

Age in Children's Literature: Navigating Methodologies

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Abstract:

Age in David Almond's Oeuvre analyzes the works of David Almond, known for his versatility in writing for both children and adults. Each chapter investigates intersecting research questions concerning the construction of age, presenting distinct insights into Almond's literary repertoire. Ranging from autobiographical exploration to digital humanities methodologies, the review underscores the diverse analytical approaches utilized within contemporary children's literary criticism.

Alter in Kinderliteratur: Methodologien navigieren

German Abstract:

Age in David Almond's Oeuvre analysiert die Werke von David Almond, der für seine Vielseitigkeit beim Schreiben für Kinder und Erwachsene bekannt ist. Jedes Kapitel beschäftigt sich mit sich überschneidenden Forschungsfragen zur Konstruktion des Alters und bietet unterschiedliche Einblicke in Almonds literarisches Repertoire. Von der autobiografischen Erforschung bis hin zu den Methoden der digitalen Geisteswissenschaften unterstreicht die Rezension die verschiedenen analytischen Ansätze, die in der zeitgenössischen Kinderliteraturkritik verwendet werden.

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Joosen, Vanessa, Michelle Anya Anjirbag, Leander Duthoy, Lindsey Geybels, Frauke Pauwels and Emma-Louise Silva: *Age in David Almond's Oeuvre: A Multi-Method Approach to Studying Age and the Life Course in Children's Literature*. New York/Oxon: Routledge, 2023. 220 pages, Open access. ISBN: 978-1-00-226960-8.

Age in David Almond's Oeuvre, a collection of six chapters, employs various methodologies from close reading to computational literary analysis, aimed at exploring the works of David Almond, a highly regarded British author known for his versatility in writing for both children and adults. Born in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, in 1951, Almond gained widespread acclaim for his debut novel *Skellig* (1998), which won the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Children's Book Award. By exploring intersecting research questions regarding the construction of age, each chapter offers unique insights into Almond's oeuvre.

Vanessa Joosen's opening chapter delves into Almond's autobiographical writing, a captivating material given the dual role it plays in both shaping his career as a children's writer and grappling with the challenges of memory's unreliability. Joosen proposes conceptualizing autobiographical writing as intertextual and aims to explore the thematization of memory in Almond's oeuvre, as well as the shift from autonomy to community, which she views as a recent trend in life writing (p. 23). In her theoretical framework, the researcher effectively intersects the issues of life writing, memory studies, and children's literature. Joosen explores the balance and interplay of reflective and restorative nostalgia in *Counting Stars* (2000) and *Half a Creature from the Sea* (2007), autobiographical collections that are rooted in the writer's childhood. The analysis of what she describes as the "process of fictionalization and imagination that was needed to turn the fragmented memories into stories" (p. 27) makes this chapter particularly engaging to read.

Emma-Louise Silva endeavors to explore the interplay between social and material aspects of the mind using cognitive narratology, focusing on the artifacts in the young adult novels *Clay*

(2005) and *Bone Music* (2021). However, the chapter's alignment with the book's overarching theme is not entirely clear, especially in relation to age studies, despite the author's assertions. Regardless of the considerable effort invested in composing the theoretical section, the analytical apparatus, it seems, is underutilized in the core part, which involves close reading of the two texts. Although presenting insightful observations on material artifacts as catalysts for personal growth, the chapter lacks coherence and buries findings in excessive quoting, limiting its potential impact.

Lindsey Geybels' chapter, adopting a digital humanities perspective on age in literature, draws on M. Nikolajeva's character theory. The study aims to explore stylistic differences, character speech content, and syntactic features associated with different age groups. Although the introduction announces the use of topic modeling (p. 59), it intriguingly focuses on frequentist lexical analysis instead (p. 71–79). Despite this, the chapter performs hierarchical clustering and principal component analysis to “investigate if David Almond's writing style differs in texts published for different ages” (p. 67). It allows Geybels to identify the texts that fall out of the general style of their intended reader's group and observe that Almond's writings for a teenage audience are most distinctive. Using the method described as “relying on lists of most common words” (p. 85) the researcher makes an array of conclusions regarding characterization and social networks (e.g., the lack of community surrounding adolescent boys). The findings also include disparities in the portrayal of various life stages across different audiences. Although some methodological elaboration would have further enhanced the study, it nonetheless provides plenty of observations on the literary construction of age.

Leander Duthoy's chapter, despite its modest claim to show “the usefulness of reader-response methodology for doing research on age in children's literature” (p. 116), offers valuable insights into age studies beyond mere methodological benefits. Although based on a small sample (five interviews), the study's inventive design and thorough methodological considerations enhance its research outcomes. In this qualitative research, readers of different ages engaged with Almond's book *My Name is Mina* (2010), and completed “extraordinary activities” (p. 95) outlined in it, including producing their own writing. As the activities extend beyond mere reading, the methodology also transcends traditional qualitative design. Duthoy's interpretation of the interviews conducted after engaging with the book is both delightful to read and well-grounded in the theory. The chapter contributes to the scientific debate on age

by presenting unexpected insights, such as the linkage between age, space, and embarrassment, as reflected in the corresponding section. Overall, a commendable contribution to the field, and, indeed, “a unique perspective on the entanglement of age, spatiality, shame and the experience of literature” (p. 114).

Michelle Anya Anjirbag and Frauke Pauwels’ chapter provides a comparative analysis of the book *Skellig* (1998) and its screen adaptation. The authors emphasize the intersection of knowledge and care in portraying characters and their relationships, exploring the impact of different media on age representations. Given the centrality of care in this study, it would be intriguing to include debates on care theory and contrast them with the authors’ interpretation. For instance, while Anjirbag and Pauwels find care to be “empowering for all generations,” (p. 142) modern social theory might view “individualistic” caregiving practices as, on the contrary, “disempowering” (see for example, Kirstein Rummery and Michael Fine. “Care: A Critical Review of Theory, Policy and Practice.” *Social Policy & Administration* 46, no. 3 (2012): 321–343.).

Concluding the collective monograph, Vanessa Joosen addresses the differences in Almond’s writing for children and adults, summarizing the conclusions of the book’s contributors. Joosen’s research question resonates with Geybels’, and while the author refers to the latter’s digital humanities methodology as “sophisticated” (p. 151), it might be misconstrued as superior to the close reading method employed by Joosen. The stylometric analysis and clustering in chapter three resulted in a ‘black box’ situation, as it did not precisely identify the stylistic features differing between writing for children and adults, despite the lexical analysis shedding light on characterization. The close reading in chapter six contributed valuable insights, offering a comprehensive examination of the distinctions between writing for children and adults, with David Almond’s work being a good example of repurposing narratives for diverse audiences. Geybels and Joosen appear to converge in their agreement, particularly regarding the portrayal of violence and death, which both find to be more pronounced in works targeted at more mature audiences. This chapter stands out for its detailed methodology of close reading, a notable rarity that aligns well with the book’s methodological emphasis.

The methodological considerations are crucial throughout the book, emphasizing the variety of tools that modern literary studies can utilize. The “multi-method approach” advertised on the

cover is well worth it, undoubtedly enriching the study of the work of David Almond, as well as the reader's comprehension of contemporary literary criticism's analytical strategies and tools. The comprehensive theoretical elaboration across the papers within this monograph further strengthens its interdisciplinary foundation, merging theoretical advancements from diverse disciplines. This monograph, in my assessment, represents a stride towards elevating age studies to the forefront of scholarly discourse in the field of children's literature.