Editorial
Water and Childhood

Welcome to the latest issue of *Journal of Children in Popular Culture.* This issue has been assembled by our guest editor and the newest member of *JOCPC*'s editorial team, Jack Anderson. Jack is a PhD candidate in the Department of Film & Television at the University of Glasgow where he also completed his MRes. His doctoral research on 'Bodies of Water and the Geographies of (Un)dead Childhood in Contemporary British Cinema' inspired the theme for this issue. Accordingly, each of the six essays included herein focus on representations of children and their relationship with water.

In its many forms, water surrounds and abides within us. It sustains life but can also cause great destruction. It can cleanse and purify yet may also carry disease. For children at play, water can instruct and delight, but for the unwary—or unsupervised—it can become the source of trauma or loss of life. When children play with water they learn about their own bodies and the world around them. Water responds to the force and speed of their touch while also obeying and demonstrating fundamentals of gravity, surface tension, locomotion, temperature, and so on. Children splashing in the bathtub or stomping through puddles demonstrate the ludic possibilities of water and the vital role it has in childhood's learning through play. The spiritual symbolisms, emotional geographies, and thresholds of experience with which water is associated are as boundless as the forms it takes. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, paired with the figure of the child, the symbolic complexity of water invites important insights and perspectives on the mutable nature of childhood and its thematic plenitude.

As a screen scholar, my first thoughts of water and children turn to film. Since the inception of cinema, water has been a reliable go-to for early filmmakers demonstrating the medium's capacity to capture and reproduce movement through photography. At the same time, as Vicky Lebeau notes, early cinema witnessed a "level of connivance" (8) between itself and the image of the child, which was already a popular fixation among the Victorians. The fascination with the spectacle of the child in early cinema is evidenced by the frequency of its appearance on screen. This is the case even with Louis and Auguste Lumière's famous first public demonstration of their cinématographe in Paris on December 28, 1895. Of the ten films the brothers screened to patrons at the *Salon Indien du Grand Café*, four focus specifically on children.

In *Le Repas de bébé* (*Feeding the Baby*), Auguste and his wife dine outside with their infant daughter Andrée who also appears in *La Pêche aux poissons rouges* (*Fishing for Goldfish*). Propped up by Auguste beside a bowl of goldfish, Andrée is clearly captivated by them and repeatedly dips her little hand into the water. In *La mer* a group of boys are playing at the beach. Running to the end of a narrow pier, they leap into the surf then quickly wade out of the waves, climb back onto the peer and doing it all again. And in *Le Jardinier,* a boy plays a prank on a gardener, stepping on his hose to stop the flow of water. As the gardener

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studies the nozzle, the boy lifts his foot sending a jet of water into the gardener's face. Significant across all three Lumière films is how water is the focus of fun and play for their respective child subjects, affirming Carolyn Hewitson's observation that water "surprises, excites and absorbs children" and is for them "a source of much pleasure" (3).

Thirty-five years later a very different form of interaction between a child and water takes place on screen when Boris Karloff happens across 7-year-old Marilyn Harris sitting by the lakeshore in *Frankenstein* (Whales 1931). Harris has picked flowers that she one-by-one tosses into the water, marvelling at how they float effortlessly on the surface. Intuiting that Karloff's monster is, despite his size, a fellow child, she invites him to join her play. The pleasure he finds in tossing the flowers and watching them float erupts in excitement that compels him to pick up Harris and throw her in the lake, expecting her to float like the flowers. What began as harmless play ends in tragedy as the childlike monster has not yet grasped his own size and strength and does not understand that little girls who cannot swim do not float.

Meanwhile, the benefits and pleasures of water play are on full display in Mervyn LeRoy's lavish 1952 biopic *Million Dollar Mermaid* which dramatises the life of Australian swimming star Annette Kellerman. The film opens on Annette as a child, her weak legs in constrictive braces that physicians insist she wear. Despite her condition, each day Annette mysteriously absconds, vexing her puzzled father who eventually learns that she hobbles down to the local lake and swims for hours. Concerned for her safety, when he goes to chastise Annette, she interrupts to explain: "Swimming can't hurt me. How can anything hurt when it makes you feel so good?" Not only does swimming not hurt Annette, but the regular water exercises also fully reverse her condition, eventually taking her to stardom on the American stage and screen.

As with most art, we watch film to understand something more about ourselves, much as we might gaze at the glassy surface of a pool of water and spy our own reflection looking back at us. And just like the reflection, when we look at children, we see something of ourselves. Drawing upon examples from film and literature, the six essays included in this issue explore just some of the ways that popular culture has presented the relationship between childhood and water. Also included in this issue is a book review by Lee Anna Maynard.

Works Cited

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