Elusive Childhood

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iterary childhood studies has emerged from traditional children’s literature criticism under the influence of the identity politics of cultural studies, to reevaluate the dubious definition of its genre by “intended audience.” This reevaluation has already allowed for an expanded focus and interchange within the otherwise “adult” canon, from which cultural critics feel freer to sample “children’s texts.” It should also encourage critics traditionally restricted to the child-canon to reconsider (more radically) the boundaries and agendas of that canon.

From its inception, the study of children’s literature as a separate genre has posed problems. Many children’s literature critics have been restrained by the limits of the field, as defining the field’s genre by audience (i.e., “for children”) runs counter to the professed aims of many children’s literature authors and critics. P. L. Travers, creator of Mary Poppins, has said, “There is no such thing as a children’s book. There are simply books of many kinds and some of them children read. I would deny, however, that [they were] written for children” (my italics, qtd. in Haviland 155). My impression is that many writers with a supposed age-defined audience agree with Travers. To name only the first few that come to mind, Russell Hoban, Roald Dahl, Chris Van Allsburg, Robert Cormier, and J. K. Rowling have made similar admissions. We will further discuss the impossibility of defining a juvenile audience, but Travers makes a good starting point: to read any work as exclusive to an age group discredits its artistry and reach.

American literary criticism has traditionally upheld the isolation of “children’s literature” and has suffered for it. Although during the 1970s and 1980s the formerly white, male canon democratically expanded, Tim
Morris points out that “restructuring the canon to include texts by women and nonwhite writers did not extend to an inclusion of texts for children” (3). The introduction of identity politics to the literary curriculum failed to bring attention to the factor of age. When literature for children gained scholarly attention outside of children’s literature criticism, it was generally marginalized as “popular culture,” indicating a “low-brow” niche in literary academia.1

From the grown-up side of the canon’s age-divide, Reinhard Kuhn’s Corruption in Paradise (1982), a keen study of the figuration of children, comprehensively surveys modern Western literature without consulting “children’s” books (except the predictable crossover Alice books, which he insists on attributing to the mathematician Charles Dodgson, not his nonsense-persona Lewis Carroll, as if to distance himself and the two). The age segregation attributed to audience has been kept so constant in literary criticism that comprehensive single-author studies often entirely overlook crossover titles. Even now it is difficult to find scholarly discussion of an author’s crossover text, because it is lost in the divide. Many artists in the adult canon (Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Donald Barthelme, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, John Updike, James Thurber, and Kurt Vonnegut, to name a few) have written picture books that remain relatively untreated by scholars because they are held apart as (academically liminal) irrelevant diversions. By merging canons, or simply breaking such outmoded barriers, scholars (especially those interested in childhood as a subject) will have a broader and more realistically complex range for contextualization as well as more comprehensive discursive evidence for analysis.

Even more troubling to the field of children’s literature is the condescension implicit in its prescriptive classification. Though the term “women’s reading” was widely understood to indicate socially permissible reading for women in the nineteenth century, such marginalization of readings and readers is no longer acceptable. In fact, curricula for “women’s literature” and “African-American literature” reflect the chosen or perceived identity of the authors, not the supposed identity of suitable readers. If this were true of “children’s literature,” the canon would be reduced to a negligible number of titles. The only two “classics” I can think of that would fit are nine-year-old Daisy Ashford’s The Young Visitors (1919) and thirteen-year-old Anne Frank’s Diary of a Young Girl (1947), neither of which, ironically, fits common standards of reading for children.2

Maria Tatar does not exaggerate the extent to which young people are excluded from the definition and production of literature that hails them:
“Adults not only have almost exclusive control over the public production of words and images for children, they also have virtually exclusive rights when it comes to the task of interpretation” (276). Parents and educators dominate the market, at least exercising veto power, which often directly results in censorship. Although book reviews and pick lists written by children can be found on the Internet, the bulk of purchasing choices are already limited by adult decisions in publishing. In this light, justifications for an audience-based genre become murky and politically suspect at best. Children’s books are not texts for children by children—they are books written by adults, chosen by other adults to be published and recommended /given/assigned to children by adults.

The first widely recognized attempt to investigate this double standard and the ageist canon (for those in literary childhood studies, at least) came in Jacqueline Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984). In it Rose argues:

Children’s fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. [. . .] [It] sets up a world 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. [. . .] If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to get at the child who is outside of the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp. (1–2)

Rose insists that the only children existing in adult culture are figurations of adult desire. Thus, she exposes the impossibility of defining an academic field that exclusively limits its definition of genre to works supposedly written for an audience that is undefinable itself.

Though the importance of Rose’s text has been acknowledged in children’s literature criticism, almost twenty years later I see only superficial changes made there in light of the “impossibilities” of the field’s vocabularies and methodologies. It would appear that critics have given Rose’s thesis lip service without internalizing the subsequent logic of her argument, which dismantles both genre and field—if one cannot “grasp” children, one cannot define them as an audience or define a literature as “age-appropriate” for that audience. Certainly one can interpret an implied audience in any given work but not a singularly defined implied audience for an entire genre. Further, to enforce the exclusion of other readers and/or readings based on such an interpretation would be ludicrous. Yet these are the presumptions of age-appropriateness.
Chapter 1

Along with Ariès’s constructivist premise, Rose’s influence has opened up the field for something akin to a Foucauldian (discursive) analysis of childhood, yet it has taken decades to clearly redefine the genres and fields associated with both children and literature. Only a handful of scholars have successfully reevaluated their methods or vigilantly curbed efforts to generalize and speak for children. This is a seemingly impossible and sometimes maddening task, and there has been much unsuccessful hair-splitting in the effort to find a common vocabulary that resists essentializing. Take, for example, two works in the field that seem to attempt what Mary Galbraith has called “emancipatory childhood studies”: Ellen Pifer’s *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (2000) and Joseph L. Zornado’s *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (2001). The former study, like mine, follows the focus of Reinhard Kuhn’s (on figuration) while updating methodology in consideration of today’s identity politics. Pifer states, “I neither assume the child’s essential nature nor seek to uncover the naked truth about real children allegedly reflected in their fictional counterparts” (6). The second work claims, though according to many critics fails, to recognize and encourage subversive potential by exposing the one-sided power and authority of adults. In either case, however, I have trouble getting past the titles and tables of contents, which definitely repeat the phrase “the child” so often that it seems to undermine the authors’ progressive intentions.

To study “the child” is to limit one’s focus to a child-figure, indicating awareness of social constructedness. One cannot doubt from Pifer’s stated plan and the execution of her work, for example, that she is committed to limiting her focus to representations in order to avoid essentializing. Very likely this was the reasoning behind using the phrase in titles by pioneers Coveney and Kuhn, and to note more recent authors cited in this book, Goodenough et al., Hurst, Iskander, Levander, Macleod, and even Jo-Ann Wallace, whose own argument critiques adult constructing. Though their titles identify “the child” (a figure) as their focus, the choice of definite article implies a universal or stereotype, revealing a deeper obstacle: in recognizing that we are presumptuous in our construction of childhood, we seem to excuse ourselves from the need to radically alter our rhetoric and thought. Abstraction hides prejudice, enabling us to overlook the near bigotry revealed in readings of “the child,” when it would be plenty obvious, not to mention offensive, if we constantly generalized representations of “the woman,” “the black,” or “the Hispanic” and in doing so dared to speak for all. As a case in point, Dorothy Broderick’s *Images of the Black in Children’s Fiction* (1973) would clearly not be so titled if written a decade later.
Methodologically, acceptance of Rose’s thesis demands shifting the focus of our analysis from a supposed audience (“children”) to authors (almost always adults), so that all child-focused writings can be read as constructing children (whether as characters, test subjects, or readers/listeners). Thus, we accept the impossibility of penetrating children’s minds to represent them fairly and attempt reparation by looking more critically at our motives for constructing them as we do. For many, the first departure from the boundaries of traditional criticism has been to consider children’s literature and children in literature together as reflections of adult perceptions, as the distinguishing trait between them, the audience, cannot be defined in any consistent manner.

We must also develop a vocabulary that reflects this new awareness and be vigilantly reminded of the abstract limits of our study. Even the social sciences have to curb temptations to essentialize the least accessible of subjects, as Ben Bradley points out: “Because infants and animals are not able to base their actions upon linguistic descriptions, they cannot be deemed to intend in the same way as adults do. When scientists and others ascribe intentions to nonverbal creatures, this shows more about how adults like to use (or over-extend) a particular linguistic form than it reveals about the subjective lives of infants” (152). Likewise, in the humanities, when we discuss “children,” we must always do so with an ear/eye to what we are really saying about ourselves, so that we can make an effort to filter it out.

With the imperative move away from essentializing subjects, in this case children, comes the need to dismantle the discourse we have built around them. This is the primary aim of childhood studies. Along with constructivist sociology and postcolonial studies, childhood studies results from the increasing awareness of culturally relative identities that compelled the new methodologies of cultural studies. My vocabulary will reflect the shared aims of these fields somewhat eclectically to indicate the larger political context of my argument; however, I hope others are more successful in developing less jargoned means of expressing these theoretical imperatives.

Some of the fairest efforts to study childhood began in the soft sciences, some of which, like literary childhood studies, analyze social construction through cultural narratives. In their broadly relevant text of childhood constructivist sociology, Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood, Allison James and Alan Prout point out that the focus of adult discourse on childhood “has been development, and three themes predominate in relation to it: ‘rationality,’ ‘naturalness,’ and ‘universality.’ […] The concept of ‘development’ inextricably links the biological facts of immatu-
rity, such as dependence, to the social aspects of childhood” (10). The popular conflation of nature and nurture narratives, inherited from developmentalism, has made it difficult to recognize the extent to which we impose “childhood” on children based solely on our interpretations of physical or behavioral signifiers.

Every time we say “she’s going through a phase” or “he’s too young to understand,” we essentialize children temporally—as if individual development proceeds in a universally consistent, chronologically determined and measurable manner. We have learned to recognize that biology is not destiny—sex does not necessarily determine gender or orientation, nor do fictitious absolutes like blood ratios measure ethnocultural identity—yet we still overlook the equally variable factor of age in constructing and sometimes limiting identity. We must recognize and constantly remind ourselves that young identities are too complex and individual to categorize by biology or chronological age. In fact, we should be weary of categorizing altogether by now.

Patrizia Lombardo writes, “We would be blind or ideologically conservative if we believed in a universal nature of childhood [. . .]. The child is a cultural object, and is culturally and historically determined, like everything else, even our body” (2). Pressing for this recognition, childhood studies tend toward inter-disciplinary methods for studying age/maturity as a central factor of socialized difference (following already highly theorized considerations of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation). There is much promise of exposure in this more general arena of methodologies through readers like *The Children’s Culture Reader* (Jenkins, 1998), *Childhood in America* (Fass & Mason, 2000), and *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader* (Levander and Singley, 2003), not to mention many excellent contributions still disciplinarily entrenched in fields like history and sociology.

In the meantime, new approaches have been stirring within children’s literature criticism in response to Jacqueline Rose and constructivist theory. From this side of the outdated audience age-divide, scholars have wondered if the expansion of the canon has been too one-sided. Richard Flynn has described this lasting challenge: “The relative invisibility of children’s literature and culture from the field of cultural studies and the mere handful of books examining the construction of childhood in ‘adult’ literary texts suggest that new tactics are called for if an exploration of childhood is to be recognized as central” (144). Flynn, whose article appeared in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, is not the first there to take issue with the boundaries of the field; he is, however, the first there (that I
know of) to declare his field as “Childhood Studies,” creating a niche between literary and cultural studies for his work. He provides a sort of mission statement, characterizing the field as one that

1. Examines the representation of children and childhood throughout literature and culture; 2. Analyzes the impact of the concept of “childhood” on the life and experience of children past and present; 3. Investigates childhood as a temporal state that is often experienced more in memory than in actuality; 4. Explores childhood as a discursive category whose language may provide a potentially useful perspective from which to describe the human person and to understand subjectivity. (144)

These literary agendas match those of constructivist sociology, though we tread on shaky ground with the fourth premise and must vigilantly qualify our “perspectives”—after all, how can one “describe the human person” or “understand subjectivity,” once it is agreed that any such construction is yet another imposition? Children’s literature scholars often admit to personal interest in (re)constructing childhood, yet our interest is politically precarious according to the constructivist enlightenment. In the last few years, the confusion has mounted, as many are criticized for “essentializing the child” when it is the precise act we are trying, perhaps impossibly, to avoid. Likewise, there is a passionate backlash of good old-fashioned essentializing.

When Karín Lesnik-Oberstein declared, in *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994), that “the child does not exist,” Margaret Meek, writing on “The Constructedness of Children,” responded as if personally attacked: “As a teacher and therefore compromised, in Lesnik-Oberstein’s terms, by my studies of what and how children read, I simply cannot imagine how I can not learn about children from children, for all her assertions to the contrary” (11). Meek has such an earnest concern for children that she has overlooked the limits of theoretical applicability to her personal experience with individuals, assuming that her generalizations are authorized through them. Both positions reveal the rift that constructivism has brought about in the study of childhood culture, demonstrating the “impossibility of children’s literature” not simply as a genre but as a field.

Karen Coats, in her contribution to the debate, has identified this rift in terms of discipline and methodology, arguing that social scientists are too likely to essentialize children, and literary critics are too likely to completely dissociate their study from real children. Comparing ours to other
identity-focused literary fields, she comes to the conclusion that “While excluding either way of conceiving the focus of study is limited, I think Children's Studies is the more inclusive term. After all, Women's Studies is never called ‘Womanhood Studies’ or ‘Woman Studies’ [. . .] womanhood is not an ideal, nor is woman a singular entity” (“Keepin’ It Plural” 140). But real women can write for, teach, and attend classes in women's studies—the study is not only of them and for them but also by them (or at least generally authenticated/verified by them). Real children rarely enter the academy or the classes we call “children's literature,” and even if their voices do, they are eventually mediated by adults in dissemination. Coats would understandably characterize my approach as limited, but any literary study of children is limited to the idea of childhood according to the discursive nature of our specialization.

Confusing the concept of childhood with the (albeit undefinable) subject position as it may truly exist in the experiences of certain youth, many critics have glossed over the distinction between studying discourse and studying its subjects. On this point, I disagree with Coats's phrasing above: “womanhood” has been an ideal in the past and still is—the study of that idealization has been the means of many literary efforts to dispel restrictive and impossible expectations put on women as a result. Likewise, childhood is an abstraction created within discourse, an ideal which few young persons are likely to fit perfectly if at all. Ideal childhood is constructed as a luxury of prolonged dependence and sanctioned irresponsibility, as well as a perceived right to protection that relatively few people throughout the world and history have afforded. And for those who have, childhood could equally seem a stifling imposition of obedience to undeserved authority, selectively preserved ignorance, and caged vulnerability. We can verify neither interpretation, however, but merely consider the possibilities and try to act with a heightened awareness of their multiplicity in spite of our simplifying biases.

Literary critics, especially those of us influenced by cultural studies, are often accused of trying to get away with amateur social science in our otherwise text-based analyses. From the position of literary study, we must be careful to recognize the discursive level of our expertise and respect the discursive limitations of our study. Far from being restrictive, this approach levels literary, scientific, and historical sources, opening up the possibility for all to be read as discourse, provided that we approach them as texts, not testimonies that provide us with authoritative access to “real children.” This temptation, as Coats points out, is the danger of our merging methodologies and one against which we are constantly negotiating boundaries.
A Childhood Studies Primer

Take, for example, Gillian Adams’s progress in establishing medieval children’s literature in the field. She is understandably defensive about the now-famous Ariès hypothesis of childhood constructedness, which she calls “logically absurd” (3), because he positions childhood as an Enlightenment phenomenon by claiming that “there was no place for childhood in the medieval world” (Ariès 33). But her defense blurs the distinction between real medieval children, who she argues indeed existed and were loved by parents, and the idea of childhood (or a family épistémè) that Ariès investigates. Her counterpoints obscure the mutually exclusive applicabilities of their arguments. To my understanding, both would agree that there were cherished medieval young persons we might call children today—Ariès simply reminds us that surviving representations suggest that such a distinction came with very different rights and limitations then, and it is necessary to study those conditions carefully to understand how changed and historically relative our expectations are today.

We need to remain clear about the difference between childhood as we individually define it at present and the varied experience of young persons in the past. Too often we extend generalized notions of childhood experience to the point of isolating ourselves in our present cultural perspectives. One can, however, ask questions aimed at thinking outside of one’s current ideological biases for more socially relativistic study by considering the layers of historical difference implicit. Biases become especially clear while investigating the censorship or editing of material for children (e.g., how and why did Joel Chandler Harris, and later, Disney, alter the mythology of Brer Rabbit?). To reach further into the past, it helps to look at oral tales from traceless generations as transmitted through one point in history with a “child audience” in mind. The editing of the Brothers Grimm proves an effective example.

Reading not simply our present responses but the different standards they imply, we might ask, for example, “Why, when editing collected tales to be more appropriate for children in their 1819 edition, did the Brothers Grimm omit ‘Puss in Boots’ but retain such harsh tales as ‘The Maiden Without Hands’? Tales such as “Puss in Boots” and “Bluebeard” with French roots did not suit the Grimms’ interest in demonstrating a common German source of folklore, but clearly violence (or at least a little tidy maiming) was not considered inappropriate subject matter to their notion of childhood, that is, at least when its presence encouraged the audience to obey and forgive their parents. Here we have a simple set of contrasts that illustrates how relative, indeed, are historic/cultural expectations for childhood. The difference highlighted here would be the apparent prioritizing
of politics and obedience in the 1819 tales, and today's higher priority of (or louder lip service to) protection.\textsuperscript{6}

The above example also demonstrates a methodology suggested by Rose's argument that children's books construct children: in fully imagining the implied audience of selected Grimm tales, we have a composite construction of childhood via the Grimms (or, to keep biases we know explicit, definitions of childhood according to two early-nineteenth-century, middle-class, well-educated, pro-unification, German males). If we investigate the above agendas further in order to understand the evolution of concepts of childhood, we can see in the tales, too, women storytellers' concerns and hopes for their offspring (complete with subversive feminist advice) co-existing, contrasting the Grimms' patriarchal biases, enriching our impressions of the composite construction. Such range helps us to further understand the constructing context, rather than inserting our present stereotypes of childhood where they do not even have a chance of fitting.

This approach allows us to see as if from a distance that our constructions are, likewise, deeply rooted, over-simplified stereotypes. This happens frequently in my classes when we discuss European and Middle Eastern folklore. Someone will object to the "gruesome violence" in the tales, but after considering the reality of violence in the United States and its cultural productions, we wonder why we react so—how can we maintain such an oblivious but absolute disconnection between what we conceptualize and defend as appropriate childhood experience and the reality young people experience and witness? Because our essentializing abstractions cloud our ability to fairly comprehend those we essentialize as children.

Awareness of the blind spot that obstructs even our sincerest efforts at understanding those we "diagnose" as children should serve as a constant reminder of the automatic self-invalidation we enact in our questioning. Any adult study of childhood is precariously hypothetical due to the "lost" childhood-subjectivity of adult scholars biased and favored by ideologies that are unavoidably adult-serving. Mounting ideological resistance on behalf of those we deem outside of ideology is impossible, yet we who are empowered by ageist essentializing (adults) are the very subjects who must alter our ways of thinking, meaning that constant reevaluations (made at the necessary risk of simply "reconstructing") are necessary steps in deconstructing our own solipsistic power. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls this process "strategic essentializing," explaining that "In deconstructive critical practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway. So then strategically you can look at essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique
of anything” (“The Problem” 51). What we can produce with such “looking” is a better view, though primarily of our own gaze, and one that will refuse, ultimately, like anything real, to come fully into focus.

By focusing on the spaces and words that adults cast around children, keeping representations distinct from any supposed authentic referents, I hope to avoid the false confidence of unreflective essentializing and get a better view of how and why we do it. My method is to approach childhood as portraiture in relief, reading adult desire in the “empty spaces” created for hypothetical children in discourse. I will also look at childhood itself represented as a space, an empty one—the tabula rasa on which the author plays with notions of what it must be like to inhabit that ideally constructed position (“again”), furnishing the space with qualities that are lacking in his/her own social position.

James Kincaid’s groundbreaking text, Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture (1992), bares the discursive framework by which we essentialize children: “The child is that which we are not but almost are, that which we yearn for so fiercely we almost resent it, that which we thought we saw in the mirror and almost wanted to possess yet feared we might. The child is the embodiment of desire and also its negation” (7). Impossible to validate through this perpetually deferred otherness, childhood is a freely imaginable concept because it is a representation of everything that can be imagined but never grasped. Desire begets repetition. Kincaid writes: “We seem to take pleasure in constructing the other not simply as an absence but as a seductive inexplicableness” (32). Childhood in literature is an inviting, uninhabited space, void of the agency that is already an unquestioned right of adulthood. It is always marked by lack—a lack that is frequently cast in a positive light. In its inaccessibility and emptiness childhood poses a representational challenge yet enables unlimited signification. Reading this signification, I find the most frequent desire revealed in fictional childhood spaces is to escape dependence upon linear thought and language (the narrative writer’s most urgent skills).

Method and Sample Reading

I have found American literature to be more neglected than British from this angle, and so to show the wide prevalence of the biases I deconstruct, and some variations unique to this country, my literary examples favor American sources. But children’s literature thrived and set precedents in England, and European tales have been transported via Hollywood to
such an extent that any investigation of Anglophone childhood discourse is best focused somewhat transatlantically. Applications of theory will be even more geographically flexible, their influence being untraceably boundless and deep. Methodologically, I aim to inform close readings with a continuous deconstruction of ageist biases, so, as in cultural studies and Foucauldian discourse analysis, fiction and nonfiction will constitute “primary” texts.

Applying my training in both cultural studies and literature has proven more difficult than I had anticipated, and I am still seeking solutions. When I began this project the only methodological model I found was James Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence* (1998), which successfully levels film and news media discursively by studying each as specific manifestations of a more general and pervasive narrative—in his case that of pedophilia (and pedophilia-phobia). I, too, am following narratives on various levels of discourse constructing childhood: romanticism, developmentalism, and antirationalism. My sources include film, picture books, comic books, psychology, sociology, geography, and post-structuralist theory, but primarily fiction. Though still leaning heavily on close literary reading, the following chapters draw from increasingly diverse sources, as the logic of my argument, not literary genres or timelines, propels the structure and analysis of evidence. Roderick McGillis explains the necessity of such a method as part of the “political emancipation” of children and discourse. He writes that we can raise consciousness and set new discursive patterns “only by taking a trajectory that passes through formal features of textuality and heads directly toward that spot where the literary and the social intersect” (204). I attempt this by reading literature on the same level as social and scientific discourse, but also by applying literary methods of analysis to nonliterary texts.

In this spirit, I will illustrate the premise of elusive childhood with a reading of Sigmund Freud’s “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” (1909), which was Freud’s only analysis of an actual child (in contrast to retrospective readings of adults’ “inner children,” as with Dora and the Wolf Man). This study is especially fascinating because the exchanges between Freud and his patient are almost entirely carried out by mail, mediated completely by the boy’s father, Max Graf, a follower of Freud’s. Hans (Freud’s fictional name for Herbert Graf), whose problem is an extreme phobia of horses that eventually intensifies to include vehicles and the street, is “cured” through a series of sessions in which his father interviews him (very suggestively), analyzes the interview, awaits Freud’s comments on his analysis, and responds according to the synthesis of both their conclusions.
Freud was aware of the unscientific method of the study: “The case history is not, strictly speaking, derived from my own observation. It is true that I laid down the general lines of the treatment, and that on one single occasion, when I had a conversation with the boy, I took a direct share in it” (5). This disclaimer suggests early on that Freud was hesitant in trusting the representation of a child to his father, or any adult. However, despite this, and his awareness of transference and suggestibility, Freud took up the case. Allowing the father’s interference, he faithfully quotes preliminary analyses along with mediated observations, authorizing them as he progresses: “[The dream] was the first dream of his that was made unrecognizable by distortion. His father’s penetration, however, succeeded in clearing it up” (19). What follows is more like a case study in suggestion, as Graf repeatedly provides his son with convenient symbolic interpretations and explanations. In response, Freud admits that a child, it will be said, is necessarily highly suggestible, and in regard to no one, perhaps, more than his own father; he will allow anything to be forced upon him, out of gratitude to his father for taking so much notice of him. [ . . . ] The whole thing is simply ‘suggestion’—the only difference being that in the case of a child it can be unmasked much more easily than in that of an adult. (102)

Freud, ever constructing children as essentially honest, justifies suggestion with his own generalizing, essentializing representation of Herbert as Hans. More important for my point here is that in the interviews’ extreme suggestibility something more universal is exposed: that Graf runs rhetorical circles around his son, wrapped up in his own (and Freudian) discourse, unaware of his inability to “read” the boy. In his sincere and tireless efforts to unfold the mystery of his son’s fear, he is doing little more than imposing conclusions, most of which appear to be useless or uninteresting to the boy described in his letters.

Almost a century later, the interviews can seem comically misguided, but they anticipate discourse that surrounds, targets, and hails children still today. Graf theorizes the cause of “Hans’s” phobia, allegedly originating in a traumatic scene in which he witnessed a large horse fall and struggle to stand. Often out of the blue, he bombards his son with Freudian suggestions, hoping one will fit. He reports the talks to Freud:

I: “When the horse fell down, did you think of your daddy?”
HANS: “Perhaps. Yes. It’s possible.” (51)
April 9th. This morning Hans came in to me while I was washing and bare to the waist.

HANS: “Daddy, you are lovely! You’re so white.”
I: “Yes. Like a white horse.” (53)

HANS: “A loud row sounds as though you were doing lumf. A big row reminds me of lumf, and a little one of widdle.”
I: “I say, wasn’t the bus-horse the same colour as a lumf?”
HANS: (very much struck): “Yes.” (64)

But the boy generally avoids confirming his father’s hypotheses, at times even disrupting the process of analysis. Responding to the dishonest and conflicting accounts of how his sister (“Hanna”) was born, Hans takes up the dialogue and turns his father’s meddlesome discourse into a game. He begins to instruct his father with his own “stork” story. In his version, Hanna was carried in a box before she was born and stored in the attic.

HANS: “Then Hanna got out.”
I: “Why, she couldn’t walk at all then.”
HANS: “Well then, we lifted her down.”
I: “But how could she have sat on the horse? She couldn’t even sit up at all last year.”
HANS: “Oh yes, she sat up all right, and called out ‘Gee-up,’ and whipped her whip [. . .] I’m not joking, you know, Daddy.” (70)

Freud interprets Hans’s “parody” as revenge against his father’s dishonesty in sex education. Yet it can also be seen as an echo of his father’s rule of discourse—“because I say so, it’s true.” This sort of disruption can challenge the very authority of discursive centers, exposing that Hans’s father usually falls back upon his identity (age/size in particular) to make his narrative the correct one.

At the center of yet excluded from and powerless within this discursive practice, Hans can only mimic his father and be interpreted. A play theorist might argue that his actions dramatize a child’s lack of power, especially when he mimics (mocks?) authority. Hans becomes so inconsistent in his version of Hanna’s birth that it is impossible to follow: “Just you write it down,” he commands his father, who only laughs (76). Continuing, he tells his baffled father, “I say, what I’m telling you isn’t a bit true” (77). (Notice the use of his father’s phrase, “I say.”) Freud again interprets this rebellion
A Childhood Studies Primer

as Hans giving his father a taste of his own medicine, but he is also resisting his father’s inadequate explanation of procreation and the imposition it represents. Whether or not Hans has the agency to consciously resist is unknowable but beside the point here; his imitation of his father reveals to the adult reader that the father’s discourse dominates the boy’s space and that an accurate analysis is impossible because of its one-sidedness. The Hans case perfectly exemplifies Rose’s hypothesis of discursive construction and Kincaid’s premise that childhood is centerless. The representation of this child is prejudicially mediated, apparently unrelated to his interests, and those who represent him seem unaware of the extent of their inability to read him. Here we are witness to construction in progress, where the real boy is, at best, a disregarded target. In short, Freud’s Hans is as hypothetical as Huck Finn.

I hope to remain clear about this issue—the constructions of childhood that make the subject of my study are by that definition hypothetical. It is the hypothesis of childhood itself I seek to locate and investigate. I will not be applying theory to the real in my analysis but following narrative lines that infiltrate both it and more popular discourse.

The project of this book is to investigate various means of negotiating the inaccessibility of childhood in literary representations by writers self-conscious of the “impossibility” of the task. It follows in two parts: first, a demonstration of techniques that authors have used in attempting to overcome the obstacle of representing the absent “child”; second, analyses of thematic reversals that authors use to decenter traditional constructions of childhood (often only to recenter them, replacing one hypothesis for a seemingly fairer one), ultimately to throw the entire authority of adult discourse into question.

Chapter 2, “Refocusing Representations,” and chapter 3, “Childhood Bound,” focus on technical issues of representation, showing a general progression in modern literature toward representing inaccessible subjects more spatially and externally, reflecting a growing reception of constructivist interpretations of subjectivity. Henry James provides a groundwork case, as his innovative narrative techniques already aimed at producing fictional subjects as “ironic centres” who could only be seen from ambivalent points of view. James recognized defining gaps in communication and power between children and adults, and he identified differences in language proficiency as the cause of these inequities. I chose to use a single-author study here to allow the close focus necessary to fully illuminate the depths of this language barrier and how it operates, as it is consistent throughout both oppressive and subversive constructions and will become
the pivotal premise for the argument culminating in my final chapter. Like Hans, conscientiously rendered literary children are less accessible than adults through language, the tool upon which the writer depends. Childhood in adult discourse might be seen accordingly as a silent space in which children are linguistically and discursively beyond reach. This inaccessibility calls the whole process of representation into doubt.

In *What Maisie Knew* (1897), James brings the problem of accessibility, and thus representation, to the foreground—as the title suggests, the novel asks the question, “What does Maisie know?” This child, the center of the narrative’s events and our lens into James’s fictional reality, is impenetrable, empty, functioning only as a reflector for the adult players. James draws our attention to the fact that this ironic representation is the closest we can get to Maisie, whose “infant mind would at best leave great gaps and voids” (10). Thus, to James, a literary child is technically and fictively an empty glass—practically invisible to those who construct her, thus limitless in what she can reflect. *What Maisie Knew* leaves us aware of the impossibility of knowing what Maisie knows, exposing adult curiosity.

As we have seen with the case of “little Hans,” and will see demonstrated throughout the following chapters, the adult-centeredness of legitimated discourse could potentially alienate those who are still acquiring language. The writer who tries to represent the muted position of childhood is up to a great challenge; James met it with a method that would become useful for many other writers I discuss, especially Harper Lee, Alison Lurie, and Toni Morrison. I focus primarily on James first, however, because he was so transparently troubled by the challenge children present to realist representation, and he foregrounded his method as a means of exposing and confronting that challenge through his externalized focalizations.

Externalizing focalization curtails the otherwise necessary illusions of presence and agency, restricts mediation, refocuses the spotlight on adult culture (as adults make up the stage that surrounds a child character, or ironic center), and, ultimately, leaves the reader in an ambivalent state, forced to fill in his/her own conclusions, possibly leading to a self-awareness of the imposition involved in this process. This method is particularly useful to writers representing a discursively inaccessible position. It is not surprising, then, that externalized focalization is common in texts dealing with childhood.

Another method of externalizing the focus on children is to spatialize fictive realities, focusing not in the minds of children but on their hypothetical worlds. One can witness this technique in *Peter Pan* (1911), where J. M. Barrie describes mapping a child’s mind, doing so in spatial
and social terms:

Doctors sometimes draw maps of [. . . ] you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island; for the Neverland is always more or less an island. [. . . ] It would be an easy map if that were all; but there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, verbs that take the dative, chocolate pudding day [. . . ] and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is still all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still. (5–6)

Barrie suggests that mapping a child's mind is like reading a palimpsest that defies linear comprehension. Childhood becomes a region as difficult to map as it is to fix by language, and perhaps for that reason, it is all the more desirable to imagine. In my third chapter, “Childhood Bound,” I consider the popularity of spatializing and mapping in childhood literature, and I posit that these techniques reflect attempts to fantasize an impossibly accessible childhood while evading the temporality and linearity of written narrative. Not only are adults childhood bound, in terms of a fantasy destination, but such desire necessitates binding childhood spatially in order to provide the illusion of its graspability.

Peter Hunt suggests that maps are used in fiction to “stabilize the fantasy” (11). As in Moby-Dick (1851), a map can be used to authenticate a fictional reality—in fact, the skeletal plot of Moby-Dick is given away in the map by Joseph P. Ascherl (figure 1), included in many editions (which shows the Pequod going down in the South Pacific) before one even begins the narrative, as if what follows is merely a document recounting actual events. The maps in books by Robert Louis Stevenson, A. A. Milne, L. Frank Baum, J. R. R. Tolkien, Ruth Stiles Gannett, and Avi have done the same with fantasy spaces. They can validate the unreal, but they also play against the limitations of reality. Barrie's written map expresses a common desire in constructing childhood—nostalgia for impressionistic, systemless thought.

Important American exemplars for this tradition are the Oz books, which negotiate the impassable boundaries of adult-imagined childhood through a heavy reliance on territorial marking, with carefully delineated borders and gratuitous hints of access. Full of maps, direction markers, and visual sectioning (especially color-coded territories), L. Frank Baum's
Figure 1. (From Moby-Dick by Herman Melville, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985, courtesy of Joseph P. Asherl)
make-believe world authenticates itself. Grappling with a popular theme in children’s literature, ontological uncertainty, Baum’s Oz could be seen as a map that precedes its territory (to put a spin on Baudrillard). Baum attempts to fix the imaginary Oz and establish a textual certitude (map) of childhood, since the concept (territory) itself is a floating discourse. But he also destabilizes the rationalist demand for certitude (noncontradiction) by pressing for acceptance of simultaneous contradiction. “Childhood Bound” explores this technique in visual and verbal illustration to wordless storytelling that posits childhood (spaces) as a challenge to linear, absolutist thinking.

In chapter 4, “Reversing Development,” I investigate the pervasive narrative of development—the fundamental model for childhood discourse that stretches its genealogical roots back into misapplications of Darwinian theory—from recapitulation to developmental psychology. I begin with concrete demonstrations of recapitulatory tropes from two British experiments in brutal honesty—William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Richard Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1929). Through exaggeration, these novels expose the pervasive yet masked rationalist bias of developmental discourse.

Writers representing childhood must contend with developmental presuppositions, which cast childhood as a definable phase in a temporally measured progression from irrational dependence to abstractly reasoning adulthood. In direct contrast, some delight in what Kincaid calls the “seductive inexplicableness” of childhood by holding it up as a position of infinite potential, resistance, and idyllic wisdom. Budding in the poetry of William Wordsworth and consequent romantics, this tradition attempts to make sense of adult shortcomings by locating seemingly inaccessible ideals, like natural creativity, free spontaneity, and innocent intuition, in a personal past called childhood. Inaccessibility then becomes explained by the irrevocable decline of age. Constructing childhood as a position of limitless possibility snuffed by growth, such writers envision a reversal of the development narrative. With socialization poised as the detriment of idealized childhood, this romantic reversal was easily reconciled with increasing modern interests in social construction. I illustrate American uses of this theme in canonical texts like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as well as science fiction by Henry Kuttner, Theodore Sturgeon, and Virginia Hamilton.

The reversal of development replaces patronizing constructions of childhood with an idealized position that is “beyond us” because it is irretrievable. From this perspective, adults are handicapped by schooling and accumulated knowledge, only hoping for glimpses of “childish” intuition.
This is a common sentiment—even Jacques Lacan’s and Louis Althusser’s conceptions of *méconnaissance* suggest that the more indoctrinated a social subject is, the more misknowing and removed from the real he/she becomes (and, it would follow, adults are). This reversal legitimizes the adult writer’s (and reader’s) own sense of misknowing and unreality through contrast.

Ultimately, the romantic view simply inverts the temporal pattern of development, reversing the direction of a supposedly fixed and still lin-eated process. The discourse remains uncentered, as children are still inaccessible, yet the shift exposes an adult desire to escape intellectual author-ity. After all, if childhood is inaccessible due to adult inadequacies, rationalist adults can hardly be expected to try harder to understand those socially defined by the concept.

The space, lacking fixed signification, between adult discourse and the negation it names childhood allows much play in meaning. Nonsense writers are not the only ones to exploit this territory (although, we will find in science fiction and comic books, Lewis Carroll greatly influenced exploration of the theme)—many writers expose the language barrier as a way of heightening readers’ awareness of the limitations of their own language and logic. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge explain this as an alienation effect: “One of the most effective ways of exposing the true nature of any public sphere is when it is interrupted, in a kind of alienation effect, by children. [...] The fact that the public sphere is always that of adults, immediately become[s] apparent” (283). In chapter 5, “Disrupting Discourse,” I investigate scenes in which children’s questioning of authority demonstrates the extent to which they are excluded from the discourse that defines and holds power over them. Such scenes suggest that adult-centered discourse needs disruption by a child in order for us to recognize its ageist exclusivity.

Depicting children as capable of indirectly (often unknowingly) disrup-ting discourse is perhaps the most consistent ideal in child-focused American fiction. This is often accomplished through a child’s question-ing: “The propensity of children to ask questions is noticeable throughout American fiction and [...] heuristic speech seems to dominate fictional children’s linguistic output” (Hurst 60). Literary children use indirect means to disrupt discourse when they are prohibited from directly engag-ing it. A question enables passive resistance and redress at the same time, soothing adult egos with a child’s assumed unknowing while drawing attention to what is debatable or flawed in adult logic.

For example, like Hans, Harriet Welsch disrupts the practice of her
psychologist in Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964):

Harriet could see all sorts of games, dolls, doll houses, and trucks. She tried to be nice about it, but she was curious. “Do you sit here all day playing with all those things?” Wait till her mother got a load of this.

He looked at her archly, “Do you think I sit here all day playing with these toys?”

“How do I know? You got a whole closet full of ’em.”

“Don’t you have toys at home?”

This was too much. “Yes,” she shouted, “but I’m eleven.” (254)

Regardless of whether we interpret simple honesty or rebellion as her motivation, Harriet’s question, “How do *I* know?” reflects an awareness that the doctor is in control of their discourse—that she is not expected to know answers, and that even if she does, as an adult he will have the final say. Such samples also prove, however, that an outsider can disrupt the discourse that defines and excludes her.

Jean Baudrillard has called this disruptive ability a “double strategy,” because, he argues, children “do not just have subject-consciousness, they have a kind of objective ironic presentiment that the category into which they have been placed does not exist” (*Baudrillard Live* 112). Such a construction is reminiscent of what W. E. B. DuBois called “double-consciousness,” which would also suggest that any marginalized subject has a critical edge because, out of the spotlight, he/she can see unseen, subversively hiding in the cloak of unrecognized otherness. In illustrating the use of this subversive technique in modern fiction and film, I draw from many of the sources that are central to preceding chapters in order to demonstrate its predominance and usefulness in the persistent deconstruction of adult discourse.

That writers indulge in the play of representing childhood, especially as nonlinear and outside of legitimated discourse, reflects a desire for something antithetical to their own art, their labor, and their intellectual world—childhood becomes an escape from rationalist adulthood.

In the opening of the film *American Beauty*, the main character and narrator, Lester Burnham, tells us that his wife and daughter think he’s a “loser,” that he has “lost something” in approaching his midlife, but “it’s never too late to get it back.” This is the impossible work we make youth do for us. Lester thinks a budding high-school girl (nestled in rose petals not so unlike the baby in Anne Geddes’s *Cheesecake*) will bring him back, as he is “already dead.” Death, in his sense of the word, was the full-time
job, family car, heeding mortality, obeying rules. Innocence, in his view, is
the out-of-reach but always hoped for escape. It is an attempt to undo the
learning that brought about the loss of that ineffable “something” he wants
back. James Kincaid explains the logic of this impossible desire: “Memory
is constructed from observation; the powers of observation are never so
strong as when we are young; though most adults lose such powers, they
can cast back into childhood and perhaps regain contact with them; thus,
we can remember childhood only by asking the child to do the remember-
ing for us” (Child-Loving 230).

As a function of our shared cultural imagination, childhood undoes
experience. It is a canvas for writers frustrated with their medium, where
its creators can imagine a past without writer’s block, miscommunication,
the limitations of language, and demands for linear coherence. All of the
techniques discussed in this book—externalized focalization, (re)territori-
alization, reversing and subverting age-centered discourse—reflect a grow-
ing awareness of the impossibility of representing childhood, and at the
same time a unique intellectual nostalgia, which through contrast, vali-
dates the struggle involved in the writer’s own labor.