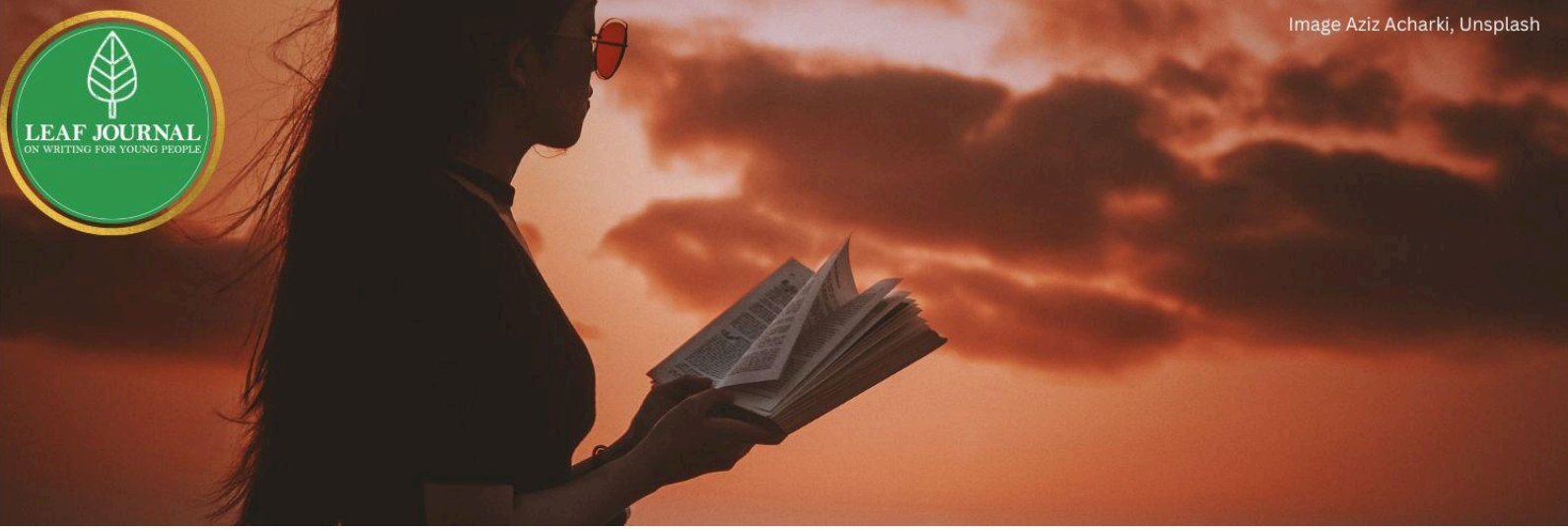

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‘All Children, Except One, Grow Up’: Adultification in Alex Wheatle's *Crongton Knights* and Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Ghost Boys*

Piu DasGupta

Abstract
In this paper I look at “adultification” – what it means, and its implications for children’s literature and children’s writers. To do so, I compare two Middle Grade books – *Crongton Knights* by Alex Wheatle and *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. I examine the ways in which these books both portray and present strategies of resistance to the practice of adultification. I also briefly consider different ways in which those studying and writing children’s literature can be “allies”, by opening up spaces and discourse around this topic. This paper was researched and presented as part of my postgraduate MA studies at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2023.

Keywords: *adultification; social class; infantilization; Peter Pan; children’s literature canon*

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What is "Adultification?"

Adultification is a process whereby children (typically children of minority racial groups, especially Black children, but it can apply to other categories) are seen as being 'less innocent or more adult than their white peers' by being portrayed as more violent or sexually mature than they really are (Epstein *et al* 2017: 1). The real phenomenon and disturbing consequences of adultification were recently evidenced in the case of Child Q in the UK, in which a teenage Black girl was strip-searched by male police officers at school, when having her period (Mohdin 2022).

In this paper, I examine the ways in which two Black children's writers – the American writer Jewell Parker Rhodes and the British writer Alex Wheatle – portray their characters as victims of the reductive and harmful effects of adultification. But I also consider how these texts both challenge and resist this colonizing construction by means of differing narrative strategies.

Ghost Boys – Jewell Parker Rhodes (Orion, 2018)

Ghost Boys is a time-slip, first-person narrative in which Jerome, a young boy shot by a police officer while playing with a toy gun, becomes a ghost and sees the effects of his death on his friends and family. Through connecting with Emmett Till, a real-life historical black boy lynched in the 1950s, and Sarah, the daughter of the officer who killed Jerome, the protagonist is able both to retrace the path of historical trauma and track forward to a glimmer of hope for the future.

The violent consequences of adultification are major plot drivers in *Ghost Boys*, indeed they form the basis of the action. Jerome, a mere child playing with a toy gun, is shot by a police officer who misinterprets his child's play as an adult act of violence. Similarly, the real-life Emmett Till's innocent physical contact with a white woman, a naïve misunderstanding of 1950s Southern segregation codes, was misinterpreted as a mocking, and implicitly sexual, advance, leading to one of the most horrific cases of lynching in American history.

When the lynch mob bursts into the family shack, Emmett's uncle cries, 'He's a child. Not from here.' (Rhodes 2018: 157). Similarly, in a dramatic courtroom scene where the ghost of the modern-day victim, Jerome, witnesses the cross-examination of the police officer who killed him, the officer who shot Jerome describes him not as a child, but huge, menacing. 'You thought the victim, a child, was a large man,' challenges the prosecutor in the Chicago courthouse. 'Were you upset to discover the man was a boy?' 'I was surprised. He was big, hulking. Scary,' responds the officer (Rhodes 2018: 129). In contrast to the projections of the police officer, the reality of Jerome's dead body is pathetically small and vulnerable. Jerome's ghost – hovering over his body – comments, 'How small I look… I thought I was bigger. Tough. But I'm just a bit of

nothing.' (Rhodes 2018: 3). Jerome's reliving of Emmett's story – 'I'm not on the outside anymore. I'm inside…Emmett's telling his story by making me feel' (Rhodes 2018: 151) – contextualizes adultification as an integral component of inherited racial trauma, a link in a chain passed down through the decades.

Infantilization: the inverse of adultification

As a counterpart to the theme of the adultification of black/working class children, Parker Rhodes explores the infantilization of white/privileged children through Sarah, the daughter of the officer who killed Jerome. While black kids like Jerome are denied a childhood, white kids like Sarah are coddled in a cocoon of manufactured innocence which is, ultimately, a trap. Jerome as a ghost describes Sarah's room, 'Her bedroom is like cotton candy. Sickly sweet. Ballerinas on the lampshade glow. Two tiny stuffed pigs rest on the pillows. Nothing bad is supposed to happen to whoever sleeps in this room.' (Rhodes 2018: 65).

The recurring references to JM Barrie's novel *Peter Pan*, which weave like a leitmotif through *Ghost Boys*, underline the connivance of the canon of traditional children's literature in the creation of a limited and limiting, and ultimately colonizing lens, on childhood. As Jacqueline Rose notes, Peter Pan is 'the little boy who does not grow up, not because he doesn't want to, but because someone else [i.e. JM Barrie] prefers that he shouldn't.' (Rose 1994: 3). Other critics have noted the prevalence of the 'Peter Pan complex' in traditional children's literature, a static Neverland which denies maturation (especially sexual maturation) and change (Nikolajeva 2005: 157). When Jerome stumbles across a copy of *Peter Pan* in Sarah's bedroom and reads the opening line – *All children, except one, grow up* – he asks: 'What happened? Did he die?' 'No,' she replies, her face reddening: 'He doesn't die. He stays a kid.' (Rhodes 2018: 91). In this brief exchange of merely two lines of dialogue, the novel's pitting of contrasting yet ultimately equally colonizing viewpoints on childhood is succinctly set out. The black child, excluded from a lived childhood experience of growing and blossoming into a physical adult; and the white child, forced into a Neverland of faux innocence, the eternal childhood. Both enforce a stasis, a rigidity of fixed being; both resist the dynamism of change and growth. It is the adult-imposed, nostalgic prism of the eternal childhood represented by Peter Pan, that becomes the focus of a *j'accuse* by Parker Rhodes of the classical children's canon: towards the end of the book, Jerome in fury throws a copy of the book against a wall.

Crongton Knights – Alex Wheatle (Atom, 2016)

As in *Ghost Boys*, adultification is a major preoccupation of *Crongton Knights*. Wheatle's book chronicles the adventures of fourteen-year-old narrator McKay and his friends as they navigate the wilds of a quasi-mythical, alternate world based on a South London housing estate. As with Parker Rhodes, adultification underlies the main action: an older boy's confiscation of a younger girl's phone, containing sexting images, is the inciting incident which kicks off the adventure. McKay's father works night shifts and

his older brother, Nesta, is not at home, so McKay is left to deal alone with cooking, homework, and keeping himself safe from the debtors knocking at the front door. As McKay says when he explodes with rage at his father and brother towards the end of the book, 'I cook for you, clean the freaking castle for you, step in to calm it down when you two are warring…' (Wheatle 2016: 194).

In contrast to *Ghost Boys*, however, adultification in *Crongton Knights* is shown in a complex and nuanced light, infinitely more subtle than the mere imposition of the colonizing gaze on the colonized. Much of the adultifying discourse in the book emanates from *within* the black community, from black parents of black children, who themselves treat their offspring as though older than they are (King 2022: 10). McKay himself in the first-person narrative, along with his friends in their dialogue, frequently express themselves using sexualized imagery and language evocative of children older than their actual age. As such, Wheatle presents an honest portrait of the internalization and unconscious adoption by the colonized of the colonizer's ideas and values, or, to use the coinage of Frantz Fanon, *epidermalization* (Fanon 1952/2021: 10). As part of the complex and nuanced picture, Wheatle also shows that adultification is not limited to black working-class families. The 'Boy from the Hills,' an affluent white child, is similarly lonely and neglected by his career-focused mother (who ironically, although a psychiatrist, is apparently more interested in the needs of her patients than those of her own child).

Strategies of Rebellion and Resistance

While *Crongton Knights* and *Ghost Boys* vividly evoke the catastrophic harm wreaked by colonizing views of childhood and children through the adultifying and/or infantilizing gaze, both books also challenge and decolonize this gaze through narrative strategies of resistance and rebellion. In *Crongton Knights*, the adultification imposed on and to some extent internalized by the protagonists is resisted by literary counter-narratives to adultification (King 2022: 2). The journey to rescue the victim of a sexting incident becomes a boyish adventure like a knightly quest for the holy grail, with allusions to the tropes and imagery of Arthurian myth: flats are 'castles' with 'drawbridges', doors are 'gates' barring the fortress of the estate to the outside world. Allusions to fantasy epics such as *The Lord of the Rings* (DVDs of which are treasured by McKay) and Harry Potter (references to characters such as Voldemort and Hermione) convey an ironic and mock-heroic tone, but also reintegrate the characters into the childlike domain to which they rightly belong. As McKay says:

> 'At least knights had body armour, swords and maces, and horses that could gallop forever. Our crew? We were trekking up to Notre Dame on the number 159 bus, with just our fists and our afros for protection.' (Wheatle 2016: 32).

Such ironic allusions to the world of Arthurian myth serve both to underline the marginalization of the characters — their exclusion from the tropes of the traditional

childhood canon — but also the reappropriation of such tropes on the characters' own, eclectic and anarchic, terms.

In a similar way to the appropriation of childhood literary genres and tropes, the playful and exuberant vocabulary of McKay and his friends as he recounts their adventures on the Crongton estate reads as an act of resistance to adultification, a reappropriation of childhood (King 2022: 9). In McKay's first-person narrative the vocabulary and inflections of Jamaican patois, hip-hop, and rap are mixed with his own colourful nomenclature (characters are given tag names such as 'Rapid' or 'Boy From the Hills'). In McKay's internal world, imagery from the worlds of computer games ('thinking' is frequently translated as 'downloading'), cars (emotions are often expressed in terms of gears, as in 'my heart put its brakes on'), knights and castles are thrown together in an exuberant mishmash, a joyful word salad which reflects the eclectic and celebratory mix of cultures expressed in the three recipes reproduced at the end of the book (jerk chicken, chocolate cupcakes, and lamb kofta). These paratextual elements extend the play beyond the confines of the text, inviting the text to be 'acted out' playfully by the reader in the cultural melting pot of the kitchen. When Wheatle described his refocusing of the lens of classic children's literature by disruptive language, he himself used a culinary metaphor, 'with my own stirred-up brew of words and phrases I hoped to offer something unique, fresh and entertaining to the reader.' (Wheatle 2016: The Guardian). The joyful riot of words joins the exuberant mix of ingredients in the recipes, inviting the reader both to read and act out the text, to playfully resist and re-draw the boundaries that restrict their own and the protagonists' lives.

Adultifying and infantilizing discourses are also disrupted and resisted in *Ghost Boys*, albeit with less humour and lightness of touch than in *Crongton Knights*. Jerome categorically rejects the artifice of constructed childhood, the sugar-candy Neverland reserved for the privileged few, by throwing Sarah's copy of *Peter Pan* against the wall. 'Real', Jerome muses, is 'graduating high school… maybe going to college… getting a job.' Real is 'not Peter Pan'. By the end of the book, Jerome's contempt for Peter Pan has no bounds, and all he can say of Barrie is that 'Peter Pan sucks.' (Rhodes 2018: 99; 120). On the other hand, Jerome's sister Kim reacts in a different way: not by rejecting the childhood literary canon, but rather by reading herself into it. When Sarah gives her the book *Little Women*, she reads it and tells Jerome, 'It's good. I imagine all the sisters are black.' (Rhodes 2018: 187). Jerome's and Kim's differing reactions can be seen to illustrate two different responses to an exclusionary literary canon: on the one hand, rejection; on the other, self-insertion by the transformative imaginative act of reading.

The character arc of Sarah in *Ghost Boys*, like that of Jerome, reveals a rejection of artificial, adult-imposed constructions of childhood. Starting off in her cocooned pink bedroom, Sarah — through the process of her interactions with Jerome and researches on the Internet — matures and grows out of her 'sugar-candy' world. It is the ultimate irony that she, in her turn, becomes 'adultified' through an understanding and reliving (albeit vicariously) of historical trauma. In some ways, the character arcs of

Jerome and Sarah move in opposing trajectories. Jerome, through death and the spatial freedom he enjoys as a ghost, finally escapes the grim confines of his life in the ghetto, blossoming in a playful and childlike conceptual space which is denied to him as a living child. Sarah, on the other hand, as the mask falls from her eyes, leaves the confines of Neverland, and finally grows into an adult.

While both *Ghost Boys* and *Crongton Knights* explore and resist the twin themes of adultification and infantilization, the difference in treatment reflects the differing narrative strategies and purpose of the two books. Rhodes' book, with its clear themes of social justice, is a call to action: as such, the adultifying and infantilizing lenses are presented with stark precision and little moral shading. 'My hope,' writes Rhodes, 'is that *Ghost Boys* prompts meaningful change for all youth' (Rhodes 2018: 207). Wheatle's inclusion of infinite shades of grey exemplifies a more humorous, ironic, and nuanced approach. It is significant that in Rhodes, the paratextual elements – the story of Emmett Till and other miscarriages of justice unearthed through Sarah's Internet researches and visits to the school library, the author's contextualizing Afterword at the end of the book – act as a springboard for her (and by implication the reader's) social activism. We are invited, like Sarah, to do our research, go forth and march with placards. But the paratextual elements in *Crongton Knights* (the recipes for fusion dishes included in the Afterword, the map of the estate evocative of high fantasy), serve as an inspiration for play; we are invited to muck about in the kitchen, or with the dressing-up box.

'On these magic shores children at play are forever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more' wrote JM Barrie in *Peter Pan* (1911: 5). In *Ghost Boys* and *Crongton Knights* we find both the premature imposition of adulthood and the nostalgia of eternal childhood deconstructed, and a vision infinitely more fluid, complex and, ultimately, *alive*, celebrated in its place.

Additional Notes:
Some notes and reflections on practice for contemporary children's writers

- The phenomenon of adultification is not limited to children of minority ethnic groups. Consider, for example, working-class children and those in the Global South, or — within the historical context — Victorian children sent out to work as chimney sweeps or in mines. In fact, the Victorian period can to some extent be seen to have given birth to the constructed concept of 'childhood,' a faux innocence attached to a privileged class of children, to be contrasted with the adultification of the many others sent to the workhouse or made to labour in factories. As such childhood, 'like Christmas', has been argued to be a 'Victorian invention,' representing the adult's longing for a lost, pre-industrial world (Read et al. 2001: 148).

- The tendency to associate Black and brown children with gritty, urban stories, usually centering some form of trauma, can arguably be said to be a facet of adultification to the extent it constricts these children to an adult, 'realist' world of care and concerns, rather than playful escapism. While great advances have been achieved post-2020 in children's writing in this regard, particularly in the genre of fantasy, by the publication of a number of important books by Black writers and writers of colour, certain genres – for example, the literature of the English country house - still often exclude children of colour.
- The exclusive focusing on trauma narratives in relation to characters of colour, their exclusion from the fun, carefree spaces of childhood, may also be adultifying.
- Opening the spaces of traditional children's literature to characters of colour, not merely as sidekicks/props but as major characters and plot drivers, gives them agency and grants them the place that every child yearns for, ie. to be the hero of the story/ the centre of the action.

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Books for further consideration:

- Strategies of resistance/re-centering of childishness by Black children's writers: Patrice Lawrence, *Eight Pieces of Silva* (Hodder, 2020); Tola Okogwu, *Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun* (Simon & Schuster, 2022).

- Adultification of white working-class children and strategies of resistance: Eve Garnett, *The Family from One End Street* (Frederick Muller, 1937); Stan Barstow, *Joby* (Michael Joseph, 1964); Barry Hines, *A Kestrel for a Knave* (Michael Joseph, 1968); Jacqueline Wilson, *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (Doubleday, 1991); Matt Goodfellow, *The Final Year* (Otter-Barry, 2023).

- Historical: Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905); Jacqueline Wilson, *The Runaway Girls* (Corgi, 2022)

Author Biography

Piu DasGupta was born in Kolkata, India, and grew up in India and the UK. She studied English Language & Literature at Oxford University, where she was a scholar and took a double First Class degree, placing 4th in her year. Her first children's novel, *Secrets of the Snakestone*, is published by Nosy Crow in March 2024. Piu is currently completing an MA in Creative Writing for Children and Young People at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is planning to continue her academic studies afterwards with an MA in Magic and Occult Science at Exeter University. She lives in Paris, France, with her family and two cats.