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Book Review: Karen J. Renner, The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture

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The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture. Ed. Karen J. Renner. New York, New York: Routledge, 2013. 191 pp. $145.00 cloth.

In the film *The Good Son* (1993), an exchange occurs between Mark Evans and his child psychologist, Dr. Davenport.

Mark: What do you think—what makes people evil?

believe in evil, in *The Good Son*'s Mark Evan's words, even evil in the form of a child. Evil child tales liberate us from the societal script which denies what we witness—that children can hurt people —and describe a comfortingly simple world neatly divisible into the bad and the good. A nagging suspicion "that the lines between good and evil are not all that distinct" further powers the characters' emotional responses to unfolding events, as expertly highlighted in the chapter by Holly Blackford (94).

An evil child in its purest form occurs in characters such as *Alien*'s (1979) carnivorous baby alien, neatly analyzed in "How to See Horror: The Hostile Fetus in *Rosemary's Baby* and *Alien*" by A. Robin Hoffman, as the film allows no sympathy for the baby alien, nor even an explanation or origin story for its inhumanity. There is no external causation to shift the blame. The evil component "just is." Thus, exorcism films are not true evil child tales since we sympathize with the child who has been corrupted by a demon, though the possessed child is irredeemable. Sara Williams' contribution to *The 'Evil Child'*, "'The Power of Christ Compels You': Holy Water, Hysteria, and the Oedipal Psychodrama in *The Exorcist*" emphasizes that the possessed child does not commit murder, "but rather the demon using her body as a vessel in the material realm" (129). Dramatic tension in an exorcism film is resolved by saving the child, not dropping her from a cliff. Similarly, *The Omen* (1976) and *The Orphan* (2009) permit the audience to treat a child as a villain not because the child is evil, but because the malefactor is (respectively) the devil and an adult masquerading as a child – that is, not really a child at all.

The essays' authors explore a diverse array of themes and topics, from the prototypical film, *The Bad Seed* (1956), to the infant uprising scene in *The Simpsons* episode "A Streetcar Named Marge," to Meheli Sen's contribution, "Terrifying Tots and Hapless Homes: Undoing Modernity in Recent Bollywood Cinema." Although the book casts a wide net, its usefulness to scholars will be found not in an encyclopedic survey of the genre, but in its application of contrasting critical theories. Sullivan and Greenberg, for example, apply terror management theory to explain the emotional impact of evil child tales, proposing that the natural impulse to outlive death finds expression via a drive to produce children, and if offspring grant us a sort of immortality, evil offspring frustrate this impetus while

Dr. Davenport: Evil is a word people use when they've given up trying to understand someone. There's a reason for everything, if we could just find it.

Mark: What if there isn't a reason? What if something just is? . . . What if there was this boy and he did these terrible things because he liked doing them? Wouldn't you say he was evil?

Dr. Davenport: I don't believe in evil.

Mark: You should.

As this exchange demonstrates, evil child tales typically describe evil as a faceless, monochromatic singleton devoid of causation and permits its residency in the shell of what otherwise appears to be a young boy or girl. Narratives where we can permit ourselves to see a child simply as a force for malignancy allow us to celebrate and cheer when, at the climax of *The Good Son*, the empathetic and sympathetic mother of Henry Evans drops her child from a cliff to the rocks below, his body quickly washed away by the surf.

The appeal surrounding this genre of wicked youngsters is the subject of a new collection, *The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture*, which is drawn from articles originally published in two issues of the journal *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* in 2011. The essays' narrative subjects (encompassing, for example, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Tom Riddle from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009), and even the television program *Supernanny*) are drawn from a large and sprawling genre. The collection explores a myriad of topics, including the inherent glee at being permitted to guiltlessly enter cosmologies where the idea that children are simply evil rests on the conflict between social conditioning, which holds that a child is never beyond redemption, and our actual experiences with children (perhaps our own) who do act with malice, even with criminality. Parents are taught to label their child's behavior, not their child, as bad (e.g., "I'm not angry with you, I'm angry at your behavior"), yet these scripts run counter to both reality—we may, in fact, be genuinely angry with a child— and to the message in the tales examined in *The 'Evil Child,'* which typically postulate children as hopelessly corrupt.

As the book also reveals, an evil child tale permits the indulgence of calling a child bad. Indeed, an evil child tale says "you should"

Karen Renner asserts more convincingly in her introduction that possession narratives such as *The Exorcist* (1973) invoke the consequences of parental shortcomings, "a probing of the dynamics behind the failure of the family" (8). The essays are recent, but they necessarily omit even more recent additions to the trope, such as the films *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) and *Paranormal Activity 4* (2012), along with some important older works including *The Good Son* (1993).

As the book highlights, however, real children—even children who commit deeds worthy of the severest sanction—can never match the fictional dehumanized evil kid characters of film and fiction. An evil child tale sympathizes with our frustrating attempts to uncover causes and cures to the criminal actions of the young and delivers its endorsement through fictional constructs that we can safely categorize as non-children; as, in fact, monsters. The evil child tale offers a suspension from the struggle to categorize and understand criminal actors of tender years. In truth, humanity often evokes and participates in the monstrous, but among us, there are no monsters.

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