Since the publication of George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) Sally Shuttleworth has been a leading figure in the interdisciplinary study of literature and science. More recently, Shuttleworth has undertaken ground-breaking work on the links between Victorian literature and the sciences of the mind specifically, and her new book constitutes a major contribution to this field. The Mind of the Child is a monumental piece of scholarship, impeccably researched and full of illuminating detail (and some fascinating illustrations). The book seeks to present a comprehensive analysis of Victorian literary and scientific conceptions of the child mind, with particular attention being paid to nineteenth-century debates about education; to the child study movement of the 1890s; and to the evolutionary psychology of childhood. One of the book’s key claims is that post-Darwinian understandings of the child as an atavistic recapitulation of evolutionary history led to the development of two divergent accounts of the child mind, championed by the competing yet overlapping sciences of psychology and psychiatry: ‘the psychologists’ celebrations of the imaginative freshness of the child’s “savage” mind’, Shuttleworth argues, were set against the psychiatric model of a child that ‘comes into the world burdened by the sins of its forebears in the shape of inherited nervous disorders, or other degenerative traits’ (p. 335).

As Shuttleworth points out, Victorian theorists were convinced that mental degeneration could also result from faulty upbringing and education, and the book provides a detailed account of Victorian concerns about the potentially damaging effects of education on the child mind, concerns which culminated in the over-pressure controversy of the 1880s. This discussion of Victorian educational debates demonstrates one of the most impressive features of this book: the proficiency with which the author connects her readings of scientific and literary texts to the wider social and political concerns of Victorian Britain. Another example is Shuttleworth’s analysis of the ‘gendered politics’ of child psychology, the struggle for discursive control that ensued when ‘masculine science’ (p. 225) began to encroach on the conventionally feminine domain of child-rearing. Shuttleworth goes on to argue, perceptively, that the political concerns of Victorian child psychology, and the evolutionary principles on which it was based, typically led its practitioners to view the mind of the child on the level of ‘abstractions’ and statistics rather than individual behaviour and personality; it was a science often ‘rendered uncomfortable by specificity’ (p. 293).

Literary representations of childhood offered a means of integrating such specificity into scientific accounts, and Shuttleworth traces the various ways in which psychologists and psychiatrists made use of fictional explorations of child consciousness. Her method is encapsulated in her first chapter, in which she shows in detail how Leonard Guthrie, in his 1907 book Functional Nervous Disorders
in Childhood, structures his argument around the account of child psychology put forward by George Eliot in The Mill on the Floss. This is one of three novels (along with Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Charles Dickens’s Dombey and Son) referred to throughout the book, and Shuttleworth makes a convincing case that literary texts, and these three novels in particular, were crucial in shaping Victorian understandings of the child mind. If there is anything to be regretted in this important study, it is that Shuttleworth’s literary focus does not extend to poetry; despite some references to William Wordsworth’s The Prelude, there is no close analysis of nineteenth-century poetic writing about childhood. However, Shuttleworth’s readings of prose fiction (including novels by George Meredith, Henry James, and Thomas Hardy) are nuanced and wide-ranging, and, in its skilful examination of the links between literature, psychology, and psychiatry in Victorian culture, The Mind of the Child is a significant achievement.

University of Surrey

Gregory Tate