

for mystery and advocating a more questioning attitude, pose valuable starting points for further research in other European countries.

Most of the articles on the didactics of children's poetry focus on orality and poetry reading. In 'Exploring Poetry Teachers: Teachers Who Read and Readers Who Teach Poetry' Teresa Cremin reports on a project to develop a 'reading for pleasure pedagogy' (219), stressing the importance of teachers who share their passion for poetry with children. Although the quotations are stimulating, a more elaborate didactic framework would have been welcome.

The wide variety of the articles in *Poetry and Childhood* is at the same time the strength and the weakness of this volume. The average length of 8–9 pages per article does not allow the authors to develop their arguments in depth. Some of the articles still resemble conference papers too much. The volume's almost exclusive focus on Anglo-American works is a missed opportunity. A work of this calibre could have opened a broader view on poetry for children across borders. It is striking that in the introduction this 'British bias' is called 'inevitable' (xiii). The Introduction also acknowledges its failure to take either Caribbean poetry or gender into account. To these, a further three areas of concern can be added: the translation of poetry, the role of illustrations and the reception of children's poetry. These topics offer rich material for a next international conference on poetry and childhood and a next volume. In this light, *Poetry and Childhood* opens interesting new perspectives indeed.

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Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture: Masculinity, Abjection and the Fictional Child. Annette Wannamaker. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009 [2008]. 181 pages. USD \$39.95 (paperback).

The central argument of Annette Wannamaker's important and persuasive critical examination of masculinity in children's texts is simple: we need to explore and make visible the ways masculinity functions in popular and commercially successful children's texts in order to better understand the complex negotiations boys currently make 'as they form their gendered identities within, against, or on the margins of hegemonic masculinity' (152). First published in hardback in 2008, this significant contribution to children's literature criticism is now available in paperback – making it a must-have for anyone interested in the complex processes that constitute gender representation in texts produced for young readers.

Wannamaker's critical survey of boys and the books, films and television programmes that they actually like to read and watch (which is an innovative approach in itself) is organised according to a sample of these key texts, with chapters dedicated to various versions of the Tarzan story, the award-winning novel *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, the Captain Underpants series, the Japanese anime television programme *Dragon Ball Z*, and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter

books. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories (most notably Kristeva's notion of abjection), Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque, empirical studies of children's reading habits and even comments from young fans which disclose their own attitudes to the texts they consume, Wannamaker provides an incisive analysis of the multiple images of masculinity produced by such texts. The results of her critical assessment are surprisingly complex, particularly in relation to *Dragon Ball Z* and the Captain Underpants books, which have tended to be dismissed by critics, educators and parents as 'lowbrow literary junk'. The relationship between gender identity and abjection is crucial in both, as masculine identity is portrayed in opposition to a feminine abject. However, the process of representation results in ambiguity, as these texts simultaneously 'raise and work to resolve anxieties about gender identity: they threaten to dissolve bodily borders but then reinscribe and solidify them' (87). The resulting portrayal of masculinity in *Dragon Ball Z* and the Captain Underpants series thus offers young male readers conflicting messages about what it means to be a man, and hence echoes cultural anxieties about the instability of gender – which, suggests Wannamaker, may explain their appeal to young boys 'who are in early elementary school and at a moment when they are increasingly called on to perform their gender in normative ways' (101).

Wannamaker's evaluation of masculinity as it is represented in these specific books, films and television shows is thought-provoking and intelligent, although the primary corpus she has chosen to analyse for her project is surprisingly random and limited. Admittedly, she does take on two series, Captain Underpants and Harry Potter, but even so, the sample of children's literature she analyses is restricted to the work of only four authors. The central arguments of *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture* (which suggest that representations of masculinity in children's popular culture are deeply ambivalent) can, of course, be applied to texts outside Wannamaker's small corpus, but, given the rich potential her topic offers, this does seem to be an unexpectedly narrow study. Throughout the course of her discussion on masculinity in children's literature, Wannamaker refers on numerous occasions to the seminal publication in this area, *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film* (2002), edited by John Stephens. This volume covers an incredibly diverse array of texts – from picture books through to YA fiction – and in contrast to Wannamaker's project offers a much more comprehensive perspective of masculine representations in texts produced for children.

A second criticism relates to Wannamaker's assessment of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, which Wannamaker attests 'open up spaces of productive crisis through their depictions of nonhegemonic masculinities existing in opposition to cultural expectations' (128). Arguing that characters such as Hagrid, Neville Longbottom and especially Harry himself continually perform unconventional forms of masculinity, Wannamaker suggests that Rowling's novels show male characters performing a range of masculine behaviours as they negotiate hegemonic masculinity. The problem with such an analysis of

the Harry Potter books is that it is far too oriented towards story content, thus ignoring the myriad ways in which narrative discourse is used to privilege certain forms of masculinity over others. Further discussion of story closure, for instance, which in most of Rowling's texts depends on an assertion of masculine competitiveness as Harry defeats Voldemort yet again, would have revealed how hegemonic forms of masculinity are endorsed throughout the series. Similarly, a discussion of Rowling's use of narration and focalisation strategies would demonstrate how such techniques act to marginalise female characters, consequently constructing masculinity and femininity as oppositional, rather than relational, concepts.

Aside from these minor issues, *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture* is an important and much-needed study of representations of masculinity in children's literature and popular culture. Wannamaker's book deserves to be widely read, as it offers an astute critique of how popular children's texts reveal cultural anxieties about what it means to be a man in the modern world.

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