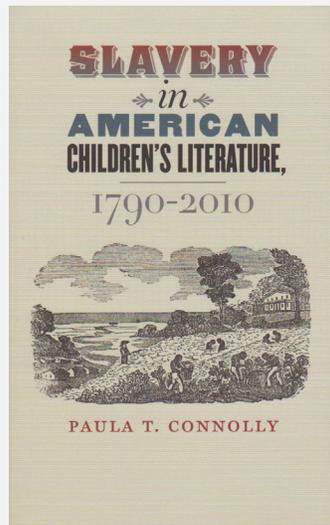


## Professional Reading: Where Diddie Meets Douglass

Connolly, Paula T. *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790-2010*.  
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Teachers seeking a subtle understanding of how ideology infiltrates writing for children need look no further than Paula Connolly's revelatory *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010*. Noting that U.S. slavery and its racial implications have been contested in American literature since pre-Civil War times, Connolly contends that “changing representations of slavery and race in American children’s literature” (8) have constituted an “indispensable tool” (2) in America’s endless debate over human bondage and race. Though Connolly never dismisses aesthetic qualities in children’s literature about slavery, she cares primarily about how U.S. authors and propagandists historically manipulated texts to influence America’s political and racial future. Connolly ranges through schoolbooks, novels, picture books, essays, poems, and magazines directed at child and adolescent readers in pursuit of her quarry.

Seeing children as potential “instigators of a reformed nation” (3), for instance, antebellum abolitionist authors urged that juveniles organize antislavery societies. In contrast, Caroline Gilman used southern children’s magazines before the Civil War to instruct future mistresses and masters on effective slave management. Around the same time, a proslavery book reviewer asserted that southern-authored schoolbooks would reverse the damage incurred by exposing slave state white children to northern abolition perspectives. A century later, black

activist and author W.E.B. Du Bois capitalized on the two-years' run of his magazine *Brownies' Book* as a "recovery project" (149) to expose youthful readers in an era of race hatred to models of African American slaves—including numbers of women—who made significant contributions to the nation, while liberating black folktales from the interpretive constraints of white collectors.

Connolly guides readers through her mountain of literary examples by recategorizing children's literature typologies over time as authorship, readership, and U.S. racial mores become transformed, and by relating those categories to trends in adult literature about slavery. So, a trio of genres—radical, moderate, and conservative—separated the different ways abolitionists addressed slavery and race for antebellum and Civil War-era children. Radical abolitionist writing like Noah Webster's *The Little Reader's Assistant* accorded resistance and agency to kidnapped Africans enduring the middle passage. The American Anti-Slavery Society's magazine *The Slave's Friend* offered explicit stories of sadistic slaveholders. Lydia Maria Child, in the *Juvenile Miscellany*, served up the white abduction story genre—a way of helping white child readers identify with slavery's almost exclusively black victims. More likely to portray black submissiveness and white agency than the reverse, radical abolitionist writers for children nonetheless appeal more to today's racial sensibilities than moderate abolitionist children's literature authors such as Samuel Goodrich, author of the "Peter Parley" tales. Goodrich and company's worst descriptions of slavery's cruelties tellingly occurred in non-U.S. locales while conceding the reality of kindly masters in the United States, even accepting the slaveholder argument that blacks suffered from natural indolence (an important justification for enslaving them). Conservative abolitionist author William Taylor Adams, however, made certain his resistant slave in *Hatchie, the Guardian Slave* was a mulatto who has sublimated his desire for freedom to serve a white mistress wrongly reduced to slavery, the implication being that "whiteness" was a necessary precursor for wanting freedom. Antebellum white southern writers like Gillman and Robert Francis Goulding, in contrast to all three abolitionist takes, offered dialect-laden plantation stories and "Robinson Crusoe-like" (69) adventure tales, all intended to counter abolitionist depictions of cruel masters and heroic slaves.

Slightly more than half of Connolly's account covers children's literature between the Civil War's end and the present, with categorizations morphing over time. Arguing that children's literature through World War I "re-presented slavery as a way of explaining the past, interpreting the present, and reimagining the nation's racialized future" (92), Connolly explores Reconstruction-era schoolbooks, such as *The Freedman's Spelling-Book* and the *Freedman's Readers* series, designed for previously enslaved children. Such works were contemporary to nostalgia-laden postplantation novels with mammy comfort figures like Louise Clarke Pynnelle's *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot; Or, Plantation Child-Life*.

When addressing "postbellum antislavery responses" (128–33), Connolly engages the turn-of-the-twentieth century African American writers who depicted slave times for children,

noting they inclined towards nonfiction genres more than did white authors. Thus, biographies of exemplary black figures like Frederick Douglass served as “New Negro” counterpoints to common white-authored tropes about slave uncles and sambos (as in Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories). Observing for the 1920–1950 period that mainstream publishers’ releases for children persisted with racist stereotypes of African American characters, Connolly distinguishes twentieth-century plantation and neplantation novels from pseudoabolitionist adventure novels and slave biography. Whereas neplantation tales argued for the continuation of “racial hierarchies” (137) and persisted in depicting lazy blacks and “pickaninnies” (e.g., the Miss Minerva series), pseudoabolitionist adventure stories curiously represented a step backward by slavery’s critics: they marginalized black characters, highlighted the tribulations of white rather than black protagonists, and presented the African continent in frightening terms. In contrast to both trends, *Brownies’ Book* biographers emphasized slave rebellion, black agency, black uplift, and physically appealing black figures, focusing with increasing frequency on black female subjects. Connolly’s final chapter looks at depictions of slavery for children during the era of Civil Rights. Here Connolly’s subheadings are neoabolitionist stories (fictional accounts with pre-Civil War settings), diachronous fiction and folktales (stories moving between today and a secondary period in the past), and biographies and neo-slave narratives. During a period that saw Virginia Hamilton become the first African American recipient of the Newbery Medal and the founding of the Coretta Scott King Book Award, proslavery tropes declined. Readers of this journal will especially appreciate Connolly’s analysis of Paula Fox’s controversial *The Slave Dancer* (176), and her examinations of how Virginia Hamilton and Julius Lester have returned slave folktales to their original African roots.

I found *Slavery in American Children’s Literature* a dense read at times, especially in the later chapters where it is easy to get lost in Connolly’s classifications. She differentiates recent neoabolitionist writings, for instance, by the subcategory paradigms of eye-witness, racial pair, and activist-rescuer. Occasionally, I craved more information about authors’ intentions and readers’ responses, information that might be out there in letters, diaries, and newspapers, but which would require a different kind of research and authorial objective. It is one thing for Connolly to suggest, for example, that Pynnelle’s focus on slave violence against other slaves assured post-Civil War white readers of their own immunity from black violence. But did white reviewers and readers, in fact, derive such gratification from her prose? How do we know? It is one thing to argue that slaves playing attacking Indians in a Christmas Day play in *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot* occupied a “liminal space where the master’s children acknowledge the hatred racialized others have for them” (111) without acceptance of African American resentments, another to prove this was Pynnelle’s conscious or unconscious intent. I sometimes found myself craving more examples to justify Connolly’s divisions. For instance, her genre of black-authored turn-of-the-twentieth century children’s literature about slavery seems to boil down to two writers—Edward Johnson and Silas Floyd.

That said, this book is an excellently contextualized masterpiece. Connolly relates her literary analysis to historical events and trends, beginning her analysis with the arrival of the first black Africans in colonial Virginia rather than with a literary text, and punctuating her narrative with informed digressions into slave religion, the Harlem Renaissance, and other subjects that illuminate the literature she discusses. Throughout, she eschews facile simplifications. Interestingly, she notes, for example, that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Pictures and Stories from "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"* aimed more at children than the original *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, tamped down violent moments in the adult version, yet countered racialized stereotypes of blacks by giving slaves more agency than in the original. More recently, *Jumping the Broom*, though superficially a celebration of black community life in the midst of slavery's tribulations, nonetheless presents too many glimpses of smiling slaves for comfort (besides giving false impressions of the legitimacy of slave marriages). Literary critics will appreciate how often Connolly draws on theory, applying, for instance, Ashraf Rushdy's definitions of "palimpsest narratives" (187) to diachronous works with young blacks confronting discomforting past experience. Connolly provides readers with thorough and frequently discursive notes, a twenty-two page bibliography, quality image reproductions, and an unusually helpful index.

*Slavery in American Children's Literature* is a major contribution to scholarship and merits serious adoption consideration in graduate children's literature programs. Most important, it will be invaluable as a dual teaching/learning tool for teachers and informed parents.

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### **About the Author**

**Robert E. May**, Professor of History at Purdue University, has written widely about slavery in the Old South, including his prize-winning *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*. His articles cover such topics as slavery's territorial expansion, the role of slave servants in the U.S.-Mexican War, and Christmas celebrations on antebellum plantations. Most recently, he has reconsidered slavery from an entirely different perspective—the Lincoln-Douglas rivalry. Cambridge University Press has just released his latest book, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (2013).