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**MR. POTATO HEAD MEETS THE CREEPERS:
A YOUNG READER'S ENCOUNTERS
WITH MANIPULATED TEXT**

By Bruce Maylath

Those of us who have children or teach children have often asked ourselves, what kind of book should my children read? What will help them learn to read? What will teach them about the world they live in? What will they enjoy reading? Often we make our decisions based on a glance at a book's cover, its pictures, or its opening paragraph. Sometimes we even select a book because of something we've seen advertised. Such might easily be the case with *Mr. Potato Head Meets the Creepers*, a seemingly colorful, fun, and delightful book with accompanying audio cassette designed around Hasbro Industries' Mr. Potato Head toy. On the surface, a book like *Mr. Potato Head* seems appealing. A child who has not yet begun to read can follow the printed story by listening to the narrator and characters in the story speak. The pictures in the book are bright and cheerful. Children exploring and learning about their world may and do find *Mr. Potato Head* engaging--a story they like to read many times over. Adults, however, may find the tale unsettling, for the story is loaded with cultural and sexual stereotypes, including stereotypes of class. Worse, the book seems to encourage stereotyping and may foster in children certain assumptions about the suitability of various types of language.

Mr. Potato Head Meets the Creepers is in itself a remarkable illustration of the intimate relationship between language and social status. Prestige in language has been a part of human experience as long as humans have spoken what passed for words. It usually manifests itself as class distinctions. Certain accents, patterns of words, and words themselves sound more prestigious than others, based on what we have been enculturated with. Most Americans, for instance, would agree

that the "upper-crust" Hudson River accent of Franklin Roosevelt, James and William Buckley, and George Plimpton sounds more "refined," i.e. prestigious, than the "hillbilly" Appalachian accent of Loretta Lynn or Jed Clampett. Prestige is a result not of inherent quality or lack of quality in a certain variety of language; rather, it is the result of those in positions of power trying to distinguish themselves from those outside of the power positions and those outside trying to attain the positions of power for themselves: in a word, social mobility or social intransigence. The prestige dialect, frequently termed the "standard," is, in C.C. Fries' words, "the variety [of language] used by those who hold positions of trust and respect and conduct the important affairs of a community" (Davis 5). Those who do not hold those positions frequently wish to. Their language, however, if different from the standard, usually bars them from these positions as soon as they open their mouths. Non-standard dialects thus serve the power establishment as a signal of an upwardly mobile, lower-class, power-usurper's unacceptability.

What has all this to do with *Mr. Potato Head Meets the Creepers*? Everything. The entire book is about social mobility. Briefly, Mrs. Potato Head, a middle-class wife, decides she wants to join the Greater Potatoville Garden Club. To do this she must gain the approval of the club's "chairpotato," Mrs. Boise Au Gratin III, a clearly upper crust (or peel?) matron. Mrs. Au Gratin must inspect the Potato Heads' garden. However, when Mrs. Potato Head sends her husband, Mr. Potato Head, and her son, Frenchfry, out to clean up the garden, they discover their plants have been overrun by the low-level, despicable Creepers, a species not even worthy of being Potatoes. Aghast when she inspects the garden, Mrs. Au Gratin prevents Mrs. Potato Head from joining the club until the garden is free of Creepers. The Potato Heads throw up their hands, forlorn. All but little Frenchfry, that is. Frenchfry crosses class lines to talk to his Creeper friend, Feeler. Cleverly appealing to the Creepers' sense of social inferiority and desire to rise, Frenchfry persuades them to leave the Potato Heads' garden and infest Mrs. Au Gratin's. They do. This prompts the club membership to oust Mrs. Au Gratin and install Mrs. Potato Head in her place, thus elevating

her to a position of "trust and respect and conduct[ing] the important affairs of a community," in short, a position of prestige. The Creepers, however, remain Creepers, though somewhat better nourished in the Au Gratin garden than they were in the Potato Heads'.

For a child reading this story, the text is influential on two counts, one cultural, the other linguistic. First, the cultural.

A child transacting with this text--creating a "poem," to use Louise Rosenblatt's term--must suspend disbelief (Coleridge's term) and accept potatoes taking on human characteristics such as the ability to speak, to walk, to join clubs, to belong to a class, and to desire to rise in station. More importantly, the child must accept--and not suspend--the belief that these human characteristics are indeed true to the humans in the child's world. If Mrs. Potato Head wants to join a club, her action must ring true somewhere in the child's experience if the child is to make sense of the text. In line with the conventional, traditional view of the American middle class family, Mom cooks; Dad doesn't. Instead, Mr. Potato Head does the outdoor chores around the house, like gardening and "fixing that loose step...and the leaky gutter and the front porch swing and the attic roof," as Mrs. Potato Head points out, emphasizing for the reader the middle class male role her husband is to play. One can now also deduce that Mr. Potato Head performs these chores himself; he does not hire workers to do these tasks for him as an upper class gentleman (an out-of-sight Mr. Au Gratin III?) might. Other cues from the text reinforce the reader's conception of Mr. Potato Head's class. He wears "blue sneakers," not leather shoes, eats scrambled eggs, and reads the morning newspaper. While readers might envision a gentleman of the leisure class doing at least some of these actions too, they can also make out the author's intent here: Mr. Potato Head is a normal-type guy; he does the same things the average middle class man does. Also, in typical middle class fashion, Mr. Potato Head belongs to a lodge, the Potato Lodge, which he attends every Wednesday night. Similarly, his son is a member of Spud Scouts. The only member of the Potato Head clan who doesn't belong to a social organization is Mom, Mrs. Potato Head. Acting on her impulse both to

join socially with society and to rise socially in that society, she contacts the Garden Club's premier lady, Mrs. Boise Au Gratin III.

The very name Boise Au Gratin III indicates which class this Mrs. belongs to. "Boise Au Gratin" is clearly French, not Anglo-Saxon like "Potato Head." As such the name conveys a definite notion of prestige. English-speaking societies have a long history of deferring their own social status to the French. The roots of this tradition extend all the way back to 1066, when William the Conqueror crossed the English Channel from France to establish himself, his followers, and his and their descendants as the royal ruling class of Britain. Even in America, so far removed in both time and geography from the Norman Conquest, a name like Du Pont still registers prestige in the ears of American-born English speakers. Suffixed to the name is the number, III. Au Gratin's not only belong to the class of power and prestige; they have belonged there for generations. They have a tradition of prestige.

In direct contrast stand the Creepers. They are lower than low. Not only are they not potatoes, they do not even adapt such civilities as living in houses or eating off plates. Instead, they live outdoors and eat raw plants directly from the garden. Moreover, they don't even eat from their own gardens. They nefariously enter others' gardens, vandalize them, and steal their produce. The Creepers are more than rude; they're wicked.

In Potatoville culture, three clear-cut classes of character exist: middle, upper, and lower. The upper retains the power and prestige. In addition, however, two races exist: Potatoes and Creepers. Potatoes are civilized; Creepers are undesirable, wild, even reprehensible. Potatoes, even those that do not have the power and prestige of the upper class, can nevertheless aspire to higher status and have realistic hopes of achieving that status. Creepers, however, will always remain Creepers.

Reinforcing, if not indeed definitively establishing the child reader's understanding of Potatoville culture (and by implications the

child's own culture) is language. *Mr. Potato Head* makes some very clear assumptions and rather more subtle assertions about what kinds of decisions a child and a child's society should make about proper language. Each class of character uses a very distinct brand of language. Apparently, this is especially obvious on the accompanying audio-tape. The mother of the child whose *Potato Head* book I'm using tells me that the Creepers speak with an accent of the New York City working class, made familiar to the rest of the country by Archie Bunker, the Three Stooges, and the many stock character movie villains whose favorite phrase is, "You doity rats!" Mrs. Au Gratin, as might be expected, speaks with the accent associated with upper class New Yorkers, the ones who ostentatiously drop their r's and pronounce their words as if they were trying to adopt the upper class pronunciation of the British. The Potato Heads speak with a General American accent, the type spoken in Chicago and much of the Midwest and the type most radio and TV news reports adopt if they didn't already grow up with it. But would the text alone convey class distinctions? Would a child reading the story receive the same messages?

Yes. A reader can place a character into a particular class virtually the moment he or she reads the characters' first words of dialogue. A writer could achieve this effect only two ways: by selecting certain words and by placing those words in a certain order. No other option is open to the author. Other than through an occasional question mark or exclamation point, rhythm, intonation, pace, inflection cannot be conveyed in our standard system of spelling and punctuating. The question one must ask is, how do particular words in a particular order do this? The answer, I believe, is in the subvocalization they evoke. When certain words printed in a certain order on a page remind us of a pleasing turn of phrase or sound we've heard before, we call that passage articulate or eloquent. What happens when a group of words becomes poetic in our minds is that our eyes stop searching merely for information and our inner ears take over recreating through subvocalization (that little voice in ours heads) a spoken utterance. A reader, even a child, reading *Mr. Potato Head* does just that as his or her

eyes first come into contact with the characters' dialogue. Let's see how that can happen.

Even before the actual story begins, Mr. Potato Head appears to introduce himself, the storybook, and the tape. His language, even here, is very colloquial. He uses phrases like "Okie dokie," "I guess" (rather than the more upper-class sounding "I suppose"), and "All right, let's get the show on the road." In one concession to phonetic spelling, albeit one so common most cartoonists today now use it, Mr. Potato Head consistently says, "I'm gonna" instead of "I'm going to." The first time he says this is in the context of "I'm gonna get around to fixing...." Later he says to his son, again quite colloquially, "You and I are gonna get a good roasting." A sentence like this is distinctly middle class. As we shall see, Mrs. Au Gratin would never use a phrase like "gonna get a good roasting," (nor, actually, would Mrs. Potato Head). Just as notable, however, is the fact that Mr. Potato Head says "you and I are...." The low-class Creepers would more likely confuse or disregard objective and subjective cases of pronouns and say, "Me and you is....," likewise disregarding grammatical number in their verbs.

The Creepers produce other "improper" and grammatically "incorrect" sentences. They consistently leave out the auxiliary verbs "to be" and "to have" when the meaning is apparent without them. They say, for instance, "Hey, Potato Head, who [are] you calling pesky? We Creepers [have] got a right to creep around...." In contrast, Mrs. Potato Head says soon after, "You've got to get rid of those Creepers!" Also of note here, the Creepers dispense entirely with such niceties as titles. The Creeper speaking in this instance bellows out, "Hey, Potato Head." Potatoes, of course, **always** address each other as "Mr." and "Mrs." In contrast, Creepers hail each other by shouting, "Hey, you guys!" They also use such irregular phrases as, "Get a load of this joint!" "Yeah, ain't life great?" and "Lookie what we find. A whole garden to chow down on!" Certainly no Potato would talk this way.

Mrs. Boise Au Gratin III would definitely not talk this way. Mrs. Au Gratin employs very "refined" speech, that is to say, prestigious-sounding words and word patterns. When Mrs. Potato Head first contacts her, she responds, "Potato Head? I don't recall seeing your name on the social register, but perhaps if your garden is exemplary we might consider your application. I'll be by to examine the premises and the state of the horticultural arts this afternoon. Ta-ta, Mrs. uh...Potato Head." Mrs. Au Gratin appears to use a substantial number of Latinate words. If we take out these Latinate words and replace them with words of Anglo-Saxon origin, we come up with a passage Mrs. Potato Head might say as chairpotato, which she is soon to become. "**Maybe** if your garden is **outstanding** we might **think about** your application. I'll be by to **look at** your house and garden this afternoon. **Good-bye.**" The sentences still sound slightly arrogant, but the arrogance must reside in the message itself. Certainly some of the arrogance has been toned down just by selecting Anglo-Saxon words in place of the French and Latin.

Like the French name Au Gratin, French and Latin words in English are a legacy of the Norman Conquest. As Old English and Norman French mingled, those who wanted to show their connections with the Norman aristocracy used French-based words. Ruling-class Normans lived in "mansions" while their Saxon serfs lived in "houses." Likewise, Normans dined on "pork" while Saxons ate "swine." Saxons, like Thomas a Beckett, who aspired to join the aristocracy had to adapt to not only the French language but French words in their own English language. As a result, English often has two words for the same thing, the Latinate word always sounding more prestigious than its Anglo-Saxon synonym. Mrs. Au Gratin, then, is simply showing through her choice of words that she is following the centuries-old tradition of power and prestige established by the French conquerors and incorporated into their language.

In striking contrast to her natural way of speaking, Mrs. Potato Head, when she first meets Mrs. Au Gratin, tries--somewhat unsuccessfully--to elevate her rank by adopting Mrs. Au Gratin's word choices. When Mrs. Au Gratin asks her, "May we proceed?" (rather than

the more colloquial, "Can we get started?") Mrs. Potato Head responds, "Well actually my gardener is just putting the finishing touches on the rose beds. Perhaps a cup of tea?" If she had been talking to someone she considered her peer, Mrs. Potato Head would more likely have said, "Well my husband is just about done with the roses. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Interestingly, Frenchfry and his friend Feeler seem to share a common "youth" dialect. Frenchfry uses "kid slang" like "Check this out!" and "old" (which only youth would use) as in "I'll get those mean old Creepers" and "I'm a match for any old Creeper!" In another sentence, Frenchfry explodes in a string of words and phrases one might typically associate with youth: "You Creepers better look out 'cause this little potato is on the warpath!" Here Frenchfry deletes "had" as in "had better look out." Even the phrase "look out" sounds typical of children. Likewise, "'cause" instead of "because" and "this little" are elocutions common among youth.

This language of youth appears to cross class boundaries. The reader might notice the linguistic bond Frenchfry appears to share with his Creeper pal, Feeler, when he gets his first glimpse of them together. "Psst! Hey, hey, Feeler!" whispers Frenchfry. "Come on out, I gotta talk to you." Feeler responds, "What's up, Frenchfry?" Frenchfry then proceeds to give his "I thought you were classier than this" speech. When Frenchfry ends by taunting, "You Creepers aren't ready for the big time," the big Creepers respond, "Says who? We Creepers got upward mobility. Yeah, we got plans. Big plans." Their speech here sounds typically "Creepy" until Feeler says, "Come on, Frenchfry, tell us where to find this swanky garden you're talking about." Feeler's question sounds significantly different from the other, older Creepers', mainly in its length. As a rule, older, nastier Creepers don't construct sentences this long. Frenchfry does, however. The fact that Feeler uses words and word patterns, including length, closer to Frenchfry's instead of his elders' indicates that the kids are not bound by the class structures and resultant language distinctions adults are.

Like their backgrounds, circumstances, and desires, the characters' language bears out the class structure of Potatoville. Children, especially those just beginning to read, have a vastly limited set of perceptions about the greater world and, as a result, only a feeble understanding of that world. Their understanding will grow and change immensely as they mature. Their formative years are crucial, however. What they perceive and understand early on will form the foundation on which future growth and changes must rest. Books, even books like *Mr. Potato Head*, if they have the impact we like to think literature has, can contribute much to a child's understanding of the world. In the case of reading *Mr. Potato Head*, a child's understanding could well be that the world consists of three classes. Although on the surface all the characters share a common language, English, they speak at least three distinct dialects, and possibly four if one counts Frenchfry's and Feeler's as separate (though their dialect seems to be primarily a variation of the middle class vernacular). Moreover, dialect, as determined by words--their selection and order--not accent, immediately indicates a character's status in the society.

Of course, children will judge more than books in their lifetimes. They may quite likely judge other people, and they may even judge themselves. *Mr. Potato Head Meets the Creepers* sets up the middle class as the only really desirable class. Any self-respecting reader will identify with the heroes, the Potato Heads; given the way the story unfolds, no child would want to identify with the Au Gratins or the Feelers. Yet children who do not belong to the middle class might well have a difficult time reconciling this story with their own home language environment, particularly if their parents speak differently from Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head.

What kind of books do we want our children to read? Knowing fully its text, we will probably find *Mr. Potato Head Meets the Creepers* troublesome. But the problems this book presents can be found in many books, both children's and adults'. Innumerable authors, through the worlds they create in print and the words and patterns of words they assign their characters, have relegated whole groups of people to the

level of untouchables, and other groups to heroic stature. If we do not want our children to judge other human beings by their power and prestige--or lack of the two--as manifested by their background and language, we need to look for books that present a more positive view of language and class.

This article really finishes where the Mr. Potato Head story begins. In his introduction at the front of the book, Mr. Potato Head tells the reader, "When you finish the story, you can turn the tape over and **record your own story**" (my emphasis). With the adventures of the residents of Potatoville still fresh in the reader's mind, what kind of story can we expect the child to compose?

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From EXPO 86:

Some of the rides were so exciting that officials expected "the occasional protein spill."

Police were called "security hosts," and the restrooms, "guest relations facilities."