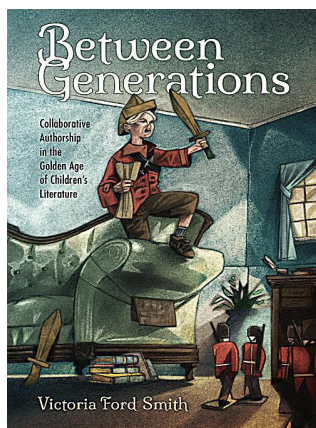


VICTORIA FORD SMITH

BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children's Literature

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After decades of following Jacqueline Rose's dictum that the child is unknowable except as the projection of adult desire, more and more children's literature critics are now turning their attention again to real children. Spurred by developments in cognitive literary studies and so-called participatory research, they reconsider the role of young people as readers, budding scholars, and authors. With *Between Generations: Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Victoria Ford Smith joins scholars such as Marah Gubar, Claudia Mills, and Robin Bernstein in questioning the power relationships between adults and children in the production of meaning from texts and images. Rather than seeing children as powerless, passive and dependent on adults, they stress children's agency and the productive dialogue that arises when adults and children interact in creative processes. In Smith's own words, her book challenges "the assumption that adults produce texts and children consume them" (5).

The focus of *Between Generations* lies on the Victorian child's collaboration with adults. While the subtitle puts the stress on authorship, the book itself explores the creativity of the young in several domains, including printing, giving feedback, literary criticism, art, and illustration. In five chapters, Smith sketches the political and pedagogical climate and the material circumstances that fostered or inhibited the child's active involvement in the production of literature and art, and then moves on to discuss a few cases in more detail. In these case studies, she pays attention to both real and fictive col-

laborations between adult and child creators. Evidence of real collaborations exists, but is scarce, as children often were only vaguely credited – if at all – for their input. Yet, as Smith convincingly argues “considering the real and fictive side by side offers new insights into how authors wrestled with the place and status of children’s voices in children’s literature” (7). Thus her work not only draws on archival material and ego documents, but also offers close readings of selected passages from literary works. Well-known authors, such as Charles Dickens, William Thackeray and J. M. Barrie are featured alongside lesser known writers and artists – including, of course, the children themselves, none of whom gained true fame.

In the first chapter, Smith analyses images of children as “active listeners” (37), such as the young Edith Story, whom William Thackeray diverted with stories from his manuscript for *The Rose and The Ring* (1854) as she was recovering from illness. Edith commented on the stories and made sketches to accompany them. The chapter opens up Victorian debates about preferences for oral versus written culture, and highlights cases where children and adults paired up in interactive storytelling moments. It also introduces the “child study movement,” which plays an important role throughout the book. Established in the late 19th century, this movement was “a precursor to developmental and educational psychology that marshaled the methods of a range of scholars, amateur and professions – psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, biologists, educators, and parents, among others – to build a portrait of all aspects of child life” (46). Child study scholars debated the challenges of accessing children’s voices in an unmediated way, and some tried to minimize their own role in the interaction with children in order to get a better understanding of them. One of the most influential theories of the age was recapitulation, which states that children’s development parallels that of mankind, and which was also taken for granted by many child study experts. Smith contrasts it with views that left more room for the child’s individuality and agency. Some insisted that children were not just reproducing language but also reshaping it in flexible and creative ways.

Chapter two diverges from the others in that it investigates one collaboration in detail: the evolving co-authorship between Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson Samuel Lloyd Osbourne. Here, Smith takes her cue from Robin Bernstein’s work on material culture and children’s literature to investigate the impact of the toy printing press in fostering children’s authorship, editorship, and literary entrepreneurship. In chapter three Smith explores efforts to hear

children's opinions about children's books and culture that still ring very familiar today. Smith draws parallels between Peter Hunt's "childist criticism" and nineteenth-century authors and pedagogues who worked to give children more authority as judges of children's culture. She mentions, among several others, Caroline Hewins, an American librarian who created forums for children's voices, and Matthew Arnold, who as a school inspector contributed to establishing interactive teaching methods that gave children more agency in the classroom. Chapter four continues on this theme, considering art education for children as hovering between requiring imitations of adult art and fostering children's creativity. For instance, Smith makes the interesting observation that children's art classes were boosted by industrial developments, and that the main goal was preparing children to be designers and engineers rather than helping them explore their creative skills and needs. Moreover, she is able to find examples of collaboration in which children's drawings were valued for artistic reasons and inspired adult authors.

The real-life cases Smith has unearthed, such as the partnership between Robert Louis Stevenson and Samuel Lloyd Osbourne, and between the poet Robert Browning and the child artist William Macready, are compelling. The quotes and letters she cites are fascinating and often endearing. There is, for example, the dialogue between Stevenson and Osbourne over a poem Stevenson wants to have printed in his stepson's journal; it mimics actual negotiations, but involves an exchange of doughnuts rather than money. While Smith pays respect to the constructive dialogue that arises when adults and children enter creative partnerships, she does not idealize it. She addresses, among other issues, the complications in the relationship as the child Osbourne grew up and the dynamics of the co-authorship with Stevenson shifted.

In the conclusion, which is a proper chapter in its own right, Smith draws attention to two cases that take her work further forward into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Arthur Ransome's collaboration with the teenagers Pamela Whitlock and Katharine Hull in relation to *The Far-Distant Oxus* (1937), and Timothy Archibald's collaborative photography project with his son Elijah in 2010. There are some paths that Smith could have explored more in this conclusion, in particular how the collaborations in her book are determined by gender and class, and the specific ages of the collaborators she discusses. Yet, that lack does not compromise the strong positive impression *Between Generations* leaves. The best volumes of scholarship spur readers to continue the work that has been presented, and to

look for further evidence and arguments. *Between Generations* is such a book. Smith argues that children's literature studies have been marked by a "paralyzing suspicion upon references to an author's biography, devalue the work of children, and underestimate the agency of young people" (9). Her work makes an important contribution to a paradigm shift in children's literature studies, and it also points to the wealth of material that has been ignored. This makes me confident that *Between Generations* will inspire many scholars to unearth further traces of creative collaboration between adults and children, both in the past and the present, and to reflect further on the challenges and limitations, but also opportunities and insights of this kind of work.

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