The Representation of Cruel Children in Popular Texts
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Much has been written about the subject of cruelty against children, but this volume of collected essays seeks to focus critical attention instead on the representation of the cruel child. As a cultural sign, the cruel child lies at the nexus of many different and competing discourses that construct the child and childhood. By examining the cruel child in many kinds of popular texts we can sharpen our understanding of the changing nature of the representation of the child.

In the eighteenth century, Romanticism tended to construct the child as innocent, while the evangelical religious tradition tended to construct the child as born into sin, as a site of chaos that must be disciplined and controlled. In the nineteenth century, however, the rise of the social sciences introduced the nature vs. nurture argument, which problematized the child’s identity as one that is shaped by both hereditary biology and material environments.

In terms of the representation of the child in cultural texts, the romantic view of the child has tended to dominate in the years after the so-called golden age of children’s literature. The rise of the imaginative child and imaginative texts for children meant that the child became a figure idealized for its innocence, curiosity, and wonderment and that childhood became a discrete period of life in which the imagination was to be developed and indulged before the mind forged manacles of society could corrupt it. The cruel child, therefore, has tended to be constructed as the opposite of the idealized, imaginative child.

But the purpose of this volume is to examine the ways in which the cruel child is a complex construction, one that often acts as a kind of shadow figure for modern society. This is evident in horror narratives, for example, in which the evil child becomes the married couple’s worst nightmare sent to destroy their chance for a peaceful domesticity. The child is the figure that possesses the ability to roll back the clock and plunge society into a pre-modern time of magic and superstition. It is also evident in bullying narratives in which the innocent child is victimized by an aggressor who is representative of all that a just and inclusive society abhors. The cruel child is again the site at which modern society threatens to unravel into violence and savagery.

As a shadow figure, however, the cruel child also represents the possibility of power and agency, the possibility of transforming from innocent victim into powerful social actor. In horror narratives, again as an example, the victimized child can suddenly unleash great supernatural forces to exact revenge on his or her tormentors. The cruel child is not simply the opposite of the innocent child but that which is suppressed when innocence is allowed to overwhelm the child’s identity.

We welcome essays that explore the complexity of childhood cruelty in popular texts (books, film, television, digital media, etc.) produced in any time period and any nation. Please submit either 500-word abstracts, conference papers, or full articles by June 15/2015 to cparkes@lakeheadu.ca and mflegel@lakeheadu.ca.
Possible topics include:

**Kids are Cruel:** The assumption that children and young people are naturally cruel is a commonly expressed one, and we invite submissions that unpack how childhood is constructed in such a way as to make it compatible with cruelty.

**The Bad Seed:** William March’s 1954 novel focuses on the experiences of a mother whose child is “born bad.” In what ways does this trope continue to circulate in popular texts?

**Child Villains:** How do texts, both for adults and for children, represent child antagonists/villains? Are such characters simply linked to villainy more broadly, or are they portrayed in ways that highlight cruelty and wrong-doing in ways specific to childhood?

**Cruelty to Animals:** It is often assumed both that children are naturally attached to animals and that children are naturally cruel to animals. How are representations of child cruelty to animals linked to discussions about child nature?

**Children in Horror:** The evil or possessed child is a common trope in horror films. Are such representations spurred on by fears of child depravity, or do they simply capitalize on the assumed innocence of children, producing horror through the depiction of “unnatural” child violence?

**Dystopia and State Violence:** Dystopic fictions for young people are incredibly common and popular. While most texts focus on children as objects of state violence, many, including *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale*, represent children empowered by repressive regimes to enact their own violence against other children. How do texts that focus on the collaboration of children and young people with oppressive states contribute to narratives of childhood and youth more generally?

**War and Colonialism:** Children are sometimes made unwilling participants in war, forced into committing acts of cruelty, but they are sometimes represented as willing participants engaging in violence as a rite of passage or as part of a heroic adventure. How does the figure of the child operate in narratives of war and conquest?

**Cruelty, Competition, and Commerce:** To what extent are children raised for competition in the marketplace? To what extent are they taught to win by aggressively outperforming their peers?

**Bullying, Cyber-Bullying, Shunning, and Social Exclusion:** Are bullying and social exclusion distinct features of childhood or are they a normative part of culture scapegoated onto children? To what extent is the cruelty associated with bullying also a part of the maintaining of peer groups and the control of social capital in the digital age?

**Sibling Rivalry and Domestic Violence:** Domestic violence is generally constructed as that which happens between adults within the home, with abuse focused on children as victims of violence. However, do representations of violence within the home also focus upon the role of children as the perpetrators of, or participants in, violent relations?

**Criminality and Juvenile Delinquency:** While the nineteenth century saw the growing belief that children involved in crime could not fully understand the consequences of their actions, the late 20th century saw increased demand for them be charged as adults. What lies behind such a remarkable shift and what does it tell us about the position of the child in society?
Gender and Sexuality: To what extent do representations of cruel young people intersect with social constructions of gender and sexuality? Are cruel boys constructed differently than cruel girls? Is cruelty tied to nascent or developing sexuality and the concomitant othering/excluding of those who challenge heteronormativity?