

Children in the Spanish Civil War

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The Spanish Civil War

There are many books about memories of the war written by those who lived it, although most of them refer to the postwar period.

Josefina Aldecoa has a very interesting testimony titled *Children of the war*, in which she collects the experiences in the war by some of her friends, now very well-known writers, to whom she refers as the “generation of the 50s”, the generation of the war.

Those children had been born in the period between 1925 and 1928, more or less, and at the time of the war were eight, nine, and 10 years old: “the age of the conscious childhood”, to use her own words.

But to be able to understand why these children felt impelled to write about their experiences during the war, I think it is important to analyse, even if it is superficially, the causes and general atmosphere of the Spanish Civil War.

Many books have been written about the war itself, but only a few have tried to disentangle the causes that made a country divide into two antagonist groups. I have not chosen a Spanish author because, in my opinion, a foreigner would write in a more dispassionate way. Gerald Brennan has lived in Spain a long enough time to acquire both love and knowledge of this country, and this is why I have chosen his book *The Spanish labyrinth* to try to present the facts that made the war inevitable. He starts by describing the situation in which Spain was left after the last king, Alfonso XIII was sent into exile.

The elections of the Constituent Cortes gave an enormous majority to the Republicans and their Socialist allies. But, whilst the Socialists presented a compact Left group, the Republicans themselves were split into two sections, Left and Right. The fall of the monarchy had made the right wing Republicans the party of the Conservative Republicanism: all over the country the middle and lower-middle classes who were tired of the king and had little love either for the Army or the Church, voted for them.

The Left Republican parties contained a large number of intellectuals (among which the famous "generation of 98"): doctors, lawyers, and university professors who had received a magnificent education at the Institucion Libre de Ensenanza.

The first Government of the Republic, however, included members of all Republican parties. The Republic had come in as a reaction against the Dictatorship and the Monarchy, both strongly supported by the Church, so, during the recent elections, the Republic had deliberately identified the cause of the Monarchy with that of the Church. The working classes then considered the Church as their mortal enemy, and dozens of churches and convents were destroyed, especially in Andalusia.

Although the first President of the Republic, Don Niceto Alcalá Zamora, was an Andalusian landowner, the main error of the Republic was to ignore the importance of the land and the land workers, the “campesinos”. That is why, although in 1932 the new Spanish Republic had consolidated itself in the eyes of Europe, and Spain had ceased to be the country of the Black Legend, only two years after this, in a wretched hamlet in the province of Cadiz, called Casas Viejas (“old houses”), an old anarchist known as Seisdedos (“six fingers”) organised a party armed with sticks and shotguns and attacked the barracks of the Civil Guard. It is important to bear in mind that the inhabitants of Casas Viejas, as all the field labourers on these great latifundia, were miserably poor and ignorant, which explains their audacity and the impossibility for them to measure the importance of their action.

It was not long before troops were on the move through the whole province. Seisdedos and his followers retired to their houses, where, refusing to surrender, a siege began: their houses were set on fire and 25 people, including Seisdedos, were killed.

To many historians and researchers, this was the real beginning of the Spanish Civil War. A professor of Anthropology at Indiana University (USA), Jerome M Mintz, has written a very well documented book about it. In *The Anarchists of Casa Viejas*, he explains that, although the insurrection of January 1933 momentarily spurred the government’s agrarian reform programme, the efforts were short lived and the end results, minimal. In July 1935, the land reform programme of the Republic soon stagnated because of legal snarls, landlord protest and lack of energy and initiative. Large estates were made virtually invulnerable to expropriation, and land reform came to a standstill.

So, on 17 July 1936, three and a half years after the uprising at Casas Viejas, (the hamlet is now a village and has changed its name to that of Benalup de Sidonia) the Spanish Civil War began. Immediately a purge started of those identified with the Republic and the Left. The blood-bath quickly reached out to include all those "with ideas": Socialists and Republicans, and also anarchists who were known for their strong opinions and their actions.

The rest is already known: the garrisons of Spanish Morocco were taken by the troops of general Franco, and moorish troops were flown across to the mainland and solidified the rebels' hold on Andalusia. The whole country would be split in two: the Blue Zone (right wing) and the Red Zone (left wing).

Children in the war

Josefina Aldecoa, in the book mentioned above, writes about the generation of writers whose testimony we now have. There must have been many others who could not express their ideas through the written word, but very likely, their experiences must have been very similar. These children came from different parts of Spain (North, South, etc) and belonged to different sections of society, but circumstances seemed to have made them alike, and their reaction to the war was very similar. As Josefina points out in the prologue:

In the different towns and villages, in one or other zone of the conflict, these "children of the war" lived the same experience; an experience that we have never forgotten, and that, somehow, had a deep influence on us all.

Although each wrote about the things that they were especially attracted to, there are some recurrent themes which affected all of them:

- ★ Freedom
- ★ Religion
- ★ Social injustice
- ★ The awakening of sexuality.

Freedom

Except for those who lost members of the family, or friends, the time of the war was a period of freedom: there were no rigid hours for meals, for lessons, or for bed. The grown-ups seemed to have forgotten all notions of discipline. Familiar life deviated its attention from domestic themes and fixed it on what was happening outside. In fact, most of the time, they seemed to have forgotten the children ... except in the moments of the bombing, when the main question, every day, was “Where are the children?”.

Josefina Aldecoa points out in the prologue of her book, that they, the children of the war, matured very quickly during the war, precisely because the grown-ups ceased to watch over them.

The children had left the atmosphere of protection in which they had been living, and felt free and happy amongst fear and ruins.

We children, were always somewhere else. We were wandering through the streets, unguarded, uncared for, looking for unexploded bombs and bullets, treasuring pieces of shrapnel ... queuing for potatoes, begging the soldiers for pieces of bread ...

As a matter of fact, many a child died after having found an unexploded bomb among the ruins; many saw, for the first time, a corpse abandoned on the debris.

In *My cousin Rafael*, Julio, the protagonist, whose family is spending the summer in a village near Segovia (like many other families from Madrid), is asked by her aunt:

“Are you longing to go back to Madrid?”

Yes ...

I am sure you must miss Madrid”.

“Madrid” meant to go back to normal life. And the boy remembered that, in normal life, he never went out by himself; that, after school, he used to sit at the balcony and watch the sun go down. That, on Sundays, he was taken to the cinema by one of the servants. And that, apart from his sisters, he did not have a single friend. No, he did not want to go back to Madrid, he rather stayed in the war, which, for him, meant freedom and company.

Because of this possibility of going everywhere, Julio receives the greatest shock of his life: his first encounter with death. Climbing the mountain, in the sierra, looking for bullets and bombs, he finds a swarm of ants, and following them, there was a dark form lying by one of the pine trees. A strong, penetrating smell, unknown to him, was brought by the wind. He did not see much: he rather guessed. Part of the grass was charred, and, from behind the tree, a pair of legs were showing, almost burned, with the boots still on. But he knew there was a corpse behind them, and, unable to stop crying, he ran down the mountain like the wind. It took him a long time to forget the vision of that dead man, and he never told his family.

Carmen Martin Gaité writes about a trip to Burgos from Salamanca, with her father and her uncle, during the war. Her cousin, also a girl of 13, like her, was

going too. Carmen remembers the excitement of going to a hotel for the first time in their lives, and sharing a room with her cousin: such a thing would have been unthinkable in peacetime. The grown-ups, in the other room, were speaking about the problem which brought them there, and did not pay any attention to them.

Our happiness was based on the fact that we had been left alone, they had not even told us to put the light off, or to shut the window, because they had their own problems. Our foolish happiness was fed on their sorrow. But we did not care.

The two girls, unguarded, left the hotel at night, just for the pleasure of going round the streets by themselves. The streets were full of soldiers, and of strange women they had never seen before, and military songs were heard. They returned to the hotel quite soon, without the grown-ups suspecting anything, and the next morning, they went down to breakfast, full of remorse, but immensely happy.

Jose Fernandez Comerzana used to wander through his home town, Murcia, by himself, for the first time in his life. Then one day he saw a group of people, going in the direction of the State prison, an old castle. They shouted, and seemed to be very excited. The child followed them, and, terrified, impotent, watched the execution of 10 prisoners, who had been acquitted the day before by the Popular Tribunal, but would not be acquitted by the mobs. Terrified, he saw one on his neighbours, Ezequiel, and ran to him, his eyes blinded by tears, unable to speak. The old man tried to console him:

“What are you doing here, child? This is not for your eyes. You shouldn’t be allowed to run free and see this.”

It was the ugly face of Revolution. It was the price I had to pay for my freedom.

Madrid-born Maria Asunción Echage wrote a book about her childhood with her numerous relatives, and the war was part of it:

The war had started, without us realising what was really happening around us, a warm morning, in July.

She also remembers their unexperienced and unexpected freedom in the times of the war:

Being a child in a war, in spite of what people think, has many advantages. One of them was to be able to wander unmolested throughout a town which had been bombed, and was partially destroyed, and full of misery, unafraid of being imprisoned, or questioned, or killed. Nobody cared for us.

The day after the end of the war, her sense of freedom disappeared.

As soon as the school opens, you shall start with your lessons. A new life began.

Religion

The first time José Fernandez Comerzana realised that there was a religion for the poor and a religion for the rich, was when he had to go to the Parish Church to be prepared for First Communion. "The poor children were at one side and we were at the other side", he remembers.

That was in the time before the war. Later on, when the revolution burst out, he would think of this again, when he sees the rage of the poor children burning the Churches and destroying the statues of the saints.

He is unable to understand, and nobody is able to explain it to him. Neither is he able to admit why he is mainly told about punishment and the everlasting fire of hell, rather than of love.

On the first Christmas of the war, José's mother hesitates about preparing the crib, a traditional Spanish custom. At last she decides to, but her neighbour does not dare: she tells her children that to prepare the crib is a sin, and José is scandalised by her hypocrisy. Why, he thinks, is this a sin now, and was it a good custom before the war?

On the whole, Christmas has not changed much, except that there is no Midnight Mass, and that the words of the traditional Christmas songs have been altered to suit the moment.

But the injustice that he had always found incomprehensible, was that of the Three Wise Men. If they were reputed to be saints and come from Heaven, why was it that the richest children received the best toys? The war gave him the answer, through the confidence of one of his friends, and he was happy to be able to separate this tradition from religion: there are no Wise Men, but the parents bought the presents.

José is also surprised, and somehow scandalised, by the presence of the Moorish troops in the war. In the blue zone, too, the zone of the religious people.

Hadn't we fought a war, many centuries ago, to expel them from Spain, unless they were converted?

His parents find it very difficult to explain, and he is not convinced by the story about those Moors, who had come to help their Spanish brothers, and who, in their own way, also believed in God.

Julio, in *My cousin Rafael*, connects praying with the nights in the shelter, when the smaller children are already asleep. Every night, at that time, a voice started to pray. Julio wonders about the result of these prayers. Is God on their side or on the side of the others? Because the others may pray, too, but the war cannot be won by both parties.

Social injustice

Carmen Martin Gaité has two good friends, two confidants of her secret dreams and of her fantasies: one was the son of the Lieutenant Commander, who belonged to the same social class as her, and who accompanied her to the air shelter; the other was the daughter of a couple of Republican teachers who were in jail because of their ideas. Carmen could never understand this: she knew they were good people, so why would they not be accepted by her family?

Josefina Aldecoa, in *Historia de una maestra*, writes about the mentality of the teachers, who were mostly Republicans, convinced that the Republic was going to make great reforms to teaching.

Nevertheless, although she did not accept something that she could not understand, she never played with them at the same time, and she never told the one about the other.

The Three Wise Kings, who on the sixth of January give presents to the children, were another source of problems for both José, the boy from Murcia, and Celia, a little girl from Madrid. José, as we have seen before, prior to being told by a school mate that the presents really came from the parents, could not really understand why some children received more expensive presents than others. And when he was told that it depended on how good they have been during the year, he understood even less.

A tremendous injustice it was because I had been a good boy throughout the whole year, and the Kings, coming from Heaven, must have been aware of it. Or else they were not well organised.

Celia, in *Celia lo que dice*, by Elena Fortún, has a very interesting conversation with King Balthazar on her balcony. She asks him why is it that she has so many toys, more than she has asked for, and Solita, the daughter of the janitor, has none. King Balthazar tells her that rich children must share their presents with the poor, and she immediately sends some of her toys to Solita. When Celia tells the story to her parents, they do not know how to react, because the girl is convinced that it has not been a dream, and insists on Solita keeping the toys. It must be said that Elena Fortún was a Republican, and always did her best to minimise social differences.

José Dominguez Comerzana discovered the social differences when he went to the parish Church to be prepared for Holy Communion and sees the separation between rich and poor children.

After all, the uprising of Casas Viejas, which had marked the beginning of the Civil War, took place after many years of social differences, when the “campesinos” decided that they would not endure it any longer.

The Awakening of the senses

The fact that the grown-ups were worried and did not pay much attention to the children, left them uninformed about the changes that were occurring in their bodies and in their minds. But perhaps it was, in a way, an advantage, because they found out everything by themselves, without being misinformed or misguided. Here we can recall the words of Carmen Martín Gaité, in the episode mentioned above: “Our happiness was based in the fact that we had been left alone.”

After the first year of the war, the situation in Madrid had become unbearable, and those who had relatives, or friends, in other towns, went there, asking for shelter, in exchange for material help. There were also “official” shelters. José Domínguez Comerzana describes one of them:

There were two near my house: one under the ruins of our Parish Church and the other in a convent near by. It was a kind of concentration camp, without vigilance, of people from all the parts of Spain. They were dirty, sick, hungry, wrapped in old dirty blankets, or even in newspapers. Nobody looked after them.

Those who had relatives, or friends, or even friends of friends, used to try to send them to private houses, to spare them from all this misery. Don Ezequiel, the neighbour of the Fernández Comerzana, had sent to his neighbours a young girl from Madrid, Tina. She was 15 and a widow: her husband, an 18-year-old boy, had been killed in Madrid. She was supposed to help the priest’s servant, but, as they had no room for her there, she went to live with José’s family.

“You will have to sleep in the children’s room” – my mother said, excusing herself for not being able to offer her a private room.

“This is the eldest” and she pointed at me.

“Never mind”. Tina said, “They are so young!”

That same night, José slept, for the first time in his life, near a young female. He never touched her, but he never had peace again. He had discovered a new feeling, about which no one had spoken, clearly, to him before.

All at once I understood what was written in my book of religion about the dangers of the flesh. Nobody had been able to explain that to me, who was incessantly asking. Now I understood ... and although I had been told that it was a sin, I liked it.

Carmen Martin Gaité relates her first “sexual experiences” in the air shelters.

“It is impossible to breath here!” said the grown ups, and some children cried, but I did not feel any claustrophobia: my friend was holding me by the hand and I felt safe. Much safer than with my parents. My friend was the son of a Lieutenant Commander who lived on the second floor, who was all the time nervously shouting commands to everybody in the shelter. And nobody listened.

I did not care. I was quite happy, almost embraced by him, both isolated from the rest of the people.

“Don’t you think it is nice here?” he said. And I agreed.

The Lieutenant Commander used to take home all the images of saints he could steal from the churches, and from the streets, and the house was filling up with religious treasures. Carmen found the house fascinating, and the boy used to invite her to have a look each time a new item was introduced. Not only because it was interesting to see them there, but because it was an occasion to be together without grown-ups around.

“Will you come tonight?” he said. “I’ll call you when my parents are out, and just Lucinda, the maid, is at home”.

Lucinda was the protector of their furtive love. A 10-year love, forbidden but undiscovered.

Juan Garcia Hortelano discovered sexuality when he was sent to his grandmother's house to avoid the danger of bombing: grandmother had a bigger and safer air shelter. His cousin told him that Concha, the maid, used to go to the top of the house when everybody went down to the shelter, and basked in the sun completely nude. So, whenever there was an air raid, they used to escape unnoticed and went upstairs to have a look at Concha's body, "Chocolate Flesh" they used to call her. Looking was the only thing they could do, because when Concha discovered them one day, she was furious and sent them down, under the threat of telling their grandmother.

Once the war ended, things became calm again, in every sense, but Juan could never forget the "experience".

Tina returned to Madrid, and was killed not long after, during an air raid. She did not want to stay in the house any longer, although it was safer, because she understood the effect her presence had on the boy.

When the war ended, in 1933, life changed completely in Spain, for the worse for some, for the better for some others.

But this is another story, as Rudyard Kipling would have said.

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Multiculturalism in children's literature

adie wagner

This paper is based on issues as addressed in my book, *Sandile and the silver city* (1984) – the story about a little Zulu boy, who came from the far green hills, to look for his father in the City of Gold (Johannesburg) and then his experiences in a squatter camp. The story of Sandile stems from the author's involvement in an aid programme in the two big squatter camps on the West Rand, Doornkop and Swanieville.

Sandile's story is universal – a story addressing the basic and most important factors in the life of every child worldwide. All quotations are from the said book. The introduction of children to different worlds of culture, is not new.

In South African literature though, it has become the latest trend. Numerous publications on educational matters, such as introducing the African child to a more Westernised civilisation in the form of the white school, the museum and the art gallery, suddenly appeared on our bookshelves.

In other words, the African child gets introduced to what, in the past, used to be an almost all white affair. What about the white child and his knowledge of so-called "black-life"? Or, to make it more universal, the question may be asked: "Do other children live the same way?"

The mere fact that families, similar to his or her own, survive and live elsewhere, could be totally remote. Although television brings worlds closer, nothing can have a greater impact than the good story. Through the word, feelings, fears and dreams can become universal.

Although the story of Sandile is an African story, I tried to address a few of the most important factors in the life of the universal child.

The first and major issue addressed, and a very real one in the South African context, is the migrant worker. In this case a father coming from afar to earn a living in the City of Gold. The missing father figure features strongly throughout the story.

“My father says the sand-dumps are the trouble,” said the boy. “It’s where they dig out the gold. The gold brings people from far away to this place. They have to stay in the hostels. That’s the trouble” (23).

The father, through his child Sandile, the breaking up of family life, a safe home and also the constant insecurity caused by this, become very real to each and every child reading the book – exactly what the white child or all children worldwide would experience when there is no father figure. Throughout the story, the search for his father and the accompanying emotions play a dominant role.

Everyday Sandile thought about his father. His father had been away for a long time. Every time he asked, his mother promised that they would go and look for him (1)

and elsewhere,



His heart lurched when he thought of his father. Babomkhulu Sipho had promised that he would go and look for his father. He saw again in his mind how his mother had taken Babomkhulu Sipho's hands before he had left for work. "You must bring Zondi with you," she had said (29).

He did not understand why his heart was only half-glad this morning. But he knew that when his father came the hurt would be gone and the half-glad would become glad all over (42).

The second issue, that of having a home (strong family ties), is also clearly addressed.

How could the day become good? The day was only good at your own house. When Gogo woke you up. When the fire burned brightly. When you walked together with the other children to school. Why did his father not run home? A person could not stay here. Only your own place was good. Then the day would become good (8).

Sipho put his big bag down on the floor. He picked up Sandile just as he was, rolled up in the blankets. Then he began to sing. He sang the song of the great hills and the birds. Sandile saw his home. Gogo was stirring the pots and his heart felt warm (31).

But for the first time he felt happy again. He had the same joy in his heart as when he was at home with Gogo, sitting on the little bench before the front door. When she held his hand and told him a story of the ancestors. That's how happy he was now (25–26).

Animals in general and an own pet in particular is an issue all children can relate to. The misconception, more often than not from the white world, is the patronising view that poorer people should not own pets or cannot care for them.

The story begins with Sandile and his grandmother's dog.

Sandile bent down and ran his hand over Thasi's warm black body. Although the dog actually belonged to his grandmother, Sandile loved him very much (1).

There were always some of them that were sick, and when the good doctor came the children took the animals so that she could look at them. They were washed in a big bath of medicine because the doctor said the ticks made the animals sick and the children could also catch the fever (32).

Throughout the story there are references to the singing birds, their horse and goats back home and most of all his longing for and eventual acquiring of his own pet.

I also try to show children that people care about animals.

Today is Tuesday. This is the day for the animal doctor. She will be coming past very soon. Sandile wondered whether the animal doctor looked like the one they had gone to see long ago. They had walked far and the sick horse had been nearly dead when at last they got to the doctor. But the good man had made the horse well (15).

Mamkhulu Lindiwe looked at Sandile. "Do you see the animal doctor?" she asked. "The people did not want to go to her at first. They were scared she would take the animals away and then not come back again. But just look now. Everyone understands now. She helps them. Over there, far away at the hospital, she looks after the animals, and when they are better they come back again in the white truck" (16).

His heart was afraid. And when his heart was so afraid, then he longed for a dog. That was when he most wanted a dog. He would hug him tightly and he knew that when he held the dog's warm body everything would get better (32-33).

Two last issues of the utmost importance are LOVE and HOPE. No child can survive without love and the universal child needs hope more than anything else today.

It was nice when Babomkhulu Sipho was at home. He always lifted Sandile up high, and if Sandile closed his eyes he imagined it was his own father (33).

Your wife and your child are good. These are the things that make your heart sing (33).

As far as hope is concerned, I dedicated the whole story to hope in all its facets. Sandile is hoping for his father to come home so is his mother and the rest of family. He hopes that his uncle will bring him a dog. His mother's sister, Lindiwe, hopes for a better house somewhere away from this misery. And all these come true.

"It's the dream ..." she said. "It's Sandile's dream and Lindiwe's dream ... and now my dream." Then she began to run and in his ears he heard her calling: "Zondi, Zondi, you've come!" (50).

In writing a universal story, the above-mentioned aspects are all important but certain practicalities need to be kept in mind too.

Is the story translatable? I think that simplicity, honesty and clarity in descriptions should be present from start to finish. Try to tell the story in such a way that children all over the world can relate even when a totally unfamiliar matter is addressed.

Foreign words and their use: When using foreign words be explanatory. In *Sandile* the word "Spaza" and "Shebeen" are used but then explained to the reader.

He read slowly: "Spa-za". "The shop," said his mother (22).

"It's actually a shebeen" (28).

"The men drink beer when they come here!" (29).

Also where Zulu is spoken, all words are repeated in English.

Do not leave everything to the imagination. One of the biggest and most rewarding aspects of reading to or by the child, is the fact that imagination comes alive. Certainly when writing for children, authors all want them to imagine but I think it is only fair to sometimes help the imagination along. Especially in the case of a story from a foreign country.

1. What does Silver City look like?

There was a lot of smoke and many houses. These houses looked different to the ones among the green hills at home. They were flat and shiny (11).

2. What do the mine dumps look like?

They stood high and naked in the veld. The sand did not look like earth. It was hard and deep furrows ran everywhere down the sides (24).

3. Also the way the child from the country sees the big city:

The houses were huge! It was misty between the big houses but it was not the white mist that he saw at his own house, blowing in from the sea. The mist looked dark and cold (3).

4. The typical city girl compared to his mother, from the country:

Her hair hung around her head in bunches of small plaits. Her shoes were tall. Sandile looked at his mother's shoes. The flat black shoes that he knew so well (5).

There are a thousand more words to be said on the topic of multiculturalism, but it is my sincere wish that we shall all learn from each other and give to children all over the world from the capacious pockets of our individual countries!

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Images of the San

elwyn rjenkins

The tourist posters use the slogan, "A world in one country". Within this one country of South Africa could be found, until a century ago, one of the greatest contrasts in human culture that has ever been seen: between modern, Westernised people and members of a hunter-gatherer society whom many considered to be living examples of the earliest form of human society. Today, some of those people represent just as great a gulf between two forms of society, for they are examples of the degraded fragments of indigenous peoples to be found in many parts of the world, living on the edges of affluent society, impoverished, ridden with alcohol and disease. Others have been incorporated more painlessly into society.

The theme of the conference is appropriately entitled "Other worlds, other lives", for when South African writers have attempted to write about these other lives, such a mental leap was necessary that they have often resorted to writing about other worlds: spiritual worlds, fantasy worlds, even imaginary geographical zones.

This paper deals with the representations of the San to be found in South African children's and youth literature. If the picture that emerges is a complicated one, it is right that in a conference focusing on the "Other" we should note the cautionary advice of Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of postmodernism* (1988:61):



The modernist concept of single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other) ... Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion.

Why write about the San?

In approaching a genre of children's books as a cultural phenomenon, such as those on the theme of the San, I find myself asking why the authors chose that topic and why they wrote about it in the way they did. In a previous work (Jenkins 1993) I wanted to know why retellings of African folktales constitute what is one of the largest single genres of South African children's books. Now I find myself asking why writers have taken the San as a theme and presented them as they have done in their books. However, literary critics speak dismissively of the "intentional fallacy"; and of course one cannot get into the mind of the writer. What one can do is place the works in the intellectual climate of the time when they were written, analyse the statements that they make, and content oneself with the contribution that this analysis may make to our knowledge of the way the San have been and currently are portrayed.

There is an extensive literature on the subject of representations of the San, which has analysed the work of anthropologists, archaeologists and other academics, government documents and the writings of travellers and popular historians. Davison (1991), Dowson and Lewis-Williams (1994) and Skotnes (1995) have critiqued the representation of the San and their art in museums, and Tomaselli (1986) has investigated their image in film and television. (After all, *The Gods must be crazy* is the most successful film ever made in South Africa.) Many

writers (such as Dunae 1975, Gates 1986, Brantlinger 1988, Töttemeyer 1988, Richards 1989) have also studied representations of the African in juvenile fiction, though the San have not been specifically singled out.

Children's books have much to contribute to an understanding of the portrayal of the San. In general, children's books are an invaluable source of information on popular culture because they catch people, as it were, with their guard down. Not only do they reveal what society wants its children to think about a topic, but they are rather more frank than they would be if written for an adult audience.

Ultimately, however, both scientists and writers are creatures of their time. Anything we may learn about popular images of the San will probably amplify what is already known about their representation in scientific literature. Gordon (1992:217) is of the opinion that, "At the risk of oversimplification, I would suggest that there is little difference between the current scientific and popular image of the Bushmen The overwhelming textbook image is that they are *different* from us in terms of physiognomy, social organisation, values and personality." In the analysis of children's books that follows, I therefore draw freely on the categories of representation of African and San that have already been identified, as well as modifying them or adding what can be more readily discerned in the children's books.

The material

Various kinds of children's books contain representations of the San: fiction for ages ranging from young children to teenagers; fiction written "to order" for

prescription as a school reader; nonfiction, both of a popular kind and in a form apparently intended as school textbooks or as reference works for libraries; and collections of folktales. There could, conceivably, also be verse and drama on the subject, but I am not aware of any. Some fiction that is not specifically about the San contains references to them which also portray them in a certain light.

The creation of a particular image of the San begins before one even opens the book and starts on the text. Even the very series in which a particular volume is included tells us something about how the San are to be seen. For example, Winchester-Gould's *God's little Bushmen* (1993) is one of a series from a Pretoria publisher, Rhino Publishers, entitled "ECOSPACE – Reality of space for wild things – for all life", in which all the other volumes are about animals.

Other indicators of the image of the San are the size and format of the book, the cover, the layout and typeface of the text, the contents, style, size and position of the illustrations, and the publisher's, authorial and editorial apparatus.

Is a chronology possible?

English fiction about Africa and its inhabitants has been published since early in the 19th century. However, the children's books about the San that I have been able to trace start with the classic *Skankwan van die duine* by the Hobson brothers, first published in 1930, though Ernest Glanville's *The Hunter: a story of the Cape* (1926) may well be considered a children's book as well. Books from this period may rightly be expected to show more modern attitudes and more South African concerns than the old imperialist stories, for they were written by

Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans for South African children in the post-imperial era. Although some of the attitudes towards the San of books published as late as 1993, such as Rhino Publishers' classification of the San under natural history, can be traced back to the 19th century period of rampant imperialism and blatantly racist attitudes, and obsessions such as RM Ballantyne's fear of moral regression into black barbarism (Brantlinger 1988:66) have largely disappeared. Nevertheless, has there been a development in the period since 1930?

That a sequence of racial attitudes can be traced in South African children's books has been shown by Töttemeyer in various papers based on her research into "1 500 Afrikaans children's and youth books published between 1897 and 1987" (Töttemeyer 1988:173). Particularly striking is her analysis of the portrayal of black people in children's book illustrations (1986), which shows a broad development from crude racism, through patronisation and sentimentality, to acceptance of the black child simply as a person. In an illustrated paper, it would be possible to show a similar pattern in the portrayal of the San. However, the written contents of the San books do not show a clear chronological development, perhaps because the period covered is shorter than that reviewed by Töttemeyer.

A third source of a model chronology can be found in critiques of the scientific literature on the San, such as those by Wilmsen (1989) and Gordon (1992). Lewis-Williams (1994:2) identifies five "popular stereotypes of the San": "ignoble savages", "incorrigible children", "harmless people", "natural ecologists" and "historical actors". Although he is able to discern something of a chronology, from the 18th to the late 20th century, he also shows how certain attitudes persist, or crop up again after having disappeared. Gordon (1992:219), after remarking that "what has intrigued recent commentators on Bushmen is how dramatically their image has changed over the past few decades from that of

'Brutal Savages' to that of 'Harmless People' ", says that "there are, however, a number of problems related to this simplistic approach", and he illustrates how both extreme views have long existed alongside each other.

The different images of the San which are enumerated below are not, therefore, arranged according to some *a priori* chronology, nor does a sequence emerge from reading the books, though it is quite often possible to contrast books from different periods.

The Bushman as "man child"

Two books by Laurens van der Post, *A Story like the wind* (1972) and *The Lost world of the Kalahari* (1958), are included by Jay Heale in his bibliography (1985) which is subtitled "A descriptive booklist of Southern African children's books in English". However, he classifies the former as "The story of a boy – though it needs a mature mind to read it" (1985:60), and the latter as "an adult novel" (1985:110). Should they find a place in a discussion of juvenile literature?

As I compiled my list of books about the San, similar choices confronted me. Certain books which, because of their physical size and appearance, their covers and use of illustration, appear to be firmly within the genre of children's books, turn out, because of the way they are written, to be for adults ... and then again, perhaps not. Some books catch the eye as children's books: *The Hunter: a story of the Cape* by Ernest Glanville (1926), *Farewell the little people* by Victor Pohl (1968), *Hunters of the desert land* by PJ Schoeman (third edition, 1982) and *God's little Bushmen* by Dennis Winchester-Gould (1993). All of these have full-page

illustrations, *The Hunter* and *Hunters* also including vignettes as chapter headings, and *God's little Bushmen* (in addition to its twee title) using colour, including an attractive watercolour cover. But the length of these books, the diction, the ethnographic "facts" that are included, sometimes suggest otherwise. Louis Knobel's book, *Tlhamab, die Boesmankind*, although obviously written for children, nevertheless includes an adult foreword in tiny print that gives anthropological information. Why does Winchester-Gould want to tell a child reader that a Bushman "squatted to urinate" (21) or describe – though vaguely – the sex act? His book takes up in a more sophisticated form the discourse of Schoeman's *Hunters of the desert land*, which deals with gender relations and marital and sexual mores. Large portions of these books, therefore, are not appropriate for children, however naive the narration might be.

Schoeman's ambivalent *Hunters of the desert land* can be contrasted with his earlier book, *Op die klein spoortjies* (1944), which all the evidence shows was clearly intended for children. Linguistically, this orientation is most striking. *Spoortjies* uses a "twee" register replete with diminutives, which was particularly common from the 1920s to the 1940s in both English and Afrikaans South African children's books (Jenkins 1994:138; Töttemeyer 1993:167). In this tradition of "fairies in the mealie patch", "veld folk", "veldkindertjies" and "prinsessies in die veld", it describes a San boy:

Gaggaboemboem het begin lag. Hy het "ga-ga-ga" gelag, en dan sy pensie styf opgeblaas en "doem-doem-doem" daarop geslaan met sy knoetsige vuisies (6).

After starting in the mode of realistic fiction, with a little white boy straying from a group of Dorsland Trekkers, it becomes a fantasy in which the children keep company with anthropomorphised creatures, an ape and a cricket.

What exactly defines a juvenile book is a matter of theoretical debate. The books mentioned above possess (the worst) distinguishing features: excessive didacticism, perfunctory characterisation and narrative, patronising linguistic sentimentality, and clumsy fantasy. Hunt (1991) identifies narrative closure as a typical feature of youth novels, and this is true of most of the books under discussion. In the case of Lesley Beake's novel about a young San woman, *Song of Be* (1992), although the physical appearance of the book clearly indicates that it is a youth novel, Flockemann (1992:141), in a review, rather obstinately picks on closure as evidence of its intended audience: "What appears to set this book in the young market is its happy ending."

Why should there be this ambiguity about the intended readership of some books about the San? "Man child" is the term used by Laurens van der Post for the San in *The Lost world of the Kalahari* (1958:13). JanMohamed (1986:102), writing of *A Story like the wind* (1978), says that Van der Post's "decision to depict his own experience of African oral cultures takes the form of a novel about a young boy's adventures" because of "his belief that only a child would be interested in such cultures". In her "Word to parents and teachers", Hanneke du Preez (1985 np) introduces a selection of San folktales for children with the remark that "Children sense in them a kinship for which there is no rational explanation."

There is no particular virtue in being able to draw a clear distinction between whether a book is intended for adult or juvenile readers; indeed, cross-readership often occurs, and some books, such as folktales, are perhaps intended to be read aloud by adults to children (although there may be no evidence that the original stories were for children). However, it would appear that the ambiguity as to whether these books are intended for adults or children reflects the ambivalence of the authors as to whether the San themselves are adults or children.

At times authors such as Pohl, Glanville and McAdorey (*The Old man of the mountain*, 1992) present the San implicitly as children, emphasising their changeable emotions, delight in simple pleasures, and lack of care for the future. Sometimes the comparison is explicit: Schoeman, in *Hunters of the desert land*, says, “These nomadic people, who loved their children so, were still children at heart themselves” (176); he speaks of old Xameb’s “child-like belief” (94), and has Xameb say repeatedly of his own people, “These people are children” (158). Xameb habitually calls him “White Father”.

Some of the book titles give a further clue to the confusion of the authors about the status of their subject matter: *The Search for the little yellow men* (Hastings, 1956), *These small people* (Malherbe 1983), *Children of the Kalahari* (Mertens 1966), *Farewell the little people* (Pohl 1968), *Op die klein spoortjies* (Schoeman 1944), *God’s little Bushmen* (Winchester-Gould 1993). The small physical size of the San and their paedomorphic features suggest to the authors in some vague fashion that the San are childlike, and therefore, possibly, an appropriate subject for children to read about. Mary Phillips introduces *The Cave of Uncle Kwa* by saying, “They are a tiny people – a childlike people”; Knobel’s foreword calls them “hierdie primitiewe natuurmensies”. The “ideology of littleness” in literature (Armstrong 1990) serves to place certain categories of people, such as the women in Dickens’s novels, in a particular light. In the case of Du Preez, Van der Post, Schoeman and others, their treatment of the San as children is patronising and often denigratory, and lies behind the ambiguity as to the intended readership of their books.

In contrast to books with a dubious readership, four that are admirably suited to their young readers are *Narni of the desert* (1967) by Gwen Westwood, *Kattau the hunter* (1983) by Edna Quail, *Kabo of the mountain* (1988) by Joan Nockels

and Alex Willcox, and *The Bushmen and their stories* (1971) by Elizabeth S Helfman. *Narni*, *Kattau* and *Kabo* extol family values and the security and happiness that San children enjoy both in the clan and through their harmony with nature. Although the subject matter is alien to the readers, by making a child the implied reader and by emphasising their common humanity the authors create a feeling of solidarity between white and San children. Helfman's book is a retelling of Bleek's San folktales, presented in large format and typeface, with stunning pictures by Richard Cuffari. San beliefs are framed by accounts of the people, their beliefs and history, including a moving quotation from Bleek's informant, Xhabbo, on their longings while imprisoned. Unpleasant facts about their present circumstances and likely future are sympathetically discussed. Helfman has taken great care over her diction, which is simple but poetic:

The Bushmen are a graceful people. When they walk along, or simply bend to pick up something from the ground, their motions are like part of a dance (11).

These four books exemplify how books about the "other" can widen the experience and understanding of young readers.

Didacticism and the facts

The imperialist children's fiction of the 19th century took its inspiration from utilitarianism, science and moral instruction (Bratton 1981). Writing in the mode of the immensely popular travel writers of the period, boys' adventure writers such as Henty, Ballantyne, WHG Kingston and Mayne Reid gave detailed accounts of the way of life of African tribes and "all forms of natural history" (MacKenzie 1988:45).

This tradition has continued in the fiction about the San written by South Africans for local white readers in the 20th century, which is packed with “facts” about their way of life and beliefs. At one level this approach takes the “otherness” of the San to the extreme, putting the San in the same category as flora and fauna – the image of the San that still sees their lifecasts and their art displayed in natural history museums. But perhaps this is a harsh judgment on well-meaning writers, who find the ways of the San so different that they feel it is instructive for modern, urban youngsters to read about them. The San are also a gateway to the ways of wild creatures, which the authors enjoy digressing to describe.

Often the authors seem bursting to share their knowledge of the facts. Some of them are reputed to be extremely knowledgeable on the subject, and this is often given prominence on the cover or at the beginning or end of the book. PJ Schoeman, after holding a professorship in anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch, became Chief Warden of the Etosha Pan Game Reserve and chaired the South West African Commission for the Preservation of the Bushmen, 1949 to 1953. Others whose first-hand experience and knowledgeability are emphasised are the Hobsons and their modern editor, Esther Linfield, Victor Pohl, Louis Knobel and Willem Kotze. Jan J van der Post’s childhood, we are told, included an amazing episode when he ran away and lived with a San band. This forms the basis of the first part of *Agarob, kind van die duine* (1963), and the eponymous hero was still alive, living on the author’s sister’s farm, when the book was published.

By the time novels and children’s stories about the San started appearing in the late 1920s, the mood in South Africa had already shifted to one of pity for their extinction. However, accurate information about their history had not yet reached

a wide public, and so it is perhaps understandable that popular literature often presented a distorted picture, though the distortions become less forgivable as we approach the present. Pohl, for example, simply repeated in 1968 some of the bizarre inventions of Glanville in 1926.

Glanville and Pohl give highly inaccurate versions of the history of migrations into southern Africa and the interaction of the San with Africans. Other authors accurately include more references to how whites hunted them down and captured their children to work on the farms; they relate that until recent times the San clashed with black and white farmers when they killed their livestock; and that some San in Namibia and Botswana now work permanently or seasonally for farmers. Nobody goes far enough back in time to consider the interaction of the San and the Khoikhoi pastoralists.

While the Africans are portrayed by Glanville, Pohl and Knobel (in *Tlhamab, die Boesmankind*, 1970) as absolutely ruthless towards the San, the whites are shown by Pohl, Jan van der Post in *Agarob, kind van die duine* (1963), Ann Harries in *The Sound of the gora* (1980), Lesley Beake in *Song of Be* (1991), and Dolf van Niekerk in *Karel Kousop* (1985) to be more complex in their motives and in the relationship that develops when the San come to live on the farms. Jenny Seed's *The New fire* (1983) holds a middle position by portraying the relations between white and San as bleak and offering no way out.

Only Alex Willcox and his co-author, Joan Nockels, present a revisionist portrayal of the relations between the San of the Drakensberg and the newly arrived Africans. In *Kabo of the mountain* (1988) they show, first of all, that the San previously lived in the Drakensberg out of choice, and not because they were

later driven there; and that they and the Africans coexisted in peace. In the friendship of the San boy and African girl there is even a hint that San and Africans might have intermarried. In all this the story is in keeping with the historical facts as now known, best documented in Wright's definitive work, *Bushman raiders of the Drakensberg 1840–1870: a study of their conflict with stock-keeping peoples in Natal* (1971), with which Willcox must have been thoroughly familiar. However, Wright (1971:12) offers a sobering gloss on Willcox's idyll: "Most probably the pattern was one of co-existence alternating with enmity from the start." However, Willcox is having nothing of that: the book explicitly teaches that racial prejudice ought to be, and can be, overcome, especially by the young. *Kabo* is a romanticised backlash to the oversimplified accounts of extreme clashes between African and San, which served white authors and readers as a way of "othering" both savage blacks and the almost mythical San, and in this way displaced white guilt – a typical pattern in the literature of colonialism and imperialism (Brantlinger 1988:195).

Wright, and later Gordon (1992), raise some other complicating facts about the oppression of the San, such as that "most of the atrocities committed upon them were done with the active collaboration of fellow indigenes" (Gordon 1992:218). Jan van der Post superficially portrays the complicity of San people in the oppression of their fellows, as do two of the most recent Afrikaans writers, Dolf van Niekerk in *Karel Kousop* (1985) and *Koms van die hyreën* (1994), and Piet van Rooyen in *Die Spoorsnyer* (1993). None of the children's writers goes so far as to acknowledge another point made by Gordon (1992:11), that "rather than being victims of pastoralists and traders who depleted the game, they [the San] appear as one of many willing agents of this commercial depletion".

By far the majority of the writers prefer to write about what were known in Namibia as the "wild Bushmen". The fascination for most authors is with their

“original” way of life, problematic as such a concept now appears to be. Wilmsen (1989) goes so far as to say that the San have been interacting with other peoples for thousands of years, and that this interaction is what actually produced a definition of a particular category of people who could be called “Bushmen”; but only a few of the most recent books adopt this poststructuralist view. For example, the anthropologist, Esther Linfield, who translated and adapted the Hobsons’ *Skankwan van die duine* in 1977, tackles in her introduction the fact that the San have no name for themselves, and how this ties up with the question of their identity.

Nonfiction works on the San that are intended for children are easily classified chronologically. Agnes Jackson’s *The Bushmen of South Africa* (1956) still perpetuated some of the most notorious stereotypes of aboriginal peoples to be found in Western writing:

When the Bushmen want to prepare themselves for a festivity they throw dust all over themselves, instead of water, just as animals do (5).

Although they have hard lives, the Bushmen are naturally a gay and happy people who are fond of dancing and music (20).

Some of the pen sketches in this book reflect this tone. In contrast, the books by Mertens (1966), Helfman (1971) and Malherbe (1983) are much more accurate and sympathetic.

The information about the way of life of the San which the authors of the fiction present – in the case of John Coetzee in *Flint and the red desert* (1986) one can say *hasten* to present, as soon as the San appear on the scene – is so similar that it is predictable. Often the authors use the device of children being

taught by their elders, in order to present the information. Mostly it is man-talk, or women's activities seen by a male (such as little boys who fret at having to go gathering with the women when they would rather be hunting), but there are also some detailed accounts seen through female eyes. This information is easy to summarise: their appearance and the colour of their skin; how they make poisoned arrows and hunt; animal lore; how the women gather, especially what we are told they themselves call "Bushman rice" (ants' larvae); what they eat, especially insects, reptiles ("lizard biltong") and putrid meat; how they overeat when meat is available; how they suck up water; that they are nomadic; how they dress and ornament themselves; how they abandon old people to die, and abort babies or bury them alive in times of stress; some books show that women are treated as inferiors and even worse, and that women are silly; courtship and marriage customs and rites of passage; children's games; how and why they paint; how they dance; that they practise divination and have witchdoctors, and, in some books, that they possess supernatural powers; their folktales and religious beliefs; and what their language sounds like, with special emphasis on how, to a white person, it sounds like clicks.

The earlier books in particular, illogically have the San speak a strange English idiom, partly archaic, including calling hyenas "wolves" and leopards "tigers" (which are presumably Afrikanerisms). Considering that the San knew the animals very well, and that we are reading a translation of their speech, these inaccuracies are unnecessary. As recently as 1993, Winchester-Gould in *God's little Bushmen* has the adults speak in a mixture of archaic and childish language.

It would seem that not only are these "facts" selective, but in a number of cases they are simply wrong. (See, for example, Tobias 1978.) Although only Glanville (1926) and Schoeman in his early *Op die klein spoortjies* (1944) specifically make

the San out to be savages or animal-like (“die snaakse halwe aapgesiggie van Doedoempie” – Schoeman p 10), often one feels that the more unpleasant details, reiterated so often, are introduced to mark their primitiveness. The effect of all the books is that white readers would come away with the impression that the San are extremely different to themselves.

On a more positive note, readers will also gain a picture of the San as people who live close to, and in harmony with, nature. At their best, these books convey quality of life rather than dry ethnographic facts. Edna Quail’s *Kattau the hunter* (1983) exemplifies this. The little boy senses the warmth of the sun, the shade of the trees and clouds, the heady taste of honey, even “the springbok sensation” (39) when he hunts. He learns,

This was the place where his people and the birds and the beasts had lived since Mantis first threw a feather into the sky and made the moon (9).

His people’s beliefs form a meaningful part of his experience of the world rather than being conveyed as quaint stories, as they are in Mary Phillips’ *The Bushman speaks* (1961) and *The Cave of Uncle Kwa* (1965). A recurring theme is that because of the oneness of the San with nature, “they never took from the land more than they needed” (Linfield, in her Introduction to *The Lion of the Kalahari*, 1977). In *When whales go free* (1988:48), Dianne Hofmeyr specifically introduces a description of the harmonious way of life of the hunter-gatherers on Robberg in order to contrast it with the rapacious whalers of modern times. Nick Greaves spells out the moral in the introduction to his collection of African folktales, *When hippo was hairy* (1988:14):

Mantis assigned this place to the Bushman – that of Hunter-Gatherer. The Bushman fulfilled his designated role faithfully, living in close harmony with the animals, birds and the plants upon the earth.

This image coincides with the stereotype of the San which Lewis-Williams (1994:3) calls “natural ecologists”.

The theme of harmony extends to human relations in the San bands. The books that have very young protagonists emphasise the security of the nuclear family and the importance of parents as role-models. Most of the books make a point of the overriding ethic of the San that harmony must prevail in the clan as a whole and even between clans (though the bands are often depicted in destructive conflict).

Without exception, all the books bring in San religion, ostensibly treating it with respect. In this concentration on San religious beliefs one can detect the urge, epitomised by Laurens van der Post but going back to Rider Haggard, to search for spiritual truths that only Africa may be able to provide. Two versions of San religion are given: in some books, it is a monogamous belief; in others, a simplistic animism that consists mainly of praying to the sun and moon. It would appear that the latter version is a figment of the imagination of the authors – Biesele (1978) makes no mention of the practice. The way that the authors insistently introduce praying to the sun, moon and stars, often on almost every page, serves to trivialise San beliefs as something barbarous, even though the practice is disguised as something quaint, attesting to the spirituality of the San.

Factual presentations of the San in modern society are much rarer than those of “wild Bushmen”. We see them living on farms, collaborating with the police or film-makers, or working for the Namibian government as election officials. The most detailed and up-to-date is that in Lesley Beake’s *Song of Be*, which is a remarkable imaginative feat. The narrator is an educated young San woman who

works with her mother on the farm of a white man in Namibia. Her inner strength is emphasised by the contrast with the farmer's wife, who is driven mad by life on the farm and commits suicide. As the story of Be's life and that of her parents emerges, many aspects of the lives of modern San are covered. Beake emphasises her own interest in the present-day San by including a note at the end entitled "The future", in which she says that the Ju/'hoan people are going back to the land with new skills, and she gives the address of their co-op. This novel and, to a lesser extent, *God's little Bushmen* by Winchester-Gould, are an assertion of feminism in the portrayal of the modern San.

When fact becomes fantasy

In looking at the didactic nature of the fiction, we have noted accurate and inaccurate history and the selective use of facts, all of which it is possible to explain, understand and even forgive. But there is a further aspect of the fiction that is less explicable. Woven in among all the ethnographic information about the San and their way of life, even from the pens of authors who are introduced as authorities on the subject, are outrageous inaccuracies and impossibilities. Perhaps San children did keep animal pets, as some of the books show, but it is hard to swallow when Mary Phillips gives her small hero a tame lion cub which he takes for walks. Glanville has the San capable of the most detailed telepathy; Pohl has them sending smoke signals; the Hobsons have a San villain with extraordinary skills in ventriloquism through which he holds sway over a band; Schoeman's ostensibly historical narrative framework for *Hunters of the desert land* is generally regarded as suspect; and Jan van der Post, in the same book that relates his own childhood experiences, ends up with a hocus pocus of tunnels, a white lady, paintings in hidden caves, and handfuls of diamonds, all presented in the same realistic narrative mode as the autobiographical material.

Several of the authors invent “medicine men”, or even “witchdoctors”, who bear no resemblance to the actual San practice of shamanism. Many depict San men throwing the bones or *dolosse*, from which they are able to foretell the future in specific detail. I can find no evidence for this in the ethnographic literature. (See, for example, Biesele 1978.) Their accounts of how and why the San executed rock paintings continue to the present day to ignore modern understanding, which dates back to the 1960s, that this was largely an aspect of shamanistic practices.

These factual inaccuracies perpetuate centuries-old European images of Africa as a dark continent inhabited by indigenous peoples endowed with mysterious supernatural powers. One redeeming feature is that we might take the Hobsons’ villain who uses ventriloquism to control the gullible as a deconstruction, from as early as 1930, of the mumbo jumbo image.

Most disappointing is a very recent book, *The Old man of the mountain* by Ursula Karsen McAdorey (1992). The cover announces that it was specially written as a reader for use in secondary schools in southern Africa, with a controlled language level, which implies that it is intended for readers for whom English is not their mother tongue. It should be a welcome extension of the curriculum, introducing all southern African children to the San. On the cover is a coloured photograph of an old San man which, like the photographs in Knobel’s fictional *Tlhamab*, adds verisimilitude to the story.

The framework of the story is a fantasy that a multiracial group of modern children stumble upon a band of San who live according to their old ways, and they join them for three months on their travels through an unidentifiable part of

Africa. The author repeatedly makes it clear, once one accepts the fantasy device for bringing the children to the San, that they are undergoing a didactic experience, to learn from the ways of the San. Implicitly, one may assume the same for the school pupils who will read it. Yet she ignores modern scholarship and perpetuates some totally discredited stereotypes of the San. Filled with cliché and mumbo jumbo, it has an old man, “holding a spear in one claw-like hand” (33) who explains his mind-reading and prophetic powers by saying, “I, Leader of the San, know these things. The gods have said that I should know” (72). Prospero-like he summons up a vision of prehistoric creatures fighting to the death, which he tells them carries the same message about the need for conservation as the extinction of the quagga. More supernatural elements include a “witchdoctor” (160) who wears an “enormous ostrich-feather head-dress” (54), and a legendary black hyena that nevertheless casts a real shadow. When, in the course of an authorial intrusion, the author writes that “The San had lived through the volcanic eruptions of the continent’s birth ... they had survived the sabre-toothed cats, the three-toed horses, the giant baboons” (63), the value of the book as a source of factual accuracy is irredeemably destroyed.

Earlier I referred to a similar unsatisfactory merging of history and fantasy in Schoeman’s *Op die klein spoortjies*. As Stephens (1992:207) points out, the danger of incorporating elements of fantasy in historical fiction is that “within the narrative frame all events are treated as ontologically equivalent and mutually coherent”. The consequence of this is that the child reader is ideologically misled.

Another book which uses fantasy to bring modern children together with the San is *The Sound of the gora* by Ann Harries (1980). Its popular success proves that fantasy need not resort to overheated images of the supernatural: it brings to the fictional portrayal of the San something which the purely realistic novels cannot.

(The novel is also remarkable for having been the first to assert a feminine point of view in the fictional portrayal of the San.) While the realistic novels, and the collections of folktales, carry the awareness that the San and their old way of life are practically extinct, fantasy lifts the San out of time, granting them a timeless status in which are preserved those admirable qualities of their lives (their physical and spiritual harmony with nature and their harmonious human relations) which the world should never forget, and which the authors would like their young readers to absorb.

Nevertheless, making the San timeless is ideologically problematic, as Davison (1991) has pointed out: instead of placing the San historically, most of the fiction implies that until the arrival of other peoples the San had a way of life that had remained unchanged since primeval times, whereafter the change was catastrophic. This denies the San a history which includes gradual adaptation to and incorporation into the society of the Khoikhoi, Africans and whites.

Like much South African historical fiction for children (see Jenkins 1993:139), some of the books about the San do tackle the passage of time. Mary Phillips in 1965 deplored the degeneracy that modernity has brought to the San; Lesley Beake in *Song of Be* (1991), on the other hand, has a San man say,

“It’s no use trying to go back, back in time, back to an old life that doesn’t – that can’t – exist any more” (73).

Beake, Jan J van der Post and Dolf van Niekerk quite matter-of-factly portray San people leading their lives in modern circumstances. Other writers, such as Ann Harries in *The Sound of the gora* and Jenny Seed in *The New fire*, awaken the conscience of the reader, with the implicit warning that history should not

repeat itself: never again should atrocities such as those perpetrated against the San be allowed.

A common humanity

According to Stephens (1992:205), one of the main premises of historical fiction for children is that "Humans behave and feel in ways that remain constant in different periods". In this way, readers can empathise with the historical characters. He acknowledges that this tenet of humanism has been weakened in recent times by arguments for cultural relativism, but concludes, "Nevertheless, historical fiction continues to be written for children and to some extent read by them."

A technique used by most of the authors which strongly draws the reader into the lives of the San is the use of a San character as the focalisation or point-of-view of the narration. Another way in which we might expect the reader to enter the minds of modern San could be when the plot involves what I have previously (Jenkins 1993:134) called the *umtalaan* theme in South African children's literature, entailing socially approved friendship between black and white playmates. One would have hoped for insights from Jan van der Post's *Agarob, kind van die duine* (1963), since it is based on his own childhood experience of close friendship with a San boy, but he is not particularly interested in interiority, and the narrative proceeds mostly by incident. Dolf van Niekerk's *Karel Kousop* (1985), on the other hand, does convey the awkwardness and uneven development of the friendship of a white boy and a young San farm labourer, but the story is told firmly from the point of view of the white boy, deliberately leaving the other an enigma throughout. However, both books stress the common humanity of the

San and white boys, using, for example, the device of having them strip naked together.

It is also refreshing to encounter, in *The Sound of the gora*, *Song of Be* and *God's little Bushmen*, a shift from the voices of white males to narratives told from the point of view of young San women, which is a welcome move to gender awareness.

In the course of looking at these books, I have pointed out some of the stereotypes of the San that they present, and I have also referred to other, often more brutal, stereotypes that have circulated over the last two centuries. Davison (1991:140), remarks,

The common denominator of these stereotypes, which have entered popular consciousness to varying degrees at different times, is that the people so classified are denied voices or histories of their own, they become objects of scientific or popular interest because of their difference from the observer; they are cultural Others.

It is true that the authors may have chosen the San for their plots because they offer a different, almost exotic setting and subject matter for an exciting children's story; but unlike the authors of the British colonial period, they were writing for South African children about their own land. Through fiction they have been able to create a voice for the San, bringing them alive for modern white children. For all their faults, most of these books can help children, through identifying with the San characters, experience different social relations and a different relationship with the land and its creatures, and experience a different spiritual quality of being in Africa.

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