

Children's Books in the Age of Pluralism

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It was a good life being a children's librarian in New Zealand in the 1960s. The New Zealand School Library Service and the schools we helped were awash with money (well, they had enough anyway) and there were few hassles, either with children, parents, teachers or other librarians. Everyone seemed grateful for our efforts and apart from a Seventh Day Adventist School which declined to borrow any fiction, no-one criticised our book selection.

Into this idyllic scene burst a bombshell - Josephine Kamm's *Young Mother* about teenage pregnancy. Although it was a cautionary, even a moral tale about the dangers of unmarried teenage sex many parents and teachers were upset that such a subject should even be mentioned in a book for teenagers, and librarians who stocked it came under fire.

But it was in the mid-1980s that a change in children's and young people's books published in the UK became suddenly noticeable. The Librarians' Christian Fellowship (LCF) received one or two letters expressing concern over the contents of some juvenile literature and carried out a survey to see how widespread this concern was [1]. Although limited to Evangelical and Charismatic Christians it revealed considerable dismay at what children were being given to read. It was the heyday of the Livingstone and Jackson "Find your own adventure" books and these and other occult type stories were causing as much anxiety to parents as delight to some of their offspring. Other complaints were about coarse and ungrammatical language, swearing and blasphemy, teenage sex, racism, books which confused good and evil, which sneered at vicars and the church and at Christianity in general and books which were anti-authority. About the same time members of the public began to complain with some effect to booksellers. *The Zodiac Postman Pat* was withdrawn from publication because a major chain of distributors refused to stock it saying that they didn't want to cope with the anticipated stream of objectors. Most children's librarians are now acutely aware that buying a book with a Puffin imprint no longer guarantees happy acceptance by all and sundry. It is, of course, not only Christians who complain. At least one library service I know worries about stocking any books which mention pigs in case Moslems are offended. Anything deemed too politically incorrect or too politically correct can cause an outcry. Why is there now so much disagreement about what constitutes a good children's book?

A shift from a quasi-Christian consensus to the philosophical pluralism of the post-sixties makes it inevitable that many books will offend somebody and librarians have neither the time nor the inclination to filter out everything to which somebody might conceivably object. But they might be interested to know what this paper aims to explain - Why do committed Christians (ie not "nice people from the West who are kind and generous" but real believers in the Bible and the creeds of the Church go out of their way and, often in some trepidation and embarrassment, pluck up the courage to explain to a librarian or a school teacher what distresses them about a book their child is reading.

Just as Moslems believe that Allah is the only true God and Mohammed is his prophet, so Christians believe that Jesus is the only way to God. This is the hard core of Christian belief and the basis of what Christians say and do including pointing out why they do not like books which will, by promoting anti-Christian beliefs and practices, turn children away from God although they would not expect every book to turn children to God, ie be specifically religious.

I have already mentioned the kinds of books mentioned by respondents to the LCF survey of

1989 so will concentrate on developments after that date. In particular I want to explore the clash between Christian belief and the post-modernist and pluralist ethos of the '90s as it affects books written for children and teenagers.

First, a summary of some basic differences:

- CHRISTIANITY

1. Absolute truth exists.
2. The meaning of human existence is contained in the Biblical narrative, beginning with the downfall of Lucifer, through creation, the fall and redemption of humankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, culminating in the end of history and the vanquishing of evil.
3. Final reality resides in God who is good, therefore there is reason for hope.
4. Christianity is the only wholly true religion and therefore the others are false where they differ.
5. The Bible is God's word to humankind mediated through human authors. Authorial intent is all important.
6. No longer provides a philosophical and ethical framework for western democracies.

- POST-MODERNISM

1. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes, the only truth is that there is no Truth.
2. There are no meta-narratives which can bring all the particulars into a universal which gives meaning to life.
3. Life is meaningless, ie without objective hope, therefore reality is grim.
4. No religion has the right to pronounce itself true and others false or inferior.
5. The meaning of any text is created by the reader. A word (signifier) has no necessary connection to the thing signified.
6. Pluralism generally accepted as the 'right' way to think.

The following survey is based partly on my own reading and work as a school librarian and partly on comments and letters from other Christians, some with a professional interest in children's books.

Many traditional children's books - *Heidi*, *What Katy Did*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* - fitted into the Christian framework outlined above. Later authors like C S Lewis followed the same tradition. The tension between good and evil was a strong element in the plot and its resolution on the side of good gave a satisfying ending.

After the 1960s there was a subtle change. Authors like Susan Cooper and Alan Garner seemed to be writing about the clash of good and evil, light and darkness but the nature of good and evil seemed to have changed somewhat. The children in *Elidor*, for example, play with a ouija board as though it were an entirely innocent occupation and in *The Dark is Rising* Christianity is described as too weak to overcome evil. But recently published books are going further.

Some writers are now using the Bible as a source for their books and some are treating it in a way which will horrify Christians. In Michael Morpurgo's *The War of Jenkins' Ear*, for example, a schoolboy claims to be Jesus returned to earth. If this is not actually blasphemous it is distasteful to followers of Christ and many Christians will consider it blasphemous. On the other hand Alan Clark's *The Good Book* is an intriguing tale of a gang leader who studies Old Testament battles in his gran's Bible (Authorised Version and the author quotes it at great length) and uses the tactics to defeat other gangs. Gory incidents like the knifing of Eglon - "and the haft also went in after the blade; and the fat closed upon the blade so that he

could not draw the dagger out of his belly; and the dirt came out" - gain a startling realism from their new context. Fortunately New Testament ethics prevail in the end.

Jostein Gaarder's *The Christmas Mystery* and Geraldine McCaughren's *A Little Lower Than the Angels* use biblical themes or stories. Some Christians may object to the rumbustious treatment of biblical characters in McCaughren but the book is all about a band of strolling players in the Middle Ages and is historically accurate - mystery plays were like this.

But the book which causes me most disquiet is the very recently published *The Subtle Knife* by Philip Pullman. It is the second book of a trilogy, *The Dark Materials*, and the third story may yet nullify what I am about to say when it is published. I rather hope it will. Both *The Subtle Knife* and its forerunner, *Northern Lights* are a brilliant and imaginative *tour de force*. The writing is breathtakingly evocative. If any children's books from the second half of the twentieth century survive to become classics they must include these. Janni Howker described *The Subtle Knife* as a theological novel like the *Narnia* books and at first glance this would appear to be the case. The Christian belief that we reap what we sow - that actions have consequences which we must bear - is worked out in the adventures of Lyra and the other characters. That people have souls each with its own unique characteristic is vividly portrayed. Each daemon (or soul) is in the shape of an animal. In children (because their characters are still developing?) the daemons can change from one animal to another, but in adults they are fixed. The greatest tragedy that can befall anyone is to become separated from their daemon. (Again - biblical overtones - "what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?")

But in spite of this, so far the trilogy seems to be a deconstruction of the whole biblical metanarrative, in that it says the opposite to what the Bible's Author (in human terms, its authors) intended. In one incident Thorold, Lord Asriel's servant, a shrewd and honest man, describes to the witch, Serafina Pekkala, how his master, loathing the Church but despising it because it is too weak to be worth fighting, has decided (Thorold is not absolutely sure about this) to aim his rebellion against God:

"He's gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself and he's a-going to destroy him. That's what I think ... course, anyone setting out to do a grand thing like that would be the target of the church's anger." [2]

Later on another witch, Tura Skadi, reports back after a meeting with Lord Asriel:

"And he invited us ... to join his army against the Authority ... He showed me that to rebel was right and just, when you considered what the Authority did in his name ... And I thought of all the terrible mutilations I have seen in our own south-lands; and he told me of many more hideous cruelties dealt out in the Authority's name ... He opened my eyes. He showed me things I had never seen, cruelties and horrors all committed in the name of the Authority, all designed to destroy the joys and the truthfulness of life." [3]

So God becomes the source of evil and falsehood, the fallen angels are good, Lucifer is, after all, an angel of light, and the fall is something admirable. Pullman attacks both Catholic and Protestant Christianity. His church's structure is Catholic with a pope and a magisterium but in *Northern Lights* the pope's name is Calvin and he lives in Geneva. Children will get the impression that Christianity has done nothing but harm. This is a commonly held view but it is not fair and ignores centuries of social work and the influence of Christian reformers like Wilberforce and Shaftesbury. But we must await the third volume. Perhaps Paradise will yet be regained.

One of the aspects of post-modernism which has most pervaded children's and young people's books is hopelessness. The prevailing message in teenage literature now seems to be, "You can't trust anyone, especially adults and particularly your parents, and the whole world is a pile of shit". [4]

Sartre's contention that life without an infinite reference point is meaningless was greeted at first by those who did not wish to take him seriously with the reply 'Does there have to be a meaning?' If the increasing gloominess of teenage novels is anything to go by it seems that perhaps there does or life is grim indeed. An increasing number of children's writers feel it is their duty to convey this sense of pessimism to their readers because, they feel, it is the final reality about life.

John Marsden, an Australian writer, says that protection is the worst form of repression. One of his latest novels, *Dear Miffy*, is about a boy who commits suicide. Speaking about the book at a meeting of Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research (ACLAR) [5], John McKenzie said:

"Is it responsible writing for a character with whom we identify to commit suicide, or attempt suicide (and make a mess of things) without the text exploring other coping strategies? What exactly is the reader left with to take away from the text? That there is no hope if you, like Tony, have suffered rejection and violence? ... For a reader who, like Tony, is at the edge of the abyss, the experience of the narrative is likely to push him/her over. Death would seem to be a positive embrace." [6]

Two other Australian writers, Maureen Stewart and Margaret Clark have also recently written novels about teenage suicide. In Australia it is a very relevant issue as there has been a dramatic increase in the number of young people committing suicide. Books like this can help only if they offer some hope.

Even Teletubbies was attacked recently in *The Times* for giving toddlers a false view of reality by showing babies playing in the sunshine, instead of preparing them for real life.

Some fantasy stories for junior age children are now moving towards pessimism. Victor Kelleher's *To the Dark Tower* is an expanded retelling of Browning's poem *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, in fantasy form for children. Tom Roland, the hero, goes on a quest which involves terrible danger only to find when he finally reaches his goal that the golden age he has been promised is a delusion. He must be content with the rather depressing life he has because there is no paradise to be gained.

Christians, ironically, should understand this world view. If the Christian hope of the resurrection were removed we would be in the same boat. As St Paul said, "If Christ be not risen we are of all men most miserable". Or, to put it in the words of a twentieth century Christian:

"It is the age-old insistence of Christianity that man is not a lonely accident in a meaningless whirl. To be sure that can be no vital and sustaining hope without faith, but the reasonableness of faith is not yet argued down. Read the New Testament again. Every life which discovers meaning, is one more bulwark against the flood of evil which despair, above all, has let loose - violence, drugs, cynicism, cruelty and the passionate quest for elusive personal advantage." [7]

Looked at on a more mundane level, or, as Christians would put it, on the level of common grace, present reality is not in fact all bad. Babies do play in the sun. Pleasures and achievements, love and goodness are also part of reality. John Marsden and those who feel

like him might find Chesterton's *Ballad of a Suicide* instructive as well as amusing.

Another point to be considered is the kind of child who reads these books. Age, of course, is a factor. Children are happier if they are not exposed to all the world's wretchedness from the earliest possible age. Most libraries now divide their collections by age. Another point already touched on in discussing John Marsden is the background of young readers:

"Writers do not realise that in reacting sometimes for novelty's sake against all the 'niceness' 'respectability' or 'virtues' of their own early days they are teaching young people who do not have that background at all". [8]

There can be no doubt that teenagers revel in doom and gloom in much the same way as adults enjoy a good murder mystery, nor that reality today is nastier than it has been for decades. Nor should we fail to recognise the cathartic or even therapeutic value of books that help children come to terms with the unfortunate experiences so many of them are forced to undergo these days. "Misery e'er delights to trace its semblance in another's case" [9] is still true today. Some Christian parents will be upset that subjects like divorce, drugs, rape and anorexia are the common ingredients of so many teenage novels. I would encourage such parents to realise that not all children can escape these misfortunes and then ask them to read some of these books noting how the authors deal with the subjects. There is all the difference in the world between a book which makes drug taking seem like fun and one which shows its evil consequences, as, for example, Melvyn Burgess does in *Junk*.

A third area where librarians will receive complaints is novels which portray sex between unmarried people as OK I fear there will be little sympathy here for the Christian viewpoint which is so well known it does not have to be spelt out. One does not, however, have to be a Christian to recognise the dangers of promoting unprotected sex in, for example, Judy Blume's *Forever* (written before the AIDS epidemic. She might write it differently now). there are some books which seem a little anachronistic in their view of teenage sex. In both Rosemary Harris's *Summer of the Wild Rose* and in Michelle Magorian's *A Little Love Song* young people who lived in an era when extra-marital sex was sternly frowned upon seem to indulge in it without the misgivings they would probably have had. There is also an implication in the latter story that the cruel treatment of Miss Hilda (incarcerated in a mental hospital when she became pregnant) makes it alright for anyone else to do what she did. Sex between teenagers is practically the norm now in novels about relationships. As a Christian I wish it were otherwise and I wish authors would take a long hard look at the results of the sexual revolution and ask themselves whether they would consider writing a novel which assumes that sex should be kept for marriage. I can't see why it should jeopardise literary quality and if Barbara Cartland is anything to go by it doesn't seem to jeopardise popularity. And if it be objected that she isn't read by the young, *Sweet Valley High* is, and from the one example I've read, it seems to thrive on romance rather than sex.

Finally, a word on rubbish. By this I mean series like *Goosebumps*, *Point Horror* and *Sweet Valley High*. Many of them are relatively harmless and even teachers who regard *Goosebumps* as deplorable find them a godsend for some reluctant readers. Certainly in two classes I questioned (a Year 5 and a Year 6) from two different schools they beat even Roald Dahl into second place in the popularity stakes. What Christians object to mainly in horror stories is the occult themes. The Authorised Version puts it quaintly:

"And when they shall say unto you, seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep and mutter: should not people seek unto their God?"

But Christians do take the biblical injunction seriously and are worried by anything that might induce children to experiment with the occult.

Most of the letters I have received have expressed shock, not just at the serried rows of books adorned with phosphorescent fanged monsters in leading booksellers but at the absence of quality literature for teenagers. However there is a lot more of this than a visit to W H Smith's would indicate. And librarians do not find it difficult to find good authors, especially for younger teenagers. Furthermore given a little guidance from teachers and librarians they will soon become enthusiastic about a wide range of authors including classics. We had quite a run on Louisa Alcott at one stage. It is a mistake to think that they will only read the modern controversial authors and are interested exclusively in the seamier side of life. Funny books were some of the most popular among Years 7 and 8 in my last school and as they were studying *The Dairy of Anne Frank* anything on the sufferings of children in other cultures was popular. These included not only books about Jewish children in the holocaust but Beverly Naido's books about South Africa and books about warring factions, for example, in the Lebanon in Patricia St John's *Nothing Matters But Love*. It is a shame when school libraries are overloaded with popular series and teachers and even some librarians give up trying to introduce children to anything more worthwhile. It is also a shame when a whole library collection is slanted to a pessimistic and what Christians would regard as an immoral approach to life. Balance is important.

Finally, Christians keep alive the religion on which British culture is based. Much music, art, and particularly literature requires a knowledge of Christianity to be understood. Librarians are the custodians of our culture. Perhaps Christians may be able to help in this task. None of us wants to harm children. Our differences are more about means than ends in this respect and it is helpful if we understand, even if we cannot agree with, each other's viewpoints. I hope this paper has made some contribution to an understanding of the Christian viewpoint and that the next time an anxious mother comes to complain about her child's library book she might not just be dismissed as some kind of a crank.

NOTES

- 1] The original working party report, "A Great Gulf Fixed? Christian and humanist values in children's books" was published in *Christian Librarian* 13, 1989, pp.9-28. It was later reprinted in *Issues in Librarianship 2: the Debate Continues*. Universities' and Colleges' Christian Fellowship for Librarians' Christian Fellowship, 1996, ISBN 1851690107, pp.76-96. Copies of this latter publication are still available, price £3.00, from the LCF Secretary, 34 Thurlestone Avenue, Ilford, Essex, IG3 9DU.
- 2] Pullman, Philip. *The Subtle Knife*. Scholastic, 1997, p.48.
- 3] Ibid. p.283.
- 4] Ireland, Jill. "Are they the best books of the year?" *Ready Time* 4 (2) May 1996, p.18.
- 5] ACLAR - Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research.
- 6] McKenzie, John. "To be or not to be? Don't be a wuss: life sucks. Moral responsibility and suicide in children's literature. In *Access* 11 (3) August 1997, p.10.
- 7] Blaiklock, E. M. and D. A. *Why Didn't They Tell Me?* Zondervan, 1972, p.157.
- 8] Yule, Valerie, quoted by Kate Legge in "Life Sucks Timmy". *Australian Magazine* 8 March 1998, p.13.
- 9] Cowper, William. *The Castaway*.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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