Reciprocal aggression

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In his famous photographs of children and in the Alice books, Lewis Carroll often displays a surprising willingness to jettison the solitary Child of Nature paradigm and explore instead the complex relationship that links children to adults, himself to his beloved child friends. Rather than single-mindedly insisting that a firm barrier separates young from old, Carroll frequently blurs this line, characterizing the child not as an untouched Other, but as a collaborator enmeshed in a complicated relationship with the adults who surround her. As in the case of the female children’s authors studied in Chapter 1, his work reveals a keen awareness of the fact that children are always already involved with (and influenced by) adults. But whereas they seem comfortably certain that children can nevertheless develop into creative agents who help shape their own life stories, Carroll remains unsure. He hopes that children can function as empowered collaborators, but—like Stevenson—he fears that the power imbalance inherent in the adult-child relationship ensures that all adults can offer children is a fraudulent illusion of reciprocity. Even his own cherished brand of nonsense literature, he suggests, can function as a form of coercion that pushy adults foist upon profoundly uninterested children.