Adult

Catherine Williams
Kansas State University

Abstract

This article explores the topic of adulthood within children's literature. Because adults author, illustrate, and produce children's literature, adults construct what childhood looks like, as well as the degree of diverse representation within children's texts. The varied, and sometimes conflicting, depictions of child characters reveal the difficulties in defining the boundaries between adults and children, particularly whether their relationship is one of difference, similarity, or degree. Children's literature also interrogates the privileged moral position of adulthood, calling into question whether or not simply being an adult makes someone a reliable role model. The evolving depiction of adults underscores the difficulties of defining adulthood's role in children's texts. Lastly, the article examines the phrase "coming of age" and its relationship to the adult/child binary. By rendering "coming of age" as a complex process, the relationship between childhood and adulthood can be viewed as a spectrum, rather than one of difference. Ultimately, examining adulthood reminds scholars to cultivate an awareness of their assumptions as they negotiate, untangle, and examine their own positions as adults within a genre for children.

Keywords: adult; children's literature; childhood; coming of age; adulting

Author Bio: Catherine Williams is a Master's student in the English department at Kansas State University. She studies children's literature and cultural studies. Her research interests focus on motherhood, trauma, resilience, and childhood studies.

Email: willicat@ksu.edu

The term "adult" derives from the Latin "adultus", a noun used to signify something that is "full-grown, mature, firmly established," or a "fully-grown person" (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED], 2011). In its earliest cited usage (1531), the OED locates "adult" beyond the domain of childhood: "Soche persons, beinge nowe adulte, that is to saye, passed theyr childehode" (OED). If adulthood requires us to pass through childhood, then "adult" defines childhood as a distinctly separate state rather than a transitional phase of life. Though the binary of adult and child certainly still exists, the boundaries between adult and child are becoming increasingly blurred.

In contemporary usage, "adult" has become a slang verb, as in "adulting" which means to "behave like an adult," and to demonstrate "grown-up" skills such as "having a job and living independently [and] also such mundanities as taking clothes to the dry cleaners" ("Adult as a Verb"). *Merriam-Webster* reports that the usage of adult as a verb has seen "a six-fold increase" in the first five months of 2016, with over 642,000 mentions of "adulting" within the Lexis-Nexis publication database alone ("Adult as a Verb"). The emergence of "adulting" by English-speaking Millennials indicates a blurring of the lines between adult and child in the twenty-first century. As Marah Gubar (2013) declares, "there is no one moment when we suddenly flip over from being a child to being an adult" (p. 454). This suggests that young people gradually make the transition towards adulthood by acquiring skills that demonstrate maturity and independence instead of leaping between the binary of child and adult.

Adults occupy both a pervasive and perilous position within children's literature—particularly in terms of its production and distribution. As Beverly Lyon Clark (2011) notes, "children's literature always has at least a double address: the children who are the ostensible audience and the adults whose decisions make it available" (p. 15). Adults author, illustrate, and control the publication of children's texts. Adults also curate the degree of diversity and representation in children's books, and control which texts receive prestigious accolades such as the Caldecott and Newbery honour awards. Because adults, rather than children, produce most children's literature, scholars such as Jacqueline Rose (1984) have asked whether or not children's literature can be said to actually exist. She argues that children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written but in that it hangs on the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first, (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between.

Notions of authority and agency collide with the role of adults in children's literature—in the very production of these texts, adults create an authoritative role that defines the interests of their audience. As Perry Nodelman (2008) suggests, "children's literature is not so much what children read as what [adult] producers hope children will read. . . It is the judgement of the producers that engender the texts, not the actual characteristics of the audiences" (p. 4-5). By defining the interests of children based on the producer's "hope," adults potentially occlude the interests and experiences of actual children.

The relationship between adults and children's literature becomes even more fraught when one considers that it is the adult, and not the child, who constructs what childhood looks like within texts. As Nodelman (2008) argues, "the childlike can be constructed and understood only in relation to that which it is not—the nonchildlike or, more directly, the adult" (p. 206). In contrast, Lucy Boston (1974) declares that it is the ability to eliminate the division between the child that was and the adult writer that grants authorial legitimacy in writing texts for children, aligning herself with a model of similarity with children and not difference (p. 164). A similarity between these differing views is that adults are unreliable in depicting the lives of children—they are either defined in contrast to adults or constructed from an adult's memory.

Scholars disagree whether the distinction between adult and child is best understood as a matter of development, difference, or similarity. These different views are revealed through depictions of child and adult relationships within the genre. Gubar (2013) composes three models outlining the relationship between adults and children: the deficit model, in which “young people are viewed as lacking the abilities, skills, and powers that adults have;” the difference model, which stresses “the radical alterity or otherness of children, representing them as a separate species, categorically different than adults;” and the kinship model, which positions adult and child as “akin to one another…the concept of kinship indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity.” The kinship model “holds that children and adults are separated by differences of degree, not kind…” (p. 451-454). Each of these models implicitly directs the author’s creative intent, and thereby shapes the way adult and child are each defined within a text. For instance, Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) embodies the model of difference, wherein Max literally becomes Other, more monstrous than human when he joins the Wild Things. In contrast, Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* (1989) treats adolescence and adulthood as differences of degree—the high school-aged protagonists become sexually active, have children, and even become homeowners, despite the ambiguous passage of time.

The varied depiction of adults, from noble guardians to terrible villains, further underscores the difficulty in defining adulthood’s role in children’s literature. On one hand, adult characters are models of the social and cultural values of a historical period. When depicted this way, adults are a guiding, responsible force of reason and a direct foil to the imagination and energy of children. L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908/2013) exemplifies the traditional distinctions between adult and child, wherein the stern Marilla Cuthbert acts as a foil to the relentless energy of Anne Shirley. The portrayal of adults in Montgomery’s novel guides Anne towards socially normative behaviours and acts as a prescriptive force that shapes Anne’s path to adulthood. Despite the assumed superiority of adulthood, Montgomery’s text implicitly acknowledges how children, such as the loquacious Anne Shirley, can profoundly impact adults as well.

However, children’s literature also interrogates the privileged moral position of adulthood, calling into question whether or not simply being an adult makes someone a reliable role model. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865/2000), adults bestowed with authoritative titles—such as Queen, Duchess, or King—neglect to provide the child protagonist Alice—or the child reader—with any guidance or moral lessons. Indeed, Carroll’s nonsensical text destabilizes notions of authority based on age or title, a trend that children’s literature continues to interrogate. Lemony Snicket’s immensely popular *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) actively subverts adult authority, as the adult guardians are either profoundly evil or immensely gullible, leaving the Baudelaire orphans to work out their own solutions to their unfortunate events (Bullen, 2011; Sadenwasser, 2014).

The ambiguous requirements for “coming of age” illuminate the difficulties in defining adulthood within the genre of children’s literature. In a purely legal sense, adolescents come “of age” in North America at eighteen years of age, when they may legally vote in elections, buy cigarettes, and enlist in the military. However, even that distinction is not absolute, since many of these technical “adults” typically still rely on their parents to some degree for financial and emotional support. As Lydia Kokkola (2013) argues, the emphasis on adolescence as a middle state serves “larger cultural aspirations of preserving the notions of childhood innocence and adult maturity” rather than developing what it means to become an adult (p. 6). Young Adult (YA) authors increasingly resist these cultural pressures by rendering coming-of-age as a complex process of growth and challenges.

The question of what it means to grow up becomes a crucial tension within children's literature--particularly in YA texts. Authors such as Chris Crutcher, Sherman Alexie, Neil Gaiman, and J.K. Rowling treat coming of age as a matter of exposure to "adult issues." Often YA books are defined by their issues, as in: abuse (*Staying fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993)), poverty and racism (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009)), and the death of one's parents (*The Graveyard Book* (2008), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997)). Many contemporary YA texts negate adulthood as a distinct chronological phrase, choosing to measure maturity by the character's ability to achieve agency and resilience. Instead of censoring issues of adulthood, one "comes of age" by responding to the grim realities of the "adult world" and in turn, invites readers to examine ways they too can find their way.

The influence of adults on children's literature inevitably collides with nearly every aspect of the genre. In unpacking the definition of adult, the tenuous distinction between adult and child is illuminated. By challenging the binary between adulthood and childhood, scholars are better poised to critically examine the implicit cultural attitudes of adults that are reproduced within children's literature. In doing so, scholars can address how even beloved children's texts may reproduce problematic ideologies associated with race, gender, or socioeconomic class. Most importantly, it locates the increasing self-awareness of scholars who must negotiate, untangle, and examine their own positions as adults within a genre for children.

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