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Forum: Trauma and Children's Literature

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Forum: Trauma and Children's Literature

Katharine Capshaw Smith (bio)

This is not a story to pass on

—Toni Morrison

At the end of a novel describing the devastating psychological effects of enslavement and infanticide, the narrator in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) uncovers the contradictions at the heart of narratives about trauma. Enshrouded by repression and silence, trauma often becomes unspeakable (to use another of Morrison's terms) and narrative art inadequate in the face of human suffering. There are stories that cannot be passed on. But like those literary theorists who explore the paradox at the heart of writing about the Holocaust, Morrison and others recognize that unspeakable stories must be spoken. These are not stories to *pass* on, to pass up, because ignorance about historical trauma is an enormous risk. As Santayana famously asserted, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." And, finally, despite the effacements of time and repression, these are stories that will not die, that will not "pass on" into oblivion, because their effects reverberate not only in the psyches of those who experienced them, but also in the social and cultural composition of daily experience. "The past is never dead. It's not even past," William Faulkner wrote, and while many children's novelists struggle to place trauma securely in a historical space, most also hear the echoes of historical trauma in contemporary life.

This forum began as a session at the 2003 Modern Language Association conference, where several of our writers began to consider the special position of childhood in relation to trauma writing. The essays you read here confront not only issues of representation, but speak provocatively about the current limitations of trauma studies and critical theory. Exploring how adults writing for children treat trauma, the essays also reflect on how critics have approached the analysis of trauma texts. In this way, these essays challenge us to remap the territory of trauma studies. They acknowledge that discussions of trauma have largely focused on the Holocaust and have taken a psychological approach; three of them maintain that trend even as they **[End Page 115]** interrogate it, with the important work of Hamida Bosmajian and Adrienne Kertzer on children's literature and the Holocaust serving as a backdrop. But the articles also push us to consider expanding our conception of trauma to include under-represented histories and

repressed sites of violence and suffering. The essays indicate that other modes of criticism—such as sociohistorical analysis, critical social theory, and gender studies—may be productive contributions to a field that has hitherto been defined by psychoanalytic study. And, importantly, the writers also acknowledge the failures of some trauma texts and trauma theory, false steps that effect a kind of injurious fallout on the child reader. Overall, the essays apprehend that trauma as a concept has become more and more contested as it has migrated from psychology into other critical realms, as well as into mainstream conversation.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would like to offer some tentative observations about the way adults imagine children and trauma. Since adults often are deeply invested in a desire for childhood innocence, constructions of children's responses to trauma (whether in books or in popular culture) generally adhere to two poles: Because children are imagined as innocent, they are figured almost iconographically as the ultimate victims of trauma, those who require above all else adult protection and guidance (adult protection, interestingly, has often in some way been absent or compromised prior to the traumatic event). Kenneth Kidd's essay offers a rich overview of the "wounded child" trope, discussing its historical emergence and its intersection with psychoanalytic study. Alternately, because children are imagined as innocent, they are also figured as the survivors of trauma, those who can offer adults spiritual advice in how to triumph over pain through simple, honest, essential values like love, trust, hope, and perseverance. (Child healers, of course, are a Romantic construct and pervade children's literature.) This dualistic configuration recalls the work of Perry Nodelman and Jacqueline Rose, and creates another version of the child as "other" by proposing both child fragility and strength. Like many constructions of childhood...

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