# Authenticity and Artificiality: Juvenilia in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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One of the trials—and joys—I have found in beginning a new project with juvenilia is that it forces me to ask afresh what makes a particular child-produced text especially worthy of study. While that is always a question scholars might pose of a given creative work, juvenilia's attributes and our perceptions of them can offer some especially perplexing and rewarding opportunities for reflection on our scholarly practices. In the following paper, I pose a set of queries meant to generate conversation about how we select and value juvenilia, how we frame our analysis of this literary or artistic production, and how we name our own habits of engagement with children and the works they produce.

What better way to provide context for these topics than some jokes? Jokes written by children, that is, and recently published online:

- A man goes to a doctor's office and says, "Doctor, I'm a chicken." And the doctor says, "No, you're not."
- What's scary, but not that scary? A French pig[.]
- why was A afraid of B? cause B C D.
- why did the chicken cross the road[?] to get her tv, eggs, feet, bananas, brides, groomes [*sic*] and earth.
- why [do] wolves howl? because they have no idea what they are doing[.] (*Kids*)

Each of these (dare I say) genius gems of humour makes us laugh precisely because it is *not* funny—or at least not funny in the traditional sense. In each case, the child creator has some rhetorical knowledge of how a joke might be constructed, setting up either a question for the audience to attempt to answer, riddle-like, or using tried-and-true scenarios about chickens and doctors. And in each case, the child creator



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fails to quite pull off the logic or pun necessary to a so-called successful joke. And yet … these joke fails are really funny!

In developing my criteria for selecting a piece of juvenilia for study, I've thought about this irony a lot: namely, that the text that fails joyously, egregiously even, may be among the most successful—or at least the most noteworthy. In my doctoral research, I investigated what made certain juvenilia of the 1920s and 1930s capture the public's attention—both its admiration and admonitions—and how that fascination or concern related to prevalent theories about childhood, play, and creativity. Contained within my bibliography were the names of accomplished young memoirists, poets, and novelists whose work, I want to say, was more than skillful mimicry—although, even as I write that phrase, I am struck by the ways in which Mariah Kupfner's work with children's samplers shows us that mimicry in and of itself is a form of agential participation in the culture. Furthermore, in the interdisciplinary field of juvenilia studies, which certainly includes historical or sociological research, some juvenilia's value is not as individualistic works of genius, but as the representative output of a society whose values or practices may be discovered from this child-crafted art.

IF JUVENILIA scholars' focus, however, is upon close analysis of artworks or literature *as* art and literature, rather than as signs of something else, the question of intentionality or self-aware craft can return. I have contended that not only did accomplished young authors such as the writers of The St. Nicholas League (1899–1940) or teen author team Katharine Hull and Pamela Whitlock (first novel published 1937) fully embrace the going ideology surrounding childhood and its connections to nature, but they also *self-consciously* wielded the supposed hallmarks of childhood in their works—thereby artfully reinforcing a prevailing sentiment about childhood in ways that ironically made their readers rejoice over the authenticity and innocence of the authors' own childhoods.[1] Echoing Marah Gubar's "kinship model," Karen Sánchez-Eppler's conceptualization of children as "significant and varied participants in the making of social meaning" (xv), and Laurie Langbauer's characterization of the young writers of dime novels in the 1910s–20s as "wide awake" in their practices, I would say that these young authors were consummate professionals, more similar to their adult counterparts than dissimilar.

But as much as I admire and give credit to these young authors and others for their professionalism, if I am honest, their most neatly executed verses and chapters can grow a little … boring.[2] If I weren't aware of the youthful nature of these texts' authors, I would probably categorise this literature alongside the perfectly reasonable but not especially life-changing narratives of an adult-authored beach read: something that certainly took a level of proficiency not everyone can achieve—young or old—but not, perhaps, a piece of art bound for longevity and close study.

In contrast to these tidy pieces of literature, my favourite youth-authored texts from the early twentieth century have always been those that actually missed the mark,

showing signs of their composers' imperfect knowledge and, in doing so, creating something that seems new or like an unintentional commentary upon our rigid adult ideas about the world: in other words, an authentic vision.

The reality of my preference for such idiosyncratic "mistakes" in juvenilia is something that feels at odds with my primary work as a teacher. This year marked my tenth teaching outside the university setting, in a PK–12 all-girls independent school where I serve as English department chair for fifth to twelfth grade but have on occasion advised teachers for even our youngest students. In my day-to-day work with eleventh and twelfth graders, I am perpetually guiding my students to *not* show their youthfulness, with the end goal of making their compositions as indistinguishable from those of accomplished scholars or writers of op-eds and fiction as possible. In fact, in the case of research papers, I specifically ask students to occupy the position of scholars, entering into conversation with published academics as equals, not as Others, so that their work can flawlessly replicate those they admire or aspire to be.

But here again, I find myself seesawing over the purpose of my engagement with children and their productions, since I am struck by the reality that in the end, the kind of flawless uniformity I have described above is not at all what we strive for as scholars. Aside from wanting to differentiate our claims or otherwise mark our work as making innovative inroads, we are also increasingly contending with the spectre of AI right now, which has shown us that the polish of prefabricated or formulaic prose has all the material depth of a bottom-of-the-line IKEA cabinet: it might appear good on the surface and initially get the job done, but there is cancerous chipboard lurking just beneath. In thinking, in contrast, about all the weird and wacky wonderfulness of my favourite juvenile-authored texts, I am pretty sure the allure for me and for the readership that assiduously reviewed and scrutinised them in the 1920s and 1930s was that there was some possibility of authenticity (or truth to materials), some eschewal of the artificial world that we are increasingly scared characterises childhood, as well as some artistry, in their writing.

I am left with these questions about what makes certain pieces of children's writing significant enough or interesting enough to write about, and what it means for children when we label their work as such—questions that I have considered again and again alongside other scholars of juvenilia, but which may serve as inspiration for further consideration of the philosophies underpinning our engagement with child-produced work:

- Is it possible for the specialness of child-authored work to reside in the creative output itself, or is it inescapable that knowing who the creator is impacts our reception of it?
- The world of education is awash with children's writing. What is it that sets some of this writing apart?

- How much of a role do privilege and connectedness play in juvenilia's publication, and what does publication history do to our understanding of the worldview projected in these works?
- When we group certain authors based upon their identifiers—such as being female or Latinx—we may, at least in part, be looking for them to convey something special about the group to which they belong. Do we do the same for child authors? Do we expect juvenilia to chart a kind of experience that is different from our own, and is there, in consequence, a certain voyeuristic quality to reading juvenilia?

The rest of my questions reflect my thoughts about what might be involved in a project to merge my old research on the 1920s–30s with new research into this current cultural moment one hundred years later, when we appear to be facing some of the same issues or dynamics despite the gap in years:

- There are innumerable social media accounts now that feature children saying cute and funny things or commenting upon adult topics with a lisp or an inappropriate use of adult language. While some majority-youth-generated platforms may have self-policing built in, frequently adults serve as mediators of younger children's words, offering them as entertainment, rather than as signs of a youthful user's agency, creativity, or innovation. Are these reels and posts a form of juvenilia, and are the platforms they exist on any more democratic in nature than earlier publishers of juvenilia?
- Working on a campus with girls aged 3–18, how might I use their output to further think about the philosophies surrounding juvenilia … or even ways to teach writing? How do we balance teaching kids successful form without minimising their individualism and the possibility of their producing something more authentic? What might collaborations between university schools of education, literary scholars, and primary or secondary educators bring to light?
- How are girls' artistic voices constrained or shaped by their consumption of girlhood? Do we teach girls differently than we teach boys when it comes to having agency in navigating cultural constructions of gender? Are reviewers of juvenilia more likely to construe young girls' intentional wielding of cultural ideas as artifice than young male authors' and artists' manipulation of masculine ideals?
- Given the ways that AI is starting to dominate a lot of texts and other media, might we be entering a moment—not unlike the

early twentieth-century era I studied in my previous research—in which readers and viewers are searching for the kind of authenticity that juvenilia's idiosyncrasies have often been credited with providing?

- And finally, on a personal note, at thirteen, my daughter finished her first novel; at fourteen, she's begun research for her second one. I find myself in the position of other parents of juvenile creators: does my advice about her creations have the potential to disturb what makes them valuable? Or does she deserve the same level of professional guidance I would offer a peer author?

At the foundation of juvenilia studies is a purposeful contradiction of Jacqueline Rose's notion that children passively receive literature and do not engage in cultural production themselves. While the field thereby proudly touts its engagement with real children, it is imperative that we consider the implications of our work for the actual young people surrounding us in our day-to-day lives. My experiences pinning students' caps for commencement ceremonies, helping them breathe through bouts of anxiety, or subbing for a P.E. class make it harder for me to ignore the embodied experiences of the youthful creators in my world. In fifth- to twelfth-grade assemblies, when adults ask the audience members to raise their hands if they see themselves as writers or artists, it is the youngest students whose hands shoot up confidently in large numbers, proudly classifying their summer vacation compositions, comics, drawings, and short stories as signs of their creative identity. How do we help these young authors and artists to master the markers of creative success that necessarily involve knowledge of artifice, technique, or rhetoric while also holding onto their quirky, authentic, individualistically genius "mistakes"? It is a question of navigating not only artistry, but also the more commonplace but rewarding successes of life–of being able to compose cover letters, emails, and fully formed thoughts in recognizable and socially acceptable ways. As scholars who use children's practice or apprentice materials as serious objects of study, we have a responsibility to not fall prey to the same fetishistic notions of childhood genius we often say we resist, to not hold young people–who live in and are influenced by the same world we inhabit as adults–to standards of authenticity that we cannot uphold ourselves. In the existential words of one youthful joke creator, "Why was the chicken wearing a chicken costume? Because he wanted to pretend to be himself" (KidsWriteJokes, "Why was the chicken wearing." Facebook post, 20 January 2025, www.facebook.com/kidswritejokes).

## NOTES

[1] In the case of Hull and Whitlock, this representation is complicated by the interruptions to this idealised narrative of childhood that characterised their final book in the *Oxus* series, garnering them more criticism for *Oxus in Summer* (1939) than their debut novel, *The Far-Distant Oxus* (1937).

[2] What else can account for the number of articles on the charmingly errant novel *The Young Visiters* by nine-year-old Daisy Ashford (1919) and the complete silence about the more coherent, yet coincidingly more pedestrian narratives of Moyra Charleton's *Tally Ho* (1931) or Betty Boyd Bell's *Circus! A Girl's Own Story of Life Under the "Big Top"* (1930)?

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