

BOOK REVIEW

WILEY

The Velveteen Rabbit at 100

By Lisa Rowe Fraustino (Ed.), Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 2023

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A black-and-white image of the painting of Margery Williams that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, appears at the beginning of Lisa Rowe Fraustino's collection of essays. The serene face may not be immediately recognizable, but Williams's most famous book, *The Velveteen Rabbit: Or How Toys Become Real*, is. First published in 1922, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a sentimental story about how a stuffed toy becomes real through a child's love, became immediately popular and has never been out of print. It has appeared in many editions and international translations with various illustrators and been adapted for movies, television, and the stage. However, aside from Lois Rostow Kuznet's 1994 book, *When Toys Come Alive*, little serious scholarship has been done on it. Fraustino's *The Velveteen Rabbit at 100* responds to this need with a book containing 13 original essays that provide textual analysis from multiple perspectives. The strength of this book lies in its ability to place *The Velveteen Rabbit* in context, showing its relationship to other works of children's literature and the changing cultural landscape.

Margery Williams was born in London on July 22, 1881, and following her father's death when she was seven, she lived between England and the United States, absorbing the literary culture and vowing to become a writer. After publishing four adult novels and marrying Francesco Bianco, who served in the Italian Army, she and her growing family (including her daughter Pamela, an art prodigy better known at the time than her mother) lived in Paris, Turin, and London before settling in the United States. Williams admired the poet Walter de la Mare, who published works for children, and she set out to write the stories about children and their toys that she had told her son and daughter when they were young. Based on the toys she had loved as a child, *The Velveteen Rabbit* was her first children's book, and it reflected the themes of sadness, deprivation, and loss that characterized the lives of children who had lived during World War I.

The richness of Margery Williams's life experiences and imagination is captured in the chapters of *The Velveteen Rabbit at 100*. In "For Nursery Magic Is Very Strange and Wonderful: The Queer Space of the Nursery in *The Velveteen Rabbit*," Karlie Herndon focuses on the late

Victorian nursery, a space that the British upper-middle class Williams would have been familiar with and that inspired other writers with its "nursery magic." "Virtual Realities: Animation and Simulacrum in *The Velveteen Rabbit's* Tradition and Legacy" by Holly Blackford Humes speaks to the text's connection to puppetry in its exploration of what it means to be real. "*The Velveteen Rabbit* in Italy," by Claudia Camicia and Elena Paruolo, suggests parallels between *The Velveteen Rabbit* and Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and looks at translation strategies for and audience reception to Italian versions of Williams's book. Other essays, such as Wenduo Zhang's eco-critical reading in "Illustrations and the Eco-Reality of *The Velveteen Rabbit*," examine the book's treatment of nature and the environment. Collectively, these chapters demonstrate Williams's keen awareness of her physical, natural, and literary world.

Contributors to *The Velveteen Rabbit at 100* study the classic work through contemporary lenses, offering fresh interpretations and insights. For example, Scott T. Pollard and Kara K. Keeling consider disability in "Metamorphosis: The Disabled Toy Made 'Real' as an Eternally Abled Rabbit," arguing that "The Rabbit is a disabled child facing nondisabled children who do not understand him or his immobility" (203). Adrianna Zabrzewska also explores body issues, applying Karen Barad's materialist philosophy in an examination of the Velveteen Rabbit's changing body in relation to other bodies in "Becoming Real through Matter That Matters: An Onto-Epistemological Analysis of *The Velveteen Rabbit*." In "Whiteness and the Selective Tradition in *The Velveteen Rabbit*," KaaVonia Hinton situates *The Velveteen Rabbit* in the context of race, contending that although the book seems on the surface to be race-neutral, a closer reading reveals "that Whiteness is positioned as normative, as a standard way of behaving, living, looking, and thinking in the original edition of M. Williams's book, and in later adaptations" (213).

The Velveteen Rabbit at 100 will appeal to different types of readers. Although one could argue that *The Velveteen Rabbit*, with its nostalgic look at toys and childhood, appeals more to adults than children, the book falls into the category of children's literature, and the contributors to the volume do a fine job of relating it to other childhood literary and film narratives, such as *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Little Prince*, *Peter Pan*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, *Toy Story*, *WALL-E*, and various fairy tales. Those interested in art will appreciate Kelly Blewett and Alisa Clapp-Itnyre's insightful chapter titled "Visualizing Velveteen: Original Illustrations and Subsequent Adaptations," which analyzes William Nicholson's original red, black, slate blue, and light

yellow illustrations and compares their vivid style, with the Rabbit's journey front and center, to images in later editions. Other chapters look at the artwork in Japanese and Italian translations, giving the volume an international flavor. The book is also issue-oriented, addressing race, class, gender, queer space, sexuality, and disability.

Lisa Rowe Fraustino's *The Velveteen Rabbit at 100* is a splendid collection that reveals a classic text in a new

light. Although the book does not include analyses of the lesser-known film and television versions of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, its treatment of literary texts is perceptive and thought-provoking, as it invites readers to revisit and ponder the question Margery Williams posed in the words of a little stuffed rabbit a hundred years ago: "What is REAL?" (3).