

Performing Motherhood: Introduction to a Special Issue on Mothering in Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract This brief introduction to the essays in the special issue on mothering in children's and young adult literature spells out the dominant theme of the essays, which is the way cultural scripts, including those found in children's and young adult literature and culture, act as paratexts that condition the practice of mothering.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir famously declared, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1949/2009, p. 283). Gender studies has seized on this insight, working through an analysis of drag presentation and performance studies to explore the ways that femininity is a socially scripted phenomenon. Drag theory teaches us that if a man can successfully perform as a woman, then women are also performing as women in carefully structured roles that include gesture, appearance,

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and affect; femininity is a masquerade, says Joan Riviere (1929), something that, according to Judith Butler (1993, p. 232), female children are “girled” into as they become adolescents. Despite this embrace of performativity with regard to becoming a woman, the discourse of motherhood still seems to cling to a more natural model: whatever she was on her way to becoming before, a woman is somehow reborn as a mother with the birth of a child. Ironically, the massive amount of literature directed to new mothers that insists that they trust their natural impulses and instincts, as well as the plethora of children’s picture books that showcase a mother’s steadfast love, belies any notion that mothering comes naturally. These paratexts of parenting, some meant to be read by anxious mothers and others to be shared with their children, instead offer scripts for mothers to follow in order to realize a cultural ideal, and the very fact that they exist in a state of flux—that their advice and models change over time and as children progress through childhood into adolescence—indicates that one is indeed not born, but must become a mother for her time.

The essays in this special issue look specifically at the scripts of motherhood offered through children’s and young adult literature. From the public pedagogy widely disseminated through Robinson Crusoe revisions and merchandise and the ubiquitous offerings of the Disney Corporation, to the picturebooks of Anthony Browne inspired by the shifting priorities of feminism, to the ideological challenges posed by maternal boys, Other mothers, incestuous mothers, and mothers in dystopic landscapes, these essays traverse over 100 years of influential mothering scripts and their potentially productive disruptions. They invite readers to consider mothering from diverse theoretical perspectives, such as care ethics, feminism, performance studies, and cognitive narratology. Cognitive theorist Michael Burke has argued that there are four primary themes that consistently elicit an affective response in literary reading: mothers, home, childhood, and death (2010, pp. 103–106). Combining these themes, as happens more often than not in children’s, middle grade, and young adult literature, packs an enormous emotional punch. And as we know, emotional engagement is key to ideological interpellation; these texts thus not only tell stories *about* mothers, but they also encode powerful schemas that tell us how mothering should and should not be performed in the larger world. They set our expectations of what a good mother is and does and who can perform mothering work, and while many of these scripts insist that good mothering is natural and instinctual, that insistence is undermined by the very existence of the texts which often seem to protest too much.

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