

Rethinking Childhood

Paula S. Fass, ed. 2013. *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*. London: Routledge. 531 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-78232-6

The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World is designed and written with the intention to create a new history of childhood to supersede Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), the ultimate seminal book in this area of research. In one way, the appointed task was necessary because after fifty years there was a need to revise *Centuries of Childhood* and to rethink Ariès's key concepts. On the other hand, as Paula S. Fass emphasises in the book's introduction titled "Is there a story in the history of childhood?", it is hard to bring new research results and scholarship to a large audience, since Ariès's book has become essential reading and has been incorporated in so many other studies in various fields of interest.

The book reviewed here is divided into three parts: the first deals with childhood in Ancient times, the Middle Ages and in Early Modern Europe. The second covers the creation of childhood in the Western World since 1500 and thematically focuses on different aspects of childhood experience in the past, such as growing up in the countryside and in the city, war, emotions, legislation, labour, schooling, adolescence, sex, games and toys, fine art, literature and children as consumers. The last part of the book focuses on childhood at different times and in different places (children as slaves in North America, childhood in Sweden, social welfare and children's rights, children and crime, scouting organisations, childhood in the Great Depression, childhood in Nazi Germany and in Latin America, as well as international child saving).

The authors whose papers are gathered in the book extract some key problems from Ariès's concepts and offer a theoretically founded alternative that is likely to become a new paradigm of the history of childhood. The first and the biggest objection they make to Ariès's concept of childhood is concerned with his approach. Fass claims that Ariès wrote a brilliant, compelling and even sensational story accompanied by simple and vivid arguments, but that he made rough generalisations. As opposed to Ariès, the authors of the chapters of this book emphasise the great variety of childhood experiences due to status, class, wealth, poverty, gender, race, geographical location (continents, north/south, east/west, urban/rural, etc.) and other environmental and cultural differences. Accordingly, it is not possible to say (as Ariès did) that childhood emerged in the 16th century when social, cultural and economic conditions turned childhood into a privilege because these conditions were available only to a few. The privilege of childhood as a general ideal emerged not earlier than the 19th century "when nation states inserted it among the ideals of citizenship" (3). In addition, considering childhood as a privilege, which became not only an ideal but a requirement of proper development, is the basic assumption that helped create the paradigm of childhood in the modern Western world.

The authors of this book aim to change this paradigm. They stop searching for various shapes of what we consider as (desirable) childhood in the past and turn to traces that confirm that people in the past recognised the child as different and that they treated childhood as a special stage of life. This approach resulted in a completely new insight, which Ariès never included in his study, i.e. that forms of childhood can be found well before the modern

period: in the ancient classical world and in the ancient Middle East where the dominant western religions of Judaism and Christianity were born, and also in the medieval period, as well as in early modern and modern times. The main and perhaps the most important conclusion Fuss arrives at is that our modern concept of childhood is culturally constructed. Our view “of child and the values we attach to childhood were subject to change” (5). Therefore, the assumption of the book is that our present-day paradigm of privileged childhood prevents us from seeing other forms of childhood in the periods when childhood had different values attached to it. This does not mean that before the 16th century the notion of childhood did not exist, but that the concept of childhood then was different.

The second big complaint to Ariès’s study is his statement that parents did not love their children before early modern times (16th century). Unlike Ariès, Keith Bradely, Steven Mintz, Margaret L. King, Joanne M. Ferraro, and Bengt Sandin emphasise in their respective chapters that the affection of parents to their child cannot be measured and valued by our modern concepts of parental love. Historical research shows that the conditions in which children grew up from ancient until modern times were marked with a high degree of child mortality (around 50%) which was the consequence of poor living conditions: diseases like the plague, malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis were rife, and medicine was largely ineffectual, water was contaminated, there were food shortages, etc. The death of a child used to happen pretty often, but the question is how parents coped with this loss. Bradely writes that “Grief could be intense, at all social levels [...]. The notion that the ancient Persians did not see their children at all until they were well beyond infancy, so that loss could be borne more easily if the children died beforehand, whether true or not, is comprehensible” (29).

Ferraro points out that most historians studying childbirth and the nourishment of infants generally conclude that parents were attached to their babies, irrespective of the high death rates (6). Also, as Grant claims, “the fact that more children died at a younger age does not mean that parents were dispassionate about their deaths” (106).

However, the situation was not universal and it cannot be applied to every time and to every child. There was a great difference in behaviour towards children of free people and the children of slaves. Furthermore, infanticide was quite common, even until the 18th century, and almost legal. As Ferraro points out, judges were reluctant to view infanticide as homicide (69) and in ancient Rome, King reports, the *pater familias* could decide – shortly after the birth of a child (eight days for males and nine for females) – whether the family would raise the child or let it be murdered (46). Bradley lists possible reasons for such an act, which is nothing but monstrous today: physical defectiveness, illegitimacy, parental disputes, the need to divide estates among sons, and the need to bestow a dowry on daughters (30). On the other hand, in Judaic and Christian communities, infanticide and abortion were strictly prohibited by religion.

Another problem was abandoning children due to famine and, again, poor living conditions. Ferraro explains that parents used to leave children to foundling homes or orphanages, or would farm them out as domestic labour (62). However, it is clear that parents did love their children before modern times. Grant clarifies that the inhibition of mourning was sometimes just the easiest way for those suffering such a loss to cope, and sometimes it was part of religious belief which “attempted to constrain their grief by urging them to regard their children’s death as a ‘gift of God’” (106).

Unlike modern child-oriented societies, Ferraro writes, childhood prior to the 19th century was considered a transitory period, a preparatory stage of life (72), i.e. children were expected to take responsibility in family life from an early age. Their responsibilities grew exponentially through the years (65) and their chores were gender differentiated in order to prepare for future adult roles. Toys and games were used for this purpose, and for developing the child's skills. In medieval and early modern societies, boys usually "undertook athletic and military training that fostered teamwork and built moral character" (64). In contrast, girls were prepared for domestic responsibilities.

Schooling was usually a privilege of the elite classes, while the remaining majority of the unprivileged had to work, and children were involved in everyday family chores (herding livestock, weeding, cleaning, carrying water or preparing food) at a very early age, from about six. Colin Heywood questions the widespread opinion about child labour during the Industrial Revolution. Childhood until the early modern period (c. 1500 – 1800), which implied working from a very early age on farms or in domestic workshops, is compared to childhood of the 19th century when children worked in tough conditions and had full-time jobs in industry. The difference accentuates leisure time: children working on family farms could still play as well as work, but working in a factory reduced leisure time. Heywood illuminates the problem from another perspective; aware of our contemporary negative attitude towards child labour, he tries to avoid the snare of a presentistic judgment of historical facts, and concludes that work was always an inseparable part of childhood. It made children useful to their families, and they wanted to be useful. Furthermore "Work would mean long hours out in the fields in all weathers [...] or the monotony of sewing, hammering, turning wheels, and so forth, but it also brought a rise in status within the family and the local community" (137). From the historical point of view, labour was necessary for survival, regardless of the conditions that we today consider brutal. The great turnaround in the history of child labour happened with the introduction of compulsory schooling, and it leads to our modern image of childhood. This was the moment when school replaced work in a child's life (125).

The changing perspectives in telling the story about childhood, based upon the historicist point of view and the abandonment of presentism, are the central idea of *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*. The question is posed whether it is applicable to the story of children's literature. Maria Nikolajeva sets fundamental premises on the nature of children's literature and its cyclical historical development. Defining the borders of children's literature is a delicate task, as they are blurred and overlap with literature in general, and defining the beginnings of children's literature is equally as elusive, considering the crossover readership of folk tales and the utilitarian purposes of children's books in history. Still, children's literature is defined by its audience. Nikolajeva applies this principle to the literature of other (disempowered) social groups: women, the working classes, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities and indigenous people of colonised territories (313). However, it is just a formal similarity. While these disempowered social groups nowadays write their own literatures and histories, children's literature is the only marginalised category in which literature for the disempowered (children) is written and marketed by the empowered, i.e. adults. The result is that "every book addressing a young audience inevitably has its shadow text that reflects the beliefs and opinions of the adults

behind” (313). This implies that adults are using children’s literature for a transfer of social norms and behaviour codes, to instruct and educate children, and this is the reason why “storytelling is a powerful factor in ideology and education” (313). Nikolajeva argues that forms of children’s literature can be traced in oral and written storytelling, in accordance with “today’s evolutionary literary theory criticism [which] claims that storytelling played a significant role in our ancestors’ survival strategies” (313). Contrary to the concept of this book, Nikolajeva concludes that children’s literature could not have existed before the invention of printing and that it is a phenomenon of the modern and post-modern era. Her arguments to support this include the economic development of printing and the book market, the “consolidation of the middle class with economic potential for buying books and sufficient leisure for perusing them; the general rise of literacy and the establishment of mandatory schooling” (314). Inclining towards a constructivist view of childhood, Nikolajeva stays within the scope of today’s views on children’s literature.

However, the question remains whether it is possible to go beyond this framework. Is it acceptable to define the beginning of a phenomenon by establishing all contextual conditions (for instance, market development and the rise of literacy) for its massive development, or can it be traced by some rudimentary forms before these conditions are fully met? Perhaps the contextual conditions only accelerated the rise of already existing forms of children’s literature. Besides, perhaps our present-day demands for artistry in children’s literature prevent us from seeing and acknowledging other types of literary texts for children. These interrogations can also be transferred to the problem of adolescent or young adult literature. Nikolajeva claims that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain (1876) is “a forerunner of the novel of adolescence” (317) while she is aware of the existence of a whole genre of instructional reading for young girls (or boys) before it, such as *The Governess* or *The Little Female Academy* by Sarah Fielding (1749). Such literary texts had the task of educating and socialising young girls “into conventional gender roles of obedient daughters, wives, and mothers” (318), which implies that those texts were written for adolescents, pre-marriage girls or boys, to prepare them for adulthood. Why then is *The Governess*, published a century before *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, not the forerunner of adolescent literature? Is the lack of literary value a strong enough reason to neglect historical facts? Perhaps the book had literary value for people of that time, but our criteria are different today.

Obviously, this shift in values of a literary text is closely connected to the changed perspective of childhood. While earlier in history childhood was, as Ferraro suitably highlights, a “preparatory stage of life” (72), a stage that should be quickly passed, during which children were supposed to adopt as soon as possible a useful role in the family and in society, the modern paradigm of long, playful and never-ending childhood tends to prolong the period of childhood and promote its own values against the values of adulthood.

The choices that Nikolajeva makes are strongly founded in the decades where the scholars of children’s literature struggle to separate children’s literature from literature in general. Children’s literature has often been identified as a lower genre of mainstream literature, as a less worthy copy of “real literature”, and the child reader has often been bundled with readers of “simple taste”. Scholars of children’s literature have put a lot of effort and energy into proving the autonomy of the field. The main and most frequently

emphasised differences that distinguish children's literature from mainstream literature are: a different history (the emergence of children's literature is connected with the emergence of the child reader), differently defined historical periods (children's literature emerged later and developed in a specific exchange of periods, mainly due to the oscillation between the two extremes of education and pleasure), the canon (children's literature has its own canon, independent of mainstream literature, and its own distinction of lower and higher genres) (315, 319).

The biggest burden for children's literature is the claim that it is not artistic. To emphasise the opposite, scholars have been writing a history of children's literature focusing on highly appreciated children's books (establishing the canon), and everything else created and published for children has been judged according to this. But if the immanent literary critic is put aside and the problem of children's literature (as defined by a specific group of readers) is reconsidered from the perspective of contextual literary criticism and childhood studies, it is obvious that the development of children's literature imitates the flow of changing paradigms of childhood at a particular time in history. At once, all those didactic and moralistic stories find their proper place and purpose in the ideologies dominant at certain points in time.

Following this sequence of thought, Nikolajeva arrives at a surprising conclusion. Commenting on the cultural and literary phenomenon of Harry Potter, she notices a cyclic pattern of the evolution of children's literature: "Nevertheless, scholars are inevitably re-defining children's literature from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. With today's conspicuous crossover literature, the evolution has gone full cycle, back to the situation when adults and children shared their reading matter. [...] It shows that young readers can easily manage books of well over five hundred pages if these are engaging enough; that children's books can be popular without losing complexity and artistic quality; that children's books can be enjoyed by readers of all ages and transcend cultural borders" (325).

The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World certainly accomplishes the set task: to impose a new perspective on childhood research, to question Aries's almost axiomatic thoughts on childhood, and to encourage the application of a new paradigm in other studies and fields of research.

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Picturebooks and Intercultural Education

Anne M. Dolan. 2014. *You, Me and Diversity: Picturebooks for Teaching Development and Intercultural Education*. London: IOE Press and Trentham Books. 192 pp. ISBN 978-1858565224

You, Me and Diversity, with its engaging title, draws one into the world of development and intercultural education and Dolan's project merits its DICE funding in selecting appropriate material for classroom use. She proposes a very helpful three-part framework for teachers to follow and devotes a chapter for each, suggesting themes that could be introduced. Every topic is extremely well researched and she details much historical