



# IMAGINING INNOCENCE

CELEBRITY, STARDOM AND THE CHILD

Edited by

Djoymi Baker, Jessica Balanzategui and Diana Sandars



# Imagining Innocence

*Imagining Innocence* reconceptualises the interface between childhood and celebrity studies by exploring how child stars embody layered cultural meanings of childhood across history and media. The book brings together research that explores child celebrities across the entertainment ecologies of film, television, sport, music, theatre, and streaming platforms.

It analyses iconic figures such as Julie Andrews, Patty Duke, Brooke Shields, and Charlotte Gainsbourg, alongside contemporary child celebrities on Disney+ and in participatory online cultures. Case studies also include trans child stars, the “Adam Goodes saga,” which reveals how settler discourses of childhood are mobilised to contain Indigenous celebrity, and children of celebrities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The book explores how child stars sit at the intersection of childhood and celebrity studies, reflecting and unsettling dominant Western, Eurocentric constructions of childhood while reframing questions of gender, sexuality, race, disability, and national identity.

By theorising child stardom as a “palimpsest,” the book highlights how cultural narratives of the child are repeatedly overwritten yet never erased. The volume will be essential for scholars and students of media, celebrity, and childhood studies, as well as for readers interested in how children and childhood shape, and are shaped by, celebrity cultures. This book was originally published as a special issue of *Celebrity Studies*.

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# **Imagining Innocence**

Celebrity, Stardom and the Child

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**Djoyimi Baker, Jessica Balanzategui  
and Diana Sandars**

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# Contents

<i>Citation Information</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
Introduction: the child celebrity as palimpsest – reconceptualising the interface between childhood and celebrity studies <i>Djoyimi Baker, Jessica Balanzategui, and Diana Sandars</i>	1
1 'Prima donna in pigtails': reading the child stardom of Julie Andrews <i>Brett Farmer</i>	9
2 Challenging normalcy through stardom: childhood celebrity, disability, and Patty Duke's Helen Keller <i>Anna Debinski</i>	24
3 'A woman's face and a child's body': Brooke Shields and child sexuality <i>Kristen Hatch</i>	37
4 'Lying with you': the filial coupling of Serge and Charlotte Gainsbourg <i>Felicity Chaplin</i>	51
5 Heritage child stars on Disney+: the liquidities of child stardom in the SVOD era <i>Djoyimi Baker and Jessica Balanzategui</i>	64
6 Teach your children well: Adam Goodes, from unruly child to Indigenous statesman <i>Barry Judd and Diana Sandars</i>	77

7	Jazz Jennings and Evie Macdonald: trans child celebrities, transnormativity, and childhood 'innocence' <i>Joanna McIntyre, Damien W. Riggs, and Clare Bartholomaeus</i>	90
8	Meet our baby: celebrities' children and childhood between comfort, refuge, and futurity <i>Eva Maria Schörgenhuber</i>	103
	<i>Index</i>	116

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## Introduction

*The child celebrity as palimpsest: reconceptualising the interface between childhood and celebrity studies*

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## Chapter 1

*'Prima donna in pigtails': reading the child stardom of Julie Andrews*

Brett Farmer  
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## Chapter 2

*Challenging normalcy through stardom: childhood celebrity, disability, and Patty Duke's Helen Keller*

Anna Debinski  
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## Chapter 3

*'A woman's face and a child's body': Brooke Shields and child sexuality*

Kristen Hatch  
*Celebrity Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 159–172

## Chapter 4

*'Lying with you': the filial coupling of Serge and Charlotte Gainsbourg*

Felicity Chaplin  
*Celebrity Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 173–185

**Chapter 5**

*Heritage child stars on Disney+: the liquidities of child stardom in the SVOD era*

Djoyimi Baker and Jessica Balanzategui

*Celebrity Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 186–199

**Chapter 6**

*Teach your children well: Adam Goodes, from unruly child to Indigenous statesman*

Barry Judd and Diana Sandars

*Celebrity Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 200–213

**Chapter 7**

*Jazz Jennings and Evie Macdonald: trans child celebrities, transnormativity, and childhood 'innocence'*

Joanna McIntyre, Damien W. Riggs and Clare Bartholomaeus

*Celebrity Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (2023), pp. 214–226

**Chapter 8**

*Meet our baby: celebrities' children and childhood between comfort, refuge, and futurity*

Eva Maria Schörghuber

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# Introduction: the child celebrity as palimpsest – reconceptualising the interface between childhood and celebrity studies

Djoyimi Baker , Jessica Balanzategui , and Diana Sandars 

This Special Issue seeks to contribute to the developing field of child celebrity studies by offering new ways of thinking about the interface between social constructs of childhood and celebrity culture. The Issue elucidates how child celebrities have been, and continue to be, crucial to the complex conceptual apparatus that constitutes ‘the child’. We begin this Special Issue with an invitation to reconsider how childhood studies can productively be brought into dialogue with celebrity studies in ways that illuminate how child celebrities and stars operate as palimpsests upon which traces of former child stars are marked. Following Hugh Cunningham’s caution that, ‘we need to distinguish between children as human beings and childhood as a shifting set of ideas’ (2005, p. 1), we identify child stars as a particularly fraught locus for these shifting concepts because they are regulated by a system of perpetual replacement. In this process of succession, new child performers – and the ideas about childhood they embody – are mapped over former child stars as they fade into obscurity or transform into adult stars.

Childhood is not a universal phenomenon but a social construction that varies greatly across cultures and eras, demarcated by the arrival of adulthood in different and often inconsistent ways (McCue 2018). The development of ‘childhood’ in the West from the 19th century onwards is beset with ‘far too many contradictions’ (Bruhm 2006, p. 98) to reconcile, and, as this Issue highlights, child stars and celebrities embody, narrativize and navigate these contradictions as they are laid over one another. Indeed, the child star is one of the most significant and high-profile means by which the concept of the child is culturally imagined and worked through. Chris Rojek (2001, p. 17) identifies the role of lineage in the construction of celebrity using the children of royal families as an example of ascribed celebrity. We argue that in the commodified constructions of child celebrity and the child star, the concept of lineage exceeds bloodlines via the perpetual replacement of the child star system, and is instead constituted by a layering of personal and cultural histories and generational and national discourses. This form of child celebrity lineage provides a framework through which to understand how the palimpsestic operations of child stardom illuminate the deep but fluid ideological structures of ‘the child’ as a cultural concept.

The star as palimpsest 'bears traces of the past that are sometimes distinct and at other times obscured by the more vivid mien of the present' (Williams 2017, p. 278). If 'stars are exemplary palimpsests for reading the shifting values of a celebrity culture' (Mask 2009, p. 4), an archaeology of the child celebrity must map not only the most visible shifts in the way childhood has been personified and marketed by young stars but also uncover their underlying influences and dead ends. This includes determining how the ghostly traces of conceptualisations of childhood from earlier eras – ideologies which may otherwise be obsolete or forgotten – continue to reverberate in the figure of the child celebrity. Indeed, a number of theorists of childhood have mobilised the language of ghosts and hauntings to articulate how the changing symbolic function of childhood can trouble deep socio-cultural attachments to linear, teleological temporality and growing 'up' (Stockton 2009, pp. 2–6, Balanzategui 2018). That child celebrities are continually haunted by the cultural narratives of childhood that pre-existed them – and, as their careers and lives progress, by their previous personae as 'toddler', 'tween', or 'teen' celebrities – exposes new resonances between ghostliness and childhood. While this Special Issue gestures towards this larger project, here we suggest the example of the tween star as a multi-temporal palimpsestic figure nestled within prior iterations of child stars.

The child star and celebrity have been manufactured throughout the 20th century through a process of increasing segmentation, a babushka doll-like differentiation marked by a zealous commodification of each developmental phase of childhood. While the 19th century began this process through a new binary opposition between child and adult, in the 20th century childhood itself was broken up into marketable phases of baby, toddler, tween, adolescent, and teen. These phases of childhood articulated a specifically Western idea of development, one that has historically tended to be white, able-bodied, and ostensibly straight (Projansky 2014, p. 28, Driscoll 2002, p. 7). Child stars embodied, mediated and sold these emerging re-articulations of childhood. The suitably named Baby Peggy was a silent film star in the 1920s of over 150 films between the ages of two and three (Orgeron 2007). Shirley Temple, perhaps the most famous child film star in history, embodied 'toddlerhood' in the 1930s both on screen and in licenced fashion even 'well past the toddler age' (Cook 2000, pp. 122–3, Lealand 2017, pp. 162–3). By the late 1930s, a new term, adolescent, was emerging, embodied by stars such as Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland (Driscoll 2001). This solidified into the teenager in the 1940s and 50s, rendered iconic by James Dean and child-turned-teen actor Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1956). The tween is seemingly a latecomer to this segmentation process, associated most strongly with the 1990s when the tween became a lucrative cross-industry market sector represented by a slate of young celebrities, particularly on the Disney Channel (Blue 2017, p. 4). However, this oft-repeated linear history is somewhat misleading.

Catherine Driscoll (2001) challenges the idea that the teenager, the teen film, and the teen star were all inventions of the 1950s, demonstrating that key attributes of what would become the teen can be traced back through Hollywood history to stars such as Clara Bow in the 1920s, and Rooney and Garland in the 1930s. Just as Driscoll exposes a previously unacknowledged backstory to the development of the teen star, here we suggest that the emergence of the tween star functions not as a neat, new category, but as a palimpsest of prior stars who have mediated and continue to haunt the multiple perceived transitions of childhood.