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## Book Reviews



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

Reviewed by Glenna Sloan

For years I have taught a class called Literacy Through Poetry, Verse and Wordplay in a graduate education program. The course, among other topics, introduces poets classic and contemporary, critically and historically considers poetry along its entire spectrum from doggerel to distinguished, and addresses the viewpoint of certain critics that poetry written especially for children is not poetry at all. After reading *Poetry's Playground* with the avid interest and absorption readers usually reserve for their favorite escapist reading material, I am eager to add this title to the reading list for the course and to enrich the syllabus through the incorporation of new insights gleaned from this meticulously researched work.

"This book was originally conceived as a critical history of children's poetry written and published in the United States after the mid-1950s" (xiii). The author decided to limit the scope of the project, describing the gap in critical and historical scholarship on the subject as "too large to be filled by one book" (xviii). Forced to be selective, Thomas addresses with insight the key issues concerning this

poetry, including one that infects what critical study exists in the field of children's poetry: the academic attitude toward poetry addressed specifically to children. Typically, academics have disparaged this genre, suggesting that its presentation robs the young of a true poetic experience. "When it comes to poetry criticism, stark lines are drawn between the child world and its adult counterpart. This study seeks to dissolve those borders" (xviii). Dissolving borders based upon sternly held opinions is far from easy, but I believe that if it is at all possible to open minds through historically based, well-reasoned argument, *Poetry's Playground* has the means to accomplish this daunting task.

"Canonical issues frame this book," acknowledges the author (xv). He argues that there are two dominant modes of children's poetry: official school poetry as exemplified by the works of such icons as Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson and, at the other end of the spectrum, works of, say, Jack Prelutsky, John Ciardi, and Shel Silverstein, verse whose antecedents are traditional nursery fare and playground lore. The book consists of five chapters, each a finely honed essay containing cogent argument based on wide-ranging research.

Chapter 1, "Public Poetry and Politics: Robert Frost and the Emerging Canon of Mid-Century American

Children's Poetry," is a discussion in terms of the politics of inclusion and exclusion in anthologies. Thomas traces Robert Frost's emergence as the official "school poet" of his own time and his endurance in that role in anthologies for schools.

Chapter 2, "Levels and Opposites" in Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*, contains an insightful view of the poetics of Randall Jarrell, another "school poet" but one who also wrote poems intended specifically for children. (It is interesting to note that one of these, not submitted as a children's poem, was published in the *New Yorker*, traditionally the venue for what is considered the best of poetry or at least what is recognized as cutting edge in the genre.) The ambivalence and contradictions involved in discussions even among poets of the relative merits of poetry are exemplified in Jarrell's two-sided poetic. On the one hand, he revered the traditionalism of Frost while, on the other, he appreciated and practiced himself aspects of the nontraditional. The diligent research that informs these chapters provides fresh and intriguing ideas to enrich the old and continuing argument about what Poetry with a capital P is and is not.

Chapter 3, "Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground," contains substantive information to supplement the well-known work of the Opies. Here readers who have not made a personal study of children's poetry may meet for the first time scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., who discusses in his book, *The Signifying Monkey*, aspects of street poetry the Opies do not, such as rac-

ism and male pride. Aligning himself with such disparate authorities as the educator, Bill Martin, and the literary theorist Northrop Frye, Thomas comments: "Often as children grow older they neither maintain a taste for playground poetry nor develop a taste for official school poetry. Because teachers and other adults fail to tap into the playful spirit of playground poetry, there is no mechanism for bridging the distance between what appears to be outdoor freedom of expression and indoor repression" (59).

Chapter 4, "Street Cries: Mother Goose, Urchin Poetry, and Contemporary U.S Children's Poetry," details the slow progress toward grudging acceptance of the poetry from literarily unacceptable ancestors like street cries and Mother Goose. John Rowe Townsend dubbed the iconoclastic or rowdy verse such as that of Jack Prelutsky, Roald Dahl, Shel Silverstein, and the like "urchin verse." Thomas argues that it deserves its rightful place in poetry's family tree. Such poets are "situated in a tradition that stretches back to Ciardi's and Roethke's mid-century dissatisfaction with mainstream children's poetry" (83). He insists that playground poetry and the children's poetry that springs from it be discussed. But from my reading of him, I believe the author would agree that it should never be "taught" in the classroom, only respected and experienced. "Teaching" too often involves scrutiny, analysis, or translation to prose and therefore seems bound to kill young children's interest and delight.

The last chapter of *Poetry's Playground* is a defense of visual poetry for

children. It includes a highly informative history of the form in its various manifestations. Visual poetry, in common with children's poetry as a whole, has had its detractors throughout its long history. But my students, all elementary and middle school teachers, report how young students delight in this form. It is often successfully used as a model for original creations by young students. Thomas sums up a scholarly defense persuasively: "Highlighting the problematics of representation, naming, and signification, these playful poems help to encourage children (and adults) to become resisting readers, oppositional readers, skeptical readers, productive readers" (103).

A coda, "Toward a Canon of U.S. Children's Poetry," concludes the book with a forceful argument for the inclusion of "counter-canon" poetries" in anthologies for children so that they may experience the "diversity of expression poetry offers; and to affirm the poetry they already know."

The book includes generous notes to further elucidate certain points in the text. Useful appendices are titled "Most Commonly Anthologized Poets," "Most Commonly Anthologized Poets Grouped by Nationality," "Most Commonly Anthologized U.S. Poets and the Poems Representing Them: A Descriptive Canon," and "Award-Winning Books of Contemporary U.S. Poetry."

In the coda the author explains his purpose for writing this book. "My aims are threefold: to suggest the complexities of contemporary poetry for children written in the United States, to situate the competing tradi-

tions of U.S. children's poetry in their larger social and poetic contexts, and to propose several avenues for continued research" (106). All aims are amply met. In fewer than two hundred pages, Joseph Thomas has created a comprehensive scholarly treatise that establishes the climate as well as the standard for further research into any aspect of children's poetry in the United States.

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*Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature.* By Jerry Griswold. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.

Reviewed by Roberta Seelinger Trites

Jerry Griswold's *Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature* is a visually sumptuous book, stunningly appointed and lovely to behold, one that is well-designed for its intended reading audience: the general public. The unannounced goal of the book is to provide a thematic explanation of children's literature to nonspecialists, and the visual appeal of this volume will play no small role with the success the book will undoubtedly have with that audience.

Griswold approaches the topic at hand by identifying five "themes" in children's literature, each of which is treated in its own chapter: snug-