

Helen A. Fairlie, *Revaluing British Boys' Story Papers, 1918-1939*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. x, 214 p. ill. ISBN 9781137293053. £50.00 (hardcover).

Helen Fairlie's *Revaluing British Boys' Story Papers, 1918-1939* sets out to reconsider the value of publications such as *Hotspur* and *The Magnet* in the light of their reception by child readers themselves. This is a welcome intervention into scholarship on a period which has until recently been characterised as a largely unexciting one for British children's literature—a view that fails to take into account the vibrancy of the periodical market which, as Fairlie shows, comprised a substantial part of children's reading lives at this time. Where boys' story papers are recognised, critics have tended to follow George Orwell in characterising them as a vehicle for conservative ideologies. Fairlie suggests that the story paper has thus been undervalued in terms of its perceived lack of literary quality, its status as popular literature, and its ephemeral physical nature, arguing that, by focusing on readers and their lived experiences, it is possible to revalue the texts themselves and their role in the cultural life of Britain.

After a useful introductory chapter mapping out the critical and historical perspectives which underpin the book, Fairlie devotes three chapters to specific aspects of the story papers: their moral code, the school story, and the imperial hero. Taking *Hotspur* and *The Magnet* as her case studies, she argues that while the papers do offer a largely conservative worldview which prizes "traditional" values such as loyalty, respect for authority, and physical bravery, this does not entail a straightforward top-down transmission of ideology. Drawing on a number of cultural and reader-response theorists including Jonathan Rose and Wolfgang Iser, Fairlie makes the case for a more complex reception of these messages by child readers. Furthermore, she draws attention to the relationship between the story papers and the child readers, pointing out that the importance of children themselves as purchasers as well as consumers facilitated a much more active role for the child reader. The following chapter considers the impact of cinema on the popularity of the story papers, while the final chapter considers the papers as cultural artefacts, with a particular focus on advertising.

Formulating a critical approach that can take account of the readers is a central aim of this book, and Fairlie draws upon a wide range of theoretical perspectives, including new historicist approaches, reader-response theory and theories of cultural production in an attempt to do so. It is a shame, then, that she does not really succeed in synthesising her theoretical approach with the subject matter itself. A reading of the story papers in relation to

their actual readership might have opened up particularly interesting avenues in the case of school stories; although these often sought ostensibly to inculcate respect for the authority of school and master, the fact that story papers were frequently disparaged by real-life teachers suggests an interesting interplay between subversion and authority. Ultimately, however, Fairlie fails to really interrogate this beyond observing that child readers were well able to distinguish between the fictionalised public school settings and their own school experiences. One reason for these shortcomings is the dearth of information about the readers themselves. Fairlie eschews an oral history approach because of the issues raised by retrospective accounts of childhood experience (although she does draw on memoirs and on existing oral histories), but given the limitations of contemporary data about reading habits this leaves her with many questions unanswered. The book thus demonstrates the potential for a reader-focused analysis of these texts, but also the pitfalls of such an approach.

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