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Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis, eds. Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics. Austin: U of Texas P, 2017.

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Abstract

Review of Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis, eds. *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2017.

Keywords

Children, childhood studies, gender, race, labor laws, comics

Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis, eds. *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2017. 280 pp.

The narrative representation of childhood in comic books may now be thought of as a trope that intersects with larger social, political, and cultural conversations in literature and thus calls for a reexamination in literary comic studies (xii). Today, comics (like fairytales) connote a child audience and therefore immature material. However, as comics evolved with contemporary productions of storytelling, adults participated in the consumption of comics. Due to this audience-consumer relationship, which contains an array of ages, *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics* addresses the primary influence of children characters and representations of childhood that comics utilize to challenge the dominant culture. As Frederick Aldama writes in his forward, “They [comics] speak to the common experience: that childhood for creators around the world is the alpha and omega in the creating of a world republic of comics” (3).

Like many scholars’ work in childhood studies, *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics* turns to the often overlooked position of the child and uncovers how, within a socially constructed childhood, comics themselves become a vast educational tool. *Picturing Childhood* notably questions adults as authors who write these texts and examines how the imagined child space works in the comic world to outline, challenge, and transmit cultural norms. And, while comic books have been around for generations, research on children characters and childhood as a narrative device within these texts remains sparse. This collection speaks to our understanding of, “childhood as both an abstract concept and a lived experience” (3). Each chapter identifies elements within the normative construction of childhood, such as how children are defined as a group of innocent “beings,” a position separate from the adult “being” (Saguisag 131), that in turn demonstrates the narrative usefulness of childhood when discussing topics like racism, consumerism, and wartime propaganda in a productive way through the comic form.

This collection of essays ranges from comics like *Little Orphan Annie* (1930s), which evaluates a hegemonic gender discourse and contemporary girlhood, to comic strip retellings of Emmett Till’s tragic story as an attempt to change racial stereotyping. It also considers ways that the children in *Little Audrey* (1950s) bridge a divide between gendered oppression and minority struggles. In their chapter, “In the Minority: Constructions of American Dream Childhood,” Christopher J. and Janardana Hayton state that *Little Audrey*’s representations of childhood disrupts, “a so-called stereotype threat, which can adversely affect performance by minority consumers as they anticipate their own actions being negatively stereotyped by others” (53). Like the other authors of the

collection, the Haytons find an intrinsic and affective quality emerging from the comic representation of the childhood trope. These comics demonstrate how constructing childhood impacts a broader audience and examines how the child's voice works didactically for both children and adults. In other words, *Picturing Childhood* approaches childhood's influence on the adult world. As Ralf Kauranen's chapter "Representations of Childhood in Home Front Propaganda Comics during World War II in Finland" states, "...comics reasserts a social norm by pointing out the mechanism through which social control is exerted" (40). Therefore, by depicting a socially-constructed-youthful-innocence (childhood) in comics, these authors recognize the comic space as questioning and challenging from the position of inexperience and naivety.

Each chapter contains a unique archive that depicts how various comics shed light on historical moments, political beliefs, and even consumer culture for childhood itself. Some comic titles studied in this collection include *Mafalada*—featuring a young girl from Buenos Aires, Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s (Tullis 92), *Ayoko*—about an illegitimate young girl growing up during the 1970s in post-war Japan (Nobis 150), and *Persepolis*—a nonfiction story about a girl living through the Iranian Revolution that began in 1979 (Marks 163-64). Yet beyond these examples, the authors of this collection contribute to the overall evaluation of how child characters in this narrative form navigate politically and socially charged topics, simultaneously introducing a path for alternative views that challenge the dominant discourse of class, race, and gender during the publication time of the particular comic. *Picturing Childhood* even goes so far as to explore how the construction of childhood also extends outside of the comic, emerging as a marginalized position to the hegemonic order in the Western world. For example, as Pamela Robertson Wojcik explains in her chapter, "Little Orphan Annie as Streetwalker," President Roosevelt's Fair Labor Standards Act (1930s) disallowed children to work and earn money. She finds that while trying to protect the young body, this new legislation ultimately turned childhood into a state that is, "economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless'" within society (14). It created an emotional bond to the child person and portrayed character—a subject that questions outside of any prescribed social conditions. Therefore, it is through the emotional connection to children that the adult public may be able to accept heavily charged topics with an open mind—which is what the essays in *Picturing Childhood* aim to do through their exploration of childhood in comics.

Picturing Childhood brilliantly articulates the pros and cons of children characters in comics. On the one hand, child representations work through the "becoming" position, a familiar space of being a kid and the experience of growing up. It is through this commonality that authors explore socially and politically charged topics, rethinking what dominant ideas exist. However, these young characters also become marginalized, as they become useful narrative

tools—representing a position that is secondary to the adult. This book ultimately demonstrates how child representation in visual narrative effectively works in establishing comics as educational tools for children and adults. By blending childhood studies and cultural studies within transnational comics, *Picturing Childhood* relocates the child figure as impacting adults while simultaneously commenting on public perceptions of the childhood state. Ultimately, *Picturing Childhood* is a much needed and long-awaited interdisciplinary project that looks at representations of children throughout the history of comics.

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