
CANADA AND UNITED STATES

Paige Gray, *Cub Reporters: American Children's Literature and Journalism in the Golden Age*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019, Pp. xxxviii, 131. Paper \$28.95.

The good news for anyone contemplating an occupational study of rookie journalists in the age of ink and extras is that you haven't yet been scooped. Paige Gray's *Cub Reporters: American Children's Literature and Journalism in the Golden Age* eschews its titular subject for a cultural analysis of a handful of classic comics, novels, and reportage written for children and set amid the fast-paced world of newspapers. The book aims to illuminate how journalism and children's literature intersected during their respective heydays (roughly 1865 to 1925) and helped to define American childhood and identity. These texts empowered young readers to question the truth claims of adults, says Gray, and to create their own better understanding of the world. For all its appeal, this thematic emphasis on youth agency rests more on theoretical possibility than historical demonstration.

Gray's enticing Introduction combines the breeziness of Young Adult fiction ("Pretend it's 1896. You live in New York City. It's Sunday.") (xiii) with a complex reconceptualization of *artifice* in shaping narrative truth. She seeks to sever the term from its pejorative association with duplicity and apply it to "the creative processes of narrativizing, making meaning, and selling reality through the venue of the newspapers." (xvi) As characters and readers, children are both "reporters of artifice" (xviii) and its "greatest champions," (xv) says Gray. Enter the Yellow Kid and the ragamuffins of *Hogan's Alley*, R.F. Outcault's groundbreaking comic strip from 1895. In commenting on the news of the day, these unruly urchins alerted newspaper readers young and old to the absurdity of social life, the spectacle of mass politics, and the permeability of barriers separating fact from fantasy. Gray sees the strip as emblematic of the way stories set in the world of newspapers alerted young readers to the falsity or invented-ness of natural phenomena, objective facts, and "unquestioned

power narratives" (xxi), including ideological assumptions about race, class, gender, and generational differences. The Yellow Kid both "challenged and indulged" these assumptions, says Gray. It's hard to know what children actually made of the comic, but Gray insists that it and all the works discussed herein operated as destabilizing agents of social change.

Gray tries to illuminate this process in a series of case studies beginning with Horatio Alger's 1869 novel *Rough and Ready; or Life Among the New York Newsboys*. She argues that the real and fictional children who hawked newspapers effectively "edited" the headlines they cried, thereby unsettling "preexisting power dynamics" and challenging "foundational hegemonic structures." (3) These dynamics and structures are never specified beyond general adult-child or fact-fiction dichotomies. Nor is the effectiveness of their challenge examined. Stretching the truth to sell more papers is not exactly a frontal assault on the values of the capitalist press. Nor is it a byproduct of close reading so much as material want or devilish amusement. Real newsboys knew in their bones that the sensational, stodgy, partisan, and rival newspapers they peddled all presented various takes on the truth. Gray's deliberate conflation of literary and historical newsboys, and her inflated claims about the social and psychological impact of their fake news cries, take Alger's romanticization of working children to new heights.

Gray next turns to the hugely popular Gallegher stories and other fiction written in the 1890s by the young war correspondent-turned-novelist Richard Harding Davis. Gray contends that these tales of a street-smart Philadelphia newspaper office boy invited young readers to participate in the process of artifice by showing just how the sausage is made, with the added spice of adventure and crime solving. Davis both celebrated and critiqued the reporter figure, says Gray, and made him integral to the formation of American identity. It's a perceptive reading based on Davis's published writing, private letters, self-presentation as a dashing figure who attributed his success to his childlike curiosity and boyish gumption. Davis doubtlessly inspired more than a few journalistic careers with his description of Gallegher rushing into the newsroom at the last minute, waving fresh reportage, and shouting "Stop the presses!" (32)

Gray then casts her eye on one of L. Frank Baum's lesser known works after *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The 1912 volume of his *Aunt Jane's Nieces* series, written under the penname Edith Van Dyne, revolves around the nieces starting a feisty small-town daily. Ever attuned to paradox, Gray observes that Baum both challenges and reinforces domestic gender ideology of the period by celebrating women in journalism while pulling back from endorsing their full agency. She further argues that the nieces "function as reporters of artifice through their use of spectacle—a specific kind of artifice that depends on public display." (46) Women in journalism such as stunt reporter Nellie Bly were spectacles themselves, said Gray. Baum, meanwhile, functions as "the man behind the curtain," essentially writing in drag.

Gray flips the script in the next chapter to focus on the African American *Chicago Defender's* influence on real children in the 1920s and '30s who read its *Defender Junior* publication, joined its Bud Billiken Club, and participated in its annual parade. These activities stimulated a "creative artifice," (70) says Gray, that promoted racial consciousness, community identification, and needed self-esteem in an otherwise racist world. Here artifice functions to reinforce rather than undermine concocted truths. Gray bases her conclusions on the relatively strong evidence of children's letters to the editor and readers' recollections.

The book's conclusion jumps ahead in time to yet another text, Louise Fitzhugh's 1964 novel *Harriet the Spy*. It won readers and stirred controversy, suggests Gray, because Harriet's boundless curiosity and neighborhood espionage "shows her development of self and societal understanding." (90) Less persuasive is her assertion that Harriet channeled the iconoclastic energy of 1960s Gonzo journalism to expose how "story and knowledge are created." Gray sees Harriet as a role model who reveals how "power structures—school, her parents, the newspaper—sometimes hide artifice to secure authority." (93-94) Unfortunately, we never see anyone reading *Harriet the Spy*—or any of the works discussed in the book with the exception of the *Defender Junior*—in the way that Gray suggests: as secret decoder rings to the sham of adulthood. Even the girls who formed *Harriet the Spy* clubs may simply have been seeking adventure, diversion,

or friendship. The fact that most boys wouldn't have been caught dead reading this "girls book," and few adults would have encouraged them, reveals the transgressive limits of children's literature in its golden age and beyond.

Ultimately, Gray wants us to believe that children's literature about newspapering provided generations of young readers with the insights of postmodern deconstructionists ever alert to "the fantasy of fact." (68) One can argue that the best children's literature is devoted to exposing adult foibles, fallacies, and falsifications. A newspaper setting is not essential to this message, but, as Gray shows, it *could* be conducive to it.

Vincent DiGirolamo
Baruch College, CUNY

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