

Constructing the Child

Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature. Marah Gubar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 280 pp.

Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England: Literature, Representation, and the NSPCC. Monica Flegel. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009. 236 pp.

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<1> In her seminal study *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature*, Beverly Lyon Clark explores “the institutional underpinnings of the field of children’s literature” and considers “the various ways in which our culture has constructed children and children’s literature.”(1) Moving from the nineteenth century’s respect for the genre (especially in America) to the commodification of children’s culture by Disney and the popularity of the Harry Potter series, Clark rethinks not only the history of children’s literature and culture, but also our understanding of its audience, reminding us that “children are creative, not just imposed on,” and that the currently bemoaned impact of commodified children’s culture is not “significantly different from that of Fauntleroy a century ago.”(2) This corrective view of the genre served as a call to action to many in the field of children’s literature, and it is exciting to see some specific responses to that call in the two books under review here.

<2> Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers* and Monica Flegel’s *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England* respond to Clark’s work by expanding our understanding of the culture of children and children’s literature in the nineteenth century and correcting some widely-held assumptions about the so-called “golden age” of writing for children. Gubar, in particular, takes pains to reveal the degree to which that moniker frequently marks an approach that “underestimates the critical richness and complexity of Golden Age children’s literature” and that ignores how often writers of this period “frequently complicate, challenge, ironize, or interrogate the artless ‘Child of Nature’ paradigm” associated with such writers as Lewis Carroll, J. M. Barrie, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and Kenneth Grahame (vii). Hence her argument that children of this period were (in actuality and in fiction) as artful as they were artless, as much “innocent Other” as “competent collaborator, capable of working and playing alongside adults” (9). Drawing attention, on the one hand, to the passage of laws that cordoned off childhood as a realm to be protected and to the fictions that constructed the child as “an isolated emblem of innocence” and, on the other hand, to “classic Victorian and Edwardian children’s books” that “conceive of child characters and child readers as socially saturated beings, profoundly shaped

by the culture, manners, and morals of their time,” Gubar ultimately argues that “the late Victorian cult of the child is better characterized as a cultural phenomenon that reflected *competing* conceptions of childhood” and that children’s literature of the “golden age” “celebrates the canny resourcefulness of child characters without claiming that they enjoy unlimited power and autonomy” (4, 9, 5). Especially striking in this regard is her insistence that, despite our widespread acceptance of Humphrey Carpenter’s 1985 claim that “‘the old view of the child as miniature adult . . . had largely receded’ by the mid-nineteenth century,” fairy tales and fantasies, including Ruskin’s *The King of the Golden River* (1851) and Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) (as well as John Leech’s cartoons for *Punch* of worldly-wise, jaded children) reveal that “Victorians were constantly confronted with young people behaving like adults, whether it was poor children who were already ‘old hands’ at whatever form of labor they practiced or wealthy children accompanying their elders out to various social, scientific, artistic, or religious events” (17).

<3> What *is* new at mid-century, Gubar argues, is that these child-adults, the precocious children and far-too-informed and experienced young so common in Dickens and Mayhew (and Ruskin and Thackeray), are becoming objects of concern as much as objects of precocious delight. In considering precisely how children became objects of concern and exactly when childhood turned into a period of life that needed to be protected, Gubar’s concerns intersect with Monica Flegel’s. In their attention to child labor laws (pertaining to children working in factories and in theaters) and to the growing sense that “all children should enjoy a protected period of dependence and development before experiencing the cares and pleasures of adult life,” both critics historicize a notion of childhood that privileges innocence and insists that children lack both responsibility and an awareness of the world at large (Gubar 17). Both Gubar and Flegel also make it plain that this ideal took a very long time to put in place. Citing the work of Hugh Cunningham and of Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, they remind us that “the battle” to protect childhood “was not won until the early twentieth century” (Gubar 17): “the emergent ‘idea of childhood as properly a time of happiness,’” as Cunningham puts it, was in competition with earlier notions of childhood “throughout the nineteenth century” (Flegel 14). Citing James Kincaid’s suggestion that “because our own culture has so thoroughly embraced” the image of the innocent child, “critics have tended to focus disproportionately on texts that feature it,” Gubar not only generously directs our attention to an earlier version of her argument, but she also takes Kincaid’s suggestion seriously, for *Artful Dodgers* is marked by an attention to the noncanonical that reveals just how right Kincaid is and just how prevalent the tendency (among Victorians and Victorianists) to find evidence that would support their belief in an uncomplicated notion of childhood. Similarly salutary is her reminder that Kincaid had argued (in 1992) that critics have “misrepresent[ed] Philippe Ariès’ famous point about the separation between adult and child. While Ariès is careful to argue that the emergence of the desire to distinguish adulthood from childhood ‘was quite gradual,’ Kincaid observes, his followers attempt to ‘seize control of the past by erasing distance, turning Ariès’s gradualism into Noah’s flood’” (Gubar 34).

<4> In tracing how cruelty to children became not only “a distinct legal concept,” but also, and more crucially, how that new legal understanding of child abuse reveals “a transition in the conceptualization of child endangerment” from a matter of “mere ill-treatment” and “mere neglect” to “acts of ‘cruelty to children,’” Flegel admirably resists the flood narrative (1).

Moving from narratives of child abuse in the 1830s and 40s and Mayhew's depiction of child street performers at mid-century, and contextualizing those narratives alongside the emergence of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the 1880s and 90s, and the passage of the "Children's Charter" in 1889, *Conceptualizing Cruelty* reveals how (and how very slowly) cruelty to children became less an issue of labor, education, or health and more of a domestic issue. In much the same fashion, in the literature of the mid-nineteenth-century, "the figure of the endangered child was, in part, replaced by the abused child — a figure whose place was ensconced within nascent child-protection discourse" (3). As Flegel's "in part" suggests, the history of this shift is not linear nor does it always seem logical. As she puts it, "debates about endangered childhood in the nineteenth century surface and resurface in [the literary and the social-scientific] genres before becoming subsumed in the overarching narrative of child protection" (4). And these genres of course interfere with each other: "the NSPCC's primary depiction of the abused child as helpless, defenceless, and innocent, for example — a depiction largely inspired ... by literary representations of childhood — certainly served to make the child a worthy subject of social intervention, but it also limited what a child could do and what a child could be" (4). That these limitations were not always beneficial to children becomes especially clear in her chapter on street performers and child actors (chapter 3 "What Eyes Should See': Child Performance and Peeping Behind the Scenes"). Reading this chapter alongside Gubar's work on child actors and children's theater (chapter 5, "The Cult of the Child and the Controversy over Child Actors" and chapter 6, "Burnett, Barrie, and the Emergence of Children's Theatre") is especially instructive. Together they provide a picture of a child that is just as much an agent as an object, that is at once dependent and autonomous, helpless and capable and of the literature, the laws, and the cultural appetite that produced such a paradoxical figure. Or, as Gubar puts it, "involved in an inherently collaborative art form, successful child performers were perceived as being both artful and natural, both inscribed and original. In other words, they modeled a form of nonautonomous agency in which being scripted by adults did not necessarily preclude them from functioning as intelligent, creative individuals" (158-9).

<5> Flegel's chapter on the development of child protection laws based on the laws that protected animals is especially nuanced and telling in terms of the construction of the child (chapter 2, "Animals and Children': Savages, Innocents, and Cruelty"). Her emphasis on "the child and the animal as companions in their suffering, as blameless victims of an uncaring, adult society" corrects the popular view that laws protecting animals were in place long before laws that protected children (41). This view is based on the admittedly striking fact that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the RSPCA) was founded in 1824, almost sixty years before a local chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was founded and sixty-five years before it became a national society. But that fact obscures the equally relevant fact that "violence against and abuse of children in England was condemned — both in society and before the law — before it became a distinct crime in 1889"; the Victorians denounced cruelty to both categories of "feeling subjects," and "the linkage of the child and the animal allowed for a productive, if problematic, space in which to examine questions about the nature of the child, the relationship between humans and the 'lower creation,' and the concept of cruelty itself" (40, 41).

<6> The link between children and animals is further, if whimsically, suggested by Gubar's description of Jim Hawkins, the putative hero of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), as "a

helpless parrot” (71). This droll (and accurate) description comes in what is perhaps my favorite chapter in *Artful Dodgers*: chapter 2, “Collaborating with the Enemy: *Treasure Island* as Anti-Adventure Story.” A wonderful example of what Sharon Marcus calls “just reading,” this chapter resists “*Treasure Island*’s status as an energizing myth of empire” and reveals not only how “terrifying, traumatizing, and ethically problematic” that project of empire is in Stevenson’s novel, but also the extent to which the novel “undermines [Jim’s] achievements” (70, 83). “Even as Stevenson characterizes his hero as an indispensable partner in the adults’ enterprise,” Gubar points out, “he suggests that Jim is not so much collaborating as collaborating with the enemy, functioning as a helpless pawn rather than a genuine colleague” (83). Gubar here “attends to what [this] text make[s] manifest on [its] surface” and is thus able, as Marcus puts it, “to account more fully for what” *Treasure Island* makes quite clear at the level of plot and character “but critics have failed to notice.”(3) “Just reading,” in other words, allows Gubar to reveal the paradoxical nature of Victorian childhood at work in a text that has — for over a century — been read as a straightforward celebration of the child-hero. This approach is as eye-opening as it is productive, not only for a more precise understanding of this classic text, but also, as I learned when I assigned this chapter to my students, more generally as a reading strategy. It inspired in my students a similarly attentive and skeptical post-colonial reading of *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885), and they continued throughout the term to compare the accepted reading of a text to what the words on the page were, in fact, telling them.

<7> *Artful Dodgers* is just as insightful about texts for which there exists no accepted reading: texts which have disappeared from print, and thus from the canon and from our syllabi. What is more, Gubar doesn’t just recuperate noncanonical texts; she brings them into productive conversation with canonical texts in intriguing (not to mention highly suggestive and teachable) ways. I want, in particular, to call attention to her reading of Dinah Mulock Craik’s *The Little Lychetts: A Piece of Autobiography* (1855). One of Gubar’s examples of a text with a child narrator and thus an example both of how “children are shaped by their culture” and of the degree to which they “resist and revise the conventions of adult society,” *The Little Lychetts* not only revises *Jane Eyre* (“a book whose ignored subtitle is *An Autobiography*,” Gubar reminds us), but it also, like *Treasure Island*, “encourages children to become more canny critical readers of the stories handed to them by adults” (44, 45, 68). Gubar here does for Craik’s virtually unknown novel what U. C. Knoepfelmacher did for Jean Ingelow’s *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869), Juliana Horatio Ewing’s “Amelia and the Dwarfs” (1870), and Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* (1872) and “Speaking Likenesses” (1874) in *Ventures into Childland*.(4) She does similarly enticing recuperative work with the children’s stories and poems of Tom Hood. Popular in the nineteenth century but “virtually unknown today,” they “provide some of the most amusing proof that Golden Age fantasists often resisted the pressure to construct a barrier between innocence and experience, viewing Romantic primitivism as a target for humor rather than a cherished creed” (22). Gubar’s pages on these texts provide yet another strong corrective to simplistic notions about the Victorians’ idea(l) of the child. Revealing the way in which one of Hood’s fairy tales makes Rousseau’s theory of education the butt of his joke, for instance, or quoting from his poetry (a poetry that has much in common with the limericks of Edward Lear and anticipates the word games of Milne’s *When We Were Very Young* [1924]), Gubar’s use of Hood provides one more brilliant (and captivating) piece of evidence for her argument about the literacy and competence of children in the nineteenth century and as portrayed in nineteenth-century literature.

<8> As I hope this review has made clear, these two new books are enormously readable and a pleasure to learn from, and they are also crucial correctives to still-current assumptions about Victorian childhood and the literature produced for and about nineteenth-century children. Gubar's book compels me to revise my seminars in Victorian Children's Literature to represent more thoroughly the noncanonical writers so popular and influential in the nineteenth century, and *Artful Dodgers* also inspires me to add a consideration of children's theater to my courses. Similarly, Flegel's book suggests how we might move beyond Mayhew and more accurately and specifically contextualize the imbricated categories of age and class. Further, in her inclusion of fiction written for a family audience, particularly the novels of Dickens, she contributes to a more precise understanding of the child in Victorian literature and in Victorian culture, moving away from the imprecise and often anachronistic practice of categorizing nineteenth-century literature by the age of its intended audience and suggesting, rather, a more inclusive approach to what we might call the child in fiction. Indeed, both Gubar's and Flegel's larger concerns with what precisely constitutes a child suggests not only that this category was still very much under construction in the nineteenth century, but also that (and therefore) the genre of children's literature was also a work in progress. Children's literature does exist as a separate and discernible category of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, but that clear demarcation is not something we find (it is rather a category we impose) when we seek to classify eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts in terms of their intended readers. Gubar's and Flegel's work also reminds us, then, not to inflict our own generic assumptions onto the writing of the Victorians and Edwardians.

<9> Some quibbles: I'm not sure what the mercenary marriages Ralph Nickleby tries to arrange for his post-pubescent niece Kate have to do with cruelty to children, and Flegel's repeated references to Florence Dombey as Flora are jarring. Gubar's work in "reconceiving" Victorian and Edwardian children's literature is groundbreaking, to be sure, but she is not the first to interrogate our understanding of this period and its notion of children's literature or to draw our attention to a much wider canon of children's literature. A more generous acknowledgment of the work of Knoepfelmacher on Ewing and Carroll, in particular, would seem to be in order, as would at least a reference to the important anthology of Victorian fairy tales and fantasies (by some of the writers Gubar is most interested in recovering — Ewing, Mary Louisa Molesworth, Burnett, E. Nesbit) he co-edited with Nina Auerbach.⁽⁵⁾ But these are minor criticisms, and they do not detract from the importance or the strength of these two wonderful new contributions to a field still too often misunderstood and still woefully understudied. *Artful Dodgers* and *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children* go far in remedying both ills.

Endnotes

(1) Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003): xii, xiii.^(^)

(2) Clark, 179.^(^)

(3) Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 3, 75. (^)

(4) U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). (^)

(5) Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, ed., *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). (^)