

Teresa Michals. *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1107048546. Price: US\$95.00/£60.00.

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In some circles, 2014 will surely be remembered as the year of the Great YA Debate. In *Slate*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker* (just to mention a few sites of this dispute), cultural critics and pundits, including James Wood and A.O. Scott, bemoaned the current popularity of children's and young adult (YA) literature among adult readers. Ruth Graham declared that "adults should feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children," while Christopher Beha suggested it is "self-defeating and a little sad to forego such pleasures [as are to be found in the novels of Henry James] in favor of reading a book that might just as easily be enjoyed by a child," by which he means Harry Potter (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/books/review/the-great-ya-debate-of-2014.html?_r=0; <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/henry-james-great-ya-debate>). But what these writers (and all of us that followed the debate on the blogosphere) should really feel embarrassed or sad about is that we weren't reading Teresa Michals's new book. For *Books for Children, Books for Adults* reveals that what *The New York Times* called "The Great Y.A. Debate of 2014" has a very long, surprising, and absorbing, history, a history that begins not with Ruth Graham's inflammatory *Slate* essay but much earlier—with Daniel Defoe and the various adaptations of his 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/books/review/the-great-ya-debate-of-2014.html?_r=0).

Indeed, Michals suggests the important historical context her book brings to this debate when she writes, at the end of her introduction, that “the purpose of *Books for Children, Books for Adults* is ... to uncover the history that must be forgotten for a popular columnist such as [Joel] Stein to write ‘I’ll read *The Hunger Games* when I finish the previous 3,000 years of fiction written for adults’” (18).

The promise of that contextualizing history is compelling in and of itself. But there is more. *Books for Children, Books for Adults* also makes an original and impressive contribution to the nascent field of age studies, exploring the way in which the meaning and the importance of the notions of adulthood and childhood intersect with and impact the audiences for whom novels were intended by writers and publishers, the novels thus written for and marketed to those audiences, and the critics and readers that responded to the novel from Defoe to James. Reminding us that age, like race, class, gender, and orientation, is a construct, and that “our own routine preoccupation with demarcating age by number” represents a drastic and fairly recent way of understanding the stages of life, Michals reveals that the binary view of novels for children versus novels for adults makes no historical sense and argues instead that we situate “literary history within the social history of age” (6, 3). Specifically, she argues that the eighteenth-century novel was written for an audience of women, children, and servants, and that the binary operating in this case would be not child versus adult but child versus master. The important distinction has to do not with numerical age but with social status. It was not, she argues, until the emergence of the psychological idea of adulthood, in the twentieth century, that “adult” became “a term of aesthetic value” that could be set against that of child (12). Similarly, it was not until adulthood became “a subject of riveting interest” that, logically enough, novels could be written specifically and exclusively for that group of readers (16). In other words, and

as Michals asserts at the outset, this book “describes the relationship between the novel and modern ideas of adulthood” (1). We know the novel changed from Defoe to Henry James (to J.K. Rowling); what Michals wants us to understand equally well is that “adulthood” is no more an historical constant with a definite and stable meaning than is “the novel” and that the history of one is imbricated with that of the other.

Books for Children, Books for Adults is important, then, in terms of the history of the novel and the history of age as a social category. It’s not just crucial reading for scholars of children’s literature (though it is indeed that) but a book that, as the construction of its title implies, argues that first there were books for children, then books for adults, and thus a study that significantly revises our understanding of (the history of) the novel and its readers. In her chapter on *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, Michals shows how the novel, originally written for the “mixed-age” demographic I describe above, became, in its reception and in its adaptations, and “as an idea of adulthood gained new importance,” “a staple of children’s literature” (19). Conversely, in her chapter on *Pamela* (1740), she traces the novel’s transformation from one that proclaims on its title page to have been “Published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes” to “adults-only reading” (62). Michals does similarly recuperative work on the reception history of the nineteenth-century novel, arguing that in the novels of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, and Walter Scott (a triumvirate she admits “may seem odd” but one that is, as she shows, extremely revealing in terms of the history of the novel’s developing conception of age) “characters reach maturity as this stage is understood by the eighteenth-century conjectural historians, becoming, not psychologically complex adults, but polite and commercial people” and that Dickens’s novels, written “for families, rather than adults,” seek to bring together readers “in term of middle-class ideals of

gender and domesticity rather than dividing them up according to age” (100, 15, 16). Finally, “modernism’s break with the model of family reading” and what Michals so aptly calls “the cult of adulthood” are the focus of her concerns in the final chapter, on Henry James and his “exclusively adult readers and subjects” (175, 176, 177).

This overview of *Books for Children, Books for Adults* gives, I hope, a tantalizing sense of the trajectory of Michals’s innovative argument, but it doesn’t begin to do justice to the scope of her study—in terms of the range of disciplines she brings to bear on her analysis (law, medicine, psychology, reception history, history of the book, the history of education, the history of sexuality, and economics) or in terms of the genres and periods she surveys (which range from Puritan devotional works to Gustave Flaubert’s 1856 *Madame Bovary*). It also doesn’t begin to capture how seamlessly she weaves into her argument about the emergence of a literature written specifically for the new category of the adult (which is, let me be clear, her focus) a precise account of the development of a body of literature specifically for children. Michals carefully charts the movement from a mixed-age audience initially associated with the child somewhat metaphorically (the servants, women, and children that make up that demographic are all children in that they are all disenfranchised, so to speak) to “the rise of a distinct market for children’s literature in the middle of the eighteenth century” (2). The seeds of that market were in fact planted in the mixed-age market’s privileging of “the young person” as “the most important member of that [mixed-age] audience,” but Michals insists that this new specific market should be distinguished from the mixed-age audience, not from the adult audience, which had yet to emerge as a category (2). This aspect of *Books for Children, Books for Adults* is especially impressive in the way it expands our understanding of the history of children’s literature. Drawing our attention to Protestant devotional writing (which, “unlike novels ... was

committed to differentiating readers by age” and is “where we should look to find many of our familiar assumptions about numerical age and reading” in place “before the middle of the eighteenth century”); “the Godwin family project of producing politically progressive children’s literature” at the end of the eighteenth century; and Jan Fergus’s 2006 study of the book-buying practices of public schoolboys in the eighteenth-century, not to mention the plethora of adaptations, chapbooks, and abridgements designed for children in the eighteenth century, Michals rounds out the familiar story of John Newbery and situates it within the history of the novel’s development more generally (20, 43). She makes it clear how much is lost when that history is separated from the history of literature for children, too, delineating their imbrications and drawing attention to the long history of cross-reading (which is precisely the kind of reading that ignited the “The Great YA Debate of 2014”).

Books for Children, Books for Adults is also beautifully written. It is as much a pleasure to read at the sentence level as it is an eye-opening and challenging corrective to received notions about the relationship between “books for children and books for adults.” Carefully researched and cogently argued, this is a book to savor. It is not a book I simply read to review but rather one that absorbed me, a book I found myself wanting to take my time over and enjoy and let percolate and also one that kept sending me off to find out more about Helen Shipton (whose 1896 essay on “‘Jane Eyre’ and the Older Novel” in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Monthly Packet* asserts the importance of Samuel Richardson’s 1740 *Pamela* in Charlotte Bronte’s childhood reading); to read Richardson’s 1740 version of Aesop’s Fables; to look more carefully at Barbauld’s *Lessons for Children* series (1778-1779), in which, Michals finds, Barbauld “created the look that still makes high-end children’s books recognizable at a glance today,” with their “fine paper, wide margins, large clear print, and a minimum of words per page” (111). I’ve

already recommended the Crusoe chapter to students, and I'm looking forward to teaching the introduction at the beginning of my seminar on the history of children's literature (and to the revisions to the syllabus for that class this important book inspires and compels me to make). I look forward, too, to the impact this book will make on novel studies and in the field of children's literature. I predict it will be profound.

Biographical Notice:

Kelly Hager is Associate Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Simmons College, where she teaches Victorian literature, children's literature, and the history of feminist thought. She is the author of *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Ashgate, 2010) and co-editor, with Talia Schaffer, of a special issue of *Victorian Review* entitled "Extending Families" (Fall 2013). Her current project, "Novel Constructions," brings together the fields of Victorian literature and children's literature with the history of reading practices in a study of children's literature's power to shape its readers as intellectuals, healthy bodies, and (albeit in a normative fashion) sexually well-adjusted subjects.