

## Book Review

Mark Froud, *The Lost Child in Literature and Culture*  
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(eBook), 198 pages.

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While a book should not be judged by its covers, the image on the front cover of Mark Froud's sociocultural study about the concept of the lost child in literature and culture might be seen to provide a succinct pictorial summary of the book, a visual summation of arguments put forward by the author. The image is a photographic representation of a blindfolded blonde girl in a vintage dress, her mouth slightly open and her arms raised, seemingly searching or feeling her way ahead with the open palms of her hands. As a representation of a child accompanying a text written by an adult for adults, the image reinforces the point Froud makes in Chapter 2, that in one of the fundamental forms of narrative, namely folk stories, children are objects of adult representation because the stories are not *for* children, but *about* children.

Froud's analysis in Chapter 2 of fairy tales such as "The Red Riding Hood" or "Hansel and Gretel", which are probably known to every European and English-speaking child and parent, reveals a contradictory attitude towards children which lies at the heart of social relations and cultural representations in Western society. Children are innocents in danger while at the same time their unruly delinquency poses a threat to the community; they are both desirable and inconvenient, they are to be both protected and banished. This dichotomy, Froud concludes, is emphasised by the figure of the lost child. Furthermore, Froud demonstrates how the ambiguous site of the fairy tale, as a means of both positive transformation and negative manipulation and control, has been adapted in contemporary fictional narratives by writers such as Angela Carter and Joyce Carol Oates. Froud's textual analysis of the folk tales runs parallel to a psychological analysis, where consuming children in "Hansel and Gretel", for example, is seen as a symbolic reclamation of an inner child which was lost to adulthood. On the other hand, Froud never loses sight of the real lost children or wider social issues that precipitate violence.

Real life examples of institutional child abuse are the focus of Chapter 3, which deals with the lost child in narratives of history. Froud looks at the practice of child migration of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the transport of children to institutions of the Commonwealth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Forgotten Australians of Stolen Generations, showing how hundreds of thousands of childhoods were denied through commodification of the child as a unit of labour or objectification and separation from their biological parents. In a move from the real to the imaginary, Froud also examines fictional narratives such as David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the lost child is turned into a symbol of a whole national identity or past and is made to signify combinations of inner psychology and a national consciousness, and hope for the future as well as memories of the past.

Being blindfolded, the little girl in the cover image cannot see what is coming her way; she cannot see the future and can therefore be likened to the lost child as emblematic of the disruption of the usual understanding of linear time because, as Froud argues, the child is symbolically viewed as the embodiment of potential future. In the first three chapters of the study, the figure of the lost child is used to symbolise emotional and psychological states of individuals and contemporary society, exposing underlying fears and hypocrisies which lie underneath the surface of society. Entitled “The Child Lost in our Time”, Chapter 4 of Mark Froud’s study deals with the media representation of high-profile cases of child murder and abduction, where the author reveals that the image of a blonde white girl seems to carry extra weight within Western national consciousness. Some of the fictional texts discussed in this chapter as reactions to the horrors of the everyday world and as symbolic of a metaphysical trauma are Joyce Carol Oates’s *Carthage* and James Miller’s *Lost Boys*. In Froud’s view, the authors use the figure of the lost child to criticise the post 9/11 society in Britain and America.

The hairstyle and the vintage dress of the blindfolded blonde girl in the black and white cover photograph suggest a bygone era, a ghostly presence of the past, uncannily arrested in a photograph which blurs the distinction between life and death. In Chapter 5, the author discusses how the figure of the child, an uncanny link to an earlier self, has come to embody the uncanny in literature and film, and how these representations are symbolic of loss within adults and society. Nicolas Roeg’s film adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier’s short story “Do Not Look Now”, Alice Munro’s short stories, Alice Sebold’s novel *The Lovely Bones* and the 1999 film *Stir of Echoes*, based on Richard Matheson’s 1958 novel of the same title, are discussed as examples of a large number of texts and films which position lost children at the centre of spectral or uncanny narratives in order to represent the presence of the lost child within every adult.

Finally, the girl’s half-open mouth in a mute photograph relates to Chapter 6 which argues that the lost child figure is equivalent to the absence within language postulated by Jacques Derrida and other post-structural theorists. This void within language is seen as indicative of trauma, of robbing children of their voice and enabling oppressive institutions and individuals to obscure their abuses. On the other hand, in society’s double-edged attitude to children, the child is seen as the manipulator of the sign and, consequently, a figure which embodies corruption and is to be feared. Examples from prose fiction and film as well as real-life cases of feral children are discussed in this chapter in order to explore how those who express themselves differently are silenced and excluded, and how the silence can be opened out and oppression lifted.

Growing out of a doctoral thesis, *The Lost Child in Literature and Culture* is a well-researched book which takes its readers on a journey across disciplines, countries and eras in order to remind us of real-life abducted, victimised, murdered, stolen and lost children and to explore how those cases connect to the imaginary and symbolic. The study is as much about the lost child within us as it is about what the symbol tells us about the world we live in.

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