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Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature

by Jessica Straley (review)

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Jessica Straley. *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. Print.

Jessica Straley's *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* convincingly asserts that children's literature of the Golden Age was cognizant of, engaged with, and even revised Victorian evolutionary theories. Although "evolution" appears in the book's title, Straley focuses on recapitulation, which posits that an individual human's development repeats the evolutionary process of the human species. Victorians wondered how best to educate children if childhood was, according to recapitulation, "a way station on the road to fully realized humanity, a living relic of a still prehuman, even bestial past" (6). Evolutionary thinkers reasoned that since children were like "primitive man" (16), they should be educated like primitive man; hence, evolutionist-influenced pedagogy delayed the introduction of literature and prioritized scientific knowledge gained through hands-on methods. Straley argues that children's literature by authors such as Lewis Carroll and Rudyard Kipling countered such pedagogical recommendations by championing literature—particularly nonrealistic, playful, even nonsense literature—for its ability to successfully develop the child. Far from being an "escapist genre" (39), children's literature creatively defended its effectiveness in humanizing children; these "tales," Straley puns, were "capable of teaching the child how to retract his bestial 'tail'" (26). Other books have explored Darwin's impact on Victorian literature, including Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983) and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (1988). These monographs, however, concentrate on fiction aimed primarily at adult audiences. By drawing attention to the position of the child within evolutionary thought and by analyzing the impact of such theories specifically on children's literature, Straley makes an original and much-needed contribution to the scholarly examination of the intersection between nineteenth-century evolution and literature.

Straley dedicates a chapter each to Margaret Gatty, Charles Kingsley, Carroll, Kipling, and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Even though these authors held diverse perspectives on Darwin and on evolution, they all lived in and wrote to a post-Darwinian society, and Straley is attuned to the nuanced ways scientific conversations influenced and challenged these writers whether or not they personally believed in evolution. For example, Gatty was an "avid

anti-evolutionist” (40), and her *Parables from Nature* “rejects evolution” through the book’s foundation in natural theology—the principle that orderly nature evidences God’s design (33). But Darwinian precepts, Straley claims, motivated Gatty to modify her conception of natural theology to acknowledge the limitations of human observation of the natural world. Although Carroll was “a noted skeptic of evolution” (88), Straley inventively connects his use of parody in the *Alice* books (most famously, Alice’s inability to correctly recite Isaac Watts’s “Against Idleness and Mischief”) to evolution. In Straley’s analysis, parody is a type of evolution—an adaptation of an older text. In the face of a chaotic, mutable world, parody offers humans like Alice agency to initiate and manipulate change. Kingsley, conversely, did accept evolution, and *The Water-Babies* features a clearly recapitulative plot. Chimney sweeper Tom is changed into a newt to begin his journey of maturation and salvation. Straley places *The Water-Babies* in conversation with the evolutionary ideas of Herbert Spencer, who advocated that children learn as early humans presumably did, through self-directed observation, experiments, and discovery—in short, through the scientific method. Tom’s aquatic education follows Spencer’s program, but only to a point. While Spencer considered literary instruction superfluous, Kingsley incorporates fairies and nonsense, and therefore, “literary fancy,” into Tom’s and the reader’s education (77).

I found Straley’s chapter on Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* particularly rewarding for its deft handling of historical context and theories of adolescence, in addition to its careful attention to the thematic and formal aspects of the stories. Straley persuasively complicates the now common interpretation of Mowgli as a hybrid character by highlighting his heterogeneity, “his eclectic collection of bestial identities” (124). After pointing out that “In the Rukh,” the story in which Mowgli grows up and joins the workforce, was not included by Kipling in *The Jungle Books*, Straley reads Mowgli as a forever adolescent boy who holds “the potential to become the entire animal kingdom” (127). Straley contrasts Kipling’s adolescence-as-endpoint formulation with G. Stanley Hall’s conception of adolescence as the last, but pivotal, step before adulthood. To Straley the very structure and order of the stories further resists typical linear movement. The “nonchronological ordering of Mowgli’s plot” (129) and the animal songs that conclude many stories, which Straley characterizes as narrative pauses, reinforce a “perpetual, anti-progressive, and lyrical adolescence” (130). Jed Esty’s *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (2012), though not referenced by Straley, makes for a good companion piece with this chapter, as it tracks the shift to a permanent adolescence in the modernist Bildungsroman, including in Kipling’s *Kim*.

Straley's final chapter clarifies the male-centeredness of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, which rarely discussed women at length; some female evolutionists addressed this gap by stressing the importance of both motherhood and the woman's choice of partner in human evolution. Focusing on Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Straley traces Mary Lennox's female recapitulative course: though she has prematurely grown up in India, she reverts to youth when she relocates to England, where she associates with animals like the robin and transforms into a motherly character, thereby fulfilling the woman's proper aim and role in evolution. This late examination of gender, however, foregrounds the book's overall neglect of the topic. The sexist slant of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory deserves comment in the book's introduction and arguably necessitates a greater attention to gender in the literary analyses. Throughout the book, I desired a fuller sense of how a character's gender shaped his or her recapitulative storyline. For example, Straley only nods to the idea that gender affects Tom's and Ellie's different paths and bodies in *The Water-Babies*. Straley doesn't acknowledge that Alice's gender may intensify her worries about naming and identity; in her otherwise thorough scrutiny of Alice's parody of the Watts poem, Straley overlooks the substitution of a *male* crocodile for the *female* bee. Although all of Straley's primary texts are replete with animals, Straley rarely considers or even specifies the gender of those animals. Does the bestial heterogeneity that Mowgli attains in *The Jungle Books* also include gender diversity? Hopefully this gap is a place where future scholars can build on Straley's otherwise strong research.

Because *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* is written in a readable and lively style and focuses on canonical authors and their well-known publications, I can imagine it being useful and generative in graduate and undergraduate courses on children's literature of the Golden Age and on nineteenth-century literature and science. Straley grounds each primary text thoroughly and impressively within the relevant scientific, cultural, and pedagogical conversations of the period. Overall, Straley offers a compelling study not only of evolution's profound influence on children's literature but also of children's literature's overlooked contribution to evolutionary debates.

Alexandra Valint is an assistant professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she teaches courses in Victorian and children's/young adult literature. She has published on Frances Hodgson Burnett, Robert Louis Stevenson, Catherine Sinclair, and Juliana Horatia Ewing. She is currently completing a book manuscript on the Victorian multinarrator novel.