

## 'Counterfeit' child shows more than meets the eye

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Department of English and Writing Studies professor Steven Bruhm has explored the notion of the 'counterfeit child' in literature and film, where the little ones are not as innocent as they seem. Credit: Paul Mayne, Western News

Kids aren't as innocent as they seem, says Steven Bruhm.

Bruhm, a professor in the Department of English and Writing Studies, recently published *The Counterfeit Child* in a special issue of *English Studies in Canada* titled *Childhood and Its Discontents*, edited by Nat

Hurley. ESC 38.3-4 (2013): 25-44. The paper deals with the image of the [child](#) in horror films and literature, implicating the child is often a terrifying not-so-innocent figure in these works.

So, what is the 'counterfeit child' for Bruhm? What makes it so terrifying – and so fascinating?

"Children's literature is full of representations of children who aren't 'real' children, children who are fakes, counterfeits, frauds of some sort. In our contemporary culture, where the child has such an angelic status in many ways, we invest so much in our children," said Bruhm, who once taught children's literature, but focuses on Gothic literature.

"I've become interested in the ways in which this fake, this fraud, has come to underpin this (innocent) child in so many movies and novels."

The counterfeit child he deals with in film and literature is a stand-in, a changeling child, a fake, a fraud, an adopted child or orphan in books and movies – any child a parent did not expect to raise, Bruhm explained. The 'counterfeit child' is the notion children are not as innocent as they seem, and they, in fact, know more about the world than adults perceive them to.

"It can be a child you think is a human child, but turns out to be the spawn of Satan, or a child figure who turns out to be an older human being, an adult in disguise. There are all kinds of stories. Daphne du Maurier has a story, *Don't Look Now*, that was made into a great movie where their child has died, and they go to Venice and he sees the person he is sure is the ghost of his dead child, and it turns out to be an old and horrifying little woman," he said.

In his recently published paper, Bruhm argues cultural expectations of children are disastrous and the consequence of these unrealistic

expectations ultimately proves deadly.

"We are in a cultural moment where we are putting an impossible demand, making impossible expectations of our children. We want them to be special angels, but we also want them to be fully knowing, fully articulate, fully grown up at the same time," Bruhm explained.

But that knowingness in children is ultimately horrifying to us, he added. In literature, it proves the counterfeit child's ability to manipulate, to carry out evil acts, and in movies and [literature](#), that must be killed off.

"These children, these figures always meet their end, either by being killed or they are rendered like Regan in the Exorcist, with amnesia," he said.

"What we want now of the child is total success, knowingness, worldliness, but when we get what we want, it's terrifying because it's way beyond our control and beyond the natural order of parents and [children](#), of experience and innocence."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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