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The Phenomenon of Adultification in R. Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of adultification in Ransom Riggs's Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children *(2011), focusing on how the narrative positions children within adult roles and responsibilities. Central to the analysis are the concepts of boundary dissolution and parentification, alongside the recurring tropes of the child redeemer and the lost child, and pervasive experiences of trauma and ennui. Through these frameworks, Riggs's characters are shown inhabiting liminal identities that blur conventional distinctions between childhood and adulthood. Drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of "growing sideways," the article explores how the peculiar children resist linear models of development and instead inhabit non-normative trajectories of growth shaped by delay, repetition, and queer temporality. By examining these narrative and psychological dimensions, the discussion highlights how Riggs portrays childhood as a space of burden, responsibility, and vulnerability. Ultimately, the article argues that* Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children *challenges conventional frameworks of childhood, offering a complex vision of growth and identity that unsettles developmental norms.*

Keywords

adultification, childhood studies, Young Adult fiction, non-normative growth, child redeemer

Introduction

Childhood in literature is rarely as innocent as cultural mythologies suggest. Contemporary young adult fiction, in particular, often assigns adolescents responsibilities and burdens that belong to the adult world. This phenomenon—commonly described as adultification—reveals the porous boundary between childhood and maturity, raising questions about what it means to "grow up" in literature as well as in lived experience.

Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* provides a compelling case study of this tension. On the surface, the novel is a fantastical adventure built on vintage photography and Gothic motifs. Beneath its supernatural frame, however, it depicts children trapped in a time loop who must repeatedly assume roles of caregivers, leaders, and protectors. Despite their physical stasis, they carry adult responsibilities, illustrating how fantasies of eternal childhood are haunted by premature maturity.

This article argues that Riggs's portrayal of the peculiar children exemplifies adultification as both a narrative device and a cultural symptom. Through characters who oscillate between vulnerability and authority, the novel destabilizes idealized notions of childhood innocence and highlights the costs of making children bear adult burdens. In addition, it examines recurring literary tropes that shape the experience of childhood in the series: the child redeemer, who achieves salvation through sacrifice; the lost child, whose alienation underscores vulnerability and grief; and the pervasive experiences of trauma and ennui that haunt both ordinary and peculiar worlds.

To further illuminate these dynamics, I draw on Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of "growing sideways," which critiques linear narratives of child development. Stockton's framework

allows us to read Riggs's children not as frozen in time, but as figures of lateral growth: beings who resist normative aging while embodying nontraditional forms of maturity, negotiating a childhood that is shaped as much by social and cultural expectations as by chronological age.

By analyzing *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* through these lenses, the article demonstrates how Riggs reimagines childhood as a liminal state: neither innocent nor fully adult, neither timeless nor developmental. This perspective contributes to ongoing debates in childhood studies and literary criticism about the instability of age categories and the cultural work performed by young adult fiction.

Conceptualizing Childhood and Adultification

Adultification describes the process by which children are compelled to assume roles, responsibilities, or knowledge typically reserved for adults. While the phenomenon has been documented across psychological and sociological research, it is most frequently discussed in relation to marginalized communities, in which race, class, or systemic inequality force children to grow up too quickly. For instance, scholars such as Jahnine Davis emphasize how Black children in particular are subject to adultification bias, a perception shaped by histories of slavery and racism that continue to inform cultural and institutional practices.[1]

In literary contexts, however, adultification extends beyond social realities into the realm of narrative convention. Young adult fiction often places protagonists in situations where they shoulder disproportionate responsibilities: saving worlds, protecting families, or becoming moral guides for adults. Such stories blur the boundaries between childhood innocence and adult obligation, simultaneously affirming the significance of youth while burdening it with extraordinary demands. In *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, this tension is central. Jacob Portman, ostensibly an adolescent on the cusp of self-discovery, quickly becomes protector and leader of the peculiar children, illustrating how adultification functions as a narrative strategy to test and redefine the limits of youth.

One way of understanding adultification is through the lens of "boundary dissolution," a concept drawn from developmental psychology that describes the blurring of generational roles within families.[2] In its most common form—parentification—children assume caregiving responsibilities for siblings or even parents.[3] Scholars distinguish between instrumental forms, such as household labor, and emotional forms, in which children manage the feelings and conflicts of adults.[4] Both appear in Riggs's novel: while the peculiar children rely on Jacob for physical protection

1 Jahnine Davis, "Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding," *HM Inspectorate of Probation*, *Academic Insights* (2022): 5.

2 Anne Shaffer and Byron Egeland, "Intergenerational Transmission of Familial Boundary Dissolution: Observations and Psychosocial Outcomes in Adolescence," *Family Relations* 60, no. 3 (2011): 290.

3 Lisa Hooper, M., Scyatta A. Wallace, Kirsten Doehler, and John Dantzler, "Parentification, Ethnic Identity, and Psychological Health in Black and White American College Students: Implications of Family-of-Origin and Cultural Factors," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 43, no. 6 (2012): 813.

4 J. K. Dariotis et al., "Parentification Vulnerability, Reactivity, Resilience, and Thriving: A Mixed Methods Systematic Literature Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 13 (June 21, 2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20136197>.

and leadership, they also depend on him emotionally, projecting onto him the security that their absent or ineffectual caretakers cannot provide.

This shift then becomes especially visible in the second book, *Hollow City*, when Emma, usually the group's beacon of strength and source of courage, breaks down after realizing that they have only two days left to save Miss Peregrine, their only hope of survival. Without Miss Peregrine, the children will lose both their caretaker and the protective time loop that shields them from Hollowgasts. In this moment, the group faces the collapse of their world, and Emma's despair signals the erosion of the last vestiges of stability.

Moreover, if they fail, Jacob will be trapped in a dying world overrun with monsters, unable to return home. Overwhelmed by guilt, Emma apologizes for dragging Jacob "into this hopeless mess—and for what?"[5] And although Jacob has spent much of the journey wracked by doubt and self-consciousness, he suddenly finds himself compelled to step into the vacuum of authority left by both Miss Peregrine and Emma. Until now, he has been defined by hesitation—uncertain of his purpose, anxious about belonging, and unwilling to see himself as a leader. Yet in Emma's moment of despair, Jacob assumes the emotional and moral weight of the group, offering reassurance and guidance even as he struggles to believe his own words:

> 'Everything happens for a reason,' I said. I couldn't believe those words had come out of my mouth, but as soon as they were spoken I felt the truth of them, resonating in me loud as a bell. I was here for a reason. There was something I was meant not simply to be, but to do—and it wasn't to run or hide or give up the minute things seemed terrifying and impossible.[6]

This scene marks a turning point in Jacob's development. Having long resisted the idea of destiny, Jacob reframes his presence as a kind of moral balance: "Miss Peregrine saved my grandfather—and now I'm here to help save *her*."[7] He then rallies the children with renewed conviction: "It's not hopeless. We'll save her, Emma—or we'll die trying."[8] From this point forward, Jacob has crossed an invisible threshold—from self-doubt to self-command, from dependent child to caretaker, embracing his role as both leader and emotional anchor.

Jacob's transformation encapsulates the psychological process of boundary dissolution: he internalizes the burdens of the adult world, becoming protector, guide, and emotional stabilizer for those around him. His adultified role is not chosen but necessitated by crisis. Riggs thus turns Jacob's coming-of-age narrative into an examination of inherited responsibility in which childhood becomes the stage upon which the emotional labor of adulthood is rehearsed, demanded, and prematurely endured.

Significantly, however, adultification is not always portrayed as destructive. A number of studies suggest that limited responsibility can foster resilience and self-esteem, while excessive or emotionally charged forms may result in long-term psychological strain.[9] This ambivalence is mirrored in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, in which the peculiar children's assumption

5 Ransom Riggs, *Hollow City* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2014), 105.

6 Riggs, *Hollow City*, 105.

7 Riggs, *Hollow City*, 106.

8 Riggs, *Hollow City*, 106.

9 Dariotis et al., "Parentification Vulnerability, Reactivity, Resilience, and Thriving," 56.

of adult roles is both empowering and tragic. Their skills and leadership make them resourceful, yet their suspension in time traps them in an endless cycle of responsibilities without the possibility of normative growth.

The novel dramatizes this tension most clearly through Miss Peregrine herself, as someone who embodies the paradox of protector and authoritarian parent. As an ymbryne, she can manipulate time and transform into a bird, gifts she uses to shield the children within a carefully maintained loop. Yet her protection comes at a cost. She dictates their days to the second, assigning chores, regulating activities, and requiring absolute compliance. While these routines might appear to foster discipline and development, their endless repetition arrests growth, trapping the children in a cycle where learning never accumulates into maturity.

Furthermore, Miss Peregrine's fierce control extends to withholding vital truths, as when she delays telling Jacob about his peculiarity, a decision that ironically places him in greater danger. Therefore, for the narrative to move forward, Miss Peregrine must be removed—or at least stripped of her governing authority. Once kidnapped by Dr. Golan and unable to resume her human form, the children are forced into the wider world without money, guidance, or adequate preparation. In this sudden shift from rigidly choreographed safety to unregulated survival, the dangers of adultification come into sharp relief: children accustomed to perpetual repetition must now assume impossible burdens, caring for one another and, in Jacob's case, leading a fight to save not only their guardian but their entire world.

Additionally, the broader significance of adultification in YA fiction lies in its relationship to changing cultural constructions of childhood. Historians such as Philippe Ariès have argued that childhood is not a timeless biological fact but a category shaped by social and historical conditions. From the Romantic ideal of childhood innocence to the Victorian "angelic child" and the twentieth-century emphasis on children's rights, definitions of what it means to be a child are in constant flux. Contemporary perspectives further emphasize children's agency and competence, positioning them as active participants rather than passive dependents.[10] Yet even within this framework, the tension persists: children may be recognized as capable agents while simultaneously subjected to heightened surveillance, reduced freedoms, and premature expectations.

YA fantasy exploits this paradox by creating narrative spaces where young protagonists are both free from parental oversight and laden with responsibility. The peculiar children, confined to their wartime time loop, exemplify this contradiction. They play, bicker, and perform childlike rituals, but the absence of effective adult protection forces them into leadership, caregiving, and self-defense. A striking example occurs when the children stage a magical play for Jacob: Miss Peregrine herself opens the performance by transforming from falcon to human, after which each child steps forward to display their peculiar talent. Millard juggles bottles while invisible, Olive floats through a gravity-defying gymnastics routine, and Emma swallows and exhales flames. What looks at first like harmless amusement is quickly undercut when Jacob learns that such performances were once a livelihood, "the way most peculiars made a living."[11] Play, then, is not entirely innocent—it is saturated with economic necessity and adult expectations.

10 Sheila Greene and Elizabeth Nixon, *Children as Agents in Their Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

11 Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011), 186.

The same tension is evident in Fiona's and Hugh's botanical games: what begins as whimsical entertainment, with saplings stretching skyward in "Jack and the Beanstalk" fashion, is shadowed by the children's own boredom and the sense that their powers must constantly be exercised, rehearsed, and put to use. Even more unsettling is Enoch's pastime of reviving clay soldiers, only to force them into battle. When Jacob asks whether he treats all his "toys" this way, Enoch replies that they would not be alive at all without him—a remark that reduces life to a possession, revealing the children's comfort with cycles of creation and destruction. These episodes blur the line between play and the rehearsal of adult roles: entertainment shades into survival practice, and games of control and destruction anticipate the violence they must later enact against their enemies. Riggs thus dramatizes the constructedness of childhood itself: it is never a purely innocent stage, but one shaped by cultural pressures, economic necessity, and the looming demands of survival.

In this sense, adultification in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* is more than a psychological motif; it is a narrative lens through which we can interrogate the very idea of childhood. The peculiar children's existence underscores how societal demands—whether in the historical context of war or the fantastical context of Riggs's story world—continually reshape what it means to be a child. Their liminal status reveals the instability of age categories, suggesting that childhood is best understood not as a universal biological stage but as a social role negotiated in relation to adult expectations.

The Psychological Toll of Adultification

Having established how adultification shapes both social perception and narrative representation, the analysis now turns to its psychological ramifications. The burdens placed on children—whether through familial expectation, societal pressures, or fantastical responsibility—extend beyond plot devices and theoretical frameworks, leaving measurable marks on identity, emotion, and development. By turning to the psychological toll of adultification, not only can how Riggs's characters navigate extraordinary circumstances be understood, but it also illuminates how these pressures mirror real-world experiences of children forced to grow up too quickly. This shift allows us to connect the conceptual framework of adultification to the lived, emotional, and developmental consequences that underpin both literature and life.

Scholars such as Gregory Jurkovic have shown that prematurely assigning children adult responsibilities generates stress, guilt, and long-term disruptions in self-esteem.[12] Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* dramatizes these effects through its protagonists, who are continually burdened with roles beyond their years. By portraying children navigating dangers, leadership roles, and emotional labor, the novels make tangible the psychological weight adultification imposes.

Children subjected to adultification often experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety due to the pressures of adult responsibilities. Jurkovic notes that these responsibilities may include concerns over family welfare and financial stability, fostering a precocious sense of independence.[13]

12 Gregory Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 54-55.

13 Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods*, 54-55.

Moreover, chronic exposure to such stressors can result in physical symptoms such as headaches as well as psychological conditions like generalized anxiety disorder.[14] Even before encountering the peculiar world, Jacob Portman exemplifies this early anxiety, much of which stems from the expectations placed upon him by his family's assumptions that he will one day inherit and manage their K-Mart business. Jacob's refusal to follow this predetermined path is met not with understanding, but with disappointment and dismissal, deepening his sense of alienation. The inability of the family—portrayed not as individuals, but as a collective—to recognize or value his individuality leaves Jacob caught between the pressure to conform to their expectations and his own yearning for autonomy, a conflict that fuels his growing anxiety and self-doubt.

Furthermore, feelings of guilt and shame are also common in adultified children, who often internalize responsibility for family struggles.[15] Jacob experiences this acutely. After his grandfather Abe's death, Jacob's insistence on the reality of the monsters and the peculiars is dismissed as delusion, intensifying his feelings of alienation and inadequacy. This mirrors Jurkovic's observation that adultified children may feel incapable of trusting their perceptions and struggle to take pride in their accomplishments.[16] The tension between Jacob's awareness of the peculiar world and his family's dismissal of his belief creates profound inner conflict, illustrating the emotional cost of prematurely assuming responsibility.

This intergenerational pattern is reinforced in the figure of Abe, who as a youth was thrust into the role of protector during World War II, charged with shielding the peculiar children from mortal danger. His later-life symptoms—memory lapses and secrecy, which his family attributed to dementia—can be read as the long-term consequences of this early trauma. His apparent decline reflects the connection that psychologists such as Davidson and Bifulco have established between trauma, adultification and late-life illness.[17] However, it also illustrates how unprocessed burdens become unintelligible to those outside the peculiar world. Therefore, even if we were to theorize that Abe suffered no neurological decline and remained unscathed by the psychological strain of lifelong secrecy, he still embodies the silenced legacy of adultification: the survivor who bears unbearable knowledge alone.

Similarly, Emma Bloom illustrates how adultification distorts relationships. Abused and abandoned by her parents, she latches onto Abe as both protector and romantic partner, blurring boundaries between caregiving and intimacy. When Jacob enters the "loop" years later, he becomes a surrogate for his grandfather, and Emma's attachment to him reflects what psychoanalytic theorists describe as "repetition compulsion": an unconscious reenactment of unresolved past bonds.[18] Jacob, for his part, embraces this role partly as a way of honoring Abe's legacy. Their romance is thus haunted by adultification—Emma prematurely cast into adult roles of caregiver and partner, Jacob thrust into heroic responsibility without space for adolescent exploration.

14 Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods*, 54.

15 Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods*, 55.

16 Jurkovic, *Lost Childhoods*, 55.

17 Julia Davidson and Antonia Bifulco, *Child Abuse and Protection: Contemporary Issues in Research, Policy and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 76.

18 Dorit Lemberger, *Psychoanalytic Investigations in Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 153.

Bronwyn Bruntley provides another striking case. Only fourteen, "Bronwyn was more like a mother to the young ones than even Miss Peregrine."[19] Acting as *the* maternal figure, she tucks them into bed and comforts them in times of distress while also using her superhuman strength to shield them from danger. Having killed her abusive stepfather to defend herself and her brother, her protectiveness originates in trauma, which in the loop calcifies into permanent parentification. Riggs presents Bronwyn's nurturing as both heroic and self-effacing. When the children find themselves in the chaos of battle, she unhesitatingly offers up her bulletproof sweater to shield others, a gesture that sets her identity as one who sacrifices her own safety for the well-being of those in her care. Additionally, gender expectations intensify her burden, as she embodies the maternal archetype expected of young girls even within a fantastical setting. Trapped in the loop, Bronwyn's caregiving can be read as not only duty but as compensation for the adulthood she can never reach, a poignant enactment of suspended desire.

Even Miss Peregrine reflects the long-term consequences of early caregiving expectations. As an ymbryne, she is defined by protection and caretaking, suggesting that societal pressures may have shaped her identity from a young age. Her emotional suppression, composure, and sense of duty parallel traits observed in parentified children, demonstrating that the effects of adultification can extend into adulthood and across gendered caregiving roles.

Beyond individual psychology, adultification in Riggs's narrative is inseparable from a double historical trauma that defines the peculiar condition. The children are shaped first by the catastrophes of human history—the wars, displacements, and genocides that marked the twentieth century—from which each has fled into the seeming safety of a time loop. Yet their refuge is shadowed by a second catastrophe, one born within the peculiar world itself: the rebellion of power-hungry peculiars whose failed pursuit of immortality produced the Hollowgasts and Wights. Hunted by the monsters created and erased from the history of the ordinary world by their own kind, the peculiar children inhabit a perpetual aftermath. Both worlds have betrayed them; both futures are lost.

Within the time loop, the peculiar children are suspended in a state of repetitive sameness, their days endlessly replayed without the promise of growth or change. Such condition is akin to what George Steiner calls the "great ennui": a profound weariness born from historical trauma and the loss of a meaningful future.[20]

For Jacob, this ennui manifests in his drift through ordinary life, alienating him from his family's stability. Although his family's success in owning a chain of K-marts offers a stable and predictable potential future, he finds no satisfaction in "the utterly unremarkable life that had been mapped out for [him]."[21] Instead, he is consumed by a sense of purposelessness, a feeling that his life lacks the significance and adventure that characterized his grandfather's wartime victories. His torpor reflects a broader generational and cultural malaise, a yearning for meaning in a world that seems devoid of it. Put other way, Jacob's weariness is sharpened by the comparison he continually draws between his own uneventful life and his grandfather's wartime heroism. While Abe's youth

19 Riggs, Hollow City, 36.

20 George Steiner, "The Great Ennui," in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 3-12.

21 Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, 181.

was defined by peril and purpose, Jacob feels trapped in a sterile, predetermined existence, unable to find any adventure that might give his life significance:

> "All because of a 70-year-old hurt that had somehow been passed down to me like some poisonous heirloom, and monsters I couldn't fight because they were all dead, beyond killing or punishing or any kind of reckoning. At least my grandfather had been able to join the army and go fight them. What could I do?"

Here Jacob voices the existential predicament that lies at the heart of Riggs's novels: inheriting the memory of struggle without the opportunity to engage in it. Abe's life had meaning because it was lived in opposition to clear and terrifying enemies; Jacob, by contrast, inherits only the absence, the hollow afterimage of danger with no arena for action. In this way, Riggs links Jacob's boredom and sense of futility not merely to adolescent malaise, but to the larger cultural exhaustion of Steiner's great ennui—a condition in which the past overshadows the present and renders the future seemingly devoid of meaning.

Likewise, the peculiars' daily existence illustrates what Ian Irvine terms postmodern ennui: a condition of meaninglessness produced by endless repetition and the collapse of sustaining narratives.[22] Trapped in the loop, the children remain biologically frozen at the age they entered, denied the possibility of emotional or developmental growth. Yet whenever they step outside its boundaries they are forced to confront dangers and responsibilities far beyond their years—challenges ordinarily reserved for adults but which, in the absence of other protectors, they alone must face.

This paradox leaves them suspended between childhood and adulthood: young in appearance, yet compelled to shoulder adult burdens without the developmental foundation to bear them. In this way, they embody the fragmented identity that Irvine associates with the postmodern subject—caught between incompatible roles, unable to fully inhabit either. Their coping strategies reveal this fracture. Millard obsessively charts maps in a futile effort to impose order on stasis; Emma greets Jacob with a knife, her wariness hardened into a survival mechanism; and Enoch reanimates corpses with unsettling detachment, treating life and death as little more than tools. These behaviors echo the psychopathic detachment and depressive tendencies Irvine links to existence stripped of forward momentum. Riggs thus renders the time loop as a metaphor for adultification itself: childhood collapsed into weary stasis, agency narrowed to endurance, and young people condemned to carry adult burdens without the horizon of adult futures.

Therefore, psychological and existential theory together reveal the peculiar children not as mere products of fantasy, but as figures embodying the burdens of premature adulthood. Riggs portrays how anxiety, guilt, and fractured relationships intertwine with a deeper weariness—an ennui born from carrying responsibilities too heavy for childhood and from inhabiting a world stripped of meaningful futures. Jacob's sense of purposelessness in the shadow of his grandfather's heroism, Emma's haunted attachments, Bronwyn's maternal sacrifices, and the loop's stifling monotony all illustrate different facets of this toll. By entwining individual psychology with collective stasis, Riggs demonstrates how adultification does more than warp development: it collapses the very distinction between childhood and adulthood, leaving young people suspended in roles that both

22 Ian Irvine, "Postnodern Ennui and the Maladies of the New Fin de Seicle: Towards an Outline of Postmodern Ennui," *The Antigonish Review* 116 (1999): 2.

exhaust and define them. The novel can thus be situated within larger cultural conversations about trauma, boredom, and the existential cost of survival.

Liminal Childhoods: The Lost Child, the Redeemer, and Non-Normative Growth

Often positioned at the threshold between innocence and experience, vulnerability and power, childhood has long been a site of cultural imagination. Literature repeatedly positions children within this liminal space, where they appear not simply as passive figures of fragility, but as symbols of cultural longing, redemptive hope, and existential unease. Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* and its sequels build upon this tradition by presenting a cast of "peculiar" children who are simultaneously frozen in time and burdened with adult-like responsibility. Through Jacob Portman and his companions, the series reworks three enduring figures of childhood: the redeemer, the lost child, and the non-normatively developing child archetypes which are not mutually exclusive. Jacob, in particular, embodies all three: he is at once "lost" in his grief and alienation, called to a redemptive mission, and forced into a sideways trajectory of growth that refuses conventional developmental norms. Examining these figures not only illuminates Riggs's novels, but also situates them in a wider literary and cultural conversation about what it means to be a child.

The Child Redeemer

One of the most resilient archetypes in literature is the child redeemer who combines innocence with transformative potential. As Lisa Farley observes, this figure channels cultural hope for a future restored to purity and moral clarity.[23] Yet as Alexis Brooks de Vita points out, such figures are also deeply unsettling: they achieve redemption only through sacrifice, often surrendering their own innocence or even their lives for the sake of others.[24]

Jacob Portman's trajectory across the series exemplifies this tension. Reflecting on his journey, Jacob describes himself as "cautious by nature, a planner," more comfortable in avoidance than confrontation.[25] Yet once he enters the peculiar world, his latent abilities force him into a role of responsibility. His rare capacity to see Hollowgasts—monsters invisible to all but him—marks him as uniquely indispensable to the community. The burden of sight becomes a call to leadership. This dynamic recalls the biblical redeemer: chosen not by will but by necessity, fated to confront evil on behalf of others.

In the series' finale, Jacob's destiny culminates in the ultimate act of sacrifice—he willingly becomes the very thing he has fought against. By transforming himself into a Hollowgast, he

23 Lisa Farley, "Innocence," in *Trickbox of Memory: Essays on Power and Disorderly Pasts*, ed. Felicitas Macgilchrist and Rosalie Metro (London: Punctum Books, 2020), 65-66. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1jf2c49.6>.

24 Alexis Brooks de Vita, "Descent into the Pit of the Redeemer: The Sacrificial Child in International Film and Literature," *Extrapolation* 55, no. 3 (2014): 372.

25 Ransom Riggs, *Library of Souls* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2015), 212.

embraces monstrosity to destroy Caul, the series' antagonist, and save those he loves. Jacob thus crosses the final threshold of the redeemer figure, internalizing the darkness he once sought to master. His purity becomes the weapon of salvation, and his self-defilement the cost of renewal, echoing de Vita's notion that the child redeemer troubles us precisely because their innocence is traded for collective survival. The child redeemer Jacob is not merely a savior, but a caution—a figure who restores the world only by becoming its most fearsome inhabitant.

But Jacob is not merely a Christlike symbol. His redemptive role is tied to his lineage: he inherits his peculiar gift from his grandfather Abe, who also bore the burden of fighting Hollowgasts. Redemption, in Riggs's world, is genealogical as well as individual. Jacob does not choose to be peculiar; peculiarity is thrust upon him as both inheritance and obligation. This complicates the redeemer motif, showing how salvation may emerge less from divine election than from the intergenerational passing of trauma, talent, and responsibility.

Finally, Jacob's redeemer status is communal rather than solitary. His bravery alone cannot save the peculiar children, as his role is to enable their collective resistance. This emphasis on interdependence distinguishes Riggs's redeemer figure from more solitary savior narratives. In this sense, Jacob exemplifies what de Vita identifies as the child redeemer's dual role: both an emblem of future hope and a mirror for society's flaws, revealing how much the community depends on its children to carry burdens adults cannot bear.[26]

The Lost Child

If Jacob is a redeemer, he is also profoundly "lost." The motif of the lost child is another recurring archetype, one that reflects cultural anxieties about innocence, vulnerability, and abandonment. As Mark Froud argues, the lost child symbolizes a fractured selfhood, embodying both what adults fear losing in themselves and what they cannot recover.[27]

Jacob's "lostness" begins in the ordinary world. Alienated from his peers, emotionally distant from his father, and haunted by his grandfather's cryptic stories, he enters adolescence already unmoored from belonging. The death of his grandfather marks his literal and symbolic displacement: Jacob loses his guide and his anchor to meaning. The search for truth about Abe propels Jacob into the peculiar world, where his alienation becomes both deepened and transformed.

Moreover, the peculiar children themselves embody the figure of the lost child on a collective scale. Trapped in time loops, they are cut off from the linear flow of history. Their condition is paradoxical: they are protected from harm yet condemned to perpetual delay, repeating the same day indefinitely. They are lost not only to the outside world but also to themselves, denied the possibility of normative futures—adulthood, aging, integration into broader society. This resonates with David Buckingham's observation that modern culture both mourns and desires the "death of childhood," lamenting its disappearance even as it anxiously restricts children's autonomy.[28] Riggs's

26 de Vita, "Descent into the Pit of the Redeemer," 372.

27 Mark Froud, *The Lost Child in Literature and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

28 David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

time loops literalize this paradox: the peculiar children are preserved as an eternal childhood, yet at the cost of agency and change.

Ultimately, for Jacob, the lost child motif is inseparable from grief. His grandfather's absence opens up a void that can only be filled by entering a new, disorienting world. His quest becomes a metaphor for the cultural work the lost child performs by reconciling trauma, seeking belonging, and negotiating between memory and transformation. In embodying both redeemer and lost child, Jacob demonstrates how salvation is inseparable from loss—how one must be displaced to become a guide.

Growing Sideways: Queer Temporalities and Peculiar Delay

Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of "growing sideways" provides another crucial lens for Riggs's novels. Stockton challenges the linear developmental model in which childhood is a preparatory stage culminating in adulthood. Instead, she suggests that some children, particularly those marked as queer or different, grow laterally rather than vertically: they accumulate experience and identity in non-normative, expansive directions.[29] Riggs's peculiar children exemplify this non-linear growth. Biologically frozen, they do not "grow up" in conventional terms. Yet they continue to expand their knowledge, skills, and relationships. Their growth is sideways, stretching outward rather than upward. Emma, for example, has lived for decades, but still experiences adolescent jealousy and longing, while Bronwyn displays maternal protectiveness alongside childlike loyalty. Their development resists simple classification as either childlike or adult, embodying Stockton's claim that the child is always a "shadowy spot" central to cultural imagination, yet never fully knowable.[30]

Moreover, Jacob himself undergoes a kind of backward birth, another of Stockton's concepts. At first, he perceives himself as an ordinary teenager, alienated but unremarkable. Only retrospectively after entering the peculiar world does he recognize that his difference had always been there. This mirrors the queer child Stockton describes: one whose identity is named only in hindsight, whose difference precedes but is only later acknowledged. [31] Jacob's peculiar self was present all along, but required the framework of the peculiar community to be recognized.

The peculiar children's time loops also dramatize Stockton's notion of delay. Their "protection" from the outside world comes at the price of autonomy, echoing how society often justifies restrictions on children in the name of safety. Miss Peregrine's control is loving but absolute: she governs their days, sets their boundaries, and enforces their perpetual delay. This recalls Stockton's critique that childhood "protection" often doubles as regulation, ensuring that children remain dependent and controlled.[32] Ultimately, Stockton's framework illuminates how Riggs's children resist assimilation into adult norms. Their peculiarity—like queerness—makes them

29 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press Books, 2009), 11.

30 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 6

31 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 6-7.

32 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 42.

both ghostly and threatening to the social order. They remain hidden, feared, and marginalized, yet also reveal alternative ways of imagining growth, identity, and time.

Archetypes in Tension

Taken together, the redeemer, the lost child, and the sideways-growing child form a web of archetypes that both reinforce and challenge one another. Jacob, and more broadly the peculiar children, embody all three: lost in trauma and dislocation, redeemers of their community, and embodiments of non-normative growth. These overlapping figures highlight the paradox at the heart of Riggs's series: childhood is both preserved and prematurely ended, burdened with adult responsibility yet denied normative adulthood. The peculiar children complicate developmental categories, illustrating what Stockton calls the "estranging" nature of childhood — always suspended between hope and fear, promise and loss.[33]

Riggs's novels thus contribute to a larger cultural rethinking of childhood. They suggest that children are not simply the "adults-to-be" of developmental narratives but figures of profound liminality: lost and found, innocent and burdened, static and expansive. *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* both draws on and transforms long-standing literary archetypes, revealing the imaginative power and cultural work of childhood figures who refuse to grow up in straight lines.

Conclusion

Ransom Riggs's *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* reimagines childhood as a site of paradox—at once sacred and burdened, preserved and exhausted, innocent and knowing. Through the lenses of adultification, the redeemer archetype, the lost child, and Stockton's growing sideways, Riggs exposes the instability of what we call childhood. His peculiar children are not simply victims of adult neglect or beneficiaries of protection; they are products of a cultural imagination that asks children to redeem, to remember, and to repair. In Jacob Portman's evolution from an anxious adolescent to a sacrificial redeemer who becomes the very monster he once feared, Riggs dramatizes the emotional and existential cost of forcing youth to shoulder the world's redemption. Across these interwoven archetypes, childhood emerges not as a natural stage of innocence, but as a negotiated space shaped by trauma, expectation, and deferred desire. The peculiar children's looping lives dramatize this entrapment: they are preserved as children precisely by being denied the freedom to grow. Yet within that confinement lies resistance. Their sideways growth, shared burdens, and capacity for care constitute alternative forms of becoming, modes of endurance that defy linear progress and normative maturity.

Ultimately, Riggs's series subverts both nostalgia for childhood purity and faith in adult rationality. Instead, it imagines a continuum where the boundaries between child and adult, savior and monster, are perpetually unstable. To be peculiar is to inhabit that in-between space—to grow not upward, but outward, not into adulthood, but into complexity. In this way, *Miss Peregrine's*

33 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 3.

Home for Peculiar Children invites us to see childhood not as something to be outgrown, but as a vital, unsettling condition through which we must continually reckon with what it means to survive, to change, and to remain human.

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