

Mothers, Motherhood, and Mothering in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Online Conference hosted by the University of Münster

12th – 14th November 2025

In their introduction to *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism* (2016), Karen Coats and Lisa Rowe Fraustino observe that “[w]hether living or dead, present or absent, sadly dysfunctional or happily good enough, the figure of the mother carries an enormous amount of freight across the emotional and intellectual life of a child” (3). Building on the work begun in the 2015 Special Issue of *Children's Literature in Education* dedicated to representations of motherhood in children's and young adult literature, Coats and Fraustino's book intended to provide space for a range of critical approaches to mothers in children's and young adult literature, thus beginning the process of filling a notable gap in the field; at the time, while work addressing mothers in children's and young adult literature was slowly growing, it was also “scattered and lack[ed] cohesion” (11) and did not have the same “volume and quality of attention paid to mothers in other disciplines [such as] psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, women's studies, and ... literature for adults” (4).

Nearly a decade on from this ground-breaking edited volume, the amount of scholarship addressing mothers and motherhood in children's and young adult literature has steadily continued to increase. Significantly, there has been a noticeable flurry of new work in 2024, including two chapters in *Family in Children's and Young Adult Literature* edited by Eleanor Spencer and Jade Dillon Craig; a chapter in *Eating Cultures in Children's Literature: National, International and Transnational Perspectives* edited by Anna Gasperini et al.; and multiple journal articles.¹ Research in this area, it appears, is reaching a crescendo.

This online conference, hosted by the University of Münster, seeks to engage with this exciting moment in the field by facilitating scholarly conversations about how mothers, motherhood, and mothering are represented, mediated, and negotiated within children's and young adult literature. While these conversations should be situated primarily within the fields of Children's Literature Studies and Young Adult Studies, we are also interested in the intersections between these two fields and Motherhood Studies; in particular, as the title of the conference indicates, we are keen to explore the nuances of ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’ as defined by Adrienne Rich in her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1976). As Andrea O'Reilly, the founder of Motherhood Studies, neatly summarises,

¹ Of these, two were published in journals dedicated to children's and young adult literature: Katherine Norbury's “Writerly Sisters and Maternal Absence in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2024, pp. 202-21; and Varna Venugopal and Swarnalatha Rangarajan's “Mother Trees and Memory Keepers: Botanical Life in Recent Indian Children's Climate Fiction,” *Children's Literature in Education*, 2024, pp. 1-20.

“the term ‘motherhood’ refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word ‘mothering’ refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women” (*From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born*, 2). In a political landscape that is swinging ever-further to the Right, as currently seen in the West, and in an already-patriarchal world that is becoming increasingly hostile to women, it is more important than ever that we investigate and interrogate the narratives surrounding mothers, motherhood, and mothering in books for children and young people.

Submissions

Submissions on any topic pertaining to mothers, motherhood, and mothering within children’s and young adult literature are welcomed, including (but not limited to):

- The role of children’s and young adult literature in (re)producing cultural schemas and scripts for mothers
- Mothers, motherhood, and family, including mother figures and ‘found family’
- Queer or transgender mothers, or mothers who otherwise resist the heteropatriarchal institution of motherhood
- Motherhood and community, including ‘other-mothering’, particularly in non-Western cultures
- Mothers across genres (for example: romance, realism, dystopia, sci-fi, fantasy) and cultures
- Representations of adoption and fostering
- Sex, sexuality, and motherhood, including depictions of young and/or potential mothers and of pregnancy or motherhood as a negative consequence of teen sex
- Politics, the body, and (teen) motherhood, particularly regarding access to reproductive healthcare like contraception or abortion in countries such as the United States, Northern Ireland, India, Poland, and Brazil
- The role of religion in texts depicting mothers, motherhood, or mothering
- Rejecting or resisting motherhood
- Absent or aberrant mothers
- Ecocritical and/or ecofeminist approaches (mothers in/and nature; Mother Nature)
- Motherhood, patriarchy, and power
- Scholarly approaches to children’s and young adult literature at the intersection of Children’s Literature Studies, YA Studies, and Motherhood Studies, as well as other inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches.

To be considered, please send a proposal of no more than 250 words, a short biography of no more than 100 words, 3-5 keywords, and the time zone you will be in during the conference to jennifer.gouck@uni-muenster.de by **Friday 2nd May 2025**.

Publication Opportunity

A number of the participants from this conference will be invited to submit a revised, book-chapter-length version of their paper to be published as part of the edited volume provisionally titled *Mediating Mothers, Motherhood, and Mothering in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. The collection will be submitted for inclusion in the series Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference.

Please indicate in your proposal if you are interested in this publication opportunity.

More information on the series is available here:

<https://link.springer.com/series/15789>

Timeline

2 nd May 2025	CFP Closes
June 2025	Notification of Outcome
Aug 2025	Speakers Confirm Attendance
Sept 2025	Conference Registration Opens
12 th Nov – 14 th Nov 2025	Online Conference