Questioning the Canon: Rethinking the Golden Age of Children’s Literature

The “Golden Age” of children’s literature, which features British and American texts produced during the mid-19th century into the early 20th century, introduced readers to enduring characters and situations that are firmly established in our cultural imagination. The phrase “the Golden Age of children’s literature” brings to mind such canonical texts as *Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan,* and *The Jungle Book,* and the prevailing rhetoric has long been that these texts are beloved and classic. However, Golden Age children’s books reveal a context that was rife with conflict and exclusion, and critics rightly question the validity of teaching such texts today. Indeed, these texts feel increasingly out of place in contemporary conversations—they often exalt a white, middle-to-upper class hegemonic perspective and perpetuate racist and sexist caricatures.

Calls for more diversity in children’s literature have drawn attention to the tendency to revisit the same canonical texts when teaching and writing about the Golden Age. These texts, however, are only a small sample of the literature available featuring and written for children during this era. As scholars from Michelle H. Martin to Kate Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane have shown, children’s literature during this time period was not exclusively white-centric. Additionally, many contemporary revisions and adaptations now seek to provide new perspectives on Golden Age texts, addressing or amplifying voices that are missing in the source text.

This panel invites submissions that interrogate and seek alternatives to canonical Golden Age children’s literature. What lies beyond the canonical? Whose voices are missing from texts like *Alice, The Wind in the Willows,* or *What Katy Did,* and where can we find these voices? How can we reconsider the canon of the Golden Age and broaden the selection of texts that immediately come to mind? Indeed, how useful is the term “canon” in an era when recuperative work and revision challenge prevailing perceptions of well-known texts?

Possible topics include but are not limited to:
- The circulation of texts by Indigenous people and people of color during the Golden Age time period
- 19th-century texts that resist the valorization of the Romantic child
- Less well-known but still canonical work
- What we call “the Golden Age of children’s literature” is really “the Golden Age of Anglophone children’s literature.” How might literature for children written outside the
United States, Canada, Great Britain, or Ireland challenge and/or affirm hegemonic perceptions of the Golden Age canon?
- How do we best teach what is missing from canonical texts? Do we need to teach the source texts in order to teach the revisions?
- How do the characteristics usually associated with the Golden Age appear in noncanonical texts?
- How do contemporary revisions of canonical texts revise problems with the source material?
- What is the role of digital spaces and fan engagement in revising Golden Age texts?
- What makes these texts worthy of being deemed part of a “Golden Age,” and who gets to make that determination?
- What does the term “canon” mean for contemporary and future children’s literature scholarship?

Please submit 500-word proposals and a short bio (75-100 words) to jillcoste@ufl.edu by March 1, 2020.