



Intimations of Mortality: Death in Children's Fantasy

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URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/10063/7039>

Date: 2018

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Abstract:

"Children's books have always been filled with death," Patrick Ness writes in his review of Neil Gaiman's *Graveyard Book*. "You can't have an orphan without at least two dead people, after all." Literary childhood, from its origins, is not only associated with, but commonly defined by the experience of loss. This thesis argues that children's literature is fixated on endings; that it is marked by the insistent, and persistent, presence of mortality. Further, it argues that mortality is not just a prevalent theme, but a fundamental organising principle both thematically and structurally, working to define the genre and shape its form and substance.

The mortal notes in children's literature are an inevitable effect of the peculiar conditions of its production. Children do not, for the most part, write their own literature: it is written by adults who necessarily write from a point in time irrevocably apart from it. Critic Jacqueline Rose has famously articulated the "acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee" on which children's literature rests. The overwhelming presence of mortality in the genre is a direct effect of the rupture at its heart: in being aware of the acknowledged difference between writer and addressee, and filtered through adult memory and imagination, literary childhood cannot help but be framed as eulogy and elegy, constructed as the beginning and an ending.

This reading, then, addresses the gap between adult and child that has occupied children's literature criticism for almost thirty years, but it moves beyond questions of power and control to focus on its creative effects. It explores mortality and the construction of literary childhood in relation to adulthood in a range of fantasy subgenres. It begins with the classics of the Victorian Golden Age, exploring the writing of childhood at the origins of modern children's fantasy. The chapters on animal stories, toy stories and ghost stories all show how the figuring of childhood through close association and identification, each foregrounding particular aspects with which literary childhood is invested. In animal characters, primacy is given to an intense and large contextless vitality, to an orientation in a paradoxically eternal and eternally fleeting present moment. Through memory boxes, highlighting the importance of the child (and children's literature) as a lieu de mémoire.

characters emphasise the ways in which childhood is figured as past and as haunting, memorialised even in its presence. In time-slips and alternate world fantasy, the dissonant once-and-future oriented, mortal qualities of literary childhood manifest themselves in the manipulation of the time and space of setting.

But as dependent as the impulse to elegy is on difference, it also depends for its entire effect on the ineluctable continuity between adult and child. Put another way, we were once them. They will be us. That the "implication" relation between adult and child is so neatly encapsulated by the memento mori – "that which you are, that which we are, you shall be" – speaks to how and why mortality casts so deep a shadow in the literary imagination.

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