

Girls, Boys, Books, Toys

Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture. Ed. Beverly Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet. Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. 312 pp. US\$19.95 paper. ISBN 0-8018-6526-3.

Girls, Boys, Books, Toys is an interdisciplinary collection of sixteen critical essays that explore "feminist theory's engagement with children's literature and other aspects of children's culture" (1). Divided into three parts — History, Theory, and Culture — the book brings together the work of scholars, writers, and artists, both well established and emerging, from an impressive variety of fields including literature, history, sociology, and photography. The editors describe the book as a "sampler" of feminist approaches to the field of children's culture, and the needlework metaphor is apt. It evokes a foundational and abiding trope of feminist criticism at the same time as it gestures to the nascent field of "children's culture," a field that is still developing a common language and range of reference. The metaphor of the sampler also recognizes the challenge of stitching together a collection of essays that range widely in subject matter and approach. The diversity of topics and methodologies constitutes the collection's strength but also, though to a much lesser degree, its weakness.

The book's subject matter extends from children's literature of the Romantic or Revolutionary period (in Mitzi Myers's "Child's Play as Woman's Peace Work: Maria Edgeworth's 'The Cherry Orchard,' Historical Rebellion Narratives, and Contemporary Cultural Studies") to the nature of social science research on children's books (in Roger Clark *et al*'s "The Liberal Bias in Feminist Social Science Research on Children's Books") to an illustrated essay on contemporary boys' "action figures" (in Karen Klugman's "A Bad Hair Day for G.I. Joe"). The approaches and methodologies are similarly wide-ranging and include the descriptive (as in William Moebius's broad survey of women's contributions to the twentieth-century picture book genre in "Making the Front age: Views of Women/Women's Views in the Picture Book"), the quasi personal (as in Lissa Paul's responses to Grace Nichols's writing for adults and children in "Coming to 'sing their being': The Poetry of Grace Nichols"), the postcolonial (as in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's "Fictions of Difference: Contemporary Indian Stories for Children"), discourse analysis (as in John Stephens's and Robyn McCallum's "Discourse of Femininity and the Intertextual Construction of Feminist Reading Positions"), and cultural studies (as in Susan Willis's "Imagining Dinosaurs").

A key challenge in putting together such a disparate and wide-ranging collection is finding common ground. The editors accomplish this in two ways. First and most obviously, Beverly Lyon Clark's "Introduction" briefly but skilfully rehearses key moments in the development of children's literature criticism and feminist criticism since the 1970s, and outlines the ways in which the two fields have — or, mostly, have not — converged. The introduction cogently makes the case for the specific intervention that motivates *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys*. Second, there is an explicit conversation between many of the essays in this collection. In their article on social science research on children's books, Roger Clark *et al* refer to Lissa Paul's essay on Grace Clark together with Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas's essay on Yusuf al-Qa'id's story "Rahab Gives Up Drawing." Lissa Paul discusses Claudia Marquis's "Romancing the Home: Gender, Empire, and the South Pacific."

Cheryl B. Tornsey refers to Lois Kuznet's essay on doll houses and toy narratives and to Susan Willis's essay on dinosaurs. This critical conversation and the careful interweaving of the essays in this collection could not have been easy to orchestrate and the editors are to be commended for having pulled it off so successfully.

That said, there are challenges in a collection of this kind that are less easily overcome. Here I will outline two but I want to preface my remarks by noting that these challenges are inherent in the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field. The first is the difficulty in address created when experts in a field write for a cross-disciplinary readership. How much background knowledge can one assume and how much must one provide in the essay? An example of this is Mavis Reimer's excellent essay on the late nineteenth-century girls' school story. Reimer traces one influence on L.T. Mead's 1886 novel, *A World of Girls*, to W.T. Stead's use of the schoolgirl figure in his 1885 series of sensationalist articles on white slavery in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Stead's "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" series has attracted significant scholarly attention in the past decade, most of it feminist, and Reimer's rereading of the series to focus on the figure of the schoolgirl is a welcome addition to that body of work. However, accommodating a readership that may have no significant training in feminist literary criticism, Victorian studies, or even children's literature requires providing enough contextual background in each of these areas to make the essay coherent and persuasive to interested non-specialists. Reimer carries this off with incredible skill but one cannot help but wonder what more she might have done with the material if she had not been constrained in this way.

A second challenge inherent in the emergence of a new, interdisciplinary field is a certain methodological incoherence. This is most obvious in the essays in section three of the collection, "Culture." The essays in this section focus on contemporary children's popular culture and their subject matter ranges from boys' action toys (Karen Klugman) to the representation of dinosaurs (Susan Willis), the Riot Grrrl "movement" (Lynne Vallone), Arab leftist comic strips (Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas), and *Mary Poppins* (Lori Kenschaft). The first three essays in this section — those by Klugman, Willis, and Vallone — adopt a highly personalized methodology which one might describe as that of a "participant observer"; each of these essays has its origins in the author's observation of the culture of her own child/children and each attempts to generalize from these observations. The most obvious drawback of this approach is the absence of a sense of historical context and background. Lynne Vallone's essay on "Grrrls and Dolls: Feminism and Youth Culture," for example, claims that "whereas the differences and dissonances created by divisions of class, race, and gender are customarily invoked in cultural and literary studies, age has been less carefully attended to" (196); a footnote makes reference to recent work which "begin[s] to map the power imbalance between adult and child" but no reference is made to Shulamith Firestone's 1970 *The Dialectic of Sex* which took age (specifically children's rights) as a primary category of radical analysis. Similarly, Vallone reproduces a Riot Grrrls drawing which represents "a female torso as a mutilated apple, suggesting Eve" without recognizing that the drawing also clearly quotes the North American cover illustration of Germaine Greer's 1971 *The Female Eunuch*. However, I feel a little churlish pointing out these very slight omissions because the intellectual energy and insights offered by the essays in this section are fabulous. The weaknesses are those of a new field struggling to be born.

A final quibble about what I think is in most ways a groundbreaking collection: I am puzzled by an occasional tone of defensiveness or even querulousness with regard to the field. An example is found in Beverly Lyon Clark's "Introduction," which complains that "mainstream feminist critics have not been eager to embrace children's literature" but instead "appropriate" or "ignore" it (4-5). Similarly, Mitzi Myers complains that "if feminist social historians and literary critics are now trying to count women in, they are still leaving children out" (25). Surely this collection, which has brought together an incredible variety of feminist scholars — many of them at the top of their respective fields, others emerging as future leaders, all of them taking the imbrication of gender and children's culture very seriously indeed — gives the lie to that concern.

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The Inside Scoop on Children's Writers and Writing

Writing Maniac: How I Grew Up to be a Writer (And You Can, Too!). Sheree Fitch. Pembroke, 2000. 96 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55138-121-4. *The Young Writer's Companion*. Sarah Ellis. Greenwood, 1999. 128 pp. \$12.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-371-4, 0-88899-411-7. *The Storymakers: Writing Children's Books; 83 Authors Talk About Their Work*. Canadian Children's Book Centre. Pembroke, 2000. 176 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN 1-55138-108-7.

Young readers love to find out more about their favourite authors. Young writers are eager for hints and tips to help them achieve the same success. Three recent books, all appropriate for readers aged eight to twelve, meet both these needs.

Writing Maniac is part autobiography, part writing manual, pulling the young reader in with its inviting layout, snappy titles, small bites of information and irresistibly playful tone. Positive and encouraging, Fitch frees young writers to stretch their imaginations and have fun with words, ideas, dreams and the music of language. She shares her own successes and failures while providing lots of exercises and mind-stretchers for young authors. A useful booklist is included at the end, as well as a "List of writing words," with special emphasis on poetry. No computer or Internet references are included, and a common question "Where can I send my writing?" is not addressed. The focus here is on creating and having fun with writing, and Fitch does that well.

A journal format was chosen for *The Young Writer's Companion*, with ample space throughout for the reader to add notes and ideas. The book is divided into eight appealing sections on themes such as Islands, Dreams, or Family Stories, which connect information about how famous writers used these themes and techniques, with exercises for the reader to try. Ellis combines her own hints, writing activities and idea-starters with quotations from a variety of authors. Helpful annotated booklists end each section — an overall index would make this even more