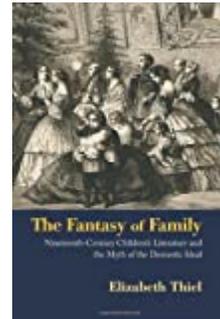




**Elizabeth Thiel.** *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal.* Routledge, 2008. xiii + 199 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-98035-7.



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## Representing the “Transnormative” Family, Critiquing Domesticity

The yearning for the loving, supportive, and stable family, as Elizabeth Thiel notes, is by no means unique to the Victorian era. Nevertheless, she suggests, it was the Victorians who elevated the image of such families to the status of cultural icon, something at once supposedly so natural that belonging to such a family was every human's right and so easily shattered that economics, temperament, location, and mortality (among other factors) ensured that in practice, such “rights” were rarely granted. In *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal*, Thiel examines how women writers of Victorian children's fiction approached what she terms the “transnormative” family, “identified primarily by the temporary or permanent absence of a natural parent or parents, often by the presence of a surrogate mother or father, who may or may not be related to the child, and, frequently, by the relocation of the child to an environment outside the 'natural' family home” (p. 8). Such families did not merely reflect common practice (as she observes, demographers of the Victorian family have shown that only by a

small majority did mid-Victorian households with intact nuclear families consisting only of fathers, mothers, and the children born to them outnumber households incorporating, say, stepparents, grandparents, additional children, or unmarried sisters-in-law); Thiel demonstrates that they also allowed authors to explore ways in which the middle-class domestic ideal contradicted reality.

Thiel's study is part of a substantial body of work produced over the last two decades that addresses the intersection of fiction and the lived experience of children and/or women. Some of these earlier examinations, such as Kimberley Reynolds's *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910* (1990), are more concerned with gender roles than with attitudes toward family; others, such as Penny Brown's *The Captured World: The Child and Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in England* (1993), Jacqueline Banerjee's *Through the Northern Gate: Childhood and Growing Up in British Fiction, 1719-1901* (1996), and Laura Peters's *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire* (2000),

consider texts for adults alongside or instead of texts for children; still others, including my own *Family Ties in Victorian England* (2007), examine representations of family drawn as much from nonfiction as from fiction. By limiting her investigation to nonstandard families, a small group of stories by a still smaller group of women writers, and particular types of children's fiction—the waif tale, stepmother fiction, and foster-family stories—Thiel is able to provide considerable textual detail about works that in many cases will be unfamiliar even to scholars working in this area, and to suggest ways in which the attitudes on display in these works may differ from those apparent in fiction written by male authors or for an adult audience. Thus, save for a few sweeping claims that may start the reader searching for exceptions, such as the assertion that “If the angel in the house represented the ideal of womanhood for the Victorians, the figure of the spinster was its antithesis” (p. 104), *The Fantasy of Family* generally avoids the trap of claiming to illuminate some overarching “Victorian” mindset. Indeed, its specificity is one of its major virtues.

After an introduction outlining and contextualizing the argument, the body of the volume begins with a theoretical chapter reviewing sociological discussions of the Victorian family, historical reasons for the disruption of nuclear families, and literary-critical research on adult fiction, sketching the extent to which children's literature conforms or does not conform to the adult pattern. This chapter situates the remainder of the book but relies heavily on earlier scholarly work; while useful, it is less illuminating than the later, more text-based chapters.

Chapter 2 examines waif tales by Florence Montgomery and the pseudonymous authors “Hesba Stretton” and “Brenda” (who was the subject of Thiel's 2002 doctoral dissertation at the University of Roehampton, Surrey). Whereas many nineteenth-century texts presented the street child as dangerously criminal, Thiel notes that “For the authors of street-arab tales, the child was inherently innocent and both needed and deserved to find a better life beyond the slime, ooze, and depravity of the slums” (p. 49). Such a “better life” necessarily entailed the child's removal from his or her original home and insertion into a setting that would more closely resemble the middle-class domestic ideal; the newly constructed family thus represents “a moral and religious sanctuary that far outweighs life with natural kin” (p. 59). This point has been made by earlier researchers; where Thiel's discussion becomes particularly helpful is in its juxtaposition with her discussion of middle-class families that

likewise fall short of the ideal. Her exploration in chapter 3 of stepmother tales by Charlotte Yonge, Caroline Birley, Lucy Lane Clifford, and Harriet Childe-Pemberton leads her to conclude that “even for the middle classes, the domestic ideal is largely untenable without compromise” (p. 71). Stepmothers in these stories may be pleasant and sincerely devoted to the well-being of their husbands' children, but even when they appear to succeed in creating a simulacrum of the model home, it is always and forever only an imitation.

Similarly, chapter 4, in which the principal authors are Mary Louisa Molesworth, Childe-Pemberton, Catherine Sinclair, and “Brenda,” looks at depictions of the child-rearing provided by aunts and uncles and finds that such fictions “sometimes hint that the domestic space can be severely disrupted by the presence of extended family members,” and that like stepmothers, aunts and uncles “cannot ensure the creation of an environment that consistently and satisfactorily adheres to the dictates of the domestic ideal” (p. 100). While Victorian fiction by male authors such as Charles Dickens, Sheridan LeFanu, and Robert Louis Stevenson contains some reprehensible uncles and, as in the case of Betsey Trotwood, some admirable aunts, Thiel shows that this situation is often reversed when the author is female and writing for children; aunts are typically unsympathetic or misguided, while uncles are delightful but, at the same time, may have rejected marriage, the begetting of children, and stereotypical male gender attributes even while involving themselves with their nephews and nieces. This chapter, which contains Thiel's subtlest and most interesting readings of texts, pays particular attention to what she sees as her authors' covert subversion of Victorian domestic ideology, a subversion that may be concealed beneath an apparently idealistic surface.

As symbolic “surrogate mother[s] with responsibilities for both educating and edifying future generations” (p. 128), the authors with whom Thiel concerns herself participate in something of the same enterprise as the stepmothers and mothering aunts of their fictions. Hence chapter 5, which considers the authors' narrative voices and public personas, argues that “their influence was potentially as duplicitous as that of the surrogate carers whom they often implicitly, or explicitly, criticized” (p. 130), and that they often “guided their readers to question, rather than collude with, prescribed doctrines” of domesticity (p. 134). Particularly through their double address to child and adult readers, their fiction allows glimpses of ambiguity and incongruity, suggesting that

the artifice by which apparent “naturalness” is achieved extends not only to the writing of fiction but also to the construction of the family ideal itself. But as the conclusion to Thiel’s study points out, the Victorian family myth remains potent within the culture offered to child consumers today, from toys such as “The Family Love Doll House” and its iconic nuclear “family of man, woman, young girl, smaller boy, baby and dog” (p. 158) to Harry Potter’s longing for his lost—and in Lily’s case, implausibly perfect—parents.

Like all too many academic books these days, *The Fantasy of Family* would have benefited from more assiduous copyediting. Errors range from repeated misspellings (Philippe Ari s’s first name appears in the text, bibliog-

raphy, and index as “Phillipe,” while Sara Crewe’s is consistently rendered as “Sarah”) to problems of usage (“As Daniel lays dying” [p. 56]) to small matters of fact (the General in Ethel Turner’s *Seven Little Australians* [1894] is Judy’s half-brother, not her stepbrother [p. 183]; Clifford is said to have married in 1975 rather than 1875 [p. 172]; Yonge was one of two children of a retired military officer, not, like her father, “the seventh child of a Devonshire clergyman” [p. 176]). Minor blemishes aside, however, Thiel’s is a sensible, low-key, and clearly presented investigation, distinguished particularly by its knowledgeable selection of texts. Researchers interested in Victorian children’s literature, women writers, and the history of the cult of domesticity should benefit from reading it.

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