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Realms of innocence, realms of ignorance: Teaching the post 9/11 cautionary tale

Abstract:

There are those who claim that childhood is the realm of innocence and should remain so. Others however claim that the overprotected child is more likely to become a victim of life's grim realities, insofar as that child is not exposed to the vicissitudes of the ways of the world (Lurie 1991). Since ancient times, children's cautionary tales have warned against the presence of dark forces, from uncaring parents to wolves in the forest (Warner 1994). This paper addresses the historical and creative pedagogies implicit in the development of tertiary programmes designed to teach writing for child audiences in the 21st Century, particularly the issue of how should those aspiring to write for today's post 9-11 child approach the complex problem of either preparing the child reader for the realities of the 21st Century by exposing that child to the realities of war, famine and human vice, or of continuing to maintain a state of protection (so-called) by screening that child from such realities.

Biographical Note:

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The notion of childhood innocence has been debated since ancient times. Making no differentiation between child and adult, the Biblical prophet Jeremiah (circa 626 BC), states: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?' (Jer 17 v 9-10), while Socrates (469-399 BC) asserts: 'Children today love luxury too much... What kind of awful creatures will they be when they grow up?' (Rosen 1994: 6). The primary intention of this paper is to encourage student-authors involved in the study and practice of Creative Writing for child audiences to evaluate a variety of historical, philosophical and creative pedagogies which suggest that childhood might be more reasonably considered as a constantly evolving phenomenon incorporating all aspects of human nature, rather than some inherent 'state of innocence' (Rose 1984: 12), particularly when such a state, mythical though it may be, is so often protected (usually by an adult) from the 'unpleasant realities' of life (Lurie 1991: 215). A second intention of this paper (indeed, a corollary of the first) is to suggest to emergent writers of juvenile fiction that if a child is to reach maturity, he or she will encounter life's realities and that it is no doubt better for that child to experience such realities vicariously via the cautionary medium of literature, than to be protected from what will inevitably follow (Lurie 1991: x-xi).

Modern concepts of childhood were formed in sympathy with the philosophy of Locke (1632-1704) and his notion that childhood is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate (Clark 2003: 2), metaphorically 'written upon' by either 'good' or 'bad' influences. In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau further contends that, 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil'. So influential were Rousseau's ideas, when he moved to England, his work was hailed as 'inspired prophecy' (Jackson 1989: 249). In his *Ode to the Intimations of Immortality*, Wordsworth (1807) also contends:

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house
Begin to close upon the growing boy.

Conceding the value of the philosophies noted above, Postman (1994), in response to Aries' research (1960), finds more subtle influences behind the development of the modern child. Both writers claim that from the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was believed that 'youthful exuberance' needed to be tempered if the adult's desire to overcome 'the natural inclinations of children' was to prove successful, especially when such exuberance proved an 'impediment to book learning'. Therefore the qualities of 'quietness, contemplation and precise regulation of bodily functions' were 'highly valued' (Postman 1994: 46), and contrary to Rousseau's recommendations regarding the embracing of the 'free spirit of childhood', "nature" had to be overcome in the interests of achieving both a satisfactory education and a purified soul' (Postman 1994: 46). Aries also claims that this 'campaign for greater seriousness would triumph only in the nineteenth century, in spite of the contrary evolution of child welfare and more liberal, realistic pedagogies' (Aries 1962: 118).

Nelson (1991) establishes an interesting corollary to this argument in her audacious work, *Boys will be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-*

1917, in which she argues that Victorian children's fiction demonstrated a conflation of the concepts of '(Victorian) Manliness and the Angel of the House', whereby boys were encouraged to become softer and more compliant to Victorian ideas of the feminine (1991: 2-5). Thus the Victorian Christian ideal that those who were not 'born Angels (notably males) might have Angelhood (feminine virtues) thrust upon them' (1991: 4). The Victorian concept of angelic Christian innocence among children, especially blond children, is extensively elaborated upon by Warner (1995: 382). The idea is exemplified in the Victorian evangelical children's novel, *Children of the City*, which shows two (blond) children kneeling in prayer as its illustrated frontispiece, the caption beneath reading: 'So down they knelt, two neglected little children of the Kingdom'. The idealised child-innocence is further exploited in Sir John Everett Millais' painting *A Child's World* (1886), now known as *Bubbles*, showing a curly-headed (blond) boy with a bubble pipe. Ironically, the painting became one of the first cases of the commercialisation of childhood when purchased for the Pears' Soap advertisement based upon the purported purity of both child and the soap. The soap was claimed to be so pure, according to Pears 'before' and 'after' ad, that it could 'wash little negro [sic] boys white'. (Laver 1968: 8, 25). One of the most idealised Victorian representations of childhood innocence is evident in the Thomas Cooper Gotch painting, *The Child Enthroned* (1894), in which a girl clothed in sumptuous brocade is regally elevated upon a throne, gazing querulously down upon humanity. That the child has been sanctified is evident in the halo surrounding her blonde head.

Yet if children are as innocent as the Victorian Ideal would have us believe, why is it that the child's deathbed is so often articulated in the sentimental religiosity of Victorian literature as the 'final opportunity to repent'? (Reed 1975: 165-171). Conflicting ideas as to the inherent state of childhood innocence add a deep irony to Birkin's research (1979) into the life and work of J. M. Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*, especially as Peter was recognised in the nineteenth century—as he is today—as the idealised and free spirited boy who was 'stuck' in childhood and who refused to grow up. (Rose 1984: 36). Birkin wryly notes:

Unlike ... Wordsworth, Barrie rarely perceived children as trailing clouds of glory; he saw them as 'gay, innocent and heartless creatures inspired as much by the devil as by God' (1979: 19).

One of the problems raised by Peter Pan as a mythologised role-model for childhood is that he is a fictional character, not a real child, and the potential conflict between his 'childhood innocence' and his 'adult maturity' is all too simply resolved (as one can do in fiction) by 'sending him back where he came from' (Rose 1984: 38): that is, the fictional 'Neverland'. But since real children cannot be sent back to 'Neverland', this paper suggests that emergent writers of juvenile fiction take into account that if a child is to reach maturity, he or she will encounter life's realities—grim or otherwise—and that it would be better for that child to experience such realities vicariously, through the cautionary and preparatory medium of imaginative, mind expanding children's literature, than to be shielded from what will inevitably follow (Lurie 1991: x-xi). It would also be valuable for such student-authors to know that many parents and teachers are opposed to exposing children to these realities,

attempting to both perpetuate the child's (so-called) innocence and shield that child from the perceived 'evils' of adult life (Lurie 1991: 215).

In this 9/11 age where commercially televised images of acts of terrorism have become a part of the Western World's prime time viewing experience, and where as Postman says (1994: 94) 'television is not mediated by a mother's voice', it may well be a part of the student-children's author's learning experience to re-sensitise the child reader to the realities of such horror, or, as Qureshi claims:

envisioning ourselves as global citizens often begins with our ability to endure discomfit. Allowing students to close a book simply because the truth is too difficult to endure only promotes bystander behaviour. (Qureshi 2006: 40)

It is this writer's view that it is better to honestly and judiciously present today's child (depending on that child's maturation level and intellectual readiness) with aspects of life's realities through the adult-mediated use of the book than to shield that child from such realities or let them pass without comment as if they were no more than just another fictional element of an evening's entertainment (Postman 1994: 94-97).

Life's realities have often been introduced to the child by means of the creative, yet mediating use of the cautionary tale. The contemporary cautionary tale—as unpleasant as its warning might be—may well help a child cope with twenty first century realities and, better yet, encourage that child to initiate future global understanding. While *Little Red Riding Hood* is now considered a rather tame fairy tale (ever since Red was saved from the wolf's belly), it is doubtful that Charles Perrault considered it to be so:

From this story one learns that children,
Especially young lasses,
Pretty, courteous, and well bred,
Are wrong to listen to any sort of man. (Tartar 1987: 39)

The cautionary tale of old could best be described as a 'Fairy or Folk tale with a warning ...' Hence Tartar argues that the 'fairy tale', *Bluebeard*, in which the villain murders his wives and locks their bodies away, may also be considered as a 'cautionary tale' or warning for women to control their curiosity in a misogynistic and male dominated society (1987: 178). Today, however there is a new genre of children's story which may also be termed 'the cautionary tale', but it is far removed from fairy tale and may be better termed the 'antiwar genre for kids', or even the 'juvenile anti-holocaust genre'.

The topic of the horror of war appears in modern children's books as early as 1946 (O'Sullivan 2005: 168), but the first commercial title to make an international impact was Briggs' *When the Wind Blows* (1982) written as a satirical post holocaust response to the nursery rhyme *Rock-a-bye-baby*: (Anstey & Bull 2000: 68). While association with Briggs' earlier *Father Christmas* and the title reference to a nursery rhyme may suggest a child audience for this book, the cover of the 1983 Penguin edition tends to contradict this. No empathetic child image appears on the cover to invite the child reader in. Rather, a middle-aged couple about to have a cup of tea is shown against the background of a nuclear detonation. She wears an apron, he sports

a pair of braces. They both wear slippers. But behind them, to the left and right, lurk monstrous images of military generals—one distinctly Russian, the other probably American—both backed by militia. These characters are all adults. Ironically, considering the title, no children (let alone babies) appear anywhere in this work. Evidently Briggs is using nursery rhyme to satirise adult naiveté towards the horror of nuclear holocaust (Hunt 1995: 312).

The cover of the 1983 Penguin edition also displays a review quotation from the *Sunday Times*, referring to the book as ‘A visual parable against nuclear war...’, a close approximation of Tartar’s definition of a the cautionary tale as a ‘Fairy or Folk tale with a warning’ (1987). But while *When the Wind Blows* is indeed a modern cautionary tale, it is no nursery rhyme or fairy tale. Considering that both adult characters in *When the Wind Blows* die from nuclear sickness while muttering a prayer to an unknown God (their pleas jumbled lines from the 23rd Psalm, the hymn ‘Oh God Our Help in Ages Past’ and ‘Into the Valley of ... Death’ from Tennyson’s ‘theirs but to do or die’ tribute to war, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*), one has to wonder: who is the intended audience of this book? Given the seemingly juvenile appeal of the highly accessible comic strip format, yet the apparent contradiction of the book’s adult characters and mature topic, *When the wind Blows* is, as Anstey and Bull claim (2000: 173), a ‘marked departure from the established form of the picture book’, and while it ‘caused a stir’ upon its release, it was nevertheless ‘commended in the House of Commons as a powerful contribution to the growing opposition to nuclear armament’ (Cech 1987: 263). Perhaps politicians got it right in realising that the horrors of modern weapons of mass destruction demand that today’s readers of all ages be forced out of their cosseted ‘bomb shelter’ of naiveté and ignorance if they are to better face (and hopefully defeat) the new monsters of this age.

The anti-war cautionary tale reappeared when in 1985 the celebrated adult author Ian McEwan translated *Rose Blanche* (illustrated by Roberto Innocenti), a variation of the original Christophe Gallaz children’s story. The title comes from the German student resistance group “Die weisse Rose” (The White Rose) based at Munich University (O’Sullivan 2005: 168). This picture book squarely confronts the unparalleled horrors of the Jewish Holocaust of WWII. Told from the point of view of a young German girl who solves the mystery of where the Jews are being taken in trucks, the eponymous Rose Blanche takes the reader to the Nazi concentration camps bringing this crime to life for children. In the case of *Rose Blanche*, there is little doubt that a child audience is intended considering that the only named and empathetic character in the work is a child and yet no attempt has been made to sentimentalise the book’s potent message to suit ‘little children’. Innocenti has used actual photographs of the German siege on the Warsaw ghetto, particularly referencing the infamous ‘Warsaw boy’ photograph (O’Sullivan 2005: 170) as his illustrative source, thus refusing to spare his audience the horror of the child’s experience. The penultimate lines of the book demonstrate this:

As Rose Blanche turned to walk away, there was a shot, a sharp and terrible sound which echoed against the bare trees ...Rose Blanche’s mother never found her little girl... (McEwan 1985)

Rose Blanche is intended as a modern cautionary tale, ‘a moral awakening’ as Cech (1987: 205) states, its original version drawing upon the empathetic quality of first person narration to have the child reader relate to Rose Blanche (especially since her name is so redolent with fairy tale), and demanding that the child reader take off his or her ‘I’m too innocent to see or hear this story’ blinkers. In achieving this, *Rose Blanche* brings the holocaust to children, warning of the possibility that such horrors may occur again.

While *Rose Blanche* may serve as the seminal antiwar book for children, Michael Foreman’s *War Boy* (1991) and *War Game* (1993) continue the theme, leaving no doubt as to the frightful loss of life and futility of war. *War Game* especially extends the picture book genre by its inclusion of the metaphorical allusion to war being ‘The Greater Game’, as demonstrated in the *Punch* recruiting cartoon of 24 October, 1914, which Foreman conscientiously reproduces on his title page. Foreman also takes this use of metaphor further by cunningly extending the visual imagination of his child reader through his linking of the spots of blood on the snow of Flanders’ Fields to the circular petals of the blood red poppies that sprang from those fields. Although Foreman’s books are chilling in their direct reference to youthful recruits condemned to die in this ‘game of war’, they cannot compare to the children’s picture books addressing an anti nuclear war theme such as Junko Morimoto’s *My Hiroshima*. Morimoto’s intended child audience is evident by the cover illustration of a Japanese school girl (note the empathetic Western school uniform) being led by the hand before the awesome might of the mushroom cloud filling the sky above her. The internal illustrations spare no detail of the suffering of the dying as the unrelenting Morimoto illustrates the ‘living dead’ shuffling by the ‘newly dead’ while her minimalist print text notes, ‘There was a child, screaming, trying to wake up her dead mother.’ (n.p). These illustrations are rendered all the more shocking by the inclusion of actual photographs of Hiroshima after the flash, accompanied by the grim statistics:

70,000 people died instantly. Another 70,000 died by the end of 1945. At the end of 1950 the total was 200,000 Even today people are dying who survived the blast. (Morimoto 1987: n.p.)

In conclusion, I can do no better than to quote Cech who contends that he has written of such horrors in the hope of explaining that ‘something very bad happened’ and that knowing this ‘will help keep it from happening again’ (Cech 1987: 205.) As both an academic teaching the writing of books for young people, and as a creator who has written such books himself, I endorse Cech’s sentiments. Unfortunately, there are still those who cling to the mythical notion of the innocence of childhood claiming, as do Michael and Diane Medved in their reactionary work, *Saving Childhood: Protecting our Children from the National Assault on Innocence*, that ‘Childhood innocence is under assault from various quarters (schools, media, peers, parents)’ (Stewart: 2000 128). It is this writer’s belief that Sky is more on target when she argues in her *Myths of Innocence and Imagination: The Case of the Fairy Tale*:

The myth of the innocent child ... enshrines adult desires and dreams. It seems the adult-world still needs this fantasy, this ideal child that has access to a form

of desirable knowledge, innocence, and a kind of supernatural irrationality
Maybe this childhood Eden is the only Eden imaginable in the modern world.
(Sky 2002: 375)

The most disturbing element of the continued belief in childhood innocence is that such a notion may be linked to the need to protect the child from experiencing what are (so) often referred to as 'the grim realities of life'. As Gerson claims:

I found myself in a strange place for a children's librarian this year. I was finding it difficult to read children's books. Much of what I was attempting to read was breaking my heart ...I felt a strong desire to buffer my children from the grim realities of life. (Gerson 2004: 16)

While the author of this paper in no way contends that children should be exposed only to a literary fare of holocaust and warfare, I do believe, along with Baumel in her allusion to the implied morality of the Cautionary Tale—whether ancient or modern—that:

Among the moral tasks that parents and educators bear is the necessity of teaching children about evil. Not the difference between good and evil, which is an easier and more understandable undertaking, but that of teaching children about the existence of evil in the world. (And) one of the means of doing so is though the use of literature meant for children and young adults, that places evil in the context of worldly historical events from the far and recent past. (Baumel 2005: 147)

Based on the ideas presented in this paper, it is this writer's belief that there are times when both children and those who write for them should 'embrace uncomfortable situations' if children's literature is to continue to challenge those 'social structures that perpetuate oppression' (Qureshi 2006: 41).

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