Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917. By Angela Sorby. Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Children's poetry has long been a part of the study of children's literature, albeit a minor one. Very little critical or historical work has been done in the area, especially when it comes to U.S. children's poetry, and especially when one looks for book-length studies. Of the work that has been done, most concentrates on the children's poetry of Great Britain, and that usually takes the form of individual author studies rather than broad surveys (Morag Styles's *From The Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Poetry for Children* [1998], for example, is the first noteworthy survey on the subject, and it barely touches on U.S. poetry). This paucity of critical work makes the publication of Angela Sorby's magisterial *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865–1917* all the more exciting, and all the more crucial.

A poet herself, Sorby begins her exceptional study by theorizing and historicizing some of the commonplaces held by those interested in contemporary poetry, commonplaces regarding the function of poetry in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans, especially children. "[O]nce upon a time," these commonplaces go, "within living memory but just barely, people knew poems, repeated them, and wove them into their daily lives. Once upon a time, in other words, poetry mattered to middle-class people in a way that it no longer does" (xi). She continues, noting the assumption that "Nineteenth and early-twentieth-century popular poetry . . . was truly *popular,*" and that this "popularity had something to do with repetition," with "quotidian public expression," "with the body," with "memory," and with a readership "large enough to be conflated with all" (xii). Sorby, however, not satisfied merely to repeat these assumptions, instead interrogates them in a manner similar to how James Machor, Janice Radway, Cathy Davidson, and scholars like them have interrogated the practices of novel reading. That is, she seeks to discover how popular nineteenth-century American poetry was "used, both practically and ideologically, by both individual readers and the institutions that supported them" (xii). And she succeeds marvelously.

Recalling that nineteenth-century poetry is usually ignored by contemporary critics because it is seen as "a literary-historical dead end," failing as it does to inform modern and postmodern poetry (as modernism is often seen as a break from the features dominant in the nineteenth century) (xxvi), Sorby offers us a new way of reading nineteenth-century poetry, one that concentrates on its performative possibilities. She stresses that the amazingly popular textbook series the *McGuffey Reader*—which taught over 116 million children how to read between the years 1839 and 1920—concentrated not on literary analysis but rather on the *performance* of poetry, the speaking of poetry, the memorization and embodiment of the texts. Thus, for example, Sarah Josepha Hale's "It Snows" operates not as a perfectly formed verbal icon but rather as a "performance piece, allowing the reader to showcase a range of emotions," for the readers, "like method actors . . . are expected to submerge their individuality in the emotions of the text, and through those emotions, communicate to others" (xxxi). The suggestion is that ever since New Critical reading techniques were naturalized in the mid- to late twentieth century, we have forgotten other uses of poetry, uses common still on playgrounds and city streets where children recite playground rhymes.

Sorby's book focuses on the social dimension of nineteenth-century schoolroom poetry, the poetry written by New England poets like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and John Greenleaf Whittier, and by westerners like Eugene Field and James Whitcomb Riley. The poems produced by these writers, along with "hit singles" (as she calls them) by poets such as Elizabeth Akers ("Rock Me to Sleep"), Sarah Josepha Hale ("It Snows" and "Mary's Lamb"), Joyce Kilmer ("Trees"), and Walt Whitman ("O Captain! My Captain!") comprised "an archive of popular memory" that was sustained by what Louis Althusser would call "Ideological State Apparatuses," institutions like schools, "museums, lyceums, theaters, newspapers, and children's magazines and clubs" (xiii). Each of her chapters, then, explores an intuitional context that facilitates "intersubjectivity" between child and poem (xiv).

Chapters 1 and 2 consider how these schoolroom poets—and their poems—helped reify and promulgate "American-ness," turning a simplified and exclusively white construction of New England into a metonym for America as a whole. Chapter 1 concerns Longfellow's "self-professed romantic nationalism" (2) and how his prominence in the schools taught students "how to read—and feel—like Americans" (34). Chapter 2 turns to John Greenleaf Whittier's 1866 poem "Snow-Bound," a poem that "was second in popularity only to Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*" (35). James Russell Lowell's take on "Snow-Bound" typified the dominant nineteenth-century view: he saw the poem as "an affectionate rendering of rural child-life" (36), a rendering that served as a museum of sorts. Much like the Whittier farmhouse itself, a popular visiting place after the colonial revival of the 1870s, the poem becomes a museum that, in Lowell's words, "describ[ed] scenes and manners which the rapid changes in our national habits will soon have made as remote from us as if they were foreign or ancient" (37). As Sorby reads it, however, the poem is about *whiteness* itself, as it "describes a family defined by its whiteness, and it shows how the poet learned to act 'white,' and to assume the privileges of whiteness, while also questioning those privileges." After all, Whittier was a passionate abolitionist. Symbolically, he questions the dominance of whiteness by beginning the poem "with a series of black and white binaries [and ending it with] emerging shades of gray," shades that, according to Sorby, "signal the poet's distinctive vision of the nation's multiracial potential" (36). However, this reading was unavailable to us for the longest time (even the New Critics read the poem as a "meditation on the passage of time" [35]), for the schools of the nineteenth century employed the poem as a means to encourage nostalgia for a fictional time of racial homogeneity and to tie privileged whiteness to American democracy.

Chapter 3 centers on *St. Nicholas Magazine* and the manufacture of childhood desire, a desire "rooted not just in timeless nature and age-old rhymes but also in the popular and material culture of the postbellum American middle classes" (82). Furthermore, it explores how *St. Nicholas*—under Mary Mapes Dodge's editorship—turned formerly intergenerational poems "into the exclusive domain, the private property as it were, of children" (97). Thus, the popular poetry of the nineteenth century—based as it was in "performance and repetition"—was infantilized, and a contrastive "adult" aesthetic was constructed, one marked by "formal experiments and novelty" (97). In chapter 4, "Performing Class: James Whitcomb Riley Onstage," Sorby takes a relatively brief excursion into issues of class, tracing Riley's stage career and examining how his work blurred the boundaries between mass culture and high, child culture and adult, navigating the border "between Barnum-style sideshows and the high-toned Tremont Temple" (103). These tensions, Sorby argues—between "highbrow and lowbrow, black and white, and rich and poor"—marked Riley's work (118). His work, tied as it was to memorization and recognition, nonetheless became an expression "of nostalgia for a form of collective aesthetic experience," an "experience that predated Riley himself" and "did not simply serve the needs of the marketplace" (125).

The book ends with two chapters that continue the thread of infantilization summoned in chapter 3. Chapter 5 investigates poet Eugene Field and his relation to the shifting line between childhood and adulthood at the *fin de siecle.* This line, Sorby maintains, began its shift in late-nineteenth-century America. However, even as it shifted, it blurred. Field's popular poems (like "Little Boy Blue," "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod," and others) make this blurriness even more ambiguous, especially when they are read beside Field's pedophilic pornography (the aptly titled poem "Little Willie," for instance, or *Only a Boy,* his single surviving piece of prose pornography). In this context Sorby explores how Field's popular poetry fetishizes "the line between childhood and adulthood" (126) even while placing the child *within* the adult, "a figure for an adult's still-present personal history—some of which is understood and some of which is retained but not remembered or understood" (154). Thus, schoolroom poetry and its recitation helped to produce a new kind of internal selfhood, one that, she argues, "surely had some influence on the ways [nineteenth-century Americans] remembered themselves as children—and in turn constituted themselves in memory" (xliii–xliv).

The book's final and most compelling chapter, "Emily Dickinson and the Form of Childhood," examines the infantilization of Emily Dickinson in both the schools and in popular magazines like *St. Nicholas* "during her first emergence as a mass cultural phenomenon" in the 1890s. In so doing, Sorby gestures toward a "new kind of schoolroom poet" (xiv), one still rooted in meter in rhyme, two poetic techniques that, as a legacy of the nineteenth century, have become associated with the rhetoric of childhood, but one who also violates the "generic contract governing popular poetry." The "rough and seemingly 'incomplete' surfaces" (156) of Dickinson's poems, their "disturbing forms" (181), are at the core of this violation. Her poems seemed simultaneously so familiar yet so strange, so *off,* that a great many early reviewers articulated "and sometimes indulg[ed]" in "the urge to fix or finish them" (181). Author of what has come to be known as "the most influential negative review of Dickinson," Thomas Bailey Aldrich took it upon himself to "improve" this, the first stanza of "I taste a liquor never brewed":

> I taste a liquor never brewed,
> From tankards scooped in pearl;
> Not all the vats upon the Rhine
> Yield such an alcohol!

Complaining that Dickinson is "half-educated" and quoting Andrew Lang's famous comment that Dickinson might be a poet of note "if she had only mastered the rudiments of grammar and gone into metrical training for about fifteen years," Aldrich offers the following quatrain as a distinct improvement on the original:

> I taste a liquor never brewed
> In vats upon the Rhine;
> No tankard ever held a draught
> Of alcohol like mine.

Sorby argues that Aldrich and critics like him felt violated by Dickinson and, in response, infantalized her and her poems, complaining that they "totter and toddle, not having learned to walk." Her poems are, then, little bodies, "broken, unfinished, and disturbing" (181).

In effect, Dickinson "represented the loss of a certain imagined community"—a community created by the less formally vexing (and largely male) writers discussed earlier in Sorby's book, a community, again, rooted in "repetition and nostalgia" (181). Dickinson's decidedly modern syntax and line breaks, her dashes and metric inventiveness, "(even in edited early editions) do not lend themselves to smooth repetitions by trained elocutionists" (182). One might think, then, that Dickinson is a bridge into the twentieth century, a step into the modernism that would render "old-fashioned schoolroom poetry . . . obsolete" (187). Sorby is cannier than this, however, noting "the demand for schoolroom poetry was so strong in the 1890s that as soon as Dickinson became a best-selling poet her work was appropriated for pedagogical purposes in textbooks and juvenile periodicals." Her poetry "like Dickinson herself, emerging once a year to host a reception . . . performed quite nicely" in this context (187). Thus, Dickinson did not "supplant schoolroom poetry." Instead, she was absorbed within it, illustrating one of Sorby's most intriguing points: that "people's (institutionally instilled) reading practices can override authorial intent in determining the meaning of a poetic text" (187). Also, schoolroom poetry was never in conflict with the developing modernist aesthetic, as schoolroom poetry was a part of popular culture in a way poetry today is not. That is, schoolroom poetry was an integral part of middle-class life in competition not with the developing avant-garde but, instead, with "comic strips or silent films" (187).

The popular poetry of today is the children's poetry of today, much to the chagrin of contemporary adult poets. Everyone knows Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, and Jack Prelutsky, poets who "echo and extend the innovative, playful uses of rhyme, meter, and illustration introduced by *St. Nicholas*." Furthermore, "their tremendous popularity takes for granted (and perpetuates) a 'natural' connection between children and poetry" (189), especially narrative poetry or poetry using rhyme and meter. In the early twentieth century, when Ezra Pound urged poets "To break the pentameter" (532), he was really breaking away from the infantilization of meter and, Sorby might add, the infantilization of popular poetry in general. *Schoolroom Poets,* then, not only teaches us a new way to read nineteenth-century American poetry. It also instructs us how to read the contemporary poetry scene, asking questions not only relevant to the historically minded scholar but also to those invested in how poetry operates in the lives of both children and adults today.

Works Cited

Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos.* London: Faber, 1986.