This is an interesting and unusual book that asks us to do a lot of fundamental rethinking. It is, by its own admission, not a monograph, but rather a ‘collage’ that breaks down disciplinary boundaries, engages with specialists and non-specialists, and essentially opens up debate where we might not have realized there was a need. As J. Allan Mitchell shows, we would have been wrong. However, right and wrong, absolute separations, classifications, and definitions are not what this book is about. Rather, it is a very positive shift away from the concept of ‘human being’ to one of ‘becoming human’, though even that phrase fails to convey the fact that humanity does not have primacy in this book. The first essay is about birth, largely, though not exclusively, human birth; the second focuses upon toys, though not primarily as human playthings, rather as miniature objects in their own right; the third is titled ‘The Mess’, an exploration of the existence and uses of the far from humble table. All three can be hung on the peg of ‘child’, but that is not their aim, especially as nothing stays still: it is a book about flux and transformation. The state of becoming that is the unborn child sees it defying classification; the table provides a classic example for the exploration of form and matter, occupying ground from Plato’s world of ‘ideas’ to the child negotiating its place in the adult world; even the toy is crafted from a metal that in medieval thought was believed to grow like an animal organism. The essays knowledgeably bring together a wide range of texts so that medieval conduct books keep company with treatises on reproduction, canon law with entries from the medieval bestiaries. The whole is an illuminating work that gives new angles on texts from Chaucer’s Sir Thopas to the books of nurture that abounded in the later Middle Ages. We encounter Augustine wanting to forget the very first phases of his existence, paradoxically for the reason that he cannot remember them; Dante punning on his name as a babbling ‘fante’; Gower engaging with the primal matter of universal creation. The connections and adjacencies manage to be both inventive and genuine, and Mitchell uncovers the links that would have been natural in the Middle Ages. In short, it is a refreshing and learned book that invites us to pause while we consider the movement of fundamental things.

Clare College
Cambridge

JACQUELINE TASIOULAS