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helpful resource in finding titles, authors, and publishers, but it will be Falconer's that ultimately enriches the critical field.

Falconer's description of first encountering Harry Potter was worth mentioning earlier because it reflects the tone of her book. She seems genuinely interested in getting to the heart of profound questions of readership, best illustrated in her self-reflective discussion of *The Silver Chair* in the last chapter. She describes having read the book in childhood and not returning to it for several years. Upon rereading it again—closely and obsessively for this project—she recognized the disconnects from her earlier childhood readings. This book ends with her opening discussion of reading Harry Potter, where she notes, "I had become the child-reader I once was: voracious, oblivious to time, suspended by words in an attic room of excitement, fun, friendship and bravery" (1).

What makes Falconer's book so strong is that, although she may invoke her voracious child-reader self, she doesn't settle for easy answers. Both Beckett and Falconer acknowledge and dismiss the common argument that the crossover phenomenon is the result of a sort of "dumbing down" of adult culture, though both do acknowledge the degree to which most crossover books tend to be fantasies, thus taking on the allure of escapism (making Haddon's book a notable exception). Both books acknowledge that the crossover phenomenon is certainly nothing new, even though its current incarnation has an economic and cultural impact that is worth examining further. And both books acknowledge that crossover fiction has broken down boundaries that were probably worth breaking down anyway. As Beckett rightfully notes, "Perhaps we are finally entering an era when good fiction can simply be considered good fiction without worrying about the audience" (9).

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Thomas, Joseph T., Jr. *Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2007.

American poetry for children has long suffered from neglect, and occasional abuse, from scholars, teachers, and, indeed, from poets themselves. Judging from my own college students, I suspect that few American children

ever move far beyond the joyous nonsense of Shel Silverstein or Jack Prelutsky in their elementary classroom experiences. In teacher education, the study of more serious poetry seems to have been largely neglected in favor of prose fiction and nonfiction. And students of children's literature in search of critical works on children's poetry realize the dearth of the available research. Consequently, Joseph Thomas's study is a welcome addition—and we can only hope it is just the beginning. At the end of this little book, Joseph Thomas reveals his threefold purpose in writing it: “to suggest the complexities of contemporary poetry for children written in the United States, to situate the competing traditions of U.S. children's poetry in their larger social and poetic contexts, and to propose several avenues for continued research” (106). *Poetry's Playground* succeeds admirably in all three goals.

In his introduction, Thomas recalls the famous feud (if I may call it that) between Kenneth Koch and Myra Cohn Livingston, both accomplished poets and both dedicated to promulgating the study and appreciation of children's poetry. Koch argued that poetic sensibility was innate in childhood, that children were natural poets, whereas Livingston maintained that poetry was an art form demanding discipline as well as talent. She insisted that not everything that rhymes is poetic and not everything that appears in short lines on the page is a poem. Thomas does not seek to resolve these differences, but he sheds much light on both approaches. The book is not, by any means, comprehensive, and some may find Thomas's choices quirky. Its five chapters are devoted to Robert Frost and what Thomas refers to as the school poets; Randall Jarrell; Playground Poetry; “Urchin Poetry” and modern children's poets (e.g., Roethke, Silverstein, and Prelutsky); and visual poetry. Thomas claims in his first chapter that, in fact, American children's poetry was thrust into prominence in the mid-twentieth century by such figures as Robert Frost (Thomas makes much of Frost's appearance at the Kennedy inauguration), John Ciardi, Randall Jarrell, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Carl Sandburg. Thomas's contention is that two dominant modes of children's poetry exist side by side: the “official school poetry,” so called because it is deemed appropriate for explication in the classroom (think Robert Frost); and “a rather defanged poetry of the playground” (perhaps most famously the poetry of Jack Prelutsky and Shel Silverstein).

Thomas points out that Frost, over forty years after his death, still retains his role as the preeminent “school poet,” as evidenced by the ubiquity of his poems in all the standard children's anthologies. Frost's popularity with the establishment is unsurprising, since his poetry appears conservative, safe, uncontroversial—and, Thomas posits, white and middle class. Of

course, the purveyors of children's literature have always been conservative, guided (or misguided) by the conviction in the innocence of childhood and the sanctity of social values. The argument is convincing, however, readers looking for any literary analysis of Frost's work will be disappointed. Perhaps Thomas feels that ground has been sufficiently ploughed.

In the second chapter, Thomas expands his discussion of "school poetry," which he describes as being dominated by "voice poetry"—the dominant form of all contemporary American poetry. Voice poetry is exemplified by the omniscient narrator, the narrator with wise and eloquent observations about life—again, like Robert Frost's poetry. Thomas contrasts this poetry with that of a poet he greatly admires, Randall Jarrell. Jarrell, he contends, does not write voice poetry; rather his works are close to conversation—although not, Thomas observes, so loud as the Beats. In *The Bat Poet*, Jarrell weds the two opposing forces of mid-twentieth century poetry—the cooked and the raw, or the poetry of form and restraint and the poetry of unbridled feeling. Jarrell shows us, Thomas notes, "that opposing tendencies and internal contradictions make for interesting poetry" (38). Thomas's celebration of *The Bat Poet* and his insightful explication make for pleasurable critical reading.

In the third chapter Thomas turns to child poets and particularly to their playground poetry, which he insists must be acknowledged in any comprehensive study of American children's poetry "as belonging to a rich poetic tradition" (40). It is curious that no critic of children's novels ever turns to the musings of third graders to examine trends or discover literary influences, but when it comes to poetry, the jingles of children at play are often elevated to literary stature. This supports Kenneth Koch's argument for the innate poetic sensibilities of small children, and here Thomas seems to agree. When in the earlier chapters he writes of "school poetry," it is with a thinly veiled disdain, as if it were only an artifice created for pedagogical purposes. "School poetry" employs the traditional poetic devices—rhyme, rhythm, imagery, metonymy, and so on—but poetry of the playground is raw, visceral, and full of genuine emotion. Thomas compares the "school poetry" to nonsense verse and the playground poetry to graffiti—with the implication that the graffiti is far more original, gutsy, and full of life. Thomas's discussion of playground poetry quite vividly illustrates its essentially aggressive nature. Of course, that is what recess is all about anyway, a temporary receding from the business of living, an opportunity for children to vent their built-up hostilities, to reject temporarily (and in a socially accepted fashion) the rules imposed upon them by adult society. He rightly associates the playground poetry with the notion of the carnivalesque in literature (and life)—the rejection

of authoritarianism, the defiance of the social order and its artificial constraints, the need to upset the status quo in order to return equilibrium to the world. Thomas suggests that more of the playground poetry be admitted into the schoolroom since it might produce a dialogue that “would lead both children and adults to an enriched understanding of poetry and the communities that produce it” (60).

Following this encomium to the poetry of the playground, Thomas moves onto some of the most familiar of contemporary poets, including John Ciardi, Silverstein and Prelutsky, who write what he calls “domesticated playground poetry.” Readers may be surprised to find Thomas a lukewarm fan of these wildly popular figures. In fact, he sums up their work almost dismissively: “Unlike the verse of official school poetry, domesticated playground poetry—the literary, adult-produced analog to playground poetry—often offers little that is new to child culture besides an adult-controlled replacement” (82). His contention is that neither Silverstein nor Prelutsky seems “to recognize that child culture already produces, disseminates, and re-imagines a poetic tradition much like [their] own, but with a sharper edge” (81–82). On the other hand, he has high praise for Theodore Roethke for offering children more variety in form and for not condescending to children or assuming that they only like nonsense poetry or comic verse. In his final analysis, however, Thomas acknowledges that poets like Ciardi, Roethke, Silverstein, and Prelutsky are all rebelling against the sanctioned school poetry and reaching back to the even older tradition of folk poetry, playground chants and the carnivalesque roots of these time-honored forms.

Thomas’s final chapter focuses on what he terms visual poetry—also variously called concrete poetry, pattern poetry, pictorial poetry. He explains that, far from being a modern phenomenon, the earliest example of a visual poem is to be found in ancient Greece. Once again, however, we see the conservative forces of children’s literature casting suspicion on this form when it was resurrected in the twentieth century (although Thomas points out that no less a figure than Lewis Carroll introduced the form to children’s literature with “A Mouse’s Tale”). Thomas provides some fascinating explications of several visual poems, and very clearly demonstrates the subtleties involved in well-crafted piece, notable Arnold Adoff’s “He/She,” and X. J. Kennedy’s “Concrete Cat” (which, ironically, was intended to parody the form, but, as Thomas convincingly argues, is a remarkably successful example). He also provides some less adept examples, by which he is able to formulate a lucid and persuasive case for the sophistication of this poetic form.

In what he calls the coda, Thomas discusses the concept of forming a canon of children’s poetry, which he begins by comparing eight widely

used anthologies, ranging from Louis Untermeyer's *Golden Treasury of Poetry* (1959) to Donald Hall's *Oxford Illustrated Book of American Children* (1999). From these eight collections, he identifies which poets are predominant (Cummings, Frost, Roethke, and Sandburg appear in all eight, with Coatsworth, Dickinson, and Langston Hughes close seconds, appearing in seven). In three appendices, he includes statistics on which poets appear most frequently, in which anthologies, and from which nationalities. Notably missing from Thomas's selection is Nancy Larrick's *Piping Down the Valleys Wild* (1968), a celebrated and extensive anthology that might have substituted for one of the two editions of X. J. and Dorothy Kennedy's *Knock at a Star* that he does include. In a fourth appendix, he lists award-winning children's poetry books. The importance of a canon in the first place is never made entirely clear. Indeed, it seems strange that a critic who is not averse to iconoclasm would be so keen on a concept that is so closely affiliated with the establishment. And last of all, we see the extent of Thomas's scholarship, his ample and interesting endnotes and an extensive bibliography.

Thomas himself acknowledges the work of the British author Morag Styles, whose *From the Garden to the Street* (1998) helped inspire his own work. Styles, whose focus is British children's poetry, invited others to follow in her path in exploring the realm of children's verse, and Thomas does likewise. Thomas's easy writing style, intelligent observations, and penchant for the provocative provide excellent models for his successors. Anyone interested in children's poetry will want to read this book.

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Kent Baxter. *The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2008.

In the past two decades, several important books have appeared that examine that notoriously troubling category, the adolescent. Among them are Thomas Hine's *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, which covers the American colonial period to the present; Grace Palladino's *Teenagers: An American History*, focusing on the post-Depression era; and Jon