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Nathalie op de Beeck. *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Illustrations. xix + 262 pp. $82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-6573-0; $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-6574-7.

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The Modern American Picture Book as Cultural History

Nathalie op de Beeck's study takes up the American picture book as an example of material and cultural history. Considering texts published between the World Wars, she "situates the American picture book and its visual-verbal sequences in the cultural and critical contexts of modernity and the machine age" (p. ix). Op de Beeck's goal is to define the American picture book as a site of cultural, historical, aesthetical, and ideological discourse worthy of scholarly attention–so worthy, in fact, that op de Beeck concentrates on only one short period in the life of the picture book in order to demonstrate that the American picture book should be understood as "a mode of production, dependent on shifting beliefs about childhood, cultural tastes, and standards of judgment" (p. 11). She mounts considerable evidence that she hopes will show the modern American picture book as an interdependent mode of production arising as an expression of cultural values about art, culture, and childhood.

According to op de Beeck, a "fairy tale of modernity" informs the content of the picture book in the period between the wars. The fairy tale of modernity is, op de Beeck notes, a cultural discourse informed by an ideology privileging technology, empire, nostalgia, and notions of progress. She makes numerous interesting observations, though her textual analysis is often perfunctory and less than illuminating, preferring to amass a quantity of observations rather than quality of close textual analysis.

And here is where the book fails to perform: to pursue the power relation involved in adults inventing reality and then serving it to children is tricky and unwelcome business. And so op de Beeck avoids this tricky business by taking the child-as-reader out of the equation almost entirely, thereby keeping her study about the artifact and less about the process of ideological reproduction as the experience of one's actual conditions of existence. This would not be such a problem except that part of her stated agenda in the book is to explore the ways in which cultural and ideological discourse inform the American picture book.

Op de Beeck's theoretical approach lacks a clear, working definition of "culture" and a solid understanding of how ideology functions. It does not serve her cause to ignore the challenge of claiming a theoretical position and dealing with these contested issues. Rather, she implies that ideology finds its way into, of all places, childhood, yes, gasp, even picture books. She fails to develop this important observation and instead assumes that her readers understand the nuances of her unfounded speculations about cultural discourse and ideological reproduction.

In the introduction, op de Beeck distances herself from what could have been a strong theoretical position–and a great thesis–with the following: "There is no guarantee that the child will recognize nuances and biases in ways older creators might intend. The hypocrisies or biases reflected in the picture book inevitably are products of adult beliefs, to be embraced or discarded by younger generations; the site of reading is not a one-way street transmitting adult wisdom to impressionable minds" (p. xi). But what she claims here is in stark contrast to statements that come later, like, "the picture book constructs the child as an expert consumer of popular culture and commodities" (p. xv). On the one hand, op de Beeck wants to satisfy critics when she distances herself from broad claims that might reduce ideology to an all-pervasive force that is inescapable (at least for the developing mind of the child reader). On the other hand, she wants to give her imagined audience the power to resist and discard the part of ideology that they find objectionable. But such a claim depends on a facile and superficial understanding of ideology, as if the developing mind of a

child could at once pull itself out of the ideological context that constructs it in order to head off in a new direction. Such a claim is suspect at best, but here it becomes a fatal flaw in the argument because it is not supported by a workable theoretical framework regarding the function of ideology and cultural discourse.

In chapter 1, "Here-and-Now Fairy Tales: Old World Tradition and Modern Technology," op de Beeck outlines the ways in which the picture book takes up the nostalgic pull of old world traditions and pits these qualities against the here-and-now concerns of modern technology and practical didacticism. Op de Beeck seems to genuinely believe that children inherit their culture's ideology, or "fairy tales of modernity." These cultural mythologies are handed down from generation to generation. This is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Because she has no clear, functional working definition of "ideology," she wants to have it both ways at once, and this does not serve her cause. By stating that ideology is a kind of a buffet line of options that are "to be embraced or discarded by younger generations" implicitly suggests that picture books are, in fact, not that important (p. xi). They, like the values they represent, can be dismissed and discarded.

In spite of her desire to tell an informed story about the modern American picture book, she could have done a great deal more analysis of how the picture book constructs the subject position of the child. She hints at this in chapter 2 when she discusses race, and chapter 3 when she discusses technology, but she never manages to apply her interpretive method to the subject position of the child-reader as it is constructed in the picture book narrative. In fact, in chapter 3, op de Beeck implicitly denies the subject-position of "child" and suggests that there is simply no such category, yet then refers to an "implied reader" so diverse as to be nonexistent (p. 101). And so I am left to wonder, if she is so uncertain about what a child is, how can she discuss equally generic concepts like culture, ideology, or children's literature? Too much is assumed. Too much is dismissed.

I think it worth noting that op de Beeck is clearly in favor of the serious, genre analysis of the picture book, but her analysis never quite rises above the generic. Her analysis would have been far stronger, her thesis sharper, her reason for writing keener had she taken up the cause-and-effect relational process of ideological reproduction between the adult and the child as it is manifested in the American picture book. Instead, she throws up her hands and waves critics off by reminding us that children can "embrace and discard" what they like from the adult world all around them, and so there is nothing really at stake after all. Op de Beeck's theoretical blind spot in terms of ideology, cultural discourse, and childhood has a corrosive power in *Suspended Animation* that enervates the book's rich potential.

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