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Becoming What You Eat:

Identifying with Food in Children's Picture Books

I have eaten sardines. I have eaten many, many potatoes—mostly fried. I have even eaten the occasional doughnut. Fortunately for me, however, there is no truth in the popular phrase, "you are what you eat." I am not a sardine—nor a potato, nor even a doughnut.

Nevertheless, if there's any truth in widespread assumptions about how people read stories, then I've often been invited to be those things, or to think of myself as being them already, or perhaps as wanting to become them. I have read children's picture book stories whose central characters are sardines, potatoes, and doughnuts, and popular understandings of how people read would suggest that I've made sense of them in terms of what many readers label as an act of identification—by becoming aware of how I am like them. The opening of Chris Raschka's notoriously weird

picture book *Arlene Sardine* actually insists on this connection between me and his fish protagonist: "So you want to be a sardine," it says. It assumes I already want to be what I'm reading about—which, in the case of this sardine or of the potatoes in Toby Speed's *Brave Potatoes* or the doughnut hero of Laurie Keller's *Arnie the Doughnut*, is what I eat.

This is, I think, strange. Very strange. Why would I—why would anyone—want to think of myself as being or in the process of becoming a sardine? Or a potato, or even a doughnut? Sardines are small and, surely, uncomfortably oily, and they live too close to their neighbours. Potatoes have too many eyes and not enough mouths or ears—or brains. Doughnuts suffer the existential angst of having an empty hole at the very core of their being—and no opportunity to try to fill it by eating lots of doughnuts. For above all, doughnuts—and potatoes, and even sardines—get eaten. Their lives are short, and their fates are akin to those of the pigs in Beatrix Potter's *Little Pig Robinson*, whose "end was bacon." Yet like *Little Pig Robinson* or *Arlene Sardine* or *Brave Potatoes*, a multitude of children's books describe the lives of more or less sentient animals or vegetables or prepared foods in ways that clearly invite young readers to identify with them. Why do we want children to think of themselves as being food or like food?

Well, first of all, it's not just food. If children's literature is any evidence, We want them to think of themselves as a lot of things. There are children's stories about sentient trains and tug boats and steam engines and houses and cars and toothbrushes and spiders and toads and elephants and cacti and trees and pencils and nutcrackers and mirrors. A publisher I know once shared with me a story a would-be writer had submitted about a sentient piece of carpet fluff who, as I recall, wished to leave the safe world of the carpet until she learned of the horrifying existence of vacuum cleaners in the big wide room beyond and realized that rug is best.

The idea that a children's story can be (or for some people even must be) about a talking or thinking or feeling version of objects less animate or sentient in the real world is a basic convention of children's literature—so conventional that we tend simply to take it for granted as the way things are. When I ask the students in my children's literature courses why there are so many stories about talking farm animals—ducks on bikes or cows on strike—they have a hard time coming up with an answer. It just is that way. Children's literature is a literature of talking ducks and potatoes that feel unhappy—end of story. If pressed, they say well, children like animals. But, I ask, would they like them so much if you weren't showing them so many books about animals all the time? I point out to them that the vast majority of children on this

continent are city-dwellers or suburbanites with little chance of an acquaintanceship with living farm animals—and yet, if they've had any exposure to the typical range of toys or books for babies, they're likely to know what cows and chickens are. The familiar world of children's books is not the world most children are actually familiar with. The animals they supposedly like so much dwell almost exclusively in books.

Intriguingly, also, that seems to fly in the face of another basic assumption many people make about children and literature—that children, being as childishly egocentric as certain forms of outmoded developmental psychology tell us they are, can respond only to fictional versions of what they know in reality, that they can understand and appreciate only what they can immediately relate to or identify with. Yet apparently, they can and do learn to make sense of and enjoy stories about creatures like cows and ducks they may well have never actually met. Are they so egocentric after all? And is identification so purely an egocentric matter of responding only to what you perceive as like yourself?

Perhaps it is—for most of the farm animals in books for young children are the kind I've been talking about—the ones blessed with speech and shirts and sentience and the attitudes of middle class North Americans. They are, in other words, more like the real children who read about them than like the real animals they are more or

less vaguely based on. Perhaps we assume children can relate to them or identify with them because we have made them like we imagine children already are. Children like animals because the animals they like are like them. Does that mean there are books about sentient food because children are like food—or at least because adults think of them as food? Perhaps it does—we do like to call children little pigs when they eat too much or tell them how sweet they are and call them honey or cookie or sweetie pie or suger pie or cutie pie or various other forms of pastry.

More of that later. Meanwhile, that just raises the question of why all the sentient beings in the first place. If the talking cows or doughnuts and thinking bits of carpet fluff are more like children than like the real toothbrushes or bits of carpet fluff they are based on, why are they toothbrush and bits of carpet fluff at all? Why aren't they just children instead of children who look a little like toothbrushes?

The answer to that might lie, once more, in our convictions of childish egocentricity. We tend to believe that children, being egocentric, imagine the world surrounding them as filled with beings like themselves—that it is childlike thinking to invest toothbrushes and sardines with consciousness, volition and character, to imagine that the doughnut you're eating wishes to give you the pleasure of eating it or the sidewalk you tripped on was mad at you and deliberately out to get you. And

so we invent a literature for children which represents childlike thinking as we imagine it already is, filled with sentient objects like themselves.

But are children inherently and automatically so egocentric? Let's assume just for a minute that they aren't, that childlike thinking is not necessarily already like the world of children's literature. If it's not, then the adults who write about hopeful sardines and brave potatoes are not imitating childlike thinking—for it was, after all, Chris Raschka, an adult, who thought up the hopeful sardine, and Toby Speed, an adult, who cooked up the brave potatoes. By presenting children with this world of animated and sentient objects that adults have created as something we believe the children will already recognize and ought therefore to enjoy, we adults are, in effect, teaching children how to be childlike—encouraging them to think in the ways we expect and approve of for children.

There can be no question that there's just about always a teaching element in books of this sort. The piece of carpet fluff wishes to leave the world of the carpet only to learn that home is best. So does the bored cow with wanderlust in Phyllis Krasilovsky's *The Cow Who Fell in a Canal*, the bored bus with wanderlust in Lucy Prince Scheidlinger's tellingly named *The Little Bus Who Liked Home Best*. The lonely little petunias and solitary ugly ducklings of other stories learn the nature of friendship

with like-minded creatures, the tugboats and trains and toothbrushes and pickles of many other books who aspire beyond their tugboatish or picklish limitations learn to love themselves just the way they are—for as the fish who tries to be a frog in Leo Lionni's *Fish is Fish* finally understands, fish is and always will be fish, and as Dave the self-obsessed little pickle learns in the Veggie Tales video *Dave and the Giant Pickle*, you don't need to be anyone other than you already are, because "with His [i.e., God's] help little guys can do big things, too."

All these different stories share an intense conservatism—a conservatism that prevails in literature for young children generally. For every story about a repressed rabbit who finds happiness in a new place far from the constrictions of the warren or about narrow-minded strawberry families who learn to get along with the refugee papayas who moved in next door, there must be hundreds about the virtues of staying where you are or about supposedly ugly ducklings who actually belong with their own swan kind. While these books appear to operate as teaching tools and offer lessons, their insistence on the status quo is decidedly anti-educational. You shouldn't try to learn more or be more or understand more, they say, you should stay just the safely limited way you are already. Change is bad—and so, therefore, is education.

That conservative safeness suggests something important about how and why these stories offer readers opportunities for identification. As usually understood by people who talk about children relating to or identifying with characters in stories, the process involves two stages;

First, you recognize that the character shares characteristics with you—that because you are small and bored, you can see your own situation in the small bored rabbit in the story and thus identify with it.

And then, second: thus connected, you follow along as something happens to the character that leads it to a realization and thus teaches it a lesson—a lesson, that, since you identify, you take to be a truth about yourself. If the potatoes turn out to be brave, then so can you be.

This is the process I call the identify/manipulate syndrome. It assumes that identification leads to a change in attitude—to learning. But as I've suggested, the thing learned is most often an acceptance of what one is already. Furthermore, the original step of making an identification is itself an act of self-perception, a way of understanding what one is already. So texts that invite readers to follow this process tend to confirm the value of seeing yourself in terms of what you've identified with in two different ways—in how they start and in how they end. At the end, you usually learn to accept yourself as you already are—what you already are being what the

story has invited you, or even taught you, to accept as a fair interpretation of who you are in the first place. It is best being what you are—which is what the story has encouraged you to see yourself as being.

Which brings me back to the question I raised earlier; is it a fair or beneficial interpretation? From the similar sound of it, identification signals its connection with identity—our sense of who we are, the very core of our beings as separate individuals. But as Elin Diamond says, "If we think of identity as a mark of a separate and unified subjectivity, identification is a rejection of separateness; it denies the others difference by allowing the subject the excitement of trespass, the thrill of being the other. Art provides us repeated access to such psychic thrills" (86). But there is a paradox here. We can have that thrill only if we acknowledge a similarity to ourselves in the first place—and we can't do that unless we already have a sense of ourselves as being something separate and different from the other we imagine ourselves becoming. Is the process of identification then an egocentric matter of comprehending the other only in its reflection of ourselves, or an identity-destroying matter of accepting what we have been asked to identify with as our identity—or some more complex combination of those two apparently opposite effects?

The range of opinions on that cover the spectrum of possibilities—often at the

same time. Students in literature classes are always telling me that they don't like certain texts because they can't, as they say, "relate" to them. They mean a lot of different things by that, from a simple admission that they can't understand the aspects of a text that diverge from experiences they're already familiar with to an unwillingness to empathize with its characters to an inability to see the characters' situations as relevant to their own lives and concerns—an inability to identify. All of this suggests that they have just one strategy for responding to texts: reading it as if it were about themselves—a perhaps unintended result of the efforts of those who shared literature with them as children to encourage them to identify with the characters they read about. Equipped with only that one strategy, these adults are unable to develop an interest in texts about lives different from their own. They are egocentric readers, deprived of the excitement of trespass Diamond talks about. They need to learn that stories can be about people unlike themselves and still be entertaining, can be news about the mysterious other as well as confirmation of oneself. So, for that matter, do young children need to learn that, and the sooner, surely, the better.

On the other hand, however, the same students who require something to relate to have a strong faith in the identify/manipulate syndrome, and believe that relating to a fictional character can and indeed should lead to a change in one's own

character—the bad texts are the ones that invite identifications with characters who learn the wrong things.

To me, that seems contradictory. If we can only relate to what we know, that how can relating change us into something we didn't know yet? Or alternately, if we can learn to be other than we already are through reading, why do we need to relate to something or someone non-other in the first place? This apparent unacknowledged contradiction marks these views as ideological—as the kind of culture-confirming conceptions we tend to thoughtlessly take for granted in order to keep things as they already are. The papering over of the unacknowledged contradiction allows us to accept these ideas without needing to be aware of their uglier implications. In this case, there's both a chillingly comforting affirmation of our right to be egocentric and unaware of the ways in which others are other and also, a somewhat fascistic insistence that we need to accept what we have identified with as a view of ourselves—a view that, inevitably, represents our agreement to de-individualizing cultural values. It confirms our right to be satisfied with ourselves while making us more like others want us to be. In accepting we are edible, we become what we have agreed to eat.

While Gary Woodward offers a more sophisticated view in his book *The Idea*

of Identification, he nevertheless indulges in the same unacknowledged contradictions. For Woodward, "We reach for the familiar first: a subject that allows us to place the stranger in the context we already share" (5). Nevertheless, identification is "a process that binds a collectivity to the same common experiences. We are civilized into the same culture, securing our place within it by finding ways to negotiate our differences and demonstrate our similarities" (11). Our wish to see ourselves in others ends up in making us other than we were as members of a community—a process Woodward celebrates: "In its highest form identification offers the potent sensation of sharing another's consciousness. In the process, it diminishes the distance between the alien and the known, providing a sense of 'place' for ourselves in the external world" (18). The Victorian novelist George Eliot nicely summed up this sort of positive view of identification as community-making when she said:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.

While other theorists agree that identifying is a positive process, they are less interested in community-making than on therapeutic benefits to the individuals who identify. Gerald Cupchik suggests that identification is "predicated on some kind of resonance between the lived-world of the situated character and the emotional needs of the viewer/reader and the consequent absorption of one in the other" (17), and sees it as "an opportunity for the temporary catharsis of pent up emotion or for new insights" (17). It's instructive to realize how much children's fiction operates as a way of encouraging this opportunity for young readers—as therapeutically good for them, and good by virtue of how it might change them. While also viewing identification positively, Keith Oatley nevertheless sees a need for it to be balanced by something less empathetic:

Insofar as a writer affords only one mode of experiencing a story - a relatively pure spectator role or a total immersion in identification - then correspondingly the reader's (or viewer's) experience will be shallow. Most of our great writers encourage a moving back and forth along the spectrum of aesthetic distance, identification with different characters in turn (e.g. in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*), or identification with a character and then a view from the exterior perspective of the narrator (e.g. in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*). (446)

Oatley privileges this balance because, like Woodward and Eliot, he sees identification primarily as a means by which we learn to be different: "to derive insights from a story," he says, "one should ideally both experience an emotion and reflect on it thoughtfully" (451). Not surprisingly, then, he has only disdain for less empathetic forms of reading, which he views as overly distant and intellectualized.

While they don't actually say it, the theorists I've been discussing take it for granted that—and are happy about the fact that—identification is an act that changes identity. As the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead once suggested in a passage Woodward quotes, "We are not simply 'ourselves,' but constructions shaped through our interactions with others" (Mead 253, 12 in Woodward). Furthermore, it's a foundational principle of Freudian psychoanalysis that we become who we are by means of the identifications we make with others—that identification is the basis of our identity in the first place. As Freud says,

It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects. At any rate the process, especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices. (638)

Or in other words, we are what we have shaped ourselves into becoming through the identifications we have already made with others—especially, for Freud, our parents—in the process of our psychic development. Despite the egocentric and self-satisfying implications of responding only to what we can relate to or identify with, identification may be most significantly the process by which we have become what we are. We are what we have identified with.

Going a step further, the psychoanalytical theorist Lacan suggests that even before we base our identity in our identifications with others, we identify with and see as ourselves what is in fact a separate and less than complete version of ourselves—the image of ourselves that we see in a mirror, located within, connected to, and constrained and diminished by the context it exists in, the world visible to us around it. This perception of the image as ourselves, a perception that is ongoing throughout our lives, connects us to and identifies us with the communal but constraining world of others (for we identify as ourselves what others see). It also divides us from ourselves, for we are both the image in the mirror and the less connected less constrained, but now more hidden one who sees it. As Lacan suggests, the act of identification with one's mirror image is a misrecognition, an ongoing alienation from oneself.

If we are what or who we have identified with, furthermore, then presumably

we can misrecognize ourselves in different ways—develop different perceptions of ourselves by making new identifications, As does Lacan, many thinkers would suggest that, contrary to Woodbury or Eliot or Oatley, identification is a dangerous process exactly because it discourages us from remaining distant or separate—because it invites us into accepting ideas about ourselves that might well be counter to our own best interests.

Most people usually understand as the process of identification as the search for something like what we already know ourselves to be in what we experience. The sociological theorist Louis Althusser reverses that as he talks about what he calls interpellation,

which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that “it was really him who was hailed” (and not someone else). (245-46)

In other words, our discovery of something to identify with is not so much recognition of a pre-existing similarity as the moment in which we do in fact become what we

have misrecognized and have agreed to identify with—become both a subject, an individual with an understanding of ourselves, and also, subject to or controlled by what has interpellated us and given us that understanding. As an act of interpellation, identity is nothing more or less than identification.

Often, furthermore, identification aligns us with ideas about ourselves and others that we might be less than delighted with if we were more aware of their not necessarily beneficial implications. Consider, for instance, how Raschka's phrase, "So you want to be a sardine," acts as interpellation. Hey, you, would-be sardine," it says, apparently inviting us to nod and agree: "Of course! You're right! I do want to become a sardine!" In assuming readers are already hoping what it seems to want them to hope for, this sentence appears to invite a thoughtless agreement with it and an acceptance of the surely questionable desirability of sardinehood.

Unless, of course, readers are able to resist the interpellation. Elin Diamond describes how the playwright Bertolt Brecht

worried about and sought to subvert identification in the theater because it violated the necessary difference between spectator and stage—a distance that permitted a spectator to historicize, that is, to see the other as the other, thus situate the play's character events in a usefully comparative way to the

spectator's own history. (87)

The many negative responses to *Arlene Sardine* suggest that many of its readers are unable to find such a distance—that they read it exactly as the invitation to identify it appears to be, and object to the invitation. Here are some representative responses from reviewers on Amazon.com:

"What's not okay here? Manipulation by the author to try and convince the reader that it was okay for Arlene to want to become a sardine. That Arlene would intentionally want to get caught in a net, starve herself, and die is so misleading for a picture book that wants to explain, realistically [sic], how sardines are made."

"I have yet to meet a child who has actually seen a sardine, much less eaten one. This book, from concept to execution, is one of the worst examples of the picture book format I have ever seen, and, being a librarian, I've seen plenty."

"So Arlene 'decides' her goal in life (or is it death?) is to be a sardine. How ridiculous! Does a calf decide to be a sirloin steak? What lesson does this teach children about life and death?"

All of these readers firmly and totally reject the identification themselves—but, intriguingly, worry that less experienced readers will accept it and be dangerously

interpellated by it. They seem to be convinced that identification usually will—and, apparently, always ought to, for how else are we to socialize children into an acceptance of our view of who they ought to be—take place.

I wonder if it does. I especially wonder if it ought to. If the Amazon readers had trusted their own refusal to accept Raschka's invitation to sardine desire, they might have considered another possibility—that there's something about this book that invites the kinds of distance Brecht strove for in the theatre, some subversion of identification that establishes a distance and allows for a comparison with one's own history, which, for most of us, appears not to include the wish to fish-hood. This might be less a book to identify with than a book about the perils of identifying.

And as I've suggested already, there are clearly perils. I began my consideration of identification with the assumption that the problem with it was its self-indulgence, that reading in order to identify represented an egocentric self-involvement that prevented awareness of and interest in others, indeed, in anything other than oneself. But I've come to see that identification is actually a matter of being changed, becoming different—being othered, and often in ways that are not necessarily positive or desirable. Few of us may ever have thought of ourselves as wishing for sardinehood. But as I suggested earlier, there is a long history of books

that invite children to identify with equally repressed and therefore repressive objects—little engines that learn to stay on the tracks or little bits of carpet fluff that learn to stop wanting to be more than they already are. Furthermore, even if the engine discovered that tracks were an evil capitalist plot and the carpet fluff learned to love change, a young reader's acceptance of the identification itself represents a form of repression, a being moulded to suit the needs and desires of others. So I'm left with some questions. Is the othering of identification always a bad thing, even when its educational goals are ones we might approve of? Might there be ways we can arm young readers against the harm—help them to create a distance even when one is not being invited? Can we discover texts that ask for identification but also include elements that also allow for distance—as *Arlene Sardine* appears to do? Or can we discover reading practices that might create a safe distance even in texts that don't appear to want to allow it?

In order to these answers, I'll look at some texts that invite identification specifically with food. I suggested earlier that we do tend to think of children as somehow foodlike. Even so, food seems an odd thing to invite children to think of themselves as. We do, after all, eat it. It gets chewed, swallowed, devoured, destroyed, Do we want to have children imagine themselves as being eaten? Is any story inviting identification with food inherently a horror story—a confrontation with

what most frightens or disgusts us that allows us to confront our fears?

I suspect it is. A lot of food stories represent a form of teasing, a safely imaginary form of playing with the thrill of danger—which is what horror stories basically are. Consider how many children's stories there are about eaters being eaten or being threatened with being eaten—including many of the most widely known texts in the children's literature canon

Little Red Riding Hood brings food to her grandmother, but nearly gets eaten herself before she ends up enjoying lunch with a woodsman. In some versions of "The Three Little Pigs," the wolf who wants to eat the pigs gets boiled and eaten by them instead. The protagonist of "The Gingerbread Boy," baked in order to fill the role of a child for a childless old man and woman, runs away from childhood only to find the fate of all other gingerbread men in the salivating mouth of a fox. In all these tales, young beings who reject parental or otherwise conventional adult ideas about who they should be or how they ought to behave risk become food for predators—their humanity or childlikeness rejected or denied in favour of bodily desires that allow others to hunger for their bodies. Better, it seems, to be the obedient or provident child your parents see you as and/or want to mould you into than the dangerously defenceless and inherently edible object you actually are. if these are horror stories,

the horror is the acknowledgement of the innate vulnerability of human bodies. We are what can be eaten.

On the other hand, Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit steals food from Farmer McGregor's garden, where his father was killed and put into a surely very tasty pie by Mrs. McGregor—and gets away with it, an act of resistance to being food that strangely defies his inherent rabbit nature. Similarly, Maurice Sendak's Max, sent to bed without supper in *Where the Wild Things Are* because he threatens to devour his mother, is in turn threatened by the wild things, who say they'll eat him up because they love him so—an echo, apparently of what Sendak's teasing but terrifying aunts and uncles said to him as a child, and what my own teasing but terrifying aunts and uncles also said to me, and so truly, for me, a horror story. But Max says no—simply and triumphantly asserts his refusal to be food, and thus, apparently deserves the hot supper he finds waiting for him at the end of the book. In Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen*, similarly, after three addle-pated bakers confuse Mickey with milk and try to make him part of the cake they're making, he also assertively denies his foodhood—"I'm not milk. . . . I'm Mickey"—and instead of being eaten himself, gets cake to eat for breakfast every morning. In a more recent book, Frank and Devin Asch's *Mr. Maxwell's Mouse*, Mr. Maxwell, a fat-cat businessman—or more exactly, a fat businessman cat—celebrates his promotion by ordering a mixed green salad and raw

mouse at the Paw and Claw restaurant. The mouse in question, unusually talkative for an entrée, appears to be quite happy with his status as food, speaking of "the great honour of feeding this fine gentleman" and recommending that he'll go down better with a nice glass of wine. But in fact, he's wily enough to trick the cat into slicing into his own tail and then making his escape.

These brave children or child surrogates all develop mastery not by being protected from their own edibility by adopting other's views of who they ought to be but by denying it and transcending it by themselves. But just like Little Red or the Gingerbread Boy, they can survive only if they have or develop an understanding of themselves as being more than merely edible. All these books seem to emerge from a concern shared by the adults who produced them about the fragility of childlike bodies—their propensity for being weak enough and in their weakness, yummy enough, tantalizing enough to whet the appetites of hungry predators. It's always bad to be food. These texts all invite child readers to identify with creatures considered as food in order to deny the truth of the identification. You are not, in fact, what other can or should eat.

So why, then, invite the identification in the first place? As I suggested earlier, it seems to be because adults do worry that children are like food—or perhaps,

sometimes, worry that children worry they are like food. In revealing how children can and do escape that fate, these texts are all horror stories—and all, except "The Gingerbread Boy," teasing kinds of horror stories with happy endings

For readers who identify, therefore, the horror of edibility is confronted and expelled—but only if they accept the idea of their vulnerable edibility in the first place. As I suggested earlier, the real problem with most stories inviting identification is not so much how they manipulate readers after they identify, but what they interpellate you as being in the first place—not the triumphant conquer of wild things or wild farmers, but the original edible boy or bunny. Are children really so frightened of their own vulnerability? Why do so many adults want them to believe they are? Is it because we worry about their immature lack of consciousness of their need for our protection? Or is it because we worry that a mature perception of their own ability to fend for themselves might deprive us of our significance to them? It's interesting that Sendak's Max and Mickey are allowed their independent triumph only in what is clearly marked as wish-fulfilment fantasy, that Peter Rabbit has to pay for his with a stomach ache and maternal pampering. We adults desperately wish children to believe in their vulnerability—to think of themselves as inherently foodlike. These texts are wish-fulfilment fantasies for adults.

Even so, texts like *In the Night Kitchen* or *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* are at least ambivalent about the connections between children and food. They offer thinking readers means of escaping the identification—indeed are centrally about that. Not all texts about food offer so much room for resistance. Interestingly, however, they tend to be texts less obsessed with questions of edibility. In some texts, in fact, it's hard to figure out why their characters are represented as being food at all.

Rather than inviting readers to think of themselves as food, Saxton Freymann and Joost Elfers' *How Are You Peeling! Foods with Moods* invites us to see food as people. The primary pleasure the text offers is the cleverness of the ways in which the fruits and vegetables in the pictures have been arranged to resemble human faces. With some carefully placed beans for eyes, for instance, and isolated from a more expectable background, the peppers on the cover look like vaguely demented caricatures of a domineering parent and somewhat disobedient child. In the accompanying text, however, there is a clear invitation to identify with these strangely inhuman beings, to see their expressions and the feelings they represent as like one's own, and to accept the statements made about them as statements about oneself:

When how you feel is understood,

You have a friend, and that feels good.

But however good you feel, you don't feel edible. The existence of these characters as fruits or vegetables is almost incidental—more a matter of their shape than of the place and purpose in the real world outside the book. They might as well be tennis balls or sofa cushions.

The same is true of the theoretically edible characters in the Veggie Tales series, the enormously successful videos about God-fearing tomatoes and eggplants. They do look sort of like tomatoes and eggplants, with eyes and noses pasted on—and like the tomatoes and eggplants I've encountered in reality, they have no arms and legs, which means that the objects they use seem to float magically near them and they have to bounce rather than walk. But in fact their theoretically vegetable nature is never an issue. So why are they vegetables at all?

I can think of two possible answers to that question. The first, more cynical one is that vegetables tend to be smooth and roundish and therefore easy to deal with in 3D computer animation, much like the various smooth and roundish bugs and fish found so often in children's movies these days—in movies, even Steig's lumpy Shrek becomes smooth and roundish. The second reason is that making Bob a tomato and Larry a cucumber rather than the human children their characters seem to represent creates a distance, a separation that invites young viewers not just to identify, but to

identify with something clearly *not* themselves. There are two advantages to that.

First, there's an exoticization of the familiar—making it strange enough to be interesting. Bob and Larry may be kids just like me with feelings just like mine, but as round vegetable-like blobs, they do cute silly things like bouncing around and sticking to the wall with their suction cap hats, things that can engage my attention. As one of the videos I watched told me, "If you like to talk to tomatoes . . . have we got a show for you!"

Second, once engaged, I can be enlightened. The swerve through this clearly other world of silly vegetables ends up returning me to my own reality with a clear lesson about how to handle it and who to be within it. This is the familiar old slight of hand of the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. As the Veggie Tales slogan suggests, it's "Sunday morning values and Saturday morning fun."

For me, as a non-Christian, the Sunday morning values are disturbing. One of the videos I watched, *Dave and the Giant Pickle*, advertises itself as "a lesson in self esteem," but trickily converts trust in oneself into obedience to the Lord. Bob the tomato uses the occasion of little Dave's defeat of the giant pickle Goliath as an example of Matthew 19:26—"with God all things are possible. But as he explains it, this does not mean you can do what you set your mind to; rather, "anything God

want us to do we can do.'" And, Larry, says, "that makes me feel pretty special"—a strangely egocentric form of Christian thought that focuses on self and indeed delights in being better than others—special. Even more distressing, "Esther: the Girl Who Became Queen" erases the existence of Jews from its supposedly Old Testament story. It is merely Esther's "family" that she saves, not her co-religionists—although her relative Mordecai does speak with a a sort of Yiddish accent, at one point even saying, "Oy." Meanwhile, the evil Haman has "a simple solution" for the problem of "that sneaky little family that do sneaky little things." He plans to round them all up and ship them off to "The Island of Perpetual Tickling." For anyone familiar with the nature of Esther's family in the Bible and the history of the Holocaust, these supposedly cute jokes are more than a little chilling.

I suggested earlier that all this cute stuff is the spoonful of sugar. It appears to operate on the assumption of addressing children where they already are—the Saturday morning fun—and using it to lead them to the Sunday morning values. But its ideas about where children already are are even more distressing than the Sunday morning values. Apparently, children are already immersed in the clichés and conventions of popular culture.

The Veggie Tales characters tend to represent familiar ethnic stereotypes. In

Dave and the Giant Pickle, the father Jessie has a Jewish accent, but King Saul, being royal, has a tony English accent, and in confirmation of contemporary American attitudes towards freedom fries and such, the Philistines speak with a French accent. In *Esther*, the evil Haman is a Spanish cliché with a little moustache from a Taco Bell commercial and his cronies are the Peoni Brothers, "the most wanted peas in Persia," who speak and dress like Italian mobster stereotypes. Esther herself is supposed to belong to the the grape family, like her roundish uncle Mordecai, but she is distinctly human girl-shaped—or at least Barbie-doll-shaped. She's quite a tomato. it's not surprising, then, that she wins the beauty contest held to find a new queen, in which the contestants all wear banners naming the cities they represent and have to display their talent as well as their curvaceous vegetable curves. References to things like scummy lawyers and the Jackson Five abound, and even the form of these videos represents pop-cult conventions. The sensible Bob the Tomato is Rocky to Larry the Cucumber's Bullwinkle, Ernie to Larry's Bert, and the proceedings are frequently interrupted by the sappy Broadway-like songs of so many Disney and other cartoon movies.

If young viewers don't know all this popular culture to begin with—as they might not, if they come from censorious Christian homes—they will after watching some Veggie Tales. These videos actively teach popular culture—and the ideology it's based

on, the ethnic and gender stereotyping and the ideas about the value of good looks and the American way—as much or even more than as they teach Sunday morning values. By inviting an identification with what they assume children already are in order to teach them better, the Veggie Tales construct their subjectivity as inherently godless beings in eternal need of God's word. They invite children to think of themselves as always bad and always needing to be better—the very opposite of the self-esteem they claim to support. You are indeed what you eat—not just the healthy medicine, but also the decidedly unhealthy spoonful of sugar.

So Veggie Tales invite an interpellation with popular culture—but little sense of identification with vegetables or with food as such. The veggies are so little veggie-like that they offer no dehumanizing distance for viewers, and so invite what I'd see as a dangerously manipulative empathy with their characters. I'll finish by looking at some picture books that both do seem to invite an identification with the foodlike qualities of food, and do offer varying degrees of safely self-constructing distance from that identification.

Like *Peter Rabbit* or *The Three Little Pigs*, two of the books describe how food escapes its foody fate. The first of these, Toby Speed and Barry Root's *Brave Potatoes*, tells how the prize-winning potatoes at the county fair wake up in the night

and head off to the midway to ride the Ferris wheel, until a chef kidnaps them for his soup. But the brave potatoes not only escape themselves, but bring all the other vegetable with them. This is a typical horror story. If the food is sentient and humanized, then the chef can be nothing but vicious—well deserving of his name Hackemup—and the victims nothing but deserving of their escape from a brutally violent end. Like Mickey in *In the Night Kitchen*, the potatoes are mistaken for food, and triumphantly show that they aren't—except in this case they actually are food, which is more than a little paradoxical. At their moment of victory, the potatoes chant:

We will never be potpie.

We will never be potluck.

We will never be frittata.

We will always be potatoes.

If being a potato doesn't mean being an ingredient, then just what does it mean?

Not much, I think. These potatoes are distinctly un-potato-like. They have just two eyes each, in the usual human conformation, and they even have arms and legs, as do all the other vegetables we see Hackemup hacking up. They are more

obviously heroes of a wish-fulfilment story of underdogs—or under-roots—for readers to identify with as they triumph over potential massacre than they are vegetables. But unlike the Veggie Tales, which invite a similar identification with similarly unvegetable-like vegetables, the insistence of the potatoes' edibility offer readers much more room to manoeuvre. The book cleverly has it both ways—you can both sort of identify and be satisfied that the potatoes escape and at the same time, understand that potatoes are decidedly not like you at all—that they really are food and that they really ought to be mercilessly hacked up and cooked and eaten and that their escape is utopian, fantastic and very silly.

Arlene Sardine, I believe, offers even more room to manoeuvre. Unlike the potatoes, Arlene does not escape her fate. At the end, "Arlene was a little fish, in oil, packed in a can. A little fish packed in oil, in a can, is a sardine. Arlene was a sardine. A sardine is what Arlene was." As I read this, the joke is on Arlene, who made a silly wish and got what she wished for. The joke is also on readers who have chosen to identify with Arlene—assume she was a kind of human surrogate like the potatoes when she was actually just an ordinary brisling living out the usual real life story of a brisling, from fjord to can.

But why would readers identify with her? As I suggested earlier, wanting to

become a sardine is not something I'd thought of before this book began by taking it for granted that I did. A reader might identify with Arlene—or as the Amazon readers I quoted earlier did, assume other, less perceptive readers are being invited to identify with her—simply because the pattern of being offered a humanized animal or object to identify with is so common in storytelling for children, and *Arlene Sardine* seems to be yet another version of this common story. Its divergence from the pattern later on, as Arlene dies in the process of getting her wish, suggests what its actual effect might be: to offer a refreshingly negative critique of the pattern itself. A closer look reveals that nothing the least bit identifiable-with actually happens to Arlene. She merely does what brislings do on their way to becoming sardines. It's the strangely ingenuous narrator of Raschka's text who humanizes her—gives her a name and a goal in life, imagines feelings for her, matter-of-factly tells us when she dies but then forgets it as he goes on to say, "I'll bet Arlene felt well-rested on the conveyor belt." I'll just bet she did. In establishing a gulf between what the narrator claims is happening and what does actually happen, Raschka's text becomes a pointed satire on other books of this sort—books like *Brave Potatoes*, in which potatoes can triumph only by not acting like potatoes. In not offering the expectable pattern, it allows readers a space in which they can separate themselves from the invited identification, and also, an even larger space in which they might speculate about the dangers and

misrepresentations of the entire process of identification. It is a children's book about children's literature, designed to teach intelligent children how to read more critically. We are not what we eat, it declares—as long as we choose not to consume the identifications offered by a system which intends to feed us dangerously oppressive ideas about ourselves.

The extreme negative response that many readers have to *Arlene Sardine* suggests either that they don't get the joke, or more likely, I think, that they do get it, and they don't think it's funny. They just want to keep on assuming that children do identify and should identify, that children's stories should be readable at face value and not reveal the manipulative agenda behind the face. The resilience of the standard conventions becomes clear in Laurie Keller's *Arnie the Doughnut*, which operates as a sort of anti-*Arlene Sardine*, beginning as just about the same story, albeit about an inherently more attractive food product, and then restoring the conventions *Arlene* moves away from. Just as Arlene hoped to be a sardine, Arnie "turned out to be just the kind of doughnut he'd hoped to be". We hear the detailed stages of his manufacture, just as Raschka's narrator tells us the stages by which Arlne becomes a sardine, and also like Arlene, he is unaware of the true nature of what he wished for: for all of Arnie's knowledge of sprinkles and other doughnut minutiae, he is astonished to discover why Mr. Bing has bought him:

Eat me?' Arnie shrieked, his sprinkles flying everywhere. "Why would you do as thing like that? Do you make a habit of eating all your houseguests?"

But even though a telephone call confirms that all the other doughnuts back in the shop know they have been made to be eaten and are happy about it, Arnie refuses to accept his fate. Like the brave potatoes he gets away with his refusal to be food, and, after considering a life as Mr. Bing's ballroom dancing partner or paperweight or bodyguard, he ends up happily ever after as a pet—a "doughnut dog."

I find it especially revealing that Arnie becomes a pet—a being both inherently less than human and inherently and always humanized by those whom it lives with, a creature existing somewhere halfway between the animal and the human. For a lot of adults, that exactly describes childhood itself—the state of being more than the mere animal you were born as but not quite yet the civilized adult human you will become, a form of existence that both allows your divergence from adult standards of rationality and behaviour and defines your need for adult supervision and control. for a lot of adults, children and pets have all too much in common.

Personally, I believe children deserve better. They are not dogs. for all the charm and humour of *Arnie the Doughnut* and *Brave Potatoes*, they are not doughnuts or potatoes or even sardines, and inviting them to think that they are is an

expression of adult power they need defences against. They need to be suspicious of the process of identification. They need more *Arlene Sardines*. They need more books like Erich Rohmer's *Pumpkinhead*, in which Otho, born with a pumpkin for a head that makes him desirably edible to a series of predators and leads to his head being separated from his body and suffering disaster after disaster, achieves only a very temporary happy ending which does not stop him from being edible or turn him into something more normally human. His mother tells him, "You must be more careful, Otho You know the world will always be difficult for a boy with a pumpkin for a head. And Otho found that suited him just fine." Unlike Arnie or the potatoes, he doesn't have to become something he isn't in order to be happy—he just has to be happy about being what he already is, an edible being who eats other edible beings, a body and the subjectivity more or less firmly attached to it, a paradoxical combination of an organic substance and a human ideal of childlikeness.

Finally, for all the books in which pumpkinheads or doughnuts cease to be pumpkins or doughnuts and turn into something more safely like what parents wish their children to be, child readers need more tools to see beyond the habits of mind and the processes of reading literature that such books take for granted. They need, in other words, to learn to read critically. The more we help them to develop the tools to do that, the more healthy and nutritious will be the books that they read.

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The children I met have distinct personalities and diverse hobbies, yet they're often eating in eerily similar ways. Compare the diets of Paulo from Sicily and Isaiah from Los Angeles. In the past, a Sicilian boy would have grown up eating very different foods from his counterpart in the US, but now their diets are converging. Both Paulo and Isaiah eat French fries, burgers, pizza, pasta and white bread. They live continents apart, but it's as if the boys' parents have been shopping at the same global superstore!" 52. Children learn food preferences from valued or trusted others. Who has the least long-lasting influence? parents. 62. Flavor principles are the preparation and seasoning of foods to match the identifying spices and ingredients of a culture. True. 63. The process of handing down the manners and understandings in common to a culture from one generation to the next is known as. Describe a type of food or drink. Can your partner identify it? It's a type of meat. It's quite healthy. 64. When you cook at home, you can prepare food in healthy ways, by boiling or baking, for example, instead of frying in lots of oil. You can limit the amount of sugar and fat in each meal. All of this will make it easier to control how healthy you are. 65. really tasty but simple dishes. h You can learn about the world. i You know exactly what you are eating because. you bought it yourself. j You can save time by cooking large quantities. 4 Work with a partner.