The Southern Quarterly

Volume 54
Number 3 *Children in the South*

Article 2

August 2017

Guest Editor's Introduction

Mark I. West
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Guest Editor's Introduction

Mark I. West

The idea of devoting a special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* to children in the South is tied to two important anniversaries related to the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi. The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the de Grummond Collection took place in in 2016. The founder of this collection, Lena de Grummond, started teaching courses on children's literature at The University of Southern Mississippi's School of Library Science in 1966. She wanted to introduce her students to original manuscripts and illustrations related to children's books so that they could gain insights into the creative processes of authors and illustrators. This goal led her to solicit original materials from children's authors and illustrators, and the contributions formed the foundation for what is now widely recognized as one of America's leading research centers for the study of children's literature. In 1967 de Grummond and Warren Tracey, the university librarian for The University of Southern Mississippi, decided to create a children's book festival to display and celebrate the original works that various children's authors and illustrators had donated to the collection. Now known as the Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival in honor of an early and generous supporter of the festival, this annual event is marking the fiftieth anniversary of its founding in 2017.

In several ways, *The Southern Quarterly* and the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection are sister institutions. Both are associated with The University of Southern Mississippi, both came into existence in the 1960s, and both promote and support research related to Southern culture. Given these commonalities, *The Southern Quarterly* is celebrating the fiftieth anniversaries of the founding of the de Grummond Collection and the Fay. B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival by publishing a special issue on children

in the South with a particular emphasis on Southern children's literature. However, this issue also includes articles about works for adult readers in which child characters play significant roles, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Thomas Wolfe's *The Lost Boy.* Whether they are writing for children or adults, Southern authors often have much to say about the experience of growing up in the South. Scattered throughout this issue are numerous visual images that are connected to the various essays and articles. These images provide their own valuable glimpses and insights into the lives of Southern children.

This special issue begins with Jonathan Alexander's autobiographical essay "Outside Within: Growing Up Gay in the South." Alexander holds the title of Chancellor's Professor of English, Education, and Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Irvine. He also serves as the editor of *College Composition and Communication.* His essay, however, deals with his growing-up years in Louisiana during the 1970s and '80s. In his essay, he examines how being gay in the South shaped his childhood and adolescence. As the title of his essay suggests, he grew up feeling conflicted about his Southern heritage. Although he often felt like an outsider at the various schools he attended, he still had a sense that he somehow fit within the larger context of Southern culture. Throughout his essay, Alexander explores how this tension defined his experience of growing up gay in the South. The sense of tension that Alexander addresses in his essay is in many ways specific to particulars of his childhood and adolescence, but many other young people growing up in the South also experience tensions and conflicts related to Southern history and culture.

In "Beyond the Big House: Southern Girlhoods in Louise Clarke Pyrnelle's *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot*," Laura Hakala writes about the underlying tensions involving racial and gender roles in Louise Clarke Pyrnelle's *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot: Or, Plantation Child-Life.* Published in 1882, Pyrnelle's novel is set on a Mississippi plantation in the 1850s. Hakala analyzes the relationship between the three white girls mentioned in the title of the novel and three African American slave girls who also live on the plantation. Through considering how this novel romanticizes plantation life, Hakala detects how Pyrnelle reinforces agrarian and white supremacist versions of Southern girlhood. Hakala also delves into conflicts that the girls experience concerning gender role expectations. Hakala argues that plantation spaces produce fluid gender role expectations for Southern girls. In researching and writing this article, Hakala draws heavily on the resources housed in the de Grummond Collection.

Anita Tarr addresses the changing nature of life in rural Florida during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in her article "Preserving

Southern Culture: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling*." As Tarr makes clear, Rawlings did not grow up in rural Florida, but after she moved to Cross Creek, Florida, in 1928, she developed a great respect for the culture and values associated with this part of the South. In her analysis of *The Yearling,* Tarr shows how Rawling celebrated the agrarian lifestyle associated with rural Florida while at the same time acknowledging that this lifestyle was at odds with the social and economic changes that were gradually transforming Florida. In her article, Tarr explains how this tension shapes the experiences of Jody, the young protagonist from *The Yearling.*

Jan Susina's essay "Alabama Bound: Reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* While Southern" is personal reflection on the connections between his childhood years in Birmingham, Alabama, and his reading of Lee's classic novel. As Susina discusses in his essay, Lee's novel has provided him with a framework for better understanding the conflicts and tensions that shaped his own Southern childhood. He explains how the insights he gained from Lee's novel helped him formulate his rejection of the racism and segregation that he witnessed as he was growing up in Birmingham. He also draws connections between Lee's novel and those aspects of his Southern childhood and adolescence that he still embraces even though he no longer lives in the South.

In her article "Lost Childhood in Southern Literature," Paula Gallant Eckard delves into a theme that runs through much of Southern literature—the theme of lost childhood. Eckard examines how this theme is reflected in the fiction of three Southern writers: Thomas Wolfe's *The Lost Boy*; Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster*; and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones.* These are not works of children's literature, but they all feature young characters and protagonists. Although these children are from the South, they experience a sense of rootlessness. They find themselves in a world that's changing in ways that they cannot easily process or understand. They not only feel alienated in terms of their immediate environments, but they also possess no clear sense of the future or what lies ahead for them. As Eckard discusses in her article, these lost children are in danger of being overwhelmed by the tensions and upheaval associated with changes that occurred in the South over the past century.

Tina L. Hanlon's article "Struggles for Life, Liberty, and Land: Appalachian Mining Communities in Children's Literature" focuses on children's and young adult books that are set in Appalachia from the early twentieth century to the present. They deal with conflicts between mountain communities and the coal industry, which provides jobs that often cause injury, death, economic hardship, and pollution. The young protagonists in these books have a deep identification with the land where they live. For many of these characters,

when the land is despoiled by the coal companies, they feel as if they, too, have suffered a loss. For the most part, however, these young characters do not seem like the lost children that Eckard discusses in her article. Hanlon argues that for these child characters, their sense of belonging to a community, even if it is a community that is under duress, provides them with a sense of identity and purpose.

In "Lessons at the Southern Table: The Fusion of Childhood and Food in Dori Sanders's *Clover*," Joanne Joy, like Tina Hanlon, writes about characters who strongly identify with the land. In Joy's article, she writes about characters who have deep ties to a peach farm in South Carolina. Joy's article deals with the portrayal of racial tensions in Dori Sanders's *Clover,* a children's novel in which a ten-year-old African American girl moves in with her white stepmother. Joy shows how these tensions are partially alleviated by the sharing of food and recipes. As Joy explains, in Sanders's novel food functions as a sort of medium of expression and communication.

A common theme that runs through much of contemporary Southern children's literature is the tension between the Old South and the New South. This tension is at the core of "Childhood in the New South as Reflected in Children's Literature: A Forum." This article brings together the recommendations of nine prominent children's literature professors who teach at Southern universities and colleges. Each of these professors provides a thoughtful recommendation of a favorite children's or young adult book that deals with the experience of growing up in the New South. Taken together, these nine recommended books serve as an excellent introduction to contemporary Southern children's literature.

In addition to the abovementioned articles, this special issue includes Eric Tribunella's interview of Ellen Ruffin, the curator of the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection. This interview focuses on the collection's holdings related to Southern children's literature. The issue also features an original poem by Carole Boston Weatherford, who is a prominent children's author and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award. Titled "Hearts and Minds: How the Doll Test Opened Schoolhouse Doors," this poem deals with the efforts to prove that racial segregation harmed African American children. Weatherford's poem is followed by Joli Barham McClelland's profile of Carole Boston Weatherford. The issue concludes with Valerie Bright's interview with Gail Haley, a Southern picture book author/illustrator and winner of the Caldecott Medal.

As the guest editor of this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* on children in the South, I received help from many people. I thank Philip C. Kolin, the editor of *The Southern Quarterly,* for inviting me to guest edit this special issue and for guiding me throughout the process of making the issue

a reality. I thank Diane DeCesare Ross, the managing editor, for making sure the contributions correspond to *The Southern Quarterly*'s house style and for assisting me with securing the illustrations. I thank Ellen Ruffin, the curator of the de Grummond Collection, for providing me with information about the history and scope of the collection. Finally, I thank the contributors to this issue for their willingness to participate in this project.

University of North Carolina at Charlotte