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Stronger, Truer, Bolder.
American Children's Writing, Nature, and the Environment.

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**Rezension zu Karen L. Kilcup:
Stronger, Truer, Bolder. American Children's Writing, Nature, and the Environment.
University of Georgia Press 2021.**

Amanda Halter

Between 1789 and 1873, almost 400 periodicals for children were founded in the United States. Not only is their sheer number striking, but a peek inside many of these literary magazines reveals that they contained some of the century's most original and compelling examples of nature writing and environmental writing: illustratively, the journal *Juvenile Miscellany* included detailed botanical drawings, *Parley's Magazine* boasted illustrations of myriad aviary and mammal species. Further, these and many other children's magazines featured short stories, poems, game corners, dialogues, and much more, concentrating on nature, the environment, and human-nature-animal motifs. The sheer quantity, content, and well-recorded popularity of these periodicals attest to a profound interest in 19th-century America in educating young people about and entertaining them with the natural world.

While ecocriticism – the academic field broadly concerned with literature and the environment – has expanded its scope beyond the canon to examine various periods, genres, and geographical locations, children's literature is still rarely discussed. Indeed, monographs and essay collections specifically dedicated to the intersection of Children's Literature and Ecocriticism can be counted on one hand, among them Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd's 2004 collection *Wild Things: Children's Literature and Ecocriticism* and Alice Curry's 2013 monograph, *Environmental Crisis and Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of the Earth*. What is more, except for a few chapters (cf. Kilcup 2021: 7), minimal scholarship to date has considered 19th-century youths and nature. To be sure, no previous scholarly work has comprehensively addressed the aforementioned substantial literary and cultural resources.

Given this context, Karen L. Kilcup brings together ecocriticism, nineteenth-century American literature, cultural studies, cultural history, and children's literature in her badly needed 2021 monograph *Stronger, Truer, Bolder: American Children's Writing, Nature, and the Environment*. In this work, the Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, scrutinizes 19th-century American literary magazines for children. Over the course of five chapters, the author “track[s] American writers' evolving conceptions of children's relationships to nature and the environment” (Kilcup 2021: 5). It is an endeavor that unquestionably fills an identifiable research gap, yet Kilcup's opening query asking “why should we – literary critics or Americans as a whole – care about nineteenth-century children's literature beyond its antiquarian or curiosity value?” (ibid. 2, my emphasis), sets a thought-provoking tone. The author offers compelling answers throughout the substantial 336 pages of text in *Stronger, Truer, Bolder*.

Throughout a relatively dense introduction, Kilcup acquaints the reader with the aforementioned research gap, going on to lay out the scope, corpus, and project design of the monograph while also providing historical and literary background on education and entertainment in the 19th century. The introduction of *Stronger, Truer, Bolder* further surveys pertinent domains and foundational concepts crucial to the project's framework. This encompasses discussions spanning multiple ecocritical areas like environmental justice and

critical animal studies alongside broader fields like childhood studies, gender studies, Native American studies, periodical studies, and cultural studies, as well as critical concepts such as “agency,” “child,” and “environmental citizenship.” This insightful opening proves indispensable for setting up the work done in the book, but it is also a worthwhile stand-alone read for anyone interested in working at the intersection of ecocriticism and children’s literature.

In the subsequent five chapters, Kilcup contextualizes and analyzes 19th-century children’s nature writing periodicals. She begins by showing how, in the early 19th century, nature was associated with individual and social morality, with nature’s “rules” providing models for both children and society as a whole to emulate. As the century progressed, her readings demonstrate, many writers moved toward environmental consciousness-raising and activism on the one hand, and entertainment and pleasure on the other. Thus, the overall interpretive trajectory of *Stronger, Truer, Bolder* uncovers how writers’ early didactic and moral tone, which assumed that young people needed disciplining, came to gradually prioritize children’s environmental agency and responsibility.

The work’s structure, both overall and within chapters, assists in developing this argument. Each of the five chapters moves chronologically, focusing on specific segments of the 19th century: the first centers on Lydia Maria Child’s *Juvenile Miscellany* (1826–1836), the second on Samuel Goodrich’s *Parley’s Magazine* and its successor *Merry’s Museum* (1830s–1840s), the third on a pair of mid-century magazines, and so forth. In each chapter, Kilcup presents critical contexts for each journal before diving into detailed analyses. In the analyses, the author explores the representation of natural history, animal welfare, child-nature relations, and other motifs and themes across multiple journal editions. She traces how various environmental strands – including environmental justice, inter-species relationships, and environmental citizenship – reappear, whether modified, subdued, or enlarged, throughout these journals, evolving amidst the backdrop of significant socio-historical shifts in the United States, such as the complexities surrounding “the Indian problem” (Chapter 1), “gendered” child-nature relationships (Chapter 2), or racial tensions (Chapter 5). Despite her detailed focus on specific periods and journals, the structured approach and engaging writing style in these analytical sections ensure that the intricate arguments remain accessible.

Following the central magazine analyses, Kilcup decidedly closes out each chapter with a study of a book-length single-author volume, including Child’s radical volume *First Settlers of New-England* (1829) in the first, Jacob Abbott’s *Mary Erskine* (1850) in the second, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Queer Little People* (1867) in the third, and finally, Celia Thaxter’s *Stories and Poems for Children* (1895). Through these seemingly ‘superfluous’ narrative analyses, Karen L. Kilcup reveals how they confirm or complicate the ideas presented in the chapters’ journals of focus, ultimately situating the close readings of individual magazines within larger cultural patterns and discourse. This analytical strategy works well to contextualize and highlight the broader implications of the magazine’s missions.

In the final chapter (Chapter 5), Kilcup takes a self-proclaimed “slightly different approach” (23). Here, while she continues the children’s magazine focus by first reviewing the “contributions of one extraordinary early 20th-century magazine” (294) – the first children’s magazine that spoke explicitly to African-American children, *The Brownies’ Book* (1920–1921) – she then acknowledges the emphasis on book publication in the 20th and 21st centuries. Instead of a single full-length complementing book, she meditates briefly on *three* books: Mary Lindall’s picture book *Little Machinery* (1926), E. B. White’s classic *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), and Marie Lu’s contemporary, futuristic young adult novel, *Legend* (2011). In her analyses of

these final texts, Kilcup illustrates how American authors continue to tackle many of the previously identified 19th-century themes, developing traditions of children's environmental writing that foster young people's agency and citizenship. This last chapter, thus, strategically bridges the period between the 19th central journals and today, highlighting the book's most compelling answer as to why we should care about 19th-century children's nature periodicals:

“If we can understand how nineteenth-century American writers portrayed human-animal-nature relationships,” Kilcup teases in the book's introduction, “perhaps we can better comprehend – and more positively develop – the evolving relationship between American culture and nonhuman nature” (2021: 2). It is through Kilcup's well-written close readings of the journals in her monograph that we can begin to identify and trace this relationship. And by linking her research on 19th-century texts to contemporary works, she leads us to the poignant, if not harrowing, realization that “[t]he environmental problems these texts explore [starting in the 19th century and trailing to today] have become emergencies that young activists are demanding political leaders acknowledge” (ibid. 335).

The central accomplishment of *Stronger, Truer, Bolder* is thus – while limited in scope within the vast landscape of children's nature writing and environmental literature – that it demonstrates the lasting impact literature has on young people. It has and continues to encourage them, as the title of the work suggests, to embody qualities of “strength,” “truth,” and “boldness” when facing environmental challenges. Nineteenth-century periodicals and their legacy have contributed to “eloquent, determined, and self-empowered” (ibid. 336) young people like Greta Thunberg who will change the world (ibid.).

While Kilcup's work is a noteworthy touchstone, it remains far from exhaustive. It selectively examines a fraction of the 19th-century literary abundance, barely whizzing through the subsequent centuries to make its point. As iterated throughout the work, it serves as a “preliminary sampling” (ibid. 17), a foundational “starting point” (ibid. 5) for future explorations; Kilcup herself emphasizes that it represents “only the first word, not the last, on this capacious subject that will reward future study” (ibid. 17). As such, one can see *Stronger, Truer, Bolder* as an inaugural scholarly exploration at the nexus of ecocriticism and children's literature but also as a resounding call for sustained and continued research in this area. In addition to its introduction and five chapters, the 100 pages of footnotes, bibliographic matter, and a meticulous index assist in starting such an endeavor.

Works Cited: Pflieger, Pat. “American Children's Periodicals, 1789–1872: Introductory”, www.merrycoz.org/bib/intro.xhtml. Last accessed Nov. 14, 2023.