



***The Child in British Literature: Literary Constructions of Childhood, Medieval to Contemporary.* Edited by Adrienne E. Gavin. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 266 pages. ISBN: 0230348270. \$85.00.**

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This ambitious volume of critical essays traces constructions of the child in British literature over the last 800 years. Divided into three distinct, chronological sections, "Medieval and Early Modern Literature (1200-1700)," "Eighteenth-Century, Romantic, and Victorian Literature (1700-1900)," and "Edwardian, Modern, and Contemporary Literature (1900-2010)," *The Child in British Literature* aims to provide readers with a clear overview of the major themes in and changing representations of this figure in diverse literary eras. The work additionally proposes to challenge and revise traditional readings of the child and to add a fresh perspective by drawing on social and historical contexts.

In many respects this collection achieves its impressive goals. Indeed, one of the main pleasures in perusing the text involves reading a wide range of articles by experts in the field of children and literature. Furthermore, while uncovering various constructions of the child, the volume's essayists complicate the standard discourse of childhood. For instance, while literary critics often view the child in terms of strict dichotomies—as either evil or innocent, wild or tame, symbolic of life or death, etc.—many contributors to this collection, by contrast, eschew simplistic polarities and mine the social implications of such childhood representations. In fact, some of the most intriguing essays of this sort reread the "Golden Age of British children's literature" (9) or constructions of the Victorian child. In "Degenerate 'Innocents': Childhood, Deviance, and Criminality in Nineteenth-Century Texts," Liz Thiel deftly examines the "tensions between innocence and degeneracy" in literary representations of Victorian "street children" (132). She argues that fictional representations of so-called "street Arabs" (132), as both innocent and degenerate, coexisted in literary works to serve the social goals of garnering middle-class sympathies for urchins who existed outside what one critic called the "sanctified space of childhood" (Flegel 2009: 133) and to attack social commentators of the day who saw such children as threatening savages. Likewise, in "Angelic, Atavistic, Human: The Child of the Victorian Period," Naomi Wood explores how Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* synthesizes the dichotomies of the idealized and the realistic nineteenth-century child and in so doing both "celebrates and problematizes the Victorian cult of childhood" (116). Even Katherine Doudou's essay on the child in recent British fiction, "Examining the Idea of Childhood: The Child in the

Contemporary British Novel," focuses on how Ian McEwan's youth-centered tales question the repeated equation of childhood with innocence. According to Doudou, McEwan's novels work to deconstruct the discourse of childhood and expose the child as nothing more than a rampant, though necessary, adult "cultural fantasy" (247), echoing critic Jacqueline Rose's remark that "the very act of constructing the child" often spotlights "what the adult desires" (1993: 2).

While some essayists in this volume reexamine dichotomous readings of children or emphasize how such representations reflect grown-ups' dreams, others wrestle with distinct or widespread critical views of the child in particular periods. For instance, taking aim at scholars who read early twentieth-century childhood as nothing more than a continuation of Britain's "Golden Age," Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries argue in "Unadulterated Childhood: The Child in Edwardian Fiction" and "'From the Enchanted Garden to the Steps of My Father's House': The Dissident Child in Early Twentieth-Century British Fiction" that the Edwardian child changes significantly from its Victorian predecessor. Gavin and Humphries claim that novels such as J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan and Wendy* and Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* turn the tables on the power dynamics between adults and children present in nineteenth-century literary constructions. Rather than showcasing children who teach Victorian elders, yet remain victimized by adults and the environment of industrialized England, Edwardian children either, in Gavin's analysis, bask in an idealized, fantastic, and empowering world apart from and superior to adults, or in Humphries' eyes, imaginatively dissent against parental voices and a wider repressive religious society. In a similar manner, historian Daniel T. Kline tackles former childhood critic Philippe Ariès' contention that in "medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (Ariès 1962: 128). Exploring representations of "the violated child" (22) in canonical texts, simple prayers, and conduct books, Kline convincingly contends that medieval society not only recognized childhood, but depended upon, valued, and supported the child's correct and ethical upbringing in British society.

Another of the volume's strengths is its rather broad definition of "literature." Although some essays examine representations of children in the traditional British literary canon, others mine more obscure texts. This diversity appeals to readers who want a purely literature-based exploration, as well as those who wish to encounter more novel, historical constructions of the child. In the canonical camp, for instance, those yearning to read about children appearing in the work of such towering authors as Charles Dickens, William Wordsworth, and William Shakespeare will not be let down. While the previously mentioned Victorian-era essayists analyze Dickens' young criminals and orphans, Roderick McGillis revisits children in the imagination of romantic poets in "Irony and Performance: The Romantic Child," and Katie Knowles' "Shakespeare's 'terrible infants'?: Children in *Richard III*, *King John*, and *Macbeth*" exclaims against "homogenous" (38) readings of the bard's child kings. In fact, Knowles rightly argues that Shakespeare's mini-royals must be seen as individual characters with diverse functions within each separate drama rather than as they have been conventionally viewed—*en masse*. Without a doubt, the essay on a canonical work that strikes the reader as the most surprising and original is Andrew O'Malley's "Crusoe's Children: *Robinson Crusoe* and the Culture of Childhood in the Eighteenth Century." In this thought-provoking article O'Malley expertly contends that Defoe's classic, a novel that is "virtually childless," (88) is none-the-less crucial to understanding the idea of the child as it was developing in Britain in the eighteenth century around the discourse of education. For O'Malley, *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel about "new beginnings" and the "self-

fashioning" (92) of an individual who starts over on a remote desert island, enacts philosopher John Locke's highly influential theories about childhood emerging at the time. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke believed that the child's mind is a *tabula rasa* or blank slate that must be developed by its surrounding environment (1693). O'Malley reads Locke's concept of the developing child in Defoe's protagonist's journey. After landing on the island, Robinson Crusoe exists in a kind of "near infantile helplessness," but through time he receives an education by nature, growing toward "adult self-sufficiency" (94). By considering *Robinson Crusoe* as a reflection of the theories in Locke's educational treatise, O'Malley makes a riveting case for considering Defoe's masterpiece as a text that clearly represents the idea of the eighteenth-century child even though it does not contain *any* prominent child characters.

On the non-canonical side of the fence, several scholars unearth intriguing representations of the child in everything from lesser known performances and poems written by child authors to sentimental poetry penned in Victorian philanthropic publications. In "Infant Poets and Child Players: The Literary Performance of Childhood in Caroline England," for example, Lucy Munro brings to light how early seventeenth-century child writers represented themselves in complex and non-threatening ways, while asserting their rights to authorship. In the essay "'She faded and drooped as a flower': Constructing the Child in the Child-Rescue Literature of Late Victorian England," Margot Hillel examines how writers concerned with social welfare painted young strays and waifs in rescue poetry as lost sheep who were denied "natural" (middle-class) childhoods. Hillel believes such literature attempted to appeal to the morality as well as the literal pocketbooks of its more affluent readers. Finally, even such seemingly dull fare as educational primers are put on a pedestal as fair game for "literature" in Edel Lamb's superbly written, engaging article, "'Children read for their Pleasantness': Books for Schoolchildren in the Seventeenth Century." Edel asks readers to reconsider how the diverse reading experiences of both "instruction and delight" (69) in the context of British educational institutions served to construct the early modern schoolboy.

Undoubtedly, the strongest essays in the collection are those that make explicit connections between children and their historical contexts. In "The Post-War Child: Childhood in British Literature in the Wake of World War II" and "Shackled by Past and Parents: The Child in British Children's Literature after 1970," Pat Pinsent and Karen Sands-O'Connor convince readers that constructions of the child cannot be divorced from the atrocities of the Second World War, adult nostalgia for a simpler past, and the emergence of the "Carnegie Medal" for the year's most exceptional children's book published in the UK. These authors also argue that the Cold War, shifts in class, and the changing structure of the nuclear family clearly affect representations of the modern child. According to Pinsent and Sands-O'Connor, transformations in twentieth-century British society bring about an increased focus on the working-class child and the way this figure must cope under the widespread abandonment of traditional "parental authority" (227). According to Doudou, some contemporary writers even use the "disruptively Gothecized child" (16), who obliterates family harmony and enacts horrific violence, to symbolize adult fears about impending social threats.

By the end of the volume readers will have gained a definite sense of some of the consistent themes and "broad shifts"(3) in representations of the child in British literature throughout the centuries. The essayists in this collection assert that the child is repeatedly

imagined as a sign of change and transience, a figure of victimization and pain, and an eternal symbol of "both the past and the future" (17). Moreover, taken together, the essays conclude that until the nineteenth-century very few children ever appear outside of the British middle and upper classes. Finally, the dead child remains a constant in every era, whether to underline humanity's fragility as a whole, to emphasize injustices toward young innocents in harsh adult worlds, or to immortalize the myth of childhood innocence.

Despite many dependable motifs, one of the most noted changes this volume tracks in the construction of the child has to do with the shifting politics of power. While for the Romantics children serve as a source of idealized inspiration and a repository of adult nostalgia and for the Victorians children are seen as more fully human and in need of protection, both periods represent youth who lack any real authority over their own destinies. Though a shift toward children taking over the reins of control from adults emerges in the early twentieth century, such power, the volume's critics lament, later becomes a literal burden as youth contend with and attempt to replace increasingly ineffective guardians. Indeed, in contrast to what contemporary writer Nick Hornsby has coined "kidults" (246), or adults who never grow up, the figure of the mid to late twentieth-century child in British literature is rarely innocent or carefree. In fact, he or she often buckles or falls under the weight of assuming too much maturity and responsibility much too early.

The least effective, and in fact somewhat disappointing essay in the collection is Paul March-Russell's "Baby Tuckoo among the Grown-Ups: Modernism and Childhood in the Interwar Period," which lacks a strong argument and convincing focus, elements that make the other contributions shine. The essay reads as though the author is just filing through his memory of children in modernist works and writing down whatever comes to him in a stream-of-consciousness style. The audience gains more insight into the period's children from the editor's succinct citing of March-Russell's article in the introduction, in which Gavin suggests that though ambivalently represented, children for modernist authors have become key elements in explorations of "the process of memory and language acquisition" (13).

Furthermore, despite the vast variety of "literary" sources presented, the volume, at times, seems a little too loose in its overall focus. A reader of this collection might wish, for example, for more clarity about whether this is an anthology focusing primarily on adult literature, children's literature, or both. When one reads essays about canonical writers for mature audiences for most of the volume and then comes upon interesting and enjoyable articles about twentieth-century children's book authors such as J.M. Barrie, Roald Dahl, or Enid Blyton later in the collection, it seems as though the text's focus has strayed into another territory altogether. Essays about children's literature would perhaps be better off in a separate volume focusing on and exploring the representations of the young in books penned especially for them. The inclusion of essays about books for both adults and children makes readers wonder, do constructions of the child change depending on the authors' intended audiences? The answer to this question is outside the scope of this critical collection, but could perhaps have been addressed in the later chapters of the text.

Of course, coverage is also an issue with this slim volume. Although the collection does not strive to be comprehensive or all-inclusive, when proposing to contend with several centuries

of British literature in 266 pages, inevitably many critical works featuring children will be neglected. Some might wish to see more commentary on contemporary British multi-cultural and postcolonial fiction that employs children's perspectives or on J.K. Rowling's wildly popular and influential *Harry Potter* series. Or where, some might argue, are the Anglo-Irish writers? While James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen, and Roddy Doyle get a brief nod, there is no mention of Jonathon Swift's satiric "A Modest Proposal," C.S. Lewis' amazing children's tales, or Patrick McCabe's gothecized child in the *Butcher Boy*. And though the volume mentions narratives of "miserable childhoods," (15) where is a critical discussion of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*? Indeed, if, as the editor boldly claims, "childhood has become one of the major themes in contemporary adult British fiction," (14) why does the one essay on the most recent writers only cover a single British novelist in any depth, to the exclusion of other authors on this theme? In fact, one present-day male writer is privileged to the exclusion of the many wonderful current female authors writing about the figure of the child. Examples such as Jeanette Winterson's lesbian *Bildungsroman*, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and Edna O'Brien's controversial and semi-historical novel *Down by the River* (1996) beg for inclusion.

Despite these minor drawbacks, *The Child in British Literature* is a thoughtful, timely, enlightening, and learned collection for scholars, educators, and beginners in the field of British childhood studies. Any reader looking for a contemporary, solid, professional, and informative volume on representations of the British child will find an excellent resource here.

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