

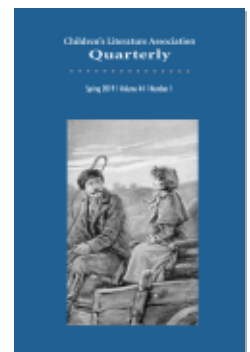
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*Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult* by Bruce Handy, and: *Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature* by Betsy Bird, Julie Danielson, and Peter D. Sieruta (review)

Jan Susina

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*Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult.* By Bruce Handy. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.

*Wild Things! Acts of Mischief in Children's Literature.* By Betsy Bird, Julie Danielson, and Peter D. Sieruta. New York: Candlewick Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Jan Susina

These two books have more in common than their titles, give or take an exclamation point. Both are engaging and lively overviews of children's literature written for general readers. They are not academic works, nor



are they intended to be. They are published for a wider, nonacademic audience: adults, including parents, who continue to read children's and adolescent texts. These readers are interested in additional information about the authors and desire a fuller understanding of the cultural and historical context of the books and how these texts have been interpreted.

A contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, Bruce Handy explains that the inspiration for his *Wild Things* was his becoming a parent, which enabled him not only to revisit some of his childhood favorites but also to reread them more critically. Handy realizes that some children's books age well and others not so well. (Stop me if you've heard this before.) He spends most of his time discussing established children's authors and illustrators: Margaret Wise Brown, Dr. Seuss, Maurice Sendak, Laura Ingalls Wilder, C. S. Lewis, Beverly Cleary, E. B. White. He recounts that the first book that he read on his own was Seuss's *Ten Apples Up on Top!*. When asked his favorite children's book, Handy acknowledges that despite countless readings, *Green Eggs and Ham* always makes him smile.

Most of the books that Handy considers are by American authors of the twentieth century, although he occasionally goes back in time to discuss the fairy tales of Charles Perrault and Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, along with Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain. The majority of the writers with whom he engages are white, save for a brief discussion of Mildred Taylor and picture books about Rosa Parks. And while he considers Charles

Ingalls the single most competent character in American literature (210), Handy seems unaware of the controversy surrounding Wilder's representation of Native Americans and African Americans in the Little House series. Issues of race or diversity in terms of characters or authorship of children's texts are rarely addressed. LGBTQ issues don't appear. For a re-exploration of children's literature, this *Wild Things* is relatively tame and mainstream. Handy has done some research into children's literature, citing Leonard Marcus, Alison Lurie, Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar, and Seth Lerer. But more often than not, he tends to draw his information from articles that appear in *The New Yorker* rather than from academic journals such as *Children's Literature*, *ChLA Quarterly*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, and *Children's Literature in Education*.

What is troubling about this volume is that it reveals the gap between what scholars writing on children's literature are doing and the books about children's literature that are accessible to and read by general readers. Most volumes written by children's literature scholars tend to be aimed at other children's literature scholars. The increasingly high cost of academic books—a problem not limited to this field—creates another hurdle for general readers and reduces the availability of such titles in libraries. There is a growing audience of adults reading children's books who would value some additional context and critical evaluation of the books that they are enjoying. A recent essay on *Bustle.com* highlighted "The 12 Books from Childhood You 'Crave' as Adults,

According to People on Reddit.” In the article, Maddy Foley reported that the post “Do you ever get cravings to read books from your childhood even though you’re older now?” received 2,100 replies within twenty-four hours. The *Atlantic’s* Web site featured a similar essay by Emma Court on “What Rereading Childhood Books Teaches Adults About Themselves.” *The New Yorker*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *LitHub* regularly feature articles on children’s literature, most of which are not written by specialists in this field. There ought to be a way for children’s literature scholars to reach a wider reading public rather than relinquishing the opportunity to discuss children’s literature to writers who discover, or rediscover, children’s books once they become parents.

*Wild Things!*, by Betsy Bird, Julie Danielson, and Peter D. Sieruta, is a completely different kettle of fish and deserves the exclamation point featured in its title. All three authors have been active children’s bloggers and children’s book reviewers for journals such as *The Horn Book* and *Kirkus Reviews*. (Sadly, Sieruta died shortly after the manuscript was submitted.) Each of these writers comes from the information science wing of children’s literature, which overlaps with children’s literature scholarship. Unlike Handy, who tends to stick to classic texts, the trio is familiar with contemporary children’s and young adult literature, deftly examining recent trends. For instance, while Handy takes a fairly hands-off approach to diversity in children’s books, *Wild Things!* includes an entire chapter on LGBT youth literature. Its scope

is intended for a broader audience than that of most volumes produced by academics.

As their subtitle, “Acts of Mischief in Children’s Literature,” suggests, the authors are interested in the subversive aspects of children’s literature. Both volumes begin with a discussion of Brown’s *Goodnight Moon*: while Handy hails this book as “a transcendent masterpiece” (2), *Wild Things!* points out that in recent editions the cigarette held by illustrator Clement Hurd has been digitally removed from his dust jacket photo. *Wild Things!* is a sort of TMZ of children’s literature, or at least the sort of literary gossip one has with colleagues after a full day at a children’s literature conference, when folks talk shop and begin swapping stories. James Marshall, Arnold Lobel, and Sendak are referred to as “the unofficial gay trio of picture books of the seventies and eighties” (66). Trina Schart Hyman’s wicked sense of humor is conveyed by a description of how she took revenge on the writer of a negative review by including the latter’s name on a tombstone in one of the illustrations in the first edition of Jean Fritz’s *Will You Sign Here, John Hancock?*. Bird, Danielson, and Sieruta also point out that Hyman embedded a copulating couple in the table carving in her illustrations of Howard Pyle’s *King Stork*. Photographs of Hyman’s spirited illustrations are included for inquiring minds.

Moving on to the topic of pseudonyms and ghostwriters, the authors of *Wild Things!* speculate about who actually wrote *The Pigman’s Legacy*, the sequel to Paul Zindel’s popular *The Pigman*—a controversy that was

settled out of court. They mention that George Selden, the author of the “beloved classic” *The Cricket in Times Square*, was also the author of the seemingly autobiographical *The Story of Harold* under the pseudonym Terry Andrews. *The Story of Harold* should not be confused with Crockett Johnson’s *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Let’s just note that *Kirkus Reviews* referred to *The Story of Harold* as “a vaguely outrageous and quasi-erotic parable” for adults about a best-selling children’s book author who is “polymorphous perverse.” It is fair to say that the authors of *Wild Things!* choose to take a walk on the wild side of children’s literature.

The chapter “Banning on Their Mind” examines the differences between how adults read children’s literature and how children read it, which sometimes lead to censorship by adults. The authors note that the more famous a children’s book is—think Harry Potter—the better chance that there will be calls for censorship. They also acknowledge that often there seems to be “an insurmountable gulf” between the books that children’s book critics (such as themselves) enjoy and those that children enjoy (168). They posit that contemporary children’s literature can be divided into two eras, BP: Before Potter, and AP: After Potter. Given the recent economic success of children’s publishing, they believe that children’s literature has firmly moved into popular culture. Whether that shift is good or bad remains open to debate. The increased importance of children’s books brings with it adult readers, Hollywood film adaptations

of mixed quality, big concept books, series, and celebrity children’s book authors. The authors wonder whether the increased popularity of children’s literature may result in selling child readers short, since the increased quantity of children’s and young adult books now available doesn’t necessarily translate into an increase in quality.

All three authors were early and successful adopters of social media for discussing children’s books. Sieruta blogged at *Collecting Children’s Books*, while Bird blogs at *A Fuse #8 Production* and Danielson at *Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast*. Blogging seems to be a promising avenue that academics researching and writing about children’s literature can use to reach a wider audience. Increasingly, children’s literature scholars are recognizing that blogging, posting, tweeting, and podcasting are effective ways to share their scholarship. The question remains as to how such work will be evaluated by tenure committees who still value single book authorship and prestige academic journals as the primary source of academic advancement. The author/bloggers acknowledge that social media is a great equalizer, but that these venues frequently lack gatekeepers and/or peer reviewers. They caution that there are no rules in this new world of social media, so *legit cave*. With Web sites such as Amazon and Goodreads where anyone can post a review, everyone can become a critic. The Internet is full of Web sites that feature information of mixed value on children’s literature. One of the most useful aspects of *Wild Things!* is that it provides a model of how children’s

literature scholars can share their work with a wider audience.

If a critical analysis of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* falls in the forest of literary scholarship, is there anyone besides academics who will read it? It may be a jungle out there, but *Wild Things* and *Wild Things!* suggest that children's literature scholars might want to venture beyond their comfort zones and take some time to hang out with general readers.

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*Jan Susina teaches courses in children's and young adult literature in the English Department at Illinois State University. He also tweets on children's and young adult literature, visual culture, and Victorian studies as @Alicentweetland.*

