

LIT 6934: History and Representation in Children's Literature

Wednesdays, 9-11 (4:05-7pm)

Turlington Seminar Room (4112)

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1-3pm and by appointment

Course Description

The child's entrance into the world is always belated. Indeed, as Marah Gubar argues in her landmark study, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, young people "are born into a world in which stories about who they are (and what they should become) are already in circulation" (6). To this end, one of the greatest tasks of children's literature has been to introduce young readers to – and suture them firmly within – social formations that precede their own. Little wonder, then, that so many works of children's literature have taken as their subject matter the (often idealized) past.

In this course, we will examine several theoretical studies of historiography and historical representation in order to discuss their implications with regard to children's literature and childhood studies. We will begin with close analyses of works of critical theory such as Hayden White's *The Content of the Form*, Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," and Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and then move on to direct critical interventions in the field of children's literature such as Sara Schwebel's *Child Sized History* and Joe Sutliff Sanders' *A Literature of Questions*. Seminar participants will be responsible for writing regular responses to the assigned texts, accounting for significant and relevant studies in the field, and composing a conference-length paper.

Required Texts

Entire Books – to be ordered

M.T. Anderson, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Part 1, The Pox Party*

Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*

Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*

Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*

Erica Rand, *Ellis Island Snowglobe*

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*

Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*

Sara Schwebel, *Child Sized History: Fictions of the Past in US Classrooms*

Joe Sutliff Sanders, *A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child*

Excerpts – accessible via Canvas

Michel DeCerteau, *The Writing of History* (chapters 1 and 2)

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History”

Pierre Nora, “Les Lieux de Mémoire”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Kenneth Kidd, “The Child, the Scholar, and the Children’s Literature Archive”

Course Requirements

Seminar Attendance and Participation: 15%

Three (3) reading responses to assigned chapters/essays: 30% (10% each)

Children’s Literature/Childhood Studies Research Project: 25%

Conference-length (8-10 page) paper: 30%

- Proposal/abstract: 5%
- Presentation: 5%
- Final draft: 20%

Attendance/Participation

Although I will occasionally give brief lectures, the majority of our class sessions will be informed by the specific questions, observations, insights, and critiques you have to offer in response to the assigned material. Thus, it is crucial that you not only attend each class but that you come to each session prepared to discuss the assigned text(s) with me and your fellow participants. Ultimately, this course is a collective venture, so its success depends on what each of you is willing to put into it.

Please let me know in advance if you need to miss a session to observe a religious holiday or to take part in a previously scheduled event (e.g., an academic/professional conference). If you miss a class because of an illness or emergency, please contact me at your earliest possible convenience. I will expect you to make up for the work you missed, either by meeting with me to go over our seminar discussions or by composing a writing response in addition to your three required ones

*Note: I realize that there may be circumstances in which you may not want to divulge the reasons for your absence. I will certainly respect your privacy. Even so, it's crucial that we make arrangements as soon as possible to ensure your continuation in this course and in the graduate program in general.

Three Reading Responses

Over the course of the semester, you will be responsible for composing **three (3) separate responses to any of the assigned readings**. Each response should be approximately 3-5 pages in length, and it should include a list of works cited (even if the only work you cite is the primary text). I will use your responses to plan our discussion sessions.

You are welcome to respond to **any of the assigned texts at any point of the semester**, so long as you produce three well written and well supported response papers by the end of the term. I ask, however, that you **upload each response to Canvas on the Monday evening (6pm) before your assigned reading is due to be discussed in class**. (For example, if you decide to write one of your papers in response to the second chapter of Hayden White's *The Content of the Form*, your paper will be due on the evening of Monday, 14 January – immediately before our scheduled discussion of this chapter. Likewise, if you choose to respond to Benjamin's essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," or to perform a close analysis of a passage from Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood*, your response will be due on the evening of 11 March – immediately before our scheduled 13 March discussion of Benjamin's works).

Here are some questions to consider as you compose each of your reading responses. You need not address all of them, and you certainly don't have to respond to them in the exact order in which I've posed them. Even so, you should strategically address some of them:

- What is the overarching argument of the assigned essay/chapter?
- What supporting arguments does the author offer in order to defend this greater thesis?
- What do you find especially convincing about the author's claims – and/or with what claims do you take exception? How, why?
- What is the larger historical/ cultural/disciplinary context in which the author is making their claim? What difference might it make to study their text in relation to this context?
- What significant critical interventions might this text be making, and in what field(s) and/or in relation to what historical/cultural moment?
- What further questions does this text invite – especially in relation to our larger collective investigation of children's literature and historical representation?
- How has this text informed your own thinking, especially in relation to your own research interests?
- What aspects of this text confuse or confound or disturb you? How, why?
- What aspects of this text would you most like to discuss in class? Why, how, and to what ends?

Children's Literature/Childhood Studies Research Project

One of the objectives of this course is to examine how research within the field of children's literature/childhood studies addresses larger theoretical concerns regarding history and its aesthetic representation. To this end, I invite you to perform a review of **either** (a) a monograph, edited collection, or a journal special issue that either explicitly or implicitly takes up the question of history and representation in children's literature/childhood studies **or** (b) a set of *at least* three (3) distinct scholarly articles or chapters that, once read together, address a common critical concern in the field of children's literature/childhood studies.

Your study will be due on 27 March, during which time you should be prepared to introduce it briefly (no more than 5 minutes) in class. It should be about 8-10 (double-spaced) pages in length, and it should address some of the following questions:

- ***If your chosen text is a scholarly monograph:***
 - What do you know about the author? What is the press and/or series in which their text was published? When? In what field(s) is it situated?
 - Into what scholarly conversations or debates does it make an intervention? What constitutes its central intervention, and what supporting claims does it make?
 - How are its chapters arranged? (e.g., thematically, chronologically, etc)? How do these chapters build up a larger framing narrative? To what extent is the organization of the text effective?
 - What arguments do you find most convincing? Surprising? Questionable? Incomplete? How and why?
 - What further research does this text invite – in both its immediate field(s) and perhaps in others?
 - What, overall, might this text contribute to our discussion of history and representation in children's literature/childhood studies?
- ***If your chosen text is an edited collection or a journal special issue:***
 - Who is the editor(s), and how may their scholarly interests inform this collection?
 - What is the press/ series/journal in which this collection was published? When? In what field(s) is it situated?
 - What overarching theoretical question or concern drives this collection, and to what extent does its arrangement of essays effectively address its overarching intervention?
 - Are there any contributions to this collection that particularly stand out to you – e.g., that especially address the concerns of the larger text, our seminar, or your own research?
 - How would you assess the larger scholarly value of this collection? E.g., is it worth reading in its entirety, or simply for one or two choice contributions? In what possible contexts might this collection be read?
 - How, overall, does this collection contribute to further thinking/research about history and representation in children's literature and/or childhood studies?
- ***If you choose to write a synthesis paper on at least 3 scholarly articles from different sources:***
 - This can be something of a "hybrid" project. That is, you can select texts from scholarly journals, edited collections, and chapters from monographs. Each of your

- selected texts, however, must address an overarching concern with history/historiography in relation to children's literature and/or childhood studies.
- Moreover, you should choose your texts so that they each address a specific theme or demonstrate the development of a larger disciplinary conversation or debate.
 - For example, you could choose a group of texts that variously address literary representations of a key topic (e.g. Black girlhood or the French Revolution); or that engage in a specific methodological approach (e.g., Marxist or queer theory); or that take up a specific concept (e.g., collective memory); or that address the works of a significant author of children's historical novels (e.g., M.T. Anderson); or that are written in response to a single text or set of related texts (e.g., *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* or adaptations of the King Arthur legend); or that address particular research methods or archival sources.
 - Once you identify your conceptual frame and choose/read at least texts that work within it, you should next arrange your essay so that it accounts for how your chosen texts speak to one another in order to place into relief even more refined questions and concerns.
 - E.g., dystopian tropes in Anderson's historical works; or intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class in Marxist readings of children's historical fiction.
 - What further interventions do your chosen texts invite, once read in conversation with one another?
 - Note: The shape of this paper will depend upon the number of sources you choose to address.
 - For example, if you decide to limit your paper to only three essays/chapters, I'll expect a particularly intensive theoretical engagement that is supported by close readings of your chosen texts.
 - However, if you decide to address more than 3 texts, then your study might be less intensive and rather more extensive. For example, you might want to imagine yourself as the editor of a prospective "reader" (e.g., a "Black Girlhood Reader" or a "Collective Memory and Children's Literature Reader"). How would you arrange these various texts within your "reader" and how would you account for such an arrangement in an editorial introduction? What topics/questions have your chosen essays not yet addressed, and thus what would you most like to include in a larger compendium?

Final Conference-length Paper

In lieu of a traditional seminar paper, I'd like for you to compose a brief (8-10 page) paper that you could have on hand to present at a professional conference. Ideally, you could propose and present this paper at a conference sponsored by a major academic organization (e.g., ChLA, IRSCL, ICAF, SCMS, MLA or a regional MLA, PCA/ACA, ASA, SALA, etc), or at a more specialized one (e.g., EGO! -- see the UPenn CFP server for updates) .

This paper must involve two major components: **First**, it must address either children's literature or concepts of childhood. **Second**, it should address the concept of history or memory in some way (e.g., representation of history or collective/individual memory; theories of history/memory; archival research/theory; studies of textual materiality, etc.).

Certainly, your conference paper could draw on the reading responses and research study you compose for this class. But it doesn't necessarily have to do so: you could just as well try out a fresh topic for this assignment. I only ask that your conference paper exemplify the rigorous work conducted by faculty and graduate students in our department: it should demonstrate clear, convincing, and original argumentation as well as study use of textual support and nimble writing.

There are three components of this assignment:

- **A proposal/abstract, due on 27 February, which includes the following:**
 - The title of your proposed paper
 - An abstract of no more than 500 words
 - Five (5) keywords
 - Your contributor bio (no more than 200 words)
 - A brief account of the conference(s) to which you'd like to send this abstract; in this account, you should describe the conference(s), its relevance to your research interests, and its/their list of criteria that inform the precise abstract you've submitted to me.
 - You are welcome to attach any CFPs for my perusal.
- **An oral presentation of your conference paper, on either 17 or 24 April**
 - I will arrange two (2) three (3)-person panels for each of these dates, and you will sign up for one of them in advance.
 - You should present a full draft of your conference paper on this scheduled date.
 - Your individual presentation should not exceed 20 minutes.
 - You should be prepared to field questions from your seminar participants after the conclusion of your panel.
 - In turn, you should be prepared to ask detailed, relevant, and constructive questions of both your fellow panel members and of members of other panels.
 - This counts toward both your presentation grade and your attendance/participation grade.
- **A final draft of your conference paper, due on Monday, 29 April.**
 - This final draft should take into account any useful recommendations you received during your presentation.
 - It should be no longer than 8-10 double-spaced pages, including:
 - Preliminary author info (name, institutional address, email/additional contact info)
 - Title
 - List of works cited
 - In turn, I will send each of you a detailed response to your conference paper – including recommendations for its future submission/performance – as well as an evaluation of your work throughout the semester.

Tentative Schedule

- 9 January:** Course introduction, preliminary framing discussion of *Octavian Nothing*
- 16 January:** Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, chapters 1 and 2
Michel DeCerteau, *The Writing of History*, chapters 1 and 2
- 23 January:** Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*
Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*
White, Chapter 3
- 30 January:** Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*
- 6 February:** Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History”
Pierre Nora, “Les Lieux de Mémoire”
White, Chapter 5
- 13 February:** Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*
- 20 February:** Erica Rand, *Ellis Island Snow Globe*
- 27 February:** Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*
Conference essay proposals due
- 6 March:** **No class – spring break (and not a moment too soon...)**
- 13 March:** Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
Berlin Childhood Around 1900
- 20 March:** Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*
Kenneth Kidd, “The Child, the Scholar, and the Children’s Literature Archive”
- 27 March:** Sara Schwebel, *Child Sized History: Fictions of the Past in US Classrooms*
Research study due: be prepared to discuss in class
- 3 April:** **No class: I’ll be at the ICAF conference. Please use this time to work on your final conference paper/presentation.**
- 10 April:** Joe Sutliff Sanders, *A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child*
- 17 April:** **Presentations**
- 24 April:** **Presentations**
- 29 April:** **[Monday] Final conference paper due by 6pm**