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A Comparative History of Children's Literature on Child Sexual Abuse

This paper seeks to address the question how socio-political developments have facilitated or obstructed the address of child sexual abuse (CSA) in children's literature over time. CSA remains a controversial topic in that, despite its worrisome extent, its suitability for children and also adolescents to read about in their literature is discussed and not seldom disputed by seemingly well-meaning adult guardians. Kimberley Reynolds and Nicholas Tucker describe that in the 1960s, "[t]he general sense of disinhibition...led to many topics once deemed unsuitable for children coming to seem acceptable in picture books" (1999, 102), and other Western children's literature, particularly from the late 1970s/early 1980s onwards. I will delineate how this development in children's literature occurred in par with and relates to medical advantages, feminist movements' efforts and struggles to raise awareness for and end sexual violence against women and children, the public and legal recognition of CSA as a crime and inherently harmful to children, and differing definitions and expectations of childhood (e.g. Hunt, 1991, 59). While several scholars have investigated texts on child sexual abuse, incest, and rape (e.g. Kokkola, 2013; Lukenbill, 1999), few have explicitly situated these texts in the socio-political and historical contexts at the time of their production. Moreover, through selected cases of global children's texts, I will refer to and compare addresses of CSA in other cultures and their children's literature production which often mirror their respective culture's history with child sexual abuse (see for example Sung, 2012). Concerning the creative dimension, I aim at presenting to what extent controversies surrounding CSA have been addressed in children's literature, how they link into socio-political contexts, and what and where gaps remain, i.e. in other media such as television and film.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, rape, taboo, law, global children's literature

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Carla Plieth is a first-year PhD candidate at the Centre for Research in Children’s Literature at the University of Cambridge where she previously completed a Master’s degree. In her PhD, she is researching the negotiation and mediation of power relations in children’s literature on child sexual abuse, in particular focusing on the male victim, the female perpetrator, and the adolescent perpetrator. Her research is funded by the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes from her native Germany.