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## Book Review

Cermakova A and Mahlberg M (2024) *Children's Literature and Childhood Discourses: Exploring Identity Through Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 280. ISBN: 9781350177000, £90.00 (ebk).

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The book *Children's Literature and Childhood Discourses* (2024) edited by Anna Cermakova and Michaela Mahlberg presents a remarkable collection of papers exploring the broad topic of fiction for children, through the lens of stylistic analysis. Approached mainly from corpus linguistics, the volume effectively integrates collaboration with other frameworks such as literary studies, cognitive linguistics, human geography, and cultural studies. The analysed texts range from canonical novels such as *Alice in Wonderland* to contemporary works like *Harry Potter*, spanning multiple genres –including adventure, fantasy and detective fiction– which enrich the volume's appeal. Two core ideas serve as unifying threads throughout the book. First, the volume seeks to establish connections between fiction and the real world, offering a cohesive foundation for multifaceted chapters that explore topics such as embodied spatial literacy and irony comprehension. Second, another recurring theme across the 11 chapters is the investigation of how children's literature reflects and reinforces social values and stereotypes, with a particular focus on the discursive construction of gender. Ultimately, based on the premise that children's literature shapes young readers' conceptualisation of the world, most chapters persuasively advocate for a critically informed approach, calling on other researchers to further investigate these complex connections. This volume not only complements but also advances scholarship in children's literature, such as the special issue of the journal *Language and Literature* on stylistics and children's literature, which adopts a stylistic approach to a diverse range of topics (Burke and Coats, 2022), or Clasen and Hassel's (2017) edited volume *Gender(ed) identities*, which addresses gender stereotypes through a literary lens. By building upon these discussions, this volume offers a distinctive contribution that further enriches the field.

Beginning the collection, in ‘Sensitive girls, purposeful boys and embodied emplacement’, Catherine Olver and Maria Nikolajeva explore differences in gender representation through characters’ physical experiences and perceptions of places. The chapter delves into how these representations stimulate readers’ cognitive-affective responses to characters’ physical and spatial perceptions. Three 1950s novels are compared to a contemporary novel to indicate a shift in gender representations. In their close reading, the authors leverage appropriate text fragments that convincingly support their claims even if more contemporary data would reinforce their conclusions. To conclude, the chapter advocates for representations that avoid the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes.

Peter Stockwell’s chapter two, ‘Can children read irony? A cautionary tale’, delves into children’s developmental literacy of irony through a cognitive poetic lens. The author conceives irony as a mind-modelling issue, a skill developed gradually from childhood to adulthood. Stockwell conducts a reader-response study on Belloc’s *Cautionary Tales for Children*, concluding that while child readers recognise textual cues of irony, they often do not interpret them ironically, as they lack schematic historical knowledge. Despite the limitations of the informal study, it offers valuable insights for future research, leading Stockwell to suggest that exposure to literary works can improve young readers’ mind-modelling capacity.

Chapter three, ‘The rhetoric of orphanhood’ by Marion Gymnich, addresses the reasons for the prevalence of orphaned protagonists in children’s literature and focuses on their linguistic representation. Analysing three corpora of nineteenth-century literature, the study categorises orphan tropes and reveals orphans as young, miserable and vulnerable. Two case studies effectively exemplify differences in orphan tropes and their functions, from the pathetic orphan that evokes pity to parodies due to the artificiality of the trope. The integration of corpus stylistic analysis and close readings offers a multifaceted perspective, providing deeper insights in the interpretation of the topic. To end, Gymnich endorses the popularity of the orphan trope in recent literature, recognising the various approaches to the concept of orphanhood.

Titled ‘Caroline Hewins and making space for books for the young in American public libraries’, chapter four by Rebekah Fitzsimmons considers the role of Hewins in the canon formation of children’s literature, aptly contextualising her historically. Fitzsimmons’s exploration of the language in *Books for the Young: A Guide for Parents and Children* departs from the stylistic approach of the volume to privilege a more historically and culturally grounded methodology. The chapter acknowledges Hewins’s accomplishments while critically addressing her obsolete notion of the ‘child reader’ and the exclusion of many authors in her canonical list, thus perpetuating a lasting bias. Fitzsimmons recommends current scholars to expand the limitations of Hewins’s work by promoting a broader understanding of children’s literature.

In chapter five, ‘Children’s geographies and (spatial) literacy’, Peter Krafl explores potential intersections between children’s literacies and children’s mobile engagement with places. Krafl suggests how children’s spatial experiences can be considered as representing certain types of spatial literacy, enabling children to ‘read’ landscapes. The author describes, for example, how the acquisition of spatial literacy skills, through the use of Google Maps, may support the development of other literacies. Similarly to

Fitzsimmons's chapter, Krafl's research is situated within cultural-geographical scholarship, widening the stylistic scope of the collection.

Kiera Vaclavik's chapter six, 'Revisioning Lewis Carroll's Alice and their afterlives through male performance', examines male amateur performances (1870s–1950s) of the *Alice* books, to generate new interpretations of the texts in relation to gender instabilities. Through an exploration of the socio-historical context, Vaclavik argues that those male performances of *Alice* were not radical due to factors such as the performance tradition and children's gender-neutral appearance at the time. The chapter studies how the contextualisation of these performances brings about, from an interdisciplinary literary perspective, reconsiderations about Alice's gender ambiguities, expanding queer readings of the books.

Chapter seven, 'Exploring representations of girls and boys in the text printed on slogan t-shirts' by Marianne McKinley, analyses how gender stereotypes are communicated through explicit messages on clothing, shaping child identity and influencing future roles. Her chapter revealingly connects academic research with gendered representations in the real world through fashion. Using corpus linguistic analysis, McKinley identifies distinctive keywords in t-shirts to identify the messages linked to each gender. Her analysis shows that text written on children's clothing often reinforces gender stereotypes, with boy's t-shirts connoting hegemonic masculinity, whereas girls' t-shirts emphasise romance, indicating stereotypical interests. This chapter effectively demonstrates how messages on children's t-shirts communicate and perpetuate stereotypical conceptions of gender, and advocates for increased awareness of these products.

Focusing on gender, chapter eight, 'Discovering what it means to be *unladylike* in children's fiction', by Anna Cermakova and Michaela Mahlberg, investigates the connection between fiction and the real world, similarly to McKinley, by elucidating how reading can shape children's perception of themselves and the world. The authors' explicit meaningful connections with other chapters of the present collection (Mastropiero's, Vaclavik's, Gymnich's) and analysed texts (*Alice*, *Harry Potter*) reveal how their multiple interests led to the conception of this volume. Through corpus methods, the case study of *Crime Most Unladylike* reveals that the word *unladylike* is connected to issues of societal expectations about gender and class. Ultimately, the authors conclude that this coming of age fiction is not only a detective novel, but an exploration of gender and societal themes, through which young readers may explore their own identity.

In chapter nine, 'Gendered reporting verbs in the Italian translation of *Harry Potter*', Lorenzo Mastropiero examines gender representations in the Italian translation of the *Harry Potter* series, evaluating their alignment with the gender ideologies of the English text. The robust methodological framework of corpus analysis, applied here to a cross-linguistic approach to literary translation, reveals that the reporting verbs used for the protagonists in Italian maintain the stereotypical gender roles of the English text. Further analysis reveals instances of *alteration*, which leads to new character gendered traits, and *standardisation*, leading to the homogenisation and reinforcement of characters' gendered voices, found in the original. This research emphasises the manipulative potential of translation in the transmission of gender ideology, while providing deeper insight into gendered voices in *Harry Potter*.

Titled ‘Hegemonic and counter-discourses of happiness’, chapter 10 by Wolfgang Teubert considers the concept of happiness in children’s literature, comparing passages from canonical Victorian/Edwardian texts with socialist stories for children. The author argues that children’s literature plays a crucial role in constructing and inspiring visions of happiness, aligned with different ideologies. The chapter finishes questioning whether contemporary children’s literature should explore more radical notions of happiness linked to different social and political structures. This political reading diverges from the volume’s overall approach, presenting a different perspective on emotions and children’s literature.

Concluding the volume, in ‘Reading children’s books aloud’, Caroline Radcliffe describes the experience of reading aloud, viewed through the interdisciplinary lens of drama and performance research. The choice of passages, the reading space, and the staging suggests that performance can enhance the embodied experience of the text during a read-aloud. Ultimately, the chapter suggests that reading aloud can be a catalyst for reflection on gender perceptions –relating to the chapter on *Alice*– and for reexperiencing the pleasure of reading as children.

In general terms, Cermakova and Mahlberg’s volume makes a significant contribution to the relatively unexplored intersection of children’s literature with the field of stylistics and related disciplines. The book presents a compelling argument and establishes a foundational basis for future interdisciplinary corpus stylistic analysis of children’s fiction, as well as of other discourses, including quantitative and qualitative approaches. The different chapters provide novel perspectives on the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, offering readers a deeper understanding of the topic from the angle of corpus stylistics, alongside literary, cultural, historical and performance studies. The book also provides valuable contributions, in particular successfully addressing the connection between children’s fiction and real world social dynamics through research on fashion, translation, performances and literary texts. As for the collection’s structure, categorising chapters according to thematic or methodological criteria or aligning the order with the sequence presented in the introduction would enhance the volume’s coherence, considering the range of approaches and topics. Overall, the book is worth reading for those seeking to gain a broader understanding of interdisciplinary research within children’s literature from a stylistic perspective. It is likely to appeal to and inspire both academics and students of stylistics and children’s fiction, as well as to other professionals, such as librarians or teachers, interested in childhood related issues.

## References

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