



Reviews



“There but Not There”: Representations, Roles, and Experiences of Children’s Embodiment in Literature and Culture

—Caroline Hamilton-McKenna

Harde, Roxanne, and Lydia Kokkola, editors. *The Embodied Child: Readings in Children’s Literature and Culture*. Routledge, 2018. 280 pp. \$149.95 hc. ISBN 9781138081567. Children’s Literature and Culture Series.

As contested sites, children’s bodies are often overlooked in cultural scholarship. In her empirical work on gender, bodies, and schooling, Carrie Paechter notably laments that even real-world “children’s bodies are not expected to be remarked upon” (311)—unless they are deemed unusual or lacking in relation to paradigms of childhood normalcy. Similarly, despite the ubiquity of children’s bodies

in popular cultural texts, few scholars have examined their varied and multi-layered expressions in literature, film, and other commercial products. Noting the predominant focus on discursive constructions of childhood in children’s literature research in particular, Maria Nikolajeva posits that only recently have literary analyses considered the child as “a material body existing in the material world” (133).



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The Embodied Child: Readings in Children's Literature and Culture, thoughtfully curated by editors Roxanne Harde and Lydia Kokkola, endeavours to address this long-standing scholarly oversight. Drawing from a range of disciplinary perspectives including anthropology, literary criticism, cultural studies, and education, authors in this collection analyze how and why children's bodies are constructed and consumed in and through a variety of historical and contemporary texts—as well as how fictional children and their real-world counterparts engage with intersecting depictions of age, race, class, religion, gender, and sexuality. In conversation with Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco's comprehensive overview, *The Body: A Reader*, their essays build on broader theorizations of the (mainly adult) body offered by scholars such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, and Grosz to trace how the "marked category" (*Embodied Child* 2) of the child's body reveals, resists, or sustains widespread cultural and political ideologies. Such interdisciplinary views on the child's body in relation to literature, culture, and the process of reading itself are especially relevant in the current cultural landscape, wherein, as editor Lydia Kokkola writes, "[e]xposure is the new normal" (14). She asserts in her introduction that there is an "increased urgency of understanding the limits and limitations of the body in the posthuman era" (12).

Harde and Kokkola bring a wealth of combined expertise on American fiction and culture, international children's literature, and English literature and education to this work. In keeping with their previously coedited volume of perspectives on Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna*, this most

recent collaboration focuses primarily on the embodied experiences of preteen and adolescent girls; as Kokkola acknowledges, the emphasis on representations of older children is in part due to their observation that “the body is more overtly problematized in fiction for teens . . .” (15). It is also worth noting that while the advance of post-humanism is given as a rationale for the volume’s timely publication, a post-humanist or new materialist lens is not explored beyond Kokkola’s passing introductory reference. Nevertheless, what might be considered gaps in theoretical perspectives are largely offset by the collection’s depth, scope, and polished curation; it provides rich and boundary-pushing material spanning multiple disciplines of the arts and humanities for readers invested in children’s studies, scholarship of the body, or more general research concerning the texts and cultures of young people.

The volume’s sixteen essays are grouped according to four major themes—“Politicizations,” “Corporealities,” “Reading Bodies,” and “Commodifications”—with editorial prefaces to each section that helpfully guide readers who may have specific interests. The one outlier in this structure is Janet Wesselius’s second introductory chapter to the collection as a whole, in which she relates the history of the Cartesian body-mind dualism to Anne Shirley’s character in L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*. Wesselius’s definition of embodiment

offers another departure; rather than provide readers with an example of a more explicit theoretical interpretation of embodiment as it relates to social and political processes—as subsequent chapters do—Wesselius’s treatment emphasizes the connections between embodiment and individual development. Specifically, Wesselius contemplates Anne’s embodied negotiation of imagined and sensory landscapes of geography and personhood as well as Wesselius’s own “multifaceted experiences of *reading* the books . . .” (35). Consequently, although Wesselius’s essay lays the groundwork for discussions of embodiment as both a theme and an experience, its reflective, personal tone might just as easily be read as a fitting conclusion to the volume rather than a conceptually unmoored chapter before the first collection of essays.

In “Section I: Politicizations,” authors Karen Sands-O’Connor, Roxanne Harde, Heather Braun, and Michelle H. Martin and Rachele D. Washington examine the multitudinous ways in which social identities such as race, class, nationality, sexuality, and gender in children’s texts contribute to Turner’s notion of an ideological “body project” (*Embodied Child* 14)—that is, to the establishment of obedient, socially acceptable political subjects. Building on Foucauldian discussions of discipline and biopower, these essays—interrogating the child’s body in relation to representations of Black Power, regional Appalachian identity, state systems of reproductive and social control, and African American

hair, respectively—explore the role of the fictional child’s body in shaping, resisting, or exposing the ideological maintenance of a self-regulating citizenry and homogenized consumer culture. While Karen Sands-O’Connor maps the broader ramifications of disparate meanings of Black Power and identity across various historical and geographical literary contexts, Roxanne Harde’s ecocritical reading of *The Hunger Games* interprets Katniss Everdeen’s damaged physicality as emblematic of the collective scars of an abused environment and regional identity. Following Harde’s thread of analyzing female bodies and dystopian political landscapes, Heather Braun examines the limited, conflicting, and often self-destructive opportunities for female rebellion in Louise O’Neill’s *Only Ever Yours*, set in a fictionalized autocratic society “that denies [women] autonomy, skepticism, and physical pleasure . . .” (81).

It is, however, Michelle H. Martin and Rachelle D. Washington’s chapter, “Kitchens and Edges: The Politics of Hair in African American Children’s Picturebooks,” that introduces one of the more engaging themes of the volume. Martin and Washington extend textual analyses to question how literary and classroom spaces might function as sites of embodied resistance to political marginalization and cultural myopia. How do texts represent the body, and how might readers engage with such representations toward a goal of social change? Drawing from their own experiences with picture books, such as bell hooks’s *Happy to be Nappy*, Martin and

Washington argue that these subversive texts not only model for Black girls “how to advocate for their own worth and beauty as children of color” (93), but they also help to establish “virtual kitchens within educational spaces . . .” (94). In so doing, they highlight the potential for literature classrooms to engage in the political work of developing readers’ cultural competence, sensitivity, and cross-racial understandings.

“Section II: Corporealities” arguably offers a more straightforward selection of historical textual analyses, utilizing a disability studies framework to consider the “meaning, nature, and consequences . . .” (97) of non-normative child figures in literature and ephemera from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have written elsewhere in their work on the “narrative prosthesis,” the symbolic use of disability in literary texts “provides an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body” (225). The three offerings in this section thus interrogate the limits and exceptions to traditional metaphorical functions of bodies that “deviate the most from the normative standard” (*Embodied Child* 95). Taken together, they explore how and to what end bodies marked as disabled or ill in works written for children emerge “as a social corrective” (96) or, alternatively, operate as a challenge to “an unsatisfactory status quo . . .” (98).

For instance, in their analysis of Susan Coolidge’s 1872 novel *What Katy Did*, Julie Pfeiffer and Darla

Schumm draw on Lennard Davis's definition of normalcy and Christian interpretations of the dis/abled body to argue that the characterizations of Katy and her aunts represent multiple and intersecting forms of disability and gender rather than simply reinforcing mainstream constructions of pious femininity. Through its "collage of images and experiences of disability" (99), they maintain, the novel "destabilizes simple binaries" (110) by highlighting "the impossibility of normalcy" (110). Kristine Moruzi's subsequent chapter, on the other hand, takes a closer look at intended child readers and texts for children that function more explicitly as "tool[s] of normalization" (97). Examining the confluence of health, citizenship, and "White, middle-class normative standards" (125) exhibited in the post-war magazine and other promotional materials of the Canadian Junior Red Cross, Moruzi centres her analysis around Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus to illustrate how visions of a healthy, competitive, yet charitable child came to embody and promote the ideal of a self-governing, economically stable society. Continuing this discussion of the social and political ideologies undergirding notions of disability and health in texts for children, Amanda Hollander's final chapter in Section II examines how early twentieth-century American and British children's fiction disturbingly aligned with principles championed by eugenicist and socialist platforms of the time—espousing beliefs in the segregation and sterilization of bodies deemed "unfit

and anti-utilitarian" (127). Unlike the romantic nostalgia indicative of the pre-war Victorian child, the presence of eugenics in works by E. Nesbit and Jean Webster "usher[ed] in the age of dystopic childhood" (138)—a period in which, in Hollander's view, disabled children were either fantastically or pragmatically removed in a hopeless display of post-war nihilism.

In "Section III: Reading Bodies," contributors Erin Spring, Adrielle Britten, Margaret Mackey, and Lydia Kokkola expand the collection's analysis of text to address the "embodied nature of the reading experience" (141). Like Section I, Section III incorporates a range of perspectives—most of which, with the exception of Erin Spring's initial chapter, do not include research on actual children. This makes Spring's study of the interconnectedness of place, text, and the embodied identities of adolescent Blackfoot Indigenous readers a particularly engaging bridge between the literary and cultural analyses of the volume and those, like Martin and Washington's chapter from Section I, that feature a stronger element of youth literacy. Broadening historian Mona Gleason's understanding of embodiment to a physical manifestation of not only social but also spatial relations of power, Spring integrates cultural geography and reader response frameworks in her combined empirical and textual analyses of how "encounters in *and* through places inform our identities, and therein the reading experience" (148).

Britten's, Mackey's, and Kokkola's succeeding chapters take a decidedly more literary studies approach to review how readers *might* engage with fiction—using their bodies and brains. Employing cognitive criticism to investigate how representations of “human embodiment, emotions, and relationships” (165) are connected and entwined in Bob Graham's *Silver Buttons* and Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen's *Extra Yarn*, Britten concludes that these “narratives imagine, in quite different ways, a fictional account of how humans flourish . . .” (171). Such texts thereby offer young readers a more attainable, “good enough” view of what it means to thrive in the twenty-first century.¹ Mackey's chapter, “The Child's Reading Body,” shifts the focus toward the “physicality of reading” (175) and the intersections of research on literature, reading, and neuroscience. Reviewing a range of theories on how not only eyes but also “hands, ears, and [the] whole body” (176) contribute to the “miracle of reading” (189), Mackey integrates reflections of her own “bicultural experience” (185) as well as current understandings of mirror neurons' effects on the body's engagement in the reading process. Finally, Kokkola's concluding chapter reviews empirical studies of not just “how the text acts upon the brain” (191), but rather how specific texts shape and interrelate with the development of children's brains and bodies. Arguing that “[r]eading is an embodied act” (202), Kokkola notes how data based on functional MRI technology has yet to capture how young students physically engage with digital media. As an appropriate close, Kokkola argues: “we need to pay more attention to children's bodies as they learn to read” (202).

¹ For discussion of “good enough” see Winnicott.

In the final part, “Section IV: Commodifications,” the contributors move from investigating the functions of children’s bodies as contested political sites, vehicles for various social ideologies, and integral players in the embodied processes of reading and meaning-making to examining how the child’s body is packaged and consumed as a cultural product. The authors break down the commodification of children’s bodies into three main subthemes: namely, that which is produced by adults for children, that which is produced with children for an adult gaze, and the lesser-known aspect of cultural production that children “create for themselves” (208). The first two chapters address the first of these subthemes. Samantha Christensen and Roxanne Harde’s chapter, “Food and the Disciplined Body in Nineteenth-Century Stories for Girls,” continues the work begun by Heather Braun in Section I—applying Susan Bordo’s research on aesthetic ideals of embodied femininity to reveal how in nineteenth-century texts for children, the consumable (and ideal) girl is also ascetic: a body who serves food to others but rarely nourishes herself. Jennifer M. Miskec’s chapter on Siena Cherson Siegel’s graphic novel *To Dance* likewise interrogates the “material, political body of the ballerina” (229) in works for children, maintaining that ballerinas continue to exist in cultural texts as glamourized collections of fetishized parts. According to Miskec, even works that illustrate the strain of ballet on the body perpetuate what she terms a “ballet habitus” (233)—a reinforcement of the fantastical and problematic vision of

femininity that young readers have become “conditioned to expect . . .” (239).

The third and fourth chapters in this section also examine visual depictions of the child’s body, this time through the medium of television. Rather than concentrating on how the child’s body is disciplined into preconceived ideals, however, these essays conclude the volume with discussions of the last two aspects of cultural production. They consider how the figure of the child is used, by both adults and children, to subvert, transgress, or blur conventional social and cultural boundaries. For example, Kate Norbury’s penultimate chapter revisits neuroscience and studies of the brain, arguing that by activating audience members’ mirror neurons, “[e]mbodied performances” (252) of queer teenage dancers on screen have the potential to more fully immerse spectators in the normalization of queer teenage sexualities and redefine White, heteronormative models of cheerleading and dance. Similarly, in exploring how children, as participants in and co-producers of popular culture, navigate and disrupt the conflicting expectations of an adult and child “collaborative gaze” (256), Lance Weldy’s final chapter delves into the tangled relationships between young performers, adult production teams, and their real or intended audiences. Weldy’s discussion of the sexualized “Twenty-First-Century Knowing Child” in television reality shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras* also marks a sobering end to the volume as a whole by calling attention to the voyeuristic tension

inherent in any cultural product that focuses so intently on children's bodies. Citing Anne Higonnet, Weldy aptly notes how the bodies of young people (even, one might infer, in scholarly works) are forced to vacillate between being visible and invisible, being impossibly "there and not there" (268). The result is a contradictory "interchange of mediated awareness" (268) that blurs the line between what children produce for others and what they create for themselves.

As Mona Gleason has observed, "[s]cholars have offered the term 'embodiment' as a more self-conscious acknowledgement of the inextricable role that the body played, and continues to play, in shaping and giving significance to human experience" (195). The editors of and contributors to *The Embodied Child: Readings in Children's Literature and Culture* add considerable depth to understandings of and language around embodiment in relation to cultural texts and materials for young

people. They do so not self-consciously, but rather with deftly woven and thoughtful themes and discussions. The contributions of this work interrogate children's discursive and material bodies in all their complex manifestations—as tools, vessels, forces, symbols, and thoroughly contested and contingent sites of identity, ideology, and engagement. The authors not only address Western representations of the child's body—over time and across media landscapes—but also consider the ways in which children's bodies themselves might respond to or engage with such depictions. Overall, the work presented in this volume provides readers with a wide range of perspectives and theories around the body and embodiment as it relates to the (mostly older) child in popular culture—offering scholars of child studies, children's literature, and education a foundational collection through which to explore the interrelated, fluid boundaries of child, body, and text.

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