

“Somethings About Me”: Slanted Conventions in Children’s Letters to Beloved Authors

Elliott Kuecker

Volume 47, Number 2, March 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094371ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs202220256>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Young Children

ISSN

2371-4107 (print)

2371-4115 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kuecker, E. (2022). “Somethings About Me”: Slanted Conventions in Children’s Letters to Beloved Authors. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 47(2), 50–67.
<https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs202220256>

Article abstract

This article is a study of letters written by American children to authors of juvenile fiction. It emphasizes the rhetorical and material choices children made in bridging the distance between themselves as writers and the authors who were to receive the letters. Focused on notions of convention, the study uses the theoretical concept of the slant to analyze the way the child writers conformed to conventions of writing and communication while also rendering those expectations askew. Ultimately, the stylistic techniques and content choices reveal methods children used to cocreate a world with the authors to whom they wrote.

Copyright © Elliott Kuecker, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

“Somethings About Me”: Slanted Conventions in Children’s Letters to Beloved Authors

Elliott Kuecker

Elliott Kuecker is a teaching assistant professor in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He teaches courses on archival science and publishes interdisciplinary research on craftwork in schools, qualitative research methods, and academic writing. Email: ellio@unc.edu

This article is a study of letters written by American children to authors of juvenile fiction. It emphasizes the rhetorical and material choices children made in bridging the distance between themselves as writers and the authors who were to receive the letters. Focused on notions of convention, the study uses the theoretical concept of the slant to analyze the way the child writers conformed to conventions of writing and communication while also rendering those expectations askew. Ultimately, the stylistic techniques and content choices reveal methods children used to cocreate a world with the authors to whom they wrote.

Key words: letter writing; children’s writing; archives; writing style; friendship

In this study, I look at letters written by American children to two authors of juvenile fiction. These letters were housed in the two respective archival manuscript collections at the University of Georgia’s Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library, filed among other materials like book manuscripts, payment receipts, and missives from publishers and librarians. The child admirers were largely elementary-school-aged, with a few middle-school-aged writers, writing from the 1960s through the 1980s. Each letter was handwritten on stationery or notebook paper, many were adorned with added illustrations or supplementary media such as photographs and full-page drawings, and most were tucked into their original envelope.

My interest in these letters has little to do with the authors of the fiction to whom the children wrote—I have not read their literature and I am

not investigating the correspondence as evidence of literary circulation and reader reception, though I appreciate how carefully each author kept the letters from the children who wrote to them. Instead, in studying the several hundred letters in these two collections, I found myself drawn to the way the child writers conformed to the genre of the letter very well, correctly following the conventions of proper letter correspondence. And yet, in the same instant, these letters slipped away from pure convention, showing use of various oblique tactics that would be unlikely to appear in adult-penned letters. The letters are intimate, funny, and generative.

The German critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) once noted, in his essay detailing the revolutionary value of children’s theatre, that when an adult is observing children play or create, they are likely to catch a “signal.” He writes, “Not so much a signal of the unconscious, of latent processes, repressions, or censorship (as the psychologists like to think), but a signal from another world, in which the child lives and commands” (1929/1999, p. 204). He noted that in the gestures of children were small signals of another world—the world of the child, which was not completely separate from the adult’s but profoundly different. I found Benjamin’s assessment to fit my experience of reading these letters—how the child writers chose to detail their own thoughts and feelings, their pushiness in wanting to know personal information about the authors, and their ways of sharing their own writing and illustrations with these authors whom they considered to be experts on the matter all seemed to signal something about the lifeworld of the child.

These noticings cannot merely be signals from the world of the child, however; Benjamin (1929/1999) himself notes that the child is in constant negotiation with the world into which she has been summoned by the previous generation (p. 116). Indeed, these letters reveal that tension between an adherence to convention—writing rules, social norms, expectations—and deviations from those conventions—tactless questioning, unusual details, and inventive phrasing. In other words, these letters contain an inherent dialectic between the expected and unexpected. Within them is a drive for reciprocity and an invitation that ultimately reads similar to the theories of “common worlding” put forth by Affrica Taylor and Miriam Giugni (2012) and others. Taylor and Giugni write, “we approach the collectivity of common worlds not only as descriptor of ‘things we share or hold in common,’ but also as an opportunity to actively assemble or bring together” (p. 110). While they center this theory in early childhood education, it also works well for thinking about the generative quality of writing and reading. In this case, the authors, literature, child writers, letter texts and illustrations, and themes of importance to both the authors and children all work in relation like a little community. As Taylor and Giugni note, we can think of “relations as generative encounters with others or shared events that have mutually transformative effects” (p. 112).

The letters the children wrote show a natural dialectical tension between the expected and unexpected, an important facet to consider given that it shows the way children negotiated manipulations and adaptations of tradition. I call this tension between conforming and skewing *the slant*. The slant is a way to describe how these letters slip away from expectations. Each letter is both conventional and slightly askew in the hands of the child. I prefer the concept of the slant over using something more straightforward, like dialectic, because the slant comes directly from several of the children’s letters rather than an outside theory. I came to the concept while analyzing a few letters in which the child writers had written their words on a formal, straight plateau, either using a ruler to draw lines (Figure 1) or just neatly conforming to an invisible line on the blank stationery (Figure 2). In these cases, the writer attempted neatness, but the results look like words falling downhill. While the words themselves are written on a straight plane, the plane’s trajectory is askew, perfectly illuminating what was impactful about the child letters in general—they conform, but not quite.

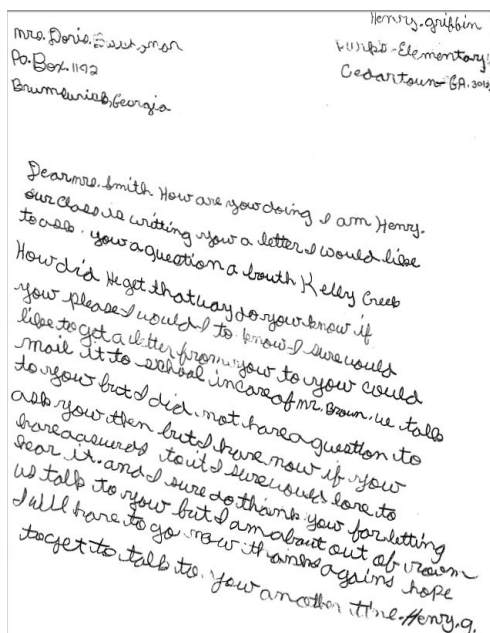


Figure 1. St. John, 1971–1974.

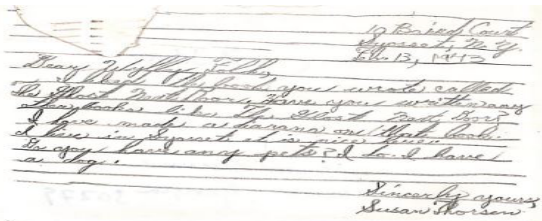


Figure 2. Smith, 1970–1979.

Beyond the slanted plane, the concept of the slant becomes its own theoretical principle that is useful in discussing how the children’s letters effectively coconstrue this common world with the recipient of the letters, who—though a stranger in the formal sense—is not a stranger at all. The child who has read their books seems to feel intimately connected to the author, the characters, the thematic choices—it is as if the world the author initiated is not merely the author’s, but a shared world for the readers who were motivated to write letters to the author. After I settled on the concept of the slant, I remembered having seen the phrasing somewhere before. It was in Emily Dickinson’s poem, “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” which suggests that we should always hide our truths just below the surface so that they might surprise upon close reading. Dickinson writes, “The Truth’s superb surprise/ As Lightning to the Children eased/ With explanation kind/ The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind” (Dickinson, 1998). It seems Dickinson is encouraging that when telling truths, they must come in layered, veiled fashion, so that they can be slowly unfolded. Otherwise, the truth might blind those who encounter it. The children writing these letters seemed to follow this slanted advice, layering their own constructions within the veils of formal convention.

Archival sources in childhood studies

While archival collections of children’s creations are growing, they are still quite rare. Many archival collections are more likely to represent things done to or about children but not created by children. Shurlee Swain (2016) notes that while “there is data in a range of archival and demographic sources about children, this rarely provides the historian with access to how practices and policies directed toward children were experienced” (p. 8). Those attempting to write the history of childhood, in particular, find the topic “an ‘illusory subject’ ... burdened by ‘unstable’ records, ‘contaminated inevitably by more and immaturity superseded by adult authorities’” and thus “much of this scholarship has focused not on the child, but on the way in which society dealt with children” (Swain, p. 3). Plenty of archives contain things about children—media, policies, laws, objects created for them, etc., but it is more difficult to find artifacts of children as creators, authors, illustrators, or speakers, largely because such things are artifacts of mundanity. As historian of childhood James Marten (2013) points out, children are “literally without political power. As a result, it is very difficult to get their points of view, and most treatments shape the lives of children and youth rather than flesh-and-blood youngsters” (p. 53). Children do not, by most standards, “feature in traditional measures of progress” (p. 52), and thus their artifacts are not considered to be of great value by many measures.

The experiences of children, like those of many other populations, are at times marginalized because of their lack of

archival representation, and to further complicate matters, many archives with child-created objects and texts are largely documenting trauma and war. Marten (2013) notes that “wars create conditions that help historians access the lives of children and parents in ways that peacetime rarely offers” (p. 60). Research like Jack Hodgson’s (2021) study of aerial drawings created by children, for example, were kept because they are products of the Spanish Civil War. Carolyn Kay’s (2021) study of children’s visual art comes from artifacts of World War I. Saheed Aderinto’s (2015) study of letters written by Nigerian boys testifies to letter-writing’s place as a “cornerstone of elementary and secondary education” (p. 247), though the letters are also largely evidence of the trauma of living under colonial rule as child migrant workers. In other words, when we do find the trace of child creations within the archives, they are often linked to childhood trauma and atrocities. While such collections are extremely important, it is equally important to find children’s creations made during quotidian or joyful parts of life.

Most of the time, researchers obtain information about children’s everyday lives by partnering with children to collaborate on research, or asking them to create documents or art for the sake of their research, rather than using archives. Some examples of this great work include Pia Christensen’s (2004) participatory ethnography, John Wall’s (2019) notions of “childism,” and Michael Armstrong’s (2006) child-written narrative inquiries. Children’s voices are indeed taken seriously in these studies, though the children also worked closely with the researcher to create the objects, which can stipulate what kind of interpretations can be made about the objects. Further, this mode of research is limited for those who use interactive or discussion-based methods, and it can be hard to find child participants and get such research approved.

For these reasons, the letters I look at are valuable as commonplace creations unrelated to any historical event and in that they were created unrelated to any kind of research goal. They are quotidian creations that function somewhat like researching “found objects of childhood” (Burman, 2022) in that those who created them would likely not remember them now, in their older adulthood. Found objects of childhood are things not “deliberately produced for research or exhibition” and thus “they pre-exist the moment of the encounter of being noticed, recognized, and—perhaps—collected” (Burman, p. 2). Found objects of childhood are often “previously disregarded in terms of aesthetic or material value” (p. 2). Often, this means that they are thrown away as waste products or were left in a public space to be found, such as a flyer posted around a neighbourhood or a toy left behind. Sources like these, when integrated into a study or exhibit, “transcend . . . the individual acts giving rise to their appearance and documentation” (p. 2). This allows for the third quality of found objects—they become endowed with an aesthetic or analytic quality and “incite critical reflection and generate plural understandings” (p. 2). In this way, found objects become provocations for interpretation far from their original intention.

In my study of children’s letters, the sources are indeed child-created materials, but they are not pure found objects of childhood because they were never considered waste. The authors who received them carefully placed them among their personal effects, which means they were of value to the individuals who received them. They were not ever solicited by a researcher, but some were clearly elicited by teachers as thank-you correspondence after an author attended school assemblies to speak about their writing. These, to use Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s (2019) terms, generally “under-utilized resource(s) for childhood studies” (p. 41) are the material traces of children (p. 41).

Like any other research matter, these letters should not be viewed as any kind of pure source of representation or authentic voice. Quite often, childhood studies is committed to taking the voice of the child seriously at the expense of criticality of the concept of voice itself. Though this task has good intentions, it is also fraught, given that the concept of voice has been slanted by researchers who point out that “this preoccupation with children’s voices, which is well deserved both in an ethical and a research sense, has mostly failed to scrutinize itself and to attend critically to issues of representation” (Spyrou, 2011, p. 152). In the context of my research, then, it is notable that

the letters I found were written by children themselves outside of the context of research, but it is further important to know that regardless, “children’s voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors such as our own assumptions about children, our particular use of language, the institutional context in which we operate, and the overall ideological and discursive claims which prevail” (Spyrou, p. 152). Like all communications, the letters are not representations of a child’s unmediated voice, somehow more pure than all other communications. After all, one of my major points is the way these children conformed to the traditional conventions of the letter, and in some cases the children wrote these letters in classrooms under the expectations of a teacher. So too, they wrote them in the context of communicating with an author whom they may have wished to befriend or impress, and they also wrote them in relation to fictional texts that inspired their letters in the first place. I say all this to mention that I am mindful that these letters are wonderful artifacts worthy of study—and also products of a specific context that may include limitations, power dynamics, and other critical factors. Perhaps this is what makes them rich sources in the first place.

Methodology and theoretical orientation

I performed archival research with print materials in the University of Georgia’s Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscript Library in the collections of two juvenile fiction authors. One collection comes from the author Wylly Folk St. John (1908–1985), who published her juvenile literature, which amounted to numerous books popular with young readers, with Viking. The other comes from Doris Buchanan Smith (1934–2002), who published with Viking and Putnam. Her first novel, *A Taste of Blackberries* (1973), is well known for its realistic treatment of death and grief (Ulin, 1980). In it, a young boy navigates carrying on with life after his best friend dies from a bee sting, a theme that showed up often in the letters.

My method is descriptive and interpretive. I read hundreds of letters in my research, though I only cite some representative samples within this article. The letters were most often singular transmissions centered on particular novels the authors wrote, though some contain evidence of ongoing correspondence. Having read over almost every letter in each collection, I was able to see the general traits of these letters, which informed my descriptive themes and analysis. My method is closely aligned with Eve Sedgwick’s (1997) notion of generous reading, a broad epistemology that embraces the affect and surprise we may experience when reading. Sedgwick explains that academics are often taught to study texts with an “aversion to surprise” (p. 9) in order to keep a critical distance from the text. Problematically, this critical distance, often termed the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—a phrase coined by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1965)—stipulates that the reader comes to the event of reading with suspicion of the text and its authorship, thereby preventing good or bad surprise that might be elicited by the text. Sedgwick believes that the range of interpretive possibilities in the academy is epistemologically narrow, given that “paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds” (p. 5). So, while we could be suspicious of a variety of things—like whether or not the thank-yous were enforced by a teacher, whether the cursive is indicative of systems of formalism in schooling, whether the children were too performative in their compliments to the authors, and so on—I am after learning something from the children’s rhetorical choices, material additions, and techniques for generative communication. Embracing the decades-long rupture between the moment they were written and the moment that I read them, I embraced “the unexpected current that may jolt between present and past” (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 28).

As quotidian objects, these letters are hard to find and minor, but additionally, letters as a genre “belong to the micro view of history ... it is not fiction but it is not fact” (Bland & Cross, 2004, p. 7). The letters I look at are, to conjure Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) descriptions of her quotidian archival subjects, “history’s flotsam and jetsam”

(p. xvi). It turns out that in studying these letters, simply attuning to the moments where things did not add up was a successful way to find something worthy to say about them. The philosopher Gadamer (1986) wrote that we can see creators and creations in the world as potential partners in dialogue with the one who is studying them. Interpretive efforts can be a “reciprocal endeavor” with the original creator and their original audience, helping us “stretch beyond” our prejudices and beliefs (George, 2009, p. 16). Thus, I feel that generosity and reciprocity serve as theoretical grounds for taking the children’s writing seriously, allowing me into the “symbiotic linkage” across time and space that those like Gadamer promoted (Auguiste, 2015, p. 9).

The letters

In the child-written letters in my study, the children’s ability to stick with conventional form and manipulate conventional form represent a great deal of the dialectical tension between expectation and surprise. Interestingly, letters as a genre already accommodate for this dialectical quality because of two factors: (1) “the genre of the letter activates practices, norms, codes, and materials without which the ‘Dear You ... Sincerely, Me’ letter form would be unintelligible,” and yet, (2) “a letter has no peculiarity but its form” (King, 2018, p. 12). In other words, all letters are prone toward dialectical qualities because they are both very strict documents and very loose documents, in the same instant. More complexly, their strictness operates in form and content, and their looseness does the same.

Letter writing has been used in education from at least the 18th century (Harris, 2009) to the 20th-century school curriculum (Hall et al., 2000) because it teaches writing while also teaching socialization and norms. As Harris (2009) notes, writing letters has historically figured as an “important [tool] for learning grammar and spelling, and polite and refined methods of socializing” (p. 334). So too, writing letters remains relevant in curriculum because it emphasizes the social structures of writing itself and helps the writer tangibly grasp the concept of audience, which is essential in writing and literacy pedagogy (Hall et al., 2000).

The child-written letters in my study would formally be called the *social letter*, the kind of letter that displays affection, offers an introduction to a potential new friend, or corresponds with an old friend (Westlake, 1883, pp. 12–13). Social letters range in content, and even though they are personal in nature, their form is expected to contain a header with address, a salutation, indented paragraphs, a complimentary close, and a signature (p. 17). These elements of form are strict, and adherence to these conventions is actually significant when considering the slant, given that the slant operates between the borders of the expected and the unexpected—conventions are merely expectations, and “arbitrary” ones at that (Hall et al., 2000, p. 143). Even something minor, like adhering to the format of letter writing, is significant in demonstrating one’s ability to fit into the norms of the world in which one was born. These conventions “operate to regulate transactions between people; they operate as guidelines for behaviour” (Hall et al., p. 143) and inevitably mark one’s participation in human customs.

In the letters I looked at, the child writers introduced themselves to the authors they had encountered by reading their books. Many of the children were writing to notify the authors that they would be using their literature for book reports. Many letters were also entirely out of the blue, written in the spirit of expressing admiration or criticism. Other times, children wrote the letters because their teacher had instructed them to write a favourite author of their choosing, and thus their letter is part of a literacy activity. In a few instances, the children had met the authors in person at school assemblies or book fairs or were writing in anticipation of either event. The letters sometimes mentioned writing tips given by the author—from the content of these letters it was clear that Smith often encouraged teachers to let children daydream during the school day. Shana, in 1979, wrote, “I wish you could come again.... Our teacher let’s [sic] us day dream sometimes” (Smith, 1970–1979). Smith also shared stories of her manuscripts being rejected from publishers during her assembly visits, a fact that seemingly resonated with

children, who often mentioned it in their thank-you letters.

The slant shows up in letters throughout both form and content. A strong example is Amy's (1979) letter (Figure 3). She wrote Smith on beginner writing paper—the kind with lines that run along the landscape of the paper and contain a dashed line in their centre for assisting with scaling lower case and upper case letters. The second-grader tells Smith, “I wrote because I wanted to tell you that I might be an author when I grow up” (Smith, 1970–1979) and includes in the envelope her “best book *The little lost Boy* [sic]” (Smith, 1970–1979). It is significant that Amy's letter is written on beginner's writing paper, suggesting that she is still learning how to write her letters correctly. At the same time, however, Amy presents herself to Smith as an amateur author who not only plans to become a professional author when she is old enough, but has already written enough books to be able to select a “best book.” Having a “best book” means one has written many books and is self-reflective in evaluating their own output. Further, in identifying herself as a writer, she is creating a commonality with Smith, showing Smith how they are similar in their career selection. So too, she is interested in Smith's feedback.

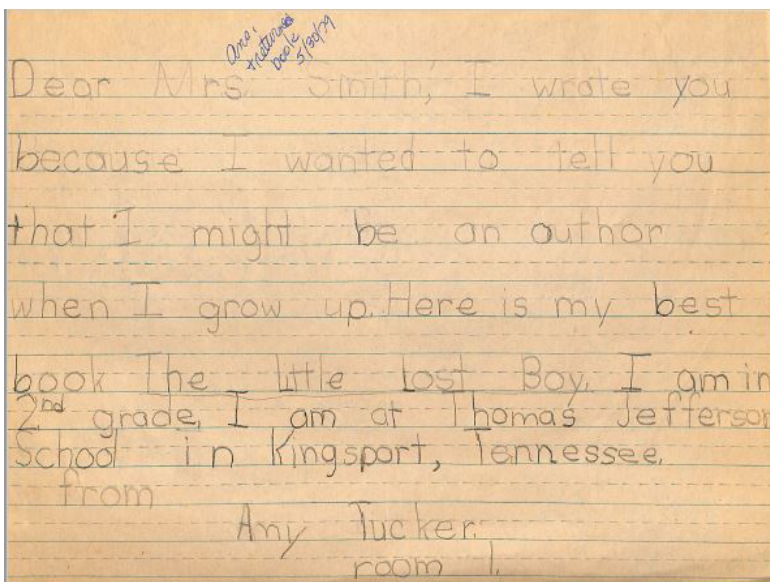


Figure 3. Smith, 1970–1979.

Like Amy's supplemental book, many letters contained writing samples and often illustration samples. Scott's (1981) letter did not contain a separate book but rather a lengthy retelling of a story he wrote called “Homer,” a classic baseball tale where a hapless athlete becomes a hero when he wins the World Series for the Mets (Smith, 1970–1979). Robert (1981) included a “sample” image of Woody Woodpecker for Smith to consider, explaining that he needed her thoughts on his potential future as a book illustrator (Smith, 1970–1979). Judy's (1973) letter to St. John contained various media. She adorned her plain writing paper with red flowers on a vine and included a separate pencil drawing of the school yard. Her P.P.S. read “I got you a picture but its [sic] not to good!” Her drawing, titled “Summer,” also continued the apology below the art: “Can't color good! Love ya, Judy!” (St. John, 1928–1975c).

This additional media may signal several things. On one hand, letters written in this vein show savvy communication because in asking for feedback on writing and illustration, the children are creating a space of reciprocity. Letters, while written alone, are actually supposed to represent pieces of dialogue, though it is just as easy to write them as monologues. By asking for feedback on an area in which the reader has expertise, the children are setting up

an expectation to receive a letter back, and specifically, to receive a letter with customized information about their particular creations. The letters also create a sense of similarity between the writer and the reader, leaning into the common worlding notion (Taylor & Giugni, 2012) that emphasizes generative exchange and transformative change. The child's act of sending text or illustration samples suggests *I too am an author seeking another author's feedback*. As Taylor and Giugni note, children, adults, and nonhuman relations form communities through tactics such as "sharing of lives, mutual interest ... and common experiences" (p. 110).

This sharing of lives, mutual interests, and common experiences speaks to my concept of the slant continuously, given that a child like Amy is writing on beginner's writing paper and yet identifying herself as an author. Or, in the case of Judy's letter, she has carefully created media and sent it to the author, but is uncertain of herself and continually apologizes about the quality of her art. These interesting tensions show that the child is in many ways asking for the collaboration of the author to whom they write—they want reinforcement, affirmation, or perhaps even a witness to failure. In Taylor and Giugni's (2012) descriptions of common worlds, they note the importance of kinship, which in their formulation leans into Donna Haraway's notion of *queer kin relational ontology* (Taylor & Giugni, p. 113), which includes animals, nonhuman entities, and things of all sorts. In such a frame, "queer kin encapsulates the possibility of sustaining relations with unlikely and very different but nevertheless significant others" (p. 112). The attempts for feedback and reciprocity from children seem to draw on the desire for kinship, but in the acts of pointing out commonality, they have also amplified their difference. This act of reaching out is a way of testing if those differences will be accepted, for which some of us, like Judy, cannot help but admit our own doubts.

Clearly the added media and materials are as significant as the text in these letters. Many children included drawings, like a portrait of a horse, a top hat, flowers, renderings of books, or drawings of people writing (Figure 4) on the letter paper or on separate drawing paper. Photographs, such as school portraits, were also common. Some media defy explanation, like a photograph I found loose in one of Smith's folders. It was a Polaroid of a young girl laying on a bed in wallpapered bedroom. The child looks to be sleeping on top of the covers in her day clothes. There are no details that would relate the photo to any of the letters' text, nor any writing on the photograph itself. This photograph is a slant, as well, in that it is reasonable to send a photograph of oneself when making a pen pal, though many adults might think it inappropriate to send a photograph of yourself while sleeping or pretending to sleep.



Figure 4. Smith, 1970–1979.

Like the use of photographs, many children were excited to share personal details, which ranged from expected to surprising, with their reader. For example, one child began her letter to Smith saying: “Here are somethings [sic] about me” (Smith, 1970–1979). The somethings are grade (7th), stature (very small), and a list of authors the child will require her students to read when she becomes a teacher in adulthood: “The only books I am going to read to them are Judy Blume’s, Ellen Conford, Alfred Hitchcock’s, and yours” (Smith, 1970–1979). This letter is emblematic of the kind of personal details the child writers often included. Age, grade, school information, and family details are common. At the same time, children would often include other information that was specific and nuanced, such as stature. The added details about the readings she will require when she becomes a teacher act as personal information in that it begins a conversation about future career choices and how the child thinks of her own strengths. It also shows her evaluative abilities, particularly with a compliment given to Smith in placing her books among Alfred Hitchcock’s and others.

In many letters, the children shared what might normally be mundane information—such as how many pets one has—thought it was not mundane given how the children presented it. For example, Judy (1973) wrote to Wylly Folk St. John saying that she liked St. John’s first name very much. This led to her telling the story of how she was named: “My whole name is Judith Elaine. The way I got my name was my brother wanted to name me Judy and the nurse wanted me to be named after her so I was named Judith Elaine and called Judy” (St. John, 1928–1975c). Similarly, in Dawn’s letter (Figure 5) to St. John, she mentioned that she included a photo of her and her dog, Katri Kahn of Pakistan. The photo is missing from the folder, but importantly, she wrote, “My dogs [sic] father is

Mr. Whiskers of Walfor (who is dead) and her mother is Mitzi Van Linzich (Linzick). I am 8½, my birthday is on January 16, born in 1964. My dogs [sic] birthday is on March, 14. She is 6½ ” (St. John, 1928–1975b). In each case, the child writers included basic and expected information, but delivered the information as part of larger narratives that surprise and delight, slanting far from the typical presentation of age, name, and similar information. In fact, these examples show that the children were not merely interested in sharing facts, but were actually interested in sharing their own origin stories.

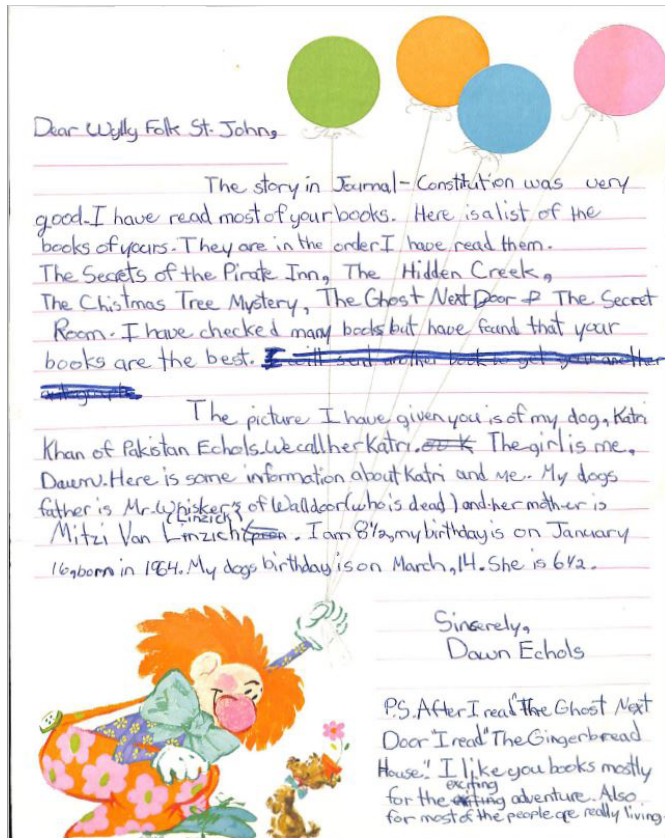


Figure 5. St. John, 1928–1975b.

Similar tactics were used when children shared stories about how they had obtained the authors' books in the first place, or when they relayed their experiences of reading the literature. These details often included information about librarians and teachers who had introduced the books to the children. Terri (1973) wrote to St. John, saying that her class reading room had 138 books, adding, "Our English teacher, Ms. Dixie, is so thrill [sic] over you" (St. John, 1928–1975b). She further requested, "When you write back, please write Ms. Dixie a little note" (St. John, 1928–1975b). Troy (1973) described to St. John that the copy of her novel *The Ghost Next Door* was overdue at the library, but that he was keeping it to read one chapter per night in his bed. After reading, he wrote, "every little noise in my room scares me!" particularly because of an illustration on page 3 (St. John, 1928–1975b). Similarly, Theresa (1972) explained to St. John that she could no longer take her trash out at night without fear of "spooks"—though her parents told her there was no such thing, she assured St. John that she had told them "yes, there are" (St. John, 1928–1975b).

Writing these kinds of details about one's personal life, origin story, experience of reading, and so on exhibit a letter-writing technique that Hall, Robinson, and Crawford (2000) call *the tell you about me strategy*, which they

identified in their study of 5-year-old letter writers (p. 139). They note that “this strategy reflects a recognition of the ‘distanced other’” (p. 140), that is, the one who is not physically present at the moment of writing the letter and to whom the letter is directed. Thus, when the child writer supplies details about their lives to the person to whom they are writing, this is a tactic for creating intimacy with someone who is physically distant. Hall et al. point out that the child’s understanding of the distanced other contrasts with Piaget’s claim that children largely operate from an egocentric worldview (p. 140). Children write letters that are thoughtful about the shared world at large, not merely sharing egocentric information but rather supplying “maps of the most significant part of their world” (p. 140). This unknown person who is receiving the missive from the child is indeed not unknown at all, and with the details the child provides, they can see the way in which they are already in a common world with the child.

The sharing of details provides proof of the common world the two parties have already cocreated through the relations among author, literature, and reader. In this case, the children are strangers in the normative sense to the author to whom they write, and yet the content of these letters reveals that they see themselves as constituent parts of a common world, connected through the books and themes of the literature shared between author and reader. Taylor and Giugni (2012) note that it takes a constellation of relations to form a common world (p. 112), and in this case the constellation consists of the child, author, literature, and even the letters themselves. Thus, when a St. John admirer mentions being scared after reading her mystery novels, the child seems to be corroborating the existence of scary things with the author, in spite of parental disagreement. Such was the case for the child who noted that taking out the trash was now scary, though her parents did not affirm this. In this way, the child was writing to an author in solidarity of their common world, in which spooks and fear were legitimate and normal. Hall et al. (2000) note that in their study, children emphasized ways in which they had crossed paths with the stranger to whom they wrote. Sometimes this was as minor as a shared emotion over an event—the child might say *I was excited too*, for example. This strategy eases the reader into the dialogic zone of letter writing, where anything that might count as shared experience becomes an entrance and preexisting connection (p. 138).

In this way, the children accomplished very sincere and deep gestures of connection through the craft of writing. As Kathy Eden (2012) explains in her work on Renaissance letter writing, the genre originated as a way to remedy physical distance between interlocutors (p. 30). Writing a letter is an activity meant to close the distance between one’s self and the other, which requires that the text written effectively draws the reader into the writer’s lifeworld. Further, the children were participating fully in a tradition that preceded their existence—the tradition of letter writing. In this way, the children were initiating contact with a stranger by means of an established method loaded with norms and expectations.

Even the use of “Dear” and the closing of “Your Friend” reveals a great degree of what Gadamer would have called tradition—not in the negative sense in which something is considered outdated and outmoded, but rather how, as humans, we are “conditioned by the inheritance of the past” (George, 2009, p. 16) in our creations and transmissions. Many times, the children opted for the most intimate of rhetorical moves within the conventional framework, such as the closings “Love,” “With Love,” or “Your New Friend.” Similarly, some played with tradition to adapt things like the postscript to be a place for loving emphasis, rather than afterthought, like Shannon (1981) telling Smith in the letter’s text that she should feel free to “drop in anytime,” only to follow up with a P.P.S. that emphasized the point: “P.P.S. Drop in anytime” (Smith, 1970–1979). The invitation to get together was warm and repeated.

The children who wrote these letters were thus very good at fulfilling a major goal of the genre itself—connection and closed distance. They did this through creating small textual moments and media. It is these moments of success that also read as slanted—they are surprising and unlike the kinds of rhetorical moves we might expect.

This is due, in part, to what writing theorist Ken Macrorie (1984) said young children could do better than all adult writers—write honestly about what they know well: “This is the first requirement for good writing: truth; not *the* truth (whoever knows surely what that is?), but some kind of truth—a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and your real experience in the world you know well—whether in fact or dream or imagination” (p. 14, emphasis added). Rhetorically speaking, then, the child writers cure the problem of physical distance through their ability to tell “some kind of truth” (p. 14), not to be confused with *the* truth, a stricter notion of authenticity than I am operating with in my study.

Another representative sample of the common world between the children and their letter recipients is found within one of my favourite letters, from a girl named Mamie who wrote to Smith. In her letter, Mamie included details about her family farm, a new home by the lake, and a postscript that read: “P.S. My brother he is 16 years old and he loves to write storys [sic]. He is gone [sic] be a preacher” (Smith, 1970–1979). What stands out here is the fact that she mentioned having five siblings, but only provided information about the one brother. Why was this brother singled out in the letter? In my interpretation, this brother was mentioned because Mamie saw him as a connection to Smith. It is as if she were saying, *you are a writer and there is also a writer in my family*. In addition, the final detail “He is gone [sic] be a preacher” has no immediate relevance but contains a world of information about what is significant in the personal life of this young girl writing from South Georgia. It is simple, accurate, and contains that honesty Macrorie attributed to child writers. Finally, it operates as a strange letter in terms of its contents, which in the same stroke is a perfect letter because of the intimate view it opens into the child writer’s world—in other words, it is pristinely slanted.

In many letters, this ability to share great details about one’s own lifeworld is matched by an excitement for learning more about the author’s thoughts and feelings, as evidenced by the numerous personal questions asked in the letters. Sandra (no date) told St. John about roller skating with a group of Methodists, adding, “I’m a Baptist, (what are you)?” (St. John, 1928–1975b). Inspired by the content of St. John’s thrilling novels, which included some witchcraft, Tracy (1973) inquired, “I am very curious to know if you ever went to a séance, or if you are married?” (St. John, 1928–1975b). Like many children who wrote St. John and Smith, Carol asked for a photograph and more, writing, “Do you have a picture I could have of yourself ... Could you give me some info about yourself? I am writing in love for your book” (St. John, 1928–1975a). Questions about children, family, requests for photographs, and more, are common, illustrating how the letter writers expected to be in ongoing relations with the authors. Tracy (1973) ended her letter saying, “I write letters alot [sic] but usually dont [sic] get a reply” (St. John, 1928–1975b), suggesting that she was using the questions to, as another child writer described, “be friends by writing” (Smith, 1928–1975b).

Some of the questions children asked throw the notion of convention into new tension, given that the questions could easily be seen as impolite or too nosy for introductory communication. If convention is meant to help teach and dictate social behaviour, the children defied some aspects of convention by lacking what we would consider tact. A lack of tact, on the other hand, serves to slant convention *toward intimacy*, thereby making it somewhat effective in curing that problem of physical distance. Gadamer (1975/2009) theorized that tact is a tricky thing because it is “tacit and unformulable” (p. 15), and requires a “special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how we behave in them for which knowledge and principles do not suffice” (p. 14). But surprisingly, he explained that in choosing to be tactful, one purposely averts their gaze from something they have seen. He wrote, “tact helps one to preserve distance. It avoids ... the violation of the intimate sphere of the person” (p. 15) by slipping past the thing in question rather than knocking on it. Asking a nosy question of a stranger is a common tactless move, but in a more positive way, it is also a strategy for getting at that truth content that Macrorie argued children are particularly good at expressing.

For example, the child writers sometimes criticized or challenged the content and style of the authors' novels, exhibiting the way in which common worlds should not be naively thought of as spaces without conflict. Many letters to Smith mentioned her novel *A Taste of Blackberries*, in which a young boy dies of a bee sting and the narrator, who was a close friend of the deceased, must grieve through the rest of the text. David (1981) told Smith: "your book ... was good. I would have liked it better if you put the part where Jamie died at the end. I would have also liked it more if it had been longer. Sincerely yours, David" (Smith, 1970–1979). Daven (1981) liked the book but "hated the grandfather," asking "How come you made the grandfather so mean?" (Smith, 1970–1979). An unknown correspondent (1977) challenged the realism of death by bee sting, telling Smith, "I didn't think it made much sense. It is true that you can die of a bee sting if you are allergic [sic]. But it does not come att [sic] your first bee sting" (Smith, 1979–1970). Similarly, some of St. John's novels were in the mystery genre, which led readers like John to critique the realism of some scenes: "I liked Uncle Roberts Secret very much except I don't think dynamite will explode from a jar" (St. John, 1928–1975c). These letters are important for showing the way that children did not merely accept the narrative choices authors made but grappled with whether or not they were reasonably realistic, timed appropriately, or needed at all. If we think of the relations among the child, author, literature, and letter as a shared world, then we see that the children are pushing against decisions made about what happens in that world, displaying tensions that arise in any shared political and communal space (as discussed by Taylor and Giugni [2012] in their formulation of shared worlds).

In both cases of the child asking personal questions of the authors and challenging their authority over their writing and the research of their content, their doing so displays a kind of tactlessness that goes against the conventions of letter writing. Interpreted in light of Gadamer's notion of tact, however, we see that the child is transparently announcing the desire to be intimately involved with the writer and the narrative choices, pushing to have a place of importance in the shared world. While these kinds of rhetorical choices go against conventions of letter writing—which emphasize politeness and constraint—the slant of it all is that going against those very conventions actually serves the original purpose of writing letters in the first place: to close the distance between people who are not physically close together. In this way, the child's lack of tact is in some ways an improvement on the genre. Getting directly into conversations about religious choices, family structure, and challenges of writing choices attempts to break down distance, implicating the child writer and letter reader into new, sometimes uncomfortable, terrain.

Ultimately, many of these child writers wrote to the authors because they already felt close to them and wanted to offer up their favourable assessments of the literature. Robert (1969) told St. John, "your story really impressed me" (St. John, 1928–1975a) and Sherry (Figure 6) told Smith that her publication was "considerate, reliable, and well crafted" (Smith, 1970–1979). Many children also described how reading about grief was meaningful in light of recently losing grandparents and others. In many cases, it is clear that the letters not only helped create intimate relations, but that the relations clearly preexisted the letter being written. The shared world was already there, and the letters acknowledge it and complicate it by offering up more democratic communication between the authors and the child readers. Now, the children have the chance to address the authors, proving that they do more than simply receive the literature.

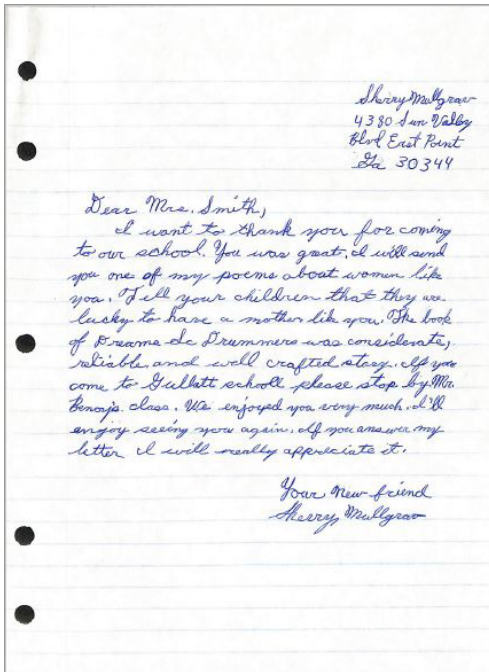


Figure 6. Smith, 1970–1979.

In some cases, the child admirers wrote Smith or St. John with such familiarity that it took very careful readings to understand their relationship. Pam's (1970) letter to St. John, for example, begins with an apology: "I'm sorry that I haven't written in such a long time" (St. John, 1928–1970b, p. 19). This is immediately followed with evidence that Pam and St. John do not actually know each other, given that Pam goes on to introduce herself, explaining, "I have a cat and a dog and some goldfish" (St. John, 1928–1975b). Similarly, Sandra apologized for not having written St. John recently, and went on to offer to halt her correspondence so that St. John could finish her next book (St. John, 1928–1975c). In the same letter, however, she asked for the title of the next book. It seems that St. John must have corresponded with both of these girls, who each signed their letters with "love," but given that each letter contains introductory data, St. John was not a regular pen pal of the children.

In many of these cases, the slant occurs due to the instability of roles—the letters slip between notions of familiarity and distance very quickly. These kinds of letters redraw the normative lines of text to author, making elements of the novels active players in the shared world between author and reader (who becomes letter writer). This fits, indeed, as it is well understood that it is not merely humans who act, but also nonhumans—the novels, the letters, and even characters and themes that the novels conceptually consider become active participants in creating the common world. In another study of letters from admirers, Linda M. Grasso (2013) studied notes from women who wrote to Georgia O'Keeffe and argued that "'knowing' the paintings means also 'knowing' the artist who created them. This fantasy produced the illusion that viewers were intimately connected to the artist and her work" (p. 29). In other words, the artifacts become active participants in creating the common world—as products of the creator and also things themselves, beyond the creator.

Several letters illustrate this part of the slant, revealing the way this complex intimacy is felt. Tammy's and Cheri's letters to St. John each reference the other, seemingly because the girls met St. John together at a book event. It appears that St. John used their names in one of her novels because they were her admirers. Tammy began, "I am taking the privilege to write you and thank you for using my name in your book" (St. John, 1928–1975b).

She included a wallet-sized headshot and with blue pen, drew a horse's head on the bottom of the page, next to her phone number. She had not read the book that included her name, but said, "I'm sure I'll enjoy it" (St. John, 1928–1975b). She ended with, "Thank you for your interest in me" (St. John, 1928–1975b). Cheri's letter begins, "I don't know what to say but, 'Thank you' for putting me in the book, 'The Ghost Next Door' I have read the book and think its wonderful. I also Like [sic] the part I play in it" (St. John, 1928–1975b). Despite using the girls' names in a novel, St. John did not know the girls well, as evidenced by the fact that she misspelled Cheri's name in her book. Cheri pointed this out, only to forgive St. John, writing, "Well don't think its your mistake because everyone spells it that way. It's the thought that counts" (St. John, 19728–1975b).

The girls both saw the use of their names as more significant than the author simply borrowing a name for a book—these girls felt that they had been integrated into the text. For Tammy, the naming of a character after her was akin to "an interest" in her as a person. She noted she would buy several copies of the book to give to her nieces for Christmas, which may suggest that she assumed her nieces would also see her name within the book as some indication of a certain level of fame. Cheri's name was misspelled, revealing the lack of connection St. John and she had, and yet still, Cheri understood this naming as if she had been cast as an actor in the text. In fact, in her own letter, she quoted herself as if she were a character speaking dialogue: "I don't know what to say but, 'Thank you'.." and "Well I better be going now 'Bye!'" (St. John, 1928–1975b).

It does not require meeting the authors in person to feel connected to their texts. Laura's (1979) letter to Smith contained the most inventive closing: "Berrily Yours, Laura" (Smith, 1970–1979). Laura's penmanship is perfect and her letter contains all formal conventions of letters, making her "Berrily" jarring. At first I thought it might be a misspelling or an error—but it does not closely resemble any normal closings for letters. While it sounds like the word *barely*, a skilled writer like Laura would know that is not an appropriate closing for a letter. In this letter, Laura calls Smith's book "touching" and speaks about *A Taste of Blackberries* resonating with her because she recently lost her grandfather.

It is most likely, then, that Laura's word *berrily* is a beautiful portmanteau. It combines the title of the book, *A Taste of Blackberries*, with the 19th-century letter closing *verily yours*. Laura's invented word is impactful because it actually only works in reference to Smith's own book. It is a word for one occasion and one relationship, created to express something new. It is as if she were telling Smith *I am confidently yours* and also *I have adopted your language into my own*. The potential of this word expands even more in light of an earlier error in the letter, where Laura wrote, "I am to you because I read your book a Taste of Black Berries" (Smith, 1970–1979). Here, it seems like Laura may have intended to write, "I am writing to you because..." (Smith, 1970–1979), but the word *writing* slipped away before being written down.

Grasso (2013) found that in the fan mail to O'Keefe, many writers felt prompted by the art to enter into "intense, intimate connection in which distinction between subjectivities is eradicated ... [and] merging is the transformative result" (p. 29). Similarly, many of the child writers' letters described the way in which lives had already merged into a new space, a world dictated by the complex relations among many different things, both human and not. Tammy, Cheri, and Laura all found themselves as part of the texts in various ways, suggesting that the material boundaries of the novels were irrelevant. Tammy saw her name in the text as an interest in her as a human being, meaning that the name carried her with it into the new text, a thing that was created, not only due to the author writing it, but also because of her existence. Cheri saw herself as part of St. John's novel and believed St. John *wrote her*, so to speak, granting St. John's abilities enormous consequence. Laura extended the text into her letter, cocreating new words/worlds that merged sentiment with Smith's own language.

Conclusion

The “chief virtue” of letter writing, writes Kathy Eden (2007), is its ability to foster “close relatedness,” which “applies not only to the subject matter and the language but also the character of the writer” (p. 235). Letters are meant to bring people together in spite of distance, time, difference, and anything that “hinders intimacy” (p. 237). And even under such romantic intentions, they are still a formal genre with strict stipulations of style and form. In fact, learning how to successfully compose them according to convention is used as a way to teach norms of behaviour and communication at large.

These letters written by children to beloved authors show how the goal of close relatedness is often best met through slanting conventions, allowing for many relations to mingle in the new world created among the author, reader, text, conceptual themes, letters, and other elements. The drive to manipulate, extend, and play with expectation can coincide with sophisticated rhetoric, nuanced techniques, and carefully negotiated layers of family, politics, pets, humour, fears, grief, postscripts, photographs, and anything that can fit into a missive and an envelope.

References

- Aderinto, S. (2015). "O! Sir I do not know either to kill myself or to stay": Childhood emotion, poverty, and literary culture in Nigeria, 1900–1960. *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 8(2), 273–294. <https://doi.org/10.1353/HCY.2015.0024>
- Armstrong, M. (2006). *Children writing stories*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Auguiste, R. (2015). Archives and invention: The archives structuring presence in documentary film practices. *Journal of Media Practice*, 16(1), 8–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2015.1015798>
- Benjamin, W. (1999). *Selected writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*. Belknap Press of Harvard University. (Original work published in 1929)
- Bland, C., & Cross, M. (2004). *Gender and politics in the age of letter-writing, 1750–2000*. Ashgate.
- Burman, E. (2022). Found childhood as a practice of child as method. *Children's Geographies*, 20(3), 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1566518>
- Christensen, P. H. (2004). Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation. *Children & Society*, 18(2), 165–176. <https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.823>
- Dickinson, E. (1998). *The poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading edition*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Doris Buchanan Smith. (2011). In Gale literature: Contemporary authors. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1000092345/LitRC?u=uga&sid=LitRC&xid=3c8790bf>
- Eden, K. (2007). Petrarchan hermeneutics and the rediscovery of intimacy. In T. Bartolini & H. W. Storey (Eds.), *Petrarch and the textual origins of interpretation* (pp. 231–244). Brill.
- Eden, K. (2012). *The Renaissance rediscovery of intimacy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Freeman, E. (2010). *Time binds: Queer temporalities, queer histories*. Duke University Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1986). *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays* (R. Bernasconi, Ed.; N. Walker, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2009). *Truth and method*. Continuum. (Original work published in 1975)
- George, T. (2009). What is the future of the past? Gadamer and Hegel on truth, art and the ruptures of tradition. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 40(1), 4–20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2009.11006662>
- Grasso, L. M. (2013). "You are no stranger to me": Georgia O'Keefe's fan mail. *Reception: Texts, Audiences, History*, 5, 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.5.1.0024>
- Hall, N., Robinson, A., & Crawford, L. (2000). Young children's exploration of letter writing. In D. Barton & N. Hall (Eds.), *Letter writing as a social practice* (pp. xx-xx). John Benjamins.
- Harris, A. (2009). This I beg my aunt may not know: Young letter-writers in eighteenth-century England, peer correspondence in a hierarchical world. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2(3), 333–360. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.0.0072>
- Hodgson, J. (2021). Accessing children's historical experiences through their art: Four drawings of aerial warfare from the Spanish Civil War. *Rethinking History*, 25(2), 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2021.1928393>
- Kay, C. (2021). German children's art during World War I. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106211015694>
- King, R. S. (2018). *Writing to the world: Letters and the origins of modern print genres*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Macrorie, K. (1984). *Writing to be read*. Boynton/Cook.
- Marten, J. (2013). Childhood studies and history: Catching a culture in high relief. In A. M. Duane (Ed.), *The children's table* (pp. 52–67). The University of Georgia Press.

- Ricoeur, P. (1965). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation*. Yale University Press.
- Sánchez-Eppler, K. (2018). Geographies of play: Scales of imagination in the study of child-made things. In S. Spyrou, R. Rosen, R., & D. T. Cook (Eds.), *Reimagining childhood studies* (pp. 41–56). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2002). *Touching feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Smith, D. B. (1970–1979). Correspondence—from children. Doris Buchanan Smith Papers (MS2035). Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Athens, GA, United States.
- Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices; From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, 18(2): 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568210387834>
- St. John, W. F. (1928–1975a). Christmas tree mystery files, correspondence (from readers), 1969. Wylly Folk St. John Papers (MS2145). Hargrett Rare Books & Manuscript Library. Athens, GA, United States.
- St. John, W. F. (1928–1975b). Ghost Next Door files, correspondence 1971–1974, Wylly Folk St. John Papers (MS2145). Hargrett Rare Books & Manuscript Library. Athens, GA, United States.
- St. John, W. F. (1928–1975c). Uncle Robert's Secret files, correspondence (from readers), 1972–1974. Wylly Folk St. John Papers (MS2145). Hargrett Rare Books & Manuscript Library. Athens, GA, United States.
- Swain, S. (2016). Locating the child within the history of childhood. In J. Faulkner & M. Solos (Eds.), *Critical childhood studies and the practice of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 3–14). Lexington Books.
- Taylor, A., & Giugni, M. (2012). Common worlds: Reconceptualising inclusion in early childhood communities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 13(2), 108–119. <https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.2.108>
- Ulin, R. (1980). A treatment of death in the classroom. *English Education*, 11(3), 162–168.
- Wall, J. (2019). From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Children's Geographies*, 20(3), 257–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>
- Westlake, J. W. (1883). *How to write letters*. Sower, Potts, & Company.
- Wylly Folk St. John. (2003). In Gale literature: Contemporary authors. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1000086490/LitRC?u=uga&sid=LitRC&xid=a1601d81>