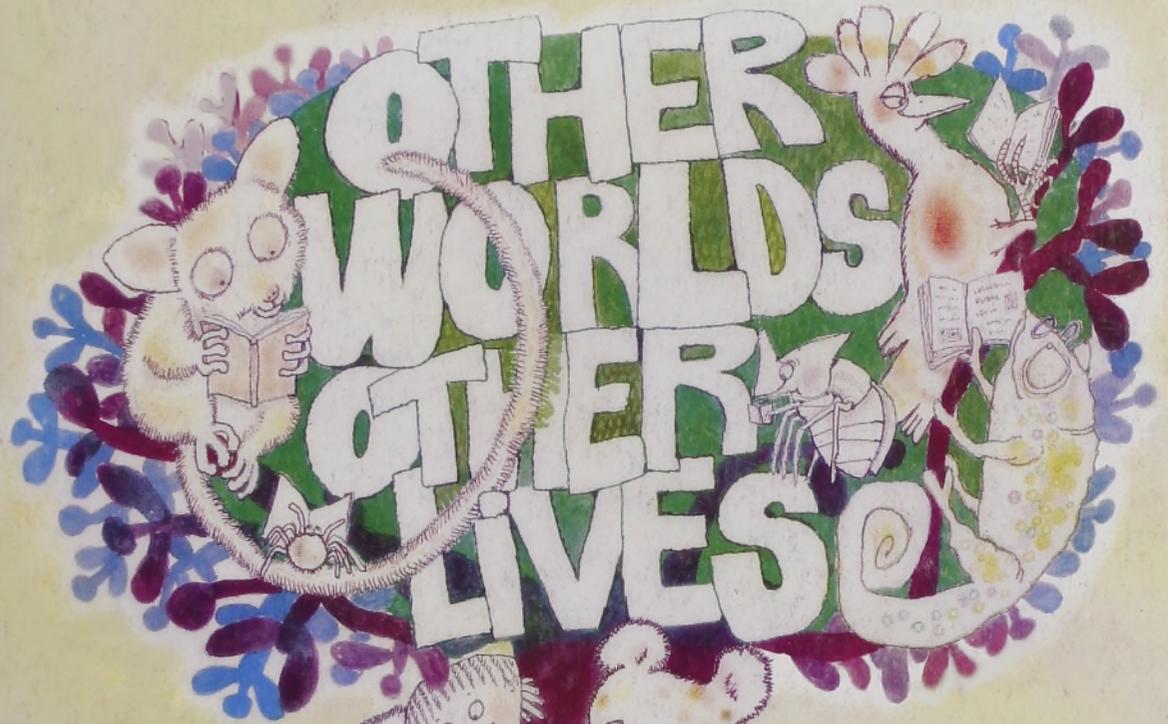


volume 3



children's literature experiences

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Other Worlds Other Lives

children's literature experiences

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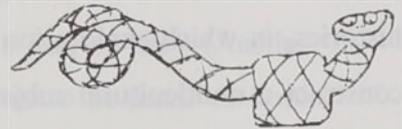
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Multiculturalism in recent Australian children's fiction:

(re-)constructing selves through personal and national histories

john stephens



Multiculturalism has been a recognised facet of Australian life for about 30 years, and has been expressed as official government policy for over 20 years. It is not yet a fact of life, however: its conceptual existence does not guarantee equality or tolerance amongst all cultural groups within society; there are ongoing debates about its shape, its effects, and its future direction;¹ Australians in general are confused about the meaning and consequences of multiculturalism (McAllister 1993:71); and within the 50 percent of Australians who might be described as “British Australians” (Castan 1990:77) there are often stirrings of a nostalgia for the more monocultural life-style which pertained around the middle of the century. Australian children’s literature has responded in two ways to this situation: on the one hand there are some inexplicit expressions of nostalgia, especially in picture books (Stephens 1994:102–6); on the other hand, when multicultural themes are explicitly evoked, the effect has been unequivocal promotion of a multicultural ideology, either by self-consciously producing it or by “reflecting” it as a tangible social condition. In the six years from 1989 to 1994 about 90 “multicultural” children’s books were published in Australia;² the

winners of the Office of Multicultural Affairs award for 1994 were chosen from a list of 29 books published in 1993.

This paper deals with some examples of fiction for children which overtly promote an ideology of multiculturalism. To do this, I will be examining two kinds of texts: historical fictions, which discover inherent multicultural tendencies preceding modern multicultural policy, and hence function to naturalise modern policy (O'Neill, *So far from Skye*; Alexander, *Mavis Road medley*); and personal histories, in which exploration of a protagonist's background functions to construct a multicultural subjectivity (Marchetta, *Looking for Alibrandi*; Baillie, *The China coin*). These novels still pivot on the dominant theme of children's books, that of personal identity development, but the construction of individual subjectivities is pursued in interaction with the idea of a minority culture's sense of identity, and functions as an analogy for a national development of multicultural awareness and agency.

In 1991, OMA, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, established the Multicultural Children's Literature Awards, with the intention of fostering books which reflect Australia's cultural diversity. The Office has since articulated six criteria against which entrants are judged. These are that a book should:

1. include insights into a non-Anglo culture within Australia;
2. present a comparison/contrast of an Anglo culture with another;
3. depict an active, conscious integration of cultures;
4. include insights into racism or clash of cultures;
5. include insights into issues of social justice/social harmony;
6. include insights into the immigration experience/loneliness/alienation.

The (elusive) metanarrative underpinning these criteria conforms to the very general principles expressed in a 1982 paper issued by the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, which outlines four principles perceived as essential for a multicultural society: social cohesion; respect for cultural identity and awareness of Australia's cultural diversity; equal opportunity and access for all Australians; and equal responsibility for commitment to and participation in Australian society (Hawkins 1989:233). The OMA Award criteria are in essence based on these principles. How these are put into practice is by selecting books where the issue is naturally integrated into the story line, or, put another way, where the multicultural society is depicted as "just a fact of life" (Austin 1993:203). These are loose criteria, and enable awards to be made to books which actively advocate multiculturalism: thus of the four books I have chosen to talk about in this paper, all have either won the OMA award (Baillie 1992; Marchetta 1993) or been shortlisted for it (Alexander 1992; O'Neill 1993). The judges examine only the content; questions of value or of effective narrative method are deemed to be already solved because of the initial process of selection: the short-list is chosen from books referred to OMA by the Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award judges. Not to put too fine a point on it, what we have is a somewhat ineptly operated award for political correctness, and while I do not have any difficulty with awards going to books like those I am concerned with here, I think that we are seeing some very uneven outcomes, especially at the picture book end.

I argued in a 1990 paper that only a small number of books published in Australia by the late 1980s had dealt with multicultural issues in any radical way – that is, in a way which articulates multiculturalism at the heart of the book, rather than more cosmetically. Although in the period since then the representation of intercultural experience has, with very few exceptions, continued to be mediated by

British Australians, there has been a perceptible shift in the treatment of positionality, with the result that the experience of members of minority communities is more frequently depicted from an insider perspective. Novels depicting migration experiences or experiences anchored in a minority culture still usually pivot on the dominant theme of children's books, that of personal identity development, but in each of the novels discussed here the construction of a character's individual subjectivity is now inextricable from the character's sense of cultural affiliation and intercultural positioning. As a consequence, development of a personal identity functions as an analogy for a national development of multicultural awareness and agency.

A pervasive problem in the fiction dealing with multiculturalism in the 70s and 80s was that it inadvertently re-inscribed the marginalisation of minorities by reproducing the limited focalisation strategies generally characteristic of children's fiction and positioning the focaliser within the dominant culture. In practical terms, this meant that while the novels pivot on notions of alterity, minority groups were excluded from focalising roles and hence from the privilege of narrative subjectivity. The consequence is that so-called multicultural experience could only be represented from a British Australian perspective. The absence of significant migrant voices, of subject positions for children from minority groups, ultimately leads to a partial, and hence false, representation of the Australian experience of multiculturalism. Further, the practice of focalising through the perspective of the majority culture sustains a problem of representation, insofar as ethnic otherness is implicitly depicted as deviating from a norm and hence inevitably subordinate. As soon as this is pointed out it seems blindingly obvious, though practice is still slow to change. It might have been expected that a more sophisticated sense of cultural perspective would have been enabled by the international fashion for multiple focalisation over the past decade, but this does

not seem to have happened. Rather, many authors appear to have grasped the simpler principle of presenting events and perceptions as narrated or focalised by a member of a cultural minority. Thus of the four novels to be discussed here only *Mavis Road medley* employs more than one focaliser. Its two focalisers are in fact British Australians, but because Alexander has used her genre – time-slip fantasy – to project them half a century into the past she is able to replicate the acute displacement of migration, so that Didi and Jamie experience feelings of social exclusion equivalent to those felt by the actual immigrants they meet.

Looking for Alibrandi employs the simplest expedient, first person narration – perhaps an obvious strategy for Marchetta to use because she is herself a product of an Italian Australian community. In the other two novels processes of displacement, entrance into intercultural spaces, and the emergence of a multicultural subjectivity are focalised by a single character: Morag in *So far from Skye*, and Leah in *The China coin*.

In addition to this principle of focalisation, two other important elements are setting (both time and place) and the process of discovering, telling and recuperating history. Both *So far from Skye* and *Mavis Road medley* continue a process I identified in my earlier paper: successful “multicultural” books are often those which explore the theme by focussing on aspects of culture-contact in Australia preceding the mass migration which has transformed Australian society into what it is today. Hence they advocate an ideology pertinent to contemporary Australia but probably anachronistic for the earlier historical periods. The process can be described as one of rewriting social and cultural history for the purpose of reshaping the present. In contrast, *Looking for Alibrandi* and *The China coin* depict characters in quest of histories which may help to explain the present and tell them who they are. On a wider level, *The China coin* reflects Australia’s ideological transformation from a policy of wanting immigrants to assimilate into

a dominant monoculture to a policy of multiculturalism. Leah, a child with little or no knowledge of her mixed origins, is the paradigm of total assimilation. Her journey through China in quest of her mother's ancestral village and the other half of the broken coin which is her mother's "heritage" is also a quest for a self who inhabits, and is made meaningful by, history. *The China coin* thus makes a significant contribution to multicultural children's literature in its concern with origins and aftermaths, since, obviously enough, the difference between assimilation and multiculturalism resides in the mediation of these moments. It offers the possibility that displacement and relocation will lead to a recuperation of origins through a reconciliation of "now" with "then" and "here" with "there", and thence into the constitution of a new self which belongs simultaneously to both places and times.

Subjects function within social formations largely in terms of their personal histories, in the sense that we interpret our experiences by evoking the meanings which have developed within our particular social formations. Such structures of meaning may be immediately interpersonal, or familial, or regional, or national, and so on. History, in this sense, has a crucial operation in multicultural contexts or communications: whose history is accessed or accessible, that is, is ideologically dominant? How does one person's history relate to larger social formations? These questions are generally important in narrative fictions, but have specific bearing in two aspects: whose voice tells the history of the characters? and which characters are endowed with agency, and which are only subjected to social and ideological formations? Or, in other words, which singular histories enter into larger social formations as active agents?

The four novels all to varying extents illustrate how the forms of fiction – especially shape, pattern, and closure – function to confirm a particular ideological perspective

on multiculturalism. All four trace a trajectory from states of displacement and alienation to a state of community and belonging, although this state is seen to be very contingent in *Mavis Road medley* and suffers severe rupture at the end of *The China coin*.

The historical romance *So far from Skye* is a saga of migration, and it paradigmatically reflects the nexus between multiculturalism and migration by portraying a journey – both literal and metaphoric – from a condition of displacement and alienation to a new state of belonging within a society which is more benevolent economically and more cosmopolitan. The process which the book narrates is both a specific example and a general pattern. Its specificity is rendered even more particular by the dedication to the author's own great-great-grandparents, who emigrated to Australia with other displaced Skye crofters in 1852, and whose names are used for the parents of the central family. A more general pattern emerges as the small community from Talisker evidences a characteristic range of markers of ethnicity – self-identification as a community and a sense of difference from others, and, more specifically, language, religion (exclusive and often intolerant), customs and folk beliefs, music (Gaelic songs, fiddle, bagpipes), and particular artifacts (for example, the *cas chrom*, or foot-plough, which Donald MacDonald brings from Skye to Australia), most of which have a symbolic function within the framework of the novel.

These markers are an inevitable aspect of an historical novel, but O'Neill skilfully presents them in such a way as both to elicit their attributes as nuances of ethnicity and to articulate several of them as specific socio-cultural forms of general human behaviour. In doing this, she evokes a national myth which Alan Mayne has characterised as the Australian “settler psyche”:

In [Australian] representations of ourselves in literature, history, and popular culture, our national myths are drawn from the fellow feeling that we claim was born as we settled the land (1989:80).

O'Neill transforms the ethnically specific into the settler psyche by two quite obvious means. The first is by an accumulation of incidents which serve to modulate ethnically specific traits. Not only do the emigrants develop a tentative bilingualism, learning the English they will need to find employment, but Donald MacDonald suffers discomfiture when, to mollify the drunken Irish bullock-driver, he assents that "Irish and Gaelic ... [are] much the same really" (138), which raises the question of whether the crucial elements in such cultural forms as language are the similarities or the differences.³ It is a small example of how the whole novel tends to pivot on the balance and interplay between similarity and difference.

An example of another kind, now bearing on custom and, indirectly, religion, occurs with the baptism of a baby girl born during a fierce storm on the voyage over. The baby is given the name of the ship, Georgiana, to commemorate their survival, but Angus MacRae grumbles that "There's never been a child on Skye called Georgiana ... It's not a Skye name at all. Why can't they give the girl a proper name like Kirsty or Catriona or Flora?" (p 88). Symbolically, the birth and the naming represent the emigrants' transition from one life to another. But MacRae is the traveller who will never make that transition: the purpose of his journey is to find his wife, who had been transported after he had denounced her for theft. MacRae is overbearing and tyrannical, practising a narrow-minded and intolerant religion; it is thus not only a satisfactory outcome that, at the end of the novel, his wife should have assimilated into Australian society and taken another husband, and his brow-beaten son, Rory, should have run away, but

that the families from Skye find that they can approve of this behaviour. Hence the only dislikable character in the novel functions to represent an extreme of intolerance within the culture which the other characters transcend through an opening out of cultural attitudes induced by a wider experience of the world. They have come a long way from the acute “insularity” of their origin, a progress thematically disclosed in, for example, a conversation between Morag and Allan, the two elder MacDonald children, on the evening before leaving their home in Talisker. Confirming that people from neighbouring islands will also be forced to leave, Allan continues:

One day we might even meet someone from South Uist or Barra out in the Colony. But I don't think we'd really want to be meeting them, Morag. We'd do better just to stick to the Skye folk (p 6).

Alan's statement is palpably naive, but O'Neill seems concerned to display such thematic implications quite prominently.

This latter example unfolds into the second means of expressing the transformation of ethnically specific into settler psyche, through a structural relationship and pattern of replication between the novel's first two chapters and the two final chapters. An obvious symbolic link is made by parallel descriptions of eagles. Immediately following the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, the children's attention is caught by “a great sea-eagle” which “soared in slow circles far above their heads” and eventually “plummeted to earth” (6). On the final page, between a Gaelic psalm and a snatch of an old folk song, lies a description of a second eagle: “Far above their heads a wedge-tailed eagle soared into a blue sky, circling and circling, higher and higher” (204). The novel's close replicates, in a pattern of sameness and difference, that earlier moment, brought together with the moment which concludes Chapter two (a psalm and another verse from the

same folk song) as the steamer carries the islanders away from Skye. The earlier mood of grief tinged with hope is recuperated at the close, as Island culture is celebrated in the new setting.

The exploration of cultural sameness and difference is also focused in the concluding chapters through Morag's friendship with Kal-Kal, a local Aboriginal girl. This friendship takes Morag a long way from "sticking to the Skye folk", but the effect is intensified by its transformation of two motifs which conclude Chapter one – the "old songs and stories" which embody a more essential culture than the culture recognised by religion, and "the small white shell" which Morag picked up in Talisker and carries in her pocket (14–15). In Chapter 14, Morag and Kal-Kal discover a shared experience: "My grandma ... taught me all the old songs and the old stories" (175). That is, while the actual details may be different (different songs, different stories), the two girls have identified a common, essential human process: the transmission of a culture through song and story from generation to generation. They then embark on a process of cultural exchange which leads them to another contiguity, as they discover that both of their peoples have been dispossessed to make space for sheep. The novel does not pursue this more superficial analogy, however, and it may have to be read as an awkward false note. That the exploited labourers from Skye become implicated in the continued dispossession of Aboriginal Australians is a fact too disruptive to enter a settler narrative posited on an ideology of self- and social-advancement through migration. Attention falls rather on the friendship between the two girls and their process of cultural exchange which culminates in an exchange of gifts on New Year's Eve, when Kal-Kal gives Morag an emu feather necklace and receives in return the white shell which Morag brought with her from Skye.

One of the central issues in Australian debates about the form and nature of multiculturalism is the status to be accorded to the British Australian “host” culture, since definitions of “multicultural” tend to imply “non-Anglo” – see, for example, the Hirst Schauble-Castan exchange (1990) or Gunev (1993: 448–449). *So far from Skye* has a complex relationship with this issue, inasmuch as it not only portrays the settler psyche affirmatively, but also acts as a reminder to British Australians that some of their ancestors spoke a language other than English, had experienced “third world” living conditions, and were often narrow and intolerant. In doing that, though, it also asserts that early migrants to Australia were not just ethnically and linguistically diverse, but that their *ad hoc* multiculturalism was the basis for a distinct new culture.

So far from Skye used the genre of historical romance to depict a transition from displacement and alienation to a state of belonging within a more benevolent society. *Mavis Road medley* introduces its historical perspective through a different genre, that of time-slip fantasy. When two teenagers (Didi and Jamie), virtually strangers to one another, are transported from the late 1980s to 1933, the temporal displacement they experience transforms them into outsiders, pseudo-immigrants in their own country. The representation of a society in transition involves other social issues beside cultural diversity, though the most notable are its inclusion of issues of individual development, gender issues, and ideas about political diversity. The novel is also about using the past to understand the present, as a way of grasping cultural difference across time as well as ethnicity. In this last aspect, the novel makes very clear how historical fiction grounds its account of multiculturalism in a depiction of a society that is always in transition. On the one hand, in 1933 Didi assures some Jewish immigrants that “Migrants will come to this country from every single continent in the world ... We’ve become a very multi-cultural nation” (p 159), thus linking

them into an inexorable chain of immigration. On the other hand, the novel gives short shrift to “old” Australians who oppose change and want to preserve an imaginary monoculture: thus a proto-fascist group of the 1930s, known as the New Guard, is depicted both as thuggish and as situated outside the tide of history, the recourse to violence by some of its supporters ultimately futile. There is an implication that the neo-fascism of the late 20th century is of the same order:⁴ for example, the minority, extreme right *Australians Against Further Immigration* party opposes the policy of multiculturalism, asserting that if it were abandoned “our proud and unique Australian culture can once again prosper without the threat of drowning in a sea of opposing cultures” (propaganda pamphlet, 1995). The Great Depression setting of *Mavis Road medley* is also pertinent, because the long recession of the 80s and 90s has produced a comparable response (amongst a small minority of people), in Australia as in other parts of the world.

Mavis Road medley is at times shamelessly heavy-handed in its presentation of such themes, though the process is readily enabled by the constant and pervasive sense of “how different everything was” (p 33). In Didi and Jamie’s focalising of the people they meet, everybody is different and at least slightly alien: for example, social custom and interaction, body language, and dress codes are all strange, regardless of ethnic origins or orientations. From their outsider perspective, they learn how in a multicultural society individuals can belong to several communities with overlapping memberships, a situation which is figured by the inhabitants of the house at 54 Mavis Road. Mrs Finkelstein’s boarders all speak at least four languages (p 126), and come from various countries and from both urban and rural communities. Conversation, banter and argument amongst the boarders, and talk of their fears and aspirations, represents the operation of community in diversity. A sharing of music underscores this depiction of community in diversity,

especially through Jamie's ability as a harmonica player to pick up a melody and harmonise. The musical exchange gives body to the metaphor of the novel's title, a medley, or "a piece of music combining airs or passages from various sources".

The other two novels, in which history is now linked with contemporary individuality, focus their multicultural themes through versions of *Bildungsroman*. In such novels, multiculturalism functions as an ideological formation within which a divided or fractured subjectivity achieves unity of being. *The China coin* is a *Bildungsroman* in the form of a travel narrative and here, as I remarked earlier, displacement and relocation lead to a recuperation of origins and hence to the constitution of a new self. *Looking for Alibrandi* pursues the same process and outcome, and is able to be very explicit about its handling of multiculturalism as theme because it is mapped onto the genre of contemporary romance. The title, in a rather obvious way, declares that the narrative will centre around a quest for selfhood,⁵ and in this quest the presuppositions and assumptions of the main character, Josephine Alibrandi, are systematically dismantled so that she can piece together a new sense of self from the fragments. Unlike the other novels I am discussing here, the process of dislocation is not physical in the sense that Josephine moves from one place to another, but is rather a sense of rupture both within and across social boundaries. Indeed, the notion of somehow moving away is used to figure a failure to achieve an agential subjectivity. At a point early in the novel, chafing against the circumscribing social conventions of her Italian community, Josephine expresses a desire "to run one day. Run for my life. To be free and think for myself. Not as an Australian and not as an Italian and not as an in-between. I'll run to be emancipated. If my society will let me" (p 40). The desire, and the inevitable social constraint on that desire, expresses the dilemma of what might be termed "the intercultural subject", someone who feels out of place in both the cultures she moves between in her day-to-day

existence but also perceives that being “in-between” is the most radical displacement of all. The possibility of seeking some other possible space is thematically negated because that is what Michael Andretti, Josephine’s natural father, had done, and on his return 17 years later he can only become an emotionally whole person by forming a relationship with the daughter he did not know he had. Josephine’s sense of alienation is increased because of her illegitimacy, a severe stigma in the eyes of a traditional Italian community. By including this issue, and then further compounding her character’s alienation by placing her in an exclusive school in which she feels she belongs to a different social class,⁶ Marchetta has intensified Josephine’s sense of never belonging, of being a fractured self in every social context. Generically, the novel draws on teen romance,⁷ perhaps influenced by soap opera in the sheer excess inherent in the components of the main character’s situation, an excess which also pervades many of the novel’s events,⁸ but the objective seems to be to use excess to enable the novel’s themes and issues to be stated overtly and, by assuming familiarity with such generic codes, to assure readers that textual outcomes are transferable to actual lived experience. The novel’s strategy of using first-person narration is an important factor here. In principle, first-person narration by a member of a minority community has the potential to be a powerful means of expressing subjectivity; Josephine’s propensity to melodrama and overstatement in describing her sense of lack of agency enables her transition from an intercultural subject to a multicultural subject to be articulated very overtly.

Romance characteristically charts a primary character’s progress from a state of lack to a state of plenitude. This progress has useful potential for advocacy if desirable social change can be mapped onto it. The effect is clear in Josephine’s case, as initially her desires and ambitions appear to be impeded by her status as a particular kind of intercultural subject and the barriers this involves. In

romance advancement forward for the heroine is usually achieved through marriage to a hero of higher social and economic status. *Looking for Alibrandi* reworks this formula as a multicultural theme by displacing it into a quest for the father. Thus Josephine's first disastrous date with Jacob Coote, which quickly breaks down over issues of cultural differences and expectations, becomes transmuted into a pseudo-date with her father, during which the basis for a relationship is formed while sharing "Italian" food (pizza, garlic bread, coffee). Further, teen romance, as distinct from *Mills and Boon* novels, recognises that romantic relationships achieved by the end of the novel are temporary (see Pausacker 1993:5), but Josephine is denied even that. The possibility of her early dream of upward socio-economic movement through a relationship with upper-class John Barton is foreclosed when he commits suicide; in a parallel movement, her romance with "lower"-class Jacob Coote has ended and remains no more than a vague future possibility. Neither is offered as a pathway towards a multicultural subjectivity – before that can be possible, Josephine has to find reconciliation with her originary culture, through reconciliation with the father, who represents an actual path to social and economic advancement, and with her grandmother, whose secret transgression against her culture and inability to pursue the consequences of that transgression deprived her of personal agency and left her in a life-long situation where, subjected to her culture, all she can do is go on implementing and transmitting its restrictive codes.

The mapping of multicultural progress onto romance occurs still more radically in the novel. The suggestion that female readers of romance "may identify with the powerful, active lover as well as with the passive, innocent heroine" (Radford 1992:16) explains reader responses both to Josephine and to Michael. The latter is a puzzling figure, until we see that his early indifference and even hostility is the equivalent of the romance hero's, where such behaviour conventionally masks

a powerful attraction to the heroine, and his transformation into a figure of power and authority comes to signify a capacity to cross cultural boundaries. Josephine is constituted as a passive, “innocent” heroine by the constraints of her Italian community, reinforced by her sense that as an illegitimate child she must be seen to conform or else she confirms her society’s prejudices. Innocence is a somewhat specific quality here: while in many ways she is a feisty and rebellious character, going so far as to break the nose of a classmate who offends her by making racist slurs, her innocence is encoded through her essential compliance with the mores of her culture and especially through the preservation of virginity, in contrast to her friends. Up to a point this reflects Australian *Dolly* romances, where the heroine tends to stand firm while virginites tumble all around, though it also relates archetypally to older forms of romance in which a father finds a lost daughter – Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s tale* is an excellent example, especially insofar as finding the lost daughter also results in reconciliation with the wife, and because the usual pattern is for the daughter to be raised from a lowly to a royal state. I am not suggesting that these more arcane romances (at least arcane for adolescent readers) are particular pretexts for *Looking for Alibrandi*, but that the novel conforms to common romance patterns as well as more specific features of contemporary popular romance fiction. It is thus a good illustration of how multiculturalism can be advocated by harnessing the forms of a popular genre.

The movement from lack to plenitude which informs the use of romance forms in *Looking for Alibrandi* also shapes the development of multicultural awareness in the other three novels, though in *The China coin* it is rendered as more contingent, its expression beyond personal experience fissured by the events of Tiananmen Square in June, 1989. Each is grounded in an assumption that has been neatly formulated by CL Ten: “We make choices as persons who have been

shaped by our cultures and our historical experiences. Our culture helps us to map out the available options and to give significance to them” (1993:8). A common qualifying strategy, though, is to depict originary cultures as marked by lack as well as plenitude. Characters, and by implication readers, have to learn to accept the possibility that any culture has limitations and that it might be desirable to transcend them. Exposure to other cultures increases the chance of recognising and transcending the limitations of our own, and hence a growth in autonomy of choice that offers the plenitude of agential subjectivity.

Books such as those I have been discussing assume this principle as a grounding truth. They do not envisage any problems with the notion of multiculturalism; nor, implicitly, do they see as an issue the question of whether social intervention is needed to encourage the development of a pluralist, multicultural society. The problem, rather, is how to disseminate and inculcate the ideology of multiculturalism. Each book finds ways to do this, either by disclosing inherent multicultural tendencies in earlier Australian history, or by delineating personal histories which plot a transformation from an intercultural subjectivity to a multicultural subjectivity.

Notes

- 1 See for example the 1990 exchange amongst Hirsh, Schauble and Castan in *Overland* about the origins of tolerance in Australian society, or Kukathas’s argument that there is no need for a policy on multiculturalism, but that “People from particular religious or cultural or intellectual or moral backgrounds should have every right and the freedom to speak or to play a role in public affairs. But they enjoy these rights and freedoms as individual citizens, rather than as members or representatives of particular groups” (1993:28).

- 2 There are some issues of categorisation which make a precise number indeterminable. This is not just the problem of “What is a multicultural book?”, but also involves the question whether to include books by or about Australian indigenous peoples who, as Gunew points out (1993:455), “have distanced themselves from multiculturalism, which they see as being defined in terms of cultures of migration”.
- 3 Language is, of course, a vital factor in minority culture experience: to have one’s own first language set aside, or, as often, pejorated, and to be unable to understand, to reproduce, and to use the discourse of the dominant culture is an exacerbation of otherness.
- 4 One of the characters describes the New Guard as “crackpots” (p 127), and their representation in the novel confirms this, but also indicates that they are a social threat. Political groups of the extreme right in contemporary Australia replicate some of these attitudes, and presumably Alexander is glancing at this. The remark, bordering on parody, by the offensive, fascistic George that “Those Yid bastards steal jobs from dinkum Aussies like me” (p 68) is only slightly cruder than “One in four jobs (25%) created between 1982 and 1990 were taken by immigrants. The Government’s reverse discrimination practices which emphasise the employment of persons of ethnic background will ensure this will continue” (propaganda leaflet from the *Australians Against Further Immigration Party*, 1995).
- 5 The author’s preferred title for the novel was *The Emancipation of Alibrandi*, which points even more directly to Josephine’s growth towards agency (Ridge 1993:19).
- 6 Josephine’s sense of exclusion from wealthy Anglo society generates a desire towards that society: “I want to belong to [Ivy’s] world. The world of sleek haircuts and upper-class privileges. People who know famous people and lead educated lives. A world where I can be accepted. Please, God, let me be accepted by someone other than the underdog” (p 33). Conveniently, she is moving towards that world: a marker of her trajectory is when she gives up her part-time job at Macdonald’s for part-time office-work in her father’s law firm.
- 7 The romance genre explicitly cited in the novel, though, is *Mills and Boon* romance (p 198). Despite the apparent rejection of this paradigm here – “Josie, life is not a *Mills and Boon* book. People fall out of love. People disappoint other people and they find it very hard to forgive” – *Looking for Alibrandi* comes very close to achieving a *Mills and Boon* closure.
- 8 Especially: the revelation that Josephine’s narrow-minded grandmother had an extramarital affair during which she conceived Josephine’s mother; the suicide of John Barton.

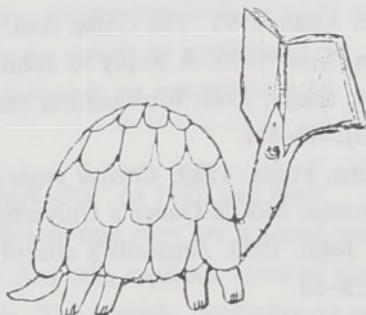
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Teaching tolerance through children's books

lilia ratcheva-stratieva



The problem of tolerance and intolerance is not recent. It has existed for thousands of years. The refusal to accept the unknown, and the different, is as old as the world. It is inherent in people. Everyone is affected by the syndrome of not accepting the other, having been at some point either unaccepting or unaccepted, and in most cases both.

This creates a pedagogical opportunity, as the syndrome may be influenced, in order to facilitate the acceptance of others.

Literature for children is one of the important tools in overcoming this syndrome. This problem has been treated in a number of books for children. There is a passage in Alan Alexander Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* when Kanga and Baby Roo come to the Wood. In spite of being a Bear of Very Little Brain, Pooh feels that something is not quite right, the question "Where did they come from?" bothers him and he starts feeling a vague unease and aversion to their coming. Rabbit puts this feeling into words. He says that that is precisely what he does not like. They wake up one morning to find a strange animal among

them. An animal that they have not even heard about. An animal that carries its children in its pockets. What will happen if Rabbit, too, started carrying his children in his pockets ... how many pockets would he need!

This episode shows a typical feature of human behaviour – the fear of the unknown and the reaction to it. Something is fearsome when it is unfamiliar. In adults the reaction may not be fear but unease, which will subsequently turn to unfriendliness, hostility and intolerance to what is different and what therefore may be a threat.

Milne divides the animals' reaction into stages. At first they are alarmed and turn unfriendly, then they feel an urge to defend themselves by chasing away the cause of their anxiety. The urge to defend themselves is realised in an act of aggression – they kidnap Baby Roo thinking that this will make Kanga leave the Wood forever. Yet Milne goes on to finish this episode with the acceptance of Kanga and Baby Roo, that is he differentiates and analyses the stages in the behavioural process towards the unfamiliar – intolerance, acquaintance, acceptance.

So Rabbit starts playing with the kidnapped Baby Roo and likes Roo more and more. Pooh likes Kanga's leaps and sadly reflects that "Some can and Some can't" and that is precisely why he comes to admire her and tries to imitate her. Kanga, on the other hand, when giving Piglet the spoonful of medicine, explains that the medicine is "very tasty once you get used to it." Those words give the reader a key to overcoming the fear of the unknown, the anxiety, hostility and intolerance to what is different – getting used to it, getting acquainted with the other party, is the solution.

A similar episode is used by Tove Jansson in *Enchanted winter*. In the cold winter, at sunrise, the whole Moomin Valley is awakened by the distinct, deafening sound of a horn. In the pale light of the morning winter sun a big Hemul is skiing down the slope. He blows a shiny brass horn and is evidently feeling great. Not so with the several freezing creatures who pat their paws in the snow and are not quite sure if they should approve of this show.

With Tove Jansson the mechanism of behaviour is yet more distinct as compared with Milne's. Too-tiki says that there will be no more peace and quiet in the valley. While Moomintrol (who has longed for somebody as merry and extrovert as the Hemul, and not distant or secretive) asks himself worriedly why he does not like the Hemul. Further on, dazed by the Hemul's yellow-and-black sweater, Moomintrol momentarily realises the cause of his hostility – how very different we are from each other, he thinks. And again the negative feelings crystallise into an urge to chase away the cause of these feelings, because he will not go away on his own.

From the moment when Salome overhears by chance Too-tiki and Moomintrol conspiring in the dark to lure away the Hemul with better skiing slopes to the moment when Moomintrol tells him "Please stay with us!", Moomintrol has gone through the whole range of emotions – from anxiety and hostility, the desire to get rid of the Hemul as soon as possible, through the pangs of conscience, to this undefined feeling that makes him say "Please stay with us!". Thus Moomintrol rids himself of the accumulated anxiety and suddenly feels relieved. He is seized by the same exhilaration he feels when he wades into the sea in the summer.

The child, in which the boundary of conscious and unconscious are not as clearly defined, does not experience things in this way. This is the way an adult sees them. The young reader re-lives this differentiated mechanism of acceptance by instinctively identifying with the character – in this way the young person both achieves self-knowledge and learns the way to overcome the above-mentioned negative emotions. The way to overcome them is through acquaintance, which replaces fear and indifference with attachment, negative with positive emotions, anxiety, alarm and aversion with a sense of needing the other party.

In the fairy tale *The Beauty and the Beast*, to take another example, every evening at the appointed hour the Beast comes to the girl and they talk and talk. The Beast's outer appearance has not been specified in the fairy tale, and it becomes more and more horrible in the reader's imagination as a result of the fact that it can only be deduced from the girl's reactions. Having agreed voluntarily to live with the Beast, she has made a great sacrifice in order to save her father. Every evening his ugly body and fearsome voice make her tremble; and to the Beast's question "Am I so ugly?" she replies with "Yes" and steadfastly refuses to marry him. However, when she goes home for a short time, she realises how much she has grown attached to the Beast. This process of overcoming indifference or hostility has been called "taming" by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The fox refuses to play with the Little Prince because it has not been "tamed". To his question what "taming" is, the fox replies: "It means to get in touch with the others".

The importance that children's authors attach to the processes of "taming" and gaining mutual knowledge is suggested by the fact that many children's books are wholly devoted to tracing these processes, these mechanisms of "taming", of "getting used to the others". I shall mention only a few instances of this. The plot

of *Der Findefuchs* by Irina Korschunow may be summed up in a sentence – a fox gradually accepts a small fox cub that she has found as her own cub. The book actually is an analysis of the process of getting used to the fox cub. At first the fox does not even want to let the lonely cub she has found suckle. It is not her cub. She has not given birth to it. She has to take care of her own three cubs who will soon need meat and will make her life even harder. However, when she sees the cub shivering with cold and crying, she lies down by it at first with the idea of just warming it. Then she lets it suckle. Finally she carries it home. And only after she has run away from the hunter's dog with the small fox cub, after she has fought the badger for it and convinced the neighbour that she will keep it, does she start feeling that it is as her own child. She accepts it so thoroughly that it ceases to be the foundling and becomes just another cub, and the fox its mother. The whole story is in fact an analysis of the gradual process of building a relationship – from indifference to mutual knowledge as a result of the common experience, care and selflessness for the sake of the other. And because this process is most frequently two-sided, authors present the development of parent and child simultaneously, and ultimately the book helps both in finding their own identity and overcoming indifference and hostility. *Sonntagskind* by Gudrun Mebs is about the long way that a small orphan girl and a young woman must travel before before developing affection for each other. That is the reason they meet in the beginning of the book. From the outset they intend to stay together. Nevertheless, they go through the evolving range of mistrust, disapproval, doubt, mutual appraisal, until they reach the final decision to stay together.

An identical evolution is experienced by the characters of *Sarah, plain and tall* by Patricia MacLachlan. A father who is widowed sends an announcement to the paper that he is looking for a mother for his children. Then Sarah comes; she on

the one side and the father and two children on the other go the long way from indifference and curiosity to mutual affection and the acceptance of compromise and sacrifices for the sake of their staying together.

This aspect of human behaviour is viewed from a slightly different angle by the famous Bulgarian fiction writer Yordan Radichkov, known for his depiction of the type of primitive character (marked by a primitive, simple and limited thought) with irony and warmth. In his children's book *We the sparrows* he presents a number of situations revealing the conservatism of human nature, its inborn fear of the unfamiliar, and refusal to accept what is different. For example, the curious sparrow Chiku collects all kinds of eggs. Eventually one egg hatches to yield a snake, another a turtle, a third spiders, of which the sparrows count 100 (because they cannot count above 100). From the sparrows' viewpoint all this is senseless and irrational. It is senseless to break one shell, only in order to come into the world with another shell on your body, they reflect when they see the turtle. It is equally senseless, they decide, to put 100 children in one egg; no bird would put 100 sparrows in one egg as they would jostle like people in trams.

The sparrow called "My Dear Sir" gives expression to this conservative thinking by summarising their arguments: "Why on earth did you collect reptiles, my dear sir. Have you by any chance heard of, say, a reptile collecting sparrows?"

The Polish humorist Ludwik Jerzy Kern in his *Ferdinand the Magnificent* places his character the dog Ferdinand constantly in situations where he confronts the unfamiliar, and consequently meets with hostility and ridicule that are like an unbreakable wall. However, Ferdinand's reaction of openness, politeness,

benevolence, a good word or compliment for everybody, his desire to help whenever possible, enable him to finally break down that wall, which people all too often erect between each other. In each of the above-mentioned books the authors build up psychological tension page after page, which in the end is relieved and that is the source of the reader's catharsis and aesthetic delight. But, more importantly, these books give the developing child the opportunity to gradually learn to understand him or herself and their motives in doing things, and therefore to understand other people better and treat them not with fear, hostility and intolerance, but approach them in a way that is acceptable to both the child and the others. Most authors, in fact, go further than that – the movement from indifference or negative emotions to positive emotions ends with strong friendship and affection, a need which answers the child's desire to feel needed by others. "To me", says the fox to the Little Prince, "you are just another boy that looks just like one hundred thousand other boys and I do not need you. And you do not need me either. To you I am a fox that looks just like one hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we will need each other. To me you'll be the only one in the world, to you I will be the only one in the world ... You can understand only what you have tamed. People do not have time to understand. They buy ready-made things from traders. But because nobody trades in friends, people have no friends anymore. If you want a friend – tame me!"

The mechanism of taming, of getting used to each other, of turning negative emotions into positive is used by authors most often in books for younger children. In books for adolescents, however, authors focus on the darker side of human nature and its destructive power, on aggression, which according to Sigmund Freud is the main obstacle to life in society. They thus affirm the values of tolerance, understanding and respect for the others by negation, by

exposing aggression. The repression of aggressive urges is the first and foremost sacrifice that society demands from the individual. That is why authors usually do not tackle the theme of the brutal, repulsive nature of aggression until adolescence. According to Bruno Bettelheim the “unconscious” is the main determining factor of human behaviour and many things in life go wrong only because of people’s inclination to aggression, egotism and antisocial behaviour. However, when the unconscious impulses are at least partly realised and experienced in the imagination, their harmful potential is decreased.

In books for adolescents aggression is most often seen in the parent-child conflict. It is based on the parent’s refusal to accept that the child is an individual with a free will of his own who may oppose the parent’s will; it is also based on the parent’s refusal to understand the needs and desires of his or her child and the attempt to impose the parent’s own needs and desires on the child. It is precisely a mother’s aggression that causes a similar reaction in the daughter in *Ilse Janda – 14* by Cristine Noestlinger. (Out of all Noestlinger’s numerous books on the theme I chose this one because, apart from its strong impact on the reader, I have had the opportunity to observe the way it was received.) In the afterward to the Bulgarian edition of the book I urged the readers to write to me about possible outcomes for Ilse. Of the 30–odd letters that I received (written only by girls, which is normal with this book) only three replied that they were happy with their families and respected by their parents. The other letters were full of pain, real confessions about the aggression of their parents which was preventing them from becoming independent individuals.

Not surprisingly, running away from home is the usual response of the main characters in many books. The escape gives them the independence so vitally required in order to establish their own identity. People who have read such

books as children will probably grow up to be better parents, understanding how senseless it is to impose their own will on the child or to be afraid of opposition from their children. Incidentally this is why the books dealing with the parent-child conflict can equally well teach both children and parents.

As far as *Ilse Janda – 14* is concerned, readers do not interpret it as fiction, but as reality which is very much like their own. “I wonder”, writes one girl, “if this story isn’t real.” Another says: “I am happy that in Bulgaria there are books about the problems of contemporary children.”

Violence becomes more and more evident in books for adolescents even outside the parent-child conflict. *The Chocolate war* by Robert Cormier reveals that in today’s world aggressive means are increasingly used, including physical destruction, in order to subdue children and to suppress and destroy individuality. Yet, just as in fairy tales, there will be the solitary fighter (Jerry Renault in *The Chocolate war*), who resists the attempt to be destroyed and subjected. What is more, the lonely heroes and heroines of those books usually resort to violence themselves, but in order to save something. In other words the violent and aggressive strain that is part of human nature can be turned to constructive purposes. Adolescents identify with the lonely fighter, experience his or her revolt, win the battle with the darker side of human nature together with the main character similarly to fairy tales (even realistic books for adolescents have a happy ending) and achieve a better understanding of this dark side of human nature.

Some books exploring the mechanism of human aggression have already become classics – like William Golding’s *Lord of the flies*. The danger for the boys who find themselves on the uninhabited island after the crash (a perfect place for

playing games and having adventures) does not come from the outside, but from within the boys' nature. They re-enact the history of mankind in microcosm, only to reach the conclusion that leaders must be both powerful and evil; one of those qualities is not enough. Those who are rational are isolated and, like Golding's Ralph, perceive the source of danger: "I am afraid of ourselves". Fear, one of the mainsprings of human behaviour, lets loose aggression, cruelty, and works on mob psychology in which your belonging to a certain community hostile to the others is the only thing to save you.

"I have often been shocked," writes Golding, "when learning what we people can do to each other ... and I cannot get rid of the thought that humanity is sick." He says he looks for the illness and finds it in the most accessible place – in himself. In our nature, he says, there is a layer that we have to understand in order to control it. That is why he writes with such passion, saying to people to look for the nature of this most dangerous beast – man.

The Polish writer Alexander Minkowski in his book *Valley of the light* explores the same theme – a group of children are isolated from the adult world in a sanatorium and have to set up a society of their own with a hierarchy of values and of individuals. Again human nature, and more precisely its negative aspects, is closely examined. The Russian Vladimir Zheleznykov also places the centre of action of his novel *The Scarecrow* in a group of children isolated from the adult world – and examines the way children attack the unfamiliar, the different, the intelligent, the rational, the decent – and adults are too preoccupied to notice the children's problems. The hero of this book – Lenka – takes on the responsibility for a seemingly insignificant cutting of classes. Yet this gives the author the opportunity to draw conclusions about the nature of good and evil, about spirituality versus narrow-mindedness, about fear and cruelty latent in

human nature, culminating in the ritual burning of the dummy of Lenka, to enact her destruction. Lenka is broken – “Those are no children, no friends but jackals, foxes and wolves”, she thinks. Again central to the book is the self-analysis, the gradual penetration into the secrets of human nature, and the end solution is again understanding of the problem. Lenka goes away from the small town forever, but an inscription appears on the blackboard saying “Dummy, forgive us!”.

Yuri Polyakov, another young Russian fiction writer, examines apathy, indifference and cynicism, as well as aggression and cruelty in adolescence and finds them equally dangerous. In his book *100 days to discharge* he reveals that the cruelty and perversions in the Army are a result as much of inborn human cruelty as of the perverted environment in which the adolescents have grown up.

The theme of tolerance, of the fight against negative responses to the unfamiliar, against violence, is so important to literature and tied up with so many other problems discussed in children's books, that it can be illustrated by numerous examples from every national literature. The choice of works that I have quoted is to a large extent subjective, my aim being to show how children's books and later adolescent books lead the young step by step towards a knowledge of the mechanisms of human behaviour, towards building their own superego, towards the mastering of the darker impulses of human nature by developing their imagination and helping them to mature as individuals.

Before concluding I would like to tackle one more aspect of the problem. However good the books are they will be able to fulfill their function only if they reach the young readers of all countries and languages. The availability of

information, translations of those books, interaction between different cultures will not be sufficient. The real formative and educational value of these books will be realised only with the active participation of the teacher and tutor – the intermediary between children and books. There should be direct discussion of the theme of tolerance, which is the most important theme in our modern world. The lack of tolerance in all aspects of human relationships – and the differences in racial, religious, political, intellectual, material aspects – are one of the basic sources of conflict in the modern world, and probably in world history as a whole.

Literature should be used to teach tolerance in school curricula in close conjunction with – geography, history and the additional materials used in those disciplines. The better you know something, the closer you feel it. Keeping this in mind, I think that curricula should not pay so much attention to, say, the industry and raw materials of a given country but concentrate more on its people, their ways, customs and rites, their religion, their folktales, their festivals and holidays. Some American publishers have taken a great step forward and gained much experience with these types of multicultural books.

Only people that know each other, and respect other cultures, ways and customs, can live peacefully together.

