



## Representing Childhoods through Comics

—Anuja Madan

Heimermann, Mark, and Brittany Tullis, editors. *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. U of Texas P, 2017. 280 pp. \$85.00 hc. ISBN 9781477311615.

As the title indicates, this collection of thirteen essays focuses on representations of childhood in comics from different countries. The editors note that their text represents “the first book-length approach to bring together a variety of comics, across vast geographic and temporal spaces, to better understand the intersections between comics and childhood as both an abstract concept and a lived experience” (3). They observe that the book stands at the intersection of comics studies and childhood studies, both of which are interdisciplinary fields. Although most chapters focus on North American comics, the anthology includes essays on comics from France, Japan, Finland, Argentina, and Iran, testifying to its transnational scope.

The anthology asks how constructions of childhood in comics speak to contemporary culture and society and how socio-historical concerns of the time shape

representations of childhood in comics. *Picturing Childhood* is organized chronologically and covers a century: the first chapter discusses *Little Orphan Annie*, which debuted in 1924, and the last chapter analyzes *Sweet Tooth*, which was serialized from 2009 to 2013. In the introduction, the editors helpfully categorize essays according to different areas of focus. Chapters by Pamela Robertson Wojcik, Lara Saguisag, and Annick Pellegrin “explore the ways in which comics reflect a wide spectrum of cultural values concerning children and childhood” (7). Chapters by Ralf Kauranen, Christopher J. Hayton and Janardana D. Hayton, Qiana Whitted, and Brittany Tullis show how comics negotiate “[c]omplex and sensitive national and sociocultural issues” through child characters (8). Chapters by Ian Blechschmidt, James G. Nobis, and Mark Heimermann investigate comics which represent “unconventional”

children, such as sexualized or grotesque children. The last group of chapters by Clifford Marks, C. W. Marshall, and Tamryn Bennett discuss autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics to explore the ways in which adulthood and childhood intersect.

This excellent anthology offers insight into how child characters in comics have been deployed for various purposes: for instance, to make child readers aware of complex issues of racism and sexuality, to socialize children into becoming good citizens, and to register protest against constricting gender norms. Qiana Whitted discusses comic book representations of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy who was lynched by two white men in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of flirting with a white woman.<sup>1</sup> Whitted argues that comics representing the lynching of Emmett Till “illustrate the racial and gender socialization of children during the civil rights era in ways that pointedly draw attention to how Black male youth are denied the social protections of childhood” (71). Whitted shows that in childhood memoirs such as Lila Quintero Weaver’s *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* and John Lewis’s *March: Book One*, Till’s lynching functioned “as a crucial part of the socialization process for Black children during the 1950s and 1960s” with regard to how they learned about race, gender, and sexuality (78).

The anthology also touches upon how children’s comics have been used to mould children into ideal citizens. Ralf Kauranen’s “Competent Children and Social

Cohesion: Representations of Childhood in Home Front Propaganda Comics during World War II in Finland” examines comics issued by Finland’s Ministry of Supply. Children were represented as productive and competent workers, “provid[ing] an understanding of children as worthy members of society with an important contribution to make” (41). Simultaneously, they were represented as innocent victims who signify the weakest members of society and therefore deserve protection (37). These discourses were framed in nationalistic terms and served to nurture social unity during wartime.

Nonetheless, as Brittany Tullis notes in her exploration of the *Mafalda* comics, child characters are also cleverly deployed to subvert and critique hegemonic norms. Tullis notes that Quino’s internationally acclaimed comic strip “constructs an alternative model of Argentine femininity for the next generation, one that revolves around education, compassion, participation, and critical evaluation . . .” (93). The spunky child protagonist becomes a vehicle for critiquing the “angel in the house” paradigm of femininity, represented by her mother. Christopher J. Hayton and Janardana D. Hayton also show how a child protagonist can disseminate socially conscious messages. Reading comics as “purveyors of cultural attitudes and norms” (48), the authors observe that *Little Audrey*’s inclusion of Tiny, an African American boy, was highly unexpected in the 1950s and 1960s. The chapter argues that the Tiny stories exposed readers to



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empathetic depictions of Black integration and egalitarian visions of Black equality.

Another question that the anthology raises is how adult artists negotiate with their childhood selves in autobiographical comics. For instance, in “Wise beyond Her Years: How *Persepolis* Introjects the Adult into the Child,” Clifford Marks argues that Marji introjects an adult consciousness into scenes of her childhood to contravene “the idea that Iranians are, somehow, impossibly other and dangerous” (166). Marks’s insightful analysis of particular panels highlights how such introjections transform the recollection of Marji’s childhood into a nuanced mediation on religious fundamentalism, Marxism, class, and the exploitation of Iranian youth in the war with Iraq.

An important theme of the collection is the negotiations that have taken place in comics about the concept of childhood innocence. Ian Blechschmidt’s chapter, “Sex, Comix, and Masculinity: The Rhetoric of *Zap Comix*’s Attack on the American Mainstream,” explores why *Zap Comix* (targeted at adults) mixed children and sex in explicit images. Blechschmidt argues that “*Zap*’s combination of images invoking children and childhood with graphic adult sexuality functions as a rhetorical device to critique . . . powerful Cold War-era imperatives . . . to conform to rigid ‘mainstream’ scripts for the performance of gender, particularly masculinity” (109). Annick Pellegrin’s essay also discusses non-mainstream comics that deliberately debunk hegemonic ideas of childhood. Pellegrin argues that Fabien Vehlmann’s French comics *Seuls* and *Jolies ténèbres*, marketed to children and adults respectively, break away from the tradition of classic Franco-Belgian comics for children, which were marked by an imperative to

protect children's innocence. The chapter claims that through the artwork as well as the focus on cruelty and death, the comics radically subvert the association of childhood with innocence.

One of the most compelling chapters of the book, Lara Saguisag's "*RAW and Little Lit: Resisting and Redefining Comics*," highlights the role of comics as a fertile ground for competing ideas of childhood. Saguisag outlines the conflicting discourses on childhood and adulthood that informed Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman's *RAW* comics and *RAW* junior's *Little Lit* series. She points out that "through *RAW*, Mouly and Spiegelman actively sought to remove comics from the sphere of childhood" and campaigned vigorously for the "adultification" of comics as a medium which could deliver "mature" narratives (129). The essay asks: "What does it mean, then, for Mouly and Spiegelman to create and publish children's comics after spending more than a decade asserting that comics needed to be dissociated from childhood?" (129). Saguisag places *Little Lit* in the context of children's comics published in the mid-twentieth century to argue that the series "upholds

the adult's role as creator and mediator of children's texts" (130) and, unlike children's comics published in the 1940s and 1950s, undermines children's agency as active, participatory readers. The chapter insightfully explores the ambivalent constructions of childhood in a medium that, in the middle of the twentieth century, mainly targeted children.

*Picturing Childhood* demonstrates how comics continue to be a site of contestation upon which the definitions of childhood are negotiated, and how representations of childhood are shaped by complex hegemonic or counterhegemonic socio-cultural forces. The book's varied themes as well as its broad geographical and temporal scope are important strengths, and the essays are strong across the board. The inclusion of work on transnational comics is commendable and indicates an increased (and hopefully sustained) interest in transnational and international comics scholarship. This anthology will be extremely valuable for educators and students of children's comics; it is likely to trigger many important conversations about the intersections between comics and childhoods.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Emmett Till's mother famously decided to have an open casket funeral, and his brutal murder drew attention to the pervasive violence faced

by African Americans. Emmett Till posthumously became an enduring symbol of racial injustice and an icon for the Civil Rights Movement.

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