

JEWISHNESS, LITERATURE AND THE CHILD

INTRODUCTION

*Katrien Vloeberghs, Guest Editor**

This collection of scholarly essays addresses figurations of Jewishness and childhood in literary texts from a variety of perspectives in literary theory and cultural analysis. Literature appears as one of the revealing instances where these two figurations interact with each other in important ways. Fundamental to the interrelationship between Jewishness and childhood is the endeavour to transmit Jewish culture, history and religion to the children of future generations and to emphasize the latter as both the keepers and renewers of tradition. The contributions aim at illuminating both the referential and metaphorical interrelations between Jewishness and childhood in the medium of literature. They shed light on the specificity of the image and role of childhood in Jewish literature as well as on the figuration of Judaism in non-Jewish and Jewish children's literature. The figurations of childhood in modern Western literature being heavily indebted to the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the question emerges how these traditions relate to Judaism, and how the child is conceptualized in Jewish literary texts. Beyond investigating images of childhood in literary works in these terms, it is worthwhile exploring texts written for the young which convey the ideas of childhood and socialization prevailing in a given culture in particularly significant ways. The present collection analyzes Jewish images of childhood in literature for children within a Jewish cultural and religious tradition, in dialogue with a non-Jewish environment (including the Third Reich) and in the development of children's books in Israel.

The texts analyzed in this issue range from picture books to epic work in several volumes, from Greek mythology and Biblical texts to post-war poetry and post-modern 'collage'. The contributors' approaches include literary theory

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and cultural studies, religious studies and political analysis, anthropology and philosophy. The investigation of the manifold connections between Jewishness and childhood in literature touch upon important issues in contemporary religious and political discourses and questions at the cutting edge of critical theory today. The representation of history and the figuration of childhood appear to be strategic instruments in transmitting ideologies, convictions about nationhood, citizenship and cultural rootedness. Often comparing Jewish and Christian approaches to the child, these essays explore historically influential childhood-related conceptions such as original sin or the messianic child. A crucial revolution in the conceptualization of childhood in the Western world since the beginning of the twentieth century was fuelled by the emergence and development of Freudian psychoanalysis. Some contributions draw extensively on this paradigm and critically investigate the 'Jewishness' of psychoanalysis, showing to what an extent this model of interpretation pervades conceptions of father-child relationships in novels today.

The Holocaust as a 'watershed event in human history' (Hilberg 1985, 251) and in Western thinking is another important site where Jewishness and childhood are intertwined. The encounter between the figuration of childhood and the representation of the Shoah in literary texts manifests itself as an aporetic relationship. Although the war, horror and extreme violence seem incompatible with the deemed innocence and vulnerability of the child, numerous authors recur to precisely the ignorant or intuitive perspective of the child to give expression to the events during the Holocaust. The majority of the essays in this collection deal with the representation of the Holocaust in literary works from Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. They focus on children's literature about the Shoah on the one hand and, on the other, on literary texts in which a child figure is central as protagonist and/or narrator.

Contributions in the field of children's literature explore the modes and functions, possibilities and limitations of the challenge of writing children's literature about the Holocaust. The need to convey the dimensions of the catastrophe through the narration of scenes of real historical horror is confronted with the wish to consider the limits of children's and youngsters' (assumed) emotional fragility. Therein lies a difficulty of the genre. The essays bring to light a number of strategies to which contemporary children's literature reverts in order to soothe the horror – be it at the risk of embellishing the awful reality of persecution and death. They also explore the potential of certain literary works to evoke endless suffering without shocking or traumatizing the implied child reader. The evolution from the immediate aftermath of the war to the contemporary, overdetermined discourse of the Holocaust is often surprising and displays a gradually increasing sensitivity to and awareness of

the problematic or difficult representation of otherness, of identification with a victim protagonist and of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Extensive attention is paid to the literary production for children in two nations where post-war writing is inextricably bound up with the events during the Holocaust: Germany and Israel. An analysis of post-war German writing for young children offers both a confirmation and in some instances a modification of literary critic Zohar Shavit's provocative statement that German post-war children's literature represents a 'past without a shadow' (cf. her controversial study *A Past without a Shadow – Constructing the Past in German Books for Children*). Innovative research by Israeli scholars in children's literature reveals the unexpected existence of children's literature about the fate of European Jewry during the Second World War in Palestine/Israel.

Since survivors nowadays are often and increasingly child survivors, the literary childhood memoir has developed into a subgenre of Holocaust literature in its own right. The present texts thematize the tension between the assumed authenticity of an ignorant child's perspective on the one hand and the subtle exploitation of its inevitable constructedness on the other. They present the modes and functions of (re)constructing the child's voice in Holocaust literature for adults as a way of overcoming the limits of representing unspeakable horror. In a similar vein, second and third generation literature strikingly often opts for the figuration of childhood in order to convey the transgenerational impact of the trauma.

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