The Wild Child

This seminar explores the figure of the so-called “wild child,” through readings in historical documents, fiction, poetry, graphic book art, and film.

The Wild Child captures paradoxes of the way childhood itself has been imagined since the eighteenth century in the West: sequestered, protected, and schooled, and yet free, creative, and imaginative. As this child of modernity was being invented, its mirror image came into focus as well: the so-called “feral” child, without parents or language, emerging on the margins of society, an object of fear and fascination, of scientific investigation and artistic imaginings, raising questions about what constitutes the human.

We begin with notable historical feral child cases of the nineteenth century—Victor of Aveyron and Kaspar Hauser—and the contemporary documents that introduced them as well as the fiction, poetry and film that re-imagined them. Among our questions: what cultural work did the idea of the wild child do when it first arose, and what does the wild child allow art to explore and reflect upon? What does the wild child have to say about constructions of modern childhood, of language, and of gender, race, disability, and sexuality?

Students will work collaboratively, sharing responsibilities for leading discussions, reporting on research. Frequent writing assignments will include one personal essay (scenes or perceptions of “wildness” in oneself and/or others), on-line forum posts, a final essay, and opportunities for work in creative genres.

Reading.

Books are available at the NYU Bookstore. Other readings will be available online via hyperlinks on the syllabus, and films will be screened outside of class time, on reserve in Avery (2nd fl of Bobst).

Please purchase these editions.
Barrie, J.M. Peter Pan: Peter and Wendy and Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. NY: Penguin Classics. 978-0142437933
Writing.
- Weekly: Post to the discussion forum about your reading every week by 9pm Monday. You get a free pass for three weeks, including the week of your report (see next section).
- Co-authored bibliography for your in-class report (see the next section)
- 3-page essay, due Th. Feb 18, 9pm via email.
- 3-page essay, due Th. Th Mar 10, 9pm via email
- A personal essay/poem/short-short story about some aspect of “wildness” (about 5-8 pages) due in class T Mar 29
- Seminar essay or creative project, in stages:
  - Be prepared to speak for a few minutes about what you’re thinking of for your final project in class on April 5
  - Essay proposal/project description and bibliography, 2-3pp due in class on Apr 12
  - Final essay/project, 10-12pp, by email and/or hard copy 5:00 Monday May 9; note that creative projects will include 2-3 pages providing an analytic frame for the work.

Grades for your writing will be assessed as follows:
An “A” essay will be engaging to read, offering a well-thought-out thesis (or creative concept), carefully and convincingly presented and argued, in well-crafted sentences and well-chosen vocabulary, and making strong responsible use of secondary literary, historical, and theoretical sources, as appropriate. It will have virtually no technical (word choice, grammar, spelling, paragraphing, citation format, etc.) mistakes.

B, C, and D essays will fall off from this model to varying degrees. E.g., a fabulous idea somewhat haphazardly presented might get a B; so might a solid idea, presented well, with some technical mistakes or mis-steps in logic or style.

Speaking.
- The class will be run seminar-style, which is to say that we all will be responsible for producing knowledge during class sessions.
- In addition, everyone will work in pairs (or trios) on an in-class report connected to the week’s topic.
  - Class presentations should be no longer than 10 minutes
    - That’s about 5 pages of double-spaced text, if you work from a script
  - Provide biographical/cultural information that you think will open up the text;
  - Hand in and post a bibliography of your topic (in MLA style) to hand out to the class
  - Focus on one or two passages in the text to raise questions for discussion
    - An interesting oral presentation will find something surprising or complex in a text, and offer a way to “unpack” it—not solve it, but open it up, investigate it.

The fine print.
Plagiarism. All of your work for the course must be yours; when you get an idea from
somewhere else, including from an online source, credit the source. Any academic dishonesty will result in an F for the course. Please see the statement on Academic Integrity.

**Attendance** at every class session is required. Any unexcused absence may lower your grade. At three absences you are at high risk of failing. If you miss a class, get notes/assignments from a classmate.

**Accommodation.** If you have any disability or health or family situation that you think I should know about, please come see me in confidence. Any student who needs a reasonable accommodation based on a qualified disability is required to register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities.

**Late work.** As a rule I won’t accept late work. If you’re falling behind, getting overwhelmed, or otherwise run into deadline trouble, come talk to me and we’ll make an arrangement for you to catch up.

**Grades.**

Class participation: 20% (15% in-class discussion; 5% in-class presentation [this grade includes assessment of the bibliography for your presentation])

Writing: 80% (10% forum posts; 10% each 3-page essay; 20% free essay assignment; 5% final proposal and 25% final essay)

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**Schedule of Reading and Writing**

(NB: this is subject to change as our work evolves)

**Week 1**  
T Jan 26  
**Introductions:** Where (and What) the Wild Children Are  
**Readings/screening** before class: Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (34pp picture book, pdf); Daniel Sousa, “Feral” (via YouTube, 12 minutes)

**I. Victor of Aveyron**

Week 2  
T Feb 2  

**Week 3**  
T Feb 9  
**Screening:** François Truffaut, “The Wild Child” (1970) (film, on reserve in Avery, 2nd fl Bobst, 85 minutes)  

**II. Kaspar Hauser**

Week 4  
T Feb 16  
**Readings:** Jeffrey Masson, *The Wild Child: The Unsolved Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*, Introduction, 3-71; excerpt from Anselm Ritter von Feuerbach’s *Kaspar Hauser*, in Masson, 74-104
**Writing:** Th Feb 19, essay 1, 3 pages, due by email 9pm

**Week 5**

**Screening:** Werner Herzog, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) (film, on reserve at Avery, 2nd fl Bobst (also available on Amazon; 110 minutes)


**Week 6**

**Reading:** Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (1969), 53-140

**III. Race, Empire and Fictions of Wild Children**

**Week 7**


**Writing:** Essay 2, 3 pages, due Th Mar 10, 9p.m.

**SPRING BREAK**

**Week 8**

**Reading:** J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (1911), 5-155

**Week 9**

**Readings:** Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan* (1914), 1-137

Research Practicum, Bobst Library

**Writing:** 5-8pp personal essay, poetry, short-short story, due in class

**Week 11**

**Reading:** Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan*, 138-277

**Writing:** be prepared to discuss preliminary ideas for final project

**IV. Becoming Wild; or, “What kind of bird are you?”**

**Week 12**

**Readings:** Richard Hughes, *High Wind in Jamaica* (1929), read at least through ch. 6, p148.

**Writing:** final project proposal due in class (2-3pp)

**Week 13**

**Readings:** Richard Hughes, *High Wind in Jamaica* (1929), 149-279.


**Week 14**

**Reading:**
Screening: Francois Truffaut, *The 400 Blows* (1959) (99 minutes), film on reserve at Avery (also available on Amazon) & screenplay for reference (175pp, includes stills) (pdf)

Week 15    T May 3
Readings: Peter Blegvad, *The Book of Leviathan* (2000) (cartoon strips), read as many as you wish, but at least these: Epigraph; Part I, Lost & Foundling; Part V, Terra Incognito; Part VII, Nameless Dread; Part VIII, Words Enough & Time; Part IX, Wilds, Woods & Gas.

Writing: Final project due by email and/or hardcopy 5:00 Monday May 9