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“WHITENESS IS ALL”: STUART LITTLE
AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Trawling the web to read reviews of *Stuart Little* published in US newspapers and magazines when the film first screened in late 1999, I found that many of these reviews allude to writers’ attitudes to E.B. White’s novel *Stuart Little*, and its relationship to the film. They are sharply divided as to whether or not the film departs too drastically from the book, but in most cases when these reviewers talk about the book *Stuart Little* they refer to an idea of this text as an American classic, and to the memories, attitudes or impressions which it evokes. Like canonical texts in general, the book *Stuart Little* stands for excellence, tradition and continuity because it belongs to the canon as well as for its qualities as a text; as Terry Eagleton says, “If the canon matters, it is because it is the touchstone of civility in general, not just because of its inherent merit” (64). Films based on “classic” novels, such as *Little Women*, *Peter Pan*, *The Secret Garden*, *Harriet the Spy* and so on always carry with them the weight of the canonical status of these novels.

By the time White published *Stuart Little* in 1945, he had been writing essays for *The New Yorker* for twenty years, and had been a columnist for *Harper’s Magazine* for part of that time as well. *Stuart Little* was his first children’s novel and it contains echoes of his *New Yorker* essays in its tartness, its lack of sentimentality, its acerbic treatment of domestic life. Its narration hovers between addressing adults and children as implied readers. Consider, for instance, the following exchange, which occurs after Mrs Little by mistake locks Stuart inside the refrigerator for half an hour:

Mrs Little...opened the door and found [Stuart] standing on a butter plate, beating his arms together to try to keep warm, and blowing on his hands, and hopping up and down.

“Mercy!” she cried. “Stuart, my poor little boy.”

“How about a nip of brandy?” said Stuart. “I’m chilled to the bone.”

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But his mother made him some hot broth instead, and put him to bed in his cigarette box with a doll’s hot-water bottle against his feet. (43)

The comedy of Stuart’s request for a nip of brandy depends on its attribution of adult tastes and desires to Stuart, and on Mrs Little’s contrasting insistence on treating him as her little boy, and implies an adult reader regarding Stuart’s predicament with amusement, rather than a child reader aligned with Stuart and caught up in his tribulations.

Marah Gubar argues in her essay “Species Trouble: The Abjection of Adolescence in E.B. White’s Stuart Little” that in the novel Stuart’s indeterminate status between child and adult, animal and human, has much in common with the in-between-ness of adolescence. Gubar notes, for instance, that “in the course of the narrative [Stuart] experiences many classic and discomfitting adolescent moments: first love, first date, first car wreck, and first job” (100). In White’s novel, domestic life in the Little household is full of dangers and perils for Stuart: he is let down the drain to recover a ring for Mrs Little; he is rolled up inside a window-shade; and trapped inside a refrigerator. Gubar argues that Stuart’s response to the dangers of his life with the Littles is to engage in the adolescent fantasy of freeing himself from his home and making his own way in the world, which is what happens in the second half of the novel, when, in his bright yellow automobile, Stuart leaves the Little home in pursuit of Margalo, the small, brown bird with whom he has fallen in love. At the very end of the book Stuart engages in a friendly discussion with a telephone repairman who suggests that he should travel north, and the narrative concludes in this way: “As [Stuart] peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him the way seemed long. But the sky was bright, and he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction” (116).

This ending is, of course, completely at odds with the closure of the film, where Stuart returns home and is reincorporated into the Little family. Rather than a contrast between the representation of Stuart as an adolescent in the book and a child-mouse in the film, as Gubar suggests, it seems to me that the principal differences between book and the film lie in the audiences they address, and in their views of the world. Whereas the implied readers of the book veer between adults and children, the film squarely addresses child viewers, while throwing in occasional jokes and intertextual references for the amusement of adults
watching with children. The most striking difference, however, is between the worlds the two texts imagine and the models of subjectivity they propose. In brief, the book’s insistence on the dangers of home and the delights of freedom produce a sense of the young Stuart as a picaresque traveler in a world full of possibilities, whereas in the film he derives his identity from his membership of the Little family, and his ventures into the world outside the Little family home are successful to the extent that he returns home endowed with a stronger sense of being a Little.

The many differences between the book and the film are interesting and telling for the ideologies they promote and the ways in which they position audiences, but I should explain that I do not subscribe to the view (held by many of the film’s US reviewers) that the film is only successful insofar as it constitutes an “authentic” or “truthful” version of the book. I would argue that the film and the book are best regarded as two texts quite loosely connected. There is never just one correct, true or authentic interpretation of any text (given that readers always bring their own knowledge and experience to reading narratives), and arguments about the extent to which a film is “true” to a book commonly rely on the assumption that it is possible to identify “essential” or “core” meanings. Moreover, film is predominantly a visual form where meaning is produced through moving pictures and other semiotic codes: print, music, speech, sound-effects, whereas readers of a novel derive meaning through negotiations between the language of the text and the knowledge, experience and world view they bring to the business of reading. The symbolic systems they employ are quite different, as are modes of reading films and books. Thus when I compare the book with the film I do not want to imply that the film ought to be more like the book – rather, the film and the book intersect in relation to characters and setting, while departing in regard to plot and (more importantly) significances – that is, the systems of beliefs, values and ideologies which they promote. Discussions of adaptations from book to film sometimes distinguish between aesthetic and sociological approaches (see Wojcik-Andrews 188-190) to the analysis of films based on books. I think this is an unworkable distinction, because aesthetics do not exist as a discrete category of textual features but are bound up with the ideologies encoded by symbolic systems.

A crucial distinction between book and film lies in the relationship of Stuart to the Little family. This is how the book begins:
When Mrs Frederick C. Little’s second son was born, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse. The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way. He was only about two inches high, and he had a mouse’s sharp nose, a mouse’s tail, a mouse’s whiskers, and the pleasant, shy manner of a mouse. Before he was many days old he was not only looking like a mouse but acting like one too – wearing a grey hat and carrying a small cane.
Mr and Mrs Little named him Stuart, and Mr Little made him a tiny bed out of four clothespins and a cigarette box. (1)

Between the first edition of the novel in 1945 and its reprints, White made a small but telling change to the first sentence: “When Mrs Frederick C. Little’s son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse.” (see Neumeyer 595). This alteration glosses over the grotesque idea, negatively received when the book was first published, that Mrs Little has given birth to a rodent. In the film, Mr and Mrs Little adopt Stuart from an orphanage, and in this way the dynamic of the narrative builds on Stuart’s dilemma as an introduced member of the Little family as he encounters negative reactions from other family members: George, the Littles’ son; and Snowbell, their cat.

This scene establishes the overt agenda of the film through the mouth of Mrs Keeper, the director of the orphanage, who warns the Littles: “We try to discourage couples from adopting children outside their own…species. It rarely works out”, whereupon Mrs Little replies “Well it will in this case.” Mrs Keeper’s hesitation before the word “species”, like her earlier hesitation before the word “uniqueness” (“Are you quite certain you’re prepared to handle his…uniqueness?”), suggests cultural sensitivities around adoption involving difference between an adoptive family and an adoptee. The inter-species adoption, which applies in the case of Stuart and the Littles, constitutes a metaphor for interracial adoption, and indeed many of the film’s reviewers claim that Stuart Little is “about” values such as tolerance and acceptance of cultural difference.

However, there are several elements of the mise-en-scène of this sequence, which invite a broader interpretation. In Mrs Keeper’s office an American flag is placed next to her desk; the color-combination of red, white and blue, dominant throughout the film, is evident in the blue
of the wall and Mrs Little’s navy-blue suit and red shoes; and in the shot where the Littles meet Stuart, he stands on a pile of books between a row of (more) miniature books and a globe. Again, the color-palette is predominantly red, white and blue, with Stuart’s face appearing startlingly white against the background of books. When he encounters the Littles, Stuart is reading Little Women; and the other titles in his (little) collection include The Moffats, The Queen’s Nose, Anastasia Krupnik, The Ghost in the Big Brass Bed and a title in the “Saddle Club” series, as well as Cornelia Spencer’s How Art and Music Speak To Us. With the exception of The Queen’s Nose, which is by Dick King-Smith, these are all books produced in the United States. Eleanor Estes’ The Moffatts and Lois Lowry’s Anastasia Krupnik are canonical texts like Little Women, and several of the books featured – Little Women, The Queen’s Nose, the “Saddle Club” series – have been adapted for film and TV.

The cumulative effect of locating Stuart against this background of flag, colors and texts is to situate him in middle America, as an outsider striving to be an insider by immersing himself in a symbolic system which identifies and rewards those who belong to the world of the Littles. It is because he is already a Little-in-waiting that he is recognized by Mr and Mrs Little as a member of the family and a brother for their son George. The expectation of the Littles, backed up by Stuart in the orphanage scene, is that they will “just know” who to adopt, which suggests that members of the Little family possess a core of being which is discernible to other family members. As I have suggested, the ostensible message of the film is that acceptance and love transcend difference. However, I think that it is worth exploring what is meant by difference in Stuart Little, and how the notion of difference relates to concepts of whiteness.

There is a growing body of work, grounded in whiteness studies and critical race theory, which focuses on the historical and symbolic processes which have privileged whiteness as a normative mode of being, and theory from this field of research offers one conceptual framework for analyzing Stuart Little. Critical race theory focuses on the emergence, coinciding with the spread of European colonialism, of the idea that the state of being white is associated with status and power. As European-ness and whiteness distinguished colonizers from colonized, whiteness was constructed, as Ghassan Hage says, “into a racial category. It involved both a European monopolisation of 96
‘civilised humanity’ and a parallel monopolisation of Whiteness as its marker” (50). In contemporary Western cultures, these ideas are still prevalent, and they are promoted most powerfully through the invisibility of whiteness to those who are white. Conventionally, studies of race have generally proceeded from the given that whiteness is the natural mode of being, and that the term “race” applies to non-white people. As Richard Dyer puts it in his seminal work *White*, “Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). That is, whiteness is invisible as a racial position, since to be white is to be normal, natural and human. The term “whiteness” refers not to the complexion of individuals but rather to the systems of power and control which privilege those of European ancestries and who distinguish themselves from “non-whites”.

In *Stuart Little*, the whiteness of the Little family is mapped onto a version of the United States where in order to live a pleasant and privileged life one has no choice except to be white. The presence of non-white (or less-white) others is alluded to in the sequences involving Snowbell’s low-life friends: Monty, Lucky, Red and the leader of the pack, Smokey, whose language is the stereotyped dialect of Italian mafioso-speak – for instance, Smokey is described by one of his associates as “cato de tutti catti” (the Godfather of cats). The film’s sharp distinction between Snowbell and the alley-cats is nowhere more evident than in the last few minutes of the film, when Snowbell recognizes that despite his flirtation with the world outside the Littles’ home, his best interests are served by allegiance to the Littles. As he says to Monty, “I’m not a street cat. I’m a house cat. I don’t want to lose my furry basket or my tinkle-ball that I push across the carpet with my nose.” Despite his tough talk, Snowbell’s transmutation into Stuart’s ally propels him back into whiteness, suggesting a selfhood congruent with his appearance, at least superficially.

The association of the alley-cats with a state less than whiteness evokes a hierarchy of value where the Littles are at the top of the whiteness pyramid. One of the markers of their status is an implied association with British culture: for instance, the actor Hugh Laurie, who plays Mr Little, is British and has played in many British television and film productions, including *Blackadder*. He took the role of Bertie Wooster in the TV series “Jeeves and Wooster”, based on PG Wodehouse’s work, which is an icon of comedy about upper-class British culture. Dyer remarks about cultural formations in the United
States that “there are...gradations of whiteness: some people are whiter than others. Latins, the Irish and Jews, for instance, are rather less securely white than Anglos, Teutons and Nordics” (12). Seen in this light, the allusions to Britishness in the film’s depiction of the Littles constitute an important marker of white privilege.

The other crucial distinction in Stuart Little is that of class. The film’s treatment of the Littles’ home locates them securely in middle to upper socio-economic habitus. In contrast, the alley-cats are distinguished by a nexus of class, ethnicity and not-quite-whiteness. Their representation as the thugs of the neighborhood — violent, uncouth, cowardly — produces a clear line of class demarcation. At the same time, their energy and verve endow them with a strong appeal, represented through Snowbell’s reluctance to break his association with them and confine himself to the safe and privileged, but less interesting, world of the Littles. If the alley-cats represent a desire for what is forbidden, Snowbell’s capitulation to whiteness plays out the repression of this desire.

Stuart’s bogus parents, the Stouts, are as white as Stuart himself, but are distinguished from Stuart by their lower-class characteristics: Mr Stout greedily gobbles the nibbles provided by Mrs Little and in general the Stouts do not behave with the decorum and politeness characteristic of Stuart and the Littles. Most of all, they align themselves with the not-quite-white, not-quite-right company of alley-cats, and can be recuperated as white only when they confess their misdeeds to Stuart and seek his forgiveness. An interesting intertextual reference here is with the film Annie, where similarly a pair of false parents from the wrong side of the class divide abduct a child (Annie) who has been incorporated into a world of privilege through adoption. In both Stuart Little and Annie, the bogus parents are weak and venal rather than wicked, and are treated as comic figures whose crassness and vulgarity undercut their pretensions to belong to a class above them. As Valerie Babb notes in her book Whiteness Visible, books of etiquette have been widely published and read within the United States since the nineteenth century. Under the rubric of “good manners” these books have always “linked these [good] manners to white, European, upper-class antecedents and thus racialized them and grounded them in a specific class sensibility” (160). The film’s representation of Stuart’s false parents enforces a comparison with Mr and Mrs Little, whose impeccable manners locate them securely within a white elite.

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The scene of the boat race in Central Park brings together the film’s various strands of significance and constitutes a turning point in the relationship of Stuart and George. A significant change from book to film is that whereas in the book the owner of the boat the Wasp is a kindly dentist whom Stuart befriends, in the film the boat has been built in the basement of the Littles’ home by George and his father, thus constituting a sign of male bonding and of family identity. It’s when Stuart works with George to complete the Wasp in readiness for the boat race that the film shows him to enter a masculine world where he shows himself to be practical, adventurous and competitive. In the book, the boat race occurs without the Littles knowing anything of Stuart’s adventure, and when he returns home having won the race for the Wasp’s owner and is asked where he has been all day, Stuart replies, “Oh, knocking around town.” The book treats Stuart’s sailing exploits as reflecting on his development as an individual, whereas in the film they bring credit to the Littles and mark Stuart’s integration into the family.

In the film, the boat race is the family’s first outing together since their adoption of Stuart; it introduces him to the world outside the Littles’ home and provides an audience for his triumph over his competitors. It’s also a scene, which self-consciously maps family onto nation. George’s boat the Wasp, with its red, white and blue colors, is smaller and plainer than the other boats, which are endowed with national affiliations through the colors and flags which they carry - for instance, several of the boats are marked as “Eastern” because of their Chinese-style junk sails; and the Canadian maple-leaf is prominent on one of the boats run down by the Lillian B. Womrath, sailed by the thuggish Anton. This comparison between the plain, home-made, sturdy Wasp and the superior weight and size of the other boats, emphasized through camera-angles which show the Wasp dwarfed by Anton’s boat, evokes an enduring myth of origins – that the hardy virtues of the founding fathers of the United States contribute to its national identity and manifest in a plain-speaking, unpretentious national character. The film’s emphasis on the importance of winning a race which has something in common with a battle (suggested by the splintering timbers of the defeated boats) alludes to another founding myth, which relates national identity to the struggle between the old world and the new, epitomized in conflict with the British crown in the War of Independence. Again, that the Wasp wins through by virtue of fair play
and skill against the unfair tactics deployed by Anton makes a claim for the *Wasp* as a signifier of the virtuous nation, innocent of ulterior motives and honorable in its dealings with its others.

Another dimension of Stuart’s induction into whiteness lies in the film’s construction of masculinity. At the beginning of the film George tells his parents that he wants a little brother, with whom he can do boyish things such as wrestling and spitting. The choice of Jonathan Lipnicki to play the part of George signals the demographic which the film is aimed at – young children and their parents – in a way which differs, for instance, from the boy imagined by the illustrator Garth Williams in the 1973 edition of the book, where George seems to be on the edge of puberty. The casting of Michael J. Fox for Stuart’s voice suggests an adolescent persona something like the character played by Fox in the *Back to the Future* films. In *Stuart Little*, one of Stuart’s tasks as George’s new brother is to induct George into a version of white masculinity appropriate to his age and class.

Stuart’s “manly” performance in the boat race enables George to overcome his sense of inferiority by virtue of Stuart’s role as a surrogate for George, a surrogate who shows physical daring and courage in the face of great odds. Stuart’s achievement in the boat is echoed in George’s fight with Anton, thus demonstrating his successful construction of a masculine identity. Even though the fight is interrupted by Mr Little, it is treated as an act of bravery rather than of aggression, because of the imbalance of size between George and Anton and because of the dirty tactics which Anton uses against Stuart.

The figure of Snowbell the cat represents another, almost parodic version of a masculine subject. Like George, he feels himself to be unequal to other males, since he is less powerful than the alley cats. He is, of course, a house cat, and thus marked as somewhat precious and effeminate. On several occasions Smokey addresses him as “Tinkerbell”, a name that sketches an association with fairies and so with homosexuality, and the fact that Snowbell takes offence evidences that this is a negative allusion in the world of the film. When Snowbell turns on the alley-cats and takes Stuart’s side, his former friend Monty says, “After all we’ve meant to each other...I love that guy”, in a throw-away reference which underlines Snowbell’s ambiguous status as a masculine figure.

One of the most striking features of the film’s representational scheme is that the topic of his species is taboo within the Little family,
with the word “mouse” generally off-limits. As I’ve noted, in the orphanage scene Mrs Keeper tiptoes around the topic of Stuart’s mouseness. Later, when the Littles’ extended family visit their home in order to welcome Stuart, Cousin Edgar almost utters the word “mouse”: “But he’s a...”, whereupon Aunt Beatrice completes the statement with “adorable”. George is the only family member to say what is unsayable when the family brings boy-sized toys as gifts: “Are you all nuts? Bicycles and bowling balls? How’s he going to toss a baseball? How’s he going to do any of those things? He’s not my brother. He’s a mouse.” But George’s outburst is explained by his initial incapacity to accept Stuart’s “difference”, and his change of heart is signaled in the moment after the race, when the crowd gathers to watch Stuart sailing across the finishing line. A woman next to George exclaims: “Who’s that mouse?” and George replies, “That’s no mouse. That’s my brother.” Characters we are positioned to dislike, such as Anton, use “mouse” as a derogatory term, taking it further by claiming that Stuart is not a mouse but a rat, and this further marks them as lacking civility and good manners, and thus unworthy of membership of the idealized white American family.

In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison analyses constructions of Americanness in the work of early writers such as Poe and Cather with reference to their representations of an Africanist presence. She says that in these texts “Silence from and about the [Africanist] subject was the order of the day” (51), and that while “American means white” (47), ideas of Americanness habitually depend on the (implied) presence of the raced other. Through the taboo, which prohibits the Littles from referring to Stuart’s mouseness, child audiences are protected from too-explicit references to difference. The film’s insistence on his whiteness and its muted references to his mouseness play out the fiction that anyone can be white; and at the same time Stuart’s longing to be part of the Little family enforces the idea that there is no more desirable state than that of whiteness. Seen in this light, Stuart’s statement “You don’t have to look alike to be family” follows in a tradition of American myth-making about a society in which color does not count.

The closure of the film occurs when Stuart returns home after his adventures, cautiously reconciled with Snowbell, and as the family stand looking out of the window at Stuart, who is perched on the windowsill facing into the room, he looks at the Little family and utters
the words: “This is how people look...” whereupon George finishes his sentence (just as Mr and Mrs Little always finish each another’s sentences) with “at the end of a fairytale!” The leit-motif of characters completing each other’s utterances suggests that intersubjectivity resides less in reciprocity than in the identification of one subject with another. Moreover, the “happy ever after” implied by the words “the end of a fairytale” is represented in terms of “coming home”, and specifically of being incorporated into family and nation. Viewers are positioned as observers of this vignette, watching from outside the window as the Littles, now incorporating Snowbell within their family “snapshot”, focus on the figure of Stuart as he reassures them of their favored status inside the fairytale.

As I mentioned earlier, the novel Stuart Little ends with Stuart embarking on a journey where he will travel north in search of adventure and new lands. In the last scene of the film, Mr Little scoops up Stuart and the family move away from the window. George returns and draws the shade, closing off our view, so that we are closed off from the life of the Little family in its brownstone house in Manhattan. The novel was published at the end of the Second World War at a time when the United States was throwing off the isolationism of the thirties and early forties and emerging as a world power, and Stuart’s sense of possibilities and the allure of the new suggest an expansive sense of individual agency. The film, in contrast, seems to promote a more guarded and cautious view of the world outside the Littles’ home, and a preoccupation with guarding family and nation from the (longing, desiring) gaze of those outside.

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