

**Secrets, Lies, and Children's Fiction by Kerry Mallan
(review)**

Sarah F. Sahn- The University of Alabama

Deposited 05/22/2024

Copyright © 2014 Sarah F. Sahn. This article first appeared in the journal *Children's Literature* 39, 2014, 586-589. Reprinted with permission by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Citation of published version:

Sahn, S.F. (2014). [Review of the book *Secrets, Lies, and Children's Fiction*, by Kerry Mallan]. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 39, 586-589. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2014.0062>.



PROJECT MUSE®

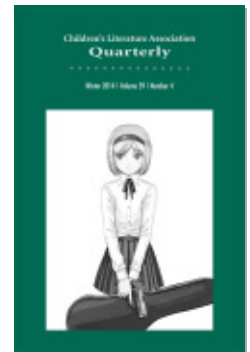
Secrets, Lies, and Children's Fiction by Kerry Mallan
(review)

Sarah F. Sahn

Children's Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 39, Number 4,
Winter 2014, pp. 586-589 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2014.0062>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/562071>

group of black inhabitants. Lefebvre is mistaken in thinking this characterization of “Canadian” is purposely exclusive.

By making the materials in these three volumes available to the general public, Lefebvre’s essays not only prepare the way for, but, it seems to me, orchestrate the reassessment of Montgomery’s literary reputation. The materials presented in volume 1 attest to a multifaceted interest in Montgomery from the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* in 1908 until after her death in 1942. Will volumes 2 and 3 (published, respectively, in May and December 2014) further our understanding of the complexities of assessing Montgomery’s literary reputation? Only time will tell, as only time will reveal the impact these volumes will have on the purportedly “much-needed reassessment of Montgomery’s literary reputation.”

Works Cited

- Garner, Barbara Carman, and Mary Harker. Vertical File on Lucy Maud Montgomery: A Companion to “Anne of Green Gables: An Annotated Bibliography.” *Canadian Children’s Literature* 55 (1989): 18–41.
- Rubio, Mary. “L. M. Montgomery: Where Does the Voice Come From?” *Canadiana: Studies in Canadian literature/Etudes de littérature Canadienne (Proceedings of the Canadian Studies Conference)*. Ed. Jørn Carlsen and Knud Larsen. Aarhus, Denmark: The Conference/ La Conférence, 1984: 109–19.

Barbara Carman Garner is a past president of the Children’s Literature Association, a

former member of the Phoenix Committee, and a member of the L. M. Montgomery Research Group. She is a retired professor of English at Carleton University, Ottawa. As Adjunct Research Professor, she pursues her ongoing research in the field of children’s literature.



Secrets, Lies, and Children’s Fiction. By Kerry Mallan. New York: Palgrave, 2013.

Reviewed by Sarah F. Sahn

Secrets, Lies and Children’s Fiction takes on the often paradoxical treatment in children’s literature of truth and lies, in which “truth” is often conflated with simple honesty, and—at least on the surface—is constructed as a behavior essential to being a moral person. In her readings of a wide range of children’s and young adult texts, Australian scholar Kerry Mallan explores how “telling the truth” emerges as a complex and sometimes dangerous act. In doing so, she also illuminates the paradoxes of our social expectations of children: “despite the difficulties that scholars have entertained about truth for many years,” she points out, “we expect children to have a clear and uncomplicated understanding of the truth” (3). She complicates notions of truth in her analysis by “focus[ing] on the intersection of secrets, lies and fiction” to show “how these not only present a staging of truth . . . but are valuable survival strategies” (11). Mallan argues that deception is often portrayed as necessary for survival in children’s fiction.

Secrets, Lies and Children’s Fiction is organized into three thematic sec-

tions. Part 1, "Truth, Lies and Survival," uses a Derridean framework to show how the interpretive reading of "truth" in a text can further obscure meaning. Mallan centers her reading on the metaphors of veiling and disguise in chapter 1 in order to explore the play of concealment, revelation, and transformation in the act of telling the truth. In representations of Muslim girlhood in Margane Satrapi's memoir *Persepolis* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's YA novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the veil becomes a visualization of "adolescent identity angst and desire to fit in" that "goes beyond because of the additional layer of cultural and ideological difference" (23). In *Persepolis*, Marjane chooses not to wear hijab, while Abdel-Fattah's Amal embraces it as a way of asserting her cultural identity. Their contrasting acts of veiling and unveiling, each as a way of telling a truth about the self, reveal the slipperiness of truth that makes it impossible to conclusively discover, conceal, or reveal.

Chapter 2 further explores the dynamics of truth and lies in relation to survival. In the texts under analysis here, the child emerges as a repository of a truth that she must conceal for her own or another's survival. Mallan focuses on a Foucauldian analysis of power in relation to truth, considering the questions, "Who is able to tell the truth? About what? With what consequences? With what relation to power?" (43). The final chapter of part 1 looks at the use of scapegoats in children's texts as mechanisms to restore the social order. In siding with and working to exonerate the figure of the scapegoat, the texts in this chapter

demonstrate the violent deceptions often necessary to preserve an exclusionary social order.

Mallan opens up a number of interesting avenues for thinking about what truth is and how it might be told in roundabout ways through stories, subtexts, and secrets; however, she often leaves off just after raising these questions, leaving them open to further elaboration. For example, Mallan concludes her reading of *The Other Side of Truth*, Beverley Naidoo's novel about state violence in Nigeria, by discussing the characters' use of codes and storytelling to protect themselves. Storytelling in Naidoo's novel "reveal[s] the power of lies or imaginative rendition as an alternative mode for truth-telling," both for the children in the novel and the children who are its target audience (54). She ends her discussion here in order to move on to analysis of another text; however, her observations raise questions that remain unexplored about how Naidoo's novel, as well as other texts Mallan has selected for her study, tell truth in circuitous ways, and possibly tell truths to child characters and readers that may be unsanctioned by adults.

Part 2, "Secrets and Secrecy," focuses on the relation of individuals, especially children and adolescents, to institutions. The three chapters in this section open up questions that invite further critical consideration of the role of secrets, revelation, and knowledge in relation to governments, family and community, and the self. Mallan seeks to complicate the "us-versus-them" mentality of many YA dystopias, which position children

and adolescents as uniquely able to resist authority. Instead, “as narratives they offer a particular conceptualization of how the state, or nation state, is part of a rapidly evolving technological world which further complicates matters of survival, freedom and protection” (94). She shows how children’s literature finds ways for characters to build trust and achieve agency even within oppressive institutions. In Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, Mallan reads the moments of intimacy between Katniss and Rue, and between Katniss and Peeta, as “fulfilling the humanist tradition whereby individuals rise up against the power exerted by external forces to become fully self-determining, autonomous individuals” (102). While she notes that the remaining novels in the *Hunger Games* trilogy “play out the consequences of [Katniss’s] rebellion and whether she is able to retain her moral subject position,” Mallan leaves open the interesting questions she raises about agency under knowledge-controlling regimes, leaving the reader to consider how such an assessment extends—or doesn’t—into understanding the limits of agency and resistance in the rest of the series (103).

The final section, “Tangled Webs,” assesses the issue of narrative authority in children’s literature. In chapter 7, Mallan considers the possibility of a “non-anthropocentric perspective” on truth by “looking beyond language as something that separates humans and animals” in several animal-centered texts, including Bruce Pascoe’s *Fog a Dox*, Margaret Wild’s *Fox*, and Marcia K. Vaughan’s *Wombat Stew* (184). She suggests in her readings that chil-

dren’s fiction can offer useful ways of imagining animal consciousness as suggested by Derrida, Haraway, and others, because they perform a “shift in narrative authority from an anthropocentric point of view to a non-anthropocentric one that takes account of animal subjectivity and consciousness” (184). Mallan’s emphasis on removing notions of deception from language is compelling, though it would require more than a single chapter to fully appraise her chosen texts in relation to animal studies.

Chapter 8 explores the sometimes playful relationship between author, narrator, and reader in metafiction that invite the reader to participate in “literary games,” such as Pseudonymous Bosch’s *The Name of this Book Is Secret* and Geraldine McCaughrean’s *A Pack of Lies* (186). Placing the act of storytelling at their center, the texts Mallan discusses in this chapter “challenge notions of authority by questioning the status of untrustworthy ‘authors’ who claim to be telling the truth, to give credence to a child’s perspective in the face of sensible adult knowledge about the world” (211).

In the conclusion, Mallan articulates the dialectic between being a “moral subject” and an “active subject” that informs the central paradox of the moral imperative to “tell the truth” and the need to lie in order to survive. This dialectic is implicit throughout Mallan’s analysis, but could be more explicitly stated in order to ground the relationship between “truth” and the many guises of deception—as lies, secrets, stories,

and disguises—that the book seeks to unpack. It would also more clearly link the many texts under analysis, which sometimes feel disconnected.

Mallan foregrounds critical theory as a lens through which to read a wide range of children's and YA texts, emphasizing "symptomatic texts" as illustrations of concepts (126). Her study would make a good companion for students learning to read critical theory alongside children's literature, though would be best accompanied by more extensive readings of Derrida,

Foucault, Agamben, and others, as the text tends to assume knowledge of critical theory. *Secrets, Lies, and Children's Fiction* opens up promising avenues of inquiry into the status of truth in children's fiction that readers will be eager to explore further.

Sarah F. Sahn is ABD in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation explores how contemporary young adult fantasy that engages with difference offers alternative narratives of citizenship to marginalized youth.