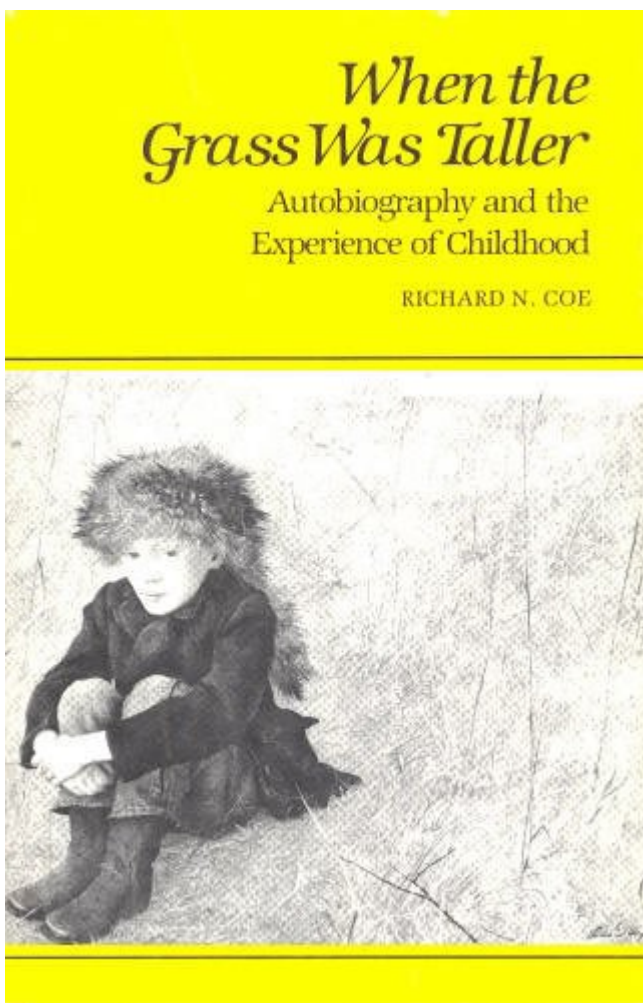


“When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood”

Pioneering work in literature and childhood studies (from the Los Angeles Times Book Review)



“When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood” by Richard N. Coe. (Yale University: \$25; 315 pp.)

Richard N. Coe’s subject is kid stuff – autobiographical accounts of childhood as they appear in such works as Joyce’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” Augustine’s “Confessions,” and Mary McCarthy’s “Memories of a Catholic Girlhood.” Coe’s approach is academic. He is, I gather, an

Australian teaching French and comparative literature at UC Davis; this explains, perhaps, the international reach of his study and why Aussie authors (Graham McInnes and Alan Marshall) stand shoulder to shoulder with Beckett, Bellow, Genet, Gide, Goethe, Gorky, Proust, Rousseau, Sartre, Stendhal, Tolstoy and Wordsworth. This list is by no means exhaustive. The book is.

Coe examines nearly everything and everyone. His method, he explains, is not to offer conclusions of a nearly decade-long study, but first to lay out all the data and then work inductively toward theory. A reader is likely to be dazzled by this encyclopedic sea of data but feel unsure how much will later prove to be flotsam. The reader is also likely to feel a touch of vertigo: more than 600 books are examined in 300 pages, 350 footnotes, and a 1200-item index.

Coe's shortcoming is the very difficulty he identifies: "Every authentic account of childhood relies mainly upon . . . a vast, disordered and inchoate accumulation of disconnected trivialities, whose residue of significance in the mind may bear little relation to any objective assessment of meaninglessness – a junk-pile of discarded or discardable bits and pieces, which make every demand on the literary skill of the writer to fashion them into a valid, coherent and well-proportioned shape."

But there are jewels to be found in this tour-de-force heap of data. Coe demonstrates that childhood is appreciably different from adulthood. If this is not evident, consider: When was the last time you found it pleasurable to crawl underneath a table? Play is the ruling genie of a child's life when an adult sense of utility is absent and things are done "for fun." As for parents, "In the beginning one loves one's parents. Later one judges them. Later still – sometimes – one forgives them."

What is genuinely delightful is that in cataloging

similarities between the works, Coe comes wonderfully close to describing a world we remember but no longer inhabit: the urge to make collections of rocks or bugs, a calendar measured out in holidays and birthdays, misgivings about religion (when prayers are offered to win basketball games or obtain pocketknives), the link between sex and obscenity (which results in so many defaced textbooks), the excitement of plays and movies, the lingering guilt for sadistic treatment of animals, the terror of sin and death, staring out the window of a passing car or train and imagining a life there, rooms and how they smelled, treasured things such as marbles and cards, and a familiarity with a few blocks that is even greater than adults' comprehension of their neighborhoods.

This essay originally appeared in the Los Angeles Times Book Review (January 20, 1985). Rereading this piece these many years later, I was struck by how Coe's effort to describe "childhood experience" (playing under tables, making collections, etc.) coincided with my own endeavor to identify phenomena peculiar to childhood in my book ["Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature."](#)