

A 25 year retrospective



of South African children's reading of other
worlds' books

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We learn from educators and psychologists that children should know their own roots: their own folk literature and their own culture. Yet those South African children who had access to books in the last 25 years grew up on Grimm and Andersen, Jacobs and Asbjørnsen. Why this Eurocentricism? Because very few people wrote for children in this country – there were a few Afrikaans and a few English story books, a few collections of (unauthenticated) African folktales and almost no picture books. Thus, South African children have, over the last 20 odd years, almost exclusively read imported books. I cannot tell you why there were so few original South African stories. I can tell you what the children did read during that time, and I can give an opinion on the effects of this reading.

Did it hurt them? I think not, for three reasons. The first is that the very first stories most children hear are the traditional ones, the folktales and fairy tales. These may have had Northern Hemisphere settings, but the universal theme, the universal truth of the traditional story is easily understood, and easily internalised. Which child who has heard about Hansel and Gretel has not identified with them? Children might not be able to analyse their instinctive fear of abandonment, but every child should rejoice at the ending of the story. The second reason has

to do with the quality of the books imported at that time, for it has come to be known as "The Golden Age of Children's Books". Finally, there is the possibility that reading these books helped our children to feel in touch with, and part of the big outside, the real world during a period of isolation which effectively cut them off from much that they should have had. Authors and publishers who allowed their books to be read in our country did our children a great service.

Towards the beginning of the 25-year period the BBC produced an important documentary, released in weekly episodes, called *The World at war*. This was also screened in South Africa and created great interest among children. Thus the first really big and important genre which fits into this time span is that of the war story. These were read avidly by girls as well as boys and there were never enough. Books which were especially important were those which had as central strands of the plot a particular idea or theme which, when the book was put together with other books, helped the child to build a balanced picture not only of the war itself, but of the build-up to the outbreak of hostilities, of the effect on the lives of ordinary people and which went some way to deglamorising the subject. Mara Kay's *Storm warning* shows us Germany and ordinary German people in the time before war was declared. It portrays the tensions in a family as compulsory membership of the Hitler Youth began to affect the young son. It builds to a climax with a description of Kristallnacht. It makes no value judgements but provides a clear picture of the rise of the Gestapo and the beginning of the persecution of the Jews. Willy Fährmann's *Year of the wolves* depicts the trauma of a German family as they flee across a war-ravaged countryside in the face of the advancing Russian army. *Uncle Misha's partisans* by Yuri Suhl and *Freedom fighter* by Carlo Picchio, two stories with similar "threads", deal with the lives of two young boys, both longing to join the partisans in order to do something to help in the fight. The former story is set in

the Ukraine under German occupation and the latter in Italy under German occupation. If these stories sound familiar perhaps you know *The Bronze bow* by Elizabeth George Speare, a gripping story set during the ministry of a certain young carpenter of Nazareth, and depicting a boy's burning desire to join the Zealots in their fight against Roman rule.

The Day of the bomb by Karl Bruckner brought home, in vivid, understated and unsentimental style, what it was like to be a child in Hiroshima before and after The Bomb, while Jill Paton Walsh and Hester Burton with *Dolphin Crossing* and *In spite of all terror*, respectively, showed us in their tales of Dunkirk ordinary people living through extraordinary times and doing extraordinarily brave things even though they were desperately afraid. Uriel Ofek's *Smoke over Golan*, Peter Carter's *Under Goliath* and Alison Morgan's *The Eyes of the blind* also have a common theme: children on opposing sides forced by circumstances to rely on each other in order to survive. The settings too are comparable in that Ofek's book is set during the three day Yom Kippur War, Carter's in strife-torn Belfast and Prices's in Old Testament times, during the Assyrian's attack on the Israelites. In each there are two boys who are divided by race, religion and ideology and who, when their situations become really desperate, are compelled to accept each other as people and, finally, to trust the other's integrity.

Thanks to television another very glamorised theatre of war is Vietnam. Allan Baillie, Katherine Paterson and Ian Strachan gave us *Little brother*, *Park's quest* and *Journey of 1000 miles* (and its sequel, *Second step*) respectively. Katherine Paterson's book tackles the emotive and difficult question of a boy who believes his father was a hero and then discovers that the cause for which he died was not a popular one. Added to this shock he discovers that his parents had been divorced before his father was killed in action ... then he meets the cause of the

divorce, his Vietnamese half-sister. Allan Baillie and Ian Strachan both address the problem of the boat people. The writing is unsentimental and these books, apart from being very fine, well-written and superbly characterised, show very clearly that Vietnam, both before and after the war was never glamorous.

It is clear that children's books really cover the subject of war very thoroughly and very professionally. It takes great skill for a writer to remain unjudgemental while at the same time keeping the whole work within the perspective of the child reader. We are fortunate that there are such fine writers otherwise we might find that children's interest in the subject had become rather morbid.

As "war books" began to diminish in number urban terrorism spilled over into children's books such as *Family at Fool's Farm* by Joyce Stranger. This is a real "onion book", with so many threads and so many levels that it bears more than one read! *The Hostages* by Michael Smith, *Prove yourself a hero* by KM Peyton, *Zed* by Rosemary Harris and Peter Dickinson's *Seventh raven* are all good enough to chill the blood and to make us stop and think. Hostage taking is a powerful and devastating weapon in the hands of ruthless people and these three excellent books bring this across very clearly though they are well within the bounds required by the norms of children's literature. Bernard Ashley too stays within these bounds in his *A Kind of wild justice* which is a story about a boy whose father is a petty criminal and who is "in bad" with a gang. He also wrote a clever, though tough story, *Terry on the fence*, about a boy caught up in a gang of juvenile criminals, and held by them so that he cannot "tell". *Don't look behind you*, by Lois Duncan, another very popular book which satisfies those readers who crave action, is about a family in the witness protection programme.

Recently Allan Baillie gave us *The China coin*, which traces the spread of the Peasants' Revolt as well as the Students' Revolt, and which culminates in the horror of Tiananmen Square. *The China coin*, like all the others, is a splendid book with a gripping story. The subject sounds "gloom and doomy" but, I assure you, the books are not. Looking nearer to home and to recent publications we have the powerful novel, *AK* by Peter Dickinson, in which we read about the struggle of an African country to attain democracy. Civil war is always sad, and cruel and ugly and this is apparent, despite the undramatic style. *Night fires*, by Joan Lingard, tells a similar story with a different setting, as in a way does the *Gift of magic* by Lois Duncan though this could be seen as science fiction too. *Into the valley* by Michael Williams and *Cry softly Thule Nene*, by Shirley Bojé are both set in Natal and tell of the violence there, while *Follow the crow* by Hugh Lewin, is set during Zimbabwe's fight for independence. Finally, in this "war zone" of books, there was the much enjoyed *Z for Zachariah* by Robert C O'Brien which describes a survivor's struggle to stay alive after a nuclear disaster.

Our children live in violent times and are, often painfully, aware of horror. They will readily empathise even if they cannot actually identify with the characters in the stories and they are able to accept what they read, be it sad, frightening or violent because it is written within the bounds imposed on the author by the age and maturity level of the prospective reader. It is more than possible that for many children real life is more sad, frightening or violent than what they read, but perhaps reading about similar problems helps them to feel less alone. To my knowledge there are no studies on this, so I have no facts or figures to give you. I have, however, given you an idea of the relevant literature and from this we can see that in the last 25 years good children's writers have, without being didactic, been honest and unpatronising.

Even so, I wonder whether we were suddenly so sated by war and violence that the proliferation of books about space came as a welcome relief? It seems clear that we were only too happy to accept the landing on the moon as an entrée to writing about space. There was one big difference, however. The children's books about the Second World War were predominantly fictional whereas those on space were almost all factual, or nonfiction. The writers of fiction were, of course, not far behind and soon science fiction, with extra-terrestrials, aliens and "other worlds" were part of the everyday children's book scene.

Madeleine L'Engle remains my own personal favourite so you can imagine my joy when, after a gap of 24 years, she wrote *Many waters*, the fourth book about the Murray family! And this leads me to an interesting digression. Had you noticed that three very fine, though very different, writers of fantasy/science fiction have each, quite independently, produced, after a long gap, a final book in a sequence which one had thought complete? *The Borrowers avenged*, by Mary Norton, was published 21 years after the last *Borrowers* book. Then Ursula le Guin added *Tehanu* to her Earthsea trilogy after a 20-year gap. And, as I said earlier, *Many waters* rounds out the Murray's tessering adventures. Apart from these three special ladies, there were Lucy Boston's *Green Knowe* books; comforting and "oldy-worldy", and a wonderful introduction to the world of fantasy.

So also were Mary Norton's *Borrowers* living safely in their small world under the floorboards, "borrowing" everything they needed from the big world up above. Then came Alan Garner's understated and popular books and Susan Cooper's wonderful quintet, which, like Jenny Nimmo's Welsh trilogy, drew heavily on the Arthurian tradition. Jane Conly wrote two sequels to her father, Robert O'Brien's, *Rats of NIMH* and Monica Hughes wrote, among others, two sets of excellent science fiction books, that is *Devil on my back* and *Dream*

catcher, and *Sandwriter* and *The Promise*. As alternatives there are Terry Pratchett's off-beat and hilariously funny books *Diggers*, *Truckers* and *Wings*, or the wonderfully inventive works of three daring men who wrote "sequels" to Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the willows*. The first of these, by Jan Needle is called *Wild Wood*. It "retells" the story from the perspective of the Wild Wooders and is mind stretching and thought-provoking while Dixon Scott's *A Fresh wind in the willows* tells how Toad transfers his allegiance from road to air transport, with hilarious but unsurprisingly catastrophic results. Finally, William Horwood wrote *The Willows in winter*, a serious story about the animals as they get older. Each of these is different, very much "its own book". Each is imminently enjoyable, and very clever. The back-in-time fantasy too was popular and well-represented. Two special ones are Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, which transports us back and forth in time in Australia while Janet Lunn's *Root cellar* lets us live both in today's America and in the time of the Civil War. Finally there is, for me and for many others, the crowning glory of fantasy, *Tom's midnight garden* by Philipa Pearce. Fantasy has certainly changed since Alice stepped into the Rabbit hole and Lucy stepped out of the wardrobe and into Narnia, and a child who has had access to the whole spectrum of fantasy and science fiction has indeed had a great gift.

A genre which children read more willingly and more often some years ago than they do now is the historical novel. There are so many superb books in this category that it is impossible to do more than mention notable authors, those whose contributions have been outstanding. From Britain names such as Hester Burton, Peter Carter, Cynthia Harnett, Geoffrey Trease, Henry Treece, Ronald Welch and, the doyenne and "best of the best", Rosemary Sutcliff. In this country Jenny Seed played an important role in recording, in English, some special events. These made exciting reading and made South African children's

own history come alive. From the United States there were people like Anne Nolan Clark, Jean Fritz, Jean C George, Irene Hunt and Elizabeth George Speare.

Another important trend to come bravely out into the open in children's books was the (now) huge field of the personal or family problem. Two of the first books that I dealt with were *Lottery Rose* by Irene Hunt and *Burnish me bright* by Julia Cunningham. "Not for us", cried some librarians, while "I'll need multiple copies", came sadly from others. There may well have been other books which dealt with the physical abuse of children but these two were our first, and they made an impact, as did the sad fact that there really was a need for them. They are totally different in almost every aspect except for the complete honesty of the writing. *Lottery Rose* is about the general neglect and physical abuse of a small boy by his alcoholic mother and her cruel boyfriend.

Burnish me bright is about a mute boy living in a village in France, shunned and ridiculed by the villagers and eventually befriended by an old man who had been a famous mimic, and who teaches him to communicate by means of mime.

Another very successful book in this field was *Cracker Jackson* by Betsy Byars which deals with the abuse of a much loved adult. This is a sensitive portrayal of a boy's feelings in which the tension is cleverly balanced by humour. One of the most telling on this subject is *Goodnight Mr Tom* by Michelle Magorian.

Fly free by CS Adler deals with both verbal and physical abuse of a child – a book about the misuse of adult power, a book which also has a positive and special "message" for the reader. *Are you in the house alone?* allowed us to share with a teenage girl in the shock and anger and frustration of having been raped

by a classmate whose father is so rich and so powerful that he can make it all “go away”. Richard Peck, an American writer, wrote this book after a friend’s daughter was raped and he found out at first hand about the insensitive and appalling laws under which this crime fell. This brave book was published in 1976 and caused many raised eyebrows. Another first was Lois Duncan’s *Killing Mr Griffin*. Whoever heard of killing the English teacher? And yet how many people have said, albeit jokingly “I could kill him!” when they were thoroughly annoyed with someone? This book also introduced us to a child who, while quite obviously not “quite right”, was also not “nice”. Some other children not considered nice by many are the bunch of “socially deprived” youngsters who – eventually – become a fairly competent tetrathlon team in *Who, Sir? Me, Sir?* by KM Peyton. Despite their sad backgrounds, this is one of the funniest children’s books ever!

Illegitimacy and the search for birth parents were subjects often written about – often badly – but *Find a stranger, say goodbye* by Lois Lowry was one of the first that really got to grips with the latter subject. Patricia Calvert, an American author hitherto unknown to me, had *Yesterday’s daughter* published in a British edition and made me gnash my teeth at the thought of her other, “ungetatable” books! *Find a stranger* and *Yesterday’s daughter* were written 20 years apart, the latter dealing with illegitimacy, first love and several other teenage problems as well, yet each is written with sensitivity and integrity and a deep understanding of both the theme and the protagonist. Equally well done, with a great deal of humour, Anne Fine’s *Flour babies* tells us about a project popular in many schools, in which a bag of flour has to be cared for as if it were a baby – a great reminder that teenage pregnancy is to be avoided.

A Summer to die, also by Lois Lowry was one of the first books which dealt with the death of one of the main characters, to say nothing of the presence of a

child at the birth of a baby. This does not sound very brave in 1995 but 20 odd years ago it was, believe me! Monica Hughes's *Hunter in the dark* has the same theme (dealing with death) but whereas Lois Lowry created supportive parents to see their child through her "last battle" Monica Hughes's parents are totally unsupportive in that they are not able to accept the fact of their son's illness, let alone his approaching death. Her handling of the emotional trauma is convincing and unsentimental. Both are fine books, and very popular with children.

Paula Fox tackled the grim subject of slavery in *The Slave dancer* – an unputdownable story, written wholly within the perspective of the child, glinting with humour, spankily exciting and written with insight and compassion.

As we have seen, books for children are written about illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, rape ... a lot of profound issues which have become part of children's lives, just as war has done. Other, perhaps more obvious problem areas have also provided the theme for many excellent and successful children's books. Divorce for instance is a theme in *Thirteen going on forty* by Dianne Bates. Alcoholism and abuse are the cause, divorce the result, the whole is a feisty, readable story about a child who is one of life's survivors. Ann Fine in *Goggle eyes* tackles divorce differently, using ordinary people with no specific "causes", just adults who do not get on and so divorce. Humour and a wise "divorced" friend are the pegs on which this enjoyable book hangs. One of my favourites is *Rachel and that woman*, by Eileen Molver. This is a warm, funny, celebration of a book which should gladden the hearts of all readers – divorced or not!

Adoption and foster homes have been the subject of many books. Perhaps the most notable are *The Pinballs* by Betsy Byars and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by

Katherine Paterson, *The Dingo summer* by Ivy Baker and *Then there were five* by Elizabeth Enright. There are also magical books like *Sarah, plain and tall* and *Journey* by Patricia MacLachlan. These two should be compulsory for all children. There is a sequel to *Sarah, plain and tall* called *Skylark*, which is also good. Another genre that seems worth mentioning is the small group of books on the homeless, the street-children. The first I saw was *Slake's limbo* by Felice Holman, then came Lesley Beake's *The Strollers*, a shrewd, well-written book full of humour, compassion and understanding which is set in Cape Town. *Monkey Island*, by Paula Fox is set in New York and paints a bleak if perceptive picture of a society where families break up, because fathers are made redundant and life becomes too hard for the adults to cope with. *Mellow Yellow* by Jenny Robson, the latest in this genre, is also set on the streets of Cape Town and is also compassionate and perceptive, funny and clever. Recently I read the first fiction book in which AIDS is a central theme. *Two weeks with the Queen* by Maurice Gleitzman is an Australian book which deals very gently with a difficult subject. Childbirth and puberty are dealt with equally gently, but openly and honestly, by Ellen Howard in a wonderful book called *Sister*. In the area of personal problems writers began isolating specific ones around which to write. Like other genres, this one grew out of the new freedom in writing for children and the realisation that if children were able to live as amputees or orphans, or as spastic or autistic members of families and classes at school, they would also be able to read about children in books who had to adapt to and cope with the same difficulties. Many of the world's most able and successful writers have added their contributions to what has become a vast body of writing on almost every imaginable handicap or problem. Many of these special books are listed in the bibliography and will, perhaps, already be friends. If they are not, remember that they, like any other children's books must be honest and fulfil the high standards which we expect in books for children.

Finally, I must mention the steady growth in the number of books for children written in South Africa, by South Africans. Most of these are written in English or Afrikaans but the first translations into our many other languages have appeared; one hopes that original writing in these languages will soon be available. Though it is not my brief to discuss South African writing specifically, I should like to congratulate publishers for taking the financial risks involved in bringing out short print runs aimed at a small market. Congratulations also to our authors whose contribution to our children's reading is growing steadily more important.

Some of the books I have discussed may sound unsuitable, even unchildlike. Remember that they were written for children and that the perspective is, must be, right for children. Remember also that the books are not exclusively about the particular "problem" which I have highlighted ... the books are about "real children" doing real things, under specific circumstances. As is to be expected in books for this age of reader, there is always some sort of solution to the problem which must obviously be convincing and possible, in terms of the story.

The stories do not offer "happy-ever-after" endings, but are positive. Apart from the genres that I have touched on, there has been a steady stream of adventure, animal, family, funny, spooky, uncomplicated "ordinary" books. A resurgence of interest in folktales and fairy tales has also been noticeable, as seen in Marguerite Poland's beautiful offerings in the South African field. Her *Mantis and the moon* is a truly magical collection of tales which proves to us all that our South African writers are among the best in the world.

It has been a good 25 years, filled with a wealth of marvellous books. I hope the next 25 will be as good. I hope also that conference participants and speakers

will try to make the acquaintance of both our authors and our books – and perhaps take home with them a few of the latter so that “other children may experience our world”.

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Canny and uncanny selves

roderick mcgillis



I intend to be unashamedly personal. My topic is the self as “Other”, and I use myself as example of what Julia Kristeva refers to as the foreigner who lives within us (see her *Stranger to ourselves*, 1991). She describes the foreigner as “the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder”. She then goes on to assert that only by recognising the foreigner within ourselves are we “spared detesting him in himself”. More importantly, the foreigner “disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (Kristeva 1991:1). My focus, then, is the foreigner within myself. Later in the paper, however, I will turn to a recent novel for young readers published in Canada, a novel which deals with a Canadian boy’s experience in South Africa, in Pretoria, as a matter of fact. The book is Lynne Fairbridge’s *In such a place* (1992; winner of the sixth Alberta Writing for Youth Competition).

I am speaking of a large issue of examining a personal discovery. The large issue is the continuing struggle of all oppressed people to overcome imperialist forces, forces that invade our children’s books as they invade our billboards and the rest of our media in order to maintain conditions of power and authority. Forces are at work that both construct from the outside people of differing cultures and races, and that seek to assimilate other cultures, other peoples into one dominant

culture. Stories have traditionally been one of the sources of social construction, one of the means by which a culture perpetuates itself and situates itself over against an “other” culture. Even when the stories of one culture do not refer to other cultures, they implicitly maintain the fiction of one culture’s superiority to another, one people’s superiority to another people. Or do they? Might it not be possible to argue that a culture’s stories inevitably must present that same culture as “other”? Or at least we might argue that all stories present a world “other” than the one we inhabit, and in doing so they bring us face to face, as it were, with the fictionality of all stories. All we know is fiction. And like fiction, all we know is duplicitous.

Is it not true to say that each of us is duplicitous, each of us is a fiction? Take myself, for instance. It just so happens that my birth enrolled me as a member of two groups: one doing much of the oppressing around the world; the other a colonial garrison huddled along a narrow strip of land just north of the United States border. I have learned that one can look at one’s position culturally and socially in at least two ways. Being male and white and of Protestant background, I had an advantage from birth over people from other groups; for example, women and males of other cultural, religious and racial backgrounds. On the other hand, being the son of an alcoholic father who squandered money who abused members of his family and who worked, when he worked, for the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railroad), I came from what we might term a working-class background, a background that brought with it certain social and cultural disadvantages. I was, simultaneously, a member of a distinctly self-serving group, and to a certain extent an “other” to those with more money, position, and experience. Something similar might be said of all of us.

The personal discovery I mentioned at the outset derives from this look back at my origins. Simple and self-evident as my discovery may seem to others, to me it

came as a surprise. It is the realisation that my past is another country, my childhood the experience of someone I no longer fully know. How these two disparate concerns – the dominant culture’s desire to situate people as “self” and “other” and my knowledge of my own self – otherness – are connected is the subject of my paper, and I borrow from bell hooks (1994:234) a question that sets my subject going: “Why do we have to wipe out the Otherness in order to experience a notion of *Oneness*?” I will connect this subject to children’s books near the end of what I have to say. To begin, however, I turn to the large issue: imperialism and its relationship to children.

I take it that among the oppressed and colonised we can number children. This is one aspect of Jacqueline Rose’s (1984) argument in *The Case of Peter Pan*, and Perry Nodelman (1992) has argued something similar in the *ChLA quarterly*. Children have little or no power and they are vulnerable to social and cultural forces. From an adult perspective, they are the “Other”, mysterious beings who in turn attract us, repel us and bedevil us. As someone who regularly goes into the schools to perform as a storyteller, I confess this: children are to me the “Other”. In order to deal with one child or a group of children, we must organise that one child or that group, get him or her to conform to certain ways of behaviour, even if this behaviour simply requires them to sit still. To confess this is not, however, to accept the absolute necessity of exploiting or taking over young minds. I mentioned the ideological effect of stories, but I also questioned this effect. In fact, my experience of the storytelling situation informs me that teller and audience, adult and children can experience a notion of *Oneness* that breaks down authority. Through story a disparate group can come together without the intrusion of authority and power. Having stated my subject, I guess I have now come to my thesis: we can answer bell hooks’ (1994) question by saying that we do not need to wipe out Otherness in order to experience *Oneness*

because we have a constant reminder of the possibility of Oneness through our experience of story. Our experience of story is both communal and personal.

This is, perhaps, simple and obvious to others. But I came to realise the profundity of this disparate Oneness, this self-evident Otherness that does not threaten, does not need control, only understanding, when I began to reflect on the stories I myself was telling to audiences of adults and children. I began telling stories 10 years ago, and at first I told stories I had heard from other storytellers. Soon, however, I began to reflect on my own childhood and to construct stories based on memories of incidents and people I once knew. Many of the people I used as characters have long since died, and I have seen nearly none of them for 30 years. Perhaps the most spectacular example of just how “Other” these people have become is the case of my father. He has become one of the most insistent characters in my stories. He is still alive, although I have not seen him since 1969, nearly 26 years ago. When I started telling stories about him, I thought I was trying to come to terms with a flawed and troubled relationship. I thought I was trying to put my own past into perspective, to engage in some therapeutic exercise. And I suppose I was.

But therapy is for those who are in some way ill or in convalescence. As I looked at my stories, I began to realise that “convalescence” and “illness” are words which do not seem to apply to me. Even more to the point is the fact that the character who is/was my father is someone I never really knew. He is an “other” whom I construct each time I tell a story about him. This character I construct both is and is not my father. The fact that he is my father and that he appears in some silly situations provides me with some satisfying sense of power over him, I guess, but more and more he is simply someone whom I can only know from a distance and try to understand. The same is true of the little boy

who was myself. I say “was” because I realise that the small character who goes through the action I remember from my past both is and is not me. I can only relate to this small person as an “Other”, someone who has links with me but who is clearly not me. Obviously, this little boy shares experiences with me and even perhaps character traits and character flaws; without him, I would not be here now. At the same time, he is not me; we do not exist in the same time; we do not use the same language; we do not know the same people; we do not share the same experiences. I am an “Other” to myself. If this were not so, then I could not have the distance from myself to reconstruct my own past, to fashion it into story. (At the moment, the question as to whether I do this well or not is irrelevant.) And it might be worth reflecting that none of us can tell stories until we have come to terms with those “Other” than ourselves; everyone who creates story does so from a distance. In other words, those who would have stories told only by those who directly experience what happens in a story or who directly fit into the culture or society depicted in the story are arguing, tacitly and unconsciously I am sure, for the erasure of all story.

Now about this reconstruction of my own past. I need to rethink what I have just said. To reconstruct my past is, of course, to take control over it, to colonise it, if you will. My past self has no independent existence aside from my fashioning it. In this sense, I have constructed the “Other” and cannot know it in and of itself. I can never know my own past self from the inside. I can never know anyone other than myself from the inside, and this includes my children. This does not mean, however, that I do not respect, sympathise with, love, and embrace these people I cannot know from the inside. I can learn to respect my own “Other”, that is “child” self, and to make the effort to understand what this “other” gives me: memories, memorabilia, photographs, perhaps even words in the form of diaries or letters or whatever. The feeling of “Oneness” I might

attain in contemplating my own “Other” self wholly into me as I am now. The reconstruction is, in effect, two ways. My “Other” self is to a certain extent something I construct; by the same token, my present self is to a certain extent something constructed by that “Other” self.

The same is true of the space which the self inhabits. That country which my “Other” self inhabits is, in its turn, an “Other” country. You cannot go home again. I know the world I inhabited 30 and 40 years ago is far different from the one I inhabit now. In some ways, that country is a country for old men and women. I mean, only those with age can remember a certain time and a certain place. We can choose to forget that time and place, but to do so is to cut oneself loose from participation in a community. To forget that time and place is to lose the ability to connect with anything outside the here and now. It is not a question of returning to a cultural moment long since past; rather it is a question of maintaining contact with that culture in order that we have something that reflects our present cultural situation. We need to know how we got here. We also need to know how here compares to all the heres possible.

Let me turn to a story that has recently forced itself upon me. A while ago, I began, almost casually, to write a story about a place just across the tracks from where I grew up. I do not know what prompted this, but I found myself writing short sections in voices different from the one I had started with. Before long I had some 15 or 20 voices going, one of which I had thought to begin with was mine. Through some mysterious alchemy, this voice – the one I thought was mine – receded in importance and two other characters began to emerge as central to the plot: a Chinese-Canadian boy of about 15 or 16 and a girl (Caucasian) of about 17. The boy was someone I remembered from my past; the girl was no one particular person from my past, but I remember people like her.

Anyhow, I did not think what I was doing was tactless until I happened to mention the story to a Chinese friend of mine who asked me point blank whether I could, in fact, write about the experience of a Chinese boy. Could I be fair to the experiences of another culture? Could I know what it felt like to be that boy?

The answer to the last question is, of course, no. I could not know what it felt like to be the real boy who appears in disguise in the story. But that is the point: the character reflects reality; the character is in disguise. The disguise, the reality that the character reflects is the reality I am able to create, not some accurate reflection of an absolute reality. In other words, to create a character is to make an imaginative leap into the possibility of other lives. Sometimes such a leap is successful and sometimes it is not. Sometimes we create good stories and sometimes we do not. What we cannot claim is to reflect accurately and absolutely the experiences of anyone who actually lives in this world we inhabit. Literature is not life. In short, each attempt at story is an attempt to understand what it is like to be an "Other". Or to use the vocabulary of my section's title, each attempt at story tries to show how what is known and familiar, the canny, is also simultaneously unknown and unfamiliar, the uncanny.

I am trying to sort out how the constructing of stories about my own past has prompted me to respond to what we in Canada face as official government policy. I refer to the government's policy of multiculturalism. This is, I hasten to add, a policy I accept and even endorse. Official government acknowledgement of the variety of cultures that constitute our country seems to me only sensible; the government here provides an example of tolerance and acceptance, at least on the surface of things. We need now, as much or even more than ever, tolerance and respect for other ways of thinking, for other peoples, and for other cultures. By extension, our children need exposure to literature which reflects the cultural

mix of our countries. They also need exposure to literature which brings to their attention the larger global community to which we all belong.

The self and foreign places

This brings me to Lynne Fairbridge's *In such a place*. Here is a well told story which deals with both international and inter-racial relationships. The plot is not complicated, but the issues it takes up are. The plot concerns 16-year-old Mark whose father sends him to South Africa while he is away doing research in Northern Alberta, in Canada. Mark is typically Canadian: doubly displaced. He feels alienated from his father because his father has remarried (Mark's mother has died), and he feels alienated both from his friends in Canada who are far away and from the people he meets in South Africa whose cultural experience is so different from his own. South Africa differs from Canada in climate and social conditions. Mark quickly learns about child beggars in the city, about an education system that has for many years disadvantaged black people, about urban crime, about life in the townships, and about friendships between persons from differing racial and cultural backgrounds. Coming from Canada, Mark carries certain assumptions concerning the country he now experiences first hand. This experience will test his assumptions, and in doing so it will teach Mark much about not only South Africa, but also about his own country, Canada.

Fairbridge is subtle in her evocation of the "Other", showing rather than telling how intricate an issue the self and "Other" is. She points out similarities between life in Canada and South Africa, both on a personal and public level – Mark's father left home to find work and so did the father of the black South African

boy, Siphso, privilege and class affect the attitudes of both Canadians and South Africans, the dominant society in both countries has traditionally mistreated “others” less powerful, all people desire a good life, a life of independence and self-reliance. But she also takes note of differences between the two countries: the market place with its cornucopia of flowers and its child-beggars is something new in Mark’s experience. The constant reminders of the need for security are also new to Mark. Most powerfully new, however, is the life his friend Siphso lives and has lived, the life in the township, the life that accepts a need for violence to achieve significant change. Mark’s shift from non-involvement to a commitment to change derives from the shock he receives when Siphso asks him, in the name of friendship, to negotiate with arms, to take up arms on behalf of oppression.

The book raises issues relating to the infiltration of political concerns into private lives, and in doing this it amounts to the story of one boy’s rite of passage from rather naive self-concern to a mature acceptance of social responsibility. Mark decides, at the end of the novel, to stay in South Africa and to assist a local clergyman in teaching young disenfranchised children how to read, write and do arithmetic. In other words, Mark comes to understand the importance of education in changing people’s lives. Early in the book he had attempted to tempt Siphso into skipping school and going “cruising for girls or something” (Fairbridge 1992:41). He did not understand Siphso’s desire to learn, and the drive that sent Siphso to two jobs besides going to school. By the end, however, Mark has learned to understand. Education is the key to improving life.

But something remains to be said. The politics this book investigates are the politics of the “Other”. We never forget otherness in *In such a place*. The book insists on binaries: Canada/South Africa, father/son, teacher/pupil, rich/poor,

male/female, city/townships, reason/emotion, violence/nonviolence, privileged/underprivileged, black/white. Such binaries insist on otherness, one term reflecting the familiar and accepted, the other the unfamiliar and unaccepted. For example, for Mark who comes from Canada violence is unacceptable; he has no understanding of a situation in which violence might be perceived as the only means to change. He takes a nonviolent position regarding political activity, but he learns that he himself holds a double standard since he unconsciously condones and even participates in violence in his personal life. I refer to his interest in and practice of karate. I do not want to suggest that Fairbridge argues for another point of view; that is, I do not want to argue that the book comes round to condoning violence. It does not. But Mark comes round to understanding how a situation can become so desperate that violence seems the only answer.

Sipho tells Mark that he has lost a baby brother because his family was too poor to buy food and medicine, and he also tells him that some soldiers have shot his sister, Faith. Here is Mark's reaction to this information:

Mark was shamed into silence. Sipho was right. Life was easy for him. And he recalled his fight with Kevin, how angry he had been then and how easily provoked to violence. (Fairbridge 1992:95).

Throughout the book, we see that Mark enjoys physical aggression; he does not grasp the implications of this enjoyment until now. He too can erupt violently, so why should he be surprised that others, and others with far more provocation, do likewise. In short, Mark cannot understand others until he comes to understand himself. Once he realises that he has "to make my own decisions" (Fairbridge 1992:111), he is ready truly to enter the world of the other. He does this by disguising himself as a black person in order to find Sipho in the township. Fairbridge (1992:128) remarks: "There was something disturbing about having to

become black in order to enter Sipho's world". Although she does not spell out what this "something" is, I think we can understand that to enter the world of another, we ourselves must become other than we are. We are always faced with the "other". We cannot escape otherness.

This is what Mark learns and this is why he does not return to Canada at the end of the book. Canada is his home, but it too is a place with its own unfamiliarity; Mark has never met his step-mother and he feels he has never known his father. He decides, however, that what he experiences in South Africa presents, for the moment, the most compelling unfamiliarity. He remains so he can assist in the teaching of young children. He feels he can "change something for the better" (Fairbridge 1992:143). The "something" here relates to the "something disturbing" I noted in the previous paragraph. The word is a signifier, but what it signifies remains undefined. The "something" remains attached to the notion of "otherness" I have been discussing – always just out of reach, always unknowable, and always an aspect of each of us. To accept this "something", this "otherness" is to share a oneness with others.

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Stories/Nuwe Stories van Rivierplaas (Alba Bouwer):

the black nanny as ideal mother

m.j. prins



A very peculiar trait of the Rivierplaas stories by Alba Bouwer is the aloofness with which the real parents of the white main character, Alie (a girl of nine, 10 years of age whose name represents an obvious allusion to the author's own first name, a fact by which Bouwer's autobiography is activated as intertext) are treated, especially in view of the way in which the black housekeeper, Ou Melitie, is being revered. A striking manifestation of this aloofness is the fact that Alie's parents are consistently being called "oom Jan" and "tant Lenie" (*uncle Jan* and *aunt Lenie*) by the narrator, and never, not even via the *erlebte Rede*, "Pa" and "Ma" (Mum and Dad). In view of this, as well as of the rather negative focus on her (and her husband) which we find in the stories, there is a touch of (apparently unconscious) irony in the fact that *Stories van Rivierplaas* is dedicated to "Mammie en tant Maggie" (*Mummy and aunt Maggie*).

Sometimes Ou Melitie's presence is even preferred above that of Alie's own parents. In the opening paragraph of "Die Grys skooltjie" (*The Little grey school*) (1988:73) we read that in the mornings Alie's parents have breakfast very early,

and Alie has to eat alone. But that is so very nice, because Ou Melitie must pour milk on her porridge and see to it that Alie eats a whole slice of bread and drinks a whole large cup of milk. (All the translations in this article by M J Prins.)

Nowhere in these stories do we find such an adoring, glorifying focus on Alie's own parents as the one we have of Melitie in for instance the following passage from "Die Toefalantat" (*The Magic lantern*):

(N)obody can be like Ou Melitie, that Alie knows, and immediately she is filled with joy, because although the filmmaker shows the farmer's maize plants are so beautiful and even if his Afrikaner cattle are so fat and even if he has got such beautiful fowl-runs, he and his little girl can never have an Ou Melitie (1985:24).

To her, Ou Melitie is far more valuable than the opulence displayed by the scenes on the screen during the film show. And for the rest, Ou Melitie serves as easily as a role-model for Alie as any of the white adults whom she is prone to imitate. When she and Lulu are playing shop, Alie not only imitates her mother but also Ou Melitie (1985:92).

It is as if Boucher's intention in depicting this very special relationship between a white child and a black woman was threefold: (a) to redress the racism that prevailed in Afrikaans children's literature in the 30s and 40s (as was highlighted by Töttemeyer 1985), (b) to pay tribute to the rôle black women played in the upbringing of white Afrikaner children (The fact that these books were originally published only a few years after the National Party came to power is not without significance.) and (c) to give her readers (young and old) a "lesson" in perfect motherhood and how that would be experienced by a child.

The aim of this paper is to expound hypothesis (c), that is, to show in which ways Ou Melitie can be described as the ideal mother. This aim, of course, implies

the question: What is an “ideal” mother? According to J A Hadfield the three cardinal principles of parenthood are: (a) The Principle of Protective Love, (b) the Principle of Freedom and (c) the Principle of Discipline. “Only in an atmosphere of security is a child free to act, to venture, and to be spontaneous. Only by discipline can these spontaneous tendencies be directed and co-ordinated, so that the personality is free. Discipline, therefore, is as necessary to true freedom as freedom is necessary to true self-discipline. And a sense of security, is a prerequisite to both” (Hadfield 1962:256).

The principle of protective love: Alie, the main character, is loved dearly by the family’s black housekeeper. Ou Melitie shows her affection for the child of her white employer and his wife in many endearing ways. It is, especially, a *protective* love. So much so, that she sometimes even protects Alie against her own parents. In “Die Asdans en die bul” (*The Ash dance and the bull*), after Alie and her little friend Lulu have donned the bead bands and copper rings of two of the black children on the farm and allowed the two black children to put on *their* dresses so that they could teach the white children the “ash dance”, the group of children are being chased by a bull, upon which they run into Ou Melitie’s hut for protection. On their way home after this incident of racial mixing the two girls take their mutual oath of secrecy: “Kros-jor-hart-en-dounsy” (*cross your heart and don’t say*):

Now they can go home safely because they know Ou Melitie would never split on them (1988:14).

In the security provided by this protective love, Alie feels free to act, to venture and to be spontaneous – three important aspects of the events which constitute these stories. In “Eiers uithaal” (*Taking out eggs*) Alie knows how to handle the broody black hen, because Ou Melitie taught her to lift the hen from her nest

before she can peck (1988:17). In “Voor die kuier” (*Before the visit*) Alie and her friend Lulu are on their way home from school when they notice Alie’s mother, aunt Lenie, standing in the kitchen door:

Aunt Lenie’s stance is like a large white cloud which appears on the spot where the sun sets and which speaks of rain, because usually she is already having her nap in the afternoons when they return from school.

“I suppose Ou Melitie has told her about our riding on the calves on Saturday,” Lulu says.

“Ou Melitie will never tell!” Alie says, and she wishes she had a string of plaited hair which she could toss over her shoulder, like Cillie when she is angry (1985: 126).

With Ou Melitie, who washed the dung from Alie’s hair after the adventurous riding on calback, the secret of their mischievous behaviour is safe.

In Ou Melitie’s tender, sympathetic and often empathetic presence Alie feels secure enough to behave in a completely spontaneous manner. Ou Melitie is a patient listener to Alie’s stories, and somebody with lots of understanding for Alie’s lively imagination, a trait in which the later writer of children’s stories is already present in embryo. Ou Melitie is the ideal interlocutor: one who listens and reacts and who never gets tired of answering questions, even if they are asked for the umpteenth time:

Many times Alie has asked Ou Melitie: “Ou Melitie, which of the three things will be the nicest for me (at her grandma’s place M.J.P.)– sleeping on a small feather-bed, or driving to school in the small donkey-cart in the mornings, or sitting in the kitchen in front of the fire in the stove in the evenings?”

Ou Melitie also never knew exactly and then one day she said: “When you are sleeping on that small feather-bed, that is the nicest thing during the night. When you are travelling in the little cart, that is the nicest thing in the morning. When you are sitting

in front of the fire at the old lady's place, that is the nicest thing in the evening, dear miss Alie. Now, why do you ask?"

Then Alie gave Ou Melitie's apron a sharp pull and said: "Ou Melitie, of all the people I know who are clever, you are by far, by far the cleverest! Really!" (1988:63).

Ou Melitie is a source of wisdom, one who knows the right answers to Alie's childlike questions. She is never too tired or too busy to play Alie's games of fantasy with her, because she has an intuitive insight into her little white friend's cognitive and emotional world and lots of respect for the kind of person she is. In a word: she is like a real friend to her.

During the holidays Alie has breakfast outside the house with Ou Melitie and her two children. During these occasions they also often chat about Brakfontein, the farm of Alie's grandma:

"Ou Melitie," ... "(B)rakfontein is just as beautiful as the picture in a story-book. Look, the roof of the house is flat and it is made in sections, just like a pumpkin tendril which sprouts in all directions. And it is bigger than our house, and in winter there are always pumpkins lying on the roof."

Then Ou Melitie says: "But our house here at Rivierplaas is also very beautiful, dear miss Alie."

"And on Brakfontein there is a large earth dam with two willows with finch nests and a poplar bush," says Alie.

Emily of Hoppies would state abruptly: "You have often spoken of that poplar bush, dear miss Alie. I don't want to hear about that bush again."

But not Ou Melite! No, she says: "The poplar bush, dear miss Alie, what does it look like, tell me again?"

In summer the poplar bush is as silver and as greenish as the silk of the old dress of great grandma'(s) ..., and then the little wind says 'shlirr ... shlirr' through it. In

autumn the poplar bush is yellow, not yellow-yellow like the sun, Ou Melitie, nor red yellow, like the fire, but simply, simply ...”

“Poplar bush yellow,” says Ou Melitie.

“Yes, poplar bush yellow,” says Alie (1988:57).

In contrast with the unsympathetic and impatient Emily, Ou Melitie is the epitome of the patient and empathetic children’s interlocutor, one who supplements wherever the juvenile ability to formulate falters and who never gets tired of repetition.

As “ideal mother” Ou Melitie is a source of security. Through her influence and help Alie succeeds in coping with the pains and perils of life. In “Die Groot beesslag” (*The Great slaughter*) Ou Melitie protects her against, and leads her thoughts away from, the harrowing shooting of the ox (1985:7). While a typical Free State thunder storm is developing, Alie’s grandmother instructs her to cover all the shiny objects in the room – a well-known manifestation of an ancient Afrikaner folkloristic superstition.

“Grandma”, Alie asks, “why do you make everything so dark for the weather and why do you cover all the shiny things? Can the lightning bird see all the shiny things in the dark room and stick in its beak and bite them?” upon which Alie’s grandma answers: “No, my darlin(g) ... (G)randma does not believe the pagan superstitions, but one should have respect for the dear Lord and His elements” (1985:73).

In spite of this reprimand, the narrator, who is narrating from Alie’s focus, continues referring to “the lightning bird”, by which Ou Melitie’s mythology is vindicated. One wonders: Could it be that this focus on the weather (as a bird) does, after all, assist Alie in exorcising that which frightens her so much? For, as the *Princeton encyclopaedia of poetry and poetics* has pointed out, “psychologicall(y)

... (personification) may be described as ‘a means of taking hold of things which appear startlingly uncontrollable and independent’ ” (1965:612).

In quite a number of instances Ou Melitie actually acts as saviour or rescuer. She catches the cat which had escaped and started running down the street after Alie had hidden it in the car on the way to town (1988:106); she saves the life of Dafiétjie, one of the black children on the farm who had drunk paraffin (after Alie’s own mother had called for her in desperation) (1985:36); she also saves the life of little Bennie, Alie’s brother, when a sweet gets stuck in his throat (1985:95), and she rescues Alie’s second little brother, Hennie, from the platform of the windmill after she had duly warned the child’s mother to stand still lest he might get a fright and tumble down (1985:136).

The principle of freedom: As the ideal mother, Ou Melitie knows that Alie needs a measure of freedom. This also sometimes implies protecting her dear little friend against the overstrictness of a typical Afrikaner educational approach. In “Die Winkel-winkel” (*The Shop-shop*) Alie is turning the milk-separator while she simultaneously reads a book, in contravention of a parental rule. When Ou Melitie turns up unexpectedly, she merely warns (1985:83):

“*Jōna whe, you must watch out, lest master Jan might catch you out, dear Miss Alie.*”

The principle of discipline: Love and freedom, however, do not mean lack of discipline. The way in which Ou Melitie marries the principle of discipline with those of love and freedom is a moving and heartwarming aspect of these stories. It is a discipline which is executed in a charitable and sometimes even playful manner. In “Die Verjaardag” (*The Birthday*) (1985: 111) Alie has the following

conversation with Ou Melitie on the morning of her 10th birthday, after Ou Melitie has congratulated her by saying:

“My, you are big now, your legs have also become sturdy.” (One of Alie’s secret wishes, known only to herself and Ou Melitie, is to have sturdy, strong legs like those of the black children, a wish in which an element of puberty’s often painful physical self-consciousness is already noticeable.)

“Do you really think my legs are sturdy today because I am ten years of age?”

“The little sparrow in the thorn tree told me early this morning those little legs will become very sturdy this year, but the black fowl told me your legs will not become sturdy. Now, do you believe the little sparrow or do you believe the black fowl, dear Miss Alie?”

“I never believe the black fowl, Ou Melitie, never!”

“But I must say, the little sparrow has also told me another thing ... (S)he said, in connection with being allowed to ride on horseback by Jantjies every evening, you must no longer ride on that horse, dear miss Alie.”

The riding on horseback referred to by ou-Melitie is yet another example of an “irregular”, but this time also rather dangerous, privilege being granted Alie by a black adult behind the austere backs of her parents. The occasion chosen by Ou Melitie to reprimand Alie for this, and the idiom in which she does it by tuning in on Alie’s predilection for the playful and the fantastic, is most appropriate and a prime example of an apt educational approach.

It is a discipline which has room for reward and encouragement as well as for reprimand and punishment. If Alie will behave well at school, Ou Melitie will grant her the privilege of going with her and her children to the river that afternoon (1988:46), an excursion which Alie values very highly. And when Lulu, Alie’s friend, misbehaves during this visit to the river, Ou Melitie immediately warns her:

“(If you do that again, I will tell your mother, and you will never again come with us to the river” (1988:49).

Bouwer achieves all this without moralising or preaching to the reader. The way in which Alie reveres and identifies with her black “mother” has enough force to convince readers (young and old) of these classic children’s stories of the value of the educational approach which is demonstrated. Maybe one could say that in many a successful children’s story an exemplary educational approach is explicitly or implicitly demonstrated, by which the parents of tomorrow are also educated.

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