

Theorising the Body in Children's Literature

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.

– Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge:*
and *The Discourse of Language*

Implicit in any discourse on children's literature is the construction of childhood. Among the many writers and theorists on this topic it is commonly accepted that our concept of childhood has altered dramatically since the late eighteenth century which saw the "birth of the modern notion of childhood".¹ Since that time childhood has become a site of intense scrutiny: it has been popularised, romanticised, politicised and analysed by individuals and institutions and these, almost inevitably, carry a vested interest in both their subjects and outcomes. Virginia Blum writes: "[t]he fact that all observers/theorists of children have been children inevitably complicates the relationship between the

¹ Erica Burman, "'What is it?'" Masculinity and Femininity in Cultural Representations of Childhood', *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (London: Sage Publications, 1995) 50. See also Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood; The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature*, rev. edition (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967); and James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

observing and observed subjects.”² As Blum’s statement suggests, I too am present within my own discourse on childhood. My gender, ethnicity, and age impact upon my beliefs and therefore influence my arguments, as do my childhood, reading practices, and interests. This thesis is not, therefore, an objective analysis of the construction of the child’s body in selected contemporary Australian children’s novels. Rather, what I am attempting is a reconsideration of texts, written for children, that construct the body in particular ways resulting in specific political and ideological effects. Although my primary interest is in the construction of the child’s body it must be noted that it is not only the child’s body which is prone to manipulations and subversions in children’s literature. Therefore, in many of the chapters I also consider the portrayal of adult bodies.

In order to problematise the ways in which the body is constructed in children’s literature I utilise a variety of theoretical approaches in this thesis, from feminist and Foucaultian theory to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and Kristeva’s theory of the abject. All of these theories are, in different ways, preoccupied with the constructed nature of the subject and together they can be understood as representing a manifold or eclectic approach which is, simultaneously, complementary. Whilst each chapter involves the analysis of specific texts from a single theoretical basis, together these theories create an interesting and comprehensive approach to many of the issues which arise in relation to representations of the body in children’s literature. Obviously this method diverges from the more typical approach in which an up-front synthesis governs a whole dissertation. Yet in avoiding this narrow or more restrictive methodology, I have been able to both problematise the textual representations of bodies and subjectivities and test the validity

² Virginia L. Blum, *Hide and Seek: The Child Between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Chicago:

or appropriateness of different theoretical approaches by exposure to the specifics of a text or texts. The result, I argue, is a discourse on body-politics which identifies some of the conservative ideals that render bodies docile, desirable and disruptive within Australian children's literature. Such an argument does not, however, eliminate the potential for subversion within this genre; rather, such an eclectic methodology offers new possibilities in the face of dogmatic reassertions of old certitudes. It enables me to explore new spaces, problematise the status quo and offer possibilities for the reconsideration and rewriting of the body in this genre.

First it is necessary to define my use of the terms 'child' and 'childhood'. Throughout this thesis I will be using these terms to represent a status which is a social and cultural construct reflecting what is commonly conceived as biological immaturity and political powerlessness. I will avoid giving specific age ranges to delineate childhood as this would inhibit an understanding of my argument and its possible application to texts written for individuals outside any such age group. This resistance to specificity is supported by an understanding of the changing nature of Australian children's literature which is now generally recognised as extending beyond the parameters of what has traditionally been seen as a child-oriented readership. It now encompasses Young Adult novels which are often marketed at individuals as old as, or older than, twenty-one. As this thesis is concerned with novels that fall into the Junior or Young Adult categories I feel that specifying the age of childhood would inhibit an understanding of the expansive nature of this term and its ongoing political, social and economic implications.

Furthermore, as theorists such as Joseph P. Kett³ and Frank Musgrove⁴ have noted, the use of alternate terms to denote an older readership – such as adolescent, young adult, or teenager – is prone to raise the same issues that arise when using ‘childhood’.⁵ These terms, like childhood, are constructs which serve particular social, cultural and political purposes and are, consequently, equally as problematic. Therefore, this thesis will not be served by the use of new or alternate terminology, but rather will continue to use ‘children’s literature’ provisionally as a designation that, whilst neither neutral nor unproblematic, nevertheless defines the parameters of the field of scholarly inquiry into which this thesis falls.

Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children’s Literature* argues that children’s literature functions in specific social and cultural ways which enact an adult desire to secure, place and frame the child.⁶ By rendering the child knowable and Other, adulthood is constructed in opposition to this figure thereby constantly reaffirming its centrality, superiority and authority. The binary relationship between childhood and adulthood is essential to the genre of children’s literature. Rose argues that, contrary to popular perception, this is a genre “in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) but where neither of them enter the space in between.”⁷ The adult/child dichotomy of this schema is premised upon the modern notion of childhood. However, the traditional confidence and

³ Joseph P. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

⁴ Frank Musgrove, *Youth and Social Order* (New York: Routledge, 1964).

⁵ According to Musgrove, “[t]he adolescent was invented at the same time as the steam-engine. The principal architect of the latter was Watt in 1765, of the former Rousseau in 1762.” (33).

⁶ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: Or The Impossibility of Children’s Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) 2.

⁷ Rose 1-2.

certainty with which childhood was once conceived has increasingly become a site of examination and contestation. Like Rose, historians, literary theorists, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and even biological scientists have begun to question the category that is childhood and to identify the manipulations and political implications of its use. Children have become the focus of studies whose wider concerns envelop issues such as the modern family, social policy, maternal welfare, women, demography and public health.⁸

Philippe Ariès in his text *Centuries of Childhood* was one of the first to detail how the concept of childhood has changed and developed since medieval times when, he claims, “the idea of childhood did not exist”.⁹ This was not to suggest

... that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking.¹⁰

By the eighteenth century, European society’s perception of childhood began to change, as is evident in the work of poets such as Blake and Wordsworth, giving rise to a “cult of childhood”¹¹ which celebrated the natural purity and innocence of the child. This movement towards romanticising children, by envisaging them as pure and angelic, was probably founded by Jean-Jacques Rousseau who asserts in the opening lines of *Emile*

⁸ Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society, 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1.

⁹ Ariès 125.

¹⁰ Ariès 125.

¹¹ A term used by Rose 43-5 but which she attributes to George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1966).

that: "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil."¹² Standing outside worldly preoccupations, this innocent child is as yet uncorrupted by an alienated and alienating civilisation,¹³ but is undoubtedly vulnerable and in need of care and protection. Innocence in childhood represents a condition which has been lost or forgotten by all who have strayed from this state and therefore this construction is prone to idealisation and sentimentalisation.¹⁴

'Innocence' is a word replete with a sense of the otherness of those we label 'innocent'. The innocent are those we take to be somehow both freer than ourselves and more limited in what they know and can do. We often locate innocence in childhood or simplicity and regard it nostalgically. It is that 'Other' country from whence we came, but to which we cannot return. This is not, I hasten to add, the only way to conceptualize innocence (it is not Blake's way, for example), but it is a familiar conceptualization in our culture. The innocent are 'Other,' and our relationship to this other is ambivalent precisely because it is both attractive and beyond our complete ability to emulate.¹⁵

This construction, according to Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers, has "persisted through a plethora of Victorian sentimentalist writing into the early twentieth century in such works as Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, and finds its natural home today in Disney Studios."¹⁶ Blum states that the construction and repetition of the model of innocent childhood reflects a nostalgia for the pre-industrial pastoral scene by romanticising the nuclear family and encoding the female body as a site of production.¹⁷ It sentimentalises the child who becomes a tool for nostalgic and idealistic critiques of

¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1974).

¹³ Burman 50.

¹⁴ Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 13.

¹⁵ Roderick McGillis, 'Self, Other, and Other Self: Recognizing the Other in Children's Literature', *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature*, 21.2 (1997): 228.

¹⁶ Rex Stainton Rogers and Wendy Stainton Rogers, *Stories of Childhood: Shifting Agendas of Child Concern* (New York: Harvester, 1992) 27.

society, the family and childhood itself. Therefore, what has emerged from this transformation, which began in the eighteenth century as a burgeoning investment in the site of childhood, is a rhetorical device used to call up a wealth of associations related to innocence, powerlessness, loss, deprivation and isolation.

These traits are not, however, the only qualities with which the child is regularly associated. Another influential construction, which is often ambiguously coupled with the trait of innocence, is that of the depraved, sinful, savage or untamed child.¹⁸ This child is envisaged as base, corrupt and animalistic. Unlike the innocent child in whom socialisation results in corruption, for the untamed child socialisation and eventually adulthood represent the only hope for salvation. The image of the untamed child is a relatively common and powerful construction which can be found in contemporary literature and cinema, including texts such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and films such as *The Exorcist*. It has also been used by anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead, to essentialise the differences between adults and children as is evident when she writes that children are:

... pygmies among giants, ignorant among the knowledgeable, wordless among the articulate, with incomprehensible urgencies and desires and fears among adults who appear to have such matters reduced to a system – a system which must be mastered. And to the adults, children everywhere represent something weak and helpless, in need of protection, supervision, training, models, skills, beliefs, 'character'.... [C]hildren in their lack of control represent the impulses which the adults in their childhood laboriously learned to discipline and control.¹⁹

¹⁷ Blum 248.

¹⁸ Rose notes that there is "a circulation in which childhood, innocence and sexuality all figure in central but uneasy relation." (99).

¹⁹ Margaret Mead, 'Theoretical Setting – 1954', *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 7.

Untamed children, according to Mead, are never “fully human” until they have learnt this adult level of control and discipline.²⁰

Virginia Blum argues that the “overtly fantasmatic nature” of such constructions of childhood tends to illustrate the political and ideological beliefs upon which they reside.²¹ Whether children are constructed as untamed or innocent they ultimately remain bound to a schema which recognises their status as one that is less-than or lacking in those attributes which have political, social and cultural currency – knowledge, power, age and even sexual experience.²² Childhood, according to such constructions, is a state of “*becoming* (growing to adult maturity), rather than *being* (children as their own persons).”²³ This construction of childhood, as necessarily premised upon a understanding of and dichotomous relationship to adulthood, is perpetuated in a genre specifically written for children. Children’s literature celebrates the Otherness of childhood by marking and reinforcing the boundaries that separate adults and children.²⁴

Rose claims:

A number of oppositions are starting to emerge which have been crucial in determining how children’s fiction has been written since the eighteenth century and how it is still thought about to this day. The opposition between the child and the adult²⁵ ... between oral and written culture, between innocence and decay. These are structural oppositions in the strictest sense, in that each term only has meaning in relation to the one to which it is opposed. They do not reflect an

²⁰ Mead 6.

²¹ Blum 248.

²² Lacking in political significance, children are often the victims of what John Hood-Williams has termed “age-patriarchy” when referring to the “imbalance of power, control and resources which is manifested through adult control – expressed as a demand for obedience – over children’s space, bodies and time.” (Hendrick 96).

²³ Hendrick 4.

²⁴ According to Kincaid the child is “marked off as separate and distinct, distinguished from and understood as somehow in opposition to ‘the adult’.” (62).

²⁵ “[T]he instinctual life of the child and the cerebral life of the adult” – Neil Philip, *A Fine Anger: A Critical Introduction to the Work of Alan Garner* (London: Collins, 1981) 153.

essential truth about the child (although the way in which childhood attracts the idea of ‘essential truth’ makes this very difficult to grasp); instead they produce a certain conception of childhood which simply carries the weight of one half of the contradictions which we experience in relation to ourselves.²⁶

More than this, the construction and classification of a text as ‘children’s literature’, as well as its language, structure, style and the many other elements that make it so, provide an insight into the ways in which the author, the publisher, the librarian, the reader, and more broadly, society configures and constructs the child. This generic title fixes identities and relationships – between child and text, child and adult, adult and text – it marks taboos and symbolises a pact which concerns the “orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject.”²⁷ The result is a normative construction of childhood which frequently supports a white, masculinist, middle class ideal that configures the child’s body as, among other things: gendered, untamed, abject, carnivalesque and docile. Therefore children’s literature typically valorises innocence and celebrates patriarchal control whilst ignoring, erasing or demonising gender, ethnic, sexual, psychological and socio-economic differences. As a consequence, childhood has become a term “of universal social reference which conceals all the historical divisions and difficulties of which children, no less than ourselves, form a part.”²⁸

Through children’s literature the child’s body has become a site for the expression of ideological beliefs and popularly held social paradigms. This thesis reconsiders numerous texts written and published for children – many of which are recognised as being in some way radical or transgressive. This examination employs a multi-faceted

²⁶ Rose 50.

²⁷ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1983) 19.

²⁸ Rose 10.

theoretical analysis which will politicise and problematise the normative subject positions and discourses that this genre has used without adequate revision or contestation. Of the ten children's texts explored in this thesis, five are written by John Marsden²⁹ and one each by Margaret Clark, Gary Crew, Sonya Hartnett, Margo Lanagan and Victor Kelleher. In selecting these texts my only qualifying criteria were that the books had to be contemporary³⁰ Australian children's literature³¹ that constructed the body in a fashion which necessitated (enticed or demanded) reconsideration and critical analysis.

Chapter Two, 'The Gendered Body', identifies the patriarchal reasoning that underpins John Marsden's and Margaret Clark's discourses about gender in their books, *Secret Men's Business: Manhood: The Big Gig*³² and *Secret Girls' Stuff*.³³ Using feminist theory I set out to politicise and problematise the representations of gender in these texts which primarily construct gender as a biological rather than social phenomenon and which, consequently, discuss gender in essentialist terms. Furthermore I critique the positioning of the child reader as knowable and malleable in these books and consider how these non-fictional narratives normalise binary notions about gender (masculine/feminine) and gendered behaviour (reason/emotion, strength/weakness, rational/irrational). Finally, this chapter recognises, in contrast to these overwhelmingly paternalistic approaches, the potential for heterogeneity, complexity and equality in a child's gender negotiations.

²⁹ The use of so many texts by John Marsden is an intentionally political decision, one which is driven by an interest in the work of an author whose texts, especially with regard to his construction of female adolescents, call for critical interpretation and analysis.

³⁰ The range of publishing dates extends from 1979 when Kelleher's *The Red King* was published to Clark's *Secret Girls' Stuff* in 1999.

³¹ A criteria which reflected my own personal interests and also recognised the importance and benefits of ready access to both primary and secondary source materials.

³² John Marsden, *Secret Men's Business: Manhood: the Big Gig* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1998).

Chapter Three, 'The Untamed Body', utilises Harlan Lane's work on Victor, the Wild Boy of Aveyron, and the processes Lane describes in the taming of the child, to consider the construction of two wild children, Micky and Leena, in Gary Crew's *Angel's Gate*³⁴. In this chapter I argue that the child's body is a site of political and ideological contestation in which the untamed children, through their lack of socialisation, challenge society's concepts of normalcy. The result in *Angel's Gate*, like many other children's texts, is a restoration of the status quo through the successful subordination or colonisation of the untamed children and their supposed bestial corporeality. Thus, the text is as much a cautionary tale to adults about the dangers of not controlling their children as it is a murder mystery or *Bildungsroman*.

Sonya Hartnett's *Sleeping Dogs*³⁵ and Margo Lanagan's *Touching Earth Lightly*³⁶ are analysed using Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection in Chapter Four, 'The Abject Body'. In these novels various characters are represented as abject, a condition which is manifest in their incestuous relationships, maternal status, improper or unclean bodies, and finally in death. The representation of transgressive and abject corporeality in these texts does not, however, challenge patriarchal power. Instead, the closure offered in both novels constitutes a 'return to the fold' as the conservative and often judgemental tones of the texts ultimately overwhelm the discourse. In the concluding pages of *Touching Earth Lightly* the reader is offered the promise of a romantic relationship whilst *Sleeping Dogs* concludes with the Gothic romanticism of a haunted house as restitution for the repudiation of subversion and the resurrection of the status quo. Far from the promise of

³³ Margaret Clark, *Secret Girls' Stuff* (Sydney: Random House, 1999).

³⁴ Gary Crew, *Angel's Gate* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1993).

³⁵ Sonya Hartnett, *Sleeping Dogs* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1995).

boundary-breaking work offered on the cover of *Sleeping Dogs*,³⁷ both texts instead retrace and celebrate traditional motifs and old certitudes.

Victor Kelleher's *The Red King*³⁸ and John Marsden's *The Journey*³⁹ are the focal texts in Chapter Five, 'The Carnavalesque Body'. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque I analyse these two books and consider their constructions of carnival and grotesque corporeality. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque recognises the subversive and anti-authoritarian nature of carnival where focus upon laughter, degradation and the material body enables the performer, writer or translator to collapse hierarchical distinctions and challenge the status quo. Bakhtin's theory is a celebration of a tradition, the full realisation of which he finds in the works of François Rabelais and, as part of a more speculative argument, I posit that elements of the carnivalesque can also be found in modern children's literature. Using *The Red King* and *The Journey* I analyse the representation of markets and fairs as sites of grotesque bodies and consider how these bodies might be read as subversive or anti-authoritarian.

In Chapter Six, 'The Docile Body', three of John Marsden's novels – *So Much to Tell You*⁴⁰, *Letters From the Inside*⁴¹, and *Checkers*⁴² – are used when considering the implications of manipulating, constraining and institutionalising the child's body. Foucault's theoretical work *Discipline and Punish* and in particular his argument concerning the docile body is used as a starting point for a consideration of the four

³⁶ Margo Lanagan, *Touching Earth Lightly* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

³⁷ On the back cover of *Sleeping Dogs* Robert Cormier is quoted as stating that "Sonya Hartnett has truly pushed the boundaries of YA [Young Adult] literature to their outer edges and perhaps beyond...." A more detailed discussion of this quotation can be found in Chapter 4.

³⁸ Victor Kelleher, *The Red King* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1979).

³⁹ John Marsden, *The Journey* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1988).

⁴⁰ John Marsden, *So Much To Tell You* (Montville, Qld: Walter McVitty Books, 1988).

⁴¹ John Marsden, *Letters from the Inside* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1991).

protagonists in these novels, all of whom are confined within institutions. Whilst it is possible to read these texts as discourses which critique a society which silences and institutionalises the victims of male violence, however I will argue that these texts instead construct their protagonists as deviant and ultimately culpable for the violence of which they were victims. The result, I argue, is that in all three texts the female protagonists are held accountable for their own victimhood and are then rendered docile by the institutions in which they are confined – hospital, psychiatric ward, private school, gaol, and suburban home.

Ultimately this thesis is concerned with recognising the importance of children's books in disrupting the normalising discourses which often inform notions of corporeality in children's literature. It is not an exhaustive study of this topic, these texts or this field. Rather, it addresses only a few of many Australian children's books worthy of critical consideration, identifies numerous theoretical approaches which studies of children's literature and corporeality can utilise and provides a point from which further scrutiny of both children's texts and theoretically oriented literary criticism of this genre can potentially evolve. Furthermore, each chapter is undoubtedly only one of many potential methods for interpreting the texts and utilising the theories involved. The result, however, is an exploration of the representation of gendered, untamed, abject, carnivalesque and docile bodies in a selection of Australian children's books. This thesis represents a recognition and critique of the propensity of children's books to operate within, rather than interrogate, the ideological imperatives that emerge from this genre and the ensuing

⁴² John Marsden, *Checkers* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1996).

resurrection of a conservative, patriarchal social order in the conclusion to many books which often serves to render children's bodies docile, desirable and disruptive.