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World Book Day & its Discontents: The Cultural Politics of Book-Based Fancy Dress

Abstract:	In Britain, children dressing as their favourite book character has become synonymous with World Book Day, an event created by UNESCO in 1995 to promote reading for pleasure. Book-based fancy dress is often a fraught process which has attracted considerable critique. Its examination offers insights into issues ranging from intergenerational relations to the place of reading in contemporary society. In this article, I debunk a number of common criticisms levelled at World Book Day's fancy dress component, but argue that there are nevertheless several good reasons why book-based fancy dress should be rethought and reformed.

World Book Day & its Discontents: The Cultural Politics of Book-Based Fancy Dress

Introduction

On the first Thursday of every year, children the length and breadth of Britain go to school dressed as their favourite book character. This donning of more or less elaborate costumes in exchange for a charitable donation is undertaken to mark World Book Day (hereafter WBD), an international celebration of reading created by UNESCO in 1995. Relying on celebrity pzazz ever since its Blair-sponsored inception (Weedon 216), British WBD has become something of a modern tradition, despite or even because of the various controversies it has elicited. Most recently, writers and booksellers came out in force to slam the star-studded list of cut-price books promoted by the event organisers (see Flood). But the most regular focus of critique is undoubtedly the costume element, which has become virtually synonymous with WBD in Britain. Enjoining children in a pithy slogan to 'Dress up to Change Lives', it couples the transformative potential of charitable giving on the one hand and of fancy dress (to adopt British parlance) on the other. Alongside other fundraising initiatives such as the BBC's Children in Need, and the ever-increasing popularity of Halloween, fancy dress is now very much part of the fabric of British children's lives.

Yet this annual formalisation of a performative practise stretching back to the nineteenth century raises a number of issues which resonate far beyond British shores. Easily dismissed as inconsequential and frivolous, the long-neglected practise of fancy dress has started to receive more sustained critical attention in recent years. A cultural history by Benjamin Wild is forthcoming, and scholars such as Anita Callway, Celia Marshik and Bradley Shope have underlined its importance in the construction of both selfhood and nationhood in Anglophone contexts as diverse as Bloomsbury, the British Raj and the Australian outback. Playing a key role in the construction of a national imaginary (Callway

131), fancy dress also serves as an important barometer of evolving attitudes and sensibilities. With references to political correctness and cultural appropriation never far away, it highlights the often toxic tensions between freedom of expression, humour and (poor) taste – a flashpoint, according to Preeti Varathan 'for the debate between sensitivity and free speech'. Although critics and commentators stress its carnivalesque promise – 'the power of fancy dress to remake those who wear it' (Marshik 3; see also O'Donoghue and Cartner-Morlay) – it is nevertheless tightly policed and rigorously assessed.

Book-based fancy dress specifically is perhaps most systematically and conspicuously undertaken for WBD in the UK, but it also occurs within a range of other contexts and/or national settings, whether as part of formal programmes such as Read Across America Day, or more ad hoc local initiatives.[1] Wherever it is conducted, book-based fancy dress, like the literary prizes explored by Kidd and Thomas, plays a key role in the formation and reinforcement of national canons. Its examination throws into sharp relief the shape of contemporary publishing and childhood culture and, as a form of translation or adaptation, enhances our understanding of the reception of children's literature. It sheds light on what we *do* with books in addition to, or even instead of, merely reading them, and how that usage feeds back in turn into the kinds of works produced. Generally devised within the home rather than at school, WBD dressing-up also enables examination of intergenerational relations, of adult conceptualisations of childhood, and of age-based aesthetics. Moreover, analysis of debates around the annual event reveals ongoing attitudes towards the place of literature and of reading in society today.

This article begins with an exploration of the objectives of World Book Day in its UNESCO and UK incarnations, before moving on to focus on the rationale and reality, the theory and practise, of the fancy dress component specifically. A survey of the historical

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[1] See for example this blog by an American preschool teacher:
http://littlemrspreschool.blogspot.fr/2014/02/favorite-book-character-day.html

development of costuming for children makes clear the issues of agency at stake in a process, the constituent parts of which are then examined in detail. Drawing on the extensive media coverage the annual event continues to attract, I will present and probe the arguments of both detractors and supporters of WBD's fancy dress component. Based on a detailed quantitative analysis of a set of costume suggestions, I will then set out what I see as the more inherent and fundamental problems of the process before moving on, finally, to outline some possible remedies.

The overarching framework

World Book & Copyright Day, to give it its full title, was established by a UNESCO General Council resolution in 1995, informed by an Enlightenment-imbued belief in the fundamentally improving, even salvatory, nature of the book object. Since 'historically books have been the most powerful factor in the dissemination of knowledge and the most effective means of preserving it', their promotion 'will serve not only greatly to enlighten all those who have access to them, but also to develop fuller collective awareness of cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire behaviour based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue' ('World Book and Copyright Day'). The UN's functional but rather uninspiring WBD webpage states that the aim of the annual event is 'to pay a world-wide tribute to books and authors on this date, encouraging everyone, and in particular young people, to discover the pleasure of reading and gain a renewed respect for the irreplaceable contributions of those, who have furthered the social and cultural progress of humanity' ('World Book and Copyright Day'). Involving some 110 countries by 2006, there has been a strong international take-up of the event, which, according to the UN, has enabled 'a considerable number of people from every continent and all cultural backgrounds' to 'discover, make the most of and explore in greater depth a multitude of aspects of the publishing world.' This involves books

being understood and celebrated 'as vectors of values and knowledge, and depositories of the intangible heritage; books as windows onto the diversity of cultures and as tools for dialogue; books as sources of material wealth and copyright-protected works of creative artists' dialogue' ('World Book and Copyright Day'). A publishers' association was heavily involved in the creation of the resolution and, alongside a librairians' association, the planning and delivery of the first event. Yet, as Alexis Weedon points out, WBD is not a primarily commercial initiative (213), overseen as it is by UNESCO which occupies a neutral and therefore, it believes, more effective intermediary role between public and private sectors (see Larrea and Weedon 225). In UNESCO statements pertaining to the event, there is indeed a conspicuous absence of references to either buying or selling.

In the UK, on the other hand, which first undertook a national WBD celebration in 1998, 'the initiative […] came from the book trade' (Weedon 213) and is run by a charitable organization funded by publishers, booksellers and other retailers. Like the 'mother' event, though, WBD in Britain also aims to give children 'from all backgrounds' access to, and a love of, books, and, 'by starting a nationwide conversation about the importance of reading', to raise the profile of the event, the book object and the act of reading for pleasure ('World Book Day Q&A'). Although centred on the designated day in March, the organization operates throughout the year, providing book suggestions and running competitions via its website, as well as a series of author/illustrator events across the country. Resource packs provide schools with a panoply of suggestions for ways to mark WBD. Various high-profile initiatives have been launched over the years, such as the initial 1998 campaign which featured photographs of celebrities reading books which were 'instantly recognizeable' and 'appropriate to the sitter' (Weedon 215), thus prefiguring the fancy dress activity which has been in operation since at least 1999 (see, for instance, regional press coverage by Green).

Today, dressing up is a well-established fixture which has indeed come to define World Book Day (Gallagher). Taken up predominantly by primary schools (children age 4-11) but also by many nurseries/preschools (0-4) and secondary schools (11-16/18), it provides a nationwide spectacle as children and infants troop to school in their more or less elaborate costumes. World Book Day resource packs tailored to different age groups, available online and sent out to schools, feature full-page spreads entirely devoted to fancy dress (see Fig I), with further mentions in the activities suggested elsewhere. 'Bring YOUR favourite book character to life on World Book Day!' reads the main text, accompanied by a line-up of children photographed in costumes serving as visual prompts, many of which are included on Book Aid International's own page of suggestions and guides analysed below. A relatively light-touch approach is thus adopted, with just two seemingly simple but in practice rarely straightforward components: 1) favourite; 2) book character. Even this delimitation makes WBD fancy dress closer to a themed party or to British Halloween (where costumes tend to be spooky, related to monsters etc) rather than its North American inspiration with its completely open costume choices. Moreover, some schools have introduced further rules, restrictions and requirements designed to reinforce the core components ease the parental burden, or rein in the disruption to everyday learning (for example no superheroes or Disney characters; non-fictional works only).[2] Schools are clearly free to tailor activities and events, and a £1 donation to Book Aid International, a book donation and library development charity working predominantly with and for African states, is only voluntary. It is nevertheless very strongly encouraged. Combining fun and fundraising, book-based fancy dress thus participates in a long tradition of children's philanthropy (see Moruzi). The full-page spreads in the resource packs inform potential participants that their donation will 'Help make a

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[2] To the marked displeasure of at least one child participant. A contributor to the *Guardian*'s online picture gallery wrote: 'Last year my school decided we could only make headresses or hats for World Book Day and still had to wear uniform underneath.' 'How rubbish is this?' she adds. (Drabble).

HUGE difference to thousands of children's lives' since 'a new children's book' can be sent 'to a school or library in Africa' for every £2 raised.
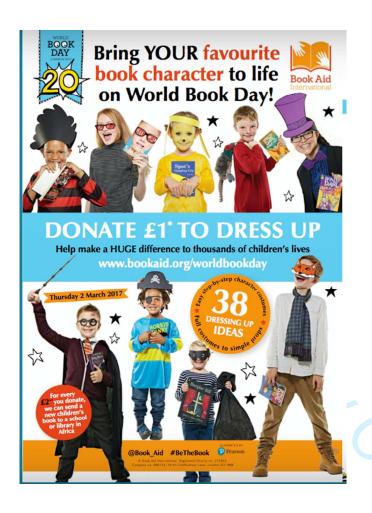

Fig I. Full-page spread promoting fancy dress in World Book Day 2017 resource packs for nursery and primary schools

While fancy dress is mentioned in resources for all levels, it is predominantly targeted at under 11s (there is no full-page spread in the secondary school pack). Further age-appropriate suggestions related to dressing up are offered elsewhere in the packs: while an element of display of an already performative practice is suggested for all under 11s (a 'character catwalk' or parade), a 'character study', which involves the child outlining the

values represented by their character, is introduced only in the primary pack. In the secondary school pack, a suggestion for students to place their costumed teachers into the correct stories is included. Requiring familiarity with a broader literary repertory, such an activity seems designed to circumvent teenage resistance to dressing up.

Book-based fancy dress in history and theory

Teenagers are perhaps deemed too cool to wear costumes to school, but fancy dress is in fact rapidly gaining in cultural caché as well as popularity (see Cartner-Morley). With its emphasis on the visual and material, it lends itself particularly well to a rapid-paced society of social-media spectacle, and is indeed an increasingly lucrative industry worldwide. Moreover, thanks to the ubiquity of character-based 'onesies', clothing with animal ears etc, costume has also spilled out into everyday wear. Combined with the widespread availability of manufactured costumes, all this means that fancy dress is perhaps more prevalent in Britain than ever before.

But publicly-displayed fancy dress has long been a feature of Anglophone childhoods. It was made popular by Queen Victoria who sketched her own children in costume and, in 1859, held a widely imitated Fancy Dress Children's Ball at Buckingham Palace. Costume balls for children combined charity with creativity (though *whose* creativity is a moot point to which we shall return). Children's books were a key source of inspiration in nineteenth-century children's fancy dress, but the pool of literary possibilities spilled out to include figures from adult works, from Dr Pangloss to Mephistopheles. For the Victorians, this was a form of entertainment and amusement which elicited a good deal of time and thought. Parents were repeatedly advised to choose costumes wisely, ensuring an appropriate match between child and outfit, a sentiment summed up nicely in an 1899 pamphlet produced by Liberty of London:

The innate dramatic instinct in humanity, which makes 'dressing-up' one of the delights of boys and girls even from their nursery days, finds charming gratification in a fancy dress ball, providing it is wisely directed and that a born Friar Tuck is not permitted to insist upon apeing Romeo, or a chubby, round-faced Audrey try to disguise her bonnie comeliness in the plaintive grace of a miniature Ophelia. ('Fancy Dress for Children').

Marshik suggests that such an approach would endure: in her examination of representations of fancy dress in British literature in the first decades of the twentieth century she writes that 'choosing a unique and flattering costume was a yardstick of cultural competence' (3).

According to Jarvis and Raine, as time went by, control of such choices increasingly shifted away from adults and towards children (27). They trace a movement from children's passive endurance and sufferance to active involvement and enjoyment, from Victorian parental imposition of costumes which engendered discomfort and embarrassment on the part of the children involved, to a more child-focused approach in the twentieth century. '[M]ost parents of the 1920s and 1930s', they write,

were determined that their children should have costumes they enjoyed. Writers in women's magazines begged that the children should choose for themselves, and suggested nursery rhyme and fairytale characters, simple animal costumes, or characters from classics such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, or *Little Women*. (27).

But a more complex picture is suggested by the memories of hoped for and hated fancy dress experiences by writers Angela Brazil and Annette Kuhn respectively. While in Liverpool in the 1870s, Brazil dreamt of attending a ball and autonomously planned her own costume with the use of a book of fairy tales (78-79), several decades later, Kuhn was obliged to endure the multiple costumes which satisfied her mother's fantasies, creative impulses and

need for recognition (289-293). While Kuhn's case is perhaps extreme, it nevertheless points to the ongoing role of adults in children's fancy dress, and to the potential for costume to become a site, not of peaceful, creative collaboration, but hostility and conflict.

Character-based dressing up as proposed by the World Book Day charity is certainly personalised and child-centred: 'Bring YOUR favourite character to life', it enjoins. Children are positioned as active agents, breathing life, Pygmalion-like, into implicitly inert fictional entities. They are promised the creative power of animation which is the prerogative of illustrators, animators, directors and costume designers. Book-based fancy dress involves going beyond individual imaginative construction to the physical materialisation of a literary character. Words and/or images are filled out, transformed from two into three dimensions, with children inhabiting or becoming the chosen character. As such, book-based fancy dress clearly participates in the widespread materialisation of cultural production, apparent in such practises as immersive theatre and experiential museum exhibits which stress sensory, embodied, collective experience. As with the plethora of museum exhibits, theme parks, and immersive events which construct physical environments through which individuals pass, WBD fancy dress is intended to be a process – or series of processes – which will enhance literary pleasure.

There are in fact at least two and often three stages involved in book-based fancy dress: 1) selection; 2) acquisition/creation and 3) assumption of the role. As we will see, the invariable conflation and confusion of these stages has important consequences for the way in which the activity is judged and perceived. In theory, of course, WBD fancy dress dispenses with selection altogether since the putative favourite is by definition singular. But in practise children have many favourites (or none) and their first choice(s) are not always achieved, for a range of reasons discussed below. The second stage requires an ability to confect, combine, transform and/or source. Creation of a costume, as opposed to its readymade acquisition,

often consists in a process of translation from two-dimensional image to three-dimensional garment. Like any translation, this involves close analysis, detailed inspection and familiarity with the original, combined with creativity, imagination and inventiveness. The final stage of the process – wearing the costume – enables the child to inhabit a character, to live out their story, to adopt Michael Dobson's phrase describing the appeal of the related activity of amateur performance (11). Designed to foster close engagement, understanding, and a sense of connection, costumed role-play has even earnt its scholarly spurs thanks to its productive adoption by cultural studies scholar Will Brooker in his recent monograph on David Bowie. By getting into their clothes, children are also, in theory, getting under the skin of their favourite literary figures.

Before examining the way this works in practice, it is worth considering the principles upon which book-based fancy dress depends and its unwritten criteria of success. Although children are encouraged to bring a book with them for the purposes of identification and evaluation, truly successful fancy dress requires recogniseability. In general terms, success requires a certain proximity to, and correspondence with, 'the original', as manifested in illustrations and/or some form of visual adaptation. The need for recognition and consensus means that not all characters lend themselves to fancy dress, a fact with important consequences for canon formation which is unlikely to have gone unnoticed by publishers. Any too conventionally dressed, nondescript character, devoid of distinctive features, does not really work – thus Alice in Wonderland herself, Halloween and WBD queen (today), only caught on as a fancy dress option several decades after her first appearance in print as a result of her quintessential ordinariness. Overall, the ideal costume is at once original and recogniseable. It is completely untouched by intermedial interference or has preserved its literary origins, even where adaptation has occurred. The perfect costume is based on a genuine emotional attachment to a book character and is either entirely devised by the child,

or is a homemade collaboration between parent and child. The labour (of love) involved in its production is clear for all to see.

Book-based costume in practice: intergenerational friction and frustration

If World Book Day materials address the child wearer, the packs themselves are directed at the adult teachers and carers who will relay the message to parents in all manner of notes, messages, and Chinese whisper exercises, many of which have an uncanny ability to transpire on the night before the event, inducing much-documented parental panic. Children and their pleasure may be foregrounded, but adult involvement is common and, in the case of infants, inevitable. If the ideal is for intergenerational collaboration or child-led creativity, time constraints or the complexity of the task involved often results in usurpation by, or delegation to, adults – and in the still markedly unequal world of domestic labour, this usually means women. Although children may struggle to identify a *favourite* character, and may quite quickly change their minds (see below), many will nevertheless respond enthusiastically to the premise. But it is often very difficult for a child to follow the rules and be who they want to be, so that almost from the first, the process involves disappointment and frustrated desires (or, some might say, compromise). Limitations of time, money, and skill, not to mention what parents deem suitable for their child, all concur to mean that many excited suggestions meet with rejection. A costume 'choice' is often more to do with what is at hand and achievable within the circumstances than what a child actually wants, with parents nudging towards a preferred option, or simply imposing their own decision. Comments below the line on WBD coverage suggest that the process can be entirely reversed, with people deciding on a costume according to what is already in the house and then finding a book to match. While this approach is certainly not without bookish merit (hunting through shelves to find a cowboy or policeman or nurse), it betrays – to adopt the moralising tone which often creeps into

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commentary on the subject – the spirit of the exercise which promotes personal preference and connection. Rather than authentic attachment, this is retrospective grafting of emotion – cheating, or ingenious, depending on your perspective. Children may be implicated in, or entirely unaware of, such artifice.

Book-based costume can become a cause of intergenerational friction rather than collaboration, exacerbated by the practical implications of costumes being ready for the start of school (usually at or around 9am) and worn for the entire day. Thus a 'quick and easy' Spot the dog option offered on the Book Aid International website not only assumes possession of a correctly sized yellow t-shirt but also the necessity of face-painting in that intense (not to mention tense) window in which breakfast must be eaten, teeth cleaned, book bags found, etc. Some parents take the whole thing in their stride with self-deprecating good humour, refusing to get ruffled (see Ditum). But investments of time, energy and money can make it difficult to remain indifferent.

Many children would choose a shop-bought over a homemade costume ('much more neater' according to my own son), whilst a high proportion of adults, impatient with the invasion of commercialism into all facets of life, now place greater value on the handcrafted (or are at least aware that society judges the latter more favorably). There has been a noteworthy evolution and indeed reversal of values in this domain, with the formerly economical and embarrassing handcrafted now the costly ultimate in chic (see Totten). Children who are learning accuracy of reproduction in writing and drawing, constantly enjoined to be neat, are perhaps more impatient wit the imperfections of crafting than their parents. But a child's rejection of homemade can be motivated by a desire to conform as much as or rather than an aesthetic preference. As with so many aspects of contemporary family life, then, parents find themselves in the classic dilemma of giving children what children themselves want or what parents and other adults deem good for them. Is it worse to

impose or to indulge?

Clearly then, book-based fancy dress, whose impossible ideal sets up all parents (mothers) to fail, is by no means an anodyne activity. Although it can be a pleasurable outlet for creativity and invention which brings together members of different generations in a shared endeavour, for many families, WBD has become an annual source of anguish. This is made more acute by the awareness of the complicated standards by which one is judged. Like any form of clothing or adornment, fancy dress gets read just as much as, and indeed probably a great deal more than, the books which WBD celebrates. Parents are often keenly aware that the choice of costume and who chooses it, its execution or acquisition, all says something about their family, their child, and themselves as parents. If the handmade is a measure of love and investment, buying readymade is a derilection of parental duty and capitulation to commercialism – but also, perhaps, a daring assertion of one's busyness. An invariably unspoken source of rivalry between parents (mothers), WBD fancy dress generates the disempowering sense that whatever you do, you can't win.

Common criticisms and the 'good, clean, fun' defence

With so much at stake, it is unsurprising that the dressing up element of WBD in its entirety – both process and end result – has elicited criticism. For many, World Book Day has become empty and meaningless because insufficiently bookish, with countless children dressed as characters primarily identifiable from film, TV and computer games rather than literary works. That virtually all of these children could easily supply a book featuring their character is, for such critics, beside the point. A child in a spangly blue dress brandishing a copy of *Frozen Fever: Anna's Birthday Surprise* obeys the letter rather than the spirit of the WBD law. According to this view, WBD fosters a love of big business and blockbusters not books. The other common criticism leveled at the fancy dress component of WBD is that, according

to one online comment in response to Ditum's article, it becomes an 'introduction into the world of consumerism' due to the proclivity of shop-bought rather than hand-made. Tantamount to cheating, buying (supermarket) readymade is deemed to be at odds with the notion of fostering deep personal engagement with a book. But such a view overlooks the fact that handmade costumes often have no input from children and that, due to the widely available how-to models, 'quick and easy costumes' can entirely bypass the book itself. Handmade can be just as devoid of meaningful engagement with a text as shop-bought, and if quick and easy is admissible then shunning readymade seems perverse. Furthermore, such criticism confuses the process of making on the one hand with the wearing of the costume on the other. If the point is for the child to have fun and inhabit a character's mindset, what difference does it make whether the costume is homemade or shop bought?

What is clear in both of these objections is a vision of literature as superior and sacrosanct, in glorious isolation from both the entertainment industry and consumer culture. Despite the ever-increasing imbrication of publishing by entertainment corporations, books continue to be seen as different and distinct. WBD (and books more broadly) are deemed to be tainted by the profiteering of superstores and online marketplaces. But of course such retailers sell books as well as costumes. Shielded by its pro-literacy campaign, charitable status and involvement with Book Aid International, World Book Day itself is hardly ever perceived as a promotional, commercial activity which serves publishers and booksellers (Weedon 214), including precisely those supermarkets and online stores commonly cast as the enemy. WBD's defence of the celebrity-heavy list as a catalyst making us all 'better off' was unintentionally revealing in this regard. Arguably, then, detractors are missing the mark. If consumerism is the problem, it is the entire enterprise of WBD, and indeed capitalist culture overall, against which criticism should be directed.

On the other hand, supporters of WBD fancy dress argue that it is an opportunity for

harmless fun, at a premium in the aftermath of the Gradrindian Gove reforms which have squeezed arts education and obsessively emphasized end results. Lots of children enjoy the process and can engage with it to the point that they actually behave differently – with some obedient, mild-mannered children becoming wild things. Amusing anecdotes can certainly be supplied: 'One year we hosted a Saucepan Man who couldn't sit down or release his hands to write, a Gruffalo who nearly passed out in assembly because of the heat of his furry suit and an Enormous Crocodile who needed three teaching assistants to help him walk round corners', writes Jo Brighouse in her *plaidoyer* for WBD fancy dress. This is undoubtedly funny, at least when read in the context of the full article, and WBD fancy dress clearly affords welcome relief for many teachers like Brighouse. Yet whether fancy dress was fun for the handless, hot or otherwise hampered children involved in these scenes is unclear. Moreover, many children are constitutionally averse to dressing up and drawing attention to themselves. WBD might respond that fancy dress is an option not an obligation for both institutions and individuals, but in any participating school non-compliance only serves to further draw attention to a child who shuns it. In any case, even if the final result may be entertaining and fun (for some), as we have seen the process itself is often fraught, thereby associating books with stress, short tempers and a sense of inadequacy rather than pleasure. Moreover, the whole notion of making reading fun, of bringing characters to life, could be seen as ill-conceived, tacitly conceding as it does that the act of reading, the imagination alone, is insufficient. By stressing spectacle, pleasure and the visual over the textual, WBD seeks to play the entertainment industry at its own game and can, perhaps, only lose.

Permissibility, proximity and parameters

Indeed, one controversial case from 2015 almost entirely bypassed books, although it generated a certain amount of amusement, a good deal of condemnation, and above all an

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enormous amount of attention for those involved. 11-year-old Liam Scholes caused a shortlived media storm when he went to school for WBD dressed as Christian Grey from erotic blockbuster *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Mother and son both insisted that this was just a 'bit of fun' and were indignant about the school's intervention which transformed Grey into the (otherwise dubious)… James Bond. But was this laughing together or, given that Liam had neither read the book nor seen the film, laughing over the child's head? The faultline between fun and offence is notoriously unstable, and this case clearly exposes the closely policed parameters within which this activity works, raising the usual suspects of appropriateness and suitability which stalk discussions of children's culture. In this instance, the kind of (adult) book and proclivities of the character in question render him unsuitable, in the minds of many, for *any* child. Yet there are also a whole series of rules, the more powerful for being unstated, which make certain types of characters (un)suitable for certain types of children. Selection of an outfit is not just about feasibility but fitness. In separate articles, writer Sam Hepburn (whose black skin disqualified her from being a fairy in a school play in the 1960s) and teacher Darren Chetty, highlight the severely limited number of costume options available to children of colour. Chetty shows not only the lack of non-white characters in children's literature but also the lack of appeal and recogniseability of those who do exist. He worries that obscure, non-mainstream and/or secondary sidekicks, characters such as Indian folk tale hero Birbal fail to help children of colour 'see themselves and people like them as being significant in school.'

Analysis of a small sample of currently proposed costumes not only reinforces these concerns, but also reveals other equally pervasive problems. The Book Aid International website (see fig II) includes a page with a total of 28 costume ideas based on 26 characters (the Cat in the Hat and Willy Wonka both featuring twice), accompanied by photographs, films and worksheets to assist in their assemblage. A first group of 10 '2017 costume

templates' is followed by a further group of '18 more costumes to choose from!'

2017 costume templates

Spot or Claude*

Mr Twit

Fantastic Mr. Fox*

Harry Potter*

Geek Girl*

Katniss Everdeen

The Cat in the Hat*

Burglar Bill*

Percy Jackson

Willy Wonka*

18 more costumes to choose from!

The BFG

Tom Gates

Claude

The Crayons

The Cat in the Hat

Angelina Ballerina*

Dennis the Menace

Elmer

Gangsta Granny

Fig II. Screenshot of World Book Day costume suggestions on the Book Aid International website

Character	Gender of character	Gender of child photographed	Author/illustrator
Spot	M	F	Eric Hill
Mr Twit	M	M	Roald Dahl
Fantastic Mr Fox	M	M	Roald Dahl
Harry Potter	M	M	J. K. Rowling
Geek Girl	F	F	Holly Smale
Katniss Everdeen	F	F	Suzanne Collins
Cat in the Hat	M	M	Dr Seuss
Burglar Bill	M	F	Janet and Allen Ahlberg
Percy Jackson	M	M	Rick Riordan
Willy Wonka	M	F	Roald Dahl
BFG	M	M	Roald Dahl
Tom Gates	M	M	Liz Pichon
Claude	M	F	Alex T. Smith
The Crayons	NA	F	Drew Daywalt/Oliver Jeffers

Cat in the Hat	M	M	Dr Seuss
Angelina Ballerina	F	F	Katherine Holabird/Helen Craig
Dennis the Menace	M	M	Hank Ketcham
Elmer	M	M	David McKee
Gangsta Granny	F	F	David Walliams/Tony Ross
Hiccup	M	M	Cressida Cowell
Gruffalo	M	F	Julia Donaldson/Axel Scheffler
Horrid Henry	M	M	Francesca Simon/Tony Ross
Mr Strong/Little Miss Sunshine	M/F	F/F	Roger Hargreaves
Very Hungry Caterpillar	M	F	Eric Carle
Where's Wally/Wenda	M/F	M/F	Martin Handford
Wimpy Kid	M	M?	Jeff Kenney
Worst Witch	F	F	Jill Murphy
Willy Wonka	M	M	Roald Dahl

Table I. Breakdown of costume suggestions and styling on Book Aid International website

The group of character options is drawn from an exclusively Anglophone and resolutely presentist corpus: no book was written in any country other than UK or USA, and none was published before 1969. All are on the lists of major publishing conglomerates (especially Penguin Random House). Not a single character was created by an author of colour, and only 38% were created by women. There is not a single black character in the list. So much for UNESCO's vision of books as 'windows onto the diversity of cultures'. As journalist Erica Wagner remarked in 2009, there is very little worldliness in World Book Day (9), which is,

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rather, a celebration of national, or at best Anglo-American literature. All this is exacerbated by the styling and casting of the associated photography, especially when we remember that WBD is supposedly aiming to provide access to books to children 'from all backgrounds'. Only one of the children photographed is black. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that that one black child is 'whitefaced' in the guise of the Cat in the Hat. But the problems by no means end here. 25 of the 26 characters are gendered (a red pencil from *The Day the Pencils Quit* being the only exception) and of these 76% are male. Over three quarters of the children photographed in costume are the same gender as the character, and the entirety of those non-aligned are girls. Not a single boy adopts the costume of a female character.

Of course, these suggestions do not represent the reality of what children actually wear (a boy dressed as Hilda from a graphic novel series by Luke Pearson does appear on a *Guardian* page, for instance). But whether or not the proposed models are actually taken up (and many are), the messages they convey are clear and consequential. If the severe lack of diversity and predominance of male protagonists in contemporary children's literature is hardly a new finding, this analysis shows how the perception of readerly abilities of projection and identification are carried over into other domains. Girls can identify with, and 'be', boys but not vice versa, which both implies their superiority (in terms of skills) and inferiority (there is something 'wrong with', or undesirable about, girls). Girls both have more choices than boys (they can be either gender) and less (if they want to be the same gender it is harder for them). At the same time, such practices limit boys in their ability to occupy other roles, to empathise, to imagine what it's like to be female. The gendered take-up of characters from Anna Kemp's widely acclaimed *Dogs Don't Do Ballet* (2010) underscores the scale of the problem and the conservatism injected by fancy dress even with respect to a book which seeks to probe and subvert norms. Biff, the ballet dancing pug who shows that anyone can be anything and that a male (dog) can dance in a pink tutu, is overwhelmingly adopted as a fancy

dress option by… *girls*. In a barrier-reinforcing bid to protect children, parents may dissuade, nudge away or downright refuse female costumes for boys. Children's choices are limited not only by feasibility but by these pervasive parameters of permissibility. Given such confines, dressing up serves to straightjacket children and their imaginations, not free them.

But even if we were to somehow magically diversify children's literature and loosen these constraints, problems with book-based fancy dress would remain. Pollen writes of the restrictions on the imaginative identities available for girls due to the kinds of readymade costume available to them (173), but arguably all book-based fancy dress curbs children's imaginative capacities – imagining a character and creating one being two distinct acts. What a character looks like is no simple matter, but requires an imaginative act of assemblage based on a series of textual cues. Even those texts which present direct description of their characters leave considerable room for imaginative manoeuvre (one person's 'redhead', say, being another's strawberry blonde). Other texts elide such accounts entirely, with characters instead built up through attention to what they think, say and do, and the ways in which they express themselves. Although book-based fancy dress is least targeted at and taken up by older children, works for this age range offer most scope for exercising imaginative and creative faculties in that they tend to be without the intervening interpretive layer provided by in-text illustrations. But even in picturebooks, where illustrators present the results of their own imaginative projections, the images presented are no more definitive or final than textual descriptions, no matter how much merchandisers would like us to think they are. Characters are always open to reinterpretation across time and space, and it is arguably by shifting and evolving in this way that they survive and endure. In the past it could take many years before consensus was reached, and the default image of a character concretised. Alice, for instance, was constantly reimagined in the decades after her first appearance, both by Tenniel and others. Today, however, characters emerge from the outset with an aura of irrevocability: a

figure like the Gruffalo, to name but one example, is absolutely unchanging, always… brown. With its demand for recogniseability, book-based fancy dress only reinforces this tendency to shut down the space of individual imaginative intervention.

Conclusion

In a recent V&A Museum of Childhood exhibition on Alice in Wonderland and fashion, audience interactives conspicuously avoided dressing up. To emphasise reassessment and reinterpretation, but also to circumvent problems of gender alignment, simple drawing on a postcard was the preferred option. In addition to the variously misplaced and/or spurious arguments explored above, there are indeed many good reasons to ditch book-based fancy dress definitively. Like book prizes, it plays a powerful role in canon formation and reinforcement, and enforces 'norms and ideals beyond and alongside [its] stated purpose.' (Kidd and Thomas 10). As we have seen, a damning inditement of the process emerges from analysis of suggested costumes. WBD fancy dress fails to deliver its promise of liberating release; it is instead a matter of constriction every bit as oppressive as the Victorian injunction against Friar Tucks as Romeos and Nurses as Ophelia.

But given that it serves so many vested interests, dressing as a (putatively) favourite character is almost certainly here to stay. It is an extremely high-profile activity, likely to have already shaped the creation of new works, with writers, illustrators and publishers all more or less consciously producing dress-up friendly characters. Costumes provide spectacle, drawing the attention even of those not directly involved, and sparks controversy which serves to get books and reading talked about. All this being the case, we urgently need to think about ways in which to remedy the issues raised here. We need to find ways of introducing a more varied cast of characters into books for young readers so that children can, if they so wish, choose to dress as someone 'like' themselves. But it is equally important that

they should have the option of choosing, for one day only, for the purposes of celebrating and better understanding an admired literary character, something else entirely. This is not an uncontroversial proposition (cf recent debates and anguish about the appropriateness of white children dressing as Disney's Moana) and one which clearly needs to be treated with due care (see Varathan). But the possibility of occupying and understanding another position, however fleetingly, is surely one of the greatest gifts of fancy dress. In addition to the choices available to children, attention also needs to be paid to the whole process of reproducing a character's look. Long before picking up a pair of scissors or a cardboard box/going to a supermarket, it can and should be an opportunity to reflect on characterization and narratological processes. By exploring historical and geographical variations of a given figure, children can grasp characterisation as an evolutionary, mobile process – one in which they themselves can intervene and thus be empowered. We need to encourage children to pause, to take a step back and, before thinking, 'who shall I be?' instead think about how we know what characters in books look like; why, within books, they tend to always wear the same clothes; and why, in different versions of the same story, they might look different. Mothers who feel that WBD fancy dress is quite time-consuming enough as it is are unlikely to welcome the prospect of extending and deepening the process in this way, and already stretched teachers may be unwilling or unable, to pick up the slack. But by identifying the inherent problems of book-based fancy dress and indicating possible solutions via reflective, engaged and meaningful work, this article at least provides a roadmap towards better fulfillment of UNESCO's lofty ambitions for WBD.

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Full-page spread promoting fancy dress in World Book Day 2017 resource packs for nursery and primary schools

Screenshot of World Book Day costume suggestions on the Book Aid International website

109x263mm (120 x 120 DPI)