

Review

Family in Children's and Young Adult Literature.

Edited by Eleanor Spencer and Jade Dillon

Craig.

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Family in Children's and Young Adult Literature, edited by Eleanor Spencer and Jade Dillon Craig, is a wide-ranging collection that delves into the multifaceted representation of families in Anglophone children's and young adult literature from the nineteenth century to the present day. It takes up the baton from Ann Alston's 2008 study, *The Family in Children's Literature*, which examined ideological assumptions about the family in youth literature, and explicitly extends the scope to the field of YA literature. The inclusion of YA novels in this current volume affords it great scope for exploring more subversive portrayals of family life. Certainly, it demonstrates that from the mid-twentieth century onwards, authors of children's and young adult literature have sought to reflect more comprehensively the realities of family life in a variety of forms. Common themes that thread through the chapters include: the destabilisation of the concepts of the nuclear family and home; critiques of the enduring negative portrayal of the maternal figurehead; and an examination of the broader concept of the 'self-created' family, whether with people in the community or with more-than-humans, or expanded to what the linguist and philosopher, George Lakoff, called "nation as family" (122).

Part I of the volume, "Beyond Wicked Stepmothers and Absent(-minded) Fathers", examines the portrayal of adults in children's literature from fairy tales to Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002). Whether exposing outdated archetypes or lauding realistic portrayals, these

essays call for inclusive and authentic representations of adults in youth literature. I found Richard Charlesworth's chapter, "Perspectives on Fathers and Fatherhood within Children's Literature", particularly applicable to both children's and YA literature. Though he uses the children's novel *October, October* by Katya Balen (2020) as his case study, he presents a transferable and useful critical framework to examine fatherhood as a concept and to showcase a welcome new trope in children's and YA literature: that of the physically and emotionally present father. "Part II: Home, Nation, and Empire" extends the focus from specific parental roles to an examination of the broader international canvas. Essays on the depiction of black British families in British children's literature or the experience of Latinx immigration in the US, for instance, provide alternatives to hegemonic narratives of British and American colonialism and heteronormative domesticity. Encouragingly, the chapters in this section celebrate an overall move towards more honest and empowering stories (such as Sophia Acheampong's 2006 YA novel, *Growing Yams in London*) that encourage sustaining cultural diversity.

The title of "Part III: Growing Pains and Teenage Dreams" points to the transition from children's literature to literature for young adults, although the first two essays still deal with novels for the middle-school reader, namely Enid Blyton's oeuvre and Judy Blume's *Fudge* series. In her essay, "Mum's no fun now: Constructing the Maternal in the Family Fictions of Jacqueline Wilson", Kay Waddilove examines the concept of the "parentified child" (12) in Wilson's novels and argues that Wilson's work has extended the boundaries of both the genre of family fiction and the literary constructions of the maternal figure in ways that challenges the traditional motherhood ideal. In the sense that Wilson's works, and Waddilove's examination of it, centre not only the young protagonist but also her siblings and her mother, this essay serves as the volume's lynchpin for the transition from examining family primarily in children's books to family portrayals in YA books. Alyson Miller examines the depictions of the nuclear family as a dysfunctional space in the work of controversial YA author, Melvin Burgess, in her essay, "Chasing the Dragon: The Anxieties of Family in the Fiction of Melvin Burgess". She focusses on *Junk* (1996), *Doing It* (2003), and *Kill All Enemies* (2011) to explore the generational trauma and irreparable relationship breakdown between adults and children represented in these narratives. Continuing the theme of the family as a site of discomfort and trauma in YA literature, Blanka Grzegorzcyk's essay, "A Taste for the Secret: Tracing Secretive Families in Malorie Blackman's Fiction", contends that the way Blackman's YA novels repeatedly turn to the motif of family secrets challenges the reader to look beyond the artificiality of socio-cultural narratives and to what Grzegorzcyk calls "countervailing spaces" (172) which provide room for voices from outside the mainstream to be heard. This theme is also taken up by Angel Daniel Matos in his essay, "Queering the Family in Young Adult Literature: Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*, Familial Disruption, and the Space of the Home", in which Matos considers how queer YA novels complicate and challenge heteronormative family ideologies and push readers to think queerly about notions such as belonging, relating, and bonding.

The final section in this volume, “Alternative Families in Alternative Worlds”, explores the representation of family in children’s and young adult fantasy and horror. In two of the essays, the destabilisation of the family is effected through the portrayal of the maternal role. In “Unhomely Domestic Spaces in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline*”, Jade Dillon Craig explores the destabilisation of the concept of family by the dangerous “other mother” (212) and unhomely domestic spaces, although the protagonist, Coraline, is ultimately successful in accepting her family despite their flaws. Likewise, in “Breeders, Rebels and Warriors”, Malin Alkestrand examines the recurrent YA dystopian trope of the oppression of the adolescent mother in Amy Ewing’s *The Lone City* trilogy (2014–2016) and Jennie Melamed’s novel, *Gather the Daughters* (2017). Here, the motif of the adolescent mother is used both to highlight the vulnerability of the young mothers and the challenges that they face bringing children into a dystopian world even as they rebel against oppression.

The centrality of family, both for fictional characters and for the actual reader, is explored in essays on two of the most popular series of books aimed at YA readers: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels. In her essay, “Apple to Pomegranate: Vampires and Families in the *Twilight* Saga”, Lisa Nevárez investigates the appeal of the vampire unit’s “familial bonds” as manifested both within Meyer’s vampire universe of fiction and films and the extended “fan family” (231) of the franchise which Nevárez argues is key to the success of these texts. Family and home are also central, indeed foundational, themes in the *Harry Potter* series. However, in “Lost Boys, Found Boys: Masculinities and Families in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*”, Eleanor Spencer convincingly argues that it is particularly the non-nuclear family structures in the series that offer male characters opportunities to develop alternative ways of performing masculinity in an inversion of the traditional quest narrative.

In *Family in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Spencer and Dillon Craig have succeeded in compiling a collection that is both informative and thought-provoking in its exploration of the wide range of family dynamics and settings in children’s and YA literature. The Foreword by Ann Alston and the editors’ Introduction are useful summaries of the subject of family in youth literature, and trace the themes of the volume through the concept of “exploding the nuclear family” (1) in which protagonists seek new communities as substitute structures of care to replace the (patriarchal, hetero-normative, conservative) family unit. However, I missed a more explicit problematisation in the book of how frequently the voice of the adult females in these novels were othered, vilified, or silenced, as described in the chapters by, amongst others, Joosens, Schwabe, Miller, and Dillon Craig. It would have been productive to see more attention paid to the way some of the family constructs are presented, as Miller points out about Burgess’ novels, “in ways that further silence the perspectives of women” (166).

Academic works about family in children’s and YA literature tend to focus on literature for younger children and this is also reflected in the balance of essays in this volume. While there were chapters focussing on old and established children’s authors (e.g. Enid Blyton, Frances Hodgson Burnett), most of the chapters focussing on literature for younger children

included a culturally-diverse and relatively under-studied range of authors and books. In contrast, the chapters on YA literature tended to focus on works by well-known authors of great popularity with readers and academic critics alike (e.g. Gaiman, Rowling, Meyer, and, to a lesser extent, Burgess and Blackman). Despite its international selection of authors and stated Anglophone focus, this volume is an exploration of predominantly British literature with very few examples from the US and none from other English-speaking nations – and I would have welcomed a showcase of more novels from outside this well-established, well-analysed, ‘canon’. However, in examining the curiously overlooked concept of family in children’s and YA novels, this volume provides both a useful update to the field as relates to children’s literature and a useful and explicit extension to YA literary criticism – but also leaves plenty of scope for further scholarly investigation.