

A Generation Gap of Another Kind

Clémentine Beauvais. 2015. *The Mighty Child. Time and Power in Children's Literature*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. xii, 226 pp. ISBN 978-9027201584

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Although time is an essential category for the conceptualisation of both the child and literature, especially literary narrative, *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature* by Clémentine Beauvais focuses on the temporal otherness of the adult and the child, their belonging to different temporalities and the outcomes of that belonging. Its core interest is “the paradoxical adult desire to ask the child didactically for an unpredictable future” (4) in the field of children's literature. Its core perspective is the existentialist tradition of thought.

In her book, Beauvais resists the almost reflex discussion of gender, class or race determinants of childhood in contemporary children's literature criticism and directs her analytical interests towards the generational conception of childhood, i.e. broader patterns of childhood representations and experiences in different cultural and historical contexts. By employing the existentialist theoretical framework, she addresses what has for decades been a central issue of power in children's literature from a new perspective. Her discussion of that subject starts, of course, with a footnote on Jacqueline Rose's famous study of children's literature and with questioning the vertical, hierarchical model of adult-child power relations inherent to it. Following, adjusting and upgrading the existentialist tradition of thought and relevant recent children's literature criticism, Beauvais proposes a more complex conceptualisation of power relations between the child and the adult, and introduces the concept of the mighty child and his/her power. According to Beauvais, the “power” of the mighty child is in that he/she belongs to the realm of imagination, to the symbolic sphere, while adult “power” over children is more tangible and is expressed as order, marks, punishments, etc.

The book consists of three parts. The first is dedicated to the concept of time and the two main temporal figures of the child in children's fiction: *puer aeternus* (characteristic of broadly defined classic children's fiction) and *puer existens* (characteristic of most of contemporary children's literature). In contrast to *puer aeternus*, who is conceived as trapped in time, *puer existens* is imagined as a placeholder of the future. The second part of the book develops the notions of the latter figure from the perspective of otherness, and approaches the adult-child relation as a special “problem of others”. Following the existentialist tradition of thought, Beauvais does not see the conflict of otherness as a specificity of the relationship between adult and child, but as part of one existential condition. On the other hand, in this part Beauvais points out the primary temporal specifics of adult-child otherness, and develops the idea of children's literature as both an “other” and an “othering” type of literature, the literature that is other and the literature that reinforces, produces the otherness. The third part of the book develops the idea of education and committed children's literature as both normative and subversive practices, proposing the view of contemporary children's literature as a form of committed literature, as well as releasing its pedagogical impulse from bare didacticism and empowering it with pleasure and *jouissance*.

Relying on the pillars of existentialist writing, such as that of Jean-Paul Sartre, or children's literature criticism, such as that of Perry Nodelman, in *The Mighty Child* Beauvais hypothesises “that the hidden adult is always subjected to a specific form of power belonging to the child. That form of power is might, and its currency is time. Thus, alongside the adult's authority inside and outside the narrative, the child's might emerges: the potent, latent future to be filled with yet-unknown action” (19). In that framework, children's literature emerges as literature that “addresses the child as a mighty temporal other who may do in future what the adult was unable to do” (135). But in counterbalance with raising existentialist problems (such as the impossibilities of fully being-for-others and being-in-the-world at the same time), children's literature also idealistically calls for solving these problems. These calls are important because they, as Beauvais demonstrates, can be seen as signs of not only an adult desire for a lost indeterminacy, but also as signs of the child as the one through whom this indeterminacy can partly be regained. Therefore, this desire for indeterminacy also signifies the “adult faith that the child is an independent individual who can do something not yet known” (135). In this context, the specific power of the child reader emerges as might, and the specific power of the adult author as authority.

The Mighty Child's reading of time and power in children's literature redefines basic concepts of children's literature studies, such as the child, adult, didacticism or hope, and marks new pathways for children's literature scholarship and criticism. Its coherent, informed and lucid confronting and merging of existentialist writings with recent children's literature criticism and divergent children's literature texts – from classics to recent work, from novels to poetry, from picturebooks to crossover literature – can be seen as a demonstration of one of the multiple intellectually stimulating directions which children's literature studies might take if they dare to try. Future theoretical and historical testing of its arguments and conclusions, their development, confirmation or rejection, will hopefully have the same revealing effect.

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A Long Time Ago

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In 2008, with Kerry Mallan, she initiated and edited the Palgrave Macmillan series titled “Critical Approaches to Children's Literature”, with the aim “to identify and publish the best contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film and media texts” (ix). The most recent contribution to this series is Bradford's own