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Pedophobia and the Ideal Child-Adult in Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962)

Considered a modern classic, Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962) builds on the tradition of early twentieth-century orphan narratives to work through modern experiences of childhood and adulthood. In this historical fantasy, the wealthy Bonnie Willoughby and her poor cousin Sylvia are left in the care of a pedophobic governess, Miss Slighcarp, who conspires with the predatory Mr. Grimshaw to dispose of the children so she can inherit the Willoughbys' wealth. The children are forced into lives of hard labor when Miss Slighcarp ends their schooling, takes their toys, and eventually abandons them in an abusive home for orphan girls. Bonnie and Sylvia therefore lose the privileges of childhood, but by using their wits and pluck (and with the help of a goose boy) they survive their ordeal and ultimately triumph over their abusers. Aiken's novel implies ambivalence about both childhood and adulthood. While the novel features the mistreatment and abuse of children by child-hating adults, suggesting adult frustration with the privileges of what Viviana Zelizer calls the modern "sacred child," the generally unhappy grownups suggest discontent with the state of modern adulthood as well. Surpassing the limitations of both conventional childhood and adulthood, child protagonists in children's literature like Bonnie and Sylvia function as hybrid figures that combine the physical youth and optimism of youngsters with the agency and canniness more typical of maturity, offering an ideal fantasy for readers across the age span. The novel suggests that we can understand children's literature as defined in part by its ambivalence about both childhood and adulthood, expressed potently in narratives of pedophobic adults and their empowered child antagonists.