

# Introduction

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What is so special, for adults, about the books they read as children? This is the question Walter Benjamin asks in his essay on children's literature. Whatever people read in their childhood seems, in adult memory, "to have been the most beautiful and best thing possible" (250), Benjamin suggests. At least some of the contributors to this special issue, *Children's Literature*, would agree. And some might add another point to Benjamin's observation: not only are adults nostalgic about the books they read in childhood, children's books themselves are written by nostalgic adults. Think of Peter Pan's Neverland, Mary Lennox's secret garden, Dorothy Gale's Land of Oz: such magical places as these "are created by adult authors, not just for child characters and readers, but for their own nostalgic indulgence," Susan E. Honeyman writes in this issue. Her essay, "Childhood Bound: In Gardens, Maps, and Pictures," considers fantasy worlds (gardens, remote islands, barnyards) created by authors of children's literature, fictional childhood spaces that all have one feature in common: "they are clearly bound and inaccessible to adults." The bounding of the space establishes it as belonging to children alone, as "childhood bound." The bounding also sustains adult nostalgia. "Adults are childhood bound, in terms of constructing childhood as an ideal destination," Honeyman writes; "but childhood itself is bound by borders that sustain

the fantasy.” Her essay explores these bounded spaces as “imaginary escapes from ‘real,’ civilized, urban(e), disconnected experience.”

The imaginary, written and read in diverse ways, is one of the threads that ties these essays together. For Johanna M. Smith in “Constructing the Nation: Eighteenth-Century Geographies for Children,” imaginary spaces (in this case, imaginary geographies of nation) serve an ideological, “nation-building,” function. Smith examines geographies for children written during the eighteenth century, when Britain was taking shape as a nation. She argues that, although children’s geographies have received very little critical attention, they “can profitably be examined for the cultural work that they do” in imagining a national and predominantly commercial community, bounded off from its Others along gender and racial lines. In Virginia Brackett’s “Romantic Archetypes in *Peppermints in the Parlor*,” the imaginary again has an ideological role, though one viewed positively in terms of community- and character-building. Brackett draws from Northrop Frye’s theory of the imagination (as well as from Carl G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, Jean Piaget, and others) to analyze romantic quest archetypes in Barbara Brooks Wallace’s *Peppermints in the Parlor*, a mystery written for children between the ages of eight and twelve. Archetypal plot and imagery “offer pleasure” to childhood readers, Brackett maintains. More than this, they offer “identity-strengthening models.” The romance may support, in children and in readers of any age, “the development of self-respect and a respect for others.”

The imaginary is very much in play in “Private Places on Public View: David Wiesner’s Picture Books,” where Perry Nodelman suggests why the illustrations (floating turnips; frogs, fish, or lima beans, flying in formation) in David Wiesner’s books are so much like each other and so disruptive of normally expectable reality. Wiesner’s pictures “might well represent the state of fantasy itself,” Nodelman writes. “More exactly, they might represent that which makes fantasies fantastic.” In the same gesture, they might tell us something about the fantastic “unnaturalness of human logic.” Image and text come together again in Philip Nel’s “‘Said a Bird in the Midst of a Blitz . . .’: How World War II Created Dr. Seuss.” Focussing on Seuss’s experience between 1941 and 1943 as a political cartoonist for the newspaper *PM*, this essay assesses “the degree to which World War II influenced not only [Seuss’s] later work but also all of us who grew up reading that work. He produced books that encouraged us to ask questions instead of accepting answers,” Nel writes; “and he taught us that even smallish Whos and little turtles can speak out and make a difference.”

In Lynn Penrod's "Bosco and Le Clézio: Elemental Initiations," fantasy involves rites of passage from childhood to adolescence. Penrod's essay brings together two writers who "would appear to find their inspiration in two very different imaginary fictional worlds, indeed from two different worlds and from two different times altogether," but who both emphasize initiation rituals and rites of passage in their writing for children, and who both involve the elements, "earth, air, fire, and water," in their initiation tales. Nicole E. Didicher, in "Adolescence, Imperialism, and Identity in *Kim* and *Pegasus in Flight*," also considers the child's passage to, and through, adolescence, comparing "the interactions between the ways that fiction for early adolescents prepares readers to take part in a world of adult imperialism and the ways that such fiction can represent an imperialist society within its pages." Didicher asks: "Is there a relationship between the values inherent in proper maturation and imperialist ideology?" To undertake her comparative study, she reads Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, a "novel set within a fictional version of an actual imperialist society," alongside Anne McCaffrey's *Pegasus in Flight*, "a recent work of science fiction set within a fictional but similarly imperialist society." Mark Wolff offers another study of the imperialist and colonizing tendency in children's literature in "Western Novels as Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century France." After considering the history of the western novel in France, as a genre geared particularly to children, Wolff goes on to make the case "that the western novel can be understood as the instrument of a double colonization: a colonialist gaze that appropriates *le Nouveau Monde* and dominates the eye of the child." In "Nontraditional Adoption in Progressive-Era Orphan Narratives," Claudia Nelson suggests that fiction for juveniles about nontraditional adoption is, at once, ideologically laden and socially radical in its approach to women's domestic role. Nelson examines texts published between 1890 and 1918, finding a "divided" message in children's literature, an "ambivalence" that is indicative of "a serious and sophisticated attempt" to deal with complex social issues.

Three essays in this issue engage feminist critiques. Lori M. Campbell's "'For I am But a Girl': Female Power in Ford Madox Ford's 'The Brown Owl'" brings a feminist perspective to bear on Ford's characterization of the fairy-tale princess, Ismara. This essay places Ismara within an historical and literary framework, including the Victorian "political, psychological, and sociological" landscape. Julia McQuillan and Julie Pfeiffer, in "Why Anne Makes us Dizzy: Reading *Anne of Green Gables* from a Gender Perspective," read Montgomery's novel to demonstrate the usefulness to literary critics of what social scientists call a "gender perspective." McQuillan and Pfeiffer argue that recent advances in this sociological theory of gender help us

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see that *Anne of Green Gables* “can both challenge and reinforce gender structures.” Finally, Sharyn Pearce’s essay, “‘*Secret Men’s Business*’: New Millennium Advice for Australian Boys,” undertakes a feminist critique of the so-called men’s movement. Pearce centres her critique on John Marsden’s 1998 self-help book for boys, *Secret Men’s Business*. Her essay “explores the ideas and the literature that lie behind the publication of Marsden’s book, much of which is related to backlash politics, and in particular to the recently ignited controversy over the impact of feminism upon the traditional forms of masculine comportment and socialization.”

*Children’s Literature*: we are pleased to publish this rich and varied issue.

#### WORKS CITED

Benjamin, Walter. “Children’s Literature.” *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. Ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. Trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge, MA: Belnap, 1999.