

ETH-TECH ART CONTEST • EDITION II • 3rd HONOURABLE MENTION

Six Windows and a Shadow: Prompting the Hidden Adult

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Short summary of the postdigital positionality

Please provide a brief narrative (200-500 words) introducing the concept of postdigital positionality your work reflects or represents.

As a doctoral researcher in children's literature and an educator, I have spent years studying how adults imagine childhood on the page. My field begins from an uncomfortable truth: children's books are not written by children. Perry Nodelman (2008) calls this the "hidden adult," the grown-up knowledge, desire, and ideology concealed inside texts that present themselves as simple and innocent. Every picture book, however tender, carries an adult watching from behind the page.

Generative AI now imagines childhood too, and it does so at industrial scale. When I ask an image model to paint "innocence" or "wonder," it does not consult a child. It consults millions of images that adults made, selected, captioned, and circulated. The hidden adult has acquired a new hiding place: the training data. I have come to think of this as the hidden algorithm, a second concealed presence layered upon the first, inheriting and amplifying adult constructions of childhood while erasing their authorship even more completely than the picture book ever did.

My postdigital positionality, in the sense proposed by Sarah Hayes (2021), is therefore neither refusal nor surrender. I call it scholarly mediation. I use these tools, but I refuse to let them use me invisibly. Hayes argues that our human and digital identities are now entangled, and that we must develop reflexive narratives about where we stand within that entanglement. For me, standing somewhere means insisting that a children's literature scholar has a specific responsibility in the age of AI: to keep asking whose image of the child is being reproduced, and to make the concealed adult, human or algorithmic, visible again.

This artwork performs that positionality rather than merely stating it. Six AI-generated panels render six core concepts of my discipline: Innocence, Home, Wonder, Adventure, Repetition, and the Hidden Adult itself, drawing on Nodelman (2008) and on Peter Hollindale's (1997) notion of "childness," the quality of the child-text encounter that criticism struggles to capture. Five of these concepts translate readily into images. The sixth does not, and that failure is the heart of the work. A machine can paint a meadow; it cannot paint a theory. Someone must translate, and that someone is the researcher. The shadow in the sixth panel is my answer to the question this contest asks: in the postdigital world I want to inhabit, the adult behind the image steps out of hiding, and the human scholar remains the translator between theory, childhood, and the machine.

Short summary of the creative process

Please describe your creative process (200-500 words). If applicable, explain how AI tools (e.g., Midjourney, DALL-E) were used, including the prompts. If the work is entirely handcrafted, describe the materials and ideas that informed its creation.

The work is a grid of six square panels, each generated with Midjourney (version 8.1) at 2048 x 2048 pixels and assembled manually in Canva with uniform spacing, so that the six concepts read as windows in one shared house of children's literature.

Selecting the keywords: I chose six concepts anchored in the scholarship rather than in personal taste. Innocence, Repetition, and the Hidden Adult come directly from Nodelman (2008), who identifies the celebration of innocence, the pedagogy of repetition and variation, and the concealed adult presence as defining markers of the genre. Home and Adventure name the genre's canonical spatial movement, the departure from safety and the return to it. Wonder reflects Hollindale's (1997) attention to the distinctive quality of the child's encounter with the fantastic.

Designing the prompts as a controlled experiment: all six prompts share one verbatim style block ("soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette, delicate fine ink linework, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, centered symmetrical composition, no text"). I chose the watercolor storybook idiom because it is the most historically loaded visual language of childhood in Western publishing, precisely the aesthetic the model has absorbed most deeply. By holding style constant and varying only the

conceptual content, the grid becomes a small experiment: what does the model believe each concept looks like?

The deliberate impossibility: five keywords are scenic and translated easily. The sixth, the Hidden Adult, is an abstract critical concept, and the model cannot receive theory directly. I had to convert Nodelman's argument into a visual metaphor myself: a child absorbed in a picture book, with an adult presence rendered only as a shadow. What the model produced surprised me. It merged the adult silhouette almost entirely into the child's own shadow: the two outlines overlap so closely that a casual viewer perceives nothing unusual, only a child and its shadow. Sustained looking is required to notice that the shadow's proportions are quietly wrong, taller and older than the child who casts it. I had asked for a faint presence and received a nearly invisible one. I chose to keep this result rather than regenerate toward something more legible, because it enacts the theory more faithfully than my prompt did. The hidden adult is hidden precisely because we do not look closely, and this panel now asks of its viewer the same attentive, suspicious reading that children's literature criticism asks of its texts.

Assembly and human decisions: the final composition, panel order, spacing, and the pairing of each image with its keyword were done manually in Canva. No image was accepted on first generation; each panel was selected from multiple attempts against criteria I set in advance: stylistic consistency across the grid and fidelity to the concept, not prettiness.

PROMPTS

Panel 1. Innocence

A small barefoot child around five years old, standing alone in the middle of a sunlit meadow filled with tall swaying grass and scattered wildflowers in pale yellow and lavender, wearing a simple loose linen smock in soft cream color, holding a single dandelion seed head close to their lips and gently blowing it apart, dozens of tiny seed particles drifting upward and catching the golden afternoon light, the child's eyes softly closed and cheeks slightly flushed with quiet joy, hair tousled by a light breeze, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette dominated by warm cream, pale yellow, and soft sage green, delicate fine ink linework outlining the child's silhouette, loose painterly brushwork in the background grass, whimsical storybook illustration tradition reminiscent of classic picture books, warm diffused afternoon sunlight casting long soft shadows, shallow depth of field with the background grass slightly blurred, centered symmetrical composition with the child as the clear focal point, no text, no logos, no watermark

Panel 2. Home

A small stone and timber cottage nestled at the edge of a quiet forest at dusk, warm golden light glowing from two round windows and spilling softly onto the front garden path lined with lavender bushes, smoke curling gently from a small chimney, a young child around six years old sitting

curled up on the interior windowsill wrapped in a knitted blanket in muted terracotta color, holding a small brass lantern that casts a warm flickering glow on their face, the child gazing peacefully out at the darkening blue twilight sky dotted with a few early stars, moss growing softly on the cottage roof, a woven straw doormat and a pair of tiny rain boots by the front door, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette of deep indigo blue, warm amber, and mossy green, delicate fine ink linework defining architectural details, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, warm interior lighting contrasting softly against the cool dusk exterior, centered symmetrical composition with the cottage framed by overhanging tree branches, no text, no logos, no watermark

Panel 3. Wonder

A small child around seven years old caught mid step through a glowing arched doorway made of twisting vines and softly luminous flowers, transitioning from a plain grey stone room into a vast floating garden suspended among pale lavender clouds, oversized blossoms in dusty rose and pale turquoise towering several times taller than the child, dozens of tiny floating paper lanterns drifting weightlessly in the air like slow fireflies, delicate glowing pollen particles suspended in the atmosphere, the child's expression full of wide eyed astonishment, one hand still resting on the doorway frame as if hesitating between two worlds, soft flowing fabric of the child's dress rippling gently as if caught in a slow motion breeze, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette of dusty rose, pale turquoise, and soft lavender, delicate fine ink linework, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, dreamlike diffused glow lighting with soft bloom around the lanterns, centered symmetrical composition framing the doorway threshold, no text, no logos, no watermark

Panel 4. Adventure

A small determined child around eight years old standing upright inside a handmade paper boat with a folded triangular sail, sailing down a winding river that cuts through a dense green forest, holding a small brass compass in one outstretched hand while the other grips the boat's edge, the child wearing a slightly oversized canvas jacket with rolled sleeves and a small knapsack strapped to their back, distant blue mountains visible on the horizon beneath a sky painted in soft coral and gold from the low sun, gentle ripples trailing behind the paper boat on the calm river surface, overhanging willow branches framing the edges of the scene, a few small paper birds folded from the same material as the boat flying alongside, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette of river blue, forest green, and warm coral gold, delicate fine ink linework, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, warm low angle golden hour lighting, centered symmetrical composition with the river leading the eye toward the distant mountains, no text, no logos, no watermark

Panel 5. Repetition

A row of seven identical small cottages lining a quiet cobblestone village street, each cottage painted the same soft dusty blue with matching white window frames and the same round wooden door, each front window revealing the same child standing at a slightly different age, from a small toddler in the first window to a young teenager in the last, all wearing the same simple striped shirt in muted red and cream, the lighting and pose in each window subtly varied to suggest the passage of time, a single cobblestone path running straight through the center of the composition, small potted plants of the same species sitting outside each identical doorway, soft even daylight falling uniformly across the entire street, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette of dusty blue, cream, and soft muted red, delicate fine ink linework, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, centered symmetrical composition with strict horizontal repetition of the cottages, no text, no logos, no watermark

Panel 6. The Hidden Adult

A small child around six years old sitting cross legged on a sunlit wooden floor, fully absorbed in reading a large open picture book resting on their lap, warm afternoon light streaming through a nearby window and casting a soft elongated shadow behind the child on the wall, the shadow's silhouette subtly and ambiguously taller and more adult shaped than the child's own proportions, faint and barely perceptible, as if an unseen adult presence lingers just behind the reading child without being directly visible in the room itself, dust particles gently visible floating in the sunbeam, the picture book's open pages showing soft indistinct illustrated shapes rather than legible text, the child's posture completely relaxed and unaware of the shadow's subtle strangeness, soft watercolor children's book illustration style, visible paper texture beneath the pigment, gentle muted color palette of warm cream, soft grey, and pale gold, delicate fine ink linework, whimsical storybook illustration tradition, soft ambient diffused lighting with the shadow rendered slightly darker and cooler in tone than the rest of the warm scene, centered symmetrical composition with the child in the foreground and the ambiguous shadow occupying the negative space behind, no text, no logos, no watermark