

**POETRY'S PLAYGROUND:
THE CULTURE OF CONTEMPORARY
CHILDREN'S POETRY**

Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Wayne State University Press
http://wsupress.wayne.edu
196 pages; paper, \$24.95

Joseph Thomas begins by stating that his book “has the...modest aim of simply broaching the subject” of contemporary US children’s poetry. But he immediately adds that he will also “try to avoid two interrelated problems that are common to most studies of children’s poetry,” namely that the poetry is “usually treated in isolation, as something wholly apart from the poetic traditions of adult poetry” and that the extant studies on it “are somewhat insular, referring largely to other studies of children’s poetry or, more broadly, to other studies of children’s literature, drawing only infrequently on the critical and historical conversations surrounding adult poetic texts.” Not only does Thomas do an excellent job of “broaching the subject,” but, in part of his book at least, he also does an excellent job of indeed discussing children’s poetry in terms both of its involvement with wider poetic, historical, and critical conversations, as well as demonstrating the involvement of adult poetic, historical, and critical conversations in children’s poetry. In doing so, Thomas not only has written one of the most interesting and thoughtful books on children’s poetry that I have read in several years, but also one of the most interesting and thoughtful books on children’s literature overall. For the issues Thomas rightly notes concerning the isolation of children’s poetry (criticism) apply to children’s literature overall too, with little work still done on the mutual implicatedness of texts, authors, history, and criticism, between adult and children’s literature and criticism.

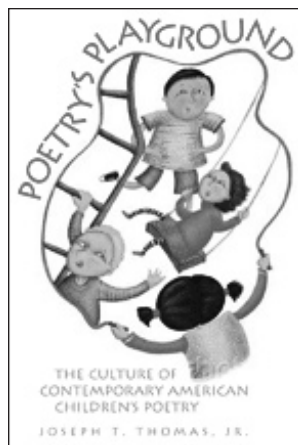
Thomas’s first two chapters are wonderfully illuminating discussions of debates in North American poetry about developments in themes and style and how these affected canon formation through the inclusion of poetry in anthologies, both for adults and children. Through discussing specifically the emergence of first Robert Frost and then Randall Jarrell as “the U.S.’s official school” poets, Thomas demonstrates how certain ideas of poetry and certain

ideas of childhood interlocked. Thomas fascinatingly analyzes, in the second chapter, how Jarrell’s critical writing and children’s poetry both negotiated and disrupted the polarizations at stake in the “anthology wars” between the “raw” *New American Poetry* (1960) and the “cooked” *New Poets of England and America* (1957). In these sections, Thomas manages to explain different ideas that were circulating about poetry and its values and roles, showing how one can indeed very fruitfully use both readings of children’s and adult poetry, context, and criticism, without isolating one from another, but instead assessing how ideas and debates in one area also emerge in the other. These first two chapters, in my opinion, are a rare and inspiring example of how criticism (children’s/ adult) can develop forward in this way.

Thomas does, however, unfortunately run aground on substantial problems in his third chapter, and these also affect his further chapters, particularly the fourth chapter. For, by endeavouring to include a serious consideration of “Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground,” Thomas effectively contradicts his prior aims and methods. Thomas here attempts

to argue that “any comprehensive study of American children’s poetry—and, more broadly, poetry in general—is ultimately insufficient insofar as it fails to acknowledge and consider playground poetry.” This “playground poetry” Thomas defines as “what children often do with language while outside grown-up supervision” and reveals that “children have a poetic tradition of their own, a carnivalesque tradition that signifies on adult culture.” Thomas, entirely now in keeping with much prior children’s literature criticism, therefore

reinstates the “separate” child and its “true” “own” poetry, that he had precisely put into question in his first two chapters. Now, it turns out, those various, competing, poetic, and pedagogical definitions of childhood he discussed so illuminatingly in the first two chapters were after all merely secondary to a true, real child and its poetry, which Thomas can retrieve and describe here. This child, it further transpires, is a version well known to prior discourses of childhood in a range of areas, namely the subversive or even anarchic child—for Thomas, as so often, specifically the sexually subversive or anarchic child. Thomas, therefore, proceeds to overlook the implications of an important argument by Randall Jarrell he himself invokes earlier, where Jarrell suggests “that modernism, rather than being a departure from romanticism, has in fact carried romantic ‘tendencies to their limits.’” Thomas too, rather than breaking away from a tradition of the Romantic child, as he believes, to



uncover the truth about the child, instead, I suggest, only creates in turn another version of this Romantic child.

Thomas does try to underpin his child and its poetry, again, as has happened frequently before in other critics, by invoking, for instance, Mikhail Bakhtin (hence the references to the carnivalesque), Sigmund Freud (relying on a common but problematic reading of Freud as simply concerning conscious sexuality, not unconscious sexuality), and Laura Mulvey, but this confirms the problems rather than solves them. For the specific uses of Bakhtin, Freud, and Mulvey, as well as Thomas’s own selections of “playground poetry,” only demonstrate that any child is produced by the “grown-up supervision” Thomas had apparently assumed himself not to be part of. But he, can, of course, by the logic of his own initial arguments, no more escape (and who could?) also being one of the “adults who view childhood through the lens of...ideological preconceptions.”

This book does an excellent job of discussing children’s poetry in terms of its involvement with wider poetic, historical, and critical conversations.

Having committed himself to this subversive child, the rest of the fourth chapter hangs almost entirely on the standard of truth it sets. Hence, the relative merits of John Ciardi, Theodore Roethke, Shel Silverstein, and Jack Perlutsky, are measured in terms of their proximity to the authenticity of “playground poetry.” This leads, in places, to some quite eccentric statements, such as that Silverstein is “domesticated” because “[h]anging a teacher by her ears is, at worst, a mild form of torture...there is no shooting, no arson, only pinching.”

The fifth and final chapter of the book is a suggestive discussion of visual poetry, which points to further interesting areas of research, but does not allow enough space, in this relatively brief discussion, to disentangle entirely the complex theoretical issues around “visuality” that Thomas touches on and of which he is clearly aware. The book ends with a series of helpful appendices listing inclusions in children’s anthologies under various headings and categories, as well as children’s poetry awards.

Karín Lesnik-Oberstein is Reader (associate professor) in Critical Theory at the University of Reading (UK), where she is also Director of the “Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media” (CIRCL) and the MA (Research) in Children’s Literature.

ENIGMATIC MAGIC

AFTER DARK

Haruki Murakami

Knopf
http://www.randomhouse.com
208 pages, cloth, \$22.95

In Haruki Murakami’s *After Dark*, “we,” the reader and the unknown narrator, witness intimate moments of these characters’ lives—the supernatural experience of a Sleeping Beauty sucked into a television screen and the transient but poignant encounters Mari Asai, the protagonist, shares with a musician, an ex-professional wrestler and owner of a twenty-four-hour love hotel, and a battered Chinese prostitute. As readers, we are in a position of constant unease as we are sucked into the movement of a city that

at night resembles “a single gigantic creature—or more like a single collective entity created by many intertwining organisms.” Murakami writes: “The district plays by its own rules at a time like this.” In this suspenseful but subtle novel set in Japan, we witness a series of surrealistic and miraculous events transpire after dark, when characters are at the mercy of the wiles of the city.

In Murakami’s novel, a shift occurs at night—

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