



The Centre for Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature  
at the University of Wrocław has the honor to invite you to the 25th lecture  
in the series "International Voices in Children's Literature Studies"

**Prof. Philip Nel**

## **Getting Personal: Unlearning Objectivity, Anti-Racism, and Stories We Love**



This talk is the first draft of the first chapter in *The Misuses of Enchantment: Childhood, Nostalgia, and Who We Are*. The book itself — under contract with Oxford UP — considers how the American authoritarian movement is using children's literature and children's education to further its aims. In the US, this is most visible in the rise of book bans, all of which seem motivated by what Svetlana Boym calls restorative nostalgia — that longing for an uncomplicated, imaginary past that seems to explain our fractured, precarious present. Other varieties of nostalgia — such as what Boym calls reflective — challenge such totalizing narratives, lingering in the loss and the brokenness that restorative nostalgia denies. Since nostalgia of any variety entwines biography with history,

my first chapter moves from personal memories to national histories, and from misrememberings to critical reckonings with the past.

In this talk, I address the need, in doing anti-racist work, to admit fault, to learn from our mistakes, and to learn from how our own history — national history, family history, personal history — often prevents us from perceiving those mistakes. People's understanding of racism is deeply entwined in the stories they love and in the stories they believe about themselves. But this is not just an acknowledgment of the inevitable deficits in my understanding that emerge from the gap between my experience — as a straight, white, cisgendered male — and the communities of color I am writing about. Rather, it's an examination of how the presumption of scholarly objectivity always masks its ideological bias towards white, Western modes of knowledge. Or, as radio producer Ramona Martinez says more succinctly, "Objectivity is the ideology of the status quo." I'm not suggesting that we abandon research, ignore facts, or replace evidence with experience. Instead, we should do what transgender journalist Lewis Raven Wallace advises in *The View from Somewhere*: We should aim for transparency and self-awareness. We should admit what we don't know.

Indeed, since as children we absorb racist ideas without our awareness and without our consent, it's especially hard to claim scholarly objectivity on matters of race or racism. So, to examine racism as a structural phenomenon (which it is), we have to consider it as a structure of feeling — Raymond Williams' term for "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." In this frank discussion of my own racist entanglements and my mistakes in addressing them, I hope to use my own story as a vehicle for some practical advice in anti-racist education, which begins in unlearning what we think we know.

**Philip Nel** is University Distinguished Professor of English at Kansas State University. He is the author or co-editor of fourteen books, including the forthcoming *How to Draw the World: Harold and the Purple Crayon and the Making of a Children's Classic* (Oxford UP, November 2024), the first in the *Children's Classics, Critically* series he is co-editing with Melanie Ramdarshan Bold.

**DATE:** 16 October 2024

**TIME:** 18.00 (CET)

**VENUE:** MS Teams

If you are interested in taking part in the lecture, please register **HERE**

