



*Spring 2022, Thursdays, 4-6:45 pm, Dr. Allison Speicher*

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## ENG 461-01: INVENTING CHILDHOOD

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There have always been young humans—but there haven't always been children, at least in the modern sense. Scholars in a variety of disciplines agree that rather than being solely a biological fact, childhood is a social construction: what we imagine and expect children to be is a collectively constructed ideal that varies across time and place. In fact, many aspects of today's construction of childhood are relatively new, historically speaking: the idea of childhood as a protected period devoted to play and schooling, a "pre-sexual" period of innocence and creativity, dates only to the nineteenth century. As such, some scholars speak of the 1800s as the time when childhood was "invented," pointing to the proliferation of children's literature, the spread of public schools, the creation of pediatrics, and the founding of the juvenile court system as evidence childhood had come to matter as never before.

This course will explore literature's role in the "invention" of modern childhood by turning attention to both literature about children and children's literature. We'll explore fictions in which children lead the leisured lives envisioned by the new ideal and fictions that reveal the notion of protected childhood to be a form of racial and class privilege, available only to the rare few. We'll see children playing at home, learning at school, enslaved on plantations, exploited in factories, torn from their families, and nurtured warmly in the middle-class home. We'll take children seriously as historical actors and think critically about how children's agency is curtailed. And we'll see how authors from a variety of backgrounds invented and re-invented childhood on their own terms.

Whatever your experience with children or children's literature, you are welcome here. Both critical and creative projects relating to nineteenth-century childhood will be nurtured in this course.