

# A GREAT GULF FIXED?

## CHRISTIAN AND HUMANIST VALUES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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### The Nature of the Problem

When I worked as an advisory librarian for the New Zealand School Library Service in the 1960's the *bête noire* of children's writers among librarians was Enid Blyton. We were supposed to discourage school libraries from stocking her books and the only copies we ourselves held were kept in a special section labelled 'Horrid Examples'. The criteria we used in book selection had little to do with morals, sexual or otherwise, and few if any children's books contained anything offensive to Christian morality. Nor were we concerned that bad golliwogs made the Noddy books racist or that the Famous Five were too middle class. Our objections concerned poor literary quality, the low reading age required and the fact that children got hooked on Blyton and refused to read anything else. I do remember a Christian teacher training college Lecturer mildly objecting to Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* on the grounds that it might make children query the eighth commandment. But, by and large, Christian librarians could work side by side with colleagues who had no Christian commitment without any clash of values when it came to choosing books for children.

Today we have a different situation. There is now often a tension between Christians and others when it comes to choosing children's library books and before we examine this in more detail it might be wise to be clear how this situation has come about. To do this it will be necessary to set it in its wider social context.

Until about the 1960s writers for children, even if not Christians themselves, conformed to many Christian presuppositions as most of society still did. That is to say, most people still believed that right and wrong, good and evil, were as Christianity defined them, even if their own behaviour did not measure up to these standards. In the Western world a Christian consensus of opinion still existed among ordinary people.

This consensus had, however, been under attack from Humanists from before the turn of the century. Gradually their views seeped into the universities and theological colleges and from there they began, through the media and through clergy influenced by the higher criticism, to penetrate the thought forms of the man in the street. This meant that as children's authors began to move away from Christian values in their books, so they encountered little opposition from parents because they too had been conditioned to accept non-Christian values. In Rosa Guy's book, *The Friends*, the dying mother says,

'Things that were right and things that were wrong, or what I considered right or wrong, have lost their distinction. Now what I considered right is completely wrong, and what a short time ago I might have considered wrong, is just the way of things.'

The loss of moral absolutes in the modern world could hardly be better expressed. Hence there is now a great gulf fixed between two opposing viewpoints in society; the Humanist view, held at least in part by the majority, and the Christian view contained in the Bible. The problem of children's books must be seen within this context and as one aspect of a battle in which all Christians are now engaged.

Francis Schaeffer defines Humanism as, 'the system whereby man, beginning absolutely by himself, tries rationally to build out from himself, having only man as his integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value'. (1) This is, of course, the absolute antithesis of Christianity which puts God, not man, at the centre of the universe.

What are the practical results of this change in thinking? Firstly, moral values are no longer

regarded as immutable and eternal, fixed in the very nature of God Himself. Instead, they are regarded as relative, changing with the situation, hence extra-marital sex may be right or wrong, according to the circumstances in which it occurs. The orthodox Christian view, of course, is that it is forbidden. The Bible also teaches that homosexual acts are wrong. Humanists and Christians who base their faith on something other than the Bible would disagree. Both these factors have implications for librarians dealing with teenage novels which assume that extra-marital sex and homosexual acts are perfectly acceptable.

Secondly, most Humanists see no harm in occult fantasy stories as they do not believe in the supernatural. Bible believers, on the other hand, take God's Word seriously when it forbids us to meddle with the occult. Thirdly, attitudes to death have changed. Belief in a future life has to quite an extent disappeared. Again, children's books reflect this.

Fourthly, Humanists believe man is essentially good or at least morally neutral. They do not accept the doctrine of original sin. This has implications when dealing with violence and pornography, humanists by and large arguing that showing these on television or writing about them in books has never been proved to corrupt anyone, while Christians tend to feel there is no need to feed the darker side of human nature. There are, of course, many other divergencies of views between Christianity and Humanism but these have particular relevance to children's books.

A brief mention should be made at this point about the New Age. Several recent Christian publications have pointed out that the spiritual vacuum left by Humanism is being filled less by a return to Christianity than by monistic New Age philosophies. No doubt such thinking will be reflected increasingly in children's literature and Christians would do well to look out for it.

In order to find out how far Christians were concerned about current trends in children's literature, the Librarians' Christian Fellowship established a working party under the chairmanship of Norma Waller, and notices were placed in several evangelical periodicals asking for readers' comments. Over forty letters were received. Some were written on behalf of several people and some came from Christian and secular organisations. There was considerable agreement as to what the main areas of concern were. The results were as follows:

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|--|------------|
| 1. Occult and fantasy  | 17 letters |
| 2. Bad language and blasphemy  | 7 letters  |
| 3. Sexual morality   | 6 letters  |
| 4. Racism  | 4 letters  |
| 5. Attitudes to parents  | 3 letters  |
| 6. Attitudes to the Church and Christianity  | 3 letters  |
| 7. Violence  | 2 letters  |
| 8. Death   | 2 letters  |
| 9. Other topics mentioned included morals (other than sexual), anthropomorphism (of animals), sexism, patriotism, poetry, illustrations and bad grammar. |            |

## THE OCCULT

At tea was the vicar's wife.

"We'll have donkey rides and coconut shies..... and we ought to have fortune telling. One doesn't - h'm - *believe* in it - but it's what people expect. Some *harmless* fortune telling by cards, for instance - "

‘I hated my parents and I hated life. I sought to commune with evil spirits to cast spells on those who had wronged me. But you cannot possess the power of evil, it possesses you, and my bitter heart was a good breeding ground. From then onwards I lived in hell, my friends cast me out of town, my home was the burying ground and the rocks; not one evil spirit but many.... Others have told of the crying and the wounding, the chaining and the cutting with stones. I only remember the desolation and loneliness of evil; everything turned from us. There was another demon-possessed man with me...’ (3)

‘Hundreds of black-cowled figures kneel at prayer in the dark-vaulted church ... a golden chalice is being passed... blood drips from his vampire fangs. He hands you the chalice and you have to drink. It is human blood, cursed in death’s name.’ (4)

I have quoted these extracts to show that the treatment of the occult in children’s books varies from the acceptable to the thoroughly objectionable. The first extract reflects the scepticism about fortune-telling which existed in the 1920’s when it was published. Fortune-telling, because no-one really believed in it, was acceptable at a church fête. Elizabeth Speare’s *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* published in 1960 reflects a similar view, this time concerning witchcraft which is assumed to be superstitious nonsense. Ironically it was this disbelief in the occult which led to the repeal of the witchcraft acts in the 1950s and the subsequent proliferation of occult activities to the point where people are beginning to take them seriously again.

The second extract comes from *The Victor*, by a Christian writer, Patricia St. John. Here demon possession is described in a totally compassionate way, the victim finally being delivered by Christ.

The third extract from one of the Puffin books quoted in the Evangelical Alliance report *Danger - Children at Play*, is simply horror for its own sake. Steve Jackson who writes some of these adventure game books for Puffin, in an interview with *Christian Family* magazine, vigorously denied his stories upset anyone but a survey conducted by the Rev. Nigel Holmes-Clough, a Pentecostal pastor, seems to indicate the opposite. His views were given nationwide media coverage and he received over one hundred telephone calls from worried parents, death threats from Satanists, and angry abuse from fans of the books. Mr. Holmes-Clough says,

“I’ve heard of serious personality changes in children who have read these books ... fear of the dark, bed-wetting, children complaining that things are moving in their bedroom. In one instance a boy of seven ... is now having to have psychiatric treatment.” (5)

It should, however, be noted that each Fighting Fantasy book and adventure game book needs to be examined on its own merits. LCF Chairman Richard Waller reviewed four titles and considered one of them, *Starship Traveller*, to be a wholesome fantasy adventure story, though the other three contained unpleasant occult elements.

A blanket condemnation of all books dealing with the occult would not really be the best approach. It depends how it is dealt with. It is the subject which caused most concern to those who replied. At the same time it is a thoroughly confusing subject. Each book needs to be examined on its merits and librarians do not have this sort of time in the course of their work.

Ghost stories did not produce much comment, much more concern being shown about witches. Again, whether ghost stories are acceptable from a Christian viewpoint depends on how the topic is treated. One of the best ghost story writers for children is a Christian, Ann Pilling.

To sum up, it seems to me that the dangers of stories about the occult are twofold. Firstly, they can frighten a sensitive child. Secondly, there is the opposite danger in that children become fascinated

by the occult and become involved in it. I know one twelve year old who has for many years been allowed to watch video 'nasties'. At the age of six he 'crucified' his teddy bear. When he visits the school library he is only interested in books dealing with ghosts and the supernatural.

One final point. One wonders why there has been a sudden upsurge in the number of books for both adults and children dealing with the occult. Pat Wynne Jones has probably found the explanation. She writes,

'It is an interesting fact that as religious education has declined in its role of helping children to become aware of the transcendent, so the volume of children's fiction that communicates a sense of the otherworldly has increased.' (6)

## FANTASY (INCLUDING FAIRY STORIES)

Closely allied to occult tales are fantasy stories. Again, the subject is confusing and again it was a matter of major concern among correspondents.

The Fighting Fantasy genre has already been discussed because of its occult elements. One or two other points should be made. The ingenious format of the stories involves the reader more deeply in the story than in an ordinary book, because his choices decide the plot. Horror is revelled in for its own sake. Many children go through a phase of trying to impress parents and friends by talking about blood and ghosts, vampires and corpses. Treated with mild amusement or ignored this phase usually passes. Unfortunately, the huge number of horror stories now available encourage a child to retain and develop any interest he might have in these subjects.

The second kind of fantasy story is the book of good literary quality by writers like Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald, LeGuin, Gamer and Cooper, to name but a few. A major theme of these books is the battle between good and evil. In writers like Tolkien and Lewis this is very clear, but in some writers it becomes less so. The use of traditional symbolism eg light and darkness to represent good and evil leads the reader to assume the presence of traditional categories, but is this always so? For example, in Susan Cooper's books we are told specifically that the good is not to be equated with Christianity but it is never actually defined. In C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle* the defeat of evil means the end of the old imperfect world and the beginning of a new and perfect one. In Cooper's *The Dark is Rising Sequence* the defeat of evil means the maintenance of the status quo and even that is conditional.

On the surface *Elidor* by Alan Garner appears to be about the struggle between good and evil but the two seem somehow confused. Garner himself called the book nihilistic, so perhaps the confusion is deliberate. Why, for example, is the good prince called Malebron, a name which suggests evil? Why do the treasures the children find have such unpleasant effects? Another objection to the book is the use of the ouija board as a perfectly normal activity.

Objections to some fantasy books have come from interesting quarters. Jan Mark, fiercely anti-Christian, attacks fantasies of good and evil such as the overtly Christian Narnia stories for 'the abdication of personal responsibility'. (7) It is surprising to be told that being a Christian allows one to abdicate personal responsibility! The children in the books do not do so. They are frequently having to make moral choices.

Even more interesting is the response to the Narnia books in an American article reprinted by the Christian Parent-Teacher League. (8) This article in their magazine says Christian children should not read these books for various reasons, eg God is not in them, they are Pagan, Jesus was sacrificed

as a lamb not a lion, they contain expressions such as 'By Jove' and 'golly', the children in them never go to church. It seems to me that the writer has completely misunderstood what Lewis was doing and completely underestimates the ability of children to sort out literal truth from fantasy. But others may feel differently. One correspondent said her children did find it difficult to tell fact from fiction. David Barratt takes the view more commonly held by Christian parents (and apparently by an atheist like Jan Mark) that Christian belief is reinforced in children by the Narnia books. He identifies key Christian elements such as the resurrection and the last judgement in them. (9) Pamela McKenzie who spent some time interviewing children on their reactions to books came to the conclusion that 'sometimes fantasy and metaphor convey truth better than a straightforward book written for the purpose can'. (10) A book like *Hardsell*, by the Christian writer Roger Day, can have the unfortunate effect of making readers more interested in the evil in the story (in this case, the evils of pornography) than in the author's moral purpose. This is not likely to happen in a fantasy story because the kinds of evil portrayed *eg* wrapping a donkey in a lion's skin do not appeal, or are impossible because they involve magic.

One last point about fantasy. There is a huge demand for it, and if Christians do not produce it only the secular world view will be represented.

## FAIRY STORIES

Two problems arose here. The first concerned the ultra-sensitive child who is scared by some of the brutal elements especially in Grimms' fairy tales. One mother said she had been terrified by them and they had haunted her for years. The vast majority, however, cope quite happily with these tales, and perhaps it should be up to the parents to keep such books from small children if they think they will be upset by them. The second problem concerns monsters which are no longer monsters.

'More often than not when you see or read about 'monsters' these days they are presented not as the terrible and menacing figures familiar from the tales of yesteryear ... but as rather adorable and cuddly creatures.' (11)

In other words, as a new genre of horror stories shorn of moral values is filling the library shelves, the old fairy tales where good and evil are clearly depicted are being replaced by emaciated versions designed to make sure no child will ever again be frightened by wicked witches, man-eating giants, or cunning wolves. But the old fairy stories invited a child to side with the good and to fight the evil. The new stories tell them that there is really no evil to fight. Thus, they grow up unable to choose the good and reject the evil because they scarcely know the difference, and the result is real monsters - murderers, rapists and child abusers - who cannot feel guilt because the whole concept of right and wrong is foreign to them. Of course, removing monsters from fairy stories is not the main cause of this situation. Rather, it is another manifestation of the Humanist attempt to abolish absolutes.

Two letters mentioning this problem were particularly concerned with witches. One mother said,

'I do decry treatment of baddies in books as though they were really rather neutral or even quaintly likeable. I particularly dislike the Meg and Mog books for this reason (with their witch character who doesn't behave as a real witch would at all).'

Another correspondent wrote,

'There seems to have been a determined effort to remove children's fears of traditionally fearsome things. We find friendly witches and happy monsters etc. But I read somewhere ... that this can deprive children of opportunities to learn that certain things are bad and that

there is a battle going on.’

On the other hand, a librarian who chooses books for a county school library service said that she thought that comical witches are relatively harmless, and a writer in *The Times* accused adults of reading too much into certain books. (12) Writing of Ronald Dahl’s *The Witches* she says it should be read in the spirit in which it is written - as a piece of rollicking good fun.

## SEXUAL MORALITY

Most of the objections to books about sex concerned class readers and the fact that children are obliged to read them. However, articles published in the *Times Educational Supplement*, *Christian Family* and elsewhere show that parents are also worried about books in public and school libraries. Five main categories of writing about sex produced complaints. These were: pre-marital sex; explicit descriptions of sex; rape or attempted rape; homosexuality; abortion. However, one correspondent was of the opinion that children should be given books on sex and violence in order to come to terms with their own emotional development.

It was interesting to note that several complaints came from the Avon Education Authority area. Whether the Authority is more extreme in its book selection policies than most or whether Avon parents are more conservative than most I do not know. A parent from Bristol said that the head of English to whom she complained said that so many children were not in the habit of reading that it was difficult to find suitable material. The correspondent added that she was sure the teacher had a valid point but wondered if it was necessary to resort to sordid books dealing with sexual relations between school children, abortion, adultery, teenage drinking *etc.* She was referring particularly to *My Darling my Hamburger* by Paul Zindel and *It’s my Life* by Robert Leeson.

It is not only evangelical Christians who object to this type of literature. A report in the *London Evening Standard* quoted astronomer Patrick Moore as objecting to *The Milkman’s on his way*. (13) This book by David Rees which contains explicit sexual passages and preaches that homosexuality is normal with a tract-like fervour was placed on the positive images list for school libraries by the former Inner London Education Authority’s Learning Resources Branch.

One book which caused me some disquiet but was not mentioned by anyone else was *Summers of the Wild Rose* by Rosemary Harris. Unlike the others it has a quality of gentleness and restraint. It is a poignant and beautifully told story of an English school girl’s love affair with an Austrian boy just before the Second World War. The reader is made to feel that the young couple’s sexual relationship is not only not wrong but somehow positively good and beautiful. I can imagine a girl brought up in a Christian home who found a book by Hautzig or Rosa Guy distasteful might well begin to question Christian moral standards after reading this book.

Aimed at younger readers, Judy Blume’s books require a section to themselves. Again, criticism of them has not been confined to evangelicals. Marie Winn discusses them in a chapter headed *The End of Secrecy; letting it all hang out*. She says,

‘The familiar warning “Not in front of the children” is receding into the dim past... There is no aspect of adult life be it promiscuity, perversity, dishonour, misery or confusion, that seems outside the ken of today’s children.’

Judy Blume, author of many books for children and young teenagers, is a pivotal figure in the transition from a secretive to an open approach. She articulates the change to an interviewer,

‘I hate the idea that you should always protect children. They live in the same world as we

do. They see and hear things. The worst is when there are secrets ... Sexuality and death - these are the two big secrets we try to keep from children....' (14)

Judy Blume's books are widely read. Pamela McKenzie says that among the girls she interviewed they were the most popular. Judy Blume says that they are about the things she wanted to know when she was growing up. What she does is reassure children their experiences are universal. But in doing so is she teaching them a wrong set of values? In *Forever* a full sexual relationship between two unmarried teenagers is taken quite for granted as is the fact that the relationship is only temporary. Apart from the moral dangers, what about the physical and emotional ones which can arise from the kind of lifestyle condoned here?

Unfortunately, sex is an area where the Christian and Humanist viewpoints clash head on. There seems to be a strong lobby which is conducting a virtual crusade to promote teenage sex. Librarian Keith Barker criticises descriptions of sexual encounters between unmarried people by writers like K.M. Peyton and Robert Leeson for not being explicit enough. (15) He says this is hypocrisy and he also objects to what he calls the 'inherent didacticism' in teenage books *ie* they tend to show the unpleasant effects of teenage sex such as unwanted pregnancy and abortion. He quotes with approval Norma Klein who wants,

'many more books on teenage sex - young people having affairs which lead neither to abortion, pregnancy or marriage but possibly to pleasure and the complications ensuing from any close loving relationship.'

The gist of Barker's article is that teenagers want books containing explicit passages on sex, therefore they need them, therefore the librarian must provide them. Any librarian who disagrees with this view is acting out of ignorance or fear. I think he is wrong for three reasons. Firstly, wants are not the same as needs. Secondly, he is being unrealistic. The unfortunate effects of teenage sex are, in fact, all too common. Thirdly, it is actually possible that some librarians might oppose certain books out of principle rather than out of ignorance or fear.

## **BAD LANGUAGE**

This came high on the list of concerns. Blasphemy, swearing, vulgarity and bad grammar were all mentioned. This kind of language, it is generally argued, is realistic and is particularly acceptable in a book of literary merit. A clergyman who disagreed quoted the following passage from a book his eleven year old daughter brought home.

"I don't give a bugger about train sets!" he said. "And I don't give a bugger about you!"

'Christ! Oosh, that made me jump. Bloody old owl went by like a ball of black fluff. Couldn't hear the old sod till he was practically on me bloody shoulder'. (16)

The County Librarian to whom the clergyman complained said the book had been selected on the basis of 'authoritative opinion' but as the complainant wrote, the appearance of such language in a quality book tends to give it 'a false air of respectability which must surely confuse a child's moral judgement'.

Class readers in secondary schools caused much concern because of blasphemy and swearing. *Kes* and *Of Mice and Men* were two mentioned in this regard.

## VIOLENCE

There was no indication that violence should be avoided altogether in children's books. The general feeling seemed to be that, rightly treated, it could have a cathartic effect and help children make right moral judgements. Books objected to included Westall's *Machine Gunners* and Cormier's *The Chocolate War* because of what one correspondent referred to as their 'blurred and cynical stance'. The need to protect small or very sensitive children from being frightened by violence in books is important. Parents usually know what their own youngsters can cope with. Some preschoolers, for example, love Sendak's *Where the Wild Things are*, others are terrified by it. There was some disagreement over whether violence acted as an incentive to violent behaviour in children or whether it acted as a safety valve. Probably it can have either effect depending on the child. War stories were not mentioned.

The degree of violence was a matter of concern. The Fighting Fantasy books, already mentioned for their occult elements also score highly in the violence stakes. An article in *New Society* pointed out that former adventure heroes like Biggles were always good and only committed acts of violence against evil characters. However,

'This is not the world of the Fighting Fantasy books. Here readers quickly learn to hit out first and ask questions afterwards. Whether what you do proves to be the right thing in terms of consequences, moral or otherwise, is rarely an issue ...' (17)

That children themselves enjoy the crude violence in Fighting Fantasy books is beyond question. Whether this is a healthy enjoyment, and what its wider implications may be both now and for the future remains more dubious.

## ATTITUDES TO PARENTS

"Our divorce has nothing to do with you, Karen ... Someday you will grow up and leave home, then what will I have?"

"You see ... that proves it! All you care about is yourself! You never think about me... you never ask me what I think or what I feel or what I want... I wish I was never born!"

'She was almost always there, ready to play with the children and read to them and help them to do their home lessons... and she always made up funny pieces of poetry for their birthdays and for other occasions...'

These two quotations epitomise the change that has occurred not just in children's books but in society at large. The first from Judy Blume's *It isn't the end of the World* reveals the selfcentredness and inadequacy of the girl's mother. The other from Louisa Alcott's *Little Women* describes a mother at peace with herself and the world and able to concentrate on fulfilling her children's needs. The difference reflects the loss of religious faith, and the erosion of values in society. Generally, parents who have to find all their strength for living in themselves rather than in God find it harder to cope with the needs of their children.

It is true that anti-authority attitudes have been around for years in children's books. Enid Blyton's Mr. Plod was supposed to endanger children's respect for the police, and the mildly anti-authoritarian tone of the *Beano*, Molesworth and William, have amused many generations of children. But these gained their humorous effects partly from their very improbability.

The trouble with the Zindels, Cormiers, Guys and Blumes of today is that they describe situations that are only too real, and they offer no hope and give no solution except a passive acceptance of the



situation. In so many teenage novels parents are divorced, inadequate, egocentric or bewildered, and children are correspondingly contemptuous of and rebellious against the family and the society that have failed them. That such novels can help children come to terms with their situation is probably true to some extent, but does this make up for the false values they are teaching along the way?

It is interesting that family novels of previous generations are still popular. Perhaps they still fulfil a need? Many of them also are about parentless children. Anne of Green Gables, Polyanna and Heidi are all orphans, Katy's mother is dead and the March girls' father is absent. In every case, though, the children find someone who loves them and whom they can love and respect in turn. All are set in societies where Christian values prevail and God is always in the background to give meaning to life and a reason for behaving virtuously.

Contrast this with *Edith Jackson* by Rosa Guy, about a family of orphaned girls whose foster mother cannot cope and rejects them. The oldest girl's mentor can offer only an existential solution to Edith's problems and the choice she finally makes to authenticate herself is to have an abortion (with her mentor's approval), something which goes against all her natural instincts to love and cherish small children, of whom she is particularly fond.

### **ATTITUDES TO THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY**

Three letters complained about overtly anti-Church attitudes. One writer objected to Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr. Tom* because Tom's mother, although very religious, was very cruel. I am not sure that this is a fair criticism. The woman was clearly insane and the village church played a large part in Tom's rehabilitation. Whether a child reading the book would realise Tom's mother's behaviour was caused by her insanity rather than by her Bible reading I do not know. *Tulku*, by Peter Dickinson I find more disturbing. The boy's Christian faith is denigrated and Tibetan Buddhism presented as a better religion. In Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* the reader is told that an older and stronger magic than Christianity is needed to overcome evil, and the Vicar is patronisingly portrayed as the impotent purveyor of an irrelevant religion. In Westall's *The Scarecrow*, the Vicar is treated as a joke, and in *Edith Jackson* the preacher is a randy old hypocrite. Of course, such people exist, but they still tend to be the exception rather than the rule. The average teenage book collection would unfortunately give the opposite impression.

### **ATTITUDES TO DEATH**

For a long time death was a taboo subject in children's books. It has come back because psychologists say it is harmful to children to ignore it. However where Victorians, albeit somewhat sentimentally, treated death as the doorway to another life modern writers give no such hope. Macmillan's Topliners series includes a title by Gunnel Beckman *19 is Too Young to Die*, describing a nineteen year old girl dying from Leukaemia with no hope of it being anything but the final end.

'Oh dear kind God who I don't believe in ... do something ...'

is the nearest she gets to praying. Compare this to a short story by L.M. Montgomery. (18) In *Each in his own Tongue* a woman dying in terror because of her sins finds repentance and peace.

### **RACISM**

Four letters mentioned this subject. When thinking about racism in children's books a useful basis

for discussion is the *Christian Manifesto on Race* (19) published by Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice. Maurice Hobbs of ECRJ mentioned two useful publications. *The Slant of the Pen* (20) deals with racism in school texts and *Multicultural Teaching to Combat Racism in School and Community* is a journal which often contains reviews of children's books.

One very useful letter came from a church bookstall manager who had adopted an Anglo-West Indian baby. She says her son aged two already identifies strongly with black/brown children in books and gives several suggestions for writers of children's books.

1. Illustrations should include black/brown people with correct racial features.
2. Black/brown adults as well as children should be portrayed.
3. Black/brown people should be important characters, not just part of crowd scenes.
4. Multi-racial families and friendships should be portrayed.
5. Black/brown people should be portrayed as native residents of the UK, not just as immigrants.
6. Black/brown people should be portrayed in professional occupations and as helpers of other people.
7. In Bible stories, Jesus should not be white.

One letter brought up the subject of world religions. Certain races are equated with certain religions. This is not always accurate and increases misunderstanding, but the liberal establishment prefers to keep up the fiction that Christianity is confined to white people. One correspondent tells us that the greatest pressure to have Christian books put in the public libraries is coming from black Pentecostal Christians in Birmingham.

There is an increasing number of books for children which try to promote understanding between races. One excellent example is Rukshana Smith's *Sumitra's Story*, giving keen insights into the problems of a young Indian school girl coming from East Africa and having to adapt to English society. As a Christian, I would quarrel only with the assumption in it that Hinduism and Christianity are equally true.

## MISCELLANEOUS TOPICS

### 1. SEXISM

One correspondent pointed out that sexism should be a concern of evangelicals and should not be left to others. It is unlikely, however, that a consensus could ever be arrived at by the LCF because Christians disagree so radically about the roles of men and women in society. One letter mentioned *Pour out the Cocoa, Janet: sexism in children's books* (21) which poses most of the key questions.

### 2. ILLUSTRATIONS

These came in for some criticism. 'Vague, wild, abstract drawings *etc.* don't appeal. My one year old spends hours enjoying fussy, detailed, realistic illustrations, *eg* Ahlbergs, Shirley Hughes and even Rev. Awdrey.' From my own experience I would agree and add Richard Scarry to the list.

### 3. POETRY

There was a complaint about a paucity of good poetry for children. I was surprised to hear this, although it is true that many of the more recent poetry books for children are not collections of

traditional poems if that is what is meant by good poetry. There does seem to be a preponderance of humorous and nonsense poetry which is the sort children most enjoy.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

It has been the purpose of this discussion paper to delineate problems rather than provide solutions. I should, however, like to conclude by pointing out what kind of opposition we can expect in our search for solutions and to indicate tentatively some avenues we might explore.

Humphrey Carpenter in his book *Secret Gardens* says that children's books are about ideals. Most children's writers are trying to get some message across to their readers, but today it is often a message which is at odds with the teachings of the Bible, implicitly if not overtly. But the letters we received, and recent articles in library and education journals, show what is likely to happen if we try to change this state of affairs.

One librarian commented that his colleagues should not be put off by complaints which come from parents rather than the kids themselves. One article in an education journal referred to 'parental interference' and 'touchy parents'. Another described the opposition to *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin* as 'hysteria'. Another writer says,

'We are left ultimately with only our own convictions of the rightness or wrongness of choosing a particular book and it is very difficult indeed to convince someone that our conviction is more trustworthy than theirs.' (22)

A truly Humanist and relativist statement! Of course, if there is no absolute standard of right and wrong, he is quite correct, but Christians claim to have such a standard in the Bible. If we say this, though, we must be prepared to face accusations of fundamentalism and probably comparisons with the Ayatollah! Indeed, alienation from non-Christian colleagues was a source of worry for some correspondents. One pointed out that although we do not want to compromise we do need to conserve relationship and trust. Someone else commented that they were aware of a tension between being a children's librarian and a Christian at the same time.

One librarian stated that a librarian's task is to defend controversial titles. Against that another replied,

'May I encourage Christians in library work not to be afraid to oppose those books which are so clearly a product of the godless philosophies of the present age.'

Librarians on the whole, though, seem to be more considerate of parental views than teachers. Several letters spoke of unsympathetic reactions to queries about set texts. One teacher in a Scottish Academy accused two children whose parents had complained about a particularly sordid poem of religious bigotry in front of the rest of the class. (23)

Central to the whole debate is the issue of censorship, a practice on the whole abhorrent to librarians, and when one considers totalitarian regimes rightly so. However few librarians, in fact, want to abolish censorship completely. Most, for example, would wish to censor blatantly racist material. And even if adults should be left to make their own judgements the case is surely different with children. It seems wrong to force a child to study a set text they believe is immoral, and surely a parent's wishes over what their offspring are forced to read take precedence over a teacher's. Otherwise, we are in the position of parents in a totalitarian state in this regard.

On the other hand, as I have read material for this paper I have collected examples of books which have been excluded from libraries or which people have wanted excluded. The list is long and the

reasons given in each case vary from the sensible to the ridiculous. My younger daughter's comment was, 'If you ban all those, there won't be any books left in the libraries'. I do feel that a very important factor is balance. It is one thing for a teenager to read the occasional Cormier or Hautzig. It is another when a teenage collection has a disproportionate number of such books and when the collection, taken as a whole, is obviously biased in favour of a particular philosophy of life.

Then there is the literary merit argument already referred to. Of this one headmaster wrote,

'An important principle has to be established and that is, the fact that a morally objectionable book is well written does not make it acceptable.'

Indeed, its superior literary quality may well increase its impact on the reader, making its immorality more influential. Some librarians who wrote felt it was right to exercise a certain amount of censorship.

## **PRACTICAL MEASURES**

1. Try appealing to publishers. Although we will probably not get far here we should continue to let them know what we think.
2. Try appealing to councils and County librarians. Again, no one reported anything but a dusty answer here, but we should keep trying.
3. When appeals to teachers and heads fail it could be worth going to a governor. This could have nasty repercussions on one's child, though, as heads would probably not like it.
4. Try appealing to booksellers. One reported that he had returned his stock of Fighting Fantasy books to the suppliers. Another bookseller returned Westall's *The Scarecrows*.
5. Members of Parliament may be worth contacting. A headmaster concerned about children's books was advised by the Rt. Rev. Maurice Wood to contact Baroness Cox who is interested in such matters.
6. We should consider co-operation with other organisations, eg the UCCF Literary Studies Group and the Fellowship of Christian Writers both suggested co-operation. The Association of Christian Teachers is another possibility.
7. Parents can volunteer to run school book clubs. This gives you some control over what is offered to children. One lady reported returning some books she considered unsuitable.
8. One teacher organised a very successful book fair at which the children's editor of Lion Publishing gave a talk and sold Lion books.
9. Christian bookshops can help by promoting books in the school and library markets.
10. Our local library has recently shifted the young adult books away from the children's section to the adult section. This makes it less likely younger children will read unsuitable books. This practice should be encouraged by those in a position to do so.
11. Librarians in public libraries might put forward the suggestion that some books should be kept behind the desk and that a parent's note should be required before they are issued.
12. We must remember that others beside committed Christians feel as we do on many of these matters. One librarian wrote of being able to work happily as a member of a county book

selection team. My daughter caught giggling with three friends at the age of eleven over *Forever* had it promptly confiscated by a teacher. I was grateful. It is important that we support such people.

13. Refrain from complaining over minor points or complaining in an unpleasant and emotional way. We should also let publishers, teachers and librarians know about books we find especially good. A donation of books to the school library (not necessarily Christian ones) is another idea.
14. Pray for Christian teachers and librarians, especially those who influence book selection policies, and encourage young Christians to become librarians and teachers.
15. Support schemes like the Christian Book Promotion Trust library project in which groups of churches are encouraged to donate Christian books to public and school libraries. There is a useful booklist of fiction and non-fiction titles for young people and details can be provided by the LCF Secretary.
16. Use other booklists drawn up by Christians, eg those compiled by such organisations as CARE for Education.
17. It is important for individual librarians to do what they can in their own libraries, but we need to try by reason and evidence, undergirded by prayer, to influence book selection policies and thus tackle the problem at source.

One last point. There is a dearth of Christian authors who can write good children's books. One correspondent complained that Christian children's books tend to be patronising, boring, old-fashioned, inclined to preach, and twee. I cannot improve on Pat WynneJones's comment,

'It seems to me that the greatest need is for stories which really show what life is like for a Christian child in today's world. We have had plenty of effective communication of Christian truth through the medium of fantasy but little realistic fiction showing the springs of action, the conflicts and pressures, the attacks of conscience and the real desire to follow Christ wholeheartedly which are the experience of Christians of any age.' (24)

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This article first appeared in *Christian Librarian*, No. 13, 1989 and was reprinted in *Issues In Librarianship 2: The Debate Continues* 1996. Both are published by *The Librarians' Christian Fellowship* from whom we have obtained permission to reproduce it for use on [www.amen.org.uk](http://www.amen.org.uk)

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*Children's Books in the Age of Pluralism*, *Christian Librarian*, No. 22, 1998

[http://www.la-hq.org.uk/groups/vlg/archive/vlr25\\_7.htm](http://www.la-hq.org.uk/groups/vlg/archive/vlr25_7.htm)

*Still Reading Books: teenage approaches*, *Christian Librarian* No. 27, 2003

This paper includes a listing of books suitable for teenagers.

Available as a PDF file from: <http://www.librarianscf.org.uk/about/workparties/stillreading.pdf>

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*This version scanned and checked by Randall & Mary Hardy, March 2007.*