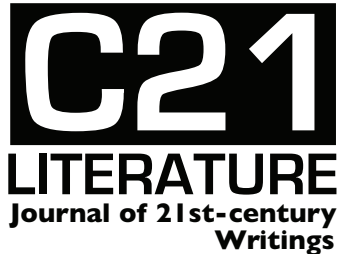




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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Review: *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* by Sandra Dinter (London: Routledge, 2019). ISBN 9780367361938, 222 pages. RRP £115.00

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How are constructivist approaches to childhood evident in contemporary English literature (1980s-2010s) written for adults? What distinguishes contemporary childhood fiction from previous portrayals of childhood, and why is the genre currently so popular? These are the central questions of Sandra Dinter's *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* (2019), an ambitious, complex, yet much-needed project that constitutes 'the first systematic account of childhood in the contemporary English novel for the adult reader' (4). Dinter's work expertly fills a gap in current childhood studies research which has neglected childhood in books for adults post-1980, with 'children's literature criticism still hold[ing] institutional authority over the topic of childhood' (ibid). Indeed, Dinter efficiently maps childhood across contemporary English novels for adults by tying together theories of childhood based on Foucauldian discourse theory, English sociocultural and political history, and literary analysis, in what is a must-read for scholars of childhood. Yet most of all, *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* succeeds by critiquing previous works in this vein, which unconsciously reinforce the structures they claim to critique, most often in claiming that one approach to childhood is more essential or 'natural' than another. *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* is Dinter's first monograph, which

expertly ties together two of her principle interests – childhood and contemporary English fiction – to form an eloquent and cutting-edge study.

In the Introduction, 'The Rise of the Contemporary Childhood Novel', Dinter initially guides the reader through the importance of her project, particularly in terms of the increasing popularity and diversity of the childhood novel from the 1980s onwards; child characters in contemporary fiction more often 'diverge from their predominantly innocent and naïve predecessors' and are more diverse in terms of 'ethnic backgrounds and sexuality' (3). The Introduction equally serves to carve out the unique space that Dinter's study occupies. Previous studies have been more restricted to representations of *children* rather than discussing childhood itself, an area where Dinter succeeds by drawing on the foundational theories of childhood from the beginning. More recent works have better emphasised the necessary contextual factors involved in studying childhood in literature for adults, yet overall Dinter observes the same 'great works' (5) and periods recurring. Thus, the book also aims to pick up study where other scholars often finish their studies, by beginning with the 1980s and examining texts into the 2010s. Overall, the Introduction coherently sets out the parameters of an ambitious and complex study in a fashion that makes the different contexts involved effortlessly accessible.

Chapter Two, 'Dismantling Constructivisms of Childhood', examines the theories of childhood that are vital to the study. Here, Dinter begins by acknowledging one of the main tensions within childhood studies: the debate surrounding the extent to which childhood is constructed, and what might be considered its true 'essence'. It is this observation in particular that becomes a key highlight of Dinter's work throughout, which works to expose some of biases of previous studies that, as previously stated, simply reject one 'essence' of childhood for another one considered more favourable. With this in mind, Dinter equally explores common misunderstandings of Foucauldian discourse theory, clarifying complex material with consistent ease and sophistication. These misunderstandings, Dinter emphasises, arise partially because everyone is or has been a child, meaning we are generally more attached to essentialist notions: 'childhood is, in this sense, seemingly the object of everybody's supposed

expertise' and thus 'constitutes a different form of alterity' (24). Dinter's approach is novel in this regard, as she draws on Foucauldian discourse theory to present childhood as *entirely constructed*, intelligently building on and critiquing previous ideas to create a convincing argument. Indeed, Dinter argues that 'childhood is [...] caught up with notions of familiarity, intuition and universality, [meaning] it is difficult to conceive of it as a "thoroughly" constructed identity' (ibid).

The third chapter, 'Constructions of Childhood in Late Modern England, 1980s–2010s', is the final chapter to explore the foundational parameters of the study before turning to literary analysis. This chapter explores the historical context surrounding the focal decades, investigating in particular the political history of England and the diversification of family structures partly due to women's liberation movements, and how these have affected conceptions of childhood. '[T]he aim', Dinter writes, 'is to outline how childhood is constructed discursively and institutionally during this period and to fathom why and in which forms it has received so much attention in recent English culture and literature' (42). Dinter initially does this by exploring the transition from 'industrial society' to 'risk society' and how this leads to a questioning of traditional structures such as the nuclear family, with 'formerly fixed social roles' becoming 'subject to scrutiny' (45). She then explores the concept of risk society in relation to childhood, characterised by competitive parenting practices, and institutions such as OFSTED (The Office for Standards in Education). The remaining half of the chapter considers the English political landscape over the focal decades, considering concepts of childhood under Thatcher (1979–1990), the Major government (1990–1997), New Labour (1997–2010) and the Cameron-Clegg coalition (2010–2015). Through each of these segments, Dinter traces important policies and events affecting children, concerning for example juvenile delinquency, child protection and education. This chapter expertly ties policy to broader, prevalent ideas about childhood at the time, using important events in English history to drive home their significance. The chapter provides a sound foundation for the textual analysis to come, and provides a useful point of reference that emphasises the potential political impact of the focal texts.

Dinter then explores her chosen contemporary English texts in the six following chapters, with a selection of novels each tackling issues of childhood in different ways. These texts stretch beyond the literary canon that Dinter explains dominates literary discussion of childhood. The selected texts are approached chronologically, and include *The Child in Time* by Ian McEwan (1987); *The Fifth Child* by Doris Lessing (1988); *The Children of Men* by P. D. James (1992); *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby (1998); *Night Waking* by Sarah Moss (2011); and finally *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman (2011). Throughout each of these chapters, Dinter's analysis remains clear and enlightening, with the Foucauldian discursive approach used to reveal the interplay between constructivist and essentialist approaches within presentations of childhood.

Chapter Four, 'Approaching Childhood as a Construct', analyses the earliest text chosen by Dinter: *The Child in Time* by Ian McEwan. This chapter sets up the sharp quality of analysis that continues through the following chapters. The argument is convincing as well as being nuanced and novel, revealing the constructivism of childhood as it is evident within *The Child in Time*, whilst equally showing that McEwan's novel returns to essentialist notions, an observation that has been somewhat lacking in previous analyses of this work. Dinter summarises this argument as one that insists that 'childhood is not a discursive construct, but rather, discourse is enforced upon an already existent "real" child and distorts what nature intends for the child's development' (68). Instead, Dinter argues that the novel 'is critical of and simultaneously perpetuates such essentialist constructions of childhood' (ibid). The chapter is effective in its argument that the various narrative techniques and plots employed by McEwan emphasises childhood as construction, for example the marginalisation of child characters within the narrative, only to be transformed during the final chapters of the novel to favour an essentialist image of Romantic childhood innocence in a birth scene. Equally, published against a Thatcherite political backdrop, the chapter points to the politicisation of childhood through the use of a 'handbook' for childcare, and offers specific references to Conservative ideas and policies during

the Thatcher government, 'envision[ing] a return to traditional family structures' and thus 'echo[ing] Margaret Thatcher's famous appeal to return to Victorian Values' (72).

Chapter Five moves onto Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* in a chapter entitled 'Radical Constructivism'. This chapter approaches a novella that more thoroughly questions essentialist notions of childhood. As Dinter emphasises, the novella contrasts with *The Child in Time* in that *The Fifth Child* provides a more ambiguous perspective on an 'abnormal' child, and one that is left open at the end. As Dinter explains: 'Ben's ambiguous position serves as the novella's route into a metaconstructivist portrayal of childhood', and Ben 'functions as an aporia which cannot be solved by the special discourses which construct "normal" and "abnormal" childhoods' (88). In this sense, as Dinter confirms, the novella is genuinely radical. Dinter's analysis defies previous scholarship relating to the novella in that she aims to show how attempts to categorise non-conforming children according to medical discourse are in themselves evidence of the 'essentialist' notions of childhood. This chapter is a highlight in Dinter's scholarship, as it reveals the true potential of her discursive approach to childhood; in her analysis of *The Fifth Child*, Dinter exposes the weaknesses in previous childhood scholarship and is able to present childhood in its truly, absolutely constructed sense, even extending to those institutions seen as less invested in essentialist notions, for example medical discourses around child development.

Chapter Six analyses an atypical P. D. James work, the futuristic pseudo-dystopian *The Children of Men*, which represents a marked distance from the otherwise relatively 'realist' texts analysed in the book. This chapter engages in discussions of reproductive futurity, queer potential, neoliberal models of childhood and Conservative policy. In a chapter entitled 'The Constructed Child as a Counter Model', Dinter explains that, like McEwan's novel, it primarily conceptualises childhood whilst distancing itself from representations of 'real children', who do not appear until the end of the novel. Like *The Child in Time*, Dinter explains, the book at first challenges essentialism by presenting concepts of childhood that are not based on the current existence

of any 'real children' (for example through diary entries and not with the inclusion of actual child characters). Yet, it reinstates essentialism at the end with the miraculous birth of a child, a scene which 'construes its child character as a promise of salvation and an emblem of futurity' (122). With this birth comes the reinstating of the nuclear family as a source of hope and normality, and equally the return of normative gender roles. This chapter again expertly balances political ideologies affecting childhood with complex theory and sharp literary analysis. Dinter's work, as she mentions herself, expands previous, fleeting analysis of the novel and in so doing she explores it in a depth that does justice to the true complexity of the issues involved. Dinter concludes the chapter by insisting on this complexity as it appears within the focal text: 'James's novel suggests that hegemonic constructions of childhood and futurity are inescapable. Whether [the novel] articulates this point on a critical meta level or merely serves as a case in point for this intricate issue remains open to debate' (124).

Chapter Seven continues the book's trend of using a range of novels of different genres and statuses in literary criticism, moving this time to a more popular novel that Dinter remarks is often viewed suspiciously by critics. In 'Performing Childhood' Dinter analyses *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby, which presents a performative vision of childhood that engages with discussions about changing family structures. Dinter presents the novel as emblematic of the commercialism of 1990s Britain, showing how this theme remains vital to Hornby's portrayal of 'correct' childhood; this is a vision that Dinter expertly shows is also key to the novel's destruction of queer potential in its central child character: *About a Boy* 'is effectively a novel about the successful internalisation of norms at the expense of what we may call the initial "queer" potential of the central characters' (134). Dinter's argument in this chapter is sharp, nuanced and well-observed. She argues that whilst the novel's portrayal of childhood as a performative act and its portrayal of a range of family practices both seem refreshing, the novel equally upholds the values it challenges. It presents only one performance of male childhood as 'acceptable' and 'does not open up the possibilities for a pluralism of childhood', but rather 'foresees a singular and preconceived path' for the protagonist, Marcus (136). It equally seems to defend normative family

practices in its pathologisation of a single mother character, who is presented as having 'mental health issues and "hysterical" tendencies' (139), even trying to commit suicide at one point. This chapter is another highlight of Dinter's work, tying together theories of childhood, consumerism, British history and politics and literary analysis effortlessly and in a way that is both enjoyable to read and accessible.

In Chapter Eight, 'Historiographical Reflections on Childhood', Dinter analyses *Night Waking* (2011) by Sarah Moss, a novel that has received little scholarly attention and whose vision of childhood is told through a combination of contemporary and historical narratives; these are complemented by epigraphs citing developmental psychology and a narrator who, herself, writes about historical constructions of childhood. Dinter explains that '[b]y providing an insight into her research on childhood and quoting works from the fields of developmental psychology, history and psychoanalysis, *Night Waking* introduces its readers to the idea that childhood is a construct' (146). Dinter equally shows that *Night Waking* questions the unchallenged truths behind such subjects as history and developmental psychology, which claim to have authority over childhood but are equally constructed. Yet, like some of the previous novels discussed, it ultimately returns to an essentialist position as the narrative progresses, partly in that the protagonist's conception of a 'real child' eventually comes in the use of medical discourses to identify the child's heritage. Indeed, 'despite this strong poststructuralist impetus, an essentialist notion of the "real" child nevertheless underpins the narrative' (146). Dinter also highlights the late modern parenting anxieties that permeate the novel, including the balancing of career and childcare, which are conceived of as two incompatible arenas. It is in this chapter that Dinter's exploration of narrative devices particularly shines, in her analysis of a number of competing forms that contribute to a specific vision of childhood, and her consideration of the historical variability of childhood.

Chapter Nine, 'The Limit of Constructivism', is the final chapter to analyse a novel, this time with a focus on *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman. Kelman's novel depicts a marginalised, child immigrant protagonist who recently moved to Britain from Ghana. Dinter's argument in this chapter is another highlight of her work. In



a particularly compelling section, Dinter draws attention to how Kelman's text uses an essentialist vision of childhood innocence to positive effect, to evoke sympathy for the plight of the child protagonist. Thus, Kelman is able to draw attention to the marginalisation of children of colour, immigrant children, and children in poverty particularly against the backdrop of 'Broken Britain' evoked by the Conservatives in the 2000s and 2010s: '[a]s Harri [the protagonist] affirms the idea of the child's "natural" innocence, he encourages the reader's compassion and thus functions as a strategic ethical anchor for the novel' (169). It equally challenges the pervasive notion of the authentic and credible child's voice in literature, which are more often hinged upon adult ideals of childhood, and Dinter equally discusses the supposed 'necessity' of a so-called 'authentic' voice in texts with a first-person child narrator. Dinter also brings into question the legitimacy of a white man telling a Ghanaian child's story. This chapter is enlightening in an age that more and more prioritises challenging the racist structures in Western societies, interrogating how these are portrayed in contemporary literature as directly influencing conceptions and experiences of childhood.

The Epilogue of Dinter's work, finally, provides an apt summary of the various approaches to childhood shown in the six novels analysed. Dinter concludes that the texts analysed generally challenge essentialist notions of childhood, and view childhood as a construct, though the extent to which this is done varies. The key variables that she attributes to these different perspectives are firstly narrative structures and secondly endings. The former, she explains, is an important consideration in examining constructs of childhood from a Foucauldian perspective, especially in relation to what consequences this choice has for the narrative. Endings, Dinter observes, often serve to re-establish essentialist notions favouring patriarchy and the nuclear family. Whether these techniques are used consciously or not by the authors cannot be fully discerned, but the effect that they have is still significant. Dinter ends her study on an important note, emphasising the vital insights provided by a discursive approach to childhood whilst equally explaining the difficulties involved, both in terms of finding an 'absolutely' constructivist approach and in terms of the questions that such an approach creates.

In summary, Sandra Dinter's *Childhood in the Contemporary English Novel* is vital for scholars of childhood, and certainly for those with a focus on childhood in contemporary Britain. The work brings together complex socio-political ideas with vital theory to create a powerful overview of contemporary British childhood, and expertly guides the reader through the complex mechanisms that reflect this in literature. Moreover, Dinter expands on previous work by both examining texts from new perspectives and by incorporating a range of different texts, some of which have received little scholarly attention.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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