

Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds: *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2004

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1 Having put my hand up to review this book at a time when I was beginning work on a paper focusing on representations of diversity in storybooks for children of queer parents (Riggs and Augoustinos)¹, it was unfortunate that I did not actually find the time to read the book until some months later. When I did eventually manage to read the book I was delighted to find many of the themes and concerns that arose from my own work directly reflected in the contents of *Curiouser*. All of the chapters work neatly together to provide a well-written critique of the functions served by a range of constructions of childhood within Western nations, both historically and in the present.

2 The chapters explore in various ways how the queerness of childhood and the experiences of queer childhoods are variously disavowed within contemporary cultures. In their introductory chapter, Bruhm and Hurley elaborate what they see as an excusatory stance on children in queer families. They suggest that in storybooks for children living in queer families

we find sanitized middle-class worlds where the children are evacuated of any desires but those of creature comforts [. . .]. [Whilst] these children do express some anxiety about their queer domestic configurations [. . .] these anxieties are quelled by the assurance that they are just like everyone else, that love makes a home, and that Uncle What-Is-It is not a drag queen but a Princeton letterman... Granted, the authors of these books are writing in a climate where panic about (at best) recruitment and (at worst) pedophilia in gay and lesbian culture is rampant. But their bland children throw into high relief the truism that sexuality is otherwise omnipresent in children's culture. These books write the child's desire out of existence, eradicating the sexual child in the process (xii-xiii).

3 In a related chapter, and one that goes under the insightful title of *How to Bring Your Kids up Gay* (I for one have often wondered why it is that straight parents are allowed to state that whilst they would still love their children if they were gay, "it would be a hard life," but as queer parents we cannot wish for our children to be queer, as for them to be otherwise may mean "a hard life for us"), Sedgwick suggests that texts on "homosexual development," "and the associated therapeutic strategies and institutions, are not about invasive violence. What they are about is a train of squalid lies. The overarching lie is the lie that they are predicated on anything but the therapists' disavowed desire for a nongay outcome" (144). The desire to

¹ Riggs, Damien W. and Martha Augoustinos. "Learning Difference: Representations of Diversity in Storybooks for Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 3 (2007).

either present a sanitized depiction of queer childhoods (as Bruhm and Hurley suggest), or to attempt an erasure of queer identities (as Sedgwick suggests), may be read as symptoms of an ongoing cultural move to deny the legitimacy of queer identities and family formations, and to do so precisely by either normalizing or refuting the existence of queer cultures.

4 One of the ways in which queer cultures are routinely dismissed or demonized is through their juxtaposition with categories of "innocence." Mohr suggests that the reification of "innocence" serves to ward off all that is considered bad or threatening in the world. This is achieved through the construction of "childhood" as all that is innocent, yet he suggests this represents a paradox, in that the desire on the part of adults for this category to remain innocent serves only to pervert it and thus make it a troublesome object of desire. Ohi similarly takes up discourses of innocence in his chapter via an examination of Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*. Ohi suggests that fears over "childhood innocence" reflect less about children's needs, and more about adults' fears about their own relationship to themselves and their desires. Ohi also importantly focuses on how children are made to stand as "principles of exchange" when they are used to legitimate the relationship between two adults, or more precisely, when they are expected to legitimate heterosexual relationships through the construction of the two parent-child(ren) triad.

5 Savoy similarly focuses on the work of Henry James, this time through an examination of *Turn of the Screw*. Savoy provides a wonderful narrative that itself progressively turns its analytic screw ever tighter in order to turn the reader back upon themselves by recognizing the impossibility of adequately making a "move from seeing to knowing to articulating" (253). As Savoy suggests, what we believe we see is often precisely what we refuse to see: the operations of repression allow us to see only that which affirms what we choose to believe about ourselves. The specters that haunt the characters in the text are shown, in Savoy's analysis, as more precisely haunted by their own desires that are founded upon intersections of queerness, difference and deviance.

6 These intersections are further explored by Kelleher, in his examination of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. As Kelleher suggests, psychoanalysis shows us how "one is not born, but rather, *becomes* normal" (154-155). Kelleher examines how the categories of 'child', 'pervert' and 'normal' are brought into metonymy through the reliance of the latter upon the former two, or more precisely, that any claims to 'normality' are thoroughly wrought through the construction of childhood 'deviance' and its supposed correction through the internalization of social norms. Kelleher shows us how categories of deviancy and innocence are mutually constituted through a nexus of relationships that are designed to shore

up the normative status of heterosexuality. Yet, as Berlant suggests in her chapter, the ongoing visibility of queer narratives of childhood evidence "the shadow of the fetish called normalcy" (58).

7 The normalizing function of heterosexual hegemony is again highlighted in the chapter by Stockton, in her examination of Western "culture's contradictions over childhood sexual orientation: the tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them asexual" (283). This assumption of heterosexuality is evidenced in the ways in which coming out narratives are implicitly constructed as death narratives - as she suggests, "the phrase 'gay child' is a gravestone marker for where and when a straight person died" (238). Such statements only make sense in a context where heterosexuality is deemed the normative developmental outcomes for all children.

8 Finally, binaries of good and evil, perversion/queerness and innocence/childhood, are examined in the chapter by Hanson, where he takes up the theme of the haunting specter in his analysis of *The Exorcist*. Hanson reminds us that children queer normative notions of safety and innocence by showing how fine the line is between good and evil - that any notion of a 'real good' is always undone by its relationship to its opposite. Hanson questions whether 'the voice of the devil', for example, actually portends the evil it is said to contain, or if it instead it is simply a counter-intuitive voice that challenges particular taken-for-granted norms.

9 Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this edited collection. Bruhm and Hurley have done an excellent job bringing together such an exciting and stimulating collection of work on topics of queer childhoods, the queerness of children, and critiques of depictions of queerness in contemporary cultures. All of the chapters usefully extend contemporary thought on how we understand children and their cultures, and challenge us to reconceptualise the lines we draw and the crossings they attempt to foreclose. Discourses of childhood will always far exceed the actions and desires of children themselves, and recognizing this will contribute to a more complex understanding of the curious relations between normative and queer understandings of the worlds we inhabit.