THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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19

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19
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Age is central to the concept of children's literature, which relies on a distinction between children and adults. After all, if children were not considered different from adults in terms of their abilities and interests, there would be no need for children's books (Nodelman 248; Benner and Ullmann 145), even if such books are also read by adults. Peter Hunt defines children's literature as "a blanket term, covering both educational and purely entertaining material designed for children and 'young adults'" (42), as opposed to literature that excludes young readers. Since most published children's books are authored, published, and sometimes illustrated by adults, this discourse is an intergenerational dialogue in its communicative setup. In addition, age is often a central concern in children's literature, as many narratives feature characters of different ages and revolve around intergenerational relationships and conflicts.

In the study of children's literature, the construction of childhood has been a central concern from the start. In addition, scholars have recently started paying more attention to age more broadly, including adulthood and old age, and have found inspiration for this focus in age studies. This interdisciplinary field emerged in the late twentieth century and theorizes and analyzes age's role in social matters including law, economy, medicine, education, and culture and the arts. While age studies developed from gerontology and is still often focused on middle and old age, various scholars in this field also work on the study of the life course and involve childhood and adolescence in their exploration of age's meanings (Green; Pickard; Hockey and James). Some age scholars find children's books a relevant source because of the role that stories play in age socialization, while conversely, children's literature scholars find inspiration in age scholarship to frame their analyses in broader theories and concepts (Waller and Falcus; Benner and Ullmann; Abate). In addition to age studies, theories from childhood studies also inspire and support children's literature scholars in their work. Although childhood and age studies are considered distinct disciplines with different foci and scholarly networks, their mutual interest in age makes a dialogue between them relevant and productive. Children's literature provides occasions where such a dialogue can be started.

Concepts of Age

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines age as "a period of existence" and specifies that it indicates "the length of time (sometimes given as a specified number of years) that a living thing, as a person, animal, plant, etc., has lived." Age scholars distinguish between expressing age in numbers (numerical

or chronological age) and using other standards to measure it: how old you feel (subjective age), the age that other people attribute to you (other-perceived age), your life expectancy (biological age), and your health and abilities compared to others (functional age), to name the most common concepts of age (Green 29). Numerical ages are referenced in some social contexts (for instance, the legal age to buy alcohol, the age when children start school). Virginia Morrow notes that "[i]n many ways, numbers are the only way that governments can manage people bureaucratically, by categorizing them according to age, starting with date of birth" (151). She points out that children in the West are often asked about their numerical age and usually know it well, but that this phenomenon is bound to time and culture. The practice of celebrating birthdays only took hold in the West in the nineteenth century. In some other countries, birthdays hardly matter to this day. Morrow's research with children in Ethiopia and India shows that in these locations, greater emphasis is put on functional age and intergenerational relationships for deciding, for example, when children go to school or what tasks they are assigned (152).

When discussing age, people often refer not so much to precise years as to age ranges (teenage years, one's late sixties) and life stages. Age critic Lorraine Green (5–9) distinguishes between the following phases: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and old age. The boundaries, further refinement, and characteristics of these categories are subject to cultural differences, change, and debate. Childhood and adolescence have often been approached from a biological or developmentalist viewpoint, which identifies patterns and sets norms for the physical and psychological features of young people as they grow up. Morrow ascribes a big influence to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget for the "fixation with numerical age" that "leads to very powerful normative ideas about the 'right' and the 'wrong' age to do certain things" (151–52). In later life too, many age-related features are ascribed to biology, a tendency that age sociologists such as Green and Susan Pickard criticize. Alternatively, a sociocultural or constructivist approach will highlight the social aspects and individual differences that determine how a certain age is lived and perceived (López-Ropero; Green; Pickard). Drawing inspiration from queer studies, Julia Benner and Anika Ullmann stress the performative aspect of age: "chronological age must, like sex in [Judith] Butler's theory, be understood as a discursive category," they argue. "Chronological age makes natural phenomena readable, translates them into sequences and time periods, that can be loaded with meaning" (149, my translation).[1] However, Benner and Ullmann point out that biological realities do set some limits to the analogy between gender and age: "Many biological and psychological age acts cannot be actively performed" by people of all ages (151).[2]

Even regardless of biological limitations, Karen Coats observes that the distinction between nature and nurture is hard to draw when it comes to age. Widely popularized developmentalist theories, such as Piaget's and Erik Erikson's, have influenced the way adults treat children in certain age categories and may thus fulfill their own models despite being flawed. "If we believe, as did psychologist G. Stanley Hall, that the teenage years will be full of turbulence and dangerous behaviors, we might respond preemptively with overbearing restrictions that lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of rebellion and challenge," Coats argues (52), in agreement with Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, who have made a similar point about childhood. Similarly, if we assume that older people can no longer voice valid opinions on complex matters, it is likely that they will be deprived of opportunities to share their views, practice their debating skills, and correct this limiting perspective. This phenomenon could be witnessed in the COVID-19 pandemic, where older people in care homes were often the subject of debate but rarely invited to participate in discussions about their wellbeing.

In reflections on age's social construction and performance, it is important to keep in mind that age is an identity marker that intersects with other social categories, such as gender, race, sexuality, social class, and ability. These factors affect how age is given meaning and what kind of behavior is encouraged and tolerated on the part of a certain age group. For example, Robin Bernstein has shown that the concept of childhood innocence has been racialized in American history and that

Black children were not granted the same protection as their white peers.[3] Using early episodes from *The Simpsons* as case studies, Mariano Narodowski and Verónica Gottau address the impact of class on the construction of older men: whereas Grandpa Simpson is cast as a burden to the family and "dumped" in a retirement home (173), the more affluent Mr. Burns still holds authority and is sexually desirable to his assistant (174).

Developmentalist thinkers such as Piaget and Erikson have been criticized for casting the process of growing up in a linear and goal-oriented way (Smith 2). In childhood studies, Kathryn Bond Stockton introduced the concept of "growing sideways" as an alternative to this linear pattern: it acknowledges the existence of queer childhood and the idea that "the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (11). This idea informs recent studies on adults who enjoy products typically associated with childhood, such as wearing onesies or going to summer camps (Malewski), and on children's books that primarily address adults (Abate). Marah Gubar's "kinship model," which has become widely adopted in children's literature studies, likewise stresses that childhood and adulthood are not completely opposed but have a common ground of joint experiences and emotions. In this model, growth is not a linear trajectory but "actually a messy continuum, an ongoing process that involves losses as well as gains" (294). Alternative models from age studies also cast the aging process as cyclical rather than linear, capable of "backtracking" (Henneberg, "Crones" 118) and always incomplete.

Moreover, because age is also a relational concept and life stages co-construct each other, it is important when discussing notions of childhood to understand how they relate to ideas of adulthood. On a more individual level, people's own age may determine how they view a certain life stage. To a child, a forty-year-old may appear quite old, whereas that same person may be considered young by an eighty-year-old. In *After Childhood* (2020), Peter Kraftl, inspired by posthumanism and new materialism, shows that human-centered concepts of age and generations are relative when compared to objects: "objects' biographies may be far faster than, or slower than, *human* generations but nevertheless inflect critically upon them" (Chapter 2). Especially in the light of climate change, conceptions of age that go beyond the human life course are gaining critical currency, both in terms of the generations that preceded and will come after us, and in terms of the objects and nature that are entangled with the human in the environmental crisis.

Age Norms in Children's Literature

For scholars who take a constructivist view on age, children's literature appears a particularly relevant source to be studied, as the narratives contribute to children's acquisition of "age norms," standards and expectations associated with a given age or life stage that function as part of an "age ideology." The concept of age norms was originally developed to assess children's physical development, such as a baby's growth and weight compared to its peers, but the term is now used more widely to express expectations about social behavior, from the idea (cited above) that teenagers are rebellious to the assumption that people in their eighties no longer work.

Age norms do not have to be a bad thing. Like other social norms, they help to regulate human relationships and can serve to protect people; for this reason, some age norms are anchored in laws and policies. However, age norms may also appear random and unnecessarily limiting, for example when they set rules for clothing (lists of what women should stop wearing after a certain age)[4] or reading (adults who read children's books are immature). Age norms can be experienced as unachievable and lead to unhappiness, or they may be felt to be outdated and undesirable. To take adulthood as an example: whereas the traditional postwar benchmarks for reaching full adulthood were "family, work and independent living" (Blatterer 3.5), which people were expected to reach by their early twenties, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett found that they no longer applied in the late twentieth-century United States;

some were unattainable because of the social and economic climate (e.g., buying one's own house in high-priced urban markets), while others were no longer desirable (e.g., pinning oneself down to a fixed job). Age norms are thus subject to socioeconomic circumstances, change, and debate.

As children are socialized, they acquire age norms, and children's books can be part of this process. Like all forms of ideological discourse, age norms can be overtly expressed or more covertly present in a book. They can be part of an author's conscious writing process, but they can also be part of what Peter Hollindale calls a book's "passive ideology": worldviews and assumptions that are so ingrained in society that people accept them as truthful and do not necessarily think about them when they reproduce them. If the age norms align with readers' own views, they may simply absorb or glance over them while reading, but readers can also challenge what books convey about age. In an empirical study in which Leander Duthoy talked with readers of different ages about Joke van Leeuwen's *Iep!* (1996), he found that one character produced considerable debate: an adult man who still lives with his parents. An eleven-year-old boy was puzzled by a scene where that character's mother fills his lunchbox: "older people can make their own food right? I'd think so. I hope" (116). Although in reality, Blatterer's benchmarks for proper adulthood no longer hold, Duthoy found that they still steered some readers' appreciation of adult fictional characters. Moreover, gender norms may be at play here as well: an adult man living with his mother is considered odd, not just by the eleven-year-old whom Duthoy interviewed, but also by Guus Kuijer's fictional character Polleke, who is surprised to find out that her teacher still lives with his mother. An adult daughter living with her father, by contrast, may be more likely to be understood as caring rather than dependent.

In illustrated children's books, age is constructed in both text and images. People rely on biological features such as skin and hair, but also on activities and clothing styles, to assign an age to humans in pictures (Rexbye and Povlsen 79–80). This observation is endorsed by Duthoy's research with children and adults. For example, a fourteen-year-old girl tried to assess the age of characters in an image from *Iep!* in which a mother and her son, who is taller and carrying a backpack, are hugging. The girl compared their physical traits and vigor and drew on her real-life knowledge to establish an age range: "I guess they are about 75, 78, 79. I just look at my grandma, who has also shrunk and is that age. With the son you see he is tall and stable and he can carry a lot. So I guess he is in his thirties" (unpublished, my translation). The children also mentioned wrinkles, and the adults commented on clothes and the size of the ears.

When it comes to the construction of age, illustrations can be symmetrical, complementing and enhancing the text, to use Maria Nikolajeva's terminology (*Approaches* 226), but they can also provide a counterpoint or contradict the text. For example, in the brothers Grimm's "Snow White" (1857), the protagonist is only seven years old when her stepmother's jealousy forces her to leave the palace to avoid being killed and to seek refuge with the seven dwarfs (269). In many visuals to this scene, Snow White is depicted as an adolescent rather than a seven-year-old, either because the text was adapted or because the illustrator departs from the age in the text (e.g., Cramer 9). Catherine Siemann points out that the age of Lewis Carroll's Alice, who is "seven years and six months" old in *Through the Looking-Glass* ("Humpty Dumpty"), has evoked debate among scholars and that "[i]n its most recent evolutions, the older Alice is a common characteristic" (176). By contrast, in several critics' opinion Helen Oxenbury's illustrations of Alice make her look considerably younger than John Tenniel's original drawings, and this text helped market the book to a younger audience (e.g., Carey; Linning).

Indeed, age norms do not just relate to books' content but also inform how books are written, published, and promoted. Stylometric analyses on smaller (Hurkmans) and larger scales (Haverals, Geybels, and Joosen) have identified differences in writing styles in books by the same authors that were published for different ages. In some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, it has been common practice to put a minimum age or age range on a book. The criteria for assigning these indications are expectations about the technical reading competencies of a given age group, its

interests, and its cognitive and psychological abilities to deal with complex or potentially disturbing content. Many publishers now refrain from putting an age on the cover to avoid limiting a book's potential audience. In library catalogs, on reading promotion websites, and in reviews, however, titles are still often given an age range,[5] although many professionals acknowledge the problem of using age as the only criterion to judge a book's suitability for young readers (Simeon). The case of Harry Potter shows that these age ranges may differ in various countries (Haverals and Geybels). Research on crossover literature has laid bare several books that are classified as adult literature in one country and as children's or adolescent literature in another (Beckett). Moreover, as Michelle Abate has shown, there is an increased market of "juvenile-styled texts intended for an adult readership" (3). These titles adopt forms traditionally associated with children's literature, such as coloring books, ABC books, and bedtime stories, combined with content that is primarily aimed at adults and some-times not deemed suitable for children. For example, Adam Mansbach's bestseller *Go the F**k to Sleep* (2011) parodies the bedtime story to address parental struggles. Abate discusses Barbara Park's *MA! There's Nothing to Do Here!* (2008) as an example of "fetus fiction" that addresses expectant parents. Such books get political weight in the debate about fetal personhood and the right to abortion in the United States (110–14).

The Pleasures and Need of Defying Age Norms

Age norms can act as powerful social regulators. People who deviate from age norms can face dis-approval and be told to "act your age," but they may equally be met with fascination, and they have provided interesting material for various children's books. In Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom* (1981), the narrative mentions that the growth of Will, the child protagonist, lags behind that of most children of his age. Will's failure to meet age norms causes the adults in the book to judge his mother for maltreating the boy, and prompts them to feed and protect him (Joosen, "Age"). The deviation from age norms is used as a way to steer readers towards sympathy for Will. In *Precocious Children and Childish Adults* (2012), Claudia Nelson discusses various Victorian narratives about child-women, child-men, and old-fashioned children that exemplify "age inversion" without magical interference, but rather as a form of precocity or arrested development (3). As Nelson notes, "the dismantling of chronological age is frequently a way of tracking power or its loss, as child-men and child-women escape or are expelled from their assigned social categories" (4). Precocious children, who in the nineteenth century were often called "old-fashioned," could produce an uncanny effect, as in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (16), or evoke resentment in other characters, as is the case for Sara Crewe in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (33). More recently, sexual precocity compromises the ideal of childhood innocence and is still frowned upon (Gubar 105–106), but intel-lectual precocity has led to fascination and attraction. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of intelligence testing in children (Beauvais, "Effect"). In the twentieth century, Clémentine Beauvais has shown, the child that was uniquely gifted for its age became the fantasy of the middle class. This ideal led not only to what she calls "intelligence-enhancing methods," such as exposing children to classical music ("Effect"), but also to literature that celebrated such gifted children. In Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), for example, the eponymous heroine fulfills "the myth of child precocity, which celebrates both the early signs of adulthood in the child and the fact that these signs remain firmly contained within a childish body" (Beauvais, "Giftedness" 289).

The reverse happens in Frank Cottrell-Boyce's *Cosmic* (2008), where there is a strong mismatch between the protagonist's numerical age and his other-perceived age: although Liam is only twelve, he is so tall and looks so masculine (facial hair included) that people who don't know him think he is an adult. This misjudgment leads not only to comical situations, as when Liam is allowed to test-drive a car and passes for a substitute teacher, but also to reflections on what it means to be an adult (Joosen, *Adulthood* 66–71). Some of the age norms that the other characters use in this novel are

ridiculed. One man, for example, calls it "extraordinary [...] that one could reach adulthood without knowing how golf is played" (Cottrell-Boyce 119). But Liam also questions more commonly held beliefs about age, such as the idea that adults possess more self-restraint than children and that they are less interested in play: "Honestly, grown-ups talk about teenagers spending too much time online and taking games too seriously. A game of golf seems to take about three years, and they talk about it like the next stroke is going to save the world" (121). Liam's passing in the adult world gives him an ironic insider's view that makes him question various myths about adulthood, even though the novel also features adult characters (his father in particular) who comply with the adult norm of acting responsibly and with care for his son.

In fairy tales and fantasy stories, magical age shifts and reversals are a popular trope, as are characters who grow far older than is deemed possible for humans. These narrative techniques can also serve to thematize age norms. According to Sanna Lehtonen, "age-shifting often functions as a reward or punishment motif in tales: regained youth is a reward, premature old age is a curse" (43). They thus reinforce the so-called "decline narrative" that I will further discuss below. Some children's books provide an alternative perspective. When Sophie, the protagonist of Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), is suddenly transformed into a crone, this change is first perceived as punishment, and Sophie indeed suffers from all sorts of ailments in her aged body; for example, "Sophie discovered another disadvantage to being old: you felt queer in hot weather" (112). But as the story progresses, Sophie finds that she feels more like her true self in her old body than in her young one (Swinnen 35), and the age shift is also liberating because she is rid of controlling age norms for young women.

Conversely, some children's books point out that a magical transformation to a youthful body may hold disadvantages. In Cornelia Funke's *Herr der Diebe* (2000, *The Thief Lord*), a magical carousel functions as an age-shifting device. While the older adults in the book want to use it to rejuvenate themselves, an orphaned boy challenges their desire to be young. Pointing out the disempowerment and risks that he faces, he wants to ride the carousel in the other direction, to escape childhood and prematurely grow up into adult independence. When he achieves this wish, the narrative endorses his decision by calling him "the fortunate one" (Joosen, "City"). In van Leeuwen's *Maar ik ben Frederik, zei Frederik* (2013, But I'm Frederik, Said Frederik), a man is suddenly transformed into a boy when he reads a newspaper article. The change is marked by an immediate rediscovery of play in daily life, as he experiences joy from letting his office chair go up and down time and again. This scene relies on the age norm that children are more playful than adults. Frederik also realizes that his adult life at the office is unbearably boring. That idea confirms the trend that Susan Neiman has identified in *In Why Grow Up?* (2014): "Being grown-up is widely considered to be a matter of renouncing your hopes and dreams, accepting the limits to a life that will be less adventurous, worthwhile and significant than you supposed when you begot it" (1). But the narrative also reflects on age norms for childhood and stresses that this phase has its own limits. The child Frederik is soon deprived of his autonomy and house: "Children do not have their own house," he is told, "their parents own that" (16).[6] When Frederik is restored to his adult self at the end of the book, he retrieves his independence but is keen on keeping the connection with childhood that he briefly re-experienced. Accordingly, he seeks the company of other adults who have kept what Hollindale calls "childness," childlike qualities that are not restricted to childhood.

What these books have in common is that they acknowledge age norms but also challenge them. As such, they fit into a larger social trend that criticizes the importance that contemporary Western society attributes to chronological age, especially for children. Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris, for example, write: "Across the entire lifespan, linearity and ageism give rise to stereotypical and preju-dicial ideas about age-related needs, interests and achievements, and lead to over-segregated provi-sion, and increasingly to competition for resources to be allocated to particular generational causes" (971). One space where this "over-segregated provision" has taken shape is children's education,

where age is still the main standard used to divide children into classes. Instead Haynes and Murris plead for an "age-transgressive" or "post-age" approach, for which they are inspired by philosophy sessions with children and children's books. For example, Colin Thompson's *How to Live Forever* (1995), a picturebook about immortality, gives them ways to reflect on the concept of "agelessness" and the practice of "forgetting and re-membering age" to understand better when and how age should and should not matter (975–76). A post-age approach makes children's abilities and interests more central than age and facilitates learning across age groups. In this setting adults are not just teachers but also become learners in their own right. We can witness similar efforts to efface age-informed hierarchies in other contexts as well, as in "participatory research" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak) that does not treat children as research objects, but involves them in designing and carrying out research related to their interests.

An important reason for questioning limiting age norms is that they may lead to "ageism," prejudice and discrimination on the basis of age. While ageism can apply to any age group, in its most common use the term refers to negative discourses about old age. Sylvia Henneberg uses "reverse ageism" for "discrimination against the young" ("Crones" 121) and points out that "positive ageism" also exists. This term refers to stereotypes that carry a positive connotation at first sight but that are limiting nevertheless, such as "the stereotyping of elderly individuals as wise mentors who have no needs of their own" (121). The ageist stereotype that has been addressed most widely in age studies is the so-called "decline narrative" (Gullette), the idea that life goes downhill as we grow older. Henneberg has identified ageist and positive ageist discourses in fairy tales and classic children's books and fears that these narratives will have a negative impact on children's views of older women in particular. As she notes, ageism and sexism reinforce each other in figures such as the evil witch or the weak grandmother ("Moms"). Elizabeth Caldwell, Sarah Falcus, and Katsura Sako also locate recurrent ageist stereotypes in ten picturebooks on dementia, while they acknowledge that the full picture that these stories provide is complex: the books "employ often ageist tropes of decline," in part through the metaphors they use, and "yet at the same time support a narrative of ongoing personhood" and empowering intergenerational relationships (125). Indeed, it would be limiting to view children's literature only as an ageist discourse. Some books contribute to readers' age awareness by addressing age norms and exposing ageism (Haverals and Joosen; Joosen, *Adulthood* 39–74), and many titles have promoted intergenerational dialogues and solidarity (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques). Haynes and Murris note that "attitudes to age are changing as a result of research on aging, culturally diverse counter-narratives of older age [… and] critiques of developmentalism" (980). Various children's books are trying to create such counternarratives, including *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Cosmic*, which I discussed above.

The Complexities of Fighting Ageism: A Case Study

Ageism and intergenerational solidarity can sometimes be intertwined in the same story, as I will illustrate with a short case study. Malorie Blackman's *Grandma Gertie's Haunted Handbag* was published in 1996 for "newly fluent readers" (endpapers) and reissued in 2018 as *Grandpa Bert and the Ghost Snatchers*. The first scenes follow the gaze of two children who "other" their grandmother when she comes from Barbados to Britain for a visit. The older woman is introduced as "without a doubt the weirdest person Anna and her brother Keith had ever seen" (*Grandma* 1). Her strangeness lies in her big glasses, a hat with a parrot on top, her mysterious eyes, and the way she pats her handbag. The grandmother is associated with what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject"–a feature that aligns with the ageist idea that older people have less bodily control than younger adults and cannot contain their bodily fluids (Pickard 123). As a result, the grandmother is abjected herself. In the children, her lack of bodily control evokes disgust: as the grandmother describes being sick four times during her flight, Anna "shifted along the back seat to put a few more centimeters between her and

her strange grandmother" (3). At least this is the case in the original story, because in the 2018 edition, the reference to the grandmother's airsickness is deleted. This omission may testify to an increased awareness of ageism.

As a comparison between the editions makes clear, age norms and ageism are communicated not only through text but also through images, and these also show a shift between 1996 and 2018. The original book, illustrated by David Price, opens with a closeup of the grandmother that highlights her wrinkles, double chin, and somewhat naïve smile. The images are expressive when it comes to the characters' feelings: as the children are listening to the grandmother, their eyes and mouths are wide open. By contrast, Melanie Demmer's digital illustrations to the new edition make the facial signs of old age less pronounced and depict the grandmother as more reserved when she first meets the children. Only in a later scene of particular distress is her old age more visually pronounced: not only is she depicted with big tears, the picture also highlights her sagging cheeks, her big ears, and the wrinkles on her forehead, eyelids, chin, and neck (54).

In either edition, the grandmother at first confirms the stereotype of the "ineffectual crone" that Henneberg ("Moms") has identified in children's classics. The older woman offers useless advice when the car gets a flat tire: "Don't worry, son. It's only flat at the bottom" (5). The fact that she is "peering over [dad's] shoulder" aligns with the image of the nosy older woman (Joosen, *Adulthood* 186–87). For the children engaged in othering the grandmother, her old age intersects with her exoticism; she comes from Barbados, while they have grown up in Britain. This double othering becomes clear when she asks Anna and Keith whether they believe in "duppies": "A ghost, dear. That's what we call them in Barbados" (6). Her strangeness is attributed to her age as well as to the "foreign" traditions that she respects.

As it turns out, the grandmother is carrying her late husband's ghost in her purse and hiding from two criminals who want to steal him. When she first mentions this situation to the children, they think that she is "as nutty as a lorry-load of peanut brittle" (8), but they get sucked into the adventure when the ghost of their grandfather appears. He immediately expresses an age norm: "I wanted to meet both of you before you got much older. Most grown-ups and even some children can't see us ghosts these days" (9). The passage endorses a pattern that many children's books display: the young and older characters share imagination and a sense of adventure, while the adults are left out. As children grow up, they lose touch with the supernatural, but this connection can be regained in senescence. Anna and Keith's parents never witness the ghost; the two adults who are chasing the grandmother do see him, but they want to steal and exploit him. As the children and their grandparents are united in escaping these criminals, a connection is established between young and old. Whereas Anna first tries to maintain distance, she now "[runs] up to grandma" to whisper into her ear (16). Moreover, various ageist prejudices are silently disproven: the grandmother is quick (12, 28), creative, and inventive, and the grandfather loves "all this excitement" (40). When the older woman jumps on a bike to chase the criminals, Keith mutters, "But Grandma, you can't… ." (28) and is proven wrong before he can finish his sentence. The children and grandparents enter into an intergenerational partnership that helps them to outsmart the younger adult criminals.

As Nikolajeva argues in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (2010), children's books are marked by a carnivalesque spirit, as they temporarily reverse the power hierarchies in child-adult relationships. In real life, these structures are informed by the empowerment of adults through what Nikolajeva calls "aetonormativity" or "adult normativity" (*Power* 8). Age scholars might note that this normativity excludes older adults, or as Pickard explains, some adults "are more 'adult' than others" (3). Perhaps as a consequence of their mutual disempowerment in real life, older characters can join child figures in the carnivalesque reversal of age-related power structures and mutually empower each other. *Grandma Gertie's Haunted Handbag* illustrates this point; as the grandparents side with the children, they leave their marginalized position and turn into

heroes who beat the adult villains. During this adventure, the children also get a sense of what it feels like to be othered. When Anna is talking to the ghost, her father suddenly perceives her as odd because he thinks she is talking to herself. There seems a sense of vengeance in the grandmother's remark, "First sign of madness you know" (18). But this jab does not prevent the children and their grandparents from creating an intergenerational alliance.

If we consider the construction of the generation in between, a see-saw effect can be observed: as the children and older adults' power goes up, the generation in between is brought down, as they are depicted as particularly unsympathetic (the adult criminals) or simply left out of the game (the parents). Once again, bodily features are invoked to contribute to characterization: the male criminal "had a very hairy nose which even looked extraordinary from across the street" (Blackman, *Grandma* 14). This is another passage that is deleted in the new edition, replaced with a kind of facial hairiness that is perhaps easier to render in the less detailed digital images: "the man had very wild bushy eyebrows. They looked like a big bush growing on his face" (Blackman, *Grandpa* 28).[7] As I have argued in *Adulthood in Children's Literature*, expressing disgust about adult bodily hair, in particular hair growing out of noses and ears, offers a way for child characters to empower themselves: "Their own bodies may be small and perhaps even weak, but at least they are not hairy" (100). At the end of the book, after they have beaten the hairy criminal, the children and older adults return home in a final moment of double entanglement: not only has "Grandpa Bert wrapped himself around Keith's neck like a woolly scarf" (40), but he also joins the children in expressing his appetite for a good dinner. As many adventure stories end with the children having a good meal, this is a delight that the grandfather would like to enjoy as well. It seems that his plan to acquaint himself with the children has worked and will lead to a longer lasting relationship – unless they stop believing in ghosts when they grow into adults.

Conclusion

According to Nikolajeva ("Afterword"), there is a limit to the potential for intergenerational solidarity in children's books, since narratives rely on tensions and conflicts between characters and too much unity and understanding can kill a good story. Although not all ageism in children's literature is observed or corrected, many children's books begin with intergenerational conflict but end in solidarity. While being strongly governed by age, children's literature is also a discourse where a post-age approach is taking hold. The popularity of Gubar's kinship model in analyses of children's books shows that many stories highlight not only what divides age groups, but also what unites them. This is a crucial move in a time when issues such as global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and war make a strong appeal for cooperation between generations. Children's literature has potential to contribute to this dialogue, but in order to be successful, a critical examination of the age ideology it conveys through its form and content is needed. Such an examination can advance through resisting readers, who challenge the ideologies that texts offer, as well as through scholarship that can theorize and contextualize age in these narratives. The last decade has witnessed collaborations across the fields of childhood studies, children's literature studies, and age studies that have yielded inspiring research, but more work needs to be done. I am thinking in particular of age in works on climate change, in the history of children's literature, and in other media for children, as well as research on the intersection of age with race and empirical research (such as Duthoy's) to assess how readers make sense of age in literature. Ideally, this research would be itself an intergenerational endeavor, taking into account how age influences the positionality of scholars in the topics they highlight, the approaches they favor, and the observations they make. As children's books such as *Grandma Gertie's Haunted Handbag* show us, intergenerational alliances make for better adventures and more successful teams.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Original text: "muss auch chronological age, wie sex bei Butler, als diskursive Größe verstanden werden. Chronological age macht natürliche Phänomene lesbar, übersetzt diese in Sequenzen und Abläufe, die mit Bedeutung aufgeladen werden können."
2 Original text: "Viele biologische und psychologische Altershandlungen können jedoch nicht aktiv ausgeführt werden."
3 As Kimberley Reynolds and Jane Rosen show in this volume, working-class children also fell out of the middle-class ideal of childhood innocence.
4 Such lists are now being parodied in fashion magazines (see Chakraborty; Bird).
5 Examples are Bookfinder by the British Booktrust (www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/bookfinder/) and its Flemish equivalent Boekenzoeker (www.boekenzoeker.be).
6 My translation. Original text: "'Kinderen hebben nog geen eigen huis,' zei de portier. 'Dat is van hun ouders.'"
7 This edition also renders the criminals as white, so that their conflict is not only between age groups but also between races, with colonial implications.

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