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## Prostituted Girls and the Grown-up Gaze

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the representation of under-age girls in the sex trade through a comparative analysis of the social scientific monograph *Gangs and Girls: understanding juvenile prostitution* and the fictional novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. Through a semiotic examination of the book covers, and a discursive deconstruction of the fairy-tale conventions of the textual content, the author considers how the 'grown up gaze' is both gratified and sometimes challenged. She further demonstrate that ironically, the fictional account in *Lullabies* offers a more nuanced consideration of the socio-economic factors that contribute to the abuse and sexual exploitation of children than the expert account in *Gangs*. The article concludes by suggesting 'grown ups' must be cognizant of the voyeuristic tendencies and the political pitfalls of adult renderings of girl prostitutes.

Child prostitution brings together two areas of grave concern: the sexual abuse of children, and the exploitation of child labour. Considering the prevalent reification of childhood innocence, the existence of children involved in the sex trade represents a profound adult failure to ensure the health and safety of one of society's most vulnerable constituencies. Yet, according to scholars who address the issue, the problem has not yet received the proper attention in either academia or the health professions (Brown & Barrett, 2002; Willis & Levy, 2002; Sher, 2011). In response, recent analyses of child prostitution attempt to expose an overlooked and undertheorized area, grappling with the aetiology of, and the antidote to, this social ill.

This article considers one such analysis, *Gangs and Girls: understanding juvenile prostitution* ('Gangs', Dorais & Corriveau, 2009), and compares it with a fictional novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals* ('Lullabies', O'Neill, 2006). Written by two social science professors, *Gangs* aims to elucidate how and why under-age females get lured into prostitution. Written from the perspective of a 12-year-old girl, *Lullabies* tells the tale of a neglected child who falls into the clutches of a predatory pimp. Both books have received critical acclaim and popular success. Both books provide a context to explain how a pimp can inveigle a vulnerable girl into selling her body, and what conditions are necessary to escape his control. Thus, while the monograph is a normative project and the novel an imaginary creation, the discursive overlaps in between the two Canadian texts belie the division between fact and fiction. *Gangs* relies on narrative tropes to explicate the under-age female prostitute; *Lullabies* provides implicit social commentary on the systemic failures that compel the protagonist to participate in the sex trade. Both texts therefore contribute to a construction of knowledge about child prostitution that helps to fill a gap in the existing literature. Yet, in conjunction with raising awareness and theorizing causation, I posit that through their voyeuristic covers and their fairy-tale reasoning, both books gratify what I want to call the 'grown-up gaze'.

My notion of a 'grown-up gaze' tweaks the 'male gaze', a concept that feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey catapulted into critical consciousness in 1975. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), Mulvey deploys a psychoanalytic framework to expose how fictional film caters to the male perspective by exploiting and dehumanizing the female body for patriarchal pleasure. The male perspective is endowed with active authority to construct meaning, and the

woman is relegated to being the passive object under scopophilic examination. The male gaze thus cultivates a voyeuristic perversion which rests on the fetishization of sex difference.

The grown-up gaze addresses age as well as sex difference. Like the male gaze, the grown-up gaze projects a particular fantasy on its object which advances adult power and pleasure. In the story of girl prostitutes, the adult narrator is endowed with the authority to create knowledge, while the child is the object and bearer of that knowledge. This epistemological project legitimates voyeuristic access to the figure of the under-age prostitute and promotes passive – unintentional – paedophilia. As James Kincaid states, our storytelling of child sexual victimization, from investigation to indignation, affords us unacknowledged pleasure (1998). In the throes of our anguish over the sexualization of young girls, we are incited to sexual discourse. This discourse is not just an unconscious way to catch glimpses of taboo sexuality under the cloak of inquiry; it can also be a way to generate sexual satisfaction in the narrative construction of molested girls and male abusers. In Foucauldian terms: 'It is the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, [and] brings to light' the problem of prostituted girls (Foucault, 1978, p. 45).

In this article, I explore the triadic dynamic of the pleasure-power-knowledge regime in *Gangs* and *Lullabies* through a close text examination of the book covers and the fairy-tale conventions encoded in the storylines. Although the genres of the books signify the respectability of the content – social science criticism or serious literature – the book covers provide some enticing glimpses into the world of child prostitution, while the narratives are aligned with and reproduce fairy-tale morality. The first part of this article analyzes the semiotic significance of the covers, arguing that innocence and corruption are juxtaposed to market the books and appeal to the voyeuristic curiosity of the grown-up gaze. Part II considers the texts as fairy tales for grown-ups, with both the attendant pleasures and moral lessons that we normally associate with such childhood tales. Both texts implicitly warn naive females to quell their adventurous spirits and suppress their feminine desires, lest they be devoured by the proverbial wolf. Yet I will conclude this section by demonstrating that between the two texts, ironically, it is the non-fictional *Gangs* that seems more wedded to this facile logic than the fictional *Lullabies*. Although the novel does invoke fairy-tale motifs, it often draws upon the more empowering elements of that tradition. In addition, *Lullabies* departs from the standard tropes of a cautionary tale as the happy ending is achieved not by a heroic princely figure, nor by the protagonist's own manoeuvrings, but rather by a series of unlikely coincidences. In this way, the reader is denied a liberal humanist closure, as there is no individualized lesson to be learned. Throughout this article, I argue that in our desire to protect girls from the seductive powers of pimps, we must be cognizant of the unwitting seductive powers inherent in these narratives.

### **Judging a Book by its Cover**

To the grown-up gaze, the figure of the child prostitute is a poignant oxymoron, innocence and impurity imposed onto a single subjectivity. A semiotic and comparative analysis of the book covers of *Gangs* and *Lullabies* demonstrates the titillating use of this oxymoron to market the books. This is voyeurism in its most literal form: the visual. By juxtaposing signifiers of childhood purity with adult depravity, the text, illustrations and framing heighten the erotic appeal of the books.

The *Gangs* cover presents a black-and-white photo with 'Gangs' and 'Girls' highlighted in large yellow uppercase letters (Figure 1). The subtitle, 'Understanding Juvenile Prostitution', is significantly smaller and muted in white. What pops out, then, is not the expository segment of the title, but rather the two alliterative and contrasting words. 'Gangs' suggests criminality and masculinity, while 'Girls' connotes innocence and femininity. The title thus attempts to hook the potential reader by suggesting that inside the pages of this slim monograph, she will witness the collision of these two opposing worlds.

The black-and-white photograph also capitalizes on contrasts. The framing shows a close-up of a portion of a girl's lower body with the use of a cut-in shot. This fragmenting technique is referred to as a 'cut-in shot' because it cuts into a portion of the subject. The photograph objectifies the youth by not only giving a glimpse of her upper thigh, but also by stylistically dismembering the body. As the face is considered the locus of our humanity and subjectivity in the popular

imaginary (at least in Canada), the photograph's composition dehumanizes the subject, makes her into nothing more than a corporeal entity. The viewer is not just invited, she is compelled, to see the girl through – what we imagine to be – a paedophilic perspective: as nothing more than a sexualized object to a consuming gaze.

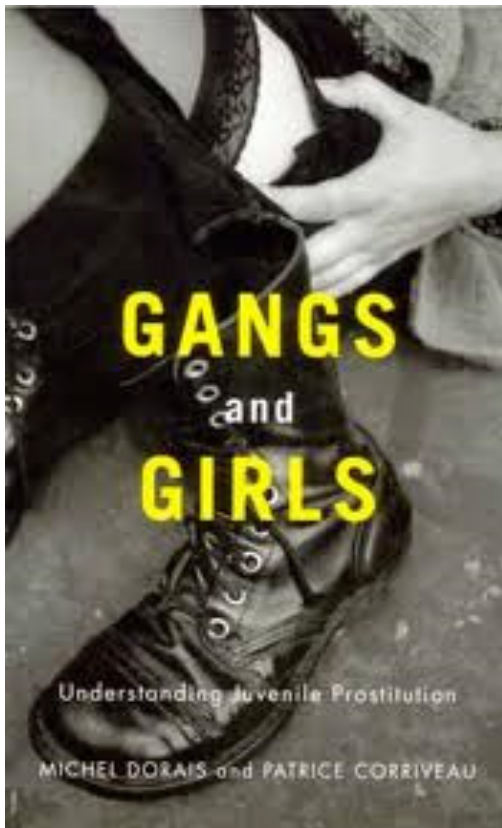


Figure 1. Front cover of *Gangs and Girls* (2009).

Along with the framing, the girl's clothing also works to gratify voyeurism through a juxtaposition of dissonant elements. In the centre of the page, we see she is sporting black leather biker boots. Running up one leg is a translucent thigh-high stay-up stocking, accented with black lace. Gracing the top of her thigh is a black skirt. Finally, in the upper-right corner of the cover, it appears she is wearing some kind of knitted sweater, perhaps a cardigan. Each article of clothing clashes with the other. The boots, signifying boyish toughness, are in tension with the short skirt and lingerie, signifying adult sexual enticement. The sweater, on the other hand, conveys homey casual attire more suitable for a child. This chimerical outfit allows for the mixing of sexual with nonsexual apparel, and of adult with child signifiers. The different materials work together to intensify the oxymoronic nature of the subject.

Along with the ambivalent attire, the reader is provided with a tantalizing glimpse of the white skin of the subject's upper thigh. Of course, a thigh is not necessarily an erogenous zone. However, the viewer's visual access is obtained because the girl is hiking up her skirt, thereby revealing flesh that her garment was designed to hide. This suggestive move, combined with the lacy stocking, effectively sexualizes this strip of exposed skin. Notice that the whitest part of the photo is this hint of skin. The subject's race is noteworthy because, as Richard Dyer reminds us, whiteness as race and whiteness as colour conflate to convey purity, cleanliness and virginity (1997, p. 70). The tacit suggestion of her childhood innocence is thus enhanced by her whiteness within the hegemonic white imaginary. This makes the photo all the more alluring as the whiteness we see is flanked by black lace and a receding black skirt.

Reflecting many of the objectifying tendencies of the male gaze, the grown-up gaze is thus gratified by this series of incongruent pairs: gangs and girls; lingerie and leather; street wear and

comfy clothing; stockings leg and exposed skin; whiteness and dark fabrics; adult pose and child's body. The fetishization of the girl, whose human subjectivity is obscured by the close-up cut-in shot, is part of how this book is marketed. The cover design tempts the reader with the very thing that it condemns: the imposition of adult sexuality onto a female child. The voyeuristic nature of the book cover suggests that our interest in the topic is not exclusively to assist exploited girls, but is also fed by the erotic spectacle of tarnished innocence.

The eroticism of the *Lullabies* title and most recent cover design is more subtle, but still caters to a voyeuristic curiosity and banks on the contradiction of innocence and corruption (Figure 2). The alliterative title *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, like *Gangs and Girls*, entices the reader with conflicting semantics. In the novel's title, there are two sets of contrasts: 'criminal' stands in tension with both 'little' and 'lullabies'. 'Criminal' signifies adult deviance and immorality, while the two 'L' words suggest child subjectivity: 'little' is a diminutive modifier, while 'lullabies' recalls soothing songs for babies. The ironic and oxymoronic title thus taints the innocence of 'lullabies' with the brush of criminality, suggesting to the reader that in the following pages, though she may be 'little', the protagonist will be engaged in illicit activities.

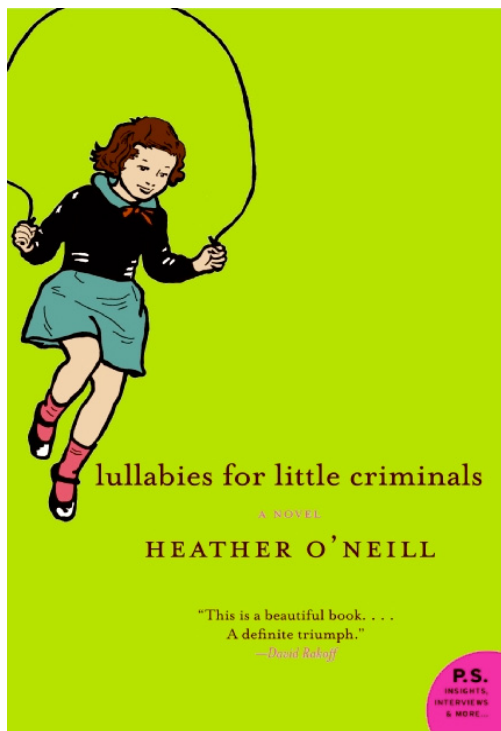


Figure 2. Front cover of *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006).

The illustration further heightens the irony of the text. The picture is one of idealized innocence from times past: a white girl engaging in a quintessential child's game, skipping rope. Again, whiteness is part of how she is coded as innocent. There is a jarring contrast between what she is doing and what the word 'criminal' connotes.

If we turn to the back of the book, we see an interesting similarity to *Gangs*. It is a close-up cut-in shot of the same girl that focuses on her skirt and legs. The top half of the girl is cut off by the page (Figure 3). As with *Gangs*, the illustration dismembers her so that the innocence of the skipping rope is inflected with an objectifying gaze. Again, keeping in mind the word 'criminal' in the title, the reader is invited to take on the perspective of what we imagine to be a paedophilic perspective, and thus tacitly invited to 'check out' her legs. Interestingly, while the back illustration effectively decapitates the girl, in the lower-left corner of the back cover the reader is provided with a photograph of the author, Heather O'Neill, which features her facial profile.

We see that she is a young white woman pensively looking out towards a source of light. The headshot of the author thus fills in the missing subjectivity of the dismembered girl; there is an

insinuation that the author herself is the girl about whom we are going to read. This is further conveyed by the additions included in the book. Beneath O'Neill's picture, the back cover advertises that the text is supplemented with a 'PS' section that includes interviews and other extras. This supplementary autobiographical information intimates that while the details may be different, the essence of the author's childhood, including parental neglect and street life, is in a vein similar to what the protagonist of *Lullabies* faces in the novel. Interviews with O'Neill – while maintaining that the book is not strictly autobiographical – also emphasize the similarities between protagonist and author (About.com author interview, 2012; HarperCollins interview, 2010). As Kate Douglas explains, this conflation between author and protagonist asserts authorial credibility and ownership of the story, and is part of the marketing strategy of new books, including fictional works: 'in the promotion of popular culture, "the personal" is profitable' (Douglas, 2001, p. 807). The marketing strategy that implies *Lullabies* draws upon the real-life story of the author functions to enhance not just the authenticity of the account, but its sensationalist value as well. The personal experiences that purportedly animate the book further amplify its voyeuristic appeal to the grown-up gaze, tempting the reader with the promise that within the pages of this first-person account, she will get the inside scoop on child prostitution.

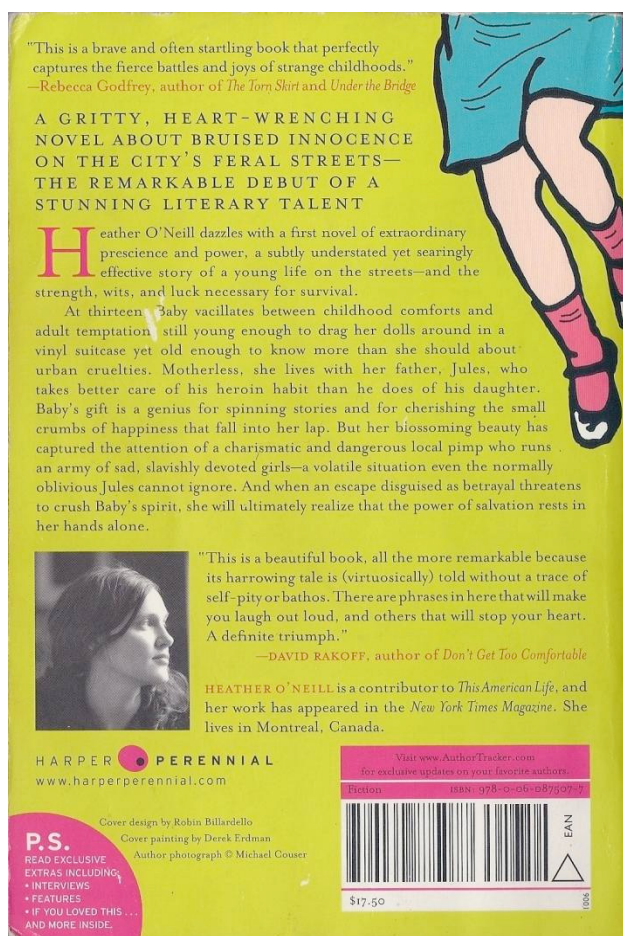


Figure 3. Back cover of *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (2006).

### Fairy-Tale Conventions

Interestingly, while the book covers of *Gangs* and *Lullabies* promise access to the untold reality of prostituted girls, either through social science research or experiential knowledge of street youth, the respective narratives that unfold are frequently in line with a familiar fairytale logic that disciplines wayward girls. In particular, *Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White* serve as ideological

palimpsests upon which the 'reality' of prostituted girls is formulated in *Gangs* and *Lullabies*. However, *Lullabies*' heroine also incarnates some of the self-preserving spirit of Gretel, of *Hansel and Gretel*, to present a much more complex and indeterminate dynamic between social structures and individual agency. In order to address how these narratives operate as fairy tales for the grown-up gaze, let me first provide an overview of *Gangs* and *Lullabies*.

*Gangs* is a best-seller written for a general audience that originated as a French publication: *Jeunes filles sous influence: prostitution juvénile et gangs de rue* (Dorais, with Corriveau, 2006). Its purpose is to outline how girls get ensnared in gang-controlled prostitution rings. In their preface, the authors explain that the French version attracted an overwhelming response from the media, general public and specialized practitioners. The authors conclude, 'This book obviously answered a broadly felt need' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. ix). But while the authors have undoubtedly gratified this societal curiosity, as Kincaid points out, this 'need' to delve into the details of the sexual exploitation of youth is also about voyeurism: 'Through these stories of what monsters are doing to our children, we find ourselves forced (permitted) to speak of just what it is they are doing; we take a good, long look at what they are doing' (Kincaid, 1998, p. 7). The evident popularity of the book does not just signify concern about a social problem, it is also implicated in an incitement to discourse, and in the indulgence of a 'good, long look' at the girl prostitute.

The scopophilic tendencies of the book should also be evaluated by the sources of evidence used to delineate these victimized girls. The qualitative methodology is primarily based on interviews with social workers and police officers. The few accounts that did come from girls who had experienced the sex trade were self-selected *after* the French version had already generated excitement in the media. These data are therefore less reliable, as they were volunteered after the authors had already constructed their version of reality in their previous book and interviews. Despite the inclusion of quotes from girls who purportedly have first-hand experience in the sex trade, as Cecilia Benoit states in the foreword of the English book, this is a 'professional account' of the situation (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. xxi). The knowledge disseminated by the book is primarily a product of the adult gaze.

And what does this adult gaze see? The highly structuralist account divides prostituted girls into four categories: the submissive, the sexual slave, the daredevil and the independent. The submissive and the sexual slave are considered 'passive' victims who do not set out to enter the sex trade, but find themselves trapped there because of the emotional manipulation and/or the overt violence of their pimp boyfriends. According to the authors, the most common type, the submissive, is a naive, needy creature from an 'unhappy' family background whose search for love and acceptance makes her vulnerable to the flattery of a pimp. This love-struck girl is often unable to recognize her own abuse and meekly submits to whatever her boyfriend demands. If she is unable to escape his clutches, her status will often degenerate to that of a sexual slave. Such a dehumanized victim has no control over her life. She is not just an emotional hostage, but could also wind up being a literal hostage locked in a room, and compelled to sexually service a continuing roster of clients.

The next two types of prostituted girls are designated by the authors to be active victims: daredevils and independents. The daredevils are risk-takers and sensation-seekers. It is not love that lures them as much as 'money and consumer goods, beauty and seduction, the irresistible attraction of partying' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 52). An expensive drug habit often accompanies this high-rolling lifestyle. While these girls believe they can reap the benefits of the sex trade without the costs of exploitation, the authors assert that they are deluded. 'She thinks she is cleverer than they [the male gang members] are, tougher than the mechanism into which she willingly inserts a finger' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 53). But lose that finger she will, the authors suggest, especially if she attempts to exit the trade. The gang members will use all means necessary, including violence, harassment and extortion, to transform her into a submissive. Finally, the independents are constructed as rational market actors who enter the trade for money and exercise the most autonomy. As with daredevils, the authors warn that an independent may find herself relegated to the submissive position if she encounters financial difficulties, falls for the wrong man, or allows a drug habit to get out of hand.

The *Lullabies* protagonist replicates many of the characteristics found in both the submissive and the daredevil types outlined in the taxonomy of *Gangs*. However, the novel also provides an

important socio-economic angle – mostly overlooked in *Gangs* – that allows for a much more critical view of the social structures that induce a girl to seek the protection of a pimp.

The first person narration of *Lullabies* is conveyed through the point of view of a 12-year-old girl, significantly named 'Baby'. Such a name casts the narrator within the discourse of childhood innocence, yet at the same time symbolically infantilizes her, thereby undercutting Baby's agency and perspectives. In addition, the oxymoronic blending of innocence and corruption subtly invoked by the book covers is further developed. As Baby herself says of her name, 'It was an ironic name. It didn't mean you were innocent at all. It meant that you were cool and gorgeous' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 4). Unfortunately for the precocious protagonist, the irony of the name takes on a much more sinister character when Baby becomes involved in the adult world of drug use and prostitution.

The novel begins with Baby living in a working-class neighbourhood in Montreal with Jules, her heroine-addicted father. Jules is unable or unwilling to hold down a stable job, and the family is constantly moving from one slum apartment to the next. While Jules is often neglectful when he is high, when sober he becomes irrational, angry and both physically and emotionally violent. Alphonse, Baby's admirer and soon-to-be pimp, enters the plot during one of Jules' abusive dry spells. Like the pimp-suitors in *Gangs*, Alphonse bombards Baby with compliments and gifts. When Alphonse whispers to Baby, 'You belong to me' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 207), she is pleased; as with the lovelorn 'submissive' outlined in *Gangs*, she desperately wants to be possessed by an overwhelming love. But after Alphonse initiates Baby into sexual intercourse, Baby understands that this love comes with a price: 'I knew Alphonse was a pimp and that sooner or later I was going to have to turn a trick. For some reason it seemed as natural as growing wisdom teeth' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 215). The first time Alphonse orders Baby to accompany a client, Baby acquiesces with only half-hearted protest. Because of her experiences, Baby believes prostitution represents an inevitable part of her life course.

### Big Bad Pimp

Thus both *Gangs* and *Lullabies* describe how an innocent girl's life course can veer off the designated societal path and into the arms of a smooth-talking pimp. In this way, both books rewrite the story of *Red Riding Hood* within explicit sexual terms. While the prostituted girl stands in for the naive fairy-tale heroine, the pimp is a reincarnation of the big bad wolf.

The wolf figure has long stood in for a seductive but deceitful man. Indeed, the earliest written record of the story of *Red Riding Hood* by Charles Perrault includes an addendum with an explicit moral. In Perrault's version of the story, the wolf triumphs in the end. Pretending to be her grandmother, the wolf tricks the girl to undress and get in bed with him. When Red Riding Hood finally notices his teeth (so clueless is the girl, she does not recognize them as fangs), the wolf utters the now famous line of disclosure: 'the better to eat you with!' - after which he gobbles her up. After this grim closing, Perrault preaches directly to the reader: 'From this short story clearly we discern; What conduct all young people ought to learn ...' (Perrault, 1998, p. 31). The story-teller cautions nubile young maidens to resist the wolves with 'luring tongues and language wondrous sweet' (Perrault, 1998, p. 31). He further warns that the wolf comes in all forms and often appears 'tame, familiar, full of complaisance' in order to disguise his dishonourable designs (Perrault, 1998, p. 31).

*Gangs* and *Lullabies* both describe pimps in the language of such charming wolves who appear to be good, kind creatures, but end up consuming the girls' innocence. *Gangs* speaks of the pimp/boyfriend as a conniver who convinces the girl that he wants her heart, when really – we are warned – he is after the market value of her body. In *Lullabies*, the chapter that introduces Alphonse is entitled 'The Devil in a Track Suit' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 158) so that the trope of disguise is explicitly foregrounded. The first time Baby's lips touch Alphonse's, he is analogized to a predatory animal who could eat her up: 'There was something monstrous about his mouth, as if he could open it wide and I would fit all the way in' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 163). Despite recognizing the danger ahead, Baby is lured by Alphonse's attractiveness, his charm, his affection and his gifts. Like Red Riding Hood, she willingly falls into bed with him.

*Gangs* and *Lullabies* also coincide with the morality of *Red Riding Hood* by portraying girls who enter the sex trade as having wayward impulses. As *Gangs* states, many of the prostituted girls are

seeking 'adventure and strong sensations' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 51). Baby in *Lullabies*, though she is hesitant and afraid the first time she is compelled to engage in prostitution, also experiences a conflicting curiosity: 'Suddenly I wanted to see what the consequences would be' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 219). In this way, the two texts collaborate to show how naive, needy and reckless girls can be deceived by the proverbial wolf and the promise of excitement. But while romantic naivety and daredevil curiosity cast the prostituted girl as a Red Riding Hood figure, her weakness for gifts configures her more as Snow White.

### **Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Vainest of Them All?**

Although the stepmother queen is normally cast as the vain one in *Snow White*, Grimm's version demonstrates how the dwarves' housekeeper is also prone to such feminine weakness (Grimm & Grimm, 1987, p. 196). After Snow White seeks refuge in the dwarves' cabin, she is strictly cautioned to be on her guard. Yet when the stepmother comes masquerading as an elderly peddler, Snow White can't resist the old woman's wares. First the queen entices her stepdaughter with a staylace for Snow White's girdle that almost suffocates the fair maiden to death. When the dwarves come to untie her, they explain to Snow White that the peddler was not a harmless hag, but the wicked queen in clever disguise. But the very next day, Snow White allows herself to be tempted by the fraudulent peddler again, this time because she is offered a comb. When the queen runs the comb through Snow White's hair, a poison is released that renders her unconscious. The dwarves remove the comb and again warn the resuscitated girl not to let anyone in. But the next day, Snow White has still not learned her lesson, as the peddler-queen induces the weak-willed waif to take a bite out of that fateful apple that finally puts her into a steadfast coma.

To be tricked three times by the same disguise clearly raises questions about Snow White's own complicity. As David Gurnham states, 'Snow White is herself obsessed by her own beauty and therefore cannot resist the old woman's gifts (2009, p. 135).' Similarly, in both *Gangs* and *Lullabies*, pimps use flattery and gifts to appeal to the desires of gullible girls. In *Gangs* the authors state that the pimp 'gives her jewellery and clothing and takes her to restaurants, movies, and sporting events. They go to parties where alcohol and drugs are generously offered' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 39). The pimps also bombard the targeted girl with aggressive attention. One subject states of her boyfriend-pimp, 'He wore me down with compliments' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 39). In *Lullabies*, Alphonse also uses compliments to wear down Baby's defences, calling her, among other things, 'a hot tamale' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 155), 'cute as a button' (p. 158), 'the prettiest girl on the street' (p. 158), 'precious' (p. 162), his 'pretty little wife' (p. 174), and 'better looking than those girls in the fashion magazines' (p. 213). In addition, as part of his courtship, Alphonse gives Baby a pair of delicate white kneesocks, a flower, moisturizing cream, a notebook, an amber ring, marijuana, alcohol, pictures of herself, a faux fur scarf and a butterfly knife. When Baby receives these items, it appears to have an aphrodisiac effect on the otherwise neglected girl: 'I felt like jumping into Alphonse's lap when he said that he had a present for me' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 256). As is the case with Snow White, part of the girls' susceptibility to and disobedience in the face of authority, as well as their wilful blindness to the dangers ahead, flows from their material desires and vanity.

In *Gangs*, the authors believe it is consumer culture that has inculcated this problematic attitude: '... who can blame them if they refuse to read the signs, when the culture in which they bathe glorifies immediate gratification, while prime-time television cultivates the myth of celebrity, beauty, and instant wealth?' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 40). In contrast, as explained below, *Lullabies* offers a stronger recognition of the socio-economic conditions that make Baby susceptible to Alphonse's gifts. Though *Gangs* addresses societal influence, it does so mostly on the level of abstract ideology. *Gangs* thus implies that the fundamental problem for the prostituted girl is that she has been brainwashed by society to hold misplaced priorities. In *Lullabies*, the fundamental problem for Baby is her inept father and an incompetent social welfare system.

### **Following the Trail of Social Welfare Crumbs**

While both *Gangs* and *Lullabies* reflect aspects of both *Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White* in their discussions of naivety, vanity, materialism and wayward disobedience, *Lullabies'* more critical



understanding of the impact of destitution, neglect and systemic oppression is also reflected in the tale of *Hansel and Gretel*.

In the Grimms' version, the background of the story begins with a poverty-stricken family on the brink of starvation (Grimm & Grimm, 1987, p. 58). The ruthless but pragmatic stepmother convinces her husband that to ensure their own survival, they should abandon their children, Hansel and Gretel, in the forest. Hansel is able to find his way back home the first time by following a trail of pebbles he had dropped when the stepmother had led them into the deep dark woods. But the second time, his plan goes awry because he uses breadcrumbs as his navigational device. When the siblings try to retrace their steps, they find that birds have eaten up their trail. They wander for days, lost and hungry, until they come upon a cottage made of bread, cake and sugar. Of course the two emaciated minors help themselves to a nibble. But while their starvation is averted, a wicked witch – who had constructed the house in order to bait them – lures the urchins inside and lulls them into a false sense of security. As soon as she can, she captures them, imprisoning Hansel and forcing Gretel to perform household chores. Her plan is to fatten Hansel up and then eat them both. But Gretel is wise to the plan and just when the cannibal is going to push the girl in an oven, the precocious child pulls a switcheroo and the witch finds herself being cooked to death. When the children unite with their father, they find their stepmother has conveniently died during their absence, and the three live happily ever after, thanks to jewels left behind by the witch. The implied moral of the story does not condemn the children for transgressing societal norms when they vandalize the house, nor for accepting an invitation to enter, nor for killing the witch, nor for taking off with her riches. All these steps are taken in the interest of survival. The moral of the story might be to disregard the rules, be smart and fight back. Live. After all, it is Gretel's quick-thinking that precipitates the poetic justice where the witch meets her fate in an oven she had intended for the children.

Similarly, Baby turns to Alphonse in part out of self-preservation. Baby's home life, like Gretel's home life, is marked by deprivation. Jules utterly fails to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter. Meanwhile, Alphonse stocks his fridge with delicious food, bestows new clothing upon Baby and gives her a place to sleep whenever she needs it. Alphonse *parents* Baby in a way that she has never experienced: 'When Alphonse came into my life, it strangely felt a little bit like he was a mother figure. Every good pimp is a mother' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 186). When Baby's father kicks her out of the house, Alphonse is the only adult who is willing to provide her with shelter. In other words, *Lullabies* suggests that Baby is not lured just by a desire for male attention, beauty or frivolous gifts. The neglected girl makes a logical decision to turn to Alphonse; his abuse at least comes with food, shelter and drugs to take the edge off. While *Gangs* alludes vaguely to 'unhappy' or 'problematic' home lives as background issues for some girls who enter prostitution, the book's focus is on the individual girl who is tempted and tricked by the illusion of a certain lifestyle: 'They were attracted with promises of pleasant things – love, money, adventure – and then cheated' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 98). The authors gloss over the fact that such girls' motivation might be to escape *unpleasant* things: trauma, deprivation, instability and emotional and physical abuse. In other words, prostitution is a rational, if constrained choice when compared with what the girls might be suffering with their families. The grown-up gaze of *Gangs*, however, does not want to focus on parents who might also be wolves in disguise.

But when parents are incapable of nurturing their children (Jules himself was a victim of childhood abuse), presumably the state should step in. *Lullabies* makes another important intervention by effectively challenging the individualist focus of *Gangs* as well as its representation of social services. While *Gangs* does refer to systemic ideological issues, its analysis of them is tainted with sexual morality. The authors bemoan 'the trivialization of sexuality among today's youth' (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 92) and the 'hypersexualization of youth' (p. 106). What these girls need, *Gangs* suggests, is education on 'love' to counteract the insidious misogyny of popular culture (Dorais & Corriveau, 2009, p. 106). There is very little class or labour analysis with regard to the girls. Furthermore, *Gangs* constructs its knowledge by relying on accounts by social service professionals and police officers. Needless to say, these adults are represented as helpful and empathetic individuals who are street smart and qualified to translate youth perspectives. They are embodied in the proverbial woodcutter who slays the wolf and rescues Red Riding Hood from his belly.

In *Lullabies*, however, we see the misuse of authority by many such adults. While *Lullabies* takes place in the 1980s, and should not be interpreted as making a direct comment on social services today, it nonetheless provides an important literary critique of the general failure of society to ameliorate the lives of impoverished, abused and neglected youth. Baby is often confronted with overworked and unfeeling social workers who seem not to notice her precarious living situation under Jules' care. When Baby is sent to a detention centre for children who self-harm, she observes of the social workers: 'Most seemed to sit behind their desks in a sort of coma. The only ones who were interested in the kids were the ones who were molesting them' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 191). Thus, while *Gangs* constructs the professional workers as heroes who can help these damsels in distress, in *Lullabies* a number of these adult characters are incompetent, burnt-out, condescending, and sometimes downright abusive. For example, it is within the care of social services that Baby first experiences sexual abuse when she is forced to strip in front of a group of other children. The social worker who was supposed to be watching the troubled youth is instead abusing his power by spending time alone in his office with his favourite child-inmate. Upon her release from detention, Baby has a string of different social workers who constantly mix up her files; significantly, these social workers often think she had been in detention for prostitution when she had, at that time, only been friends with Alphonse. Another blow to Baby's self-esteem happens when a social worker explains that because of her stint in detention, she must switch schools and enrol in a remedial program. This worker either does not know or does not care that Baby was on the honour roll at her last school. Baby's degrading interactions with social workers explain in part why she ends up turning to Alphonse for nurturance, and why prostitution does not seem like such a stretch. Under the auspices of social services, she has already experienced sexual humiliation, been labelled a child prostitute, and been robbed of educational opportunities.

In the end, Baby, like Gretel, saves herself. But it is a fantastical getaway that calls attention to the artifice of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps moralizing narratives. Towards the end of the novel, Baby is compelled to move into Alphonse's apartment full time after the failure of both her father and the state to take care of her. At this point, Alphonse has dropped his charming façade to reveal his true selfish motives. While Baby dreams up schemes of murdering him, her only concrete action in bringing this about is to draw a pentagon on the floor with Alphonse's initials in the centre and call on Satan to strike him dead. This childish plea reveals Baby's lack of agency and her reliance on (supernatural) male intervention to assist her. At the same time, Baby's dabbling in the occult positions her as a dangerous subject. She has not prayed to God or – in archetypal female fashion – to a Fairy Godmother; her invocation of the forces of evil thereby configures her as morally suspect.

Nonetheless, Satan answers her prayers. A few days later, Alphonse has died of an overdose. Baby hastily escapes the apartment, and luckily she is able to immediately locate her father, who is now living in a shelter. Even more luckily, her father realizes of his own accord that he is not competent to parent. And in perhaps the most unlikely stroke of luck, Jules arranges for a responsible family member to take over the job of bringing up Baby outside of the seedy influence of the city. Baby presumably lives happily ever after.

But this series of lucky coincidences makes the ending a little too convenient. All the children in Baby's situation who do not have a direct line with Satan or who do not share such luck will likely remain stranded in a world of poverty and abuse. This bleak conclusion is reached not just despite an intricate social welfare/police network that continually comes into contact with Baby and her father, but in part because of it. But interestingly, the marketing of the book undermines this challenging message. The back cover concludes its plot summary with a classic liberal humanist message that reassures the potential reader that Baby was responsible for rescuing herself: '... she [Baby] will ultimately realize that the power of salvation rests in her hands alone' (O'Neill, 2006, back cover). Thus, the marketing blurb that perpetuates a fairy-tale morality by individualizing Baby's plight is in tension with earlier parts of *Lullabies* that recognize the socio-economic conditions that compel (some) children to enter the sex trade.

### Conclusion: looking into the mirror

This article blurs three genres – fact, fiction and fairy tales – to demonstrate how the grown-up gaze constructs knowledge of child prostitution. Such an interdisciplinary approach challenges the truth-claims of social science and the authority of experiential knowledge, showing that the representation of empirical data or personal experience is never neutral or outside of ideology, but is always engaging with broader cultural discourses. Despite the unquestionably good intentions of *Gangs* and the literary merit of *Lullabies*, both texts engage in a voyeuristic economy while relying on fairy-tale logic.

A semiotic analysis of the book covers of *Gangs* and *Lullabies* establishes how visual and textual signs of adult corruption are contrasted with those of childhood innocence to incite the voyeuristic curiosity of the potential reader. *Gangs* puts the exploited child's body on display in order to expose the problem of child prostitution. Yet this marketing strategy vicariously feeds off and further generates the eroticization of girls. The illustrated book cover of *Lullabies* banks on the contrast between a nostalgic image of a girl playing skipping rope and the oxymoronic title that foreshadows juvenile delinquency. To heighten the sensationalist currency of the book, the back cover suggests that the author's personal experience authenticates the plot's sordid details. Both books provide latent satisfaction in the very activity – the sexualization of youth – that is ostensibly being condemned.

The textual content of both *Gangs* and *Lullabies* fulfill the promise of the covers in providing voyeuristic access to the exploited girl. Yet, far from offering a completely novel explanation of her plight, both books can be read as modern fairy tales that reiterate the familiar warnings that wolves use disguises to lure their prey, and that a young girl who allows herself to be deceived may find herself in the belly of the beast. Both texts also re-enact the construction of the naive and needy girl who is partly to blame for her own demise through her susceptibility to flattery and gifts. Yet the ways the texts depict adults are at variance with one another. In the normative universe of *Gangs*, parents and professionals are predominantly represented as *good guys* - that is, as caring individuals who only want to help the deceived girls. In this way, while offering lurid details of the lives of prostituted girls, the grown-up gaze is still reassured of its good intentions. Culpability is projected onto pimps, gangs, and popular culture, while the images of caring parents and middle-class professionals remain idealized.

In contrast, *Lullabies* depicts the pimp boyfriend as doing a better job of taking care of Baby's physical and emotional needs than both her parent and the social service professionals with whom she comes into contact. The grown-up gaze is thus turned onto itself and forced to see the world through the eyes of a marginalized child. For Baby, the grown-ups who are supposed to protect her are as dangerous as, or even more dangerous than, the pimp who sets out to seduce her. It is not just loneliness and sensation-seeking that drive Baby into Alphonse's arms, it is the desire to survive. In this way, *Lullabies* does not capitulate to the grown-up gaze that positions the individual child as the problem and attitudinal change as the solution. Although drawing on fairy-tale archetypes, *Lullabies* taps into more critical storylines. Obviously Gretel in *Hansel and Gretel* did not want to work for the wicked witch, but this was a strategic choice, if a constrained one, given her situation. Similarly, Baby does not want to work for Alphonse, but this was a strategic, if constrained, choice, given that 'Alphonse was the most dependable person in [her] life' (O'Neill, 2006, p. 273). The book thus challenges the myth of the family home as haven while drawing attention to the socio-economic conditions that facilitate a child's entrance into the sex trade.

By reading fact, fiction and fairy tales against one another in relation to children in the sex trade, I have sought to challenge some of the ways adults construct knowledge about sexually exploited children. While efforts to ensure the safety and sexual integrity of such a vulnerable population are urgently needed, the desire to understand and rescue can also be caught up in the erotic spectacle of the sexualized and wayward child. A critical reading of *Lullabies* suggests that while fiction doesn't escape all of the seductions of voyeurism and liberal humanist logic, it may nonetheless be an important avenue of information that forces the grown-up gaze to look in the mirror.

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