

## Expanding Perspectives on Alternative Children's Literature

A Review of *Alt Kid Lit: What Kids' Literature Might Be*

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*This review of Alt Kid Lit: What Kids' Literature Might Be, edited by Kenneth B. Kidd and Derritt Mason, explores the anthology's analysis and reframing of children's and young adult (CYA) literature that exists outside of normative print culture. The review focuses on the text's emphasis on diversity and interdisciplinary approaches to critiquing mainstream print culture and the exclusionary world of CYA studies and publishing. Exploration of the book's 13 essays, 2 interviews, and a panel discussion and the themes contained within reflects the pedagogical value inherent when marginalized perspectives and texts are given the attention they deserve. Overall, Alt Kid Lit is praised for its significant contributions to CYA scholarship and its potential to make lasting contributions in the work of scholars, educators, and librarians working with CYA literature and readers.*

**Key words:** children's and young adult literature (CYA), alternative narratives, critical perspectives, marginalized voices, diversity and inclusion

### Reconceptualizing and understanding "alt"

*Alt Kid Lit: What Kids' Literature Might Be* (University Press of Mississippi, 2024) is a collection of 13 essays, two interviews, one panel discussion, and a foreword by editors Kenneth B. Kidd and Derritt Mason. This is the pair's second edited book following the publication of *Queer as Camp: Essays on Summer, Style, and Sexuality* in 2019. Kidd and Mason curate a body of work that examines and affirms the power and potential of children's and young adult literature (CYA). The focus on "alt" reframes literary works that exist outside of the normative print culture as worthy of academic pursuit and as material culture of civic benefit. In the foreword the editors carefully explore the tumultuous nature of the term alt as a prefix and a descriptor within a linguistic space that is inherently reductionist, ignoring the complexities that exist within the alt. The intention of alt in *Alt Kid Lit* is to highlight the value of texts and media that have been excluded from conversations about literary merit while simultaneously engaging in progressive analysis and sociocultural critique.

Readers learn that alt can be a signifier, denoting a positionality outside the mainstream. This prescription however risks "reinforcing status rather than interrogating it (p. 4). The editors consider what the ideas within alt CYA and their text are alternative to. To explore alt CYA and its scholarship, white privilege, white supremacy's expansive reach into publishing and storytelling, and the lack of diversity represented in mainstream CYA publishing must be considered. The foreword of the book offers not only a contemplative reimagining of alternative CYA but also representations of alternative childhoods, the empowerment of marginalized and excluded voices, and the positioning of a field of inquiry that is worthy of attention, respect, and academic pursuit. The championing of alt CYA that *Alt Kid Lit* intentionally does interrogates what is considered worthy of scholarship, what media is appropriate for children, and the types of agency that children possess in their own reading choices and curiosities.

This compilation of essays, interviews, and a panel discussion repositions the alt as a focal point within CYA and children's literature scholarship, allowing for these texts and their scholarly exploration to challenge academic gatekeepers, traditional publishing, and media consumers who dismiss CYA as inferior to adult literature. The editors present a constellation of perspectives that explore alternative ways of addressing CYA. They have organized the anthology into three overarching categories: alt genre (part 1), alt medium (part 2) and alt epistemology (part 3). Interspersed with interviews of Joshua Whitehead (*Jonny Appleseed & Full-Metal Indigiqueer*) and Vivek Shyra (*Baby, You're Projecting & Part-Time Woman*) as well as a panel discussion on video games and young people's digital cultures, the book's sections and interviews remind readers of the vibrant and engaging discourse about alt CYA occurring among innovative thinkers and authors beyond the text and invites readers to consider how they might reimagine how their childhood literary and media habits may be improved by a more expansive understanding and acceptance of diverse voices and media.

### Diversity and inclusion in CYA literature scholarship

*Alt Kid Lit* carves out a unique space for itself within contemporary childhood and media studies. The intersectionality of the essays and authors contained within should not be understated in the conversation around inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives. Kidd and Mason have curated a selection of chapters that explore not only childhood identities and media habits but also racial, socioeconomic, gender, sexuality, identity, and Indigenous considerations for media culture and scholarship that have long been excluded from conversations in children's literature studies. Missing from the existing literature in the field of CYA scholarship is a book that contains this much intersectionality. *Alt Kid Lit* fills this gap where literature has been particularly focused on single-issue diversity such as Epstein and Chapman's *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults* (2021) or focused on children's literature from a historical period such as *Who Writes for Black Children? : African American Children's Literature Before 1900* (Capshaw & Duane, 2017). Books that contain as diverse perspectives as those within *Alt Kid Lit* appear to be few and far between. Additionally, *Alt Kid Lit* is an interdisciplinary text, combining literary analysis with media studies and childhood studies and employing methodologies such as critical race theory, queer theory, and critical pedagogies. The expansive perspectives within the text broaden the scope of CYA scholarship and pave the way for interdisciplinary research by future scholars.

I found each essay of *Alt Kid Lit* to be different from the last and to transport me to different geographical areas or into the conversations of perspectives that I've not had the privilege to engage with more fully prior to reading this text. The most generative chapter within the first part of the book, "alt genre," was Katherine Capshaw's article "Singing a 'Sea Island Song': Alice Childress's Responsive Black Theater." The chapter positions Black creativity and stories as being removed from white memory institutions (archives, libraries, publishing). The article is an exemplary piece of action-focused scholarship that encourages space to be carved out for child-focused Black dramatic literatures that can hold expansive pedagogical value and identity-affirming capacity for Black children. Within the second section, "alt epistemology," I was most drawn to "Bizarre Creatures and the Fans Who Love Them: The Dark Crystal as Alternative Children's Literature" by Paige Gray. This chapter encourages readers to consider their own interpretations and experiences with the media and literature of their childhoods. Like Gray, I found myself drawn to *The Dark Crystal* (Henson, 1982) as a child for the same unspoken queer, grotesque, and existential questions it evoked within myself that Gray highlights in her chapter. Gray tackles *The Dark Crystal* with interpretive examinations of posthumanism contained within the puppetry and lack of humans on screen. Gray's chapter challenges readers to rethink their interpretations of media and consider how revisiting these stories, characters, and productions can be transformative for children as they engage in world building and social construction with the media they engage with. Within part 3, alt epistemology, the standout chapter is "Reimagining the 'Alternative': Sustaining Representation of Indigenous People and People of Color through Speculative Fiction in *The Marrow*

*Thieves and Mañanaland*” by Erica Law-Montes and Cristina Rivera. The article focuses on inviting epistemologies beyond the normative settler narratives. The authors encapsulate one of the major themes of *Alt Kid Lit* more broadly by exploring the potential of speculative fiction while concurrently advocating for more diverse voices and perspectives within media culture for children and CYA scholarship. The interviews of Joshua Whitehead and Vivek Shyra and the panel discussion on digital cultures of young people and video games are refreshing palate cleansers in the book’s section breaks. I enjoyed these conversations, but I am not sure if they provide the same pedagogical value as the edited chapters of the book. These conversations, particularly the Whitehead and Shyra interviews, would be interesting to those who are familiar with these authors and their works, but I found myself impatiently anticipating the end of the interview and the start of the next section.

Reflecting on this review, I can’t help but worry that I might be too effusive with my praise. However, *Alt Kid Lit* genuinely surprised and delighted me throughout the reading experience. The chapters introduced me to new characters, stories, movies, and television shows and did so in thoughtful and responsible ways that encouraged critical interpretation and interaction with these texts and our biases toward CYA literature. The book contains apparent contributions to individual fields of the chapter authors but also CYA literature broadly. For example, the chapter “Emergency Children’s Literature: Some Observations on Pandemic Picture Books” by Gabriel Duckels is undeniably a generative chapter within a novel academic inquiry. *Alt Kid Lit* has amplified these voices and encouraged expansive perspectives. The application of this text extends beyond future childhood studies work but could be useful for the thoughtful educator, librarian, or discerning parent who is curious about implicit or explicit biases and diversifying their impact on children’s media landscapes. Within my professional field of librarianship there exist many applications of the work within *Alt Kid Lit*. Fruitful conversations among collections librarians on the types of materials collected, the representation and lack thereof of diverse representations of childhood, and the inclusion of perhaps challenging ideas within children’s collections are just some of the ways in which librarians would engage with the text. Educators may be sparked to create a reading list or unit around the themes within the chapters, and scholars likely will see room for themselves and their interpretations of alternative CYA in academic fields that have long ignored the merit of certain types of texts and perspectives.

I can imagine giving *Alt Kid Lit* as a gift to scholars, librarians, and educators in my life. The book stands out as a collection of essays for its dedication to advancing diversity through the inclusion of marginalized voices and perspectives and introducing new theoretical approaches within the field of CYA studies. The positioning of the alt as a positive, defining feature is paramount in the potential influence on educational practices, scholarship, and disruption of publishing norms. The book’s layout and format are easy to follow and create clear delineation of themes, and the text is written in easy and accessible academic language. Overall, I feel that *Alt Kid Lit* provides significant contributions to the field of CYA literature, and I am hopeful of its influence on future scholarship.

## References

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