



**Connecting Generations, Connecting Disciplines:
Intergenerational (Im)Possibilities in Popular Media**
—Madeleine Hunter

Joosen, Vanessa, editor. *Connecting Childhood and Old Age in Popular Media*, UP Mississippi, 2018. 256 pp. \$65.00 hc. ISBN 9781496815163. Platform for a Cultural History of Children's Media.

The third publication to emerge from the Platform for a Cultural History of Children's Media (PLACIM), *Connecting Childhood and Old Age in Popular Media* sets out to illuminate the metaphor of resemblance that pervades constructions of childhood and old age and to explore what role children's media might play in fostering intergenerational understanding and solidarity. Comprising twelve chapters and an introduction, the volume focuses on representations of relationships between children and the elderly in both Western and East Asian contexts. Contributors to the volume focus primarily on representations in books, film, and television; rather than creating separate sections for each medium, the book clusters discussions of similar media together to enhance the flow of the volume as a whole. The resulting volume sits at the intersection of several current trends in the field of children's literature and

culture—the reappraisal of the adult as both construct and potential reader; the extension of the field's theoretical frameworks and understandings to other children's media forms; the desire for a more global understanding of our field and its subject—each of which is drafted into the service of the volume's exploration of intergenerational relationships and dynamics.

The introduction opens on a discussion of the United Kingdom's 2016 vote in favour of leaving the European Union; editor Vanessa Joosen explores how, in the aftermath of the vote, public debate quickly became dominated by narratives of intergenerational competition that betray a larger tendency toward ageism (3). As Joosen, notes, while the majority of British voters under twenty-four voted to "Remain," 58% of voters over sixty-five voted "Leave," creating feelings of intergenerational rivalry and jealousy that saw elderly

“Leave” voters frequently portrayed in the press as “selfish usurpers of the means that younger generations should be entitled to” (3). As the elderly come to constitute an ever-growing percentage of the population across the globe, Joosen asserts that there is a growing need to rethink how we represent and understand old age, to become “agewise” (Gullette, *Agewise*). Drawing from the fields of anthropology, sociology, childhood studies, pedagogy, media studies, and film studies, the contributors to *Connecting Childhood and Old Age* pursue this goal, tracing how the “root metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson) of similarity between the very young and the very old manifests in children’s media culture at large so as to better understand what role children’s media can play in facilitating intergenerational solidarity.

Joosen has done much in the last few years to bring concepts from the field of age studies to bear upon the practice of children’s literary criticism. As she observes in her 2015 article, “Second Childhoods and Intergenerational Dialogues: How Children’s Literature Studies and Age Studies Can Supplement Each Other,” scholars of both children’s literature and age studies “start from the same constructivist approach to age” (127). Whereas children’s literary criticism has made it its mission to show how children’s fiction constructs ideas of childhood and the asymmetry of power by which this process is underpinned, age critics use research from fields such as biology, gerontology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to explore how different

life stages acquire different meanings in specific socio-historical contexts. Contemporary age critics share with scholars of children’s literature an interest in the way individuals are “aged by culture”—a term coined by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, whose research, alongside that of Susan Neiman and of Jenny Hockney and Allison James, serves as a key critical touchstone for the contributors to *Connecting Childhood and Old Age*. Central to Gullette’s research is the notion that the stories we tell about different stages of life, “whatever else they do, tell the meaning of time passing” (*Aged by Culture* 12-13). In her introduction, Joosen demonstrates how the stories that we have told about the very young and the very old have a history of mapping the behaviours of childhood onto the elderly, a history that reaches back to Aristophanes and that winds its way up through Ovid, Valerius, Maximus, and Pliny in the form of the *puer senex* trope, into the *Lebenstreppe* of the sixteenth century (5-6). This tendency to construct old age as comparable to childhood produces what Gullette describes as the “[d]ecline narrative” (*Aged by Culture* 13), the idea of aging as an arc of “physical and social ascension” (Joosen, *Connecting* 7) that hits its zenith during middle age, only to descend as one comes closer to the grave.

Having provided a broad overview of the history of the association of constructions of old age with those of childhood, Joosen turns her attention to the social and historical variability that determines the basis for



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the association and its manifestation in culture. In outlining the subjects of the chapters to follow, Joosen sketches three basic patterns that characterize the ways in which the old and the young are linked: “affinity, conflict, and complementarity” (15). While affinity is predicated upon the basis of perceived shared strengths and weaknesses, complementarity is born from difference, with the elderly bringing the resources of their accrued experience and adult status to interactions with the young, who in turn can perform a revitalizing function by virtue of their youth. As Joosen’s earlier discussion of the Brexit debate demonstrates, however, difference can just as easily create conflict between generations, particularly in times of social change. The only way out of this oppositional dynamic seems to be for children and the elderly to unite against the middle-aged, producing what Joosen describes as a “seesaw effect” (17).

If it seems as though this review has spent an inordinate amount of time dedicated to what is in essence the collection’s framing device, it is because so many of the critical and theoretical threads that Joosen introduces are woven throughout the collection as a whole. Too often anthologies of this sort can feel forced and uneven, as though someone has tried to force too many square pegs into round holes. In *Connecting Childhood and Old Age*, however, one finds a collection in the truest sense of the word—an anthology that feels as though it was produced not so much by a host of individual scholars working in isolation but by a *collective*—a community of researchers working from a shared theoretical foundation and set of references to produce some new and truly valuable insights for the field as a whole. Of particular note is Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer’s exploration of the uniquely

Dutch phenomenon of representations of euthanasia in literature for young readers. Lierop-Debrauwer provides a useful outline of the rise of youth culture, engaging Gullette's notion that individuals are aged by culture to explore how different conceptions of the life-course impact one's experience of old age, ultimately arguing for a continuum-based model of the lifespan. This position not only finds an accord in Elisabeth Wesseling's discussion of the disruption of linear progression in Hector Malot's *Sans famille* but also fits within the growing interest in "kinship" criticism in the field at large. As articulated by Marah Gubar, kinship criticism seeks to "eschew difference-model discourse that depicts children as a separate species in favor of emphasizing that growth is a messy and unpredictable continuum" (454). The contributors to *Connecting Childhood and Old Age* extend this approach to intergenerational relationships, with chapter after chapter offering the reader examples of how human experience can be reconceptualized as a constant state of "being and becoming" (88).

The move toward a more holistic conception of the life-course by those who study cultural products for children is aided by Lincoln Geraghty's chapter: "Mischievous and Mayhem: A Cultural History of the Relationship between Children and Old People in the Contemporary Family Film." Focusing on international family films, Geraghty repurposes Maria Nikolajeva's concept of aetonnormativity—the age or adult normativity

of children's literature—as a tool for analyzing intergenerational relationships across the life-course. In what may be the volume's most important contribution to the field, Geraghty argues that the adult at the centre of aetonnormativity is itself a construct that posits middle adulthood as the norm. Aetonnormativity thus "can be seen as going both ways" (149), othering not only the very young but also the very old. With this simple yet radical proposition, Geraghty demonstrates just what can be achieved when those of us who study different media engage with one another's research—when we speak to one another. His exploration of how aetonnormativity produces an affinity between children and the elderly in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Paddington* is just one of many contributions to the present volume that applies theory and insights from children's literary criticism in the analysis of other media. While such interdisciplinarity has been at the core of PLACIM's other outputs—*The Child Savage, 1890-2010: From Comics to Games* (Wesseling) and *Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys, and Contemporary Media Culture* (Wesseling)—*Connecting Childhood and Old Age* reads as a step forward. The volume's interdisciplinarity is visible not simply in aggregate, but in the approaches applied by its individual contributors.

Connecting Childhood and Old Age also provides readers with examples of what research in the field of children's literature, media, and culture looks like in the context of a globalized world. While the volume sets out

to “juxtapose Western and East Asian narratives to expose shared as well as distinct tropes in connecting childhood and old age” (19), the resulting collection exposes broader currents of similarity and difference that are characteristic of an increasingly globalized world. In Emily Murphy’s exploration of Taiwan’s “Strawberry Generation,” for example, we find the same derision toward younger generations and their problems that is a common feature of public discourse in the West; conversely, Sung-Ae Lee’s contribution puts the lie to potentially orientaling stereotypes that represent East Asian societies as innately more deferential to their elderly than those in the West through her quietly devastating exploration of the “jige” or “A-frame” script in twenty-first-century South Korean cinema (130). A tension between the global and the local runs throughout the volume, coming most explicitly to the fore in chapters by Gökçe Elif Baykal and Ilgim Ververi Alaca, and by Mayako Murai. Baykal and Alaca’s contribution is one of the few in the volume—alongside Anna Sparrman’s exploration of Swedish and American children’s responses to representations of age in advertising—to apply empirical research methods to its subject of inquiry. Baykal and Alaca’s study examines how Turkish audiences of grandparents and grandchildren respond to representations of the elderly in both international and local cartoons and concludes that current ideas about what constitutes an “authentic” representation of Turkish family life among content

producers and distributors are out of step with the lived reality of their research participants, who reported a greater affinity with the representations offered by international content. Such a conclusion raises questions about the value and purpose of cultural heritage in the age of global capitalism that are also central to Murai’s chapter, “Happily Ever After for the Old in Japanese Fairy Tales.”

Murai’s chapter is another of the volume’s standout contributions, offering what is, for a single chapter, a surprisingly far-reaching cross-cultural analysis of representations of the elderly in traditional Japanese and Western fairy tales—specifically those collected and published by the Brothers Grimm. Demonstrating the prevalence of the elderly as protagonists in Japanese fairy tales, Murai explores how the form’s representation of the elderly has been affected by interaction between the two cultures, beginning with a discussion of early Japanese translations of Brothers Grimm fairy tales and working forward to the recent outputs from the internationally renowned Studio Ghibli. In her discussion of Japanese constructions of old age, Murai entreats scholars to avoid relying on easy stereotypes of East Asian cultures as innately deferential to the elderly, arguing that “[a]dopting these views may reinforce an orientaling gaze on a non-Western culture by mystifying the image of old age in Japanese tales as a premodern alternative for the modern construction of old age in Western society” (50). As her analysis of Studio Ghibli’s *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*

shows, interaction with Western cultural productions may in fact be responsible for influencing Japanese storytellers to produce exactly the representations of the elderly that such cultural stereotyping assumes are already the default in Japanese culture. The chapter nevertheless ends on an optimistic note; after all, “[t]he international circulation of products works both ways” (59). One can hope the same holds true for the circulation of ideas and methods in our own field and that we see more research that borrows from Murai’s template.

In short, a volume that at first presents itself as dedicated to a new and, at present, relatively niche interest within the field of children’s literature and media culture ends up offering readers much more. In its attempt to illuminate the complex relationships that exist across age groups and to assert the innately multi-faceted nature of each individual stage of life, *Connecting Childhood and Old Age in Popular Media* reveals itself as a window onto where our field is right now and where it might be going next.

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