

**everyone's a critic: the liminal space between theory and children's literature in  
kenneth kidd's *theory for beginners***

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Review of *Theory for Beginners: Children's Literature as Critical Thought* by Kenneth B. Kidd (Fordham University Press, 2020)

Kenneth B. Kidd's *Theory for Beginners* explores the liminality of the space between the intellectual activity of children and that of adults. As the book's chicken-and-egg cover image implies, the placement of philosophy and theory in either domain is anything but straightforward. Though Kidd's primary field is children's literature studies, his analysis of the history and scholarship of Philosophy for Children (P4C) is remarkably astute. He champions the use of children's literature to make philosophy and theory accessible to children, while simultaneously noting that the infusion of philosophy and theory have made children's literature, in turn, more "adult-associated" (p. 7). The book opens with a nod to the humor texts *A Child's Guide to Freud* (1963) and *Communism for Kids* (2017), whose punchlines are predicated on a mismatch of subject and audience. They are 'for children' in the sense that each text uses "language that, for the most part, children, too, could understand" (p. 3). Yet, by making their subject matter explicit rather than couching it within a narrative, the authors cross a perceived boundary. "The ideas of Freud or Marx can be acceptable if hidden inside a children's book," Kidd interprets, "but to speak openly to children about Freud or Marx is apparently beyond the pale" (p. 3). Here, Kidd exposes the common presumption that true theory and philosophy are inherently adult enterprises.

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Kidd identifies these boundaries – between the intellectual activity of children and adults, between the beginner and the expert, between theory as text and theory as the act of theorizing – with the aim of interrogating them, and he finds them more permeable than *Communism for Kids* and its ilk imply. Children may have little to say about many of theory's canonical concepts like Freud's 'oedipality' or Marx's 'estranged labor', but philosophy – most notably through the P4C movement – has demonstrated children's capacity for wonder and enchantment: characteristics essential for both philosophizing and theorizing. Moreover, Kidd notes that theory "presumes a beginner" in that it is "designed to surprise, shake things up, make us think otherwise" (p. 62). After all, if theory limits itself to the adult or to the previously 'initiated', what is there to dislodge?

In claiming territory in philosophy and theory for children and beginners (whom Kidd refers to as "cousins" (p. 4, p. 60)) respectively, Kidd doesn't "mean all theory or philosophy, just certain strains or articulations" (p. 16). Kidd is also careful to avoid deprofessionalizing philosophy and theory as areas of study. He insists that theory designed for beginners is also for experienced practitioners. In any case, while the entire map of philosophy and theory may not yet be open to children or to beginners, within what remains, there is still plenty of space to play. And if Kidd is right, there is more to be done to open the territory of philosophy and theory to children and beginners. He declares: "I want philosophy and theory to be child-friendly as well as beginner-friendly" (p. 134). Kidd's exploration of that space – from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* tales to graphic guides to Jacques Lacan – reveals a dynamic between children's literature, theory, and philosophy which is refreshingly symbiotic. He not only defends the controversial claim that children meaningfully utilize theory and philosophy within their experience, but also reveals the ways that children, theory, and philosophy invigorate one another.

In the chapter on P4C, Kidd demonstrates how founders Matthew Lipman and Gareth B. Matthews championed children as inherently philosophical: "the logic runs: they were born that way" (p. 32). P4C has faced similar adultist resistance as has theory



for beginners, due in part to Jean Piaget's stage theory of psychological developmental, according to which the capacity for abstract thought emerges later in life and without educational cultivation. In spite of this, P4C has grown in the past several decades, due in part to empirical research challenging Piagetian stage theory and finding "marked improvement in [...] students' ability to engage in logical reasoning" (p. 35). Kidd notes that Lipman penned several philosophical children's books, each focusing on a different philosophical concern, to fill in 'gaps' within the K-12 curriculum, which he found "sorely lacking" (p. 36). Matthews, on the other hand, emphasized the pleasure children take in tackling philosophical puzzles raised in classic stories. Matthews' manner of philosophizing with children respects the child as a full-fledged participant. Thus, for both Lipman and Matthews, children benefit from philosophy. But, as Kidd notes, philosophy also benefits from the inclusion of children. He cites Lipman's belief in P4C's "potential to restore philosophy to its broader social function and greater cultural status" (p. 41). Moreover, as Matthews noted, children are often better positioned to embrace wonder than are adults, having no preconceptions to dislodge, thus keeping "philosophy fresh for practitioners" (p. 13).

Kidd draws out a similar mutualism when discussing the role of beginners in theory. He emphasizes the foolhardiness of dismissing beginner engagement in theory, for "[t]heory often makes beginners out of experienced thinkers, even experienced readers of theory" (p. 62). He argues that the 'beginner' may be understood "less as a type and more as a role" (p. 62) one plays within a context. For this reason, theory must be "introduced in multiple ways and on multiple levels" (p. 61). Kidd points to this most notably in his discussion of "graphic guides" to theory: imagetexts that condense the scholarship of figures like Freud and Lacan into humorous, user-friendly synopses, often replete with meta-textual commentary. Addressing the embarrassment faced by many academics who have turned to such materials for their own understanding, Kidd argues that such texts can be "extremely good for theory anxiety management" for beginners taking their first steps into a body of work (Lauren Berlant, qtd. on p. 89). Moreover, these texts refresh theory itself by offering the

opportunity for wonder and play. Kidd notes that many of these guides feature meta-commentary, such as Lydia Alix Fillingham's feminist asides in *Foucault for Beginners* (1993): "He didn't quite get around to saying that this potential threat to gender roles is contained by an overemphasis on gender roles. But I'm sure he was just about to" (qtd. on p. 80). This playful orientation serves to revitalize theory not only by attracting beginner participants, but also by encouraging the critical playing-with-ideas that comes with doing the work of theory.

In the book's final chapter, Kidd compellingly explores the role of children's literature in theory: both as a source from which theory draws and a vehicle through which theory operates. Many of the texts surveyed are canonical children's literature. For instance, several pages are devoted to Carroll's *Alice* stories – "the classic [theory] knows best" (p. 101) – from which theory and philosophy have long drawn inspiration in discussing everything from logic to language games, from post-modernism to psychoanalysis. Through Carroll's playing with boundaries of fictional genres and those between fantasy and reality, theorists find a rich resource from which to revitalize their work. This queering of boundaries lends itself to fostering theoretical thinking in young readers. In perhaps the most compelling section of the book, Kidd introduces children's literature as an introductory form of queer theory for young readers. The chapter cites a long line of beloved children's protagonists – among them Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking, Tove Jansson's Moomintrolls, and James Barrie's Peter Pan – whose enduring charm comes from their defiance of social barriers and heteronormative binaries, opening up the possibility for new ways of being in the world and "thus accomplish[ing] some of the same tasks that queer theory accomplishes" (p. 109).

Kidd finds children's literature to be especially rich for queer theory's potentiality, noting the tendency in children's works towards revolt, and unpacks several children's stories that serve queer theory in a variety of ways, from positive affirmation of the gender nonconforming child in Jessica Love's *Julián Is a Mermaid* (2018) to a more metaphorical exploration of what it means to love someone



unexpected in James Howe's *Otter and Odder* (2012). The most compelling is an explication of Alex Gino's Stonewall Book Award winner, *George* (2017), which follows a middle school transgender girl navigating her own identity. Kidd highlights the book's midpoint transition in narration, from referring to the main character by her deadname to reintroducing her as Melissa, and writes, "I love that Gino makes this demand of readers so late in the game, respecting Melissa's experience and challenging all of us to reboot our perceptions" (p. 122). Though such literary fiction is distinct from a theoretical text, Kidd notes that it "performs for young readers some of the tasks that queer theory performs for adults" (p. 16; see also p. 113).

In establishing children's literature as rich soil for philosophical and theoretical thinking, Kidd spotlights fruitful, and often neglected, opportunities for parents and educators. Many are already attuned to the possibility for literature to *didactically* address questions of identity, discrimination, and ways of being in the world, but Kidd's framework implies a possibility for something more expansive: using literature as a stimulus for engaging students actively – and early – in doing the meaningful *work* of theory and philosophy. In light of his conclusions, parents and educators, many of whom may be 'beginners' themselves, would benefit from further exploration of how they might become more 'attuned' to the philosophical and theoretical implications of children's texts and, thus, better equipped to foster these sorts of educative experiences for their students. This leaves open a possible area for future scholarship.

In that respect, in particular, it is ironic that *Theory for Beginners* is not the easy read that the title implies. The text is littered with copious allusions to theoretical work that may only take up a few lines of text – a product, no doubt, of Kidd's own extensive reading. Novices to literary theory may struggle to situate each thinker. Fortunately, Kidd is kind enough to provide plentiful footnotes to ease the process, as well as an extensive bibliography. (We beginners thank him.)

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