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**BOOK REVIEW**

*Children's Literature and the Rise of 'Mind Cure': Positive Thinking and Pseudo-Science at the Fin de Siècle* by Anne Stiles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). 249 pp., hardback \$99.99

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The 'Mind Cure', the main subject of Anne Stiles's *Children's Literature and the Rise of 'Mind Cure'*, is part of a spiritual movement called New Thought. New Thought practitioners reject scientific medicine and believe our thoughts directly affect our well-being, such that thinking positively can cure any disease and thinking negatively can lead to sickness and financial failure. Due to the inadequate care they received from physicians, nineteenth-century women experiencing depression and other mental illnesses were especially drawn to New Thought, as its emphasis on positive thinking was a welcome alternative to treatments such as Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure. New Thought grew alongside Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy in the nineteenth century, and the two movements share similar beliefs regarding health and God. For over a hundred years, both New Thought and Christian Science have been criticised for their ineffectiveness against physical injuries and diseases. Some of the movements' members have died from ailments modern medicine could cure, although the 'Mind Cure' can work against some psychosomatic illnesses, albeit for the same reason that placebos can cure conditions.

Stiles, in *Children's Literature and the Rise of 'Mind Cure'*, advances scholarship on the 'once popular' but now neglected genre 'known as the New Thought novel' (p. 3). Stiles builds her research on Beryl Satter's studies on New Thought in *Each Mind a Kingdom* (p. 4) and the literary critics L. Ashley Squires and Jerry Griswold, among others. Since literary criticism, in general, has neglected New Thought's presence in literature, Stiles corrects this oversight through her examination of New Thought influences in the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett, Henry James, L.M. Montgomery, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Stiles's analysis emphasises 'earlier, woman-centered varieties of New Thought that privileged health and spirituality over material gain' to create a book that 'stands at the crossroad of children literature's studies and medical humanities, fields that seldom intersect' (p. 6). *Children's Literature and the Rise*

of 'Mind Cure' juxtaposes these fields' perspectives to demonstrate 'how children serve as multivalent metaphors in adult-centered discourses about health and desire' (p. 6). Stiles provides well-researched and fascinating analyses of beloved late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century texts, and though the book is of limited relevance to Victorian studies, it encourages future research on New Thought literature.

Chapter 1 begins by looking at the inner child in Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and 'Sara Crewe', the short story that the author later expanded into *A Little Princess*. In Stiles's study, the inner child refers to a 'person's original or true self' (p. 24), and she gives a 'detailed genealogy of the inner child' (p. 25), showing how Christian Science and New Thought borrowed from the Victorian cult of the child to attract female practitioners. Stiles presents convincing evidence that Burnett was familiar with and agreed with certain New Thought ideas relating to children. In Burnett's literature, Cedric Errol, later the titular Lord Fauntleroy, and Sara Crewe are each Romanticised children who heal the adults around them, and Stiles argues effectively that Sara, in particular, uses 'creative visualization' (p. 46) to imagine what she desires and receive it.

In Chapter 2, Stiles turns her attention to Henry James's seemingly friendly relationship with Burnett and his critical views of New Thought. Throughout his career, James wrote literature to correct the flaws he perceived in women's writings, and Stiles makes an excellent case that James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* is a realist critique of New Thought and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. Stiles characterises Miles and Flora, James's child protagonists, as 'fun-house-mirror distortions of Burnett's innocent hero' (p. 56). Stiles convincingly argues the childcare approach of *The Turn of the Screw*'s governess is heavily reminiscent of New Thought's hands-off parenting style. Stiles's analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* is especially strong since it creates a clear interpretation of the notoriously ambiguous novella from a new angle.

Chapter 3 returns to Burnett and considers her novels *The Dawn of a Tomorrow* and *The Secret Garden*. Stiles argues that the latter is influenced by James's *The Turn of the Screw*, itself a critique of Burnett's earlier work. Stiles details how Burnett, as she aged, became increasingly predisposed to New Thought philosophy and how *The Secret Garden* criticises mainstream medicine and the rest cure. In *The Secret Garden*, characters find no success with the rest cure, Stiles argues, and instead they achieve miraculous and 'effective spiritual cures for their ills' (p. 97) through New Thought ideas and help others in turn. Stiles's interpretation of *The Secret Garden* is persuasive, as she explains how

Colin, one of the novel's characters, is given the rest cure to no avail, only to regain the use of his legs by believing in himself and acting like a regular boy.

Chapter 4 traces the spread of New Thought to Canada, and Stiles explains how Montgomery, a woman married to a Presbyterian minister, encountered New Thought ideas and found the power of positive thinking helpful in curing her insomnia. Stiles examines Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* novels and *The Blue Castle* from a New Thought angle, although this approach is less effective when applied to Montgomery's literature. For example, Stiles argues that Anne Shirley's treatment of a baby is a criticism of modern medicine, since Anne rescues the baby before a doctor arrives, yet Anne uses medicine to treat the baby, not the power of imagination favoured by New Thought and Christian Science. Anne has an overactive imagination, as a New Thought heroine should, but her thinking does not miraculously cure illness. Stiles recognises this issue: 'despite its New Thought-inspired plot elements, *Anne of Green Gables* is not a typical New Thought novel' (p. 141). Stiles's analysis of *The Blue Castle* focuses on Montgomery's dissatisfaction with modern medicine, which she argues effectively, although the connection to New Thought is again a little tenuous.

Similarly, in Chapter 5, the connection between Gilman's *Herland* trilogy to New Thought is not as persuasive as in Stiles's first three chapters. Stiles admits that Gilman is an unusual subject to study as a New Thought author: 'These New Thought borrowings are surprising given that Gilman was outspokenly critical of organized religions, including (but certainly not limited to) Christian Science' (p. 159). Nonetheless, Stiles provides a solid background for Gilman's beliefs that coincide with New Thought principles, including how Gilman struggled as a parent and would have found New Thought views on parenthood appealing. Gilman's *Herland* trilogy, a series of utopian science fiction, depicts the power of imagination. Members of the all-female society in *Herland* are capable of willing themselves into pregnancy, so the application of New Thought to these works is valid, even if Gilman's version of a New Thought utopia includes 'elements that feel foreign or even repugnant to us, such as her insistence on chastity, eugenic fitness, and Anglo-Saxon female superiority' (p. 186).

Due to its subject matter, *Children's Literature and the Rise of 'Mind Cure'* is not entirely applicable to Victorian studies. Although they began in the nineteenth century, the New Thought and Christian Science movements originated primarily in the United States. Two of Stiles's subjects, Burnett and James, are Anglo-Americans who lived in England during the Victorian era,

while Montgomery and Gilman are Canadian and American, respectively, and most of the literature Stiles analyses was written after the Victorian era. The book is tangentially relevant, since Stiles identifies Victorian influences on the New Thought concept of the inner child, which drew from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* and Charles Dickens's *Little Nell* (p. 102). Stiles proposes further inquiry into James's familiarity with contemporary religious thought (p. 82), and promising new research can be directed towards identifying further connections between Victorian beliefs and New Thought.

Stiles's book should not be dismissed due to the minimal connections to the Victorian era. While I do not always find the New Thought interpretations of Montgomery and Gilman's literature convincing, Stiles's *Children's Literature and the Rise of 'Mind Cure'* is a valuable and provocative study. Her research on New Thought's history and each individual author's connection to the belief system is thorough and always relevant to the respective chapter's literary analysis. One area that I would have liked to see Stiles further explore is people's reluctance to 'acknowledge the heterodox religious content of the New Thought novels' (p. 200), especially in beloved children's literature such as *The Secret Garden* and *Anne of Green Gables*; Stiles focuses on demonstrating the New Thought elements in these novels, rather than considering people's reactions to these elements. In her defence, this demonstration is necessary, due to the general lack of awareness of the 'Mind Cure' in literary studies. Since I occasionally questioned her choice of New Thought literature, I add that Stiles could have focused this book on fewer authors or chosen more relevant New Thought literary texts. Stiles singles out Eleanor H. Porter's 1913 novel *Pollyanna* as 'unjustly neglected' (p. 23) in her study, and that text could have been considered in place of either Montgomery or Gilman's works. Regardless, the authors and texts that Stiles analyses cover a wide range of New Thought ideas, from the miraculous healing in Burnett's work to Gilman's struggles as a mother, and Stiles achieves a comprehensive view of New Thought literature. She succeeds in her efforts 'to evoke the richness and variety of New Thought novels as well as their coherence around woman and child-centered themes' (p. 23).