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Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America

Professor Beverly Lyon Clark

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The popularity of the Harry Potter books among adults and the critical acclaim these young adult fantasies have received may seem like a novel literary phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, however, readers considered both Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn as works of literature equally for children and adults; only later was the former relegated to the category of "boys' books" while the latter, even as it was canonized, came frequently to be regarded as unsuitable for young readers. Adults -- women and men -- wept over Little Women. And America's most prestigious literary journals regularly reviewed books written for both children and their parents. This egalitarian approach to children's literature changed with the emergence of literary studies as a scholarly discipline at the turn of the twentieth century. Academics considered children's books an inferior literature and beneath serious consideration.

In Kiddie Lit, Beverly Lyon Clark explores the marginalization of children's literature in America -- and its recent possible reintegration -- both within the academy and by the mainstream critical establishment. Tracing the reception of works by Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott, Lewis Carroll, Frances Hodgson Burnett, L. Frank Baum, Walt Disney, and J. K. Rowling, Clark reveals fundamental shifts in the assessment of the literary worth of books beloved by both children and adults, whether written for boys or girls. While uncovering the institutional underpinnings of this transition, Clark also attributes it to changing American attitudes toward childhood itself, a cultural resistance to the intrinsic value of childhood expressed through sentimentality, condescension, and moralizing.

Clark's engaging and enlightening study of the critical disregard for children's books since the end of the nineteenth century -- which draws on recent scholarship in gender, cultural, and literary studies -- offers provocative new insights into the history of both children's literature and American literature in general, and forcefully argues that the books our children read and love demand greater respect.

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