

Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds.  
*Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*.  
Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press,  
2004. xxxviii + 338 pp. \$28.50.

In an age characterized (as James Kincaid has frequently observed, including in his article in this collection) by an irrational anxiety over paedophilic sexual predators victimizing innocent children, this book offers a timely and important challenge to the very terms on which such paranoiac fears rest. The essays in this collection, some “classic,” some new, reveal the kinds of investments our culture makes in the ideal of childhood innocence and productively interrogates the ideological functions these investments serve. Avoiding the pitfalls of “advocating” childhood sexuality or of denying the “reality” of the sexual abuse of children, the book carefully theorizes childhood and queerness as necessarily linked categories by examining a wide (although not wide enough—see below) range of literary and cultural texts, as well as personal experiences of queer childhood. The result is an anthology that works, though not unproblematically, to demarcate the contours of an emerging area of study.

As Stephen Bruhm and Natasha Hurley remark in their excellent introduction, the innocence we prize so highly in children and struggle so mightily to safeguard is responsible for generating and maintaining the very threats we fear: “To make the child innocent is to suppress the disruptive alternative to innocence—which, in fine binary logic, makes that ‘other’ essential to our understanding of innocence itself” (xvi). This is an important point (one that echoes Kincaid’s position: “Certainly we care about the poor, hurt children. But we care also about maintaining the particular erotic vision of children that is putting them in this position in the first place” [9]) and is an idea that unifies much of the analysis in the anthology.

In the main, the essays presented here are very strong and collectively make a convincing case for questioning our culture’s often paradoxical treatment and representation of children: they are meant to be asexual and innocent of sexuality but are assumed at the same time to be heterosexual and destined for reproductive heterosexuality; our desire to protect children from sexuality (especially queer sexuality) is shot through with the desire to consume them as erotic objects. In his engaging discussion of the connections between childhood, queerness, and class in Horatio Alger’s books for boys, Michael Moon remarks that the discourse of philanthropic protection of poor boys from which Alger borrows constitutes a “rhetoric

of seduction” (32). Ellis Hanson, in his insightful and highly entertaining reading of *The Exorcist*, captures another aspect of this hypocrisy/paradox of childhood relationship to sex by speculating that the adult desire to regulate and contain the possibility of children’s sexuality is what renders them queer: “Children are queer. Their sexual behaviour and their sexual knowledge are subjected to an unusually intense normalizing surveillance, discipline, and repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority” (110).

The prospect of a queer child is, as many of the contributors in *Curiouser* contend, doubly vexing, as it challenges both the conventions of innocence and heteronormativity. In his persuasive, if overlong, reading of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, Eric Savoy maps the narrative contortions the text makes to stifle the very possibility of a queer childhood sexuality it raises: “[Miles’s] mysterious dismissal from school point[s] in turn to other adumbrated ‘horrors,’ all of which terminate at an anatomical ‘behind’ at which the narrative cannot bear to arrive” (267). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s study of how the effeminate boy is pathologized in contemporary clinical psychiatric writing has appeared in a number of other anthologies but certainly merits reprinting here, as it too points out a kind of narrative disavowal of the queer child. Despite the American Psychiatric Association’s official removal of homosexuality from its list of pathologies, heteronormativity remains institutionalized in psychiatry in its development of a diagnosis for “gender identity disorder in childhood” (141). In the formulation Sedgwick describes, male homosexuality is considered healthy and normal, so long as it is accompanied by suitable displays of masculinity. No space is left for the effeminate boy, “for a proto-gay child to identify ‘masculinely’ might involve his identification with his own erasure” (144).

All of the essays in *Curiouser* understand queerness as a mode of resistance to the dominant discourses of childhood. In his reading of Guy Davenport’s pastorals, Andre Furlani sees the sexually adventurous children of these stories as possessing a “radical innocence” that can undermine the erotic innocence adults in our culture have constructed as a means of guaranteeing childhood powerlessness (226). Kathryn Bond Stockton proposes models of growth that challenge and queer the linear, progressive narrative of the child who grows “up” to the normative state of adult heterosexuality. Metaphor, she suggests, is particularly amenable to such a project, as it enables “sideways” growth “by putting people and things rather oddly beside themselves” (279). What might appear as a banal imagine of bourgeois domesticity—the child and its dog—is queered by

metaphor: “[T]he dog is a living, growing metaphor for the child itself ... a figure for the child beside itself, engaged in a growing quite aside from growing up” (280).

Two of the most engaging pieces in the anthology are the autobiographical arguments made by Kathryn Kent and Michael Warner, both of which draw on the authors’ own childhood experiences to locate queer resistance in unlikely places. Kent demonstrates how the Girl Scouts provided her with a space of “queer ambiguities and performances” in which “the line between hegemonic and subversive discourse is always unstable, and ... this precariousness may itself produce queer effects” (176). In his provocative and highly entertaining essay, Warner reconciles the evangelical Christianity of his childhood with his present queer self by (re)discovering the sexual energies and charismatic performativity of born-again faith.

As I observe above, Kincaid’s work (as well as that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, to a lesser extent, Leo Bersani) echoes throughout this collection. For example, Richard Mohr, in his fascinating reading of eroticized children in advertising and mass culture, follows Kincaid’s lead in remarking: “Society needs the pedophile: his existence allows everyone else to view sexy children innocently” (20). In the other essay on Henry James (James’s writing is also discussed in two other essays, Kathryn Kent’s and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s), Kevin Ohi rehearses some of the salient points of Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence* before undertaking a reading of *What Maisie Knew*. Kincaid’s prominence here is understandable, as his work has been critical in opening up possibilities of rethinking the tense and overdetermined relationship between childhood and sexuality. At the same time, the effect is to render this emerging field of study rather insular and strangely disconnected from an already substantial body of theory and criticism in the area of children’s literature and culture studies.

The idea, on which much of the discussion here about childhood’s queerness rests, that the child is a species of self-consolidating other, a construct mobilized by adults for a variety of cultural and ideological purposes, has been explored extensively by scholars of children’s literature (for example, Nodelman and Reimer, the Stainton Rogers, and Bradford). Jacqueline Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan; or, the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* is the only work of children’s literature scholarship mentioned in the book, and then only in passing in the introduction. To be fair, a good deal of scholarship in children’s literature has, in the past, been of the uncritical, celebratory variety, and this perception of the field has participated in maintaining its marginal status in the academy. The history of

childhood is also largely overlooked as a field of study worth consulting; Neil Postman serves mostly as a straw man in Paul Kelleher's article, while the works of Ariès, deMause, and Stone (all from the 1960s and 70s) are listed by Bond Stockton as the "landmark studies" in the field, without any mention of the tremendous controversy surrounding the methods and results of all three of these historians. As well, several articles in the collection take Freud's work on childhood as a point of genesis for the queer or othered child, which seems to me to be a little historically short-sighted. The discourse of Enlightenment constructed the child as a species of other and a site of potential deviance and disruption/corruption long before Freud. The Freudian narrative of development was not the first to suggest "that one is not born, but rather becomes normal" (Kelleher 154–55); this claim is central to much of the medical writing on children in the eighteenth century. Perhaps in the excitement of marking out a "new" field of study, the contributors and editors of this book have not taken sufficient account of the occupants of the fields adjacent.

Of course, one of the reasons why scholarship on children's literature, culture, and history is not included here is the near absence of discussion of texts and cultural products aimed at children themselves. To my mind, the problems with these oversights are significant but in no way insurmountable; indeed, in mentioning what I think is missing from this text, I am hoping that this extremely valuable anthology can serve as a much-needed interface between disciplines the book so admirably demonstrates are necessarily linked: queer studies and children's studies. In part, however, since the focus of the essays in *Curiouser* is predominantly on how adult representations of the child can be queered, the problem of adults using childhood as a construct that serves ideological ends is barely acknowledged, let alone resolved. Kevin Ohi suggests as much at the end of his essay on *What Maisie Knew*, when he wonders "to what extent it is possible to make the queer child legible—that is, to attend to the child's illegibility or its exorbitance—without duplicating a reification that enacts the ideological voiding/comprehension of the child in erotic innocence" (105). Such a project may well be impossible, but with its concern for how the implied readers of children's books are interpellated as subjects and how their consent to the dominant ideological constructions of childhood is solicited by these texts, children's literature studies have something valuable to contribute to such an undertaking. Indeed, it seems to me that engaging with the texts and culture children actually consume is a necessary part of any intervention in the perpetuation of erotic innocence or of childhood's otherness more broadly.

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A.J. Pollard. *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context*. London: Routledge, 2004. 272 pp. \$65.00.

Robin Hood is a shady guy. He is a liminal figure, operating on the margins of society and of scholarship, refusing to adhere to simple definitions. Robin Hood is an outlaw who defends his king, a devout Christian who terrorizes ecclesiastics, and a prankster who enforces morality. He is a murderer, a thief, and a hero. In scholarship, he lurks in the disciplinary margins between literature, folklore, and history, as well as between medieval and early modern periods, court and popular cultures, and manuscript and print texts. And yet despite his ambiguous nature, Robin Hood was—and continues to be—an important figure in the English popular imagination. As A. J. Pollard says simply, "Everyone knows the story of Robin Hood" (2). But which story? And which Robin Hood? And from where did these stories come? A small industry has been created in trying to trace the characters, places, and events to historically verifiable antecedents, but the definitive proof of a historical Robin Hood has proven elusive. Nevertheless, in his book *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-*