



Children's Play in Literature: Investigating the Strengths and the Subversions of the Playing Child, Edited by Joyce E. Kelley.

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In *Children's Play in Literature: Investigating the Strengths and the Subversions of the Playing Child*, Joyce E. Kelley brings together a collection of twelve essays which examine representations of children at play from different perspectives. Kelley writes in her introduction that authors – particularly those writing for or about children – anticipated the scientific theories which informed the psychological study of children. She asserts that “while we owe much to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists who have so carefully studied children’s linguistic and dramatic play, it is certain that authors of literature, especially children’s literature, made themselves experts on the subject much sooner” (1).

This is the thesis around which the anthology is structured, as each article author considers how fiction and film imitate, comment upon, engage with, or predict empirical research by showing the profundity of children’s play. This anthology features work from emerging scholars and more established academics. All contributors are active researchers in English, and this is reflected within the content of their work, which primarily features texts and films produced in the English language. The largely Anglocentric focus of the articles means that the anthology lacks diversity. Of the twelve articles, only Dorothy Wolfe Giannakouros’s essay, “‘The trampoline of letters and words’: Juvenile Linguistic Play in the Memoirs of Binyavanga Wainaina and Shailja Patel”, looks to interrogate a non-white experience of child’s-play. It is disappointing not to see more diverse representations of children at play. Although Kelley’s analysis of Louise Clarke Pynelle’s nostalgic plantation fiction handles issues of racism, these have been told from the author’s inherently problematic colonial perspective. Otherwise, the contributing authors take their readings from British, American, Canadian, or colonial New Zealand resources.

The title states that the depictions of play - which are the objects of critical scrutiny - have been drawn from literary works, but there are several articles which take cinema as their subject matter. For example, Andy Clinton’s article, “‘I’m ready to play now, you guys!’: J.D. Salinger, Steven Spielberg, and the Healing Power of Children’s Play”, puts his reading of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* into contact with an analysis of Spielberg’s 1982 film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, while Ian Wojcik-Andrews uses Pixar’s *Toy Story* and *Inside-Out* as well as Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to examine depictions of children’s play and mental health. The collection is logically structured in a chronological fashion, with each article forming a thematic sub-group (although this is not explicated within the contents), which allows the reader to read across genres, eras, and aesthetic expressions. Significantly, the contributing authors ground their analyses within texts and films which are intended to be consumed by children and adults alike, so they examine incidents of play from multiple perspectives; witnessed by adults or engaged in by children.

Kelley's introduction "Caution – Children at Play: Investigations of Children's Play in Theory and Literature" outlines a comprehensive literature review of psychological and pedagogical research which examines how children play. This establishes a theoretical framework which usefully explains her claim that writers of children and child's play anticipated psychological discourses. However, it is clear that some contributing authors are unaccustomed to working with this sort of material, as they tend to equate authors of fiction with child psychologists. One exception to this is Jericho Williams's article "Words with Kids at Play: Sculpting and Forging Childhood Friendship in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris*". Williams's analysis of how James depicts Maisie at play with her doll convincingly demonstrates the developmental aspects of play. Furthermore, he illustrates Maisie's use of her doll to navigate the turbulent adult world within which she is immersed. Williams does not signal an awareness of nineteenth-century psychologist James Sully's monograph *Studies of Childhood* (1896), nor does he appear to make use of his 1898 essay "Dollatory", both of which are contemporaneous with *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and examine the implications of the use of dolls in children's play. Rather than a shortcoming, this omission works to place James as the creative force behind these observations, preventing the distinction between author and child psychologist from collapsing, thereby bolstering Kelley's central thesis.

The articles grounded within an historical methodology are particularly effective in expressing their arguments. Noteworthy pieces include Alison W. Powell's opening article, which examines Wordsworth's depictions of destructive play (a canny editorial decision given the important position Wordsworth occupies within literary discourses of children and childhood), in Book 1 of his autobiographical epic poem *The Prelude* (1805). Powell puts Friedrich Schiller's view of art and play into contact with his interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry to show how Romantic ideas about childhood are reconciled with his aesthetic practice. What follows is an interesting examination of the relationship between spontaneous play, poetic composition, and the philosophical development of the poetic imagination. Additionally, Alan Gribben and Sarah Fredericks's article "Playing at Work and Working at Play in Mark Twain's Writings" usefully places Twain's fiction within the wider context of nineteenth-century American perceptions of work and leisure, through the intersection of dangerous, unsupervised play.

Michael Opest and Tim Bryant both consider the position of the author in creating texts written for or about children. In "The Buttons of the World are Round: Gertrude Stein's Toys", Opest examines Stein's use of ludic language in *The Word is Round* to suggest that her ability to imitate (developmentally important) infantile babble can be paralleled with the evolution of her own avantgarde aesthetics. Bryant's analysis of the sci-fi novel *Ender's Game* places Orson Scott Card's homophobic opinions alongside his depictions of the dynamics of play and war and the sexuality of the young characters, to consider playtime activities which are infused with violence.

Overall, *Children's Play in Literature* is a valuable, albeit uneven, contribution to the field. Some articles are persuasively written and thoroughly researched, while others would benefit from a greater degree of analysis to better ground them within previous literary research. Nevertheless, the study is rich in exciting ideas which will, hopefully, inspire scholars to create more in-depth investigations of the implications of play in literature, on a wider scale.

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