During my first semester of graduate school at Illinois State University, I was enrolled in a seminar on the subject of literary theory and children’s literature led by Jan Susina, who, at the time, was this publication’s book review editor. One evening, Jan brought into class copies of a then new and now infamous book review by Peter Hunt. The monograph Peter engaged, Jill May’s *Children’s Literature and Critical Theory*, was on our syllabus, but Jan’s aim in exposing us to the review was not, I surmise, simply to deepen our understanding of May’s book. Rather, it demonstrated how small our field could seem and how difficult, therefore, it is to write critically of work produced by friends and acquaintances. Hunt’s review, profoundly negative, begins by foregrounding this difficulty:

Reviewing books on children’s literature requires perhaps more professionalism from both reviewer and reviewee than in many other disciplines: it’s a small world. . . . Most of us know each other, and we can respect each other’s opinions, even if we don’t much like those opinions, without it becoming a matter of personalities. (387)

Additionally, the review suggests the insecurity we often feel as members of a sometimes disparaged, marginalized, and misunderstood field. As youth-obsessed as the West can be, readers of this journal will doubtlessly need little convincing that adults can have reductive and condescending views about children and their culture—including their literature—an insecurity that leads Hunt to write,

many of us involved in teaching children’s literature have for years been struggling to establish its credibility as a subject, in the face of skepticism from

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other academics. We are not, of course, alone in this, but the U.K. has perhaps one fiftieth of the number of academics that North America has and so there is little room to maneuver, few places to hide. (387)

At the end there, I’m reminded of Randall Jarrell’s poem “The Bird of Night.” Jarrell’s shadowy owl recalls Hunt’s “other academics,” while the poor children’s literature scholar with “few places to hide” suggests the owl’s tiny prey:

The ear that listens to the owl believes
In death. The bat beneath the eaves,

The mouse beside the stone are still as death—
The owl’s air washes them like water.
The owl goes back and forth inside the night,
And the night holds its breath. (The Lost World 65)

We feel small, vulnerable, even after years of struggle, and the resultant insecurity can lead us to forget that although we are scholars, we are also human, and just as we are human, so are our colleagues. Children’s literature may be marginalized by scholars outside our discipline, but the study of children’s poetry is marginalized by scholars within our discipline. Therefore, those of us—like myself—who attend to children’s poetry regularly can feel even more insecure, more worried about its place within the academy, more prone to overreact when it is dismissed or treated without the rigor and sensitivity we feel it deserves. These worries and this tendency to overreact can, unfortunately, cause us to forget lessons like those Jan endeavored to teach his students that cold fall evening in central Illinois: be compassionate in your criticism. Be human.

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This preamble brings me to the subject of my review: Poetry and Childhood, a collection of twenty-six short essays edited by Morag Styles, Louise Joy, and David Whitley. Many of the contributors will be familiar, some less so. Several are close friends of mine, and many are acquaintances. All are fine writers, and a handful are poets (including Angela Sorby, whom the introduction forgets in its list of poet contributors). However, one doesn’t have to be too clever a reader to recognize that any review beginning with such a preamble is going to be mixed. Still, there is much to recommend. The topics covered in Poetry and Childhood are wide-ranging, as are the methodologies (although the book does, on balance, skew toward an education/pedagogical approach). In essence, the book is a conference proceeding, the papers contributed by participants in “a large international conference on poetry and childhood organized by the Cambridge Faculty of Education and held in the
British Library,” yet the introduction maintains the papers were “rewritten for publication” (xii), if not, evidently, expanded. The six sections (including an “Afterwords” section) are “What Is Children’s Poetry?” “Poets and Childhood,” “Traditions and Forms of Poetry for Children,” “Childhood and Nature: Changing Perspectives,” and “Children, Teachers, Poets, Readers.” The poets treated are predominantly of the canonical variety. John Bunyan, Charles Causley, Ted Hughes, A. A. Milne, Beatrix Potter, Robert Louis Stevenson, and William Wordsworth are representative, although there are a few surprises: Carol Ann Duffy and Þórarinn Eldjarn, for instance, as well as a chapter on Brazilian poets for children.

Specific chapters of note include “Confronting the Snark: The Non-Theory of Children’s Poetry,” in which Peter Hunt wrestles with the definition of children’s poetry in his usual, stylistically compelling way (more on Hunt’s contribution below). Lissa Paul’s “Ted Hughes and the ‘Old Age of Childhood’” was prepared as the keynote address to the British Library’s “Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat,” an exhibition on four centuries of language in children’s poetry, curated by Styles and Michael Rosen and held concomitantly with the Cambridge children’s poetry conference that occasioned Poetry and Childhood. Exploring “the memory of the library,” Paul’s essay articulates the frustrating fact that as soon as one argues “for any one truth [about poetry], others are forgotten,” stressing, all the while, that “it is fitting that so many truths about childhood and poetry live inside [the British Library’s] walls” (36). Paul’s tour of those competing truths, although rooted in a discussion of Hughes, ranges from William Butler Yeats to William Blake, Jane Taylor to Lewis Carroll, Christina Rossetti to Anna Barbauld, Sara Coleridge to Pamela Mordecai. “Ted Hughes and the ‘Old Age of Childhood’” is a delightful amble through the library’s stacks, congenial as it is rigorous, Paul’s sure prose a welcome and welcoming guide. An apt companion to Paul’s piece is Michael Joseph’s essay, “‘The Penny Fiddle’ and Poetic Truth.” Joseph attends to Robert Graves, illuminating the complexities informing both Graves’s poetry for children and his intent to write for a child audience. At the core of this chapter is Graves’ conception of poetic truth, which Graves calls “a sort of supra-rational truth” (81). Joseph explicates the “arguments for poetic truth” found in Graves’ The Penny Fiddle, arguments, Joseph maintains, that are articulated in poems “light-hearted [and] accessible in terms of topic, imagery, metre and diction” while remaining “deeply aesthetically self-conscious,” a poetry perfectly tuned to “young readers sensitive to poetry at the level of intuition and play” (81–82). Joseph’s argument is complex, on the one hand arguing that Graves’ work “offers proofs that poetry is not contingent, but transcends all barriers of gender, social class, and of course age,” while, on the other, maintaining that Graves “proffers no universal claims. His truth
is not ontologically autonomous, but reified in the experience of poets and dependent on the receptivity of poets” (82). By “poet” Joseph does not mean “authors skilled in verse craft, but individuals born with a particular cast of mind—those able to grasp and abide by poetic truth” (82). If this essay is any indication, Joseph is a poet through and through, his prose as elegant as his argument. He concludes with the assertion—emerging organically from the body of the essay—that Graves’ book, and its title poem in particular, legitimat[es] the circumstances of childhood, by demonstrating that although suffering may appear purposeless and incomprehensible, it grounds the poetic process, the process of making meaning. It instructs readers to disregard nothing—not their own clumsiness and frustration, not even an apparently trite, didactic, cast-off children’s rhyme—because anything may be transvalued by poetic truth, regardless of gender, race or age. Poetic truth alone determines what has meaning and worth. (88)

A keen, receptive reader of poetry, Joseph manages in a mere eight pages to convince this reader, at least, that Graves has been underserved by the academic community, that his *The Penny Fiddle* and the poetics it implies remain as relevant and rich as they are misunderstood.

Another highpoint of *Poetry and Childhood* is David Rudd’s “Humpty Dumpty and the Sense of an Unending.” Rudd offers multiple interpretations of “Humpty Dumpty” arising from various critical/theoretical traditions. His work, in the spirit of Rod McGillis and Antony Easthope, emerges from a sensitive awareness of contemporary theory, the field of children’s literature, and criticism of adult poetry. Suitably, Rudd concludes his playfully brilliant contribution with a Derridean nod to Frank Kermode, his essay ending “with the sense of an unending” (119). However, it is only a sense of an unending, as his analysis demonstrates persuasively that one can never “draw a tidy line” around “Humpty Dumpty”—or any effective nonsense—for those attempting to put nonsense “back together again,” hoping to “declare interpretation finished” must face the fact that each interpretation is a construction as well as a deconstruction. Recalling Lacan’s “little man,” the false coherence we construct for ourselves during the mirror stage, Rudd maintains that “Humpty Dumpty” is a linguistic “hommelette” that lacks clear boundaries, the signifiers spreading meaning as fast as we try to delimit it” (118). Finally, we have “Animal Poems and Children’s Rights in America, 1820–1890.” While less obviously theoretical than Rudd’s contribution, Angela Sorby’s essay is a nuanced example of the kind of the historical work found in *Poetry and Childhood*. Tantalizingly brief (all the essays, by the way, suffer from brevity: “half the essays at twice the length,” I kept thinking), Sorby’s essay uses nineteenth-century animal poetry as a way to trace “the changing ways in which such poems construct a civic self by marking but also blurring the
boundary lines between authentically human children and animals” (179). Sorby uses the past to better understand our present, gesturing toward a question as applicable today as it was in the nineteenth century: “In a liberal democracy, what is the difference between a man, a woman, a child, and an animal—and if all are not equal, then do all nonetheless deserve some measure of protection under the law?” (180). On the whole, the essays in *Poetry and Childhood* are best at historicizing children’s poetry and illuminating the work and lives of individual poets.

However, despite the talent and reputations of those involved and despite my personal affection for many of the contributors, despite the interest with which I read many of the essays and despite the beauty of much of the prose, a phrase, again from Jarrell, returns repeatedly to my mind:—and yet—and yet (Complete 18).

You see, *Poetry and Childhood* is framed as a starting point. The back cover blurb calls it “the first academic book to give serious critical attention to the poetry of childhood.” This language no doubt comes from the press, not the editors, so we can forgive its inaccurate hyperbole. Styles wrote a serious academic book on children’s poetry herself just over ten years ago, *From the Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Children’s Poetry*, and at least two other books have followed her capable lead; in fact, one of those other books, *Schoolroom Poets*—the 2005 Children’s Literature Association Honor Book—was written by Sorby. Yet the introduction echoes this claim, insisting, for example, that the first section “asks fundamental questions about what constitutes children’s poetry and why it has never been adequately theorised” (xi). The “adequately” here serves as a hedge, sure, but it’s telling that *Poetry and Childhood* neglects to engage the foundational work of Kenneth Koch or Myra Cohn Livingston’s response to Koch in her book *The Child Poet: Myth or Reality*, an extension of her well-known, two-part essay “But Is It Poetry?” Glenna Sloan’s 2001 essay, also called “But Is It Poetry?” an homage to and extension of Livingston’s work, is also passed over. Michael Heyman’s recent work on nonsense is overlooked, a particular disappointment, as the fascinating introduction to his *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* relates quite strongly to the British tradition(s) of children’s poetry, traditions with which *Poetry and Childhood* largely concerns itself (a bias the book acknowledges early in its pages [xiii]). Also missing (save for a quick nod in Paul’s essay) is Richard Flynn’s crucial 1993 essay, “Can Children’s Poetry Matter?” an essay riffing on Dana Gioia’s “Can Poetry Matter?” The absence of a rigorous engagement with Flynn’s study is especially noteworthy, as in it he asks fundamental questions about the nature of children’s poetry and child culture. While arguing that the world of children’s poetry is, “like poetry for adults [ . . . ] a clouded battleground of competing camps of poets with specific political or careerist agendas” (40),
Flynn models how we might listen in on discussions happening in adult poetry and let those discussions inform our own. There’s disappointingly little of that sort of thing happening in *Poetry and Childhood*. Worlds of debate and theorization in the sphere of adult poetry are missing, but worse is the scant attention to our own discussions. Although obviously wrong when they frame the book as a first, the editors *are* correct when they call poetry “the Cinderella of children’s literature, receiving very little scholarly attention. It is usually poorly represented at academic conferences and is the subject of minority interest” (xv). Nevertheless, the sad truth in these words makes it even harder to understand why greater care was not taken to engage with those few already working in the area.

Hunt’s piece suffers most poignantly from *Poetry and Childhood’s* problem with framing and illustrates the missed opportunities to which it leads. His essay is thoughtful and penetrating, but it is largely unmoored from salient debates and arguments. Hunt discounts, for instance, “urchin verse” without engaging defenses of the work in this problematically named category (say, Perry Nodelman’s discussion in the poetry chapter of *Pleasures of Children’s Literature*, or X. J. Kennedy’s discerning “Strict and Loose Nonsense: Two Worlds of Children’s Verse”). When Hunt muses on the nature of poetry itself, claiming that even *words* are not necessary components of poetry (20), he offhandedly enters into a debate at least as old as the Dadaists, a debate that still rages in the world of adult poetry, especially in the domains of sound and conceptual poetries, but also in the ever-growing area of visual poetry, a mode of poetic expression as equally at home in world of adult poetry as it is in its children’s counterpart. Had Hunt lingered a bit, summoning, say, the poetry and criticism of Geof Huth, bp Nichol, or Christian Bök; looked to the children’s poetry of Jonarno Lawson, who intelligently and playfully engages the avant-garde traditions out of which those authors and others like them emerge; or engaged the insights of contemporary theorists of children’s and adult poetry who take this work and the questions it raises seriously, then his piece might have transcended the word *musing*, might have really moved our conversation forward. A scholar of Hunt’s caliber ought to have pushed himself harder.

Unfortunately, this problem of framing and the scholarly amnesia from which it emerges characterizes much of our field’s treatment of children’s poetry. It is so common, in fact, that Flynn and co-editor Anita Tarr note the tendency in the introduction to their 2002 special poetry issue of the *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*. They write, “We . . . wish that there were no special [poetry] issue. That is, we would like to think that children’s poetry, no matter how marginalized within our culture, is embraced as a full member of our family of children’s literatures.” They wish it were true, but, they note, “Sadly, this is not the case” (2). Happily, the dire situation Tarr
and Flynn limn is largely a thing of the past. Although it’s unmentioned in *Poetry and Childhood*, the journal that you’re now reading has since 2005 featured a yearly essay on the state of children’s poetry in North America, *The Lion and the Unicorn* Poetry Award, a continuation of the essay/award regularly featured in the pages of the much-missed *Signal*. 2005 also marks the first year that a monograph on the subject of children’s poetry, Sorby’s aforementioned *Schoolroom Poets*, was named an honor book by the *ChLA*, a decision repeated in 2007, when my own *Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry* was similarly honored. Furthermore, perhaps as a result of Flynn’s recent editorial commitments, the *Quarterly* has lately featured a number of pieces concerning children’s poetry (Kate Capshaw Smith, the *Quarterly*’s new editor, has shown herself to be equally committed to quality work on the subject of children’s poetry). Likewise, since 2000, *Children’s Literature* has published important essays in the area, including Emily Cardinali Cormier’s 2010 study, “‘Genius, Scientist, Saint’: Carver as Hagiography,” an analysis of the work of *L&U* Poetry Award winner Marilyn Nelson. The twenty-first century seems a kind of golden age of children’s poetry criticism and scholarship. It’s an exciting time.

However, as Tarr and Flynn demonstrate in their two-page historical overview of the study of children’s poetry, this has not always been the case. Like the scholars of children’s literature more generally, those of us committed to the study of children’s poetry have worked long and hard to secure its place in the field. If we are in a golden age, it has been hard won, and its history has been oddly circular, as each new foray laments the marginal status of children’s poetry in our profession, calling for us to journey forward, yet frustratingly starting over at square one. *Poetry and Childhood* regrettably repeats this pattern. I’m reminded of Nodelman’s words in *The Hidden Adult*: “But despite its long history, children’s literature criticism also has a habit of forgetting its own past or even, sometimes, utterly lacks awareness of that past’s existence” (134). What’s true of the larger discipline seems true of its subdisciplines. *Poetry and Childhood* begins, yet again, at the beginning, taking up subjects treated by other scholars: urchin verse (or, better, urchin poetry), the poetry of the playground, nonsense and humor, etc., all without bothering to root those subjects in the rich conversation already surrounding us. How can the study of children’s poetry move forward if we won’t even listen to ourselves?

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All this is not to say that *Poetry and Childhood* is a bad book, undeserving of readers. It’s just a bit out of touch, a Neverland of a book, full of interesting sights, brimming with possibility, yet separated from the mainland by great
seas. Let’s hope that the next book treating this worthwhile subject builds more bridges to that mainland, rests more comfortably in the now, rather than the hazy non-time of Wonderlands. At the end of the twentieth century, Tarr reviewed Styles’ *From the Garden to the Street* for *Children’s Literature*, ending the review with these words:

Styles laments that her book is not finished, never could be finished. “The challenges are endless and there is still so much work to be done in this field. I hope others will take up the debates and carry on the scholarship in this deeply fascinating area of study. If this book helps anyone to embark on that journey, I will be satisfied” (xxviii). We’ve been given the challenge. Now we have to journey onward. (200)

We should listen to Styles, to Tarr, to ourselves, take up this challenge, and move onward.

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**Works Cited**


Queer theory is looking at children. Perhaps its first glance was the collection of essays *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, which gathered work by Judith Halberstam, James Kincaid, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and indeed Kathryn Bond Stockton herself. These essays represent moments over the past twenty years when queer theory, however briefly, has turned to children as a site for inquiry, a powerful location for questions of identity, sexuality, language, and culture. Stockton’s *The Queer Child: or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* is the first of its kind, the first extended meditation on both queerness and childhood. Stockton looks to twentieth-century representations of children in film and fiction to read for images that have recurred throughout the century: the ghostly gay child, the grown homosexual who is made childish, the child queered by Freud, and the child queered by innocence, color, or money. These images of children are seldom acknowledged or accounted for in traditional social histories. Stockton does not do the work of social history, does not