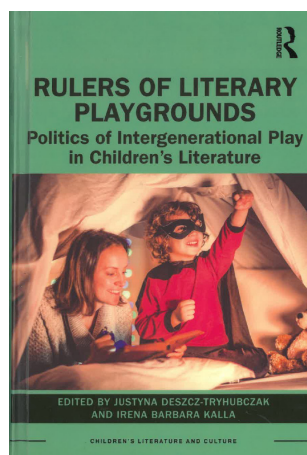


Review/Recension

**JUSTYNA DESZCZ-
TRYHUBCZAK & IRENA
BARBARA KALLA (EDS.)
RULERS OF LITERARY
PLAYGROUNDS
Politics of
Intergenerational Play in
Children's Literature**
New York: Routledge, 2021 (249 p.)



Rulers of Literary Playgrounds: Politics of Intergenerational Play in Children's Literature (2021) is part of Routledge's series on "Children's Literature and Culture". The 249-page anthology emerged from the 2016 Child and the Book conference on children's literature and play held at the University of Wrocław, where the editors are Associate Professors. In their introduction, Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Irena Barbara Kalla explain that their collection fills a gap in previous research into the representation of child play in literature. While there have been numerous studies on the representation of child play in literature and film, intergenerational dynamics between children, children's books authors, and caregivers have been largely neglected. With this collection, the editors aim to explore the ways in which these adult figures enter into children's play and how children's literature invites child and adult readers to reflect on real-life play. This goal is illustrated on the cover, which shows a dressed-up child playing next to an adult reading aloud from a book, both under the shelter of a blanket-covered play camp. The adult as narrator enables the child to engage in imaginative play and vice versa, which shows the "interdependencies between children and adults as they engage in play and in literary texts" (i), a recurring theme in the anthology. The international scope of the chapters lives up to the claim that is made in the blurb, with contributions by fifteen scholars from eight different countries. The objects of their studies are equally diverse, with material ranging from Soviet propaganda to Mexican picture-books and Polish book apps in a historical timeframe spanning from

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the early nineteenth century to the second decade of the twenty-first century. This broad scope is present in all parts of the anthology.

Part one, "Social and Political Contexts of Play", includes six chapters on how socio-political trends and cultural phenomena are represented in fictional children's play with the purpose of regulating children's and adult lives. Included in this section are some of the anthology's best structured and most relevant chapters. Birgitte Beck Pristed opens part one with her comprehensive study of Soviet literature and propaganda concerning wastepaper collection published between 1956 and 1991. She identifies a reversal of the traditional model of the adult-child relation as the propaganda under examination is directed towards children to motivate them to involve their parents in the wastepaper campaign, presenting the collection of paper first as a duty and later as a playful and pleasurable competition. Pristed discusses several pieces of propaganda to illustrate the evolution of the depiction of children and child's play that reflects a change in the tactics used in the Soviet era to regulate adults. Jan Van Coillie also tracks an evolution in the representation of play in his chapter on children's literature in Flanders during the nineteenth century, influenced by genre and the ideology of the author. Efficiently placing the works he studies into different decades, he looks at fictional play in poetry and prose and compares works published by Catholic authors and liberal authors. The changing attitudes of adults toward play run largely parallel to changes in the image of the child and intergenerational relationships. Sarah Hoem Iversen studies children's dictionaries published in Britain. She expands on the history of this genre by successfully arguing that, contrary to previous assumptions, dictionaries especially compiled for children already existed in the nineteenth century. Entries in these dictionaries related to play and gender demonstrate the power relationship between the adult narrator and the implied child reader. These dictionaries very much influenced children's normative ideas about real-life play, making this chapter another excellent addition to the section.

In the three remaining chapters, Yoo Kyung Sung, Sally Sims Stokes and Blanka Grzegorzczuk examine the representation of play in children's literature in combination with themes of heritage, migration, and terror. Sung discusses the centrality of familism and intergenerational connections in picturebooks depicting transnational Mexican childhoods, as well as in the play culture of Mexican-heritage children. While storytelling is a big part of this culture, with the grandparent filling the role of the narrator, Sung adds a critical

note by arguing that multicultural children's literature tends to over-represent the share of this intergenerational solidarity in fictional play culture. Noel Streatfeild's *Harlequinade* discussed by Sims Stokes is also a story of displacement and intergenerational connections, this time that of British circus children sent away to the countryside for the duration of the Second World War. The chapter opens with a thorough account of the history of the harlequinade genre and of the creation of *Harlequinade* published in 1943. Interwoven in this overview is a detailed summary of the story itself, hinting at intergenerational connections between the children and an old actor, but the rather abrupt ending leaves the reader wishing for a more comprehensive analysis or clearer conclusion. Part one closes with Grzegorzczuk's chapter on representation of play in post-9/11 children's novels that relate the traumas inflicted by terrorism to matters of childhood. Grzegorzczuk's selection of novels is well-considered, including a wide array of non-Western child characters, and she structures her chapter according to the three different themes linked to terror that they depict: the loss of family members, children's everyday experience in the aftermath of terror, and the reactions of adolescents participating in terror to the violations of childhood they witness.

While part one addresses how real-life play is regulated by representations of fictional play, part two, titled "Constructs of Children's Agency in Representations of Childhood and Play", includes four studies that investigate the influence of normative conceptions of children's play on texts for young readers. Elliott Schreiber's chapter on the use of the image of the tree to explore imaginative play and intergenerational relations in fairy tales is clearly organized around the three bodies of work he studies. Schreiber provides intermediate conclusions for the Brothers Grimm, Ludwig Tieck, and Hans Christian Andersen respectively, but the chapter would have benefitted from a solidification of the comparison between the three authors in a main conclusion. Ilaria Filograsso moves away from the analysis of primary material in her chapter on Gianni Rodari's pedagogical and literary concepts to show how Rodari's pedagogical agenda and Marxist ideology influenced adult culture, children's culture, and children's writing. Filograsso's chapter reads more like a literature review than a study and, like the previous chapter, lacks a clear conclusion. Elizabeth L. Nelson's chapter explores the adult understanding of childhood and play as recorded in play anthologies – collections of fictionalised representations of children's play. In the dual translation from action to word and from child to adult, play anthologies are influenced by the adult's idea of play. Nelson

not only focuses on generational determinism, but also looks at the evolution of child agency in play by studying anthologies from 1894 to 1959. Her chapter goes beyond the theme of this section and returns, in part, to the theme of the first section by uncovering that not only does the adult's image of play influence fictional play but that this representation in turn has an influence on the real-life "correct" way to play. While most chapters contribute to filling the gap identified by the editors in previous research into children's literature and play, intergenerational dynamics are not taken into account in the analyses in Taraneh Matloob Haghanikar and Linda M. Pavonetti's chapter. Instead, they focus solely on the decrease in representation of play in picturebooks awarded the Caldecott Medal and Honor 1938–1949 and 2001–2004.

"Materialities of Play", the last section of the anthology, deals with children's books as objects of play influencing extratextual child-adult interactions. Jennifer Farrar and Zofia Zasacka both rely on reader-oriented research – self-conducted surveys and a Polish national survey respectively – in their chapters. For a broader study, Farrar asked children and parents to read a picturebook with clear metafictional elements and afterwards discussed their reading experiences. In the chapter, she focuses on her discussions with the parents, adding this perspective to the predominantly school-based and child-focused nature of previous research into reader responses on picturebooks. Unfortunately, an excessive amount of attention is paid to the introduction and methodology of this chapter, depriving the reader of the in-depth analysis of the survey that this study would have benefitted from. Nevertheless, the conclusion that metafiction in the picturebooks discussed enabled parents to adjust or critically reflect on their normative understandings of reading with children is certainly relevant to this collection and makes it a perfect fit in this section. Zasacka's study looks at interviews with children aged 12–13 and 15–16 to investigate the role of play in the development of reading habits in young children. Her conclusion underlines the importance of the caregivers' role in children's first contact with literature, and thus offers an excellent example of the intergenerational dynamics that this anthology aims to explore. Elżbieta Jamróz-Stolarska introduces a new genre in the final chapter of the anthology. She explores the role of authors, illustrators, and publishers in their attempts to make children's books more pleasurable and engaging by adding elements of play to printed books. As a next step in the gamification of children's literature, she includes different kinds of digital books in her study, concluding that in Poland caregivers

play the role of gatekeeper between picturebook apps and their intended audience. This section might have been supplemented by a more detailed study on contemporary forms of children's literature that incorporate elements of play, such as in digital storytelling.

Overall, the chapters in this anthology offer elaborate analyses and clear-cut conclusions which, because of the diversity in primary material and methodologies, do not suffer from overlap but rather enrich the knowledge gained from this collection. While the chapters are grouped in a coherent way and the three sections each focus on an important component of the main subject, the collection is unevenly distributed. The last section of the anthology is made up of only three texts, half of the number of chapters in part one. This is unfortunate, seeing as it is the only section with chapters including reader response studies into one of the anthology's main research questions regarding how children and adults appropriate or follow norms imposed by children's literature. Nonetheless, on the whole *Rulers of Literary Playgrounds* certainly adds a number of important contributions to the fields of children's literature and childhood studies, specifically on the subject of connections between play and literature.

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