

**Australian childhood through the looking glass: changing
representations of childhood
in Australian children's fictions 1953 - 2003**

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Abstract

This study analyses transformations in the conceptualisations of Australian childhood represented in a specific corpus of mainstream realist children's fictions produced and marketed between 1953 and 2003. A range of critical theoretical frames enable the articulation of the paradigmatic shifts in the ideologies represented in the corpus with regard to the socio-cultural factors determining interpellations of the Australian child. Examination of the paradigmatic shifts in the ontological status of 'childhood' implicates three other concepts: the first is gender because childhood in Australia means interpellation into either 'boyhood' or 'girlhood'; second is the concept of the 'family' which undergoes a substantive reconceptualisation both of its constitution and of its significance in Australian social life; and the last concept is that of 'nation' since the state's responsibility for the welfare of children is a naturalised position by the end of the twentieth century.

The study offers a diachronic examination of changing discursive practices in the realist mode. The earliest realist texts in the corpus offer traditional understandings of childhood as a time of happiness and freedom, with children dependent on, yet separated and protected from, the adult world. I examine representations of shifting power differentials in adult-child relationships across the half century. From a new millennial perspective I argue that the fictions in the corpus represent a desire to dismantle the barriers between the worlds of the child and the adult. At the *fin de siècle*, fictions in the corpus are self-reflexive, drawing the child reader's attention to the narrative structures and discursive practices of fiction and thereby position child readers to interrogate the representations of fictive child subjectivities and the metanarratives of childhood.

Certification

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or institution.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Beverley J. Pennell', with a large, stylized initial 'B'.

Beverley J. Pennell

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