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Introduction: Giving the Child a Voice

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Children's literature has an enormous impact, perhaps still underestimated, in forming the minds, morals, and value systems of young readers. Many of the stories specifically aimed at children teach them to differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil but often the stories also advocate for such conventional values and ideologies as patriarchal social order by reinforcing gender roles. This is true in particular for early fairy tales and conventional children's stories that also tend to promote dominant racial attitudes according to the ideologies established in the readers' society. In addition, many stories convey a message that relies on transgression-punishment structure and applaud passivity, as Maria Tatar notes, favoring "passive heroes and heroines—figures who start off as victims but live happily ever after because they are beautiful or lucky" (xxi). The "Frog Prince," a story in which the frog, "the slimy, repulsive reptile" as Jack Zipes defines it, awaits to be transformed into the prince that he is so as to obtain the princess, may be cited as merely one example among numerous others that promote conventional values. "Only when he [the frog] is handsome and wealthy and suits the mating standards of the princess," Zipes notes, "does he succeed in bedding and wedding her" (110). And yet, as children's stories tend to be entertaining, informative, instructive, and even pedagogical, they offer multiple interpretative possibilities; however, what remains constant is the fact that they commonly reflect the society in which they are produced and/or read (see also Röhrich). In the "Frog Prince," for instance, class, gender, and even race intersect in a seemingly simple tale that lends itself (and its many variations) to dissimilar readings, many of them even contradictory.[1]

Although the diversity of possible interpretations of the same text would seem to suggest that scholars—and readers—are faced with rather complex narratives, children's literature has continuously been classified as minor literature. Such marginalization and categorization was challenged during the 2016 symposium on "The Child's Voice, The Child's Gaze," which convened in Bordeaux, France. The essays gathered together in this volume result from that event; they address many of the complexities characterizing children's literature, pointing out how, indeed, the narratives often appeal both to young and adult audiences. As is well known, the Grimm tales, for instance, originally targeted adults; only later were they modified to better suit younger readers as well. In a similar way, the contemporary trend in children's literature tends to veer toward targeting readers of all ages; the Harry Potter series serves as an example of such writing. Moreover, contemporary terminology alone, which is used to categorize readers, demonstrates the

[1] For more information, see, for example, Zipes 116-22.

troubling of traditional child-adult polarity. Undeniably, "there is a less of a break between the world of children and that of adults today," notes Virginie Douglas in the first essay in the collection, "both in the representation of childhood [...] and in generic terms, with the development of intermediate subcategories in the children's book, like the teenage novel or the YA novel." In her essay, "Negotiating the Age Divide in British Teen and Young Adult Fiction from the 1970s to the Present," Douglas discusses the "generic hybridity" and transition from childhood to adulthood, which, as she points out, is more of a "continuum" than a polarity.

One of the reasons why children's stories and fairy tales appeal to readers of all ages is because they bring order into a world that is chaotic. The simplified polarity between good and evil help children and adults interpret their reality moving away from its complexities into a world in which everything is either/or, not of various hues but is formed by the marked contrast between black and white. Escaping into a story with such clear antagonism between values and worldviews offers relief from ambiguities, transforming the moment of reading into a cathartic or empowering experience that depends on the identification process; in most instances, hope may be restored in an otherwise seemingly hopeless existence. Simultaneously, however, children's literature escapes such simplification, rendering the texts appealing to wider audiences invited to interpret the narratives through their own socio-cultural frame. The three essays that follow Douglas's discuss the so-called "all-age" literature and the dissolution of the traditional readership polarity of adults-children.

Philip Pullman's recent *His Dark Materials* trilogy is the example examined by Marie-Helene Mittmann in her "Shift or Dissolution? Fantasy Literature and the Emergence of 'All-Age.'" The appeal of Pullman's work targeting readers of all ages proves, Mittmann argues, "the strict binary between children's and adults' texts to be questionable, indicating that it could dissolve into 'all-age' at least with regard to this particular trilogy." A similar argument is introduced in the next essay in which Neil Gaiman's rewriting of fairy tales is discussed. Isabelle Gras' "The Child in Gaiman's Works: When the Symbol is the Thing" points out that "Gaiman started to write for children almost ten years after writing for adults." The opposite is true for Willa Cather, as Stéphanie Durrans explains in "'Kings in Exile': Children's Literature in Willa Cather's Early Fiction." Indeed, to quote Durrans: "Most of Willa Cather's readers would be surprised to learn that she tried her hand at children's fiction in the early years of her apprenticeship as a writer." These early stories, Durrans continues, "have long been forgotten and neglected by Cather scholars." In her essay she demonstrates Cather's mastery in what has been labeled "minor" literature, thus deconstructing "the opposition between high and low, between serious literature and supposedly minor forms of artistic expression." Such challenging of any established ranking and labeling of art in which Cather engaged resonates with the purpose of this essay collection.

It is quite surprising to learn that in addition to Cather, many of the authors whose works are discussed in the essays that follow are most commonly known for their fiction aimed at adult readers. Their children's stories most often are excluded from the canon stabilized around their texts and read by the general public, studied at schools, and analyzed at universities. The subsequent essays introduce children's writing by such celebrated authors, not generally associated with children's literature, as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and Oscar Wilde. In "Marketing Modernism for Children; or How Joyce's *The Cat and the Devil* and Woolf's *Nurse Lugton*… Were Made into Picture Story Books in English, Italian, and French," Caroline Marie illustrates how marketing strategies influence the categorization of literary works. In the essay, she uses Woolf and Joyce's posthumous picture books as her examples, arguing that "In a way, Children's literature is not unlike Modernism in that both create a contact zone between highbrow and middlebrow, the happy few and international readers, snobbism and cultural mass-market through reduplication and versioning."

Another representative of Modernism, T.S. Eliot, is discussed in Francois Ropert's essay on Eliot and his *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, better known to many, as Ropert suggests, through its "stage adaptation as the musical *Cats*." According to Ropert, the book addressed "an ageless spectrum of readers" and troubled the "dividing line between 'major' and 'minor' works." It abounds in intertextual references, in a way similar to Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince," which is the topic of the following essay. The voices that would subsequently appear in Wilde's drama, according to Emmanuel Vernadakis, already appeared in "The Happy Prince," published in 1888. "With 'The Happy Prince,' as later with his drama, Wilde seems to convey meaning through a creative use of various voices favouring the discrete or indiscernible minor voices rather than the blatant major ones." The story's subversive ideological message is conveyed through intertexuality: "it lampoons God, discredits religion, undermines conformity, impairs respect for authority and discards the Cartesian principle of integrity and wholeness." In other words, the story is representative of Wilde's writing in general.

The collection closes with Amelie Moisy's "Questioning Ideologies: Erskine Caldwell's Children's Books." In her essay, Moisy aims to show that "Caldwell highlights apparent progressive, emergent ideological formations, but that these coexist with a conservative ideology which seems to perpetuate the dominant power structure." This resonates with children's literature and fairy tales in general. If, on the one hand, they aim at teaching children normative values and attitudes, commonly associated with gender, on the other hand, authors of children's literature, as Dianne Johnson points out, "recognize the power and function of literature to accomplish certain objectives, such as the revising of histories that have been mistold" (217). Therein lies, in part, the power of the so-called "minor" texts whose labels and hierarchical position these essays challenge.

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