

Kiddie Lit

The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America

Beverly Lyon Clark

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore and London

Preface

When I was in graduate school in the 1970s I wouldn't have been caught dead reading children's literature. I remember my astonishment when a friend talked at a party about recently reading Cherry Ames. (Fifteen years later my friend would be elected president of the Children's Literature Association.) It's true that I was writing a chapter on Lewis Carroll for my dissertation. But Carroll was different. One of my graduate advisors, a Victorianist, had published on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in a highly regarded academic journal. And my short chapter on Carroll was simply a stepping-stone to the heart of my thesis, which addressed the uses of a kind of fantasy in contemporary U.S. fiction for adults.

It was nevertheless thanks to the Carroll chapter that I was invited to teach Children's Literature soon after I came to Wheaton College—thanks to that and a commonly held belief, to which I too subscribed, that anyone could teach such a course. What was there to know? Certainly I was not impressed by the scholarship I then started to read. Much of it seemed to focus on bibliotherapy, providing lists of books to help a child deal with the death of a pet or a grandparent, with a science project on dinosaurs, with the stigma of wearing glasses. Most of the books seemed to be annotated bibliographies in paragraph form.

In the early 1980s I was edging into children's literature scholarship by way of Louisa May Alcott. She was a crossover writer, someone whose work could appeal to adults and could be read in adult terms. I could read *Little Women* the same way I read works written for adults; I could try to revalue Alcott the same way feminist critics had been revaluing Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

It took me a long time, nevertheless, to appreciate that children's literature as a field deserved the kind of rethinking that feminists had been according works by and about women. One breakthrough for me was reading Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984). Here was a work that used the insights of post-Freudian poststructuralism to illuminate children's literature and used children's literature to illuminate our relationship

to language, given that both childhood and language are often posited as pure points of origin. Another breakthrough was Perry Nodelman's *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1988). Suddenly I could see what a distinctive genre the picture book was: this one form of children's literature, at least, offered a new vista for criticism, one requiring attentiveness to the visual and to the interaction between the visual and the verbal. What else, I wondered, could children's literature offer to literary criticism? Then, in 1990, Bernard Mergen, editor of *American Studies International*, invited me to prepare a bibliography of book-length criticism of children's literature. Preparing this bibliography (not fully annotated, though in paragraph form) took a great deal more time than I'd anticipated—of course—and it helped me see some of the varied strands of thinking about children's literature, as practiced by librarians, grade-school teachers, and professors.

That bibliography was the first real step toward this book—the first step toward some understanding of the institutional underpinnings of the field of children's literature, an understanding most fully outlined here in Chapter 3. What surprised me most in my research was how differently children's literature was regarded in the nineteenth century—how highly the nineteenth-century cultural elite regarded such literature, compared to the twentieth-century cultural elite. Although children's literature has continued to garner enthusiasm in the popular press, the more academic gatekeepers all but ignored it in the middle to late twentieth century. In Chapter 1 I examine some of the current ways in which scholars seem to think, or not think, about childhood and children's literature. In the next chapter I examine how, around the turn of the century, what was considered literary shifted from the kind of practice epitomized by Frances Hodgson Burnett to the kind epitomized by Henry James. At a time when women and children were increasingly conflated in the critical imagination, Burnett addressed both. And estimates of her work plummeted. James disdained both, in his criticism at least, though he engaged with women and children more imaginatively and indeed fruitfully in his fiction. Estimates of his work soared. Chapter 3 likewise treats the shift around the turn of the century, but instead of examining the thinking of and response to two paradigmatic authors I examine institutional shifts, in the context of the increasing professionalization of literary study.

In subsequent chapters I turn to case studies of particular authors and continue my pursuit of Alcott and Carroll—and also pursue Mark Twain, L. Frank Baum, J. K. Rowling, and Walt Disney—in order to gauge the trajectories of their critical reputations. Let me stress that I'm not attempting to cover the full

field of response to children's literature; rather, I'm attempting to undertake representative soundings of the varied ways in which our culture has constructed children and children's literature. I've chosen authors for whom there are, by and large, long trajectories of published response—and hence the works tend to be novel length and to varying degrees canonical within children's literature, hence also middle class and white. Children's literature has been primarily middle class and white since its inception, though one can find traces of alternative viewpoints in most of the bodies of work I examine. In any case, the case studies I pursue allow me to engage in depth with the nuances of response, both popular and critical, to representative and influential boys' books, girls' books, and fantasies.

In these case studies I turn to reviews and other responses, early and late: my primary materials are not so much the literary texts as the responses to those texts. I am interested in the meanings of childhood and children's literature in American culture—and hence primarily in issues of reception. Since I'm examining published responses, and especially responses by elite literary gatekeepers, my focus is on the responses of adults: I attend more to what adult gatekeepers have thought than to what children have actually read, though the latter issue does surface from time to time. (More generally, I'd argue that all the works I examine continue to be read with interest by many children.) I hope that in mapping responses to, say, *Huckleberry Finn* I will be able to offer new insights into the work itself, but my path to those insights is to scrutinize what critics and others have said, or not said, in the nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century, and in recent decades, to scrutinize the shifts in what is considered suitable for children and for adults, what is noticed or ignored in these varying historical contexts. I want to find out what people thought about the authors and their works and why. For we now think about these figures rather differently from how they were thought of when their works first appeared.

I quote from the reviews and other criticism at some length. In part that's because many twentieth-century critics have seemed unwilling to listen to what nineteenth-century observers said about the audience for, say, Twain and Alcott and what they said about childhood and adulthood. When critics cite differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses, they generally don't pursue them but treat them as anomalous. I pursue these differences through close readings of the reviews and other criticism—to acknowledge their complexity, to probe for their contradictions, to unearth what they say overtly about children and what they imply about juvenility.

In short, I'm not just providing a history of the various critical and popular receptions. I'm also analyzing the responses, reading them symptomatically, if you will. Cultural critics are fond of untangling the interplay among race, class, and gender in literary and other texts. But what if we add age to the mix? How does age complicate the kaleidoscope of difference within the text, one term reinforcing another, substituting for another, pushing another aside, perhaps skewing its import? Analyzing the shifting responses to Alcott and other authors can help us see how socially constructed the current—usually dismissive—views of literary critics are. Recognizing these shifts can help us revalue children's literature, rethink its place in the academy, or accelerate a shift that has already begun, even as we acknowledge that age is not just a simple term of difference but is always complicated by race, class, gender.

I am grateful to Marya De Voto, Monica Edinger, Sue Gannon, Tina Hanlon, Linnea Hendrickson, Deidre Johnson, Bonita Kale, Betsey Shirley, Sanjay Sircar, Sue Standing, Lauren Tedesco, David Watters, and various members of the Children's Literature: Theory and Practice e-mail list, including Michael Joseph, its founder and owner, for leads and stimulating insights. I much appreciate the assistance of Marcia Grimes and Martha Mitchell in tracking down elusive interlibrary loan materials and of Ken Davignon and Dee Jones in reproducing images. I am particularly grateful to Jan Alberghene, Roger Clark, Mike Drout, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Margaret Higonnet, Uli Knoepfmacher, Roz Ladd, and Mitzi Myers for responding to drafts of chapters. And I want to thank Rog, Adam, and Wendy for constantly pushing me in my thinking about children and children's literature.

Some of the ideas and phrasing in Chapter 1 derive from earlier attempts to chart ways in which we devalue children and childhood, in "Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers? The Uneasy Relationship of Feminist Theory and Children's Criticism," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 18 (Winter 1993): 171–76; and "On Ignoring the Hidden Laughter in the Rose Garden; or, How Our Anxiety of Immaturity Enables Us to Belittle Students," *Feminist Teacher* 8 (Spring/Summer 1994): 32–27. I have also drawn, in Chapter 3, on a few pages of "Kiddie Lit in Academe," *Profession* (1996): 149–57, and, in Chapter 5, on a few pages of the introduction to *"Little Women" and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (copyright 1999, reproduced by permission of Routledge, Inc., part of The Taylor & Francis Group), xv–liv. I am grateful to the editors of the journals, the Children's Liter-

ature Association, the Modern Language Association, and the press for permission to reprint those portions. The Beinecke and Houghton Libraries have graciously granted permission to quote from unpublished Alcott letters and nineteenth-century clippings in the Alcottiana collection.

Kids and Kiddie Lit

Let us all agree to stop using what is, in my view, an unacceptable phrase, namely, "kiddielit" and/or "kidlit." My rationale is as follows: these terms diminish the work we do in the eyes of others; one can use diminutives within a family but they may convey the opposite intent to outsiders.

— KAY VANDERGRIFT

I hate the term too, but my experience has been that it's usually used by people who are genuinely enthusiastic about children's books but somewhat embarrassed about it. More self-deprecating than insulting, if you see what I mean. They mock themselves before you can mock them.

— WENDY E. BETTS

To call children "kids" is bad enough—most of them are surely not the devilish little animal-like goats-in-training that "kid" implies. To call children "kiddies" is even worse: downright condescending, and more than a little supercilious. And to dismissively label as "kiddie lit" the often wonderful and always intriguing writing that I and a number of other people . . . have chosen to devote our professional academic life to is nothing more than insulting.

— PERRY NODELMAN

Nicknames are always unsatisfactory, but they are convenient. Their acceptability has to do with the person who uses them. "Kiddie lit" coming from a respectful colleague is ironical; coming from a skeptical or ignorant colleague, it is pejorative. The name is not the issue, the attitude of the namer is.

— STEPHEN ROXBURGH

We value childhood. But we also dismiss it. We value the image even as we ignore the reality. We love the Gerber babies, the Pillsbury Doughboy, the Michelin-tire kids, to whom we can condescend, preferably in falsetto. Advertisers foreground images of babies even when their product has little to do with children (automobile tires? interior painting? nursing homes?). Every package of toilet paper in my local supermarket features the head of an adorable baby,

too young to use the product herself. Presidential hopefuls traverse the United States kissing babies and seize photo ops that capture them hugging their children. Yet the position of the country's children provides little cause for jubilation. There may be recent small gains—fewer teen pregnancies in the past couple of years, a decrease in juvenile homicides. But for many years children in the United States have been overrepresented among those living in poverty, at a rate almost 50 percent higher than the national norm. In 1999, when the U.S. poverty rate was 11.8 percent, 16.3 percent of the nation's children were living in poverty.¹

In the realm of children's literature, trade publishers happily turn to children's books to bolster their revenues, yet contemporary critics have been slow to take children's literature seriously and treat it canonically. How many lists of the great books of the twentieth century—lists that do not specifically limit themselves to children's books—include such children's classics as *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Wild Things Are*?² The term *kiddie lit* captures our culture's ambivalence toward children and children's literature: dismissive? self-mocking? pejorative? ironical? In subsequent chapters I will map changing attitudes toward children's literature in the last century and a half, changes that allowed *kiddie lit* to emerge as a derogatory term and changes that allow us, now, to revalue, to ironize, it. In this chapter, however, I focus on some of the broader ways in which academics have expressed ambivalence toward childhood in recent decades. A few established mainstream critics, such as James Kincaid and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Margaret Higonnet and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, have treated childhood with respect. But many—most of those who do not consciously specialize in children's literature—have been dismissive. Let me give some examples.

In her brilliant *Sensational Designs*, which has remapped the history of American literature, Jane Tompkins wants to redeem from obscurity many of the works she focuses on: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. She wants to redeem them from, in particular, having "come to be thought of as more fit for children than for adults." In the process of choosing works that "offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment,"³ it's hard for a cultural critic to avoid what could be considered—what I would consider—literature for children.⁴ Yet Tompkins wants to erase this part of the readership.

In the magnificent, wide-ranging *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, now

↳ to the readership or the that who she refuse

in its fourth edition, the editors reach out across boundaries buttressed by gender, race, ethnicity, and class—but not age. Even anthologies that aim for the fullest and most diverse coverage avoid that which is associated with children. Or, more precisely, none of the literature that the editors of the *Heath Anthology* include is addressed specifically to children, even if the headnotes for individual authors frequently indicate that the author has written children's stories. When the editors make a token inclusion of an author who is best known for her children's fiction—Louisa May Alcott—they reprint not an excerpt from *Little Women* but one from a "flawed" novel presumably for adults or one of her short stories for adults.

In Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald's compilation *Feminist Quotations*, there are more index entries under "Woman/Women as child" than under any similar heading ("Woman/Women as servant," "Woman/Women as redeemer"). The authors of the entries hardly applaud such a comparison, whether the quotation expresses Elizabeth Oakes Smith's outrage, in 1853, that wives and mothers are "coerced like unmanageable children," or Vicki Pollard's, in 1969, that doctors force "women into the role of helpless, stupid, ridiculous little girls."⁶

↳ comparing to children is seen as neg.

In *The Political Unconscious*, the astute Marxist critic Fredric Jameson lists "the oppositional voices of black or ethnic cultures, women's and gay literature, 'naive' or marginalized folk art, and the like."⁷ Juvenility figures as a metaphoric subtext, set off in quotation marks, naiveté subordinated to the "folk," ontogeny subordinated to phylogeny. Later, when "children's literature" erupts more concretely in his text, its force is again dissipated as metaphor: from the perspective of some utopian future, "our own cultural tradition—the monuments of power societies . . . as well as the stories of fierce market competition and the expressions of commodity lust and of the triumph of the commodity form—will be read as children's books, recapitulating the barely comprehensible memory of ancient dangers."⁸

Finally, in her classic essay in women's studies, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" Sherry B. Ortner challenges the way women have been subordinated through their association with nature. Then, as if eager to deny a kind of guilt by association between women and children, she assumes a "natural" association between children and nature: "Infants are barely human and utterly unsocialized; like animals they are unable to walk upright, they excrete without control, they do not speak. Even slightly older children are clearly not yet fully under the sway of culture."⁹ Women shouldn't be degraded by being associated with nature, but it's "natural" for children to be.

This brief sampling of academic evasion and condescension suggests how ready we adults are to dismiss the young, whether it's a case of being a closet juvenilist or of using children as stepping-stones or mere metaphors. I greatly admire the work of these scholars—as I do that of the others whom I consider in this chapter. In fact it's because their work is so good and so influential that their dismissive stance toward children and adolescents is so troubling.

I'm also troubled because I know that I too am guilty of thinking in ways that belittle youth. I'm sometimes tempted, for example, to differentiate between my mostly traditional-age college students, on the one hand, and faculty, administrators, and staff, on the other, by thinking of the latter as "the adults." I've heard colleagues use such language in the context of noting that the students are not yet "mature" enough to do certain things—such as being fully self-governing in the dormitories and sticking to a group decision about acceptable levels of noise at 3 A.M. Yet how many self-styled adults, thrust into a group-living situation where we had not chosen our fellows (or even where we had), would consistently behave in the mature manner we want to consider adult? Those of us who teach young people need to think about what is happening when we claim adulthood for ourselves and not for our students.

We need as well to think about the ways in which our language and culture validate "maturity." As Jacqueline Rose argues in a superb study of the nexus of childhood and language, "Classifying 'otherness' in language as infantile or child-like reduces it to a stage which we have outgrown, even if that stage is imbued with the value of something cherished as well as lost."¹⁰ I want us to think what it means when we use metaphors of immaturity to devalue something. I'm thinking of phrases like "immature response," "childish reaction," "adolescent quarreling," "juvenile behavior," "puerile thinking." I want us to recognize our own "anxiety of immaturity." Not that I want to return to calling women, including traditional-age college students, "girls"; not that I want to call black men, including traditional-age college students, "boys." Given the way our culture currently constructs childhood, we cannot afford to call any adult a child.

Yet I would like to see us revalue the status of childhood. We may never reach a point where the use of the terms *girl* and *boy* would be universally acceptable and even desirable because of a genuine respect for childhood and youth; we may never succeed in making the term *kiddie lit* unequivocally positive. But I would like to see those of us who consider ourselves adults work at imagining children as peers. I'm not asking that we treat children entirely as our equals—I'm not saying that seven-year-olds should have drivers' licenses.¹¹ Yet if we try

to imagine children as peers, we can start to question some of our kitchy-kitchy-koo condescension, some of our temptation to be dismissive by means of the discourse of infantilization. I want here to pose questions, to question our indulgence in age discrimination and point out how it permeates our thinking, intersecting with gender, race, and class, before going on, in subsequent chapters, to explore the significance of these questions for the ways in which we think about children's literature.

In this chapter I'd like to raise questions that touch on the complicated relationship between feminism and childhood. I focus primarily on feminism, partly because it's what has grounded my own thinking about children and children's literature, and in many respects the current wave of feminism has fostered a new receptiveness to children.¹² There are many affinities between feminist theory and theorizing about children. Lissa Paul has pointed to a common ground between women's and children's literature, a shared content of entrapment, a shared language of otherness or deceit.¹³ Perry Nodelman has argued that children's literature is a kind of women's writing, a way of finding "an alternative way of describing reality" while still accommodating "social responsibilities."¹⁴ Margaret Higonnet explores the ways in which both women and children have been treated as Other.¹⁵ Certainly most of those who write, edit, buy, and critique children's literature, at least in this century, are women—in striking contrast with the situation of women who have written for adults. As of 2001, only 37 percent of Pulitzer Prizes awarded for fiction had gone to women, and only 8 percent of the Nobel Prizes in literature. Yet women have won 67 percent of the Newbery Medals for outstanding work in children's literature. Given the receptiveness of the field to women, it is not surprising that children's literature has addressed some women's concerns.

The relationship between feminism and childhood is complicated, however, because adulthood is exactly what many feminists want to claim. The cost of doing so is that we grind children under our heels. In 1844 Margaret Fuller complained, "Now there is no woman, only an overgrown child."¹⁶ In 1991 Susan Faludi castigated the desire to return to the nest, what she called cocooning, in part because the latter term "suggests an adult woman who has regressed in her life cycle, returned to a gestational stage. It maps the road back from the feminist journey, which was once aptly defined by a turn-of-the-century writer as 'the attempt of women to grow up.'"¹⁷ If Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that women have suffered not so much from a Bloomian "anxiety

Why claim adulthood?

I have to work as a student as such

experience

1

of influence" as from a more fundamental "anxiety of authorship," a fear of being unable to create, a fear that writing will destroy them,¹⁸ then I would add that women (and other) critics also suffer from an "anxiety of immaturity." They—we—fear that literary creation will be so associated with procreation, and with that which is procreated, that we ourselves might be considered childish. And thus we become anxious to dissociate ourselves from immaturity. Yet as C. S. Lewis notes, "Critics who treat adult as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves." To be concerned about being grownup, to admire the grownup because it is grownup, to blush at the suspicion of being childish—these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence."¹⁹

Much of the feminist ambivalence about children is related, I think, to an ambivalence about motherhood. Some feminists have indeed included children in their analyses. In the 1970s a working-class feminist mother such as Tillie Olsen could point out how rare it was for a woman who is a mother also to be a writer.²⁰ Adrienne Rich, while stressing the recurring question "But what was it like for women?" nevertheless acknowledged the child's "authentic need" and also a common oppression: "In a tribal or even a feudal culture a child of six would have serious obligations; ours have none. But also, the woman at home with children is not believed to be doing serious work; she is just supposed to be acting out of maternal instinct, doing chores a man would never take on, largely uncritical of the meaning of what she does. So child and mother alike are depreciated, because only grown men and women in the paid labor force are supposed to be 'productive.'"²¹

Other feminists, such as Kate Millett, were more specifically resisting male theories and theorists, especially Freud—for whom, with respect to maternity, "it is as if . . . the only self worth worrying about in the mother-child relationship were that of the child."²² Even now, an oppositional stance toward motherhood persists among liberal feminists, those who favor equal rights, such as Faludi, who in *Backlash* blames media brainwashing for any resurgent interest in motherhood. By the late 1970s a more celebratory stance became possible for cultural feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, who see commonalities among women, whether biologically or socially induced, and often find one in maternal nurturing. The most clear-sighted such theorist, with respect to children, would seem to be Sara Ruddick. In theorizing what she calls maternal thinking, she acknowledges the complexities of mothers' relationships with children, the need for mothers—and fathers—"to assume, at least temporarily, a child's-eye

Do feminists consider children in their analysis of motherhood?

view, in the interest of acting effectively with and on behalf of their children," and the way in which attentive maternal love "lets difference emerge without searching for comforting commonalities, dwells upon the *other*, and lets otherness be."²³

Most feminists who celebrate motherhood, however, continue to be ambivalent about—or to ignore—children. It is indeed important for feminists to claim subjectivity for mothers, especially if, as E. Ann Kaplan claims, "slippage from talking about the mother to talking from the child's perspective seems endemic" to discussions of motherhood, and especially if "at the very moment when mother-subjects start to gain attention, this subjectivity is displaced into concern with the foetus."²⁴ Yet "the child's perspective" often undergoes a curious slippage too. For feminist critics characteristically mask their ambivalence about children by eliding two meanings of *child*—as defined by age and as defined by family relationship—so that they can continue talking about themselves and hence ignore real children. Consider the following usage: "I find that while psychoanalytic feminism can add the female child to the male, allowing women to speak as daughters, it has difficulty accounting for the experience and the voice of the adult woman who is a mother."²⁵ The female child invoked at the beginning of the sentence turns out to be a woman, an adult speaking as a daughter—not a young human. Marianne Hirsch goes on to claim, "I would submit, then, that to a large degree feminist theorizing itself still argues from the position of the child or, to a lesser extent, that of the childless adult woman and continues to represent the mother in the terms originally outlined by Freud"²⁶—as if she has in fact been differentiating between the child and the (childless) adult woman. I would submit otherwise: feminist theorizing has rarely recognized, let alone addressed, the position of the child. We are so adult centered that the only child we adults can see is ourselves; we do not recognize what it means to attend to children's perspectives.

Consider Julia Kristeva's musings on motherhood. In the late 1970s, even as she deconstructed gender, she was celebrating the possibilities of dissidence and associating it with "the sudden surge of women and children in discourse."²⁷ But like other feminists she was more concerned with maternity than with juvenility, with the impact not on the fetus but on the gestating mother of "an identity that splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other."²⁸ This emphasis is largely reiterated in "Stabat Mater," a more concerted theorizing of maternity: even when she allows some space for her own memory of childhood she is (like other psychoanalytic theorists) more concerned with the adult wh

that child will become than with the child as child. As Jane Flax has remarked of such feminist theory as addresses child rearing, "we still write social theory in which everyone is presumed to be an adult"; we tend to include "almost no discussion of children as human beings or mothering as a relationship between persons. The modal 'person' in feminist theory still appears to be a self-sufficient individual adult."²⁹

Or consider Janice Radway's musings on a more metaphoric maternity. Radway explores how criticism of the Book-of-the-Month Club, at its inception in the 1920s and since, is implicated in questions of cultural authority, in particular the authority of the autonomous, educated individual. She argues that the discourse of the debates was "deeply gendered."³⁰ The language of feeding—"forced feeding, pabulum, and indiscriminate consumption," with its "distant echoes of maternal force and infantile regression"—demonized the purveyors of middlebrow culture as maternal and therefore "disgustingly effeminate" (523, 524, 515). Then Radway quickly transfers the effeminacy from purveyors to consumers: the mass audience is conceived as "passively feminine" (524). Only several paragraphs before the end does she seem to recognize that if the purveyor of culture is imaged as maternal, the consumer might be not so much female as juvenile. Only then does Radway decide to question "the necessity of . . . discriminating the child from the man"; she decides to respect "the persistence of childish interests and pleasures within the business of adult life"; she urges "a more dialectical recognition of the fact that the child always haunts us" (526). So when in the same three paragraphs she seeks "a less patriarchal discourse" (526), I can envision a patriarch who is not just husband but also father. But then, abruptly, Radway drops the discourse of juvenility in the final paragraph, returning to that of gender alone. She has been looking, she tells us, at the "necessary connection between rationality, thought, analysis, and gender" (526). Patriarchy reverts to a merely masculine authority when she refers to "a patriarchal society organized by a phallic divide" (526). In short, Radway has had a glimpse of childhood but can't focus on it for long—it disappears from her analysis.

Another strand of literary and cultural theorizing that could acknowledge children is one that explores the parameters of marginality. Yet children are still so thoroughly beyond the pale that feminists who theorize marginality have paid virtually no attention to the position of children. Such critics often address race, gender, class. But rarely age, rarely children. The most expansive lists of social cleavage—such as Susan Stanford Friedman's adumbration of, in addition to

gender, "categories like race, ethnicity, religion, class, national origin, sexual preference, abledness, and historical era"³¹—usually fail to include age. Even those that do include age do so only to acknowledge the elderly, ignoring the young. And such failures occur even though, in Friedman's case, the discursive narrative that leads up to her list tells of the divergent views of two generations of academic feminists, with their varying allegiances to theory and activism: the experience that grounds her sense of multiple contexts is profoundly shaped by differences associated with age. Friedman's essay does open some theoretical doors for attention to children. The "categories like" construction acknowledges that her list is not definitive. Significantly, she provides an accessible account of theorizing that attempts to move beyond poststructuralist anti-essentialism to a provisional recognition that the concrete realities of biology, socialization, economics—including, I would stress, age—cannot just be deconstructed but do in fact affect who we are. Still, like almost all other theorists of marginality, feminist and otherwise, Friedman is blind to children. As Mitzi Myers notes, specifically with respect to children's literature, "Even feminist criticism (despite women's historical and biological implication in childhood) looks askance at the child text: it's nobody's baby. Gender has long since been in; generation (except when it has to do with adult sexuality) remains out. Cross-dressing is hot; cross-writing is not."³²

In general, we tend to assume that what it means to be a child, what it means for an adult to understand a child—never mind what it means to write from or for a child's perspective—is unproblematic. In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," Barbara Johnson incisively addresses the ramifications of abortion and apostrophe, what it means for a poet who is a mother to address what could be considered a dead child and, more specifically, how gender renders problematic the distinction between addressor and addressee. Yet she concludes by assuming that what it means to be a child is unproblematic: "Whether or not one has ever been a mother, everyone participating in the debate has once been a child. Rhetorical, psychoanalytical, and political structures are profoundly implicated in one another. The difficulty in all three would seem to reside in the attempt to achieve a full elaboration of any discursive position other than that of child."³³ Social critics would not assume that someone who has left the working class still has an uncomplicated appreciation of what it means to be of the working class; similarly with a transsexual's appreciation of what it means to be female, or male; or the appreciation of someone who passes for white of what it means to be black. Yet Johnson can still assume that anyone who was once a child requires

no "elaboration" of what it means to be in the "discursive position . . . of child"—not recognizing that, as children's author Avi notes, "it is impossible to be a child once one becomes an adult."³⁴ Johnson is, like Ortner, like Fuller and Faludi, using children as stepping-stones.

Here I want to enlarge on the stepping-stone phenomenon. The danger of using other marginalized groups as stepping-stones came relentlessly home to me when teaching an American literature course: advocacy of the rights of one group often seems to entail metaphorically castigating another. Consider Fuller's put-down of children as she makes a case for "woman in the nineteenth century." Consider Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *The Scarlet Letter*, where he seems to compensate for creating an uncharacteristically positive portrait of a not entirely submissive woman by, in part, reducing her child wholly to a symbol. Consider Henry David Thoreau, who allies himself, civilly disobedient, with "the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race," even as he metaphorically disavows boys and women: his fellow townsmen try to punish him by putting him in jail, "just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons."³⁵

Women of color have long been aware of the stepping-stone phenomenon. Among African Americans I think of Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Alice Walker, all speaking out against white feminists who were ignoring race—who were using women of color and their labor as stepping-stones—early in the current wave of feminism.³⁶ It's resistance of this type that led Walker to prefer the term *womanist* to *feminist*, the former embracing willfulness, loving other women, sometimes men, and being "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."³⁷

In fact, the stepping-stone phenomenon appears to be a particular temptation for white members of the middle class, who tend to prize individualism over group effort and hence to image their gain as another's loss. Among other groups this phenomenon seems less common. Many African Americans, for example, seem to have a rather different relationship to juvenility than do many European Americans. On the one hand, it has been important to deny associations of the race with juvenility—with men being called boys. On the other hand, an emphasis on working for the entire race, and for its future, has generally meant more respect for children. Because African Americans have "had to

I agree. Trying to make them better or something.

Race

If you were something at one time, you can't know what it is like. If you were never in that situation, you can't try.

work in concert for survival," the maternal role may be shared by mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, cousins, not to mention fictive kin,³⁸ and with so much mutual implication in mothering there has been less temptation to devalue children. Black women are unlikely to identify motherhood as "a serious obstacle to our freedom as women," bell hooks argues. "Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing."³⁹ Certainly I have found less evidence of the devaluing of children and childhood in the writings of African-American women than in the work of their white counterparts.⁴⁰ Walker, for instance, seeks an egalitarian mode with her daughter: "We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are."⁴¹

Another adumbration of the stepping-stone phenomenon is the deployment of stages in developmental theories. For all that we like to think of the United States as a youthful society and often indulge in considerable nostalgia for childhood, we nonetheless disparage what we consider childish and, as Bruce A. Ronda notes, "have insisted on development as the prime motif of identity," have insisted "on a rhetoric of growth."⁴² I grant that stage theories can be useful: they can help parents and educators recognize that young people are not necessarily miniature adults but may, for instance, reason and approach abstraction differently. But we need to avoid reifying the stages that theorists have posited. Stage theories become pernicious when entire categories of people seem to be stuck at an early stage. In Lawrence Kohlberg's scheme of moral development, for instance, women tend to be stuck at the third of six stages—leading Carol Gilligan to question why Kohlberg didn't recognize women's "different voice."⁴³ In Freudian theory, lesbianism is constructed as an adolescent stage, a phase through which one moves to more "mature" relationships⁴⁴—as if one can't be a mature lesbian. maybe more mature?

Stage theories are also pernicious because of the way they are inherently dismissive of childhood, the way they image childhood as something other than the ideal, something that needs to be grown out of. As sociologist Barrie Thorne points out, "Conceptualizing children in terms of development and socialization imposes an adult-centered notion of structured becoming upon children's experiences."⁴⁵ We see as universal the stages that our age-graded social practices help to create—when, in fact, cultures simply "project onto infants and young children a nature opposite to the qualities prized in adults. Valuing independ-

developmental

not that's not a real

with that's the point

ence, we define children as dependent. . . . The Japanese, who value interdependence, define infants as too autonomous and needing to be tempted into dependence."⁴⁶

If, as Jacqueline Rose points out, we have constructed childhood as "part of a strict developmental sequence at the end of which stands the cohered and rational consciousness of the adult mind," then "children are no threat to our identity because they are, so to speak, 'on their way' (the journey metaphor is a recurrent one). Their difference stands purely as the sign of just how far we have progressed."⁴⁷ What would happen if we imaged each "stage" as valuable in its own right? Or what if "we redescribe development as not simply the progressive acquisition of linguistic, and therefore moral, competence," so that "we may be better able to nurture in children the necessary to-and-fro between the inarticulate and the articulate selves; a to-and-fro that might be sustainable throughout life rather than having its last gasp during adolescence, or in mystical states"?⁴⁸ How impossible would it be for educators—whose very goal is change, whose foundational assumption is that any given "stage" before the final one is not inherently desirable—to reimagine stages and development? Perhaps the emphasis of some feminist pedagogies on empowering students is a step in the right direction: maybe if the teacher encourages "her women students to say what she does not expect them to say and perhaps would rather not hear,"⁴⁹ she would validate not only the students individually but also their "stage" in the life cycle.

One of the attractions—but also dangers—of using metaphors of maturity is that, like stage theory, they image youth as something one grows out of. *Immaturity* does not seem like a permanent label. At least it does not seem permanent from the perspective of the person doing the labeling. I remember how frustrating it felt, though, to be told that I'd grow out of something—out of adolescent angst perhaps—when at the time it was all there was and I couldn't imagine myself into another place.

Maybe such labeling is particularly pernicious when we do it as a more "polite" way of rendering other distinctions. In the United States we have difficulty finding a language with which to talk about class. So instead we often individualize class characteristics and attribute to people of a class other than our own features of juvenility. Members of the middle class are apt to think of members of the working class, whether they act out aggressions or seem shy, as adolescent. Members of the middle class may also apply to male members of the upper class, the idle rich, a term that doubly inscribes juvenility: *playboy*.

Don't call them stages
b/c that implies climbing

Immaturity = different

Someone from a different class background simply strikes us as less mature. A friend of mine from a country-club background describes another friend, someone with whom she works, someone whose work she respects, as immature. The second woman is from a working-class background, the only person in her family who has ever gone to college (a state college, rather than the private school attended by the other woman), someone who survived the educational system by playing the role of the quiet "good girl," someone who hasn't had much practice in making "cultured" small talk. Yet is she really less mature—or does maturity have a different meaning for her? She may be socially mobile, no longer exactly working class, yet she probably doesn't think of herself as less mature but might think of others as more, say, artificial. I think too of my aunt. She was loud, wouldn't take anything from anyone, not even her boss at the paper mill. When I was an upwardly mobile adolescent I was embarrassed by what I thought of as her stridency; I thought she was even more adolescent than I was. Yet why should speaking up for one's rights be considered immature?

Or consider the following academic example: in an important ethnographic study of college-student writers, Stephen M. North addresses the experiences of three students in a philosophy class. He doesn't want to make value judgments, saying whose writing is good and whose is not—he claims that "none of these uses of writing for learning is the 'right' one, the most 'appropriate.'"⁵⁰ So he finds a covert means of judging, by speaking of the "academic maturity" of the students, relying on William Perry's staging of intellectual and moral development.⁵¹ One student, one of nine children in a family recently arrived in New York from Jamaica, is associated throughout North's study with metaphors of immaturity: from her "innocent approach to philosophy" to her "ingenuous" first paragraph (and likewise her oral report); from her "general naivete" (which would lead one to expect her "to fall into the lower range of Perry's developmental scheme") to the way the course serves for her as "a kind of initiatory rite"; from her seeming to be "the greenest of novices," "an acolyte" when it comes to philosophy, to the discussion of how the problem in one of her writings is that she focuses on "a sort of generalized child."⁵² North knows better than to foreground this student's race or class background to explain what he evades calling weakness. Instead he uses youth as a euphemism for weakness: he makes her Other by associating her with childhood. It's a move that allows her to grow out of her less desirable traits (assuming she leaves her class of origin). It's also a move that enables North to underscore that these traits are indeed less desirable, even inappropriate, while thinking he's according the student respect.

May be immature in not all eyes of the judge

I could go on and on with examples of how those of us who are white and middle class continue to use associations with immaturity to disparage or otherwise fail to acknowledge childhood in its own right. I haven't touched on how, say, New Critical strategies for criticizing a work of literature, strategies that privilege complexity, make it difficult to find anything to say about seemingly "simple" works, or how structuralist and poststructuralist approaches succeed in dehumanizing children. Addressing such critics' "terror of Kiddilit," Ursula K. Le Guin explains, "If you want to clear the room of derrideans, mention Beatrix Potter without sneering."⁵³

All these ways of belittling and ignoring have a profound impact on the ways in which we think about children's literature. As Perry Nodelman has noted, what criticism of children's literature has been accepted in the academy all too often perpetuates a fatuous vision of childhood and children's literature as a fount of wisdom for adults, "making it a health-giving medicine for adults sick of too much maturity" and implying that "today's children are too stupid to know how to be children."⁵⁴ And as Margaret R. Higonnet has said of "the multiple social functions" of children's literature, "First, it preserves a realm of purity, dependence, and ignorance; in turn, it also preserves the system of 'high' literature by fencing out the presocialized and subversive Other, marked by a subliterate verbal code and polluting didacticism; and it inscribes a myth of origins and integrity whose nostalgic appeal has, if anything, intensified in an age dominated by a philosophy of fragmentation and alienation."⁵⁵

Children's literature has low status in literary criticism, even though it would provide a fertile testing ground for investigating the kinds of questions Higonnet raises and for such critical approaches as a reader-response one. Where else would one find a body of literature in which virtually none of those who write it, none of those who edit or publish or market it, and very few of those who buy it, belong to its ostensible audience? Study of children's literature also raises questions about canonicity, commodification, censorship—to mention only three rich cruxes.⁵⁶

My goal in this book is to begin exploring our cultural construction of childhood—as it affects children's literature—as it affects how we respond to children's literature, even determining which works we consider to be for children (under which rubric I include both works for children and those for adolescents, collapsing a distinction that has fully taken hold only in the last few decades). For our views of childhood and children's literature are very much constructed, as

an attentive reading of nineteenth-century pronouncements makes clear—in that long-gone era when American elite and popular culture had not yet divorced. Children's literature hasn't always been designated *kiddie lit*. I want, in short, to revalue what has been dismissed as kiddie lit.

My project is not that of New Critical literary criticism, exfoliating the wonders of the texts of children's literature. Instead I concentrate on matters of reception—on reception by Americans, specifically by American adults. I seek to understand how children's literature has been received, especially in the U.S. academy but also in more popular venues, and how that reception reveals the construction and deployment of childhood. Reception is notoriously elusive, never easy to gauge. To map some of its contours I look at nineteenth- and twentieth-century reviews and other critical statements, statements in the popular press, polls of favorites, and lists of recommended reading. And I try to plumb for subtexts as I analyze these bits of evidence, to probe for underlying values and expectations. With one exception, the works I've chosen have long and often quirky trajectories: each chapter, except the last, begins in the nineteenth century and ends in the twentieth, tracing one of the many paths that reveal changing receptions and perceptions. My aim here is not to be comprehensive but to offer suggestive case studies, in-depth analyses that, in concert, reveal the complexity of changing attitudes toward children and children's literature.

First, in Chapter 2, I look at two key turn-of-the-century figures, whose opposed trajectories and whose divergent rhetorical deployments of childhood provide a glimpse of how attitudes toward childhood were changing at a pivotal moment. Chapter 3 steps back from individual trajectories to look at some of the changing institutional frameworks associated with literature—the shift in the arbiters of elite culture from genteel editors to professional scholars, the increasing bifurcation of high and low culture. The next four chapters offer case studies tracing the vagaries of reputation for authors associated with three key genres of children's literature: the boys' book, the girls' book, and (in two chapters) fantasy. The final chapter offers some reflections on other recent developments in the construction of childhood in the twentieth century.