Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 3 | Number 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation*
Volume 3 | Number 2 *General Issue*
April 2021

Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*. University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 242 pages. ISBN: 9781496823458.

Allison Estrada-Carpenter
Texas A&M University

https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation (3.1) and General Issue (3.2)*

Article 16

April 2021

Trites, Roberta Seelinger. Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature. University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 242 pages. ISBN: 9781496823458.

Allison Estrada-Carpenter
Texas A&M University

What makes a twenty-first-century text feminist? In her latest work, Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that the answer lies in a move towards interconnectedness, embodiment, and materialism. Trites' 2018 book, *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, is significantly informed by her 1997 text, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*. This context is important, as she mentions in her introduction, for providing a roadmap of her updated priorities. Trites notes, for example, that her prior work is primarily informed by a poststructuralist approach to literature (xvi). While she still believes that approach is valuable, she also acknowledges the increasing importance of considering material feminism. Trites argues that "many twenty-first-century feminisms are influenced by an attention to material issues; concerns with embodiment, intersectionality, environmentalism, and the ethics of care all acknowledge the presence of the physical in ways that linguistic-turn feminism largely failed to address" (xxii). These concerns are organized within six chapters and are useful in building up to her final focus on care, disability, and narrative structure. Trites explains that she wanted to start with an examination of the individual before moving to an analysis of individuals in social groups, with the environment, and within relationships (xxvii). I consider Trites' monograph a valuable and useful piece of scholarship that serves to thoughtfully identify key shifts in the discussion of feminism in recent children's and adolescent literature.

Trites' introduction establishes the context and need for an updated approach to feminism, one that considers both the success and limitations of twentieth-century work, within the field. This comparison between the twentieth and twenty-first-century approach is a theme Trites returns to throughout the text. For example, in chapter three, she explains how novels like Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* reflect a desire for the main character to find her voice (a twentieth-century trend) alongside concerns of ecofeminism and embodiment (a twenty-first-

century trend). Like *Waking Sleepy Beauty*, Trites notes, in this text, she is also "looking for novels about girl protagonists with some degree of voice, choice, and community," but in addition to these elements, she is now looking for texts that include "diversity, multiculturalism, ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation" (xxiii). Overall, most of these novels are engaging with feminist ideologies and the influence of material realities.

In her first chapter, "*Becoming*, *Mattering*, and 'Knowing in Being' in Feminist Novels for the Young," Trites opens with examples from *The Hunger Games* trilogy, moves to a discussion of feminist theory and materialism, and closes with an analysis of Libba Bray's *Beauty Queens* (2011). *Beauty Queens* effectively sets a foundational tone for Trites' position on the benefits of applying a lens that "calls us to consider how the material world affects discourses about girls in terms of the body, the environment, technology, physical artifacts, and the world" (29). The novel, with its premise of several teenage girls stranded on an island after a failed flight to a beauty pageant, is a representative example of shifting and evolving identities.

Unlike the previous chapter, in "Intersectionality and Multiplicities: Race and Materiality in Literature for the Young," Trites discusses in-depth several texts including Christopher Paul Curtis' *The Mighty Miss Malone* (2012), Paul Muñoz Ryan's *Becoming Naomi Leon* (2004), and Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Trites opens this chapter by noting the importance of the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Maria Nikolajeva, and Michael Hames-García. She also discusses how Standpoint Theory is useful as an approach to address the novels in this chapter. This inclusion is significant because it legitimizes the authors in this chapter who are writing from a place of lived experience that informs their narratives. While most of the texts in the section are invested in historical realism, the novels are also a reflection of concerns that persist today like passing, mixed-class relations, and the politics of respectability. In keeping

with her analysis of the importance of applying a material lens to novels, Trites often notes the socio-economic realities present within these books, including the attention to such details as rotten teeth, hair styles, and lead paint.

For her third chapter, "Ecofeminism, The Material, and Genre," Trites moves to a discussion of Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997), Jacqueline Kelly's *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* (2009), Angela Johnson's *Heaven* (1998), Jewell Parker Rhode's *Ninth Ward* (2010), and Margaret Mahy's *Kaitangata Twitch* (2005). Here she is interested "in the potential that preadolescent and adolescent female protagonists bring to ecofeminism and feminist geography: because the girls are poised in the liminality of adolescence, they understand exploitation" (83). This exploitation, in addition to age and nature, is also one that is highly dependent on the social class and specific locations of the protagonists. For example, in looking at historical texts that problematize both the Dust Bowl (*Out of the Dust*) and Hurricane Katrina (*Ninth Ward),* Trites effectively analyzes the intersection of girls coming to identify their place in the world (61) with narratives that frequently use environmental injustice as a backdrop to explore inequity and privilege.

In chapter four, "Speculative Fictions, Embodiment, and the Neoliberal Impulse," Trites examines Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* (2011), Lisa Price's *Starters* (2012), Adam Rex's *The True Meaning of Smekday* (2007), and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* (2013). In this section, she discusses how recent speculative texts, like dystopian novels, despite featuring strong, smart, and capable young girls, often rely on problematic trends, including a reliance on heterosexual relationships, a lack of female friendship, and a tendency towards body objectification. However, she balances this observation by noting how books, like *Orleans*, are successful examples of the future of dystopian feminist

literature. Though she mentions neoliberalism throughout the chapter, I found the conclusion to be the most interesting claim of the potential relationship between neoliberalism and speculative fiction. Trites argues that neoliberalism is dependent on expanding populations and therefore, "this is very likely why so few neoliberal speculative fictions involve trans women or lesbians of the potential saviors as a corrupted patriarchal world" (118). These concerns over the representations of gender and sexuality move readers into the following chapter.

In "Queering Romance, Sexuality, Gender Identity, and Motherhood," Trites begins with a literature review and then moves to two sections—one on heteronormative relationships and one on "novels that queer heteronormativity and gender identification" (120). Like chapter four, Trites notices a discrepancy between feminist intent and execution in novels like *The Servant* and *Eleanor and Park*, which "rely on heteronormative fairy-tale structures" (124). These protagonists are constrained by the limitations of their domestic, patriarchy driven lives. For both girls, the romance they engage in is then an extension of yet another male influence and, as Trites details, a revision of the fairy-tale archetype of a princess in need of rescuing (124). Yet even in novels that look at trans-identity, such as the case with Julie Anne Peters' *Luna* (2004), gender binaries persist. Trites notes that "even when trying to problematize gender binaries, the book reinscribes them" (142). This reinscription is seen in material markers like feminine gendered clothing and dress. However, Trites does concede that the book still contains feminist messages of affirming female identity and depicting complex mother/daughter relationships (143). Trites closes the chapter with her work on queering motherhood by noting differences between various depictions of mothers and returning to previous work in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. She concludes that one of the emerging trends in representations of mothers in YA

literature is "the sexually active mother who is neither subsumed by motherhood nor oppositionally divided from her child" (150).

In her final chapter, "Caring, Disability Studies, and Narrative Structure," Trites looks at Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), Jennifer Donnelley's *Revolution* (2010), Kate DiCamillo's *Flora & Ulysses* (2013), and Linda Sue Park's *Project Mulberry* (2005). Trites is influenced here by scholars like Mary Jeanette Moran, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, and Sara Day. This chapter emphasizes the importance of ethics of care and how characters across a variety of genres manifest that care. In the dystopian novel *Cinder*, the population is divided between humans, cyborgs, and androids. Trites explains how Garland-Thompson's ability/disability system fits within a reading of the novel. The human residents have the ability to oversee the cyborgs "and for all three groups to know who they are by defining themselves in opposition to each other" (162). Trites details how the novel uses these groups as a stand-in for disability. She stresses the significance of Cinder, the cyborg protagonist of the novel, emerging as an advocate for others through her care and concern for their wellbeing.

Trites closes *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms* by asserting that "novels that acknowledge intra-activity, interrelationships, and the importance of social support systems may well empower cis and trans girls far better than the twentieth-century feminist model that emphasized discourse as the primary form of empowerment" (186). I believe this statement captures the strengths and necessity of her book. While the twenty-first-century approach to children's and adolescent literature is not without its faults, the breadth and range of feminisms present in recent novels reflect a growing consciousness that Trites captures in her text. Her accessible tone and impressive range of novels make this an appealing resource with far-reaching potential for future scholarship.

Works Cited

Trites, Roberta. *Twenty- First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*. UP of Mississippi, 2018.