
Listen, my children, and perhaps we still hear of the midnight ride of the barefoot boy with cheek of tan who sails off in a wooden shoe one night with Wynken, Blynken, and Nod .... Whether we encounter these lines in the form of parody, pastiche, or children's rhyme, many Americans of a certain age will recognize them, even if we cannot quite place them or their authors. How these lines, and others like them, got under our skin is the burden of Angela Sorby's excellent Schoolroom Poets.

The epithet “schoolroom poets” originally belonged to the iconic New England quartet of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes—the figures who defined genteel liberal Northern taste from the 1840s through the Civil War. It was not until after the war that these poets and their successors truly became poets of the schoolroom. With their most famous work behind them, and with the American cultural field splintering into elite and lowbrow arenas of literary production and consumption, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes were increasingly relegated to the haunts of pedagogy. As Sorby observes, none of these poets “began as children’s poets, but all of them became children’s poets in the second half of the nineteenth century” (p. xix). Longfellow and Whittier may have had the title of “children’s laureate” thrust upon them, but later schoolroom poets like James Whitcomb Riley and Eugene Field actively embraced the role and its attendant popularity. In the process, Sorby argues, poetry itself became infantilized, to the point that “commerce with real and imagined children became the primary source of social energy in American poetry between 1865 and 1917” (p. xviii).
The real and imagined children so crucial to American poetry following the Civil War are not identical to the children of high antebellum sentimentalism. Sorby argues that in moving so decisively into the public, institutional space of pedagogy, the actual reading practices of schoolroom poetry loosened their roots in sentimentalism's culture of the family, even though that culture remained available as an object of nostalgia. Whittier's elegiac *Snow-Bound* (1866), for example, became a classic of schoolroom poetry for its celebration of hearth and home isolated by a storm in an ur-New England village. *Schoolroom Poets* reproduces a devastating counterimage, a photograph of one of the actual classroom scenes of Whittier's postwar canonization showing African American students at the Hampton Institute in uniform, sitting ramrod straight in front of a blackboard diagram of Whittier's Haverhill homestead (p. 65). The children addressed by schoolroom poetry inhabited corporate institutions, institutions often designed to draw immigrant children and other racial and class "others" out of their families of origin. For the Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin (author of *Promised Land* [1912]), no less than for the children in American Indian schools who performed *Hiawatha* pageants at the turn of the century, reciting Longfellow was an exercise in Americanization rather than a sentimental reaffirmation of the family fireside.

Such clear-cut deployments of poetry as discipline, however, are not the only story Sorby has to tell in *Schoolroom Poets*. The poetry published in the elite postwar children's magazine *St. Nicholas* helped brand a new model of childhood oriented toward "pleasure and play" and consumerism that was relatively tolerant of the "transgressive behaviors" marking children's increasingly distinctive peer cultures (p. 94). The popular poetry of Eugene Field, on the other hand, invited adult readers to explore what we might now call their inner child. Before they were taken up by American modernist poets, Emily Dickinson's poems began appearing in progressive elementary textbooks, where their off-rhymes chimed with new ideals of both poetry and education: in this fin-de-siècle, proto-modernist pedagogy, "a poem's music is meant to 'stimulate the imagination' rather than to set rhetorical standards" (p. 167).

*Schoolroom Poets* is not a comprehensive study of American poetry from the Civil War to the advent of modernism. The writers Sorby studies, and the popular venues in which she situates them, are the writers and venues against which American poetic modernism defined itself. Sorby does not try to grasp that emergence from the inside but rather to understand its occluded and yet enabling underside. Never-
theless, she makes a compelling claim that something definitive happened to the cultural place of American poetry as a whole between 1865 and 1917, that these years saw the infantilization of poetry as a genre in the United States. A recent edition of the New York Times Book Review features two anthologies of poetry in its “Inside the List” column. One is Caroline Kennedy’s A Family of Poems: My Favorite Poetry for Children; the other, Elise Paschen’s Poetry Speaks to Children, “comes with a cool bonus: a CD of many of its poems read by their original authors—including Robert Frost intoning ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ and Carl Sandburg reading ‘On a Flimmering Floom You Shall Ride’” (New York Times, 15 January 2006). Perhaps the bundled CD has now taken on for us the role that classroom recitation once played in the schooling of poetry; perhaps the infantilization of American poetry has found a way of consuming the modernism that once stood in its way. Schoolroom Poets is a beautifully researched, provocative guide to an aspect of American literary history that lies before us, as well as behind us.

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