attitude remains unchallenged.

Finally I should like to mention that two sabbaticals in the winter semester 2002/03 and the summer semester 2007 helped to make progress with the monograph. Moreover, three seminars conducted by me at the TU Dortmund University likewise supported the emergence and further modification of the project: “Eating and Drinking in British fantasies for Children” (summer semester 2000) and “Food as a Cultural Metaphor in British Fantasies for Children” in the winter semester 2011/12 and the summer semester 2014. My special thanks go to my colleague, Dr. Richard Bell, who – as always – took good care of my manuscript when doing the proofreading, and my student assistants, Magdalena Middelman and Sümeye Sönmez, who assisted me in the technical completion of it.