Childness

By Monica Flegel

In “Victorian Childhood,” Sally Shuttleworth observes that “scholars in the humanities over the last thirty years have added first gender, and then race, as factors to be considered alongside class in all forms of historical textual analysis.” She then asks, “is it now time to add age, and more specifically childhood, to the triumvirate of class, gender and race?” (Shuttleworth 2004: 107). Kenneth B. Kidd, the author of Making American Boys, and the many authors who contributed to Bruhm and Hurley’s Curiouser would undoubtedly answer in the affirmative, having produced texts that clearly argue the importance of interrogating social constructions of the child and of childhood. Though in some ways the most democratic of institutions (because we’ve all, surely, been a child at some point), childhood is also recognized in these texts as inherently constructed, imagined, and put to use by all and sundry for a variety of political and personal ends. Rather than asking us to please, for the love of god, think about the children, these works ask us to think about what narratives of childhood might mean, and how we might begin to think, instead, about those narratives and the role they play in society. Maybe then, but only then, can we begin to think about the children.

In Making American Boys, Kidd takes on an astonishing array of texts, institutions, and discourses that shape the concept of the boy and boyhood in America. Kidd focuses on two distinct yet intersecting narratives: that of boyology – i.e. writing on boys, boyhood, and boy culture (Kidd borrows the term from Henry William Gibson’s 1916 book of the same name) – and the feral tale, represented by everything from Kipling’s The Jungle Book, to Freud’s Rat Man, to Teen Wolf. Kidd’s purpose is to map out the trajectories of both boyology and the feral tale, which are, he asserts, “theoretical as well as descriptive terms” (Kidd, 2004: 1), but it is also to radically historicize a concept – American boyhood – that is, his text suggests, too often essentialized, and then, too often for fairly conservative ends. Kidd persuasively demonstrates the ways in which appeals to the essential, universal “nature” of the boy – appeals that simultaneously propose the malleability of that same boy – often serve to prop up and propagate a subjectivity premised upon the boy’s (and inevitably, the man’s) own (implied) white, middle-class-ness, against that of the (implied deviant) racial, class, and sexual other.

Kidd’s analysis throughout displays impressive, almost encyclopedic scholarship, made more impressive by the scope of a study which ranges from the nineteenth century to the 1990s, and which takes on psychoanalysis, history, gender studies, theories of biology and evolution, literature, camping, children’s literature, jungle boys, and film (among other things). The very scope of the project would suggest a somewhat shallow analysis, but
such is not the case: Kidd balances the larger generalizations and copious detail found throughout with convincing, thoughtful, and in-depth analysis of exemplary texts. He chooses such texts wisely, opting for both canonical works such as Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and lesser-known works such as *Bomba the Jungle Boy* (1926), for which he has written one of the more amusing summaries I’ve ever encountered. What results is a complex narrative of the overlapping, sometimes divergent, but often intersecting discourses that shape ideologies of boyhood in America.

Kidd identifies “boyology” as a distinctly American phenomenon, and uses the term “to describe more broadly the American preoccupation with this boy and his authorized worker from the postbellum period through the late 1990s” (2). Boyology and boy work identified and identify the boy as a coherent subject, as a sort of specimen, whose ways, language and culture can be both studied and cultivated. Though the term emerged with American pseudo-scientific study of “the boy” in the early twentieth century, Kidd traces its indebtedness to nineteenth-century advice literature, including the amusingly if accurately entitled *Farming for Boys* (1868), and to nineteenth-century fiction – in particular, Bad Boy books, such as Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1869) and Wilbur Peck’s *Peck’s Bad Boy and His Pa* (1883). From “literary boy work,” Kidd moves on to “institutional boy work,” represented by organizations such as the YMCA and the child study movement. One of the strongest aspects of Kidd’s study is that while he relies upon demonstrating how shared narratives operate within and cross between different disciplines, he is also sensitive to generic difference. Thus, while discussing the ways in which both literary and institutional boy work rely upon shared constructions of boyhood as homogeneous, as transhistorical fact, and as opposed to the feminine, the domestic, and the savage other, Kidd also analyzes the ways in which Bad Boy books in particular work as narratives of “masculine development” that separate “those with literary potential [i.e. white, middle-class boys] from those without it,” specifically, the savage other with whom the Bad Boy is always compared (53). Premised as they are on “realist” responses against feminine, sentimental fiction, and representing as they do the “friendships and affiliations” (53) shared between Bad Boy authors themselves, these texts link “the subject of boyhood to the legitimate practice of authorship in the realist mode” (61). Such attention to the different “sayables” of discrete genres keeps Kidd’s text from flattening out the complexities of intertextuality and interdisciplinarity with too rigid a framework.

While boyology is a distinctly American phenomenon, the feral tale – “a literary but still folkloric narrative of animal-human or cross-cultural encounter” (3) – has international roots; Kidd, however, is concerned primarily with how the feral tale is reworked in order to serve explicitly American ideologies of boyhood. He convincingly argues that a shift occurred between the early- and the mid-nineteenth century in terms of the focus and meaning of the feral tale. Kidd begins with two of the most famous feral child cases: Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron, who was discovered in 1799 and was the subject of François Truffaut’s 1969 film, *The Wild Child*, and Kaspar Hauser, discovered in Nuremberg in 1828 and mysteriously killed in 1833. Both cases, Kidd suggests, operate as Enlightenment narratives about “the redeeming power of culture” (87). Though things ended badly for both boys, studies of them worked to confirm that what they lacked was, precisely,
civilization; as Kidd observes, “Victor’s ultimate failures helped [Dr. Jean-Marc-Gaspard] Itard prove that ‘moral superiority which has been said to be natural to man, is merely the result of civilization, which raises him above other animals by a great and powerful stimulus’” (88). By mid-century, however, tales of feral children centered upon India, and while Victor and Kaspar were used to demonstrate the central importance of Western culture, the Indian wild child was used to represent the necessity of Imperialist intervention and the lacks of Indian culture itself, “offering both a portrait of Indian rural life and an affirmation of British superiority” (89).

Kidd argues that the dual nature of the wild child – representing both the somewhat salvageable and the irredeemably lost – works its ways into early child-saving narratives in the United States, in which articles such as “Wolf-Reared Children” (1882), by Charles Loring Brace, construct direct analogies between wolf-children in India and the street children of New York. Kidd argues that unlike the wolf child of India, however, the exemplary saved boy of Brace’s article “is poor and badly trained but decidedly human and even vaguely Caucasian” (97). Feral child narratives, that is, provided a flexible form of representation that could account for both those children who could be reached by the benefits of Western civilization – those who were, presumably, open to education and to the benefits of hard work, thriftiness, and sobriety – and those children who remained, as it were, beyond the pale: such narratives acknowledge, Kidd observes, that for every saved boy, “there’s a lifelong pauper. Street rats will never evolve, and it’s okay to abuse them” (98).

Kidd argues that boyology and the feral tale converge through Freud, through Scouting, and through 1990s pop-psychology narratives of boys at risk. Freud’s Oedipal narrative and Kipling’s Jungle Book fantasy both demonstrate that “to achieve human estate, the feral boy is required to leave behind his animal mother and assume the paternal role” (10). Kidd suggests that the feral boy becomes domesticated through such narratives, to the extent that “by the early twentieth century, the feral boy had come to represent the ideal American male self” (105). Cub scouting, initially disliked for its feral imagery, became very popular by the mid1950s, a fact Kidd links to the popularization of Freud’s theories in the US: “It’s easy to see the Oedipal logic of the Scouting program. Den mothers cultivate in Cubs an appreciation of home, and scoutmasters take over when boys come of age and embark on more outward-bound adventures. The wolf-boy of folkloric derivation and psychoanalytic and social science inflection thus became a standard American conceit by mid-century” (152). If it was a standard conceit, it was also an extremely powerful one, as Kidd demonstrates in his final analysis of the “new boywork” of the 90s. Making reference to “the mythopoetic men’s movement of the 1980s and 1990s” (171), which called for men to return to the wilderness and to discover the wild man within as ways of reasserting masculinity in a culture of, presumably, castrating feminists, Kidd argues that boy-work books such as Bruce Brooks’s Boys Will Be (1993) and Michael Gurian’s The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors, and Educators Can Do to Shape Boys into Exceptional Men (1996), rely upon appeals to biology to construct “an upbeat, quintessentially American understanding of the boy as unproblematically wild” (168). Such books, Kidd warns, “refuse the idea of gender in favor of a biological separation of the sexes,” and “tend to ignore the axes of definition and displacement such as gender, race, and class” (170).
In the end, Kidd – whose humor is notable throughout – expresses a sense of hopelessness on the topic of his conclusion: “Can this boyology be saved?” In the face of narratives of boyhood and masculinity that continually rehearse and reinscribe sexist, patriarchal, and racist narratives, so that “even the most progressive of new boyology manuals look like business as usual,” Kidd confesses, “I find myself wishing that most of the forms of boy work I’ve identified would simply go away” (189). Such a confession is in keeping with a text that operates primarily as a critique of cultural constructions of childhood, rather than as a guide out of them. For this and for other reasons, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley’s collection, Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children (2004), complements Kidd’s text nicely. Both texts take on dominant narratives of childhood in Western society, and both do so through an analysis of sex, gender, and – in a surprising correlation – camping. As well as critique, however, Curiouser also provides essays which seek to reimagine the child in ways that might (perhaps, hopefully) allow new avenues for adult relationships with children, for adults’ relationships to their own childhoods, and for child autonomy. Taking on the fascinating, volatile, and always difficult territory of childhood sex and sexuality, Curiouser seeks to understand and undermine the “dominant narrative of children: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (ix). The authors within the volume interrogate this official story, investigating who tells it, to whom, and in what ways (ix). They also, however, seek to get to know and to make their audience get to know the “queer child,” that dangerous figure whose “play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity” (ix).

The influence of James R. Kincaid, author of Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture (1992) and Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting (1998), is evident throughout the volume, which is divided into two sections: the first, “Sexing the Child” focuses on child sexuality, the second, “The Queers We Might Have Been” focuses more specifically on the queer child – “queer” encompassing both the inherent alterity of the child subject, as well as the “homoeerotic, sexually performing child” (xv). Kincaid’s basic argument is restated here: the erotic child has been manufactured to tell us “what ‘the child’ is, and also what ‘the erotic is’” (9). These two categories so overlap that “we are instructed to crave that which is forbidden,” creating a crisis “we face by not facing it, by becoming hysterical, and by writing a kind of pious pornography, a self-righteous doublespeak that demands both lavish spectacle and constant guilt-denying projections onto scapegoats” (11). Our culture, that is, makes children sexy, demands that children be sexy, while all the time denying children sexual autonomy and decrying sexual interest in children. In the midst of an almost all-pervasive interest in sexual molestation and child pornography, and of the periodic blaming of home, institution, predator, and even the child itself for the current state of affairs, what we need, Kincaid argues, is scandal: “Scandal is the enemy of cultural hegemony; it is the offense that frees us from piety” (13). Only through scandal and disgrace, Kincaid urges, can we begin to “revise the narrative, perhaps into one kinder to us and to children as well. For one thing is clear: our present gothic scapegoating stories, our stories of denial and projected desire, are doing few of us any good” (15).
Kincaid’s point is well made. Both texts, Kidd’s and Bruhm and Hurley’s, assert continually that “the child” that is at stake in so many of these narratives is not a real child: in Kidd’s text, “the boy” is revealed to be a construction of overlapping stories by authors and institutions; in “Live Sex Acts: (Parental Advisory: Explicit Material),” Lauren Berlant argues that “the little girl, the child, or youth ... invoked in discussions of pornography, obscenity, or the administration of morality” might actually be an endangered living being, but these figures are more frequently “fetishes, effigies that condense, displace, and stand in for arguments about who ‘the people’ are” (67); and in “How to Do Things with Perversion: Psychoanalysis and the ‘Child in Danger,’” Paul Kelleher reminds the reader that the popular figure of the endangered child “refers not to a group or class of children, or any one identifiable child, but rather the figure of no child in particular, a figure whose lack of particularity enables a great deal of thinking and speaking” (151). Always represented, never representing, always spoken for, never allowed to speak for themselves, real children remain utterly elusive both within these particular texts, and in all the texts that they study, and it is the child’s status as utterly representable, both Making American Boys and Curiouser suggest, that makes it so useful in cultural narratives. But if it is true of all writing about children, as Jacqueline Rose famously asserted about writing for children, that “there is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction,’ other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes” (Rose, 1993:10), it is no less true that narratives of and about childhood do materially effect the lives of actual children. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s uncovering of the “War on Effeminate Boys,” and in Judith Halberstam’s critique of the “social reorientation” of the “masculine tomboy” (Halberstam 211), and even in Kidd’s seemingly despairing turning away from boyology in all its current forms, one can ascertain that Kincaid’s call for scandalous rewrites of childhood and childhood sexuality is particularly worthy of an answer.

So how do we go about rewriting the narratives about childhood in our culture? Bruhm and Hurley argue that “verbs matter to the configuration of childhood sexuality in that they displace sexuality from the present to the future or the past (that is, the future anterior) .... In this sense, the queer child gets displaced grammatically into a different temporal register, a register that allows the dominant narrative to consign the child to a cultural unconscious” (xviii-xix). Bruhm and Hurley refer specifically here to narratives of normative sexuality that always posit child queerness as a passing phrase: as one that will be replaced by heterosexuality in adulthood, and/or as one that only the perverse or immature will retain past that point. However, the verb tenses of which they speak cannot be entirely avoided in the essays in their own volume: to speak of the queers “we might have been” and to imagine narratives of childhood that “could be” is to, in some ways, rely upon the same utopianism or nostalgia already so much a part of narratives of childhood. One can adopt these verbs, however, while also dismantling the teleological narrative of heteronormativity that so often accompanies them. The essay that most clearly and unabashedly engages with utopian ideals is Andre Furlani’s “Guy Davenport’s Pastorals of Childhood Sexuality.” Focusing on Davenport’s fictions that imagine child and adolescent sexuality as “the core human experience, as an idyll the adult must endeavour to recover, as a means of interrogating ideologies, [and] as a stage of vitality primitive to the mature
conceptualizations of taboos” (227), Furlani argues that Davenport’s stories depend on their “status as fantasy,” an artifice that “allows him to explore proscribed areas of childhood sexuality, but also to confine it outside the norms such fiction would challenge” (226). This statement would seem to suggest that Davenport’s fantasies as fantasies fail to threaten social constructions of the child, but Furlani’s essay nevertheless succeeds in capturing the powerful nature of these fantasies to such an extent that this assumption is itself challenged.

Often drawing upon the ideas of nineteenth-century French utopian Charles Fourier, Davenport’s fictions – such as *Apples and Pears*, “The River,” and “O Gadjo Niglo” – represent children as “a discrete and oppressed social class” (232-33), but they also construct spaces in which children are allowed to freely experiment and engage in sexual relationships; as Furlani notes, “Davenport gives to his stories the full sexual emphasis that Fourier viewed as the necessary precondition for a utopian project” (230). Thus, in *Apples and Pears*, a Dutch philosopher founds “a commune out of a De Stijl townhouse in downtown Amsterdam during the nuclear arms buildup in 1981” (229). Children and adults live freely and enjoy a variety of non-coercive sexual relationships within this commune, resulting in a narrative in which “nuclear arsenals, the surrogate wars of the Cold War superpowers, child neglect and child abuse, homophobia and consumer greed, not the sexual impulses of children and teens, are the perversities bewailed” (230). The fact that this narrative seems so utterly innocent, utopian, and quite frankly, impossible in today’s world, speaks loudly to the problem *Curiouser* wants to take on: why is child autonomy, not just in terms of sexuality, but in terms of society itself, so utterly impossible to imagine? And without that autonomy, can child sexuality ever be understood as something other than a threat to the child? Furlani is correct that the fictional, pastoral nature of Davenport’s texts does safely frame such narratives of child sexuality in the realm of fantasy, but fictions such as his also, nevertheless, serve to place the hysterical nature of most current talk of child sexuality in sharp relief. Though I agree with the editors that utopianism and nostalgia continually construct the child as “caught between ... two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born” (xiii), I also see the usefulness of fictions such as Davenport’s in denaturing the templates of child sexuality to which we currently subscribe.

Nostalgia is more in evidence than is utopianism in *Curiouser*, particularly in Kathryn R. Kent’s “‘No Trespassing’: Girl Scout Camp and the Limits of the Counterpublic Sphere,” and Michael Warner’s fabulous “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood.” Both writers, however, seek to forge connections with their childhood past and their adult present: rather than childhood figured as a lost, innocent space, or as, even more problematically, a queer space that one is perversely trapped in as a queer adult, these authors seek to demonstrate the continuity of past and present. In an essay that is part memoir, part theoretical exploration of the counterpublic – i.e. a social sphere “in which ‘subordinated social groups’ construct oppositional narratives of subjectivity and resistance” (175) – Kent questions, among other things, the extent to which the formation of her own queer identity was the result of her immersion in Girl Scout culture. As she observes, “if what I believe – in essence, that I was ‘taught’ to be a lesbian, ‘brought up’ to
desire other women – has resonance, then counterpublic spaces such as Girl Scout camp may tell us something about how gay, lesbian, and queer identities and practices have been replicated and sustained since early in the twentieth century” (185). Kent is negotiating difficult territory here, for if one great social fear continually elicited by the thought of homosexual adults mixing with children is that of molestation, the other is that of recruitment: in a culture in which heterosexual recruitment of children is the accepted norm, providing children with anything resembling “pro-gay” messages is still seen as entirely suspect. Kent uses her intelligent analysis of the relationship between the nationalist, middle-class imperatives of the Girl Scout organization and the operations of the queer counter-public within that organization to open up questions about lesbianism itself: “The phrase ‘scouting for girls’ epitomizes this tension; it may be interpreted simultaneously as a metaphor for the imperialist urge to reformulate individual girls into good American women and as a playful invocation of lesbian cruising. Is lesbian identity, as a set of practices, styles, and counterpublic identifications, itself a form of imperialism?” (186). Although Kent’s concerns about the extent to which she struggled against her own queerness “out of a fear” that she was “succumbing to peer pressure” (185) seems starkly out of place in a volume that seeks to denaturalize the peer pressure of compulsory heterosexuality, her admission nevertheless displays a desire to examine her connection to her past that balances the nostalgia evident throughout.

Unlike Kent’s essay which suggests a direct correlation between a queer childhood and a queer adulthood, Warner’s essay initially sets up a tension between past and present: admitting in the opening line, “I was a teenage Pentecostalist,” Warner remarks that “because that is so very far from what I am now – roughly, a queer atheist intellectual – people often think I should have an explanation, a story” (215). Warner gives that story, but it’s not the one his opening lines would seem to suggest: a substantive, traumatic, or even rhapsodic break from an entirely different existence. Warner admits that “from the religious vantage of my childhood and my adolescence, I am one of Satan’s agents. From my current vantage, that former self was exotically superstitious.” He goes on to say, however, that “I distrust both of these views of myself as the other …. What if that life and this one are not so clearly opposed?” (216). Challenging the typical understanding of childhood as always constructed by the adult who looks back upon it, Warner reminds us that our adult selves – or what we think we might become – are also constructed and imagined by that child who looks forward. Seeking continuities between the two allows Warner both to value those things in his religious past that might, at first glance, seem utterly divorced from his present and to acknowledge those things in his present that his childhood self might always already have been and felt. His statement that “religion supplied me with experiences and ideas that I’m still trying to match” (216) certainly rang true for me, as did his moving claim that “religious culture gave me a passionate intellectual life of which universities are only a pale ivory shadow” (216). Warner is not relying upon a construction of childhood as innocent and ideal here; rather than nostalgia as that which is “dead,” Warner instead utilizes child experience to challenge his adult assumptions about the sacred and the profane, about the secular and the religious. When he proclaims that “Jesus was my first boyfriend. He loved me, personally, and he told me I was his own” (221), Warner opens up a space in which to
complicate the choice between sex and religion, in which he can understand that “religion makes available a language of ecstasy, a horizon of significance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of the self can be seen as good things” (221).

The nostalgia in both Warner’s and Kent’s articles, problematized though it is in Kent’s text by her concerns about lesbian “imperialism,” is incredibly important. By looking back at a queer childhood from the vantage point of a queer adulthood that can question, evaluate, and most importantly, remember that childhood (however intangible and untrustworthy a thing memory might be), these writers challenge the assumption that child queerness represents a phase, something that “will pass” (xviii), that should pass if one is to become a mature (heterosexual) adult. Even more significantly, texts such as these that capture the joys of that queer childhood – as Kent notes, “in the camp, hugging, kissing, giving back rubs, and holding hands (especially on sentimental occasions, such as the last night of camp) were natural, produced by nature, by being one’s ‘real’ self” (177) – work against an overarching social narrative that pathologizes and fears that queer child. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys,” though first written in 1989, seems as timely now as it was then. Focusing on the diagnosis of “gender identity disorder in childhood” included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III), Sedgwick convincingly argues that while current psychoanalytic discourse does not construct homosexuality as pathology, that it still, through the inclusion of “gender identity disorder” participates in the fantasy of the eradication of homosexuality. Discouraging effeminacy in boys as a necessary precursor to the child’s “explorations of what it may be to be masculine – that is, for a male person to be human,” contemporary psychoanalytic discourse, Sedgwick argues, “while denaturalizing sexual object choice ... radically renaturalizes gender” (143). She goes on to say that:

The renaturalization and enforcement of gender assignment is not the worst news about the new psychiatry of gay acceptance, however. The worst is that it not only fails to offer but seems conceptually incapable of offering even the slightest resistance to the wish endemic in the culture surrounding and supporting it: the wish that gay people not exist. There are many people in the worlds we inhabit, and unmistakably among them are psychiatrists who have a strong interest in the dignified treatment of any gay people who may happen already to exist. But the number of persons or institutions by whom the existence of gay people is treated as a precious desideratum, a needed condition of life, is small (145).

Celebrating the queer child, imagining not just “the queers we might have been,” but the queers that children could be if given the space to do so, as Judith Halberstam does, for example, in her brilliant “Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy,” becomes, in the light of Sedgwick’s argument, an absolute necessity – a stance that has to be taken in order to treat queers as a “precious desideratum,” as a “needed condition.”

But it has to be taken not just on behalf of gay people, but on behalf of children – feral, queer, or otherwise. For if Sedgwick’s and Halberstam’s articles reveal a not-entirely-obscured social fear and hatred of effeminate boys and masculine girls, Kidd’s text and many of the articles in Curioser suggest a pervasive oppression of and mistrust of children
at large. From Kidd’s analysis of representations of “street rats and slum kids” to Ellis Hanson’s analysis of the gothic child in “Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in The Exorcist,” we are continually reminded that dominant narratives of childhood that insist on that child’s innocence, dependence, and need for restriction are predicated upon fears of what we imagine that child will be without those things. How else are we to explain a culture that claims to protect, cherish, and nurture the child while denying that same child rights and freedoms, and while reveling in narratives of the sadistic, the violent, and the evil child? If we are to add childhood to the triumvirate of race, class, and gender, we need to remember that unlike those categories, there is currently no real possibility for the oppressed subject to write back, to use his or her own experience to challenge narratives produced by the privileged – in this case, by all of us adults who currently write about children. As both Making American Boys and Curiouser attest, however, the dominant narratives about childhood already in circulation have great power, and choosing not to write new narratives or to take on old ones only serves to keep those narratives in place.

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**References**


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