

«She makes them tingle all over»: eroticising the child in twentieth- century Australian picture books*

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Writing of Britain in the period 1914-1945, Peter Hunt argues that: «war, change and the threat of war and change made nostalgia and retreat even more attractive and urgent than before, and it naturally found a place in children's books – at once a place of retreat for adults and of protection for children»¹. Kimberley Reynolds expands on this point, claiming that «adults living between the wars also required that their image of childhood provide a sense of hope, purpose, cleansing and continuity to alleviate the disruption and futility of war»². Given Australia's close links with Britain, its involvement in both World Wars and its dependence at that time on British culture, it is apparent that similar sentiments were felt in Australia. One manifestation of these sentiments can perhaps be seen in the absence of the eroticised child figure from children's novels during this period.

The eroticised child, prominent in nineteenth-century English books such as *Eric or Little by Little: a Tale of Roslyn School* by Frederic Farrar and, in

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¹ P. Hunt, *Retreatism and advance: 1914-1945*, in P. Hunt, D. Butts, E. Heins, M. Kinnel & T. Watkins (eds.), *Children's literature: an illustrated history*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 192-224, in particular p. 195.

² K. Reynolds, *Children's literature in the 1890s and the 1990s*, Plymouth, Northcote House, 1994, p. 35.

Australia, Ethel Turner's *St Tom and the Dragon*, does not disappear altogether from children's literature, however, as it is well represented in picture books³. These books, partly because of their illustrations, can, on a superficial reading can be seen as valorising a view of childhood as entirely innocent with pictorial representations of it supporting the pretty and appealing. A closer reading shows the contradictory construction of childhood in which the very innocence of children was open to sexual interpretation and in which innocence and an apparent experience were intertwined. The seductive attraction of Shirley Temple and others like her was echoed in a range of picture books.

As Jan Kociumbas points out in *Australian childhood: a history*, innocence does not preclude eroticism: «the idealisation of the child as innocent and vulnerable was always prone to sexual interpretation and by the late nineteenth century may have been becoming more so»⁴, a point supported by Patricia Holland⁵. Indeed, the very innocence of the child, often emphasised in illustration by large eyes, a finger in her mouth or against her lips, and with rather skimpy clothing, may also be interpreted as a kind of “come-hither”, sexual look, inviting the gaze of the viewer. Holland comments on the way this construction is used in popular imagery in advertisements, for example: where, as a child, sexuality is forbidden to the girl model «and it is that very innocence that makes her the most perfect object if man's desire, the inexperienced woman»⁶.

Victorian photographs often used the same construction, as Anne Higonnet has argued, noting that pictures of children's bodies can often provoke ambiguous reactions, establishing a binary opposition of innocence and experience⁷. Further, as Anna Silver has pointed out, for artists such as John Ruskin, the purity of presexual girls does not make them «unavailable erotically; in fact, it enhances their romantic appeal». Ruskin's own description of some of these girls echoes the visual construction I have mentioned and which can be seen as a continuing depiction in the works which I will be discussing: Ruskin wrote «It was beautiful to see the girls' faces round, their eyes all wet with feeling, and the little coral mouths fixed into little half open gasps»⁸.

In addition, because what we are looking at is a child or a character constructed as a child, the pleasure of looking seems to be innocent too. This article will explore the way in which illustrators frequently invited adult viewers to gaze on the bodies of children in books published for children. Such an exami-

³ I have discussed this construction of the eroticised child elsewhere. See M. Hillel, *Voyeurism and power: change and renewal of the eroticised figure in Australian books for teenagers*, in T. van der Walt (ed.), *Change and renewal in children's literature*, New York, Praeger, 2004, pp. 176-184.

⁴ J. Kociumbas, *Australian childhood: a history*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1997, p. 93.

⁵ P. Holland, *What is a child? Popular images of childhood*, London, Virago, 1992, pp. 136-138.

⁶ Holland, *What is a child?*, cit., p. 137.

⁷ A. Higonnet, *Pictures of innocence: the history and crisis of ideal childhood*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1998, pp. 36-37.

⁸ A. Silver, “A caught dream”: *John Ruskin, Kate Greenaway, and the erotic innocent girl*, «Children's Literature Association Quarterly», 25, 1, 2000, p. 38.

nation will reveal the conflicting attitudes to childhood present in Australia in the early to mid twentieth century.

My title comes from the description of a character in Michael Noonan's *In the Land of the Talking Trees*, a 1946 fantasy set in New Guinea. The book is a Gulliver's Travels-type story, opening with an illustration of the soldier, like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians in Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century book *Gulliver's Travels*, lying prostrate, tied up with ropes and surrounded by tiny people. In addition, the whole book can perhaps also be read as an allegory, with the Tamborans as Japanese and Dusty as a representative of the Allied forces, freeing the Jambies (Papua New Guineans) from their occupation. This reading is strengthened by the fact that the Tamborans use poison gas against their enemies and that the Papua New Guineans were known to Australian troops fighting, in Papua New Guinea during World War II as «fuzzy-wuzzy angels»⁹. In Noonan's book, an injured Australian soldier awakes in the jungles of New Guinea to find himself being hit on the head by a tiny man, no more than six inches high «with shiny, chocolate-coloured skin and black, fuzzy hair»¹⁰. Giving these people such a small stature also allows the author to infantilise them in a range of ways. They frequently have childish arguments amongst themselves, they are frightened of many of the natural phenomena around them, and it is only the much larger Private Dusty who can rid them of their enemies, the Tamborans. When Dusty meets the first of these people, known as Jambies, he says that the small man looks «naughty», a word usually reserved for children. The Jambies women (known as Jeannies) are eroticised in the illustrations by David Gilmore. In these, the Jeannies are depicted in rather the same way as the women of many of the islands of the South Pacific were viewed when white explorers first arrived. There is an exotic eroticism in the illustration which shows them preparing a meal for Dusty. They are dressed in brightly coloured and seductive sarongs, with shell bracelets on their ankles, and exotic flowers in their hair. They carry large platters of fruit, in their arms or on their heads, suggesting plenty and almost a promise of sexuality and their large dark eyes look enticingly upwards from lowered heads. Here are the seductive and «dusky maidens» being brought forth to entertain the white man. This image is enhanced when the people put on a concert for Dusty. One of the acts is a «chorus of sweet-voiced Jeannies»¹¹, wearing white sarongs, with

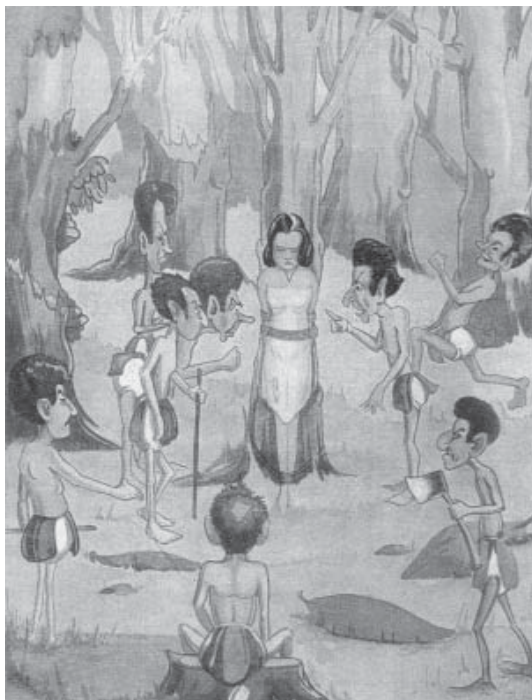
⁹ The official website of the Australian Government's Department of Veterans' Affairs reproduces a poem written by an Australian soldier and entitled *Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels*. The first verse reads: «Many a mother in Australia / when the busy day is done / Sends a prayer to the Almighty / for the keeping of her son / Asking that an angel guide him / and bring him safely back / Now we see those prayers are answered / on the Owen Stanley Track» (see: Kokoda. 'Fuzzy wuzzy angels', in: *Australians' War 1939-1945*, <<http://www.ww2australia.gov.au/asfaras/angels.html>>, accessed: July 14th, 2010).

¹⁰ M. Noonan, *The land of the talking trees*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1946, p. 3.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 43.

yellow flowers and fireflies woven into their hair. Their seductive power is such that one of them, even though she is only six inches high, especially enchants Dusty. Her name is Tingle, because «“she’s so lovely, that whenever Jambies look at her, she makes them tingle all over”¹². Dusty looked again and he was inclined to agree». Because she is the most desirable, it is Tingle who is captured by the Tamborans. She is shown in this illustration tied to a tree surrounded by ugly, aggressive and triumphant Tamborans.

It is the classic pose used in many films and books of the beautiful young maiden about to be sacrificed to the erotic desires of strange men or other predatory “creatures”, such as King Kong¹³.



Pic. 1. Illustration by D.H. Gilmore from Michael Noonan’s *In the land of the talking trees* (between pp. 82 and 83). (Photograph by the Author).

The same kind of “white man gazing at black bodies” remained evident in some books until the 1960s. But in the time frame I am discussing here, I want to look at one in particular. This is a book by Pixie O’Harris illustrated by Joyce Abbott. O’Harris was a prolific writer and illustrator of children’s books who worked most actively in the mid-twentieth century. Her first illustrations appeared in a book called *Cinderella’s Party* which was published in 1923 and she produced over forty books during her lifetime¹⁴. She was particularly known for her fantasies, especially those featuring fairies of various sorts. In a book called *Goolara*, she includes a story entitled *Daughter of the Billabong* that purports to be a kind of authentic Aboriginal story¹⁵. This is not attributed or acknowledged and does not differentiate in any way between different Aboriginal clan groups and their be-

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, illustration between pp. 82 and 83.

¹⁴ S. Lees, P. Macintyre, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Children’s Literature*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 324.

¹⁵ For a useful introduction to Australian Aboriginal culture, beliefs and Dreaming stories see: *Australian indigenous cultural heritage*, in *Australian stories*, last update: 7th January 2008, <<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/indigenous/>> (accessed: July 26th, 2010); and *The dreaming*, in *Australian stories*, Last updated: 6th March 2008, <<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/indigenous/dreamtime>> (accessed: July 16th, 2010).



Pic. 2. Illustration by Joyce Abbott in *Goolara* by Pixie O'Harris, p. 32. (Photograph by the Author).

liefs and languages. Despite the fact that it was published in the 1940s, it is very much part of the colonial appropriation of, and disrespect for, Aboriginal culture and what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra have called «Aboriginalism», in which colonial writers applaud Aboriginal culture while also insisting on «speaking for Aborigines, as they are assumed not to be capable of speaking for themselves»¹⁶.

In it, three swans throw off their feathers and turn into beautiful girls. In a scene reminiscent of the selkie stories of Scotland in which a seal's skin is taken and hidden by a prospective husband in order to prevent her returning to the sea¹⁷, a hunter sees the swans and, as he wants to marry the youngest, he steals her feathers so she cannot return to her swan shape. As a way to protect her, the spirit of the billabong turns her into a blue waterlily among many and Amera, the hunter, cannot tell which is her. However, in a scene which gives her some agency in her seduction, a petal drops from one flower and, when Amera picks it up, it turns into the girl. The hunter is, however, warned that she knows nothing of the ways of men and if he ever mistreats her she will return to the billabong. When he spears her in the arm, she leaves. Her son is brought up understanding the ways of the bush and its animals. Amera regrets his action, misses his wife and looks for her for a long time. When they are re-united she forgives his violence and returns to her. His loss and new-found happiness on finding her again makes him gentle; the girl thus also becomes a redemptive figure.

The young Aboriginal woman who appears from the swan's shape is emphasised in the illustration as a kind of Rousseauian, innocent «noble savage», but the innocence is belied by the construction of the illustration.

¹⁶ C. Bradford, *Reading race: Aboriginality in Australian children's literature*, Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 2001, p. 15.

¹⁷ Lees and Macintyre point out the resemblance to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Wild Swans*. Lees, Macintyre, *The Oxford companion to Australian children's literature*, cit., p. 325.

The girl is gazing toward the viewer, as if acknowledging and indeed inviting, her position as object of the viewer's gaze. Furthermore, as Anna Silver has claimed about some of Kate Greenaway's illustrations, the girl's passive stare is «as John Berger writes, "a sign of her submission to the [viewer's] feelings or demands [...] She is offering up her femininity as the surveyed"»¹⁸. There is the eroticism of the strange here, with such representations being seen as "allowable" because they are of Indigenous people. These constructions are in this way indicative of the power structure in which the dominant race/ gender uses that power to claim the right to gaze and to eroticise those in a position of perceived inferiority.

In addition to her own books, O'Harris also illustrated the works of many other writers. One of these was Frank Dalby Davison's *Children of the Dark People*, first published in 1936. In a statement which denies the ongoing importance of the Aboriginal people and their culture, the book states in its preface that «the dark people who once roamed the Australian bush [...] have now almost passed away»¹⁹. In addition, the cover of the book and two small illustrations of the Aboriginal girl, eroticise the Indigene, particularly the drawing of the small Aboriginal girl, depicted naked, with her back to the viewer, gazing rather provocatively over her shoulder and inviting a return gaze²⁰. The spirit of the billabong in this book is rather strangely depicted as a white fairy-figure, reminiscent of those which appear in other books by O'Harris²¹.

Many of the picture books of the inter-war period were fantasies, frequently placed in the fairy world. This made books of this sort appear particularly suitable for younger children who, presumably, were deemed to be uncontaminated by sexuality and would therefore be unaware of the eroticism of many of the images. However, this may well not have been true for the adults who formed at least part of the audience for such books as they were the purchasers and would often have read the books to the children. The fairy-like creatures in these books are also child-like and suggest something of a carry-over of what James Kincaid calls «the pedophile desire to hold the child in time»²². He argues that the obsession of many nineteenth-century photographers with child photography is part of this "erotic urge". Many of these photographers were men whereas most of the twentieth-century Australian picture book illustrators were women which may perhaps disguise the eroticism.

The Flower Babies in Connie Christie's book of the same name are anthropomorphic; they are really human children, thinly disguised as flowers.

¹⁸ Silver, "A caught dream": *John Ruskin, Kate Greenaway, and the erotic innocent girl*, cit., p. 40.

¹⁹ F.D. Davison, *Children of the dark people: an Australian story for young folk*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1966, "Preface". The book was widely used in schools as this special "school edition" indicates. It was first published in 1936.

²⁰ Ivi, pp. 7 and 136.

²¹ Ivi, p. 31.

²² J. Kincaid, *Child loving: the erotic child and Victorian culture*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 199.

These figures are rather like those of well-known Australian illustrator May Gibbs whose gum-nut figures Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie have been described as «naked babies, wide-eyed and innocent»²³. There is, however, a constant gazing on the bodies of the “flower babies” throughout this work and the viewer of the illustration is complicit in the gazing at the bodies of the children which has been established by the illustrator. The reader (viewer) is being invited to join vicariously this “innocent” eroticism. These children have a «seductive innocence», a phrase used by Jack Zipes to describe the main character in many illustrated versions of *Red Riding Hood*²⁴. The two little figures are described by the author as «chubby, loveable little darlings» (Christie unpaginated) and the names of the two reinforce a kind of salaciousness – they are called Peekabo and Dimples. We are told «Peekabo and Dimples didn’t have to worry about clothes because like all the other little Flower Babies they didn’t wear any; all they had were little necklaces of berries and Dimples always had a flower in her hair which made her look more cuddlesome than ever»²⁵. The vectors in this illustration lead the eye from the open flower, almost devouring the naked toes of the flower baby, up through the chubby legs and prominent buttocks. The caterpillar, rising like some kind of phallus between her legs, then leads the eye across to the groin area of the other (male but androgynous) baby. Dimples is being gazed at by Peekabo and is in turn inviting the gaze of the viewer as the innocent, slightly-downturned eyes look out at us from the focal point of the page. The viewer is complicit in the gaze at both of them.

Also inviting the gaze of the viewer, are the many mermaids depicted in popular art, and, as I want to discuss here, in a number of children’s books. Stuart Gordon describes mermaids as «marine enchantresses» who sit on some sea rock «voluptuously naked from the waist up, fish-scaled and fish-tailed from the waist down, forever combing her tresses»²⁶. They have been depicted this way in art, as in a work from Pre-Raphaelite artist, John William Waterhouse, painted in 1900. In this the mermaid sits alone on a shore in a rocky inlet, combing her hair and gazing off to the left of the picture with her head turned slightly towards the viewer. Her breast is just visible beneath her left arm which is crooked to grasp her hair. To add to the allure, pearls are scattered across a clam shell near her tail²⁷.

Mermaids have a seductive image in folklore, too, as Katherine Briggs points out in *The Personnel of Fairyland*, being the objects of desire of many a sailor

²³ Lees, Macintyre, *The Oxford companion to Australian children’s literature*, cit., p. 181.

²⁴ J. Zipes, *A second gaze at Little Red Riding Hood’s trials and tribulations*, in Id. (ed.), *Don’t bet on the prince: contemporary feminist fairy tales in North America and England*, New York, Methuen, 1986, p. 245.

²⁵ C. Christie, *The flower babies*, Melbourne, The Speciality Press, n.d., unpaginated.

²⁶ S. Gordon, *The encyclopaedia of myths and legends*, London, Headline, 1993, p. 309.

²⁷ J.W. Waterhouse, *A Mermaid*, Oil on canvas, 1900 (location: Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK). Accessible in: *Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The definitive collection*, © 2002-2011, <<http://www.pre-raphaelite-brotherhood.org/A-Mermaid--1900.html>> (accessed: March 23rd, 2010).

and, in addition, being depicted as having a great desire themselves for human children, especially as they wish to gain a human soul²⁸. Their beauty is thus potentially dangerous. And yet they appear in a number of books for children including a number of illustrated books which were published in Australia between the two world wars. The mermaid figures in these books can be read as a mixture of the benign – just another fairy figure – and the seductress, portrayed as such in the sexualisation of their poses. I would like to examine just three of these: Muriel Olyott's *Wondercap: Adventures with the Sandman* and Connie Christie's *The Fairy Mermaid* and *The Adventures of Pinkieshell*. All of these were very cheaply produced little books, all in paper and were designed for a mass market. We can assume, therefore, that they were widely read and their influence in forming and reflecting societal opinions was similarly widespread. Despite their childishness, the mermaids in all the illustrations in these books mirror the "marine seductresses" identified by Stuart Gordon.

The copy of Olyott's book which I used was given as a gift in 1947. It tells the story of two children who are given "wondercaps" by a little man (who is revealed as being the Sandman) they meet in the woods. These caps allow them to go on a series of adventures, including one in which the girl, Judy, is able to turn into a mermaid. In this guise, she is able to be at one with the sea creatures, able even to discover the secrets of the deep. She swims deep down with the mysterious little man she and her brother had met in the woods and with him recovers a valuable piece of ambergris from a cave. Becoming a mermaid – half girl, half fish – is thus crucial to the plot and gives Judy some agency, allowing her to take on a heroic role, albeit mediated through the Sandman. The illustration depicting Judy as a mermaid, however, still emphasise Judy as girl/woman, an object of the gaze which she seems to invite. The illustrations, unlike many discussed so far, are by a man, Walter Cunningham, a prolific illustrator of books, many of which are about Australian animals and birds²⁹. In this illustration of the mermaid sitting on a rock, she can be read as doing what Laura Mulvey says of women in their «traditional exhibitionist role» where they are «simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*»³⁰. There is an odd juxtaposition in this illustration of the mermaid's child-like face opposed to the more womanly body. The illustration is also very suggestive. Like the classic mermaid figure described by Gordon, Judy sits on a rock combing her hair with her fingers. The hair falls forward over her shoulders and down her chest, drawing the gaze of the viewer with it. What is the hair hiding; what is suggested by its placement? This and the arm

²⁸ K. Briggs, *The personnel of fairyland*, Oxford, Alden Press, 1969, p. 212.

²⁹ See, for example, *The Story of Shy the Platypus* (1944); *Karrawingi the Emu* (1946) and the *Story of Shadow the Rock Wallaby* (1947).

³⁰ L. Mulvey, *Visual and other pleasures*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan, 1989, p. 19.



Pic. 3. Illustration by Walter Cunningham in *Wondercap: adventures with the sandman* by Muriel Olyott (unpaged). (Photograph by the Author).

across her chest, draws attention to that area of her body, suggesting a sexual consciousness. The line of her hip emphasises the female form. The mermaid is the object of a dual gaze; from the characters in the book and from the viewer outside the page. There is something here of what Patricia Holland calls «the ambiguous sexuality of the pre-pubescent girl» which appears in so many images of children in popular media³¹.

Female viewers are asked to take part in this voyeurism, although it is somewhat difficult to determine whether they are being asked to identify as the subject of the gaze or the gazer. This illustration can also be read as eroticised in the way discussed at the beginning of my paper, particularly the large eyes and her look of slightly wary innocence. The coy, sideways glance from the over-emphasised eyes indicates the kind of slightly seductive, come-hither look mentioned by Kociumbas. The rock on which she sits is, in itself somewhat peculiar, imitating as it does human buttocks, reinforcing the curvaceousness of the mermaid's figure. This all suggests the exotic as erotic. Although she is talking about advertisements and images in popular culture, such an illustration might well be read as an example of what Valerie Walkerdine describes as «the complex construction of the highly contradictory gaze at little girls, one which

³¹ P. Holland, *Picturing childhood: the myth of the child in popular imagery*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 4.

places them as at once threatening and sustaining rationality, little virgins that might be whores, to be protected and yet to be constantly alluring»³².

Very similar constructions can be seen in Connie Christie's *The Adventures of Pinkieshell*. Connie Christie was a writer and illustrator of children's books as well as a designer and photographer. Like Pixie O'Harris whose story *Daughter of the Billabong* was discussed earlier, Christie was very prolific, producing about seven books a year for seven years, many of them based on European fairy tales³³. In *The Adventures of Pinkieshell*, Pinkieshell, the mermaid, goes on an adventure, and like many mermaids before her, is caught in a net by some fishermen. As befits a book for young children, this is not a story in which the mermaid lures the fishermen to disaster or shipwreck. Indeed she gives the boxes of jewels she has found to the men so that the daughter of one of them can have treatment for her illness. She is then taken home by the fisherman and befriends his daughter, Nancy.

Pinkieshell is cast as something of a redemptive figure as the child, who is bedridden and cannot walk, is persuaded to go away from home, presumably to hospital, and comes back cured. With a reference to the growing technologies of the time, Pinkieshell is given a waterproof wireless set in gratitude from the fisherman so that she can take it back to her underwater home and continue to communicate with Nancy.

The «rosy-cheeked characters» in Christie's children's books have been described as «in the cupie-doll tradition»³⁴ but Pinkieshell is more than that. There is something of a mismatch between the written text, which, as I have pointed out, is aimed at an audience of quite young children, and the portrayal of her through illustrations in which she is constructed very much in the way which Gordon mentioned and was portrayed in Waterhouse's painting. Here is the seductress, sitting on a rock combing her hair. Like the mermaid in Olyott's book, there are developing breasts hidden beneath the flowing hair. Here too is the coy look, the slightly shy glance which invites a return gaze. The puffer fish's sideways look towards the viewer suggests a sexualised, male, knowingness. Perhaps surprisingly, given that this is a completely different illustrator, there are similarities between the rocks too as this one also suggests that Pinkieshell is sitting on human buttocks. The folds where her tail joins with her torso paradoxically emphasise what would usually be the genital region; the ambiguity of the sexuality of mermaids perhaps makes them especially dangerous. In this illustration, however, the pert little naked buttocks are not covered by the tail and are openly enticing.

³² V. Walkerdine, *Daddy's girl: young girls and popular culture*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan, 1997, p. 171.

³³ Lees, Macintyre, *The Oxford companion to Australian children's literature*, cit., p. 96.

³⁴ Accessible in *AustLit-Australian Literature Resource*, <<http://www.austlit.edu.au/>> (accessed: March 16th, 2010).



Pic. 4. Front cover of Connie Christie, *The Fairy Mermaid*. (Photograph by the Author).

The Fairy Mermaid is another of Christie's books. Many of her books were published in a paper format and in many of these mermaids appeared quite frequently. Such books fitted within the hugely popular genre of illustrated fantasies with fairies, mermaids, sprites and other folkloric creatures frequently appearing. In many of these books as with this one by Christie, fantasy and adventure intersect. This particular work is about Coralshell, who, we are told, is a particularly kind little mermaid. Her grandmother gives her a necklace with a magic shell for her birthday. Interestingly, shells are «a universally positive feminine symbol of birth, life, resurrection, love and good luck»³⁵. The Shell talks to Coralshell and they have lots of adventures together. Bringing together a mythological land figure and one from the sea, Coralshell is given a pair of fairy wings by the Fairy Queen as a reward for rescuing a fairy princess from a crab who has her imprisoned in a cage. (This plot is reminiscent of Pixie O'Harris's Pearl Pinkie and Sea Greenie in which a similar fate befalls Pearl Pinkie and Sea Greenie, the coyly seductive rock-sprites captured by a wicked octopus who wants to possess Pinkie's beauty).

Here again is the child as seductress; the come-hither glance is especially prominent in the child's face and her body is that of a woman. The swirling of the

³⁵ C. Gibson, *Signs and symbols: an illustrated guide to their meaning and origins*, Rowayton, Connecticut, Saraband, 1996, p. 109.

waves forms a framing for the figure of the mermaid somewhat provocatively perched on the back of the fish. The fish, in this illustration, can be read as a kind of phallic symbol. The vectors in this illustration are somewhat confused – and confusing – as there are a number of intersecting lines leading the eye. However, given the mermaid's place of dominance in the illustration, the correspondingly most prominent vector is that formed by her tail and leading up to her body. This emphasises the naked torso and the womanly breasts, leading further up to the juxtaposition of the strangely child-like face.

The illustration in which Coralshell is given the fairy wings by the Queen very much emphasises the girl/woman being the subject of the gaze. Coralshell sits on a rock with a clump of seaweed framing her left breast; she is further framed by an outstretched wing and the vivid red of the dress worn by the Fairy Queen. She thus forms the focal point of the illustration and her tail provides a vector which leads up her body to the shell placed strategically between the developing breasts. Very much on display, she is the object of attention of every other creature in the illustration – two mice, a frog and an elf. Her navel is prominent, signifying a human, rather than a mythical birth. Like all the mermaids she is, as I have said, young. This construction suggests that mermaids are somehow locked in time, ageless and forever alluring. It is worth noting that in this illustration The Fairy Queen, like many representations of fairies, is young and enticing. She too has a childish face, innocent and open which seems at odds with her bright red dress which is low cut, revealing the cleavage between her breasts. Like Coralshell, she is girl/woman, the innocent/erotic.

Finally, moving away from mermaids I want to consider a poster done by Pixie O'Harris whose story *Daughter of the Billabong* I discussed earlier. This is interesting because of the ambiguous nature of the figure of Dick. As contemporary posters from the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries indicate, it was not unusual for young male characters in pantomimes to be played by women, sometimes even by quite famous actresses as a 1898 illustration of well-known Victorian music-hall star Marie Lloyd playing the role of Dick Whittington indicates. And the Melbourne, Australia, newspaper «The Argus» for Saturday 16 December 1922 had an advertisement for Dick Whittington from the Fuller's Theatre Company with a number of female stars listed³⁶. O'Harris's illustration was a poster for the same theatre company – Fuller's – and featured a young woman dressed as Dick.

This illustration like a number of the others considered here, uses framing which causes the young woman «to display her body to the viewer», a construction which I have discussed in relation to a number of other illustration

³⁶ The issue of December 16, 1922 of «The Argus» is accessible in: *Australia Trove. Digitised newspapers and more*, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/1862773?searchTerm=Fuller's%20%20Dick%20Whittington%20Argus%20December%201922>> (accessed: July 23rd, 2010).

such as those in Connie Christie's books³⁷. This is Dick Whittington as teenage girl, with long legs ending in high-heeled shoes, a seductive costume, which emphasises the slim waist and budding breasts. The placement of her hand on her hip also emphasises these characteristics does the slightly bent stance she has adopted. The line of the stick to which her bundle is attached leads the eye to the lips forming a light pout and thence to the eyes which are both demurely and knowingly downturned. The black trimmings on her costume form a kind of frame which draws attention to both the genital and breast areas. A patch in her costume placed just over one hip emphasises this part of her body. There seems to be no wish to make the figure androgynous, to do anything other than suggest that this was a young woman playing a young man. The cat, which is being titillated by the tiny figures of female fairies dancing around, tickling and caressing it, seems to add to the sexualised atmosphere of the illustration with his look of mesmerised pleasure³⁸.

Presumably this was not something O'Harris was inviting children to join in, but it is an aspect which would have been picked up by adult viewers, especially men, many of whom would have formed the audience for the pantomime and who were overtly being invited to spend more time looking at the character on the stage. They are manipulated into a position of carrying out the sort of erotic voyeurism on a number of levels which Laura Mulvey has described in relation to viewing films: these levels involve the artist who produces the image, the spectator who views it and the characters within the narrative³⁹. The implied audience for this voyeurism is not the child audience of the pantomime but adults, perhaps most significantly adult males, who are eroticising the body of the boy/girl Dick Whittington in which desire is located. There may well be here an echo of what Patricia Holland claims for some advertisements that, despite the ostensible audience for the purchase of food stuffs being mothers, if «a little girl appears in the frame there is always and implied audience of adult men for whom such an image carries a potentially sexual meaning»⁴⁰.

Peter Fuller argues that «the camera has the capacity to reveal where childhood is being contradicted or denied»⁴¹. This study of a number of picture books for children from the middle of the twentieth century suggests that a close reading of them can perform a similar function. Karen Brooks coined the phrase «cultural paedophilia» for the phenomenon of turning children into the objects of a collective gaze by dressing them in adult clothes, allowing them to

³⁷ Holland, *What is a child?*, cit., p. 129.

³⁸ The illustration can be found in O'Harris's autobiography *Was it yesterday? The autobiography of Pixie O'Harris*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1983.

³⁹ G. Perry, ed. *Gender and art*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Holland, *What is a child?*, cit., p. 129.

⁴¹ Quoted in J. Dusingherre, *Alice to the lighthouse: children's books and radical experiments in art*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Macmillan, 1999, p. 20.

wear makeup and perform as models, for example⁴². Something similar seems to be happening with the illustrations from the picture books discussed here which specifically invite the gaze and which are ambiguous in their construction of child/adult bodies. As this brief exploration has demonstrated, the eroticising of the child figure appears in a number of ways: through gazing at the child's body; through the infantilising of indigenous peoples and through the construction of the child as adult. Peter Hollindale comments on the way that "child" is used as a pejorative term implying a construction of childhood «as a typical set of immature and undesirable behaviours which responsible young persons should abandon»⁴³. On the other hand, childhood is celebrated as a time of innocence which should be protected from outside corruption in order to make it last as long as possible. There is a sense in which these adult constructs reflect a nostalgia for perceived innocent childhoods of the past as well as a longing for an idealised norm of childhood, what Patricia Holland describes as «contemporary attitudes and expectations [which] still refer back to that lingering nineteenth-century moment when the cult of childhood blossomed in literature and the visual media»⁴⁴. However, like the nineteenth-century magazine photographs Jan Kociumbas discusses, there are contradictory depictions in the illustrations discussed in this chapter as they indicate the way the «idealisation of the child as innocent and vulnerable was always open to sexual interpretation»⁴⁵. One could suggest that given the erotic nature of many of the illustrations discussed here the ostensible audience may well be children, but the implied audience must surely be adult. The result is an apparent ambivalence about childhood.

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⁴² K. Brooks, *Consuming innocence : popular culture and our children*, St Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 2008, p. 47.

⁴³ P. Hollindale, *Signs of childness in children's books*, Stroud, Gloucestershire, Thimble Press, 1997, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Holland, *Picturing childhood*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁵ Kociumbas reproduces an illustration from a nineteenth-century magazine with a family audience. The child in the illustration is very scantily clothed, in a provocative pose, with one leg slightly bent, a finger in her mouth and gazing at the audience. Kociumbas, *Australian childhood*, cit., p. 93.

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