

LEARNING HOW TO FEEL. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND EMOTIONAL SOCIALIZATION, 1870-1970

By UTE FREVERT, PASCAL EITLER, STEPHANIE OLSEN *et al.*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 320 páginas. ISBN: 978-0-19-968499-1

The co-authored work, *Learning how to feel*, investigates children's emotional formation through a study of popular fiction for children and advice manuals for parents and teachers, two groups of adults who were of paramount importance in children's emotional development. It concentrates on texts published in North America and Western Europe—chiefly, in Britain, France, and Germany (including a few translations from other languages)—as well as in India and Russia. Like most contemporary works on the history of emotions, the book is based on the premise that emotions are products of nurture rather than of nature, or that they at least have a strong sociocultural component. Since many societies have considered childhood *the* crucial formative period, also in terms of emotional knowledge and behavior, adults tend to direct substantial efforts at teaching children how to feel and manage their emotions in socially and morally appropriate ways. Examining some of the major collective tools of emotional socialization in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Learning how to feel* makes an important contribution to the growing body of research that explores the nexus between childhood and emotions historically.

The book's format is clear and consistent. Aside from an introduction and an epilogue, the book consists of 12 chapters, each of which concentrates on a particular emotion: anxiety, trust, piety, compassion, empathy, love, shame, pain, fear, bravery, homesickness, and boredom. The chapters all begin with a vignette that sets the scene and points to some of the central features of the emotion under scrutiny. Every chapter engages its own corpus of literature, yet many of the fictional texts, including *Slovenly Peter*, 1850 (German original: *Struwwelpeter*, 1845); *Tom Brown's School Days*, 1857; *The Coral Island*, 1857; *Taming a Tomboy*, 1898; *The Secret Garden*, 1910; *Pippi*

Longstocking, 1945 (Swedish original: *Pippi Långstrump*, 1945); *The War of the Buttons*, 1968 (French original: *La guerre des boutons*, 1912); *The Grey Gentlemen*, 1974 (German original: *Momo*, 1973) are analysed in several chapters. Rather than amounting to tedious repetition, this recurrence demonstrates the many —though not necessarily contradictory— possible emotional readings of the same text.

The authors are all —or have all been— researchers at the *Center for the History of Emotions* at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, and the book reflects what appears to have been a genuinely collaborative working process. It is unusually coherent in both style and content, and each chapter adds another layer to the overall argument. At the same time, the chapters can easily be read independently of one another, and since the book is supplied with no less than three indexes of names, subjects, and work titles, respectively, it may also be used as a reference work for those interested in particular texts or subjects.

The ambition of the book is to go beyond what adults *taught* children and youth to look at the process of emotional *learning*. The fundamental question raised in the introduction, and which all chapters deal with to a greater or lesser extent, is: Can texts written by adults in fact teach us about children's learning? This question resembles the challenge that haunts most research into the histories of children and childhood, in one shape or another, that is, how can we go beyond the changing ideals and norms of childhood among adults to examine children's agency and experience? The authors of *Learning how to feel* approach the challenge by proposing that children learn emotions in «mimetic» and «imitative» ways, and that literature offered a crucial site for such mimetic learning. As Pascal Eitler, Stephanie Olsen, and Uffa Jensen write in the introduction, children's books «imparted and shared a situated and practical knowledge, telling children not necessarily *what* to feel but *how* this or that emotion occurs, what it looks like and the physical experience of it, in some level of detail». (p. 7, original emphasis). Children's literature should, in other words, be understood as a kind of emotional playground where children could try out familiar and unfamiliar emotions through identification with the different characters of the books.

The argument is by no means a simplistic one; the authors do not suggest that emotional imitation results in a one-to-one reproduction of the author's emotion knowledge and emotion norms in the reader (or listener). Instead,

they are careful to stress that learning is a complicated process, in which the young people themselves play an active role in acquiring and adapting emotional skills. This also means that there are many potential emotional interpretations of any given fictional work. In the epilogue Margrit Pernau thus notes: «Reading provides children with the space for an imaginary experience of the unknown, which they can both observe and participate in by identifying with the characters – whether the emotions they mimic are the same as the author imputes to his protagonists or whether their mimesis is built upon a cultural misreading» (p. 251). The specific cultural and historical contexts of reception, the concrete social/material setting in which the books were read as well as the gender, class, and previous experience of the individual child were all crucial in determining what he or she learnt. Hence, throughout the book, the authors are generally careful not to draw too strong conclusions about what the juvenile readers took from the books, seeking instead to lay out the «emotional repertoires» that they made available. In approaching the methodological challenge in this manner, *Learning how to feel* in a sense dissolves the ultimately perhaps rather unfruitful dichotomy between children's experience and cultural conceptions of childhood, noting instead the mutually constitutive relationship between the two.

Some chapters focus predominantly on the places in the texts in which the particular emotion is explicitly named, others seek to identify the presence of specific emotions through descriptions of actions, expressions, or the body language of the fictional characters. Tracking the changing patterns of the emotions studied, the chapters elucidate social development over time and space. Stephanie Olsen, for example, shows how alterations in the configuration of trust in the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflect broader changes such as secularization, shifting intergenerational relationships, and decolonization. Similarly, Ute Frevert shows how transformations in the uses and valuations of shame and shaming reveal and sustain changes in gender prescriptions, notions of authority, and childhood ideals.

Moreover, there might be variations in what specific emotions *do* in different contexts. Jan Plamper argues that literary promotions of bravery in children might nourish good soldiering in Soviet Russia, and Daniel Brückenhaus interrogates how the education of compassion across racial boundaries sustained imperial hierarchies.

Noting that an emotion rarely figures independently of other emotions, the authors also consider the relationships between different emotions. Ute Frevert's chapter makes it clear that shame is often linked to humiliation, embarrassment, mortification, anger and pain, though not in a static or uniform manner. Bettina Hitzer demonstrates that fear may be shameful in some contexts and perfectly acceptable in others. Homesickness may be connected to feelings such as wanderlust or the longing for a sense of security. But when it is more clearly connected to nostalgia, Juliane Brauer shows, it may function as a mode of social critique.

The book leaves the reader curious. What did emotional socialization look like in Africa and Latin America or in other parts of Asia and Europe? What were the consequences of displacements of texts from one continent to another (a question Margrit Pernau also discusses in the epilogue)? And how about the development of other emotions such as hatred, sexual desire, grief, jealousy, loneliness, disgust, etc. only briefly touched upon in this book. However, this should not be seen as a weakness; it only means that there is more research to be done.

Overall, the book is well structured and well-argued and there is no doubt that it will be valuable not only to those interested in children's literature or the learning of emotions, but also to students and scholars of the history of emotions and childhood more generally.

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