The Year of the Child: Children's Literature, Childhood Studies, and the Turn to Childism[1]

*Sarah Wadsworth**

The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities. Ed. Anna Mae Duane. University of Georgia Press, 2013.

Making Americans: Children's Literature from 1930 to 1960. Gary D. Schmidt. University of Iowa Press, 2013.

Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature. Jodi Eichler-Levine. NYU Press, 2013.

In *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994), Anne Scott MacLeod observes that by 1920, children's literature had become an "enclave"—"a garden, lovingly tended by those who cared about it but isolated as well as protected by the cultural walls that surrounded it" (125). At the time MacLeod published her landmark study, these metaphors could easily have extended to the academic pursuit of children's literature. Analogous to the growth of children's literature in the early twentieth century, when "all the creative activity, all the knowledgeable producing and reviewing and purveying . . . took place a little apart from the larger world of literature" (125), a generation ago the scholarship devoted to children's literature tended to be cordoned off from the larger scholarly enterprise, cultivated by a dedicated few but marginalized within literary studies as a whole. Of 549 journal articles published between 1974 and 1994 and indexed under the keywords "children's literature," 80% issued forth in specialized journals devoted to children's literature, primary or secondary education, librarianship, or the book trade. Of the remaining 20%, only a handful appeared in journals with a broad disciplinary scope.[2]

Twenty years later, the academic study of children's literature resembles less a secluded reserve, sectioned off from its disciplinary environs, than a thriving hub sustained by and extending along a network of interdisciplinary crossroads. Each of the books I consider in this essay review exemplifies the kinds of cross-disciplinary

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scholarship currently unfolding in this dynamic field. As critical coordinates, they help map the contours not only of this particular branch of literary studies but also a wide swath of US cultural history. Even as they illustrate the extent to which children's literature has been incorporated into larger disciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations, however, each of these recent studies also reflects how scholars of children's literature and childhood studies have embraced a distinct set of philosophical and methodological approaches. Each one makes a significant contribution to these expanding fields. Considered in tandem, they prompt an overriding question with far-reaching implications for literary studies as a whole: how does the synergy among these critical texts illuminate what the turn to the child might mean for the discipline in its broadest sense?

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One of the signs that a disciplinary subfield has emerged in its own right is that practitioners begin to engage in self-reflective conversations concerned with its definition, theoretical foundations, origins, and historical as well as future development. In the area of children's literature, this metacritical activity has been gathering force for the past decade. Spanning the gamut of academic audiences, Perry Nodelman's theory-driven *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008) and Seth Lerer's classroom-friendly *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008) barely preceded a swift succession of reference books, including *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (2009), *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature* (2011), and *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature* (2012). At the same time, Philip Nel and Lissa Paul's *Keywords for Children's Literature* (2011) and M. O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds's *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook* (2011) took up places beside Peter Hunt's pioneering collection *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999; rev. 2005). Also, in 2011—surely a watershed year—Kenneth Kidd published his dual disciplinary history *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011), while *PMLA* showcased children's literature in its forward-thinking "Theories and Methodologies" section.[3] Reinforcing the existing disciplinary infrastructure, contributions such as these helped to solidify the fundamental questions organizing the subject: How do children's literature and the criticism devoted to it contribute to the ways we understand history, culture, psychology, art, and other branches of humanistic and social-scientific thought? What impact does the study of children's culture have on the ways we think about and interact with children and other adults, both on the individual and social levels? In what ways is it productive to think of children's literature scholarship as both distinct from and integrated with work in other disciplines as well as literary studies more broadly? With the recent publication of

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The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities (2013), edited by Anna Mae Duane, more than a dozen top scholars offer their perspectives on such field-defining questions.

Conceived as "discrete instruments in a theoretical toolbox" (8), the chapters in *The Children's Table* represent an impressive array of contexts, including law, history, philosophy, literature, and architecture, and approaches, such as queer studies, feminism, critical race theory, historicism, and performance theory. At the same time, the collection's many fine essays aim to stimulate interdisciplinary reciprocity, a goal Duane facilitates through a four-part structure that organizes the essays conceptually, rather than by discipline. This editorial strategy is not without risks; such wide-ranging interdisciplinary collections can easily become resources to be mined for isolated, easily extractable chapters. Through her introduction and brief prefaces to each of the four sections, however, Duane expertly synthesizes the contributions, both locally and globally, ensuring that *The Children's Table* amply rewards cover-to-cover reading while aiding disciplinary reading across sections. For my purposes here, a diffuse cluster of essays with particular relevance to US literary history highlights how the collection fulfills the editorial aim of advancing, through childhood studies, a "radically altered approach to the questions of what constitutes knowledge and what animates the work of power and resistance" (1).

Concluding Part I of the collection, "Questioning the Autonomous Subject and Individual Rights," John Wall's "Childism: The Challenge of Childhood to Ethics and the Humanities" is perhaps the most capacious of the contributions in this regard. From the vantage point of ethics, Wall advocates a "child-inclusive humanistic methodology"; this "childism," he explains, involves responding "more self-critically to children's particular experiences by transforming fundamental structures of understanding and practice for all" (68). Wall's essay is a call to action, contending that child studies necessitates "a revolution" such that "Art, literature, history, culture, philosophy, religion, and the like would need to be considered narrow and stunted if they did not account for age in addition to gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity" (68–69). Especially compelling is Wall's conception of an incipient radical, and radically transformative "third wave" of childhood studies.[4] Parallel to third-wave feminism, this new childism "would seek not only to understand children's agency and to empower children's participation but also to ask how children's different and diverse lived experiences call for structurally transformed scholarly and social norms" (70). Beyond energizing the study of children's culture through greater inclusiveness, Wall's proposition encourages literary scholars to consider, what would a large-scale structural transformation of scholarly norms, rooted in childism, look like for literary studies as a whole?

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In probing the implications of a model of citizenship "based on the idea of broad human interdependence instead of on the idea of adult autonomy" (70), Wall's contribution provides a valuable inroad for considering three literary-historical essays in Parts 2 and 3 of *The Children's Table*: "Recalibrating the Work of Discipline" and "Childhood Studies and the Queer Subject." True to Duane's call for a "nuanced engagement with discipline that moves beyond the binaries of oppression and resistance" (86), Sophie Bell's essay, "'So Wicked': Revisiting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s Sentimental Racism through the Lens of the Child," applies "the sharpened tools of recent scholarship on sentiment and children" to what she terms "the racial politics of sentiment" (91). As Bell points out, a persistent problem for readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been the "puzzle" of "how to reconcile the novel's abolitionist agenda and its racist epistemology" (91). Her focus on a trio of "racially marginal" (96) boys in the novel shows how these "contradictory modes of racial thinking collide in the behavior of naughty children" (91). Examining familiar scenes from a fresh vantage point, her analysis intimates "that Stowe's awareness of the limits of sentimental power and her interest in children's naughtiness and survival were much greater than most readings of her novel suggest" (102). Lesley Ginsberg's "Minority/Majority: Childhood Studies and Antebellum American Literature" turns to the famous scene of Eva reading the Bible with Uncle Tom and ably demonstrates how childhood studies extends to the cultural position of adults regarded as legal "minors," opening up new perspectives on disparities of power. Through an examination of antebellum authorship and its embeddedness in "a pervasive culture of pedagogy" (106), Ginsberg considers how the literature of childhood "enabled antebellum women writers to both reify and expose the contradictions inherent in female-authored reformist writings" (113). In response to the question "Who or what is the antebellum child when that figure is liberated from essentialist definitions?" Ginsberg's sense that as "a mutable figure," the child is "linked to other political and legal minorities" (120) connects her interrogation of gender and power to Carol Singley's essay, "Childhood Studies and Literary Adoption." Like Ginsberg, Singley demonstrates how representations of orphans, adoption, and adoptive kinship cast new light on "the construction of cultural narratives of the child, family, and nation" (183) by "de-essentializ[ing] race, ethnicity, and nationality" (185). Culminating in an analysis of Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy," Singley's essay explores how literary adoption reflects shifting ideas concerning social mobility, sentimentality, patriarchal authority, maternal power, child nurture, democracy, and individualism.

The Children's Table concludes with a section on "Childhood Studies: Theory, Practice, Pasts, and Futures" and urges us to think

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about the broader social and institutional implications of Childhood studies, from the pervasive cultural construction of idealized childhood as white to the largely untapped archival contributions of and about children to the challenges and possibilities of the Childhood studies program, department, or major within broader institutional structures.[5] While the collection's literary-history cluster focuses rather narrowly on antebellum US literature, one need only look to recent monographs to see that the kinds of questions *The Children's Table* foregrounds have been no less compelling to scholars of more recent US literature. Although it remains to be seen whether the call for radical transformation of disciplinary structures will be fully realized, the keynote of Duane's collection, with its emphasis on childhood, difference, and the distribution of power, is already being sounded far and wide.[6]

In Gary D. Schmidt's *Making Americans: Children's Literature from 1930 to 1960* (2013), questions of citizenship, race, and national identity coalesce in a captivating narrative that is equally accomplished as a work of literary criticism and as a cultural history. Enriching and complicating the history of children's literature, *Making Americans* meticulously documents the development of children's literature in the mid-twentieth century as a socially progressive civic enterprise imbued with a radically revisionist nationalist ideal that prioritized inclusion, acceptance, and global perspectives. Drawing on multiple facets of book history—from publishing and library history to studies of authorship and illustration—Schmidt eloquently demonstrates that "the story of American children's literature at midcentury is the story of its growing depiction of the meaning of democracy" (xxvii). Consistent with Wall's conclusion that a childist perspective promotes a "decenter[ing of] collective life around humanity's widest possible experiential diversity" (*The Children's Table* 81), Schmidt's work investigates how the field of children's literature came to "define 'American democracy' more and more largely" (xxvii). Tracing this development as an ever-widening series of expansions—stretching to include immigrants, minority groups, and an awareness of the US as part of a global community, while all along including the child—*Making Americans* develops a persuasive case that "children's books at midcentury used America itself as a complex metaphor for the progressive notion of social inclusion" (xxviii).

While one might easily underestimate popular mid-twentieth-century children's literature as being dominated by cookie-cutter series books and the pastel world of Dick and Jane, Schmidt discerns a subtle radicalism within the mainstream. His account is nuanced and balanced, acknowledging limitation along with innovation. Time and again, he shows the professionals involved—librarians, critics, and educators, as well as authors, illustrators, and booksellers—

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identifying the failings and striving to correct them. The result of their combined efforts to "inculcate a complex vision" was, according to Schmidt, the creation of a body of children's literature that depicted both "an America that was to be extolled and an America that was deeply flawed" (xxiv). The numerous close readings Schmidt weaves gracefully into this illuminating history largely bear out the claim that "much of American children's literature at the middle of the twentieth century was more John Steinbeck than Horatio Alger, and more Dorothea Lange than Pollyanna, and more Lynd Ward than the Five Little Peppers—all mediated through a sensibility of appropriateness and purpose within the larger social context of America" (xxiv). With sections devoted to the definition of the US as a nation of pioneers, accommodating otherness within a democratic nation, children's literature of World War II, and situating US democracy within a global context, *Making Americans* offers an expertly narrated guided tour of the period's authors and illustrators (including Laura Ingalls Wilder, James Daugherty, Lois Lenski, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire, Virginia Lee, and Robert McCloskey), selected publishers' series, and key subgenres.

In tracing the self-conscious development of US children's literature as a distinctly American cultural enterprise with a vital role in cultivating national identity, democratic values, and social cohesion, *Making Americans* documents a fascinating—and fascinatingly belated—response to the call for a uniquely American literature that Emerson and others had issued a century earlier (and that US literary historians were busily documenting in the mid-twentieth century). Like that earlier call, this one met with a fervent conviction that literature matters, that it *does* make something happen. The result of this optimistic vision was that at

> [m]idcentury children's literature would simultaneously posit America as pioneer nation and America as democratic experiment, the first a story of rugged independence and self-reliance, the second a story of interdependencies, social tolerance, and cooperation. America would be envisioned as a dangerous but exciting wilderness and as the place of a newly settled life; as a nation of individual freedom and as a nation of democracy; as a myriad of regional cultures and as a country marked by tolerance and acceptance. (xxi)

But Schmidt's study is not merely a paean to authors, illustrators, "bookwomen," and other professionals who contributed to the creation of an exceptionalist US children's literature to embody these values. An expert storyteller (he has authored several critically acclaimed children's books), Schmidt leaves readers pondering the

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fragility as well as the power of the democratic mission this literature articulated. Although his conclusion oversells the claim that by the early 1960s, a self-referential interiority had replaced social engagement as the prevailing ethos in US children's literature, *Making Americans* provokes further thinking on the failures as well as the successes of mid-twentieth-century US children's literature.

In this regard, Jodi Eichler-Levine's *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature* (2013) can be seen as both a salutary complement to Schmidt's historical narrative and a counterweight to his elegiac conclusion. Beginning her book where Schmidt leaves off—with Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963)—Eichler-Levine extends and qualifies Schmidt's argument that "by midcentury a distinctly American children's literature was often the story of America itself" (Schmidt xxi). Writing from the perspective of religious studies, Eichler-Levine "contends that Jewish Americans, African Americans, and black Jews all claim American chosenness by structuring their children's literature into redemptive, sacrificially driven narratives," in which "these groups achieve their greatest acceptance as American citizens when their citizenship is sewn up with the commemoration of real and imagined lost children" (xiii). Interestingly, Eichler-Levine and Schmidt deploy a shared metaphor of grafting to evoke a kind of organic fusion between individual readers and a totalizing narrative of national identity. Whereas Schmidt's undifferentiated child readers are "engrafted [into the story of America], usually through an assumed identification with a national culture" (xxi), the "minority constituents" Eichler-Levine evokes are grafted "onto ideals of liberal democracy" (xiii) through narratives of suffering and loss. In the Jewish- and African-American children's literature Eichler-Levine analyzes, there is no easy recourse to assumed identification. Instead, their absorption "into communities that can be understood according to overarching white Protestant notions of properly contained religiosity and domestic respectability" (xiii) comes about, rhetorically, through what Eichler-Levine terms a "sacrificial logic" (xxii) of pain and loss. Complicating our understanding of how children's literature negotiates citizenship, ethnicity, and childhood, *Suffer the Little Children* reads twentieth-century Jewish- and African-American children's literature against the biblical narratives of Miriam and Moses, as representatives of exodus and dwelling, and of Isaac and Jephthah's daughter, as figures of sacrifice and redemption. Linking the notion of chosenness with "the American rhetorical tendency to sacrifice children in order to save them," Eichler-Levine identifies suffering "as the flip side of chosenness" (xv), a coupling that sets in motion a complex, problematic mechanism that enables acceptance and belonging.

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In contrast to Schmidt, who examines the initially tentative and elliptical but increasingly credible means through which (predominantly white) authors and illustrators of the mid-twentieth century "normalized inclusion" and positioned it as essential to democracy, Eichler-Levine parses the narrative strategies Jewish-American and African-American authors have used to incorporate minority experiences into mainstream life.[7] In contrast to most of the literary professionals Schmidt discusses, Eichler-Levine's authors view inclusion from the outside in. A point of intersection between their two books, the Bobbs-Merrill biographical novel *Crispus Attucks: Boy of Valor* (1965) provides a valuable site for comparison. As the latest of that publisher's Childhoods of Famous Americans series, this fictionalized biography demonstrates, for Schmidt, a move toward "a much more nuanced and complete handling of the issue" of racial injustice than the series had manifested before (122). As the first book Eichler-Levine considers in her initial chapter, the same volume prompts a troubled response: "in the years from 1945 to the present," she writes, "American minority groups took up a more central place in such stories of civic loyalty. This book asks: at what cost?" (1).

The implicit dialogue between these two monographs continues in other ways. In exploring how "popular and ostensibly secular stories from religious and ethnic minorities are emplotted in white Protestant mythologies of pilgrim voyages, pioneer crossings, and pseudo-Abrahamic sacrifices of children" (xvi), *Suffer the Little Children* engages with one of the subgenres *Making Americans* makes prominent: stories of pioneer life. Although Schmidt locates in mainstream pioneer narratives of the mid-twentieth century a civic-minded blend of self-reliance and communal interdependence, Eichler-Levine sees these tales as the prototype for "exodus journeys and stories about settling down . . . that make black and Jewish experiences recognizable as deeply American" (xxi). Eichler-Levine's argument amplifies Schmidt's contention that US children's literature of the 1930s "linked the pioneer experience and the democratic experiment together again and again" (4) by showing how a later generation of Jewish- and African-American writers adapted the genre as a way of figuring journeys of suffering as archetypal American experiences, thereby "turn[ing] strangeness into Americanness" (48).

In the second part of her book, Eichler-Levine turns to narratives of trauma, focusing on lynching and the Holocaust in contemporary children's books, where "issues of chosenness are deeply interwoven with horror and a paradoxical mix of unspeakability and loquacious repetition" (xxii). Through an analysis of children's books about Emmett Till and Anne Frank, *Suffer the Little Children* argues that "it is suffering citizenship and the macabre loss of children that most surely makes Jews and African Americans into

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recognizable, permanent residents of American mythologies" (93). Read as an unintended sequel and counterpoint to *Making Americans,* Eichler-Levine's book, with its focus on narratives through which "dead children . . . provide symbolic entry into the cherished status of American citizens" (97), is not only sobering and salient but strikingly so. Eichler-Levine's inquiry into the way "horror over innocent sacrifices binds communities together" (99) poignantly bears out Schmidt's reflection that the historical readership he evokes in *Making Americans*—

> the generation that would live with the atomic bomb, that would be divided by the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, that would grow up to usher in civil rights, to work toward women's rights, to protest wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, to lose a naive trust in government, to perceive the limitations of the "melting pot" metaphor, to explore the boundaries of freedom . . . [would] raise a new generation that would ask harder questions about America's global influences than had ever been imagined. (xxvii)

Yet, with fortuitous symmetry, the elegiac ending of *Making Americans* is matched by the unexpectedly hopeful last chapter of *Suffer the Little Children*, where Eichler-Levine discerns in fantasies of monstrosity and the supernatural "subversive ways out of [the] trope" of sacrificial citizenship and binding through violence (xiv). Through readings of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Brundibar* (2003) as well as Virginia Hamilton's fantastic folk tales, Eichler-Levine argues that these postwar fantasies create "monstrous breaks in reality" that "portray collective trauma without capitulating to redemptive structures" (129). Interpreting Sendak's "wild things" as sympathetic, loving figures of otherness, she suggests that Max's journey shows young readers a way of both exploring and overcoming darkness and suffering; similarly, in *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983), Hamilton conveys a tale of loss, commemoration, and forgetting that is liberating rather than confining. Far from retreating into the kind of self-referential interiority Schmidt anticipates, both writers, Eichler-Levine maintains, "use specifically American tropes in order to write against the grain of tragic stories" (142), enabling young readers to "negotiat[e] difference and otherworldliness in ways that widen the circle of what can be considered American" (153).[8] In the end, however, *Suffer the Little Children* "lead[s] us to a different kind of promised land: one in which the promise is not civic acceptance or divine election, but fantastic, radical empathy" (23).

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To return to my opening query—what might a critical turn to the child (or childism) mean for the discipline in its broadest sense? Informed by a host of critical issues central to childhood studies— as Duane's collection underscores, power, difference, (inter)dependence, vulnerability, development, queerness, kinship, citizenship, ethics, resistance, and rights—the publications discussed here revolve around questions of civic and political agency that can profitably be explored in literature that is, ostensibly, not "about" children at all. But a turn to childism involves more than simply importing issues and approaches from the study of children's literature and grafting them (to revive the metaphor) onto other branches of literary criticism—in other words, "changing the terms of inquiry and forcing a different set of questions" (Duane 1). Instead, "What childism suggests is that diverse disciplines should not only work across normative boundaries," Wall stresses, "but also open themselves up, in the process, to decentering and transforming their own disciplinary norms" (72). "The goal," he elaborates, "would be less the merging of disciplinary fields than the endless retesting of substantive and methodological disciplinary assumptions against diverse approaches to human experience" (72). The essays and books I've highlighted here model how literary studies can engage more fully in this project, from paying greater attention to the complex role of institutions in shaping the production and consumption of literature to better understanding the (partial, unpredictable, but nevertheless powerful) capacity of literature to effect as well as reflect social change, and with every gain to ask, along with Eichler-Levine, "at what cost?" Above all, literary studies may begin by internalizing a basic premise that drives all of the studies discussed here: that generation and stage of life constitute categories of difference that (perhaps paradoxically) inescapably define us all. "[R]econstructing worlds in response to differences" (Wall 72) is a tall order. Those at the children's table may need to pull up a few more chairs. Better yet, why not add an extra leaf?

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Notes

1. This essay review is dedicated to E. Jennifer Monaghan, 1933–2014.

2. ProQuest Literature Online, results retrieved 10 January 2014. Of 111 articles published in scholarly journals with a broad literary scope, one article appeared in *ELH*; others appeared in *Studies in the Literary Imagination, Studies in American Fiction*, and *Mosaic*. With respect to the state of the (sub)field in 1978, the article in *ELH*, "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice" by Felicity A. Hughes, begins—and concludes, rondel-fashion—with the observation: "The theory of Children's

Literature has been for some time in a state of confusion" (542, 560). See Hughes, "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice." *ELH* 45 (1978): 542–61.

3. "Children's Literature." *PMLA* 126 (January 2011):159–216.

4. On earlier "waves" of what might be called childism, see Kenneth B. Kidd's excellent *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011): 38.

5. In Part 4 of *The Children's Table*, see Robin Bernstein's "Childhood as Performance": 203–12; Karen Sánchez-Eppler's "In the Archives of Childhood": 213–37; and Lynne Vallone's "Doing Childhood Studies: The View from Within": 238–54.

6. Notable among recent studies in this line is Courtney Weikle-Mills's *Imaginary Citizens: Child Readers and the Limits of American Independence, 1640–1868* (2013). See my review in *American Literature* 86 (June 2014): 405–8.

7. The subtitle of Schmidt's third chapter, "Defining American Democracy," is "Normalizing Inclusion."

8. In asserting that Jewish- and African-American children gain "acceptance as upstanding, religious American citizens" as a result of being "bound to and unbound from violence" (93), Eichler-Levine joins a number of contemporary critics in examining trauma and atrocity in children's literature. See Patricia Crain's canny synthesis, "Regarding the Pain of Children." *American Literary History* 25 (Summer 2013): 418–29.

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