

“Do You Think You Could Write One as Good?”: Hilda Conkling, Child Poet

Of all the child authors who created a publishing sensation in the 1920s (Daisy Ashford, Opal Whiteley, Nathalia Crane), Hilda Conkling arguably achieved the most lasting success with *Poems by a Little Girl*. With a preface by Amy Lowell and praised by Louis Untermeyer as the “most gifted of them all,” her poems were widely anthologized mid-century and continue to be represented in collections today. The figure of the child author is beset with contradictions, as explored by Myra Cohn Livingston and Carolyn Halverson. Adult readers turn to child authors to reveal “the spirit of childhood” but reject work that fails to match preconceived notions of child sensibilities, casting doubt on its alleged juvenile origins; they treat the child author simultaneously as representative of all children and as an extraordinary prodigy, wink knowingly at the child’s unknowing humor, and extol the child writer’s innocence even as they exploit this innocence by publication.

I argue that Hilda’s success is owed to her avoiding some of these contradictions. Her mother’s account of the poems’ creation as “told” to her is credible; the poems have an unaffected simplicity that appeals directly to children; although later she regretted some loss of childhood freedom, she emerged largely unscathed. But she embodies a different contradiction in the figure of the child poet. Should young readers feel inspired to become Hilda Conklings or daunted by the gap between their poetic gifts and hers? Blanch Jennings Thompson’s 1925 collection of poetry for children *Silver Pennies* presents Hilda’s poem “Fairies” with this challenge: “*This poem was written a little girl only six years old. Do you think you could write one as good?*” Is this a friendly invitation to young readers to pick up their own pen (or convince their own parents to serve as their scribes)? Or does it generate competitive self-doubt? While Livingston bewails the publication of child poets as propagating the myth that all childish scribbles merit admiration, a contrary worry is that marveling at Hilda Conkling exacerbates competition among children (and their ambitious parents) – thus compromising the vision of childhood celebrated in the poems themselves.