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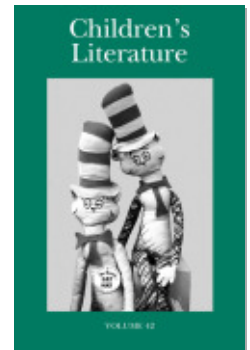
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Hawthorne's Literature for Children, by Laura Laffrado. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991.

Published between 1835 and 1853, Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings for children are representative of every kind of literature for the young that burgeoned in antebellum America. In forms as diverse as history and fairy tale, biographical sketch and Sunday school tract, geography and myth, these writings span the two decades of Hawthorne's emergence as a major literary artist. Nevertheless, because they were considered hackwork, students of Hawthorne have neglected them until recently. Calvin Schorer's unpublished dissertation (University of Chicago, 1948) remained the only extended examination of this material until Nina Baym included it in *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1982) and Frederick Newberry devoted a chapter of *Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties* (1987) to *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair* (1851). Of this now forgotten New England history, Baym startled Hawthorne scholars by claiming that the author "had never been in firmer control of matter and manner than in this series," then praised *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1852) as "his most complex and successful framed narrative." Because Hawthorne adapted the first classical myths for children into English and is often credited with inaugurating the American literary focus on the child in "The Gentle Boy" (1832), a book-length study of all his writings for and about children is long overdue.

Laura Laffrado's *Hawthorne's Literature for Children* fills a significant gap simply by calling attention to what a rich field of inquiry Hawthorne's six books for children represent. Surveying *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair* (originally published in 1841 as three brief volumes: *Grandfather's Chair*, *Liberty Tree*, and *Famous Old People*), *Biographical Stories for Children* (1842), *A Wonder-Book* (1851), and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) in four chapters, Laffrado points out that all of his juvenile works are collections. She examines his use of the framed narrative as a way of lending adhesion to these

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texts, emphasizing that through fictive narrators like Grandfather, Mr. Temple, and Eustace Bright the author systematically distances himself from the stories that he tells. Arguing that in writing for children Hawthorne “is attempting to establish a certain mode of discourse, a way in which he can write confidently” (3), she sees him escaping financial insecurity and his struggles as a writer, “his own daily reality and personal history” (8), through three auctorial personas who differ from him in age, status, and experience. In the fireside storytelling of *Grandfather’s Chair* Laffrado presents him experimenting with what he called “neutral territory,” described a decade later in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter* as “somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (7). Adducing this unusual domain, which Hawthorne later attested was congenial to the romance writer’s work, Laffrado finds a plausible formula for explaining the success of both the *Whole History* and *A Wonder-Book*.

Laffrado’s biographical framework thus relates the production of children’s books to the familiar contours of Hawthorne’s career—a protracted and solitary apprenticeship, a burst of creative power, then a sudden, painful decline. The sunny pastoralism of *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* is inevitably associated with the golden age of Hawthorne’s personal and professional life, and the discussion of *Tanglewood Tales*, the final product of the author’s two most prolific years, offers some biographical facts to suggest why Hawthorne’s vision had soured so dramatically in a sequel written only eighteen months after the first book of myths. It is less clear, however, in chapter 2 why *Biographical Stories for Children*, written within a year of the *Whole History*, remained unfinished and is so inferior a work. Why, for example, does Laffrado liken Hawthorne in 1841, returning from Brook Farm eager to marry Sophia Peabody, to Edward Temple, suddenly “confined in misery-inducing circumstances,” blindfolded in a darkened room (42)? Although her secondary sources are meticulously documented, primary research materials—family journals and letters, *The American Notebooks*—might have added fresh perspectives to a study so biographically grounded.

Unfortunately Laffrado does not examine much of the cultural ferment that produced these works, although attitudes toward children, childrearing, schooling, and children’s literature changed

radically during Hawthorne's lifetime (1804–64). Ralph Waldo Emerson, reflecting on this shift in sentiment, quoted a "witty physician" who lamented that "it was a misfortune to have been born when children were nothing and to live until men were nothing" (Cable 101). Although Hawthorne never completely relinquished the stern Calvinist view of childhood by which he was raised, his ambition to "revolutionize the whole system of children's literature" (2) should be seen within the context of the romantic spirit of reform. In the vanguard was his energetic future sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody, who not only published Hawthorne's first three children's books but drew the writer out of his isolation in Salem to a wider readership and into the intellectual atmosphere of Transcendentalism. Recommending him as "a man of first rate genius" to Horace Mann, the new secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education who would soon marry her sister Mary, Elizabeth even tried to arrange for Hawthorne's "new literature for the young" to become part of the district school libraries, which Mann planned to endow in the early 1840s (Peabody 199).

The tension between Puritan and romantic conceptions of the child in Hawthorne's fiction also influenced his fascinated, sometimes frightened observation of his own children. Of Una he wrote in *The American Notebooks*: "I now and then catch a glimpse of her, in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil" (8:430–31). The complexity of his view runs counter to Laffrado's assertion that "children throughout his fiction correspond closely to nineteenth-century ideals of cherubic, flower-children." The restlessly physical and pragmatic Charley, who seems to learn nothing from Grandfather's history and rams the antique chair with his wheelbarrow, hardly conforms to her notion that "child auditors featured in the frame tales . . . fit this mold without exception" (141). Even the wild and prescient Pearl of *The Scarlet Letter* is portrayed unproblematically, as a psychologically comprehensible character with "natural empathy" (5).

At times the book's strength, its exclusive focus on Hawthorne's writings for children, seems related to a failure to reckon with the dark and ironic side of Hawthorne's genius. There is also some carelessness in details: Hawthorne located the "familiar room" of his neutral territory not on "the upper floor of the Salem Custom House" (7) but in the deserted parlor of his own home; *A Wonder-*

Book for Girls and Boys is consistently mistitled *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls*. Nevertheless, *Hawthorne's Literature for Children* breaks new ground by offering an overview of the diverse characters, themes, and techniques that Hawthorne developed for a child audience. The appendix provides publication data and some interesting facts about the moderate remuneration and other compensations that he earned for all his efforts. It is satisfying and thought provoking finally to ponder the six children's books in uninterrupted sequence and in relation to each other. Finding *A Wonder-Book* and *Tanglewood Tales* still available today in paperback legitimizes Hawthorne's pride in not writing "downward" to children and ratifies his delight in young auditors, who "possess an unestimated sensibility to whatever is deep and high, in imagination or feeling" (*Wonder-Book*, preface).

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