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Children and Young Adult Book Review *Elementary School* **The Magician's Hat**

The Athlete as Celebrity Author: A Review of Malcolm Mitchell (2015).
The Magician's Hat. Illustrated by Dennis Campay.

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The
Magician's
Hat



Written By Malcolm Mitchell
Art By Dennis Campay

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Malcolm Mitchell's *The Magician's Hat* is a simple, well-intended picture book for beginning readers. Mitchell was a star on the Georgia Bulldog football team from 2012-2015, and football is a big deal in Athens, Georgia, and throughout the country. *The Magician's Hat* cannot really be understood outside of Malcolm Mitchell's evolution as a student athlete into someone whose story has extended and resonated beyond the playing field and into the community, more specifically the literary/literacy community.

Mitchell became more than an athletic hero/celebrity when he joined a women's book club, a story that went national and was featured on CBS news (Hartman, 2014; Watson, 2015). Mitchell then self-published *The Magician's Hat*, a story he had written previously, and began making appearances in area schools promoting reading. As a "celebrity author" he joined the burgeoning list of TV and film stars, musical artists, athletes, etc. who have written books for children.



Celebrity authors and self-publication are part of the current landscape in the industry that creates books for children. Dramatic changes in publishing, and in all aspects of popular culture (e.g., television, films, music, etc.), involve the consolidation and absorption of previously independent publishing houses into giant multinational conglomerates. This is occurring at the very time that the market fragments in smaller

"niches". While *The Magician's Hat* can be read and enjoyed in and of itself, it is worthwhile to examine the book in the context of the transformation of the publishing industry.

Publishing in the 21st Century*

During the past half-century or so, the children's book business has undergone momentous changes that are result of seismic shifts in the world's economic landscape. These changes have resulted in a fundamental alteration in publishing practices, including the involvement of a variety of new and diverse players. Much of children's literature publication, and other contemporary media and culture, are characterized by accelerating competitiveness, a concentration of ownership, technological convergence, and globalization. As a result, publishing and other media industries increasingly are dominated by a handful of large, multinational companies who are able to "synergistically" link their various holdings across national borders and reach millions of readers and viewers.

Previously independent, stand alone, publishing houses have been absorbed by gigantic multimedia conglomerates such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, which owns newspapers (including the *Wall Street Journal*) and magazines throughout the world, Fox News, 20th Century Fox films, and Harper-Collins book publishers. Another is Viacom, whose holdings include Paramount movie studios, CBS, MTV, the Showtime networks, and Simon and Schuster publishers. Scholastic is an anomaly among the publishing giants in that it remains family-owned but operates in ways similar to these conglomerates.

Among the many results of this process of conglomeration is the ever-increasing importance of the "bottom line". Publishing is, and always has been, a business that must make money to exist. Historically, there has been an uneasy tension between the mass-market side of the business and the side that is the passion of educators, parents, and book lovers in general. E. L. Doctorow lauded publishing as an enterprise in which individuals could "make money and be proud of their contributions to literature and ideas at the same

time” (quoted by Taxel, 2002, pp. 158-159). The ideal book was both a commercial and a critical success and had the additional benefit of generating revenue to subsidize more risky publishing ventures such as first novels, poetry, and other innovative writing.

This tenuous relationship had changed. One keen observer of the industry discussed the relation between children’s literature and this trend: “What once was a genteel industry dedicated to providing good books for libraries, now is big business, expected to contribute significantly to the bottom line of media conglomerates” (quoted by Taxel, 2002, pp. 159). In contrast to the past, each book now must stand on its own, and decisions to publish, once controlled entirely by literary people, increasingly are made by marketing people and those with an eye to the possibilities of synergy.

In today’s publishing environment books are seen less as discrete properties than as vital links in a media food chain. These properties are central to a process of commodification leading to the production of movies or TV miniseries, CD soundtracks, action figures, meals at fast-food restaurants accompanied by toys and elaborate packaging, board and video games, and other ancillary products. The Harry Potter and Hunger Games Series provide paradigmatic examples of synergy in action as the books (i.e., the “properties”) are turned into films that spawn a vast array of commodities and, in the case of Harry Potter, a theme park.

Consider, for example, the remarkable media frenzy that surrounded the worldwide release in 2007 of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in J. K. Rowling’s phenomenally popular series. The book’s release was preceded by the worldwide debut of the fifth film in the series—*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The film was No. 1 in every market in which it opened, and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* sold a record-breaking 11.5 million copies in the U.S. and U.K. in the first 10 days of sale. There are over 450 million Harry Potter books in print and the franchise has generated approximately \$25 billion in revenue

(Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2016a; Time Magazine, 2013).

These numbers only increase with each passing day. My 7½-year-old grandson and his parents are in the middle of reading *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the 4th book in the series; they watch the corresponding film after completing each book. In a similar vein, Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Game* books and films have generated \$4,344,000,000 in revenues prior to the release of *Mockingjay Part II*, the final film in the series (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2016b). While few “properties” can match these staggering successes, each year marks the appearance of yet another popular children’s book being turned into a film. These stories include DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn Dixie* and *The Tale of Despereaux*; Rey’s, *Curious George* (which also has a television program on PBS); three films based on Steig’s *Shrek*, White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (2 versions) and *Stuart Little* (with two sequels); C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*; Van Allsburg’s *The Polar Express* and *Jumanji*, and Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* and the soon to be released *The Great Gilly Hopkins*.

While not exclusively tied to the phenomena just described, the publication of books by celebrity authors has proliferated in recent years. The list of politicians, athletes, and entertainers who have written picture books includes Julie Andrews, Madonna, Jamie Lee Curtis, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Will Smith, Shaquille O’Neal, Jimmy Carter, Paul McCartney, Julianne Moore, Spike Lee, and Jerry Seinfeld to name just a few. Unlike the vast majority of authors, celebrities are not dependent on starred reviews to command publicity for their books, and even negative reviews may not affect sales.

The availability of these books in stores like Wal-Mart makes the lure of books written by celebrities all the more important. Nevertheless, critics of these books abound; one stated that “most of these books are pretty bad, although it’s hard to pan them all”. While noting that some celebrity authors can write a good children’s story, many can’t, “and there is seemingly no connection

between whether they can write and whether they will get published” (quoted by Taxel, 2010, p. 489).

Perhaps the most serious issue raised by the love affair with celebrity authors is that they ultimately limit the opportunities to get published for other, often fledgling, writers. Celebrity authors also command an inordinate amount of publishers’ advertising budgets, denying needed promotional dollars to less well-known authors. Jane Yolen believes that “celebrity children’s books eat up all the available oxygen” (quoted by Taxel, 2010, p. 489.). Malcolm Mitchell certainly must be considered a celebrity author, particularly among Southeastern football fans, and the appearance of his book cannot be understood outside of that fact.

Simultaneous to the absorption of historically independent publishing companies into major media corporations is the appearance of smaller, niche publishers that speak to the fracturing and fragmentation of the market. Some believe that media conglomerates have made book publishing a niche industry itself, and that children’s book publishing occupies a “small nook of that niche” (quoted by Taxel, 2010, p. 485). Multicultural children’s literature has become a niche, within a niche, within a niche.

Many large publishing companies, for example, have established imprints devoted exclusively to the publication of multicultural books (e.g., Hyperion’s Jump at the Sun Books, HarperCollins’s Amistad Books). In addition, since the late 1980’s there has been a proliferation of small presses devoted exclusively to multicultural literature. The rise of these niche publishers took place concomitant with the ascendancy of social and political conservatism in the 1980s that led to a bitter reaction against multiculturalism (e.g., Taxel, 1997) and a slowdown in the publication of authors and illustrators from “parallel cultures”.

In contrast to the global approach of the major media corporations, smaller, localized enterprises were created and often are owned and run by idealistic individuals acting less on a devotion to profit, than to a commitment, for example, to bilingual (e.g., Children’s Book Press) and

multicultural (e.g., Lee and Low, Just US Books) children’s literature. There also are a number of publishers of Christian themed books (e.g., Zondervan Publishing House) that serve the burgeoning home school market. These companies generally pay authors and illustrators less than major houses and can’t compete with the majors in terms of distribution and publicity. As a result, niche publishers often experience difficulty connecting with buyers, and reviewers can experience difficulty obtaining books, or even knowing about them.

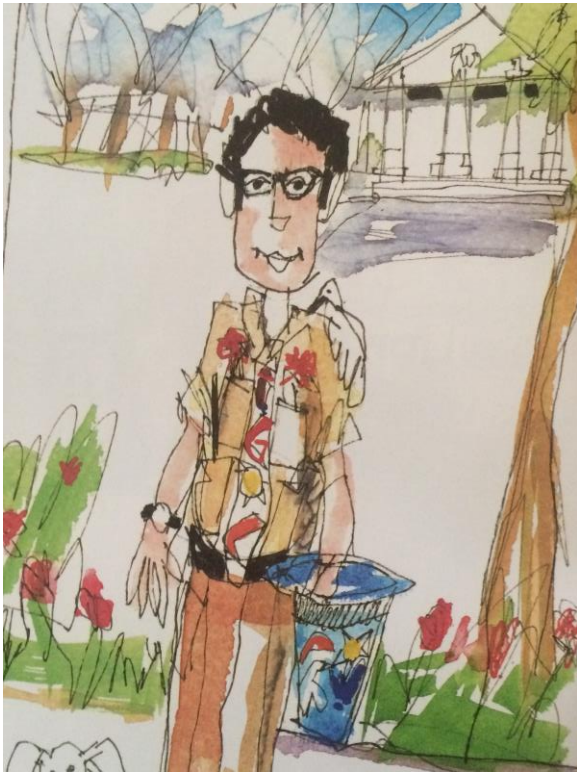
Finally, there are increasing opportunities for self-publication, including electronic publication. Search engines lists hundreds of links to enterprises that will help one publish a book. Malcolm Mitchell used \$1000 of his own money to publish his book. *The Magician’s Hat* thus is a self-published book by a celebrity author.

The Magician’s Hat

As was noted, *The Magician’s Hat* is a simple picture book for young readers. The book’s spare text is nicely complemented by Dennis Campay’s impressionistic illustrations. I very much doubt that the book would have been published had the 23-year old Mitchell pursued the usual avenues of publication and especially had he lacked his status as a celebrity. My sense is that sale of the book is largely, if not exclusively, confined to Georgia; the book is not listed on Amazon that carries thousands of books.



The Magician's Hat tells the story of a library's Family Fun Day where David, a magician, entertains his young audience with a number of tricks. He informs the children that reading a book about magic "inspired" him to become a magician. David's favorite trick is one in which he asks children their dreams for the future and then has them reach into his hat from which they select a book that actually reflects their desires. The book concludes by highlighting the book's interrelated themes: the importance of following one's dreams that will "take you wherever you want to go," and that libraries and the books within them are powerful and rewarding, an ideal source for these dreams.



These themes come across as a bit didactic in their presentation. Mitchell himself has acknowledged that "the message is more important than anything else" . . . The message that I am trying to send is that every kid has the opportunity to be able to decide if he likes it [a book] or not" (Riley, 2015). These are common themes in children's literature, as books by Mitchell (1998); Shihab Nye (1995), Tavares (2012), and McKissack (2001) beautifully, and less didactically, attest. When I shared the

book with my precocious 7½ old grandson, who reads at a 6th grade level, he did not have much to say. However, being an avid Bulldog fan, he immediately was drawn to, and impressed by, the fact that it was written by a well-known Georgia player. He easily understood that the book was extolling the importance of dreams and enjoyed the device in which each child selected a book from the magician's hat that reflected his or her dream (especially when a child unsuccessfully tried to trick David). I am confident that it was Mitchell's celebrity that drew him into these themes.

As I have suggested, the key to understanding *The Magician's Hat* is the celebrity of its author, "the magnificent Malcolm Mitchell, one of the best receivers and greatest stories in Georgia annals" (Danzler, 2016). Mitchell's story lies not only in his considerable prowess on the football field, but for his work as an advocate for literacy and, now, as a published author. These accomplishments led to Mitchell being named as the 2015 Allstate American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) Good Works Team® captain for his "standout community service and off-the-field contributions," more specifically his "dedication to promoting education and literacy among young people" (<http://www.fieldstforum.com/2015/12/10/malcolm-mitchell-chosen-as-allstate-afca-good-works-team-captain/>).

Mitchell's unlikely journey from a college student, who admittedly entered UGA with reading at about a junior high school level (Hartman 2014-video), to an advocate for literacy began with a freakish accident that occurred during Georgia's September 1, 2013 season opening game at Clemson that resulted in a torn ACL. This injury to his knee caused Mitchell to miss the 2013 season, as well as part of the season to follow. With more time on his hands, he began frequenting bookstores where a chance encounter led him to join an all-women's book club. The story of Mitchell's involvement in the club spread nationally and included stories in USA today (Watson 2014-video) and a featured story in the on the CBS evening news (Hartman, 2014-video).

Most recently, Mitchell was awarded the Atlanta Sports Councils Community Spirit Award. Mitchell was lauded for his “passion for children’s literacy” and for the creation of “Reading with Malcolm,” a campaign that encourages young children and their parents to spend more time reading books.” Mitchell is a regular visitor to local elementary and middle schools and uses proceeds from his book to support his efforts” (Towers, 2016).

Malcolm Mitchell epitomizes the intercollegiate athletic ideal: a young man or woman attends college to get an education through his involvement in athletic competition. These pursuits lead to a successful education and athletic accomplishment, as well as growing maturity and a desire to be involved with and give back to the community. Unfortunately, intercollegiate

athletics, especially major college football and basketball, have grown into multibillion-dollar industries and often make a mockery of these ideals. Student athletes far too often are exploited and leave the university uneducated and with few prospects for the future. In contrast, Mitchell, who currently is preparing for the NFL draft, exemplifies the attainment of the lofty goals for “student athletes”. *The Magician’s Hat* is a concrete artifact of documenting his wonderful accomplishments. Whether the book endures beyond Malcolm Mitchell’s celebrity remains to be seen, and perhaps is secondary in importance to the role that *The Magician’s Hat* has played in his growth as an advocate for literacy among children who follow the lead of the public figures they admire.

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