

Heroes and heroines in Soviet children's literature of the 1980s

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The focus of this paper is the development of heroes and heroines in Soviet children's literature of the 1980s.² The aim is to show that changes in the way that heroes and heroines are portrayed reflects fundamental changes in the overall ideological basis of children's literature in the Soviet Union during the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.³ This assertion is based on the fact that children's literature was seen in the Soviet Union as a tool for education and upbringing, in line with official Soviet pedagogical principles.

The nature of the canonised children's literature in a particular society is defined by the concept of childhood dominant in that society. This varies in accordance with the prevailing culture and the historical period, and affects both the type of literature produced and society's attitude towards it.⁴ Children's literature has long been regarded as an extremely valuable reflection of the values and beliefs of a society, both as it wishes to be seen and as it unconsciously reveals itself.⁵ Literature intended for children is expected to conform to a set of norms and expectations which are in line with the prevailing view of childhood and with the dominant value system. Children's literature, more than any other kind of literature, is often marginalised and excluded in a discussion of free choice and

freedom of artistic expression. Literature that does not affirm the prevailing ideology is simply not distributed or circulated, if it is ever published at all, irrespective of the society concerned.

General perceptions of narrative patterns on the part of the child reader, or even the adult reader, are based on an appeal to a common culture. This means that it is one of the chief means by which children learn the values and standards of their elders.⁶ Narrative techniques may vary considerably, especially in the interaction between the writer, the reader, and the characters in the story, but the basic principle remains the same. Very often an author will form an alliance with the child reader by placing him or herself on the side of the child; once this alliance is forged then the author can manipulate it to guide the reader towards the meanings he wishes to negotiate.⁷ Other authors may leave gaps which the reader must fill in before the meaning will be complete. Whatever strategy is adopted, the author inevitably makes assumptions concerning the beliefs, politics and customs of his readers.⁸ The more entrenched are those assumptions in the social structure, the more they are reinforced through literature. If a writer wishes to introduce new ideas more aggressively he or she does so by promoting certain characteristics of the heroes and heroines in the story as virtues which will reap a suitable reward. Very often authors are so immersed in their own ideology that they are unaware of the assumptions they are making, and these may become so dominant that they are alienating for those who do not share them.⁹

Although this is not peculiar to literature produced in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, literature for children in the Soviet Union is a rather special case.¹⁰ Other literatures by no means lack ideological content but this may be expressed more subtly in the unstated assumptions made in the texts.¹¹ In the Soviet Union the role of children's literature as a vital ideological

tool in the socialisation and education of children was far more explicit and was openly acclaimed. Being assigned such a central role strengthens the claim that children's literature reflects the social and political system, while exercising an important formative influence on the child reader.¹² The heroes and heroines of the works of classical Soviet children's literature were seen as role-models of immense significance in the process of education and upbringing. The kind of characters portrayed and the attitudes expressed by them either directly or through the narrator, are therefore important indicators of the morals and attitudes held as desirable by those in authority and, to a large extent, the general public.

In addition, children's literature during the Soviet era was obliged to conform to the guidelines and norms of socialist realist literature, which required literature to reflect reality in a positive light. In order for their works to be published, and in order to earn a reasonable living, writers were pressurised to produce works which would fulfil the requirements set down by the authorities. The heroes and heroines of Soviet children's literature were chiefly created in the mould of the traditional positive hero.¹³ All heroes were of course "positive" heroes, with the greatest hero presented as Lenin himself.¹⁴ The tradition of the epic or folk hero, with whom both the Soviet positive hero and the alienated superfluous man¹⁵ of the 19th century have strong links, is well-rooted in Russian tradition. Clark suggests a resemblance to the figures of the Old Russian written tradition in mediaeval texts.¹⁶ If one examines the tracts and novels of the second half of the 19th century the similarities between the heroes of these and of classic socialist realist novels become clear. For example, the political movement promoted is likened to a family, which often supplanted the members' natural families. In addition, the hero is usually a naive person who is gradually brought to see the light, often through a mentor/disciple relationship. Furthermore, the hero was

normally expected to make considerable sacrifices, leading a life of deprivation, and ending in a kind of martyrdom.¹⁷

The new post-revolutionary hero was positive, dynamic and committed. Doubts and uncertainties in the minds of the characters were discouraged, as were passages of introspection or psychological analysis. The irony lay in the fact that just as the "alienated man" of the 19th century had been condemned, the positive hero could be considered in the same light, cut off from individual life, and finding fulfilment only in the established values of the new regime, making decisions but having no choices available to him. The aim of the creation of such heroes in children's literature however was to provide children with role-models and to stimulate them to behaviour which would further the ends of the state and the people, such as the building of communism. Modifications in the characterisation of these heroes or heroines are therefore very real indications of more extensive and far-reaching changes, or even ruptures, taking place in the fabric and structure of society.

Characters in children's books generally displayed six basic virtues: collectivism, discipline, love of work, patriotism, proletarianism internationalism and atheism.¹⁸ Of these collectivism was a fundamental Soviet virtue, and was a primary feature of all classical works of the period. To serve and to subordinate oneself to the greater good of the majority is a distinguishing feature of the socialist realist positive hero. The whole education system was organised to inculcate such socially acceptable behaviour in each new generation, and literature was a major tool in this process.

An often-quoted example of behaviour deliberately motivated by a work of literature is the Timurite movement, inspired by a classic socialist realist hero,

Timur, originally from the book by Arkady Gaydar entitled *Timur and his squad*, which first appeared in 1940. In a translation of this work into English the introduction describes the hero as follows:

The main character in *Timur and his squad* is a member of the Pioneer children's organization. ... who exemplifies many of the fine traits of Soviet children in those days ... *Timur and his squad* reflected the author's desire to prepare the rising generation for the grim trials ahead.¹⁹

One of the central themes of the book is the polarised conflict between Timur and Kvakin; creative versus destructive, the good citizen versus the anarchist. The members of Timur do good deeds in the town and generally protect the families of soldiers who are serving with the Red Guard. There is little doubt that Gaydar was being deliberately didactic through the characters he created. A work on children's literature aimed at student teachers describes the characters as personifying the characteristics of Pioneers growing up in a new, socialist country:

Gaydar synthesised in one hero all that was most characteristic for a young person in a socialist society, and made that portrayal a new literary and vivid reality. It is just for this reason that Timur became the literary predecessor of many subsequent heroes of children's literature.²⁰

In order to make Timur and his team of friends seem especially virtuous, the rival gang is described in diametrically opposite terms, and represent the antithesis of the good Pioneer. In addition Timur's squad punishes children who do anti-social things like stealing apples from gardens and bullying other children. Although they experience difficulties which they always manage to surmount, the characters are largely static. They can perhaps be best compared with cartoon characters in Western comic books. There is not meant to be any depth to their

characters, they are not meant to doubt or to question, or to experience any kind of inner conflict. The only character development can be seen in the portrayals of Kvakin and his friends, who are gradually influenced to adapt their behaviour.

At least until very recently the work was used in literature and reading programmes in schools. A revised textbook for teachers published in 1990 recommends several changes in the approach to Gaydar's book. It suggests that it can be alienating to encourage pupils to emulate Timur, and carry out similar tasks, partly because students feel inadequate in comparison. Rather, it is suggested that they should be shown the extent of the heroes' actions, the importance of their ultimate goal, helping the children to focus not on the specific but to see the overall objective which is peculiar to Gaydar's works, their "romantic inspiration."²¹ The contrast between the two groups of children is described as being an important focus for the teacher. In comparing their actions, the freedom experienced by Kvakin's "gang" is better described as permissiveness, so that in discussing the characters the teacher needs to concentrate on the possibility of reforming Kvakin into a positive character outside the direct limits of the novel. Timur is a good comrade, but also a real commander not only because he was capable, decisive and took responsibility for his actions. He was a commander above all because he strived to nurture these qualities in others, so that in another novel about Timur, Kvakin eventually becomes more like Timur himself.²²

There is little doubt that this work by Gaydar remains significant within the education system, even after the immense changes in the country. Because these are the classics of Soviet children's literature it may be some time before they are assigned a less central role by teachers and librarians, and before children move to a wider and more controversial range of texts. Certainly to the Western reader

these texts contain unconvincing characters, who would fail to evoke any form of empathy or admiration. One of the chief reasons for this that the shared assumptions are at odds with each other in the two cultures. Western readers may well distrust those children who always do the right thing and appear to be “heroic”. Indeed it is this intrinsically virtuous side of the positive hero that renders him unreal and unbelievable, and is one reason that classical socialist realist literature has been regarded as of no consequence and poor in quality by Western critics.

By the 1980s the Soviet Union was experiencing internal crises and instabilities, together with ever-increasing urbanisation and the advances in technology and communication experienced by the rest of the world. All of these meant that children and adults alike were making increased and different demands of children’s literature. Literature and the teaching of literature had to respond to these demands within the framework of the restructuring process taking place in society as a whole, which was often broadly referred to as “democratisation”.²³ Educators were to educate and prepare children to assume personal responsibility for the future of their country and to develop the child’s individual personality to its full potential. In line with this thinking an approach to education was developed which claimed to seek to encourage independent and individual thinking – a culture of “the individual”. Literature was to contribute to this through its themes, plots and heroes.

The traditional socialist realist hero was increasingly perceived as self-righteous, unreal and superficial, and no longer provided an appropriate and believable role-model for contemporary urban children. There was no suggestion of abandoning the idea of the positive hero however, rather the discussion focused on the need to change the character of a suitable hero to be more complex and

to think for himself. The need for new positive heroes was cited as one way of educating children to move forward, to emulate heroes who would influence people's actions, and reflect the nations's destiny.²⁴ In a 1982 resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU it was stated:

The new generation of Soviet young people requires a positive hero who is close to them in time and in spirit, a hero who would be perceived as an artistic discovery, a hero who would reflect the fate of the people and in turn influence their actions.²⁵

Although this was voiced at the beginning of the 1980s, changes in the nature of the positive hero have not been sudden. The "positive hero" of the 40s and 50s had inevitably evolved into an increasingly "fuzzy" figure during the 60s and 70s. The positive hero began to lose his halo during the "thaw" of the 1950s, even being caught indulging in socially unacceptable behaviour. The growing cult of the individual, in contrast to the focus on collectivism and communal goals in earlier literature also contributed to an increase in the complexity of the hero.

As part of the larger movement towards the so-called "psychological prose" of the 70s and 80s, methods of characterisation changed and the heroes portrayed became more realistic in contemporary terms. During the 80s, with the implementation of *glasnost*, these changes became more marked; the relaxation of censorship laws and the increasing freedom accorded writers and publishers meant that they could adapt their books to the new demands made by children. Works written towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were produced by both established conventional writers who succeeded in answering the challenges presented by the new role of literature in society, as well as by writers who had formerly been ignored or whose works had not enjoyed wide distribution the so-called blank spots of Russian children's literature. Many writers whose works occupied a canonised position in the literary system succeeded in answering the

challenges presented by the new role of literature in society. Anatoly Aleksin is one of the foremost of these writers²⁶, alongside Pogodin and Prilezhayeva, Ivanov, Koval', Zheleznikov, and Vol'f.²⁷

One of the publications best placed to respond rapidly to changing demands and increased flexibility were the children's journals, which have played an important role in children's literature publishing for many years. They were established well before the turn of the century, when there were 35 such journals and newspapers in existence.²⁸ One of these is the journal entitled *Pioneer*, published in Moscow, formerly in conjunction with *Pravda* at the Publishing House of the CPSU. It therefore has a reputation of being a conservative journal, and always had strong links, as its name suggests, with the Soviet Pioneer movement, to which almost all Soviet school children belonged. I have taken three examples of stories published during the period of *perestroika* in this magazine as examples of new stories widely available to children. Despite its conservative origins the journal did undergo certain editorial changes during the 1980s, and adjusted the content of its issues, including a number of articles on religion and current affairs. For example, in a 1991 issue there was an article on Margaret Thatcher which presented her as possessing a style of leadership "distinguished by its consistency and firmness", and praising her policies for stimulating private enterprise and small business.²⁹ A series of Bible stories, retold by Romanovsky, also appeared in 1991, with the justification that such stories needed to be familiar to children in order to understand Shakespeare, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Rublyev, Rafael, Mozart and Rachmaninov.³⁰

The first story is an example of innovative writing that has a message within the context of the new climate. It is entitled *Pen friends*, written by Boris Minaev, and published in two parts in *Pioneer* in 1988.³¹ The story is told from the point

of view of one of the children, Sasha, and therefore differs from the other two in that Sasha himself is the narrator. A teacher announces that the children are to exchange letters with children in a school "from one of the friendly republics". The reason for the subsequent events is that the teacher tells them that they are to write in groups of three, and that she will read the letters before they are posted, along with the relevant Pioneer leader. When Sasha and his two friends are assigned a girl called Georgina as their pen friend, they find themselves constrained to write platitudes about their school, their town, and the weather. The motivation for corresponding with pupils in another country in Minaev's story is stated quite clearly by Lyubka Petrishcheva, the Pioneer leader, when Sasha questions the sense of writing in conjunction with two other pupils:

"Your job is to start up contact with a foreign friend. You're to write in a way that is brief, clear, and understandable. You heard just now. Or isn't it clear?"³²

This is not an individual exercise, but one for the good of the school as a whole, and, by extension, the community. Sasha objects to the exercise precisely for these reasons. The reader is indirectly made aware of the extent of the dichotomy between reality and pretended reality, between what can be openly stated and what must remain secret, by Sasha's fantasy about what he really wants to write. He wants to write to Georgina about people with grey faces pouring out of the buses, some drunk, some dragging home heavy shopping bags, women in identical scarves and shoes, he wants to tell her of the chimneys in the town that pour out smoke. But he is aware that this is not acceptable by a society still at the stage of pretending that life is rosy, and that problems are few. The story thus illustrates the trend away from the primacy of the collective towards an increased importance of personal and individual concerns and conflicts.

One of the main causes of conflict is the role of patriotic duty as one of the most highly promoted of Soviet virtues.³³ A love of one's community and of one's country was considered to be of the utmost importance, and is a theme which occurs again and again in children's books of the Soviet era.³⁴ Such books were often used in school literature and reading programmes, and were seen to give teachers the task of "discovering the most effective means of shaping the sense of patriotism and nurturing an ideological immunity to the varied ploys of bourgeois propaganda".³⁵ A shift in this attitude is one of the key features of Minaev's story as portrayed in the central character. Sasha's perceived betrayal of his friends and community to someone from another country is in complete opposition to his patriotic duty. His actions arouse intense conflict both within himself and in his school and home life.

The second letter, which he writes with no intention of posting eventually goes missing, and lands up in the hands of the teacher, who gives it to his mother in horror. His mother, to his surprise, supports him, to the extent of actually posting the letter. Sasha however is so disturbed that he has to stay away from school; this does not stop the girls in the class, when they find out about the letter, from seeking him out and physically attacking him for saying "bad things" about them. The extent of his "crime" does not appear great to a Western reader. The gap between the background assumptions of the Russian and the Western reader is evident. Sasha simply wrote a letter about what he felt was important, rather than what his teacher thought was suitable, and was somewhat critical of the things and the people around him. His reaction when confronted by his parents and initially accused of being an "informer" could only be credible within the context of traditional Soviet literature with its emphasis on patriotism and loyalty as essential virtues. His mother is however also a victim of conflicting duty and emotion; she apologises to the teacher, and

tells her that Sasha knows he has done wrong. At the same time she tells Sasha that she believes the letter is well-written and honest, and the next day, extremely embarrassed, she confesses that she has posted it.

One of the main focuses of the story is the development of Sasha as an **individual** character. In one scene, Sasha, prompted by his uncertainty concerning his own actions, unsanctioned by the usual authorities, asks his friends if they consider themselves to be individuals; the three friends end by jumping up and down and shouting: "Ivan is an individual, and Sanya is an individual; and Lyokha is an individual; we are individuals, individuals, individuals!"³⁶ This would be a potentially impossible scene to translate into a Western language for Western readers. The extent of Sasha's bravery in writing a second letter is illustrated by his friends' reaction. They are lost in admiration and, as he relates, regard him as practically a second Pushkin. Towards the end of the story he finally resolves that he will speak to the teacher:

I'll tell her that it's not nice to read other people's letters, that everyone has the right to think as they wish, and to write to their friends about it, even if they are new friends and do not live in our country, but abroad, that I am no one's enemy, but an ordinary Soviet boy, that I am ...³⁷

We do not discover what happens when he returns to school, but the implication is that a statement of his own identity as an individual has been made. Sasha emerges as someone able to make his own decisions, realising that no issue has a simple answer, and that others, like himself, are complex individuals. This contrasts sharply with the simplistic style of writing and of dealing with characters that was so much a feature of much previous Soviet children's literature, and is a very long way from the character of Timur.

Minaev's story was published in 1988 and recounts events which are said to have taken place in 1986. It spans the years when changes were first initiated and concrete effects had perhaps not always been seen. Sasha is a hero who doubts, who is uncertain of the correct attitude he should adopt, or how far he should take this new idea of developing his personal individuality. Reality and unreality are blended in Sasha's narrative, contributing to this sense of confusion, a confusion which is a feature of society in general at the time the story was written.

The second example is a story by a far more established writer, Sergey Ivanov. He is frequently cited in critical works on children's literature as being one of the more progressive writers, who resisted pressure to write conformist literature and was able to respond to changing demands.³⁸ This story was published in *Pioneer* in November and December 1989. It represents an amalgam of two types of children's stories, the familiar school-based story, and a fantasy. It is particularly well-written, with several excellent passages of descriptive fantastic prose, and is a good example of an interesting combination of innovative writing along with a small dose of the usual moralising.

In this story the heroine and the other characters play very different roles. There is no central moral message in the story, although there is a contrived attempt to ensure some element of morally good behaviour on the part of the heroine. Indeed, this is one of the most interesting aspects of the story. Briefly, the author tells the story of the Snow Maiden, who is found in the snow by an old lady, whom she calls *babushka*, and who manages to adopt her. As she grows older she becomes aware of certain supernatural powers; for example, she can hold conversations with dogs, she can read other people's thoughts, she finds that she can fly, especially when it is snowing, as she has a special affinity with the snow,

and does not feel the cold. She also has memories of a world of ice, of being carried through the air on the back of a great white polar bear to her grandfather, who is of course *Grandfather Frost*.

Tangled in with what is essentially a very beautiful fantasy is a plot concerning a stolen library book. The library book turns out to belong to the Pushkin Library in Moscow, and Tanya, here exhibiting the “good Pioneer” aspect of her character, resolves to return it, which she succeeds in doing by making use of her supernatural abilities. Vadim, who had wanted to keep the book, which oddly enough turns out to be a rare antique copy of Gogol’s “*Dead souls*”, is furious, and accuses her of being a murderess. It seems that he had hoped to sell the book to save a Polar Owl, which was in danger of being killed to be stuffed by a taxidermist. Eventually, despite this rather unusual side plot, Tanya’s grandfather comes to take her home, and everyone who knew her forgets all about her – except her grandmother. The last word from the narrator is that the owl was saved, although this is implied, rather than stated, and the story ends with the grandmother hearing Tanya whisper to her each year on the night of the first snowfall.

The narrator still has a role in the story as a commentator on behaviour and events. For example, when Tanya is first found in the snow, the grandmother is astonished, because she always wanted a daughter, and she always intended to call her Tanya. The narrator comments: “Fate often acts very differently from the way we would like it to; unfortunately you yourselves have already found this out more than once”.³⁹ It is in the portrayal of the different characters that the narrator/author introduces certain moralistic comments. Tanya herself is portrayed as a kind, compassionate, and honest character. She cannot be counted as a descendant of a positive hero both because she is a timid and fearful heroine,

and because of her supernatural nature. Throughout the story we are aware that she is a small child, and many of the things that happen to her frighten her. Other characters include Vadim, whose love of animals is the primary motivation for his actions, or Grisha, who is simply concerned with making money – and cooperates in the theft of the book for that reason. When Vadim and Tanya confront Grisha about the book, either Tanya or the narrator, or both, note that he looks guilty: “He did not know why Tanya and Vadim had come, but, like any dishonest person he was afraid of something – what if I am guilty of something?”⁴⁰ Prebylkov is also cast as a negative character, wanting the book in return for the owl, and only interested in the profit that he can gain from the whole affair: “Prebylkov was an inoffensive person, but when there was the smell of profit somewhere then he would be the first to smell it!”⁴¹

The last story to be looked at is by Lyudmila Matveeva; she is not a well-known name in Russian children’s literature, but one or two of her stories and features appeared in *Pioneer* in 1991 and 1992. This story was published in three instalments, in February, March and May 1991. It seems likely that it was directly written in response to the call for a new kind of hero to help children cope with contemporary problems. The hero of this story is an example not of a character to be emulated or even particularly admired or liked, but a character which children might sympathise with. In addition it is a descendant of the well-established “family story” which developed in response to the perceived breakdown of the family during the 60s and 70s. It was chosen because it represents both a change in the nature and type of hero, and because it has many features in common with more traditional stories and heroes.

In this story by Matveeva, entitled “*Progul’shchik*”, which means “shirker”, “truant”, or “skiver”, Georgy Maksimovich Nechushkin, or Gosha, as he is

normally called by the narrator, is introduced as a rather pitiful, yet defiant character, whose grandmother, or *babushka*, has been left to look after him when his mother disappeared without trace. His father has never seen him. The grandmother herself has few virtues, although we see her only through Gosha's eyes. She drinks too much vodka and is unable to look after him properly. He sees "a good-for-nothing old woman, with a red nose".⁴² The theme of the story centres around her decision to place him in a state boarding school for children whose parents have mostly given up their rights over their children. The story relates the reactions of these children to the situation they find themselves in; none of them is portrayed in any way as heroic. The way in which Gosha learns to adjust to life in the school is the focus of the story, together with his perceptions of the other children and staff and his ongoing feud with Vova Klimov, one of the other boys. The climax of the story occurs when he is wrongfully accused of stealing money from other children which they had earned by working each Friday at a factory making New Year decorations.

The title of the story originates both in the fact that he played truant from a maths lesson at school, and in his reaction to other situations, where he is often portrayed as avoiding the issue, or taking the easy way out. A woman who sweeps the courtyard where he lives plays the role of a mentor, telling him that avoiding difficult tasks or situations is not the correct way to behave. Gosha is also a character who lives in hope – always hoping that bad things will never actually happen. This is both his major fault and his most endearing characteristic. For example, he tries to ignore the process by which his grandmother is trying to place him in the home, fantasising that the forms have all been thrown away – "He convinced himself that that was the way it was, he even sang out all over the building".⁴³ All to no avail; in the morning his grandmother announces that they are going to the home. "Now he knew – everything. However much you

recoil from the truth, it will catch up with you anyway.”⁴⁴ He continues to attempt to hide his feelings and fake indifference; that morning he whistles in the bathroom, when they arrive at the Principal’s office he stares fixedly at the ceiling. However it is clear that this is all a show. His feeling of emptiness is reinforced by the author by commenting on an aquarium in the entrance hall of the home – an aquarium without fish – “Depressing, an aquarium with no fish”, thinks Gosha.⁴⁵

Gosha gleans much of his bravery from others. He feels strong and big next to one of his teachers, Galina Aleksandrovna, who is petite and finely-boned. With Stasik as his friend before coming to the school, he “feared no one, either in the square, in the district, or in the school”.⁴⁶ It is with Stasik however, that he got into trouble with the police, over the theft of a packet of biscuits in a shop, the incident which led to him being placed in the home. Indeed this is what he chooses to blame his misfortune on: “Because of a packet of biscuits his life changed totally. Is that just? No, of course not. But where is it, this justice?”⁴⁷ As in the previous story it is not always clear whether the comments come from the narrator or from the character in the story.

Gosha has a very poor self-image, describing himself as the “bad company” mothers feel their children will fall in with. When he notices that one of the other boys’ shoe laces are undone he wants to step on them and trip him up, to hear the noise he will make as he falls, not “because he is a bad person; and not because he felt hostile towards Alyosha Kitaev. On the contrary, he liked Alyosha. It was simply because it was difficult to stop himself”.⁴⁸ Gosha in turn is determined to show Klimov, the boy that all the children are afraid of, that he is not afraid of him. Despite this determination, and vowing that he will “thrash Klimov”, he puts it off to another day. The narrator again takes over, pointing

out to the reader that one “should never put off such matters. You have to thrash someone straight away. If you delay it, that means you are afraid, And if you are afraid, everyone knows it.”⁴⁹ Several days go by, and Gosha always finds an excuse. “Deep down, Gosha knew that these were all excuses, that all shirkers in the world are very good at finding excuses for not doing something.” Later however he realises he has had enough of excuses, and has a physical fight with Klimov. For Nechushkin, this is a major victory, for he thinks afterwards, with the narrator and the reader: “Today he had won a victory over Klimov. But his victory was a more serious one. It is without doubt far more difficult to win a victory over oneself”.⁵⁰

The concept of collective responsibility is also raised in the story. Galina Aleksandrovna is a new teacher, and is horrified to find that the children throw away clothes or hide them when they want new ones, always believing that the State will provide them. She realises that their attitude to their clothes is a result of not living at home in a family. In a family a child looks forward to the purchase of new clothes, chooses them, and realises they are bought with their mothers' wages. Work becomes money, which is then transformed into goods and possessions. At the home everything is publicly owned, and new clothes come out of the store. Parents have given up their responsibilities, “the State takes over that care, it provides the children with everything.”⁵¹ The author makes this question of non-accountability the focus of a large section of the story. The purpose again is clearly didactic, to try and inculcate a sense of individual responsibility. The moral seems to be – institutionalised life, where everything is provided, takes away the children's responsibility for goods that are communally owned. Private ownership gives more responsibility, greater appreciation.

An extension of this principle seems to be behind the decision to take the children to work in a factory each Friday, for which each gets paid according to the work he or she does. This leads to the final incident in the story, when someone steals their first pay from their pockets in the cloakroom. Gosha becomes the prime suspect, because of some money that he had hidden in his cupboard, given him by his grandmother. He runs away from the home, convinced that no one cares about him, and that he has nowhere to go. It is Aunt Masha, who played the role of adviser before, that sends him back. She reminds him again that he is behaving like someone who shirks what he has to do. She tells him that the easiest thing to do is to run away rather than face one's problems. He goes back to find that they have all decided that he could not have been the thief anyway, that they trust each other and know that none of them could have done it.

Gosha's fantasy throughout that his mother will respond to a letter that he wrote and asked his grandmother to post remains in effect right to the end. Many of the characters have similar fantasies. By the end of the story, Gosha realises that all the children dream of seeing their parents, or of being taken home, and that that is not a weakness. He manages to develop a sense of realism, without losing his fundamental idealism. He too tells a white lie at the end of the story; his mother sent a letter and she is coming to fetch him: "Lida Fyodorovna understood. Did she believe him? That wasn't important".⁵²

Of course, the true "shirkers" of the story are Gosha's mother and father, neither of whom acknowledge their responsibilities. The message of the story is that of facing up to one's responsibilities, and accepting the consequences of one's own actions. Gosha and his friends are flawed characters, with few outstanding virtues. Nevertheless there is a feeling of solidarity, and an

acknowledgement of each other's sadness. This is a story written very much in response to the new demands of the late 1980s, and yet by an author who has not yet let go of the conventions and norms of traditional socialist realist literature, so that the failings of the characters are almost too clear-cut, and the story itself remains cliched and perhaps of limited literary merit.

These are three very different examples. The story by Minaev aims to make a point about differing social values and norms and the importance of individual development and opinion. The second focuses on writing a good fantasy but incorporating certain socially responsible features at the same time. Matveeva, the writer of the last story, uses the story as a social commentary to explain to children the results of the breakdown in family structures. In all of them the characters are far removed from the traditional socialist realist hero. The purpose of characterisation has changed, and there is clearly room for a greater variety of characteristics and traits in the heroes and heroines of modern stories. The aim was to show both the diversity and the overlap in stories written at the end of the eighties in Russia. It is clear that changes in the type of hero and heroine are ongoing, but given that these examples are taken from a traditional journal, it seems conclusive that there has been a gradual move away from traditional heroes towards heroes more in keeping with the new social and political climate. New issues have been introduced, and new heroes are dealing with them in a different way. At the same time, it seems that although writers have tried to rise to the challenges posed by developments in Russia in the 1980s, the constraints under which they have operated for many years are still in evidence, and it may be some considerable time before a children's literature emerges which has the potential to develop freely and creatively and to take its place as an important contributor to international children's literature.

Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the Human Science Research Council, which provided funds for my research.
- 2 Certain sections of this paper appear in a slightly different form in an article published in 1993: Campbell, J.A. 1993, "Boris Minaev's *Sasha* and Anatolij Aleksin's *Sergej: two child heroes of the eighties*", *Slavic Almanach*, Vol. II, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, pp1-18.
- 3 The transliteration system used in this paper is that of the Royal Geographical Society, with the exception of accepted Russian names ending in "iy" and which have been shortened to "y" as in "Anatoly. References containing transliterated Russian have been left as they appear in the cited work.
- 4 Shavit, Z., 1986, *Poetics of children's literature*, University of Georgia Press, pxi.
- 5 Hunt, P., ed. 1990. *Children's literature: the development of criticism*, London: Routledge, p2.
- 6 Applebee, A., quoted in Hunt, P., 1991 *Criticism, theory, and children's literature*, London: Blackwell, p190.
- 7 Hunt, P., 1990. p102.
- 8 See for example, Sutherland, R.S., 1985, Political ideologies in literature for children, in *Children's literature in education*, Agathon Press, Vol.16, no.3.
- 9 On the issue of the accessibility of the underlying value system see Warlow, A., Alternative worlds available, in Meek, M., 1977, *The Cool web: the pattern of children's reading*, London: Bodley Head, p100.
- 10 See Shneidman, N.N., 1979 *Soviet literature in the 1970s: artistic diversity and ideological conformity*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p3.
- 11 Dixon, Bob, 1977, *Catching them young*, London: Pluto Press.
- 12 O'Dell, F., 1978, *Socialisation through children's literature: the Soviet example*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p5.
- 13 Starza, A., 1984, *Children's literature in the Soviet Union: 1917-1934*, British Theses Service, p74.
- 14 Each classroom used to have a corner devoted to books, pictures and other items relating to Lenin, much as other schools might have a Nature Table. These corners have now been removed from the classrooms and the books and pictures packed away, occasionally to the regret of the teachers concerned.

- 15 For a study of the positive hero, see Mathewson R., 1975, *The Positive hero in Russian literature*, Stanford UP.
- 16 Clark, K., 1985, *The Soviet novel: history as ritual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p47. 17 Clark, K., 1985, pp49–50.
- 18 O'Dell, F., 1978, p32.
- 19 Gaidar, A., 1988, *Timur and his squad*, (retold) Novosti Press Agency Publishing House. (Russian version originally published 1940.)
- 20 Zubareva, Ye. Ye.(ed.) 1989, *Detskaya literatura*, Moscow, Prosveshchenie, p321. (The section on Gaydar in this work is, despite the later date, largely taken from an earlier book – Ternovsky, A.V., 1977, *Detskaya literatura*, Moscow, Prosveshchenie. There was thus little official re-evaluation by the end of the 80s at least.
- 21 Kudryumova, T.F., Korovina, V.Ya., Al'betokova R.I. et al. 1990, *Metodicheskoe rukovodstvo k uchebniku-khrestomatii "Rodnaya literatura" dlya 5 klassa*, reworked, Moskva, Prosveshchenie, p218.
- 22 Kudryumova, T.F. et al. p224.
- 23 Lysenkova et al. May 1989, "Democratisation of the individual", in *Soviet education*, (original article, 1987), p83.
- 24 Makhnutov, M.I. & Komarovskaya A.I. 1984, "O literaturnom obrazovanii uchashchikhsya srednikh PTU", *Sovetskaya literatura*, Vol.4, p72.
- 25 Cited in Shneidman, N.N., 1989, *Soviet Literature in the 1980s: a decade of transition*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p93.
- 26 A study of the hero of this story "And meanwhile, somewhere..." appears in Campbell, J.A. 1993, "Boris Minaev's *Sasha* and Anatolij Aleksin's *Sergej: two child heroes of the eighties*", *Slavic Almanach*, Vol. II, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1993, pp1–18.
- 27 See Akimov A., & Akimov, V. 1989, *Semidesyatye, vos'midesyatye ...: problemy i iskaniya sovremennoy detskoy prozy*, Moscow: Detskaya Literatura, pp47–48.
- 28 Starza, A., 1984, p22.
- 29 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, Moscow.
- 30 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.1.
- 31 *Pioneer*, 1988, No.6 & No.7.
- 32 *Pioneer*, 1988, No.6, p2.
- 33 See Monoszon, E.I. 1989. "Excerpts from E.I. Monoszon". *Soviet education*, Vol.28, no.12, p22ff.

- 34 For example 540 works were published on the theme of the Second World War as part of the anniversary celebrations in 1985 with a circulation of 33 million.
- 35 Meshcheriakova N. and Grishina L. 1986. "Emulation of the heroic" in *Soviet education* (original article, 1985), p64.
- 36 *Pioneer*, 1988, No.6, p15.
- 37 *Pioneer*, 1988, No.7, p5.
- 38 Akimov & Akimova, 1989, p7, pp47-8.
- 39 *Pioneer*, 1989, No.11, p45.
- 40 *Pioneer*, 1989, No.11, p48.
- 41 *Pioneer*, 1989, No.12, p36.
- 42 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p37.
- 43 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p36.
- 44 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p36.
- 45 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p36.
- 46 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p43.
- 47 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p43.
- 48 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.2, p44.
- 49 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.3, p40.
- 50 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.3, p44.
- 51 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.3, p46.
- 52 *Pioneer*, 1991, No.5, p48.



Popular themes in children's literature in Uganda:

some case studies

evangeline I barongo



Introduction

Children's literature in Uganda consists mainly of creative stories or tales that are built around specific themes and moral precepts. By and large, the theme of a story contains a subtle message of an instructional nature intended to enable child readers to understand themselves, their environment and the complexities of social life in general. The instructional messages carried by the stories are also intended to build ambition, character and good behaviour in children.

There are basically two forms of children's literature in Uganda, namely, written and nonwritten. The written form is published in children's books, newspapers and popular children's magazines. The nonwritten "literature" consists of stories that are committed to memory and passed on from one generation to another. Stories of this kind are divided into two types in the contemporary period. On the one hand, there are the more enduring traditional oral stories which are normally told to children by grandparents in extended family settings. On the

other, there are the modernised forms of oral stories sometimes created situationally, which are told to children by children's librarians, school teachers and children's television programmers in order to communicate specific instructional messages to children. Both the written and nonwritten forms of literature are valued by children because of their beauty, entertainment value and the power of the messages they contain.

This paper attempts to examine some of the children's literature in Uganda in order to show clearly the messages and lessons which they tend to convey to child readers and listeners. An attempt is made to illustrate how this literature impacts on the existential life experiences of children and how the messages carried in the literature contribute to their intellectual development, character building and good behaviour in general.

Selected themes

The topics that are a major concern to the authors of children's literature and storytellers in Uganda are wide and varied and we cannot possibly handle all of them adequately in a short paper of this kind. Therefore, the presentation and analysis of the literature have of necessity to be selective and more importantly thematical. In other words, the discussion of a given set of literature, its content and significance to the life experiences of children, is done along a specific theme that binds such literature together.

This is significant when it is noted that, as a matter of fact, children also tend to relate to the literature they read in a thematical way. My experiences of working

in a children's library where children select and read books, magazines and newspapers on their own and listen to stories told by library staff is that children are very selective with regard to the materials they read and the stories they listen to. Some children are interested in one set of literature and not another because of the commonality of the themes that tend to meet their interests and their inner psychological needs for self-realisation and fulfilment.

Given this orientation, the paper presents and analyses children's literature in Uganda under six themes, namely:

- (i) Cleverness and intelligence
- (ii) Hard work and bravery
- (iii) Discipline and good behaviour
- (iv) Care for others
- (v) Marriage and family
- (vi) Greed and corruption.



The conclusion will attempt to show the experiences gained by children through their exposure to the literature discussed and its contribution to their social and moral growth.

1. Cleverness and intelligence

A survey of the literature that portrays the virtue of cleverness and intelligence shows that, invariably, this literature has legendary animal characters that are associated with these virtues, most notably the Hare, the Cat, the Monkey and the Chameleon. The literature in this field is of great fascination to children and

is indeed a very popular area of focus for writers of children's books in the country¹. Children seek to be as clever as these animals and quite often, they assume the names of such animal characters in their own play. There is no doubt that stories carrying this theme challenge the child intellectually and in the process assist in the intellectual development of the child. Let us look briefly at a summary of the contents of one or two of the stories under this theme.

In a story entitled *How the Hare set the Lion against himself*² a story is told of how long ago, all animals lived together under King Lion who was a cruel and unjust ruler. All animals were enslaved by King Lion; they worked for him without getting anything in return. This annoyed the animals and made them think hard of how they could free themselves from the cruel rule of King Lion. One day, a secret meeting of all the animals was convened by Mr Elephant and at that meeting, it was decided to get rid of the Lion. Many suggestions were made with regard to how this could be done. It was decided that Mr Leopard was to set a trap to kill King Lion. This, the Leopard tried but failed. Next, Mr Hippo was asked to try but failed too. Many other animals also tried but ended up in the same way as did the Leopard and the Hippo.

When everybody else had failed, the clever Mr Hare went up to Chairman Elephant and offered to assist the animals to get rid of King Lion. Chairman Elephant could not see how the little Mr Hare could succeed where the big and powerful animals like the Leopard and the Hippo had failed. He nevertheless allowed the Hare to try. Mr Hare proceeded to lay his trap.

Looking humble, friendly but a bit worried, Mr Hare went to King Lion and told him that he had come across another creature that looked exactly the same

as His Majesty King Lion who was posing as king of all the animals. Mr Hare implored King Lion to save them from this other creature since all the animals knew that he was their only King and protector.

On hearing the Hare's story, King Lion became furious and was ready to act immediately to slay the rival creature. Mr Hare, however, told the King not to panic. He advised him to attack the enemy when there was no wind and when the lake water was calm. King Lion reluctantly agreed.

After a few days, Mr Hare went to King Lion again and told him of the plans of the enemy to attack him that day. King Lion immediately set forth to hunt the enemy. Mr Hare led him to a nearby crater lake which was very deep and surrounded by a thick forest. There was no wind and the water was calm. On reaching the shore of the lake at its deepest end, the tricky Hare asked King Lion to look down into the calm water to see the enemy who looked exactly like himself. On seeing his own reflection in the water, King Lion snarled and angrily jumped into the water to attack the enemy. Not long afterwards, King Lion drowned and died.

Quickly, Mr Hare ran to his fellow animals to inform them of how he had helped them to get rid of the cruel King Lion. All the animals were jubilant at the good news. Later, they decided to make the Hare their King. Mr Hare became King of all animals because of his cleverness and intelligence.

Recently, at the Kampala Children's Library where I work, a group of children were playing in the library compound and playfully calling themselves Mr Lion, Mr Hippo, Mr Hare and so on. I joined them briefly in name-calling. Later, I

interviewed them about which names the children took and why. The ideas of domination, trickery and intelligence as represented by the characters of King Lion and the Hare were being used by the children in play in a manner that closely resembled the children's real behaviour as perceived by their friends³. Conceptions of good and bad behaviour as well as of cruel fathers also came out clearly in the children's play through the use of the Lion and Hare characters. Asked why a particular child was being called Mr Lion, some children said it was because he was a bad boy who was always fighting with other children, beating and terrorising them like cruel fathers do. One among them who tended to protect the weaker and younger children from the molestations of the "terror boys" was nicknamed Mr Hare⁴. These conceptions and interpretations of social life by the children were derived directly from what they read in the stories. This kind of literary experience enables the child to understand herself, her relations with others and the complexities of social life in general.

Related to the same theme and again using the Hare character is a story in the same book entitled *How the Hare fooled the Sheep*⁵. This is a story of trickery and quick wits as demonstrated by the Hare in taking advantage of the "foolishness" of others. In this story, the Sheep and the little Hare were neighbours on a farmland. The Hare had two problems that troubled him all the time. He had a very large family but very little land on which to grow food to feed his family. The Sheep, on the other hand, had a very large area of farmland on which he grew a variety of crops and kept many types of animals.

In order to grow enough food for his family, the Hare approached his friend Sheep and asked if he could rent part of the Sheep's farmland. Seeing that the little Hare was poor, the Sheep did not want to rent his land for money. He opted to take part of the Hare's future crop. It was agreed that for the first

crop, the Sheep would take the top part while the Hare was to take the bottom part which was under the ground. The Sheep was convinced that being the season for millet, the Hare was going to plant this crop on the land he had given him. Thinking very quickly, the Hare, however, decided to grow potatoes thus ensuring that the effective crop would be underground. When harvesting time came, the Hare called the Sheep to take his share. He was annoyed with himself when he found out that his share consisted only of potato leaves. The Hare took the whole crop of potatoes and fed his family well.

During the second planting period and using the same principle of sharing the crop, the Sheep chose to take the bottom part. This time, the Hare grew millet which enabled him to take the whole millet crop at harvest time.

When for the third time the Sheep allowed the Hare to use his land, he made an agreement with the Hare that this time he (the Sheep) would take the top and the bottom of the crop grown. Being wise, the Hare decided to grow maize whose crop is to be found in the middle part of the plant. Again, the Sheep got nothing and for the third time, the clever Hare had fooled the Sheep and used his land freely without the Sheep getting any share of the crops.

A story such as this is not perceived as one of evil trickery by the child. It is rather a case of how someone in a weak position – a position of need, can use his/her intelligence and wits to take advantage of circumstances and manage to overcome a difficulty. The success of the Hare in solving his problem of feeding his family in the context of a lack of sufficient land on which to grow the required food, leaves a positive impression on the mind of the child as an example of how, in real life, one can get out of difficult situations if one is clever and intelligent enough.

2. *Hard work and bravery*

Stories that focus on this theme convey to children the consequences of hard work, which is success and that of laziness, which is failure and the implications of both to the circumstances of the individual. They also focus on the virtue of bravery as exhibited not so much in battle or in facing danger but in enduring hardship and standing up to trying situations. Through such stories, the child's mind is oriented towards seeking success in life. He/she is encouraged to face difficulties more courageously when they arise which might be as normal and expected as writing an examination or taking bitter medicine for curing an illness.

In *Naingo and Wounded Walls*⁶, Sam Aisu writes about a guard called Naingo who was born and grew up as part of an ordinary family. Because of his qualities of hard work and bravery, he was greatly admired, not just by everybody in the village, but also by the beautiful chief's daughter whom he later married. Through this marriage, Naingo became a member of the royal family.

When he was still a young boy, Naingo used to accompany his poor father to the lake every day to catch fish. The lake was a great distance away and young Naingo and his father walked there on foot. As he grew up, Naingo was taken by his father to serve in the Chief's court. He continued to work hard and because of this, coupled with his qualities of wisdom and good judgement, he was appointed by the Chief as Guard and later became a junior chief, second in command to the senior chief himself. This is a story of a person who rose from humble beginnings to fame and prosperity because of hard work and bravery.

There are many oral stories that are told to children that portray the virtues of hard work and the problems associated with laziness. There are also many stories

that focus on the qualities of perseverance. These stories are narrated by grandparents and teachers with the didactic purpose of encouraging children to work hard and to face the difficulties of life with perseverance and bravery.

3. *Discipline and good behaviour*

Somewhat related to the theme of hard work are stories which in recent times have focused on the problem of discipline and which have tended to bring out clearly the theme of punishment for undisciplined behaviour and reward for good behaviour.

In a story headlined *Lazy boy got punishment which made him work hard*⁷, Businge Belly tells a story of a farmer who had five children, four of whom were hard-working and well-behaved while the youngest one, called Kaku, was lazy and undisciplined. Kaku preferred to play and to shine his shoes leaving his brothers to do all the housework. One day, Kaku invited his friends to his family's home for a meal which he expected his mother, assisted by his brothers, to make. He told them what a good cook his mother was and what a wonderful meal they could expect.

Kaku's mother knew that her lazy and undisciplined son was not going to assist in any way in the preparation of the meal or in laying the table but would only wait to be served, together with his friends, when the meal was ready. After getting the meal ready, the mother put it aside and instead put Kaku's shining shoes on the dinner table, covered them and invited the hungry Kaku and his friends to the table to eat. Kaku eagerly uncovered what he thought was a delicious lunch but to his utter disappointment, he saw his shining shoes on the table instead of the food. He asked his mother what had happened. Mother

replied that all along, she had been polishing his shoes. Kaku quickly got the message and repented. After realising that Kaku had genuinely changed, the mother served him and his friends the nice meal she had prepared for them. After that, Kaku became a disciplined and hard-working boy.

Another story with a message of punishment for bad behaviour appeared in the *Children Vision* of Saturday November 7, 1992⁸. The author tells a story of two brothers named Nangi and Nangira who lived near each other. Nangi was generally known in the village as a thief while Nangira was a well-behaved boy and very much liked by members of the community. One day, while looking for firewood in the forest, Nangira met an old woman carrying a heavy load. He relieved the old woman of the load and carried it for her up to her home. In appreciation of Nangira's assistance and kindness, the old woman gave him a bag and told him that it would help him. When he went home, he opened the bag and to his amazement and delight, he found in it jewels, gold and money. Whenever he wanted any of these treasures from the bag, he would say certain words to it and it would open and he would get what he wanted. He kept the magic words a secret.

One day, his brother Nangi peeped in his room and saw him speaking certain words to the bag which opened and he got what he wanted from it. Nangi heard the magic words and memorised them. The next day when Nangira had gone to the market, Nangi stole the bag, took it to his house and spoke the same words to the bag. To his disappointment, instead of getting jewels, gold and money, a stick emerged from the bag which whipped him continuously until he returned the bag to his brother's house. From that time, Nangi realised that stealing was a bad habit and he stopped.

Stories such as these are both amusing and instructive to the child. They are amusing because of the manner in which the characters in the story get either rewarded or punished for good or bad behaviour. Since it is a natural tendency to seek pleasure and avoid pain such as is implicit in punishment, literature of this kind instils good behaviour and discipline in children and society as a whole.

4. Care for others

In recent years, there has emerged a disturbing problem of street and delinquent children in most large towns in Uganda. Investigations have revealed that most of the children involved are those who run away from home to escape abuse by parents and relatives. Some writers have used this theme in stories to communicate the idea of the need for people to take care of the vulnerable groups in society.

The Lucky orphan girl is a very popular story among girls which was first published three years ago, but has now been widely committed to memory by many people⁹. It is popular for two reasons. Firstly, it is a story which reflects a common occurrence in society, namely, how orphans are abused by stepmothers or even halfbrothers or halvesisters. Secondly, it glorifies marriage.

In this story, the author, Rose Bingi speaks of a girl named Nantume whose mother died when she was still a young girl. She lived in great misery with a cruel stepmother and unkind halfbrothers and halvesisters. Nantume did all the hard work in the family but was given poor food all the time. She would collect firewood and fetch water from a well which was some distance away from home. She did all this hard work even if she was ill. One day, on her way back from the well, she stumbled, fell down and broke the pot in which she was carrying

the water. Knowing what treatment she would get from her stepmother for breaking the pot, she was scared of going home. She sat under a tree, but unfortunately it was raining. She began shivering because of her wet, cold clothes.

She heard the voice of an old woman leading her goats home from the grazing ground. Nantume ran to her and asked for shelter. Although the old woman was willing to take Nantume to her home, she asked her why she was not at her own home on such rainy day. Nantume explained her predicament to the old woman who felt very sorry for her. The woman gave Nantume her own pot. She fetched the water and took it home safely. On reaching home, her stepmother scolded her for taking so long to fetch the water and gave her very little food that night.

In the course of time, Nantume and the old woman became great friends. As she fetched water, Nantume frequently passed by the old woman's house and helped her with some work before taking the water home. Some time later, Nantume met the old woman's handsome young grandson called Jingo at the old woman's house. The two became friends, got married and stayed together happily as husband and wife. Through the assistance of the old woman, Nantume had been able to escape from a miserable life to a happy one in marriage.

In *Orphan becomes king's wife*¹⁰, Norah Kikamba tells a similar story of the sufferings of an orphan at the hands of a stepmother. Rurunga's mother died and left her when she was still a small girl. After a few years, Rurunga's father married another woman although he was not really happy to marry for the second time knowing the hostile relationship that usually develops between a daughter and a stepmother. As it turned out, his fears were soon confirmed as his new wife started mistreating his daughter.

One night, father and stepmother packed their bags, deserted their home and left Rurunga behind on her own. This was at the insistence of the stepmother who considered Rurunga to be a bad girl with whom she could no longer stay. For a long time, Rurunga stayed alone. Her loneliness and solitude made her wish for a wild animal to take her and eat her up. This was communicated in a song which she sang quite often. But her wish was never fulfilled.

One day, two hunter's dogs heard Rurunga singing. Excitedly, they went to their master and led him to see the singing girl. On hearing the sorrowful song, the hunter took Rurunga to the King. The King feeling concerned, and sympathetic to Rurunga's plight, put her in the care of a kind old woman. When she grew up, she became beautiful and the King married her. Accordingly, Rurunga became a queen.

One day, Rurunga's stepmother hungry and in rags came to the palace looking for assistance. Rurunga, the Queen, ordered that she be served milk and food. But when the Queen later went to see the woman whom she had ordered to be fed well, she found out that it was none other than her cruel stepmother who had earlier deserted her and left her to die. The Queen asked the King to let her do whatever she wanted with the woman. She summoned all the women in the Kingdom to the palace. She then led all the women, including her stepmother, to a lake nearby. On reaching the lake and without any compunction, the Queen ordered her stepmother to be drowned in front of all the women. This, the Queen explained, was to show all women in the Kingdom that if any one of them mistreated an innocent child, she deserved to be punished in the same manner.

5. *Marriage and family*

Stories on this topic are particularly popular among adolescent girls. They emphasise the virtues of marriage and a settled family life. Some aspects of this form of literature are also oriented towards sex education of the children.

In *The Golden bangle*¹¹, Nancy Oloro tells a story of a girl called Acanit whose parents both died on the same day when she was still a baby. A relative called Aunt Amulen, who did not have a child of her own, wanted to take Acanit to look after her. Other relatives refused to accept Aunt Amulen's offer on the grounds that she was too rough and was likely to mistreat Acanit. Instead, a cousin to Acanit's father was given the responsibility of taking care of her. As it turned out, however, this man was more interested in the riches which Acanit's father had left behind than in looking after her. He squandered these riches and mistreated Acanit. Even when baby Acanit had measles, the man did not take her to the hospital for treatment.

On hearing how Acanit was being mistreated, Aunt Amulen went to the home of the man and insisted on taking her away. This time, other relatives did not stop her. Accordingly, Aunt Amulen took Acanit. She brought her up well and Acanit became a beautiful girl. Everybody in the village admired her beauty, including the Chief's son who asked for her hand in marriage. She accepted and on the engagement day, the Chief's son gave her a golden bangle.

Acanit's engagement to the Chief's son made the other girls in the village jealous. Some of them had hoped that the Chief's son would ask them to marry him. Their ambitions had now been thwarted by Acanit. They began to plot against her. They planned to be friendly and get close to Acanit by assisting her with the

housework, but they actually intended to get an opportunity to damage her beauty so that the Chief's son would lose interest in her.

Aunt Amulen became suspicious of these girls so that she would refuse to allow Acanit to be in their company alone. One day, however, Acanit asked her aunt to allow her to go with the girls to the forest to collect firewood. Auntie Amulen agreed. While in the forest, the girls tortured Acanit intending to disfigure her. In the process, she lost her golden bangle in the river. The girls left her behind looking for the golden bangle but Acanit was not seriously injured.

When Acanit failed to return home from the forest, Aunt Amulen informed friends and her fiancé, the Chief's son. They went out to the forest and after a long search, they found Acanit in the home of a hippopotamus which had assisted her in recovering the golden bangle from the river. They carried her back home in great joy. On reaching home, the Chief's son decided to get married to her immediately. The marriage took place and Aunt Amulen moved to the palace to stay with Acanit. There they lived happily in comfort.

6. Greed and corruption

Reflecting on the growing problem of avarice and corruption in public life, some writers of children's books have used nonhuman characters to convey messages of the dangers of greed and corruption. This literature aims at moulding the morality of the young child and creating a better society.

In a story entitled *The Four friends*¹², Gerald Matovu narrates a story of four friends – the Fly, the Spider, the Mouse and the Lark – who owned a very

nice bull together. Everyone admired this bull. One day, three men approached Lark who was looking after the bull that day. They told Lark how the King had heard about the nice bull which the four friends owned and how the King wished to have it for a time so that it could breed among his cows. The bull was to be returned to the owners together with two calves after the cows had given birth. Lark allowed the men to take the bull.

When a long time had passed without the King returning the bull, the four friends got worried. Lark was asked to go and look for it. He set out on the journey and later returned to tell his friends how he had seen the bull among the King's large herd.

The four friends decided to go together to collect their bull from the King. On the way, there was a river which they could not cross. But Spider made a web over the river which enabled the four friends to cross it. On reaching the palace, the King welcomed them and asked them to stay for the night. The four became suspicious of the King's intentions. Obviously, the King did not appear to be ready to release the bull and had other plans in mind. The group asked Fly to get the news about what was happening in the palace. In search of the news, Fly flew to the King's cheek and heard him ordering that the four friends were to spend the night in a grass thatched hut which was to be set on fire at midnight and all the four would burn to death.

On learning of the King's evil plans, Mouse dug a tunnel leading outside the hut. When the hut was set on fire at midnight as planned, the four friends escaped through the tunnel. The King was surprised to see all four alive in the morning. Angrily, he told them to go and look for their bull among the herd and take it away on condition that if they failed to find it, they would all be killed.

The King had such a large herd that it was difficult to find one specific animal in it. Luckily though, Lark recognised the bull and sat between its horns. The four friends quickly led the bull out of the herd and ran away towards their home. By the time the King sent his men to kill them, they had crossed the river to the safety of their home.

On reaching home, the four friends decided to get rid of the troublesome bull. They decided to slaughter it and share the meat. Driven by greed, the four could not agree on how to share it. Each one wanted to take the largest share because of the special role he had played in the group's effort to recover the bull from the King. Spider claimed that he had made the bridge which had enabled them to cross the river twice. Fly said that he had collected the vital news about the King's plans to burn them to ashes. Had he not done so, they would all be dead. Mouse insisted that had he not dug the tunnel that enabled them to escape from the burning hut, they would not have been around to share the meat. For his part, Lark said that he had played the most important role of locating the bull in the King's large herd as, if they had failed to find it, the King would have killed them. The four friends greedily refused to share the meat equally until a man, passing by, offered to assist them. As it happened, the man did just what the four had failed to do and ended up by taking a share for himself. He allocated the four legs among them and carried away the rest while whistling and laughing.

This story combines the two elements of corruption and greed as well as their consequences. The King was allowed to take the bull he had requested in good faith. However, he exhibited corrupt tendencies when he failed to return it. In an attempt to keep the bull for good, he developed evil ideas and planned to kill the owners of the bull.

There have been many cases of corruption in Uganda in recent years that are very much akin to the story under review. Many public officials have amassed wealth through corrupt means. On discovery, such officials have reportedly killed or attempted to kill the evidence by burning whole buildings containing relevant documents or eliminating persons known to possess incriminating evidence by shooting or poisoning them. And the part about greed in the story teaches the child that in society, there is enough for everybody to have a share and live happily with everybody else.

Conclusion

The themes explored in this review show that children's literature in Uganda has well-defined objectives. It aims at enabling the child to understand himself/herself and the complexities of society and social life in general. This literature plays a vital role in ensuring the continuity of culture and enforcement of conformity to acceptable norms and social standards. Above all, the literature assists the child to develop his/her intellectual and psychological potential so as to be able to live a full and useful life in his/her adult life. In this way, children's literature in Uganda plays a leading role in the overall effort of society to educate its young and mould them into good citizens.

Notes

- 1 See for instance, Richard Nganwa, *The Adventures of Mr. Hare*, Hare Series, (Kampala: Ren Publishers, 1985).
- 2 See, Richard Nganwa, *ibid*, Chapter 3.

- 3 This remarkable interview was taped and is available among the author's research materials.
- 4 Ibid. Compiled from the same interview materials.
- 5 Richard Nganwa, op.cit. pp. 22–28. See also a version of the same story: “Hare Tricks Sheep” *The New Vision* (Newspaper). “New Vision Children Series”, Saturday October 3, 1992 p. 13.
- 6 Sam Aisu, *Naingo and Wounded Walls: short stories* (Kampala: Crane Publishers, 1989).
- 7 Businge Belly “Lazy boy got punishment which made him work hard”, Children Vision, *The New Vision* (Newspaper) Saturday, December 5, 1992, p. 13.
- 8 See Nyapidi Collin “Thief Learns a Lesson” Children Vision, *The New Vision* (Newspaper), Saturday November 7, 1992, p. 13.
- 9 See, Bingi Rose “The Lucky orphan girl” Children Vision, *The New Vision* (Newspaper) Saturday April 18, 1992 p. 13.
- 10 Kakamba Norah, “Orphan Becomes King’s wife, Children Vision, *The New Vision* (Newspaper), Saturday May 30, 1992 p. 13.
- 11 Nancy Oloro, *The Golden bangle* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, n.d).
- 12 Gerald G. Matovu *Mugalu and the Gorilla* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1994) See story entitled “The Four friends” pp. 17–31.

