Revolting rhymes:

humour as a subversive activity in children's literature

lawrence gordon

A sense of humour

Over 50 years before Shakespeare conceived his first dramas, the French humorist Francois Rabelais proclaimed with remarkable insight that "*le rire est le propre de l'homme*", thereby affirming his belief that laughter was a property peculiar to humankind. Laughter is an overt expression of mirth popularly associated with conceptions of humour. Laughter is also the source of popular misconceptions concerning humour because laughter is frequently a response that does not signify a joyous insight into the nature of humanity. Nevertheless, the so-called "sense of humour" is highly esteemed as an essential prerequisite for human survival amidst the pressures and demands of life in highly complex postindustrial societies.

Humour is a leveller that facilitates a social climate in which a shared experience allows human beings to bond in spite of their differences. Humour defuses tensions by providing a platform on which individuals preserve their own sanity whilst also cementing human relationships. A "sense of humour" is a highly valued personal and social asset in contemporary society for both enjoying life as well as coping with it. This standpoint is reinforced by the popular belief that humour implies insight into the human psyche because it stems from a sense of humanity that is the mark of a sympathetic response to the human condition.

Not surprisingly, a sense of humour is considered a highly desirable personal characteristic.

This desirability results in the common practice of confusing behavioural characteristics (eg repeated laughter) with the cognitive capacity to make humorous insights concerning the human condition. Furthermore, humour (like love) is associated with emotional warmth and understanding, and many people regard these qualities more highly than less emotive and more singular pursuits such as skill in abstract reasoning. Most people willingly admit to human frailties such as being impractical or unambitious or even unintelligent, but very few admit to lacking a sense of humour.

Humour and humanity

With a collective sense of satisfied anticipation, millions of children and young-at-heart adults have witnessed a recurring in-joke on the popular Star Trek television series over the past 25 years. The familiar scenario is that the human hero Captain Kirk (William Shatner) passes a humorous remark that puzzles the extraterrestrial super-intelligent Vulcan Captain Spock (Leonard Nimoy with elongated false ears). There is that customary pregnant silence as the joke falls flat, while the intellectually superior Spock looks quizzical, and finally mutters in confusion: "Humour – it is a difficult concept. It is not logical" (McCrone 1993:232).

This response induces conjugal warmth within the global village as electronic cave dwellers everywhere share yet another affirmation that being clever is not all

there is to life. Spock may be of sound moral fibre and a genius, **but** he is not human. He does not possess that magical "sense of humour" that virtually all human beings claim as a birthright. It is the latter quality that kindles a sense of brinkmanship that enables the vast Star Trek audience to feel comfortable with the outsider Spock's unquestionably superior intellectual capabilities.

Emotional warmth is associated with what is commonly referred to as a "sense of humour", and both are highly valued as "human" traits. In the same way as Spock's alien origins are characterised by his inability to "see" the joke, there is also an implicit belief that our own humanity is somehow measured by the depth of our humorous insights. The mature person is one who can rise above the immediacies of personal problems, and "see the funny side". A sense of humour is considered an important element of personal and social development as it allows the individual to cope with the human frailties of self and others.

Human frailty and humour are inextricable. It has been said almost to the point of cliché that: "To err is to be human", and there seems to be a universal acknowledgement that human frailty is an acceptable and normal human characteristic. Certainly, it is written into Western belief systems that man is basically a humble sinner because he is human and not a god, and that the meek shall inherit the earth. The socially acceptable face of Western man's self-image is founded on the Christian ethics of humility and tolerance. On the surface at least, this perspective traditionally aggrandises the virtues of modesty and concern for others, while deploring inordinate self preoccupation as manifested in the so-called "inflated ego". An abiding defect usually attributed to the latter is a nonexistent sense of humour – perhaps the unkindest cut of all!

John Donne's observation that: "No man is an island" is a central consideration in a social climate in which the development of a sense of humour is part of an

extended awareness of others in relation to ourselves. Concepts of humour are rooted in a process of identification with others as individuals interpret the nature of human behaviour. Human sympathy derives from empathy towards others, and humour is the result of perceptions derived from a contagion of feelings that have been referred to as "primitive passive sympathy" (Drever 1964:290). As such, humour is a qualitative response deriving from a state of "being human". Humour is man's humanity to man.

Defining humour

Precise and satisfying definitions of "humour" are hard to find. *The Concise Oxford dictionary* (1966:592), for example, uses rather unsatisfactory terms such as "facetiousness", "comicality" and "jocose imagination". It is more useful to follow the lead provided by the use of "humour" as a verb that implies the act of indulging or gratifying another's pleasure. This gives an indication of the empathetic basis of humour that is so evident in the distinction made between the meanings of humour and wit as being primarily a difference between heart and head. Wit is generally regarded as a more cerebral, less sympathetic and therefore more detached mechanism. By contrast, humour is characterised as relying less on intelligent wordplay but more on the emotional well-being derived from insights into incongruencies in human behaviour.

The value of the distinction between humour and wit is also enlightening when considering allied terminology such as "comedy" or "farce". These terms may be regarded as denoting forms or vehicles in which humour may appear as a device or mechanism. Therefore, for example, a critic may refer to the "lack of

genuine humour'' in a ''weak comedy'' or ''poorly contrived farce''. On the other hand, the mechanism of humour may be employed tellingly to heighten the impact of a tragedy, as for example in Shakespeare's dramatic use of the gate-keeper scene in *Macbeth*. In a similar respect, the tragic atmosphere of *King Lear* is heightened by the sad humour in the old king's ramblings. Humour has many faces but here it has the sigh of ''*la dolce vita*'', the bitter sweetness of human frailties.

The use of humour in children's literature is perhaps in most cases less sublime, but common threads can be identified. Authors using humour as a device in children's literature usually derive a sense of ''funniness'' from an ability to empathise with their intended audience as receivers of textual communication. These insights deriving from ''primitive passive sympathy'' are the basis by which the author interprets the attitudes and cultural values of potential readers of the work. The author's insights into the nature of human behaviour under certain conditions and in certain situations are reflected intrinsically in the treatment of aspects such as character, plot, theme and setting.

Humorous subversions

Literary tradition cannot be ignored. Authors of fiction write within the context of what Leavis once called ''the great tradition''. This awareness of past and contemporary performance in the field extends to practising authors of children's literature where the classic folktale also has a ''great tradition''. Humour is also a vital ingredient of children's books, but is a device used pervasively across the genres with the result that many of the more humorous children's books are not

in fact categorised as "children's humour". In practice, the majority of books described as "children's humour" are based on the "situation comedy" (eg the farmer and his wife exchange roles for the day), and the humour derives from the author's treatment of the central dilemma. In recent times, the label of "humour" has become identified strongly with the sub-genre known in the literary circles as the "subverted text". The appeal of this sub-genre to both adults and children has led to it rapidly becoming a well-patronised source of revenue in the children's book trade.

The so-called "modulated" or subverted texts in children's literature refer to manipulations of established literary models. Godwin (1991a:303) indicates that "modulation" refers to any such manipulations, whereas "subversion" refers to a "more radical overturning of prior text, meaning or generic convention". This form of literary subversive activity is founded in the postmodernist tradition of reevaluating both function and form. The result is that the structure and function of the traditional tales are reformulated to varying degrees as part of the creative writing process. This involves a process of reconstruction and development of the tale, and is far more than merely a case of a stylistic or cosmetic updating of the text.

Reactions to textual humour are symptoms of pleasurable physiological release aroused by an insight that an unexpected turn of textual events has subverted the readers' expectations. This may involve the use of unexpected wordplay, as in Garner's "politically correct" perspectives of the emperor who was not essentially naked *per se* but merely endorsing a clothing-optional lifestyle. However, usually the unexpected textual events involve radical plot subversions such as in Roald Dahl's *Revolting rhymes* where Red Riding Hood shoots the wolf, or in Anne Sharpe's *Not so little Red Riding Hood* (Zipes 1993:324–327) where the heroine has a black belt in karate and flattens the wolf without ceremony.

The elementary basis of the humour in the subverted text lies in the irony perceived by the audience initiated to the original text prior to its subversion. In a sense, the effect on the reader is a sort of painless "future shock" with a smile. The events that are anticipated do not in fact transpire as the reader's expectations are pleasurably subverted. Godwin (1991a:299) refers to this as irony perceived by an "inner circle" of readers who recognise textual incongruities in terms of the conventions established by a prior model.

An oft-quoted example is Roald Dahl's undermining of the traditional Little Red Riding Hood plot conventions by having the far-from-innocent Miss Riding Hood use a lethal weapon to eliminate the wolf. Furthermore later in the anthology, the redoubtable Miss Hood, her appetite whetted by her first kill, demonstrates all the hallmarks of a psychopathic killer. She extends her subversive activities in new directions. Firstly she unhesitatingly eliminates another wolf who had been bothering the three little pigs, and secondly both figuratively and literally bags the last surviving pig as well.

> Once more the maiden's eyelid flickers.
> She draws the pistol from her knickers.
> Once more, she hits the vital spot,
> And kills him with a single shot.
>
> Pig, peeping through the window, stood
> And yelled, 'Well done, Miss Riding Hood!'
>
> Ah Piglet, you must never trust
> Young ladies from the upper crust.
> For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes,
> Not only has *two* wolfskin coats,
> But when she goes from place to place,
> She has a PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE.
> (Dahl 1982:47)

The politics of entitlement

With rather heavy academic licence, the phraseology used in the title of this paper borrows from two sources. The first and more conspicuous is ''Revolting rhymes'' drawn directly from the title of Dahl's anthology of ''twisted tales'', while the second concerns the reference to ''humour as a subversive activity'' found in the subtitle of this paper. This phrase is borrowed from the title of Postman and Weingartner's radical sixties publication *Teaching as a subversive activity* in which the authors express their vehement criticism of the prevailing American teaching ''establishment'' and urge a more radical approach based on overturning traditional educational conventions. In many ways, this postmodernist desire to critically examine structures and functions rather than simply blindly accept past conventions out of reverence for their longevity is reflected in the subversive activities of the authors of subverted tales. This spirit is found rather pointedly in Dahl's bland irreverence. It also resides in the greater subtlety of more thought-provoking and more innovative essays than Dahl's within the sub-genre of the subverted classic children's tale, such as for example in the works of Tomi Ungerer, and Philippe Dumas and Boris Moissard.

However, whatever may be said of the lack of subtlety and twisted logic of the content of Dahl's book, there is no doubt that the title is a semantic *tour de force*. ''Revolting'' is popularly used to signify extreme distaste but may be granted a positive connotation when used colloquially with a humorous cue. Little encouragement is needed to understand the playfully conspiratorial inflections in phrases such as ''How wickedly hilarious!'' or ''How delightfully revolting!'', both having very British nudge-nudge wink-wink cues to shared humour. In this sense, the term ''revolting'' probably accurately describes the popular perception of Dahl's so-called ''devilish'' sense of black humour that combines elements of the macabre with an air of subversiveness.

However, there is more to the phrase ''revolting rhymes'' than the implication of a collection of stylishly distasteful humorous tales. ''Revolting'' derives from ''revolt'' that means to overturn or subvert, and describes what Dahl does in subverting traditional folktales to produce a humorous response from readers who find his plot details at odds with their conventional literary expectations. The reader is called upon to embrace the subversive activity by joining the ''revolt'' and taking pleasure in the unexpected. An intimate conspiracy is forged between author and reader with the aim of both having fun in bringing down the status quo which is after all fair game because it is a folktale that belongs to the people. This is a literary *toyi-toyi* with verbal toys.

A further point of irony in Dahl's title is the use of the term ''rhymes'' that connotes a modest literary form of little intellectual significance, as used in the phrases: ''nursery rhymes'' or ''rhymes for the times''. Irony rests in the fact that Dahl's recasting of the classic tales cannot simply be dismissed as ''rhymes'' that some may find revolting. In essence, Dahl has modified the conventional plots to suit the times. Dahl's Red Riding Hood is at first glance the modern woman, defending her honour and dealing uncompromisingly with the wolf. However, in Dahl's very next story, *The Three little pigs*, the intrepid Miss Hood flatters to deceive, when she emerges as a seemingly assertive feminist role-model extending a handgun of friendship to the male (chauvinist?) pig who is destined to become her travel bag. These little macabre touches involve modern plot subversions that journalists would currently describe as ''pure Hollywood'', as testimony of their populist appeal.

Dahl's dialectic, in which textual conventions are undermined and new structures created, is generally aimed at arousing laughter while at the same time demonstrating a little heavy handedly that ''crime does not pay''. The humour at the base of

these functions resides in Dahl's cheerful assault on the reader's textual expectations. This pleasurable enough process is made all the more painless by Quentin Blake's appropriate cartoon-style illustrations that clearly signpost the author's devilish intentions. Between them, Dahl and Blake succeed in removing all the tension from any future shocks within the text. The readers anticipate the "shocking" humour on the horizon.

Typecasting the subversive activities

The subverted tale has distinctive literary characteristics. The mechanisms of subversive activity in this subgenre can be classified in terms of the aspects that are subverted. The following categories pertain:

(i) **plot** subversion in which the author alters plot elements as in Tomi Ungerer's inventive version in which Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf elope and find conjugal bliss;

(ii) **character** subversion in which the humour resides in the fact that the personality of the characters has changed radically (such as Dahl's gun-toting Miss Hood), or the characters themselves are subverted (such as in Ahlberg & McNaughton's *Big bad pig* that gives sympathetic treatment to the three little wolves);

(iii) **setting** subversion in which humour derives from a re-creation of the setting as in French's stylish updated account of *Snow White in New York*;

(iv) **standpoint** subversion in which the main thrust of the humour stems from a changed viewpoint in the retelling of the story from a new angle, as in Scieszka's device in using A. Wolf as narrator in telling *The True story of the three little pigs*;

(v) **theme** subversion in which the underlying theme of the tale is humorously subverted so that the thrust of the tale receives new meaning, as in the selected series of tales under the title *Rapunzel's revenge: fairy tales for feminists* that is self explanatory; and

(vi) **style** subversion in which the literary style of the work is subverted to achieve a humorous effect as in James Finn Garner's *Politically correct bedtime stories* in which the pseudo-intellectual tone parodies the simplicity of the original versions of the classic tales (eg "Snow White and the seven vertically challenged men").

These mechanisms of subversive activity in children's literature are of course not mutually exclusive. For example, Scieszka's *The True story of the three little pigs by A. Wolf* employs a range of interesting plot, setting and theme subversions while being told from the Wolf's perspective. The publication also has a lively Runyonesque stylistic tone as befits a "hard luck" tale told by an imprisoned wolf indignantly insisting that he was "framed".

Similarly, Fiona French's *Snow White in New York* not only enjoys a downtown Manhattan setting, but also has interestingly understated plot and character innovations such as the wicked queen being a ruthless socialite and the seven vertically challenged men as comprising a jazz band who (in the spirit of the original tale) accept Snow White at face value and are instrumental in her instant success as a nightclub singer. The heroine's prince charming is the dashing New York Time's society page reporter who puts her on the front page, thereby igniting the ire of her explosive stepmother. The modernised plot details run true to theme, and the story ends with a wedding and a sunset. French's tale is subverted primarily on the level of setting (ie the modern concrete jungle replaces the traditional dark woods).

Dahl's "revolting rhymes" have an interesting modulation in the didactic literary style that ultimately effects a standpoint subversion. Dahl uses the aside to the audience as a feature of his informal literary style, taking readers into his confidence, and at times conspiring with them as to the fate of characters whom he intends to punish. Of Goldilocks, Dahl (1982:29) says:

> his famous wicked little tale
> Should never have been put on sale.
> It is a mystery to me
> Why loving parents cannot see
> That this is actually a book
> About a brazen little crook.
> Had I the chance I wouldn't fail
> To clap young Goldilocks in jail.

The eye of the beholder

The process of contextualisation is a focal concept in determining the nature of humour as the product of the reception dynamics of experiencing children's literature. The subverted text draws its sources of humour from the overturning of the expectations brought to the reading experience by the readers themselves.

The aetiology of the humorous reading experience is difficult to encapsulate in metacommunicational formulae. However, it may be safely assumed that humour (like beauty) is in the eye of the beholder. The reception of textual humour requires reading activity that enhances the hedonic or pleasure-oriented experience, and the phenomenon of humour is created as a product of the reading experience. Contextualisation is the key in a phenomenological process in which the active receiver "*sees*" the humour within the intrapersonal context of his or her own literary background and personal value system.

Three fundamental humour theories tend to be predominant. Firstly, the so-called superiority theory, typified by the German term "*schadenfreude*" (ie malicious glee), is generally based on the pleasure derived from the misfortune of others that brings a sense of security. Secondly, the so-called incongruity theories are based on the idea that humour stems from insights deriving from perceptions of unexpected phenomena. Thirdly, the so-called relief theories are chiefly Freudian in origin, and focus on the view that laughter affords a release of tension and has a cathartic effect that cleanses aggressive instincts.

Attention should also be given to reasons for the failure of receivers to see humour in texts obviously perceived by authors as "humorous". Dahl's subversions are viewed with horror by purists wishing to preserve the status quo, and leave others unsmiling for a variety of reasons. There is no doubt that the perception of humour (or lack of it) within the reading experience resides in the unique reception dynamics with which each reader encounters the text. For example, the sophisticated folktale specialist would immediately recognise Dahl's version as a stylish eighties reworking of James Thurber's shorter 1939 version in which Little Red "took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead" (Zipes 1993:229). But the derivativeness of the plot may not be the only reason Dahl's version of *Little Red Riding Hood* has been seen as lacking in humour. Some regard the tale as being distasteful in the extreme for a variety of reasons, not the least being the unsympathetic treatment of Miss Hood or indeed the fact that the tale has been perceived as a monument to speciesism, insensitively perpetuated by Dahl. Nevertheless, *Little Red Riding Hood* has proved to be a remarkably adaptable folktale that has survived in many forms and with coats of many colours.

In Frank Yipes' scholarly treatise on Red Riding Hood, many versions (some subversions) of this folktale are presented with varying plot resolutions, including

Tomi Ungerer's inventive version in which Little Red and the wolf elope and find conjugal bliss (Zipes 1993:261–4). Apart from the fact that this tale is species-friendly and affirms the concept of a "suspension of belief" as a dominant feature of the author-reader relationship in the "once-upon-a-time" context, it also imaginatively captures the whimsical air of French humour. One imagines that if Ungerer were asked to account for his tale's denouement, he would probably smile and say: "If a dog can laugh and a cow can jump over the moon, then surely a wolf can marry the girl of his dreams".

A rhyme for all times

The survival of folktales through the ages is a fascinating phenomenon. There was a time when the almost uncontrollable drive towards automation seemed to threaten the very existence of print media. In the aftermath of publications by Lancaster and others concerning the looming "paperless society", there was a spate of journal articles focusing on the imminent demise of the book. To some extent, a similar scenario pertains in respect of the classic tale that must endure the onslaughts of both intrinsic and extrinsic pressures.

Extrinsically, the so-called "media explosion" has threatened the textual basis of classic tales by placing them in a new audiovisual dimension through the growth of the film and videotape and audiotape industries. The trend, has been extended into an interactional dimension in which children may now use CD-ROM technology to participate in computer games based on the plots of the classic tales.

Intrinsically, modulations of many sorts have subversive effects on traditional aspects of classic tales. Not least among these are media intrusions such as the

''Disneyfication'' of the classic tales. This has extended far beyond homely practices such as giving cute names to the Seven Dwarfs. It involves modifying plots to produce happy endings as in ''The Little Mermaid'', and it involves tampering with the story to provide opportunities to include enough musical items to compile an LP for audio-disc or CD marketing as in ''Beauty and the Beast''. We also have a generation of children who think that Captain Hook looks like Dustin Hoffmann, and that the genie in Alladin sounds like Robin Williams.

The unparalleled increase in the popularity of subverted folktales seems to beg the question as to whether this phenomenon threatens the survival of classic folktales. Purists who seek to preserve the integrity of the classic tales face an uphill struggle in the face of corporations driven by the profit motive. There is no doubt that the prospect of the quick dollar has made the classic children's tale something of an endangered species. Nevertheless, the popular children's text cannot be regarded in splendid isolation. The overwhelming reality of the market-oriented multimedia environment cannot be conveniently waved aside and labelled as ''crass commercialism'' from a position of moral high ground.

Certain facts are incontrovertible. The humorous subverted classic tale has gained strength from its appeal to adults as purveyors and purchasers of children's literature. Likewise, children who grow up amidst a heritage of traditional ''classic'' tales do so in a social milieu in which change is regarded as a goal, and in which the printed page is generally a poor second to the ''flickering screen''. The increasing sophistication of the children as ''media-consumers'' constitutes a power group that has placed radical new demands that affect the survival of traditional children's tales.

Through all these pressures, the hardy classic tale appears to have adapted to the nature of this onslaught for a variety of reasons, not the least being that subverted tales owe their existence in no small measure to the popularity of the tales towards which the subversive activity is directed. Genre and subgenre are by definition juxtaposed like unidentical twins. The results have been witnessed in the assimilation of the subverted tale as an integral part of an ongoing dynamic literary tradition. In traditional or subverted forms, the classic children's tale is a rhyme for the times as well as a rhyme for all times.

References

Ahlberg, A. & McNaughton, C. 1985. *Big bad pig*. London: Walker.

Concise Oxford dictionary. 1966. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dahl, R. 1982. *Revolting rhymes*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Drever, J. 1964. *A Dictionary of psychology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Dumas, P. & Moissard, B. 1990. *Contes 'a l'envers*. Paris: Ecole des loisirs.

Dundes, A. 1989. *Cinderella: a casebook*. Wisconsin: University Press.

French, F. 1986. *Snow White in New York*. Oxford: University Press.

Garner, J. F. 1994. *Politically correct bedtime stories*. London: Souvenir Press.

Godwin, D. 1991a. Illusion and disbelief in the subverted fairy tale. *South African journal of Library and Information Science*, 59(4):299–304.

Godwin, D. 1991b. Modulation and subversion in the fairy tale, in Sienaert, E., Bell, N. & Lewis, M. *Oral tradition and innovation*. Durban: University of Natal Oral Documentation and Research Centre: 339–356.

Hutcheon, L. 1989. *The Politics of post-modernism*. London: Routledge.

McCrone, J. 1993. *The Myth of irrationality: the science of the mind from Plato to Star Trek*. London: Macmillan.

Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. 1969. *Teaching as a subversive activity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Rapunzel's revenge: fairy tales for feminists. 1985. Dublin: Guernsey Press.

Scieszka, D. 1989. *The True story of the three little pigs by A. Wolf*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

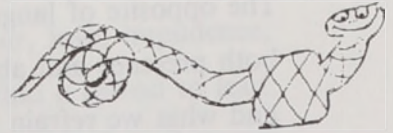
Tristan, F. 1980. *Le Monde 'a l'envers*. Paris: Atelier Hachette/Massin.

Ungerer, T. 1974. *A Story book*. Glasgow: Collins.

Zipes, J (ed.). 1993. *The Trails and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

In search of Latin American identity:

the nonofficial story



cristina colombo

When adventuring into a literary text, the reader will always experience a deep emotion, like that of an encounter. For the results of that encounter, the reader as well as the text will be responsible.

We know that there is no single meaning of a text as if it had been closed in upon itself, or sealed at its writing. The meaning is provided by each reader applying her own reading approach and from her own personal history, and yet even so, this will not be the definitive meaning. When renewing our contact with a well-known text, we are always dazzled by a double discovery, of elements we can now extricate from the very entrails of the text and of our own discovering selves, which have been forged in time.

It is life that mediates between reader and text. Life is the great mediator. It guards the key to all text and in it begins the original reading. The reader knows what the signs of life are and discovers that the role of the texts is that of ratifying existence. To learn this is to mark the border between erudition and wisdom.

Language, as the incandescent matter of life, envelops us and makes us transcendent. We are created by language and to it we turn in order to create. Naming things

makes us share in an act of creation, contains us, measures our humanity while at the same time it gives us the unique invaluable opportunity to transcend the limits of our lot.

The opposite of language is its absence, where it also predominates. Language is both presence and absence. It also appears in silence because we are what we say and what we refrain from saying. Language and silence are the common space where man expands his essence and achieves his real stature. Therefore the text is there, with its language and its silences, to say or refrain from saying and, in silence, continue to say. When a writer chooses her words, she simultaneously commits herself by choosing her silences. It is a game of opposites leading to the ultimate sense of the text.

Every word I have uttered in my life is part of a public memory, outside me, but only those who can penetrate my silences will have reached my truth and most intimate secret. Where I come from, silence is a living presence, a compulsive actor of multiple roles and also a safe shelter, an alibi, a shameless accomplice, a forced exile. Inadvertently a culture appropriates a language and in doing so, even more inadvertently, appropriates its silences.

Silence, like language, has to do with power and also with identity because man is made in ''otherness''. My conscience is forged in ''otherness''. If ''the other'' has disappeared as a mental structure and boundaries have disappeared, everything turns on itself; forms return to matter and time to eternity, and man becomes a conscience expanding in infinity. In the void then, identity will only be a rhetorical concept; and in this way, identity is the product of intersubjectivity.

Books always speak to us of our relation with others. Consequently, they always speak of identity and power.

With respect to all this, what do books for children and adolescents say to us and what do they refrain from saying? Beyond the unrepeatable personal adventures of the hero, his spirit forged in sadness or humour, love, impudence, irreverence, pain, transgression or courage, is it possible to find a thread to lead us through the intricate landscape of a Latin American identity? And furthermore, is there such an identity?

To many Latin Americans this issue of identity is a question yet to be settled. With its own proper name invented by the French in the 18th century as the starting point of an hegemonic political project, Latin American identity is still at the centre of passionate controversy.

At this point it is then valid to insist on our former question: Beyond historical data and geographic fatality is it possible to find a real formative process of a Latin American identity? And in that case, does children's and young adults' literature represent an important contribution to that process?

The political vacuum caused by the withdrawal of the Spanish authorities, the weakness of the institutions and the uneducated masses without any civil rights of their own gave rise to internal strife and to the eventual concentration of an all-embracing power in the hands of autocracies of different types. Thus, this un-restrained exercise of power by petty tyrants and the habitual occurrence of libertarian revolutions which, in most cases, surpassed in cruelty the despotic rulers they had overthrown, became a phenomenon of continental characteristics.

The subject of authoritarianism is recurrent in Latin American children's literature. *The Honourable prison*, by Lyll Becerra de Jenkins, was awarded the Scott O'Dell prize for the best historical novel. It is a first person story, taking place in the fifties, told by Martha, the daughter of a journalist known for his courageous editorials against the dictator of his country, Colombia.

Neither threats nor bribes can silence the brave man who is finally confined, with his family, in an abandoned house near a military base, in the Andes. The way in which the whole group must strive against boredom, hunger and fear; the dignity with which they endure humiliation inflicted by their wardens is described in a text full of deep insight and emotion.

From the very beginning a series of visual and auditive images creates the appropriate setting witthin which the rites of daily violence are displayed:

> People emerge from the buildings. Theaters and cafés begin to close. Though it is still early the panic preceding curfew descends over the city. ''Taxi, taxi,'' shout a couple holding a child, but the cars passing them ignore shouts and signs. The military jeeps have begun to patrol the streets. Two officers jump out of a police car and there are soldiers taking their stand all along the avenue, their rifles threatening the hurrying crowds. It's a day like any other.[1]

The time of despotism is a suspended time. Man remains defenseless, in the open; perceptions alter and even habitual sounds disappear.

> Suddenly I realize that the night enveloping us has lost its noises. No children run in the garden, nor can their voices, like excited bells, be heard at their last game before they've gone to bed. Nor the meowing of cats or the chirping of crickets or the far-away music from radios. The police whistles and their shouts of ''Halt'' and even the silence of fear have deafened us against all other sounds.[2]

Soon, for Martha's family the moment of decision arrives. The no longer sustainable clandestinity in which they live turns exile into the only possible way out.

But the choice of a future destiny is not an easy one. The answer to Martha's question: "Where shall we go, mum?" beyond reflecting a cruel reality seems to parody the most stereotyped Latin American fiction:

> "That's what your Dad and I were talking about the other night. He explained it can't be Venezuela because of Pérez Geménez, or Paraguay because of General Stroessner, or Cuba because of Batista. It can't be Haiti or Guatemala. And naturally, we can't go to the Dominican Republic because of Trujillo. So I don't know, Martha, but your father will tell us, tonight for sure."[3]

All these names are real. This was Latin America in the fifties. A number of countries treated as private property by feudal lords in office for lengthy periods of time and whose only political agenda, at the best of times, was to enjoy the sensuality of power.

In *The Honourable prison*, crime, torture and persecution mark the days of a regime whose schizophrenic nature helps to create a fictional world of its own:

> "I remember what my father said the other day" – Martha says – "to go by what is published under censorship, this is an ineffable happy country: beauty contests, football games, religious processions; all doubtless useful information to cover up the daily assassinations and disappearances."[4]

In 1978, under the military process, Argentina hosted the Football World Cup and the paraphernalia around this event took the country to the front pages shifting the attention from the fratricidal war that, in those days, was staining with blood many Argentinian homes.

The Honourable prison is not only the story of the heroic resistance of a family; it also offers a thorough picture of the different circumstances around dictatorial processes all over the world.

In *Language and ideology in children's fiction*, by John Stephens,[5] the author claims that, "Tyranny is not just a political phenomenon, but also social and cultural". In this respect, *The Honourable prison* discloses the intricate network of human behaviour that makes that phenomenon possible: duplicity, submission, cruelty, moral stupour, opportunism and fear.

This, in turn, leads us to the problem of good and evil that cannot be considered as a question between two irreducible categories only but that also includes a whole range of nuances which in their inter-relationship create a space of hybridism where the real battle must take place.

Manichaeism, the poisonous foundation of absolute power, is a system of exclusions. Manichaeism denies otherness its ontological existence. Within its structure, the opponent is an enemy that must be destroyed:

> All those against the government must live in either the terror of being killed or of being jailed and tortured.[6]

Thus treason and heroism become concepts lacking all content, sheer points of view, valid only to the antagonistic positions that support them and to which they, in turn, refer.

In the unrestrained madness of a dictatorship, human behaviour is judged only in positions of extreme moral tension:

> "I remembered what my father said one night in our town house when he discovered he was losing friends on account of his editorials against the dictator": "Some call me a traitor. Here you are either a hero or a traitor. Our fellow countrymen don't understand moderation."[7]

And then:

> A memory comes to mind: that of Enrique Sarmiento, the young twenty-two-year-old student who was detained after making a speech against the dictator and became a national hero. He talked to himself in jail. The other prisoners heard him argue, laugh, call out to his fiancée "Isabel, I've brought you a carnation for your hair" and "Where are we going tonight?" "He's gone mad," the guards said. At night he used to recite poems by Garcia Lorca and Pablo Neruda. Even on his way to the prison yard where he would be executed, he kept up the illusion that he was surrounded by his loved ones and talked to them. "I'll remain a human being to the very end," he had scratched with a nail on the walls of his cell.[8]

After several months of imprisonment and suffering, a revolution breaks out and the tyrant is overthrown. But, in the history of the country, the uprising is only one in a long series. Thus a feeling of hopelessness prevails:

> Along the Avenue of the Liberator, men and women marched arm in arm singing the national anthem. A man standing on the steps of the equestrian statue of Bolivar gesticulated as he improvised a speech. The crowd surrounding him applauded and waved small flags. "This is hysteria," said Dr. Camacho. This nonsense has been going on for a week. How much longer will freedom last: And what for?[9]

It is here, near the end of the book that we find precise doubts as to the renaissance traits of a new political process based on an exacerbated division between friends and foes.

Anyway, denunciation suffers from an overcharacterisation of the bad guys. The tyrant's men, who only five years before were held as the hope of a whole nation

have turned into drunkards, lascivious murderers, torturers, masturbators and rapists whose wives are good-for-nothing women dressed like whores. In the end, the book extols the fight for freedom and dignity. Beyond any contingency or aberrant behavior, resistance to any kind of absolute power, up to the limit of heroism, is endowed with a trans-historical worth. The inability to find the key to a civilised way of life of mutual respect and to a democratic debate reveals the existence of a society infected by a totalitarianism of a nihilistic kind. The neutralising and in its terminal phase, the annihilation of the adversary have distinguished Latin American revolutionary methodology until recently.

A revolution is also the historical event around which the story of *Tonico and the state secret* by A Diaz de Moraes, is focused. An uprising takes place somewhere in South America. Very soon legalists and rebels get involved in a fierce struggle for power. The insurgents have the support of Tonico's gang. Tonico is appointed as "liason agent: and in that position he will prove very helpful to the cause".

The story lacks the insight of *The Honourable prison* but it has a realistic pretension and a clear ideology marked by class struggle. The revolution flourishes in the streets but it is in the semantic field where it becomes really appealing and wins the most committed support.

Listen to the following dialogue between Tonico and his friend Ze:

> "The revolution? What's that? I've never heard of it."
>
> "The revolution is ... well, there's a dragon that kills people and devours everything and sends what's left by ship to the ends of the world. You can't see the dragon because he breaks into lots of pieces which then become men with the heads of grasshoppers with guns and submachine guns."

"And is that the revolution?"

"Certainly not! The revolution is when a guitar starts playing and everyone goes to fight the dragon. All that's missing is the red airplane; then the dragon is frightened and turns into tiny pieces. You pick up the bits and throw them into the San Juan bonfire and then you send the ashes to the end of the world with a message for the owner of the dragon: The days of the dragon are over. The gang, too, is the revolution and we fight with slings.

In his enthusiasm, Ze got to his feet, made as if he was shooting with a sling and said: "I too have a sling and I throw a stone at the dragon's head and he dies in bits and then I go with the gang and burn him and then jump over the bonfire and fall on the other side and nobody will jump like me."[10]

It is hard to imagine anybody resisting the fascination of such an intense romanticism of hallucinating characteristics.

As a matter of fact, Tonico's allegory is a synthesis of a longer account in the same mythical, religious terms used by a mysterious character, "older than the world", appearing at the beginning of the book. The story epitomises the fight between good and evil as unique, extreme positions – once more Manichaeism as an implied ideology – and it will be Tonico's obligatory referent to which he will return time after time, distorting facts through an a-historical and surrealist transcendence. The darkest nuances of autocratic behavior are ever present in Latin American children's literature like a leitmotiv that cunningly and wickedly pervades simple human stories with its ominous presence.

In *Lightning strikes* by Vilma Areas, the story of the conflicting end of Veronica's childhood, it is Joao, an intimate friend of the girl's father, who has endured torture. The mentioning of this fact alongside the transference, by Joao,

of certain divine attributes to a sweet smelling golden orange, source of all comfort and redemption, renders an experience of great emotive power:

> ''When I was a kid I was furious with God. That business about him seeing me all the time, even in the bathroom, you know.''
>
> ''But because of that fury I spent all day thinking about God, and trying to discover something that was totally mine, with nothing between that something and myself.''
>
> ''One lovely afternoon I was at the kitchen door sucking an orange. A marvellous orange, golden, round. First, I played with it; it had an irregular skin, some parts were rough, others so smooth. Then I began to smell the orange very slowly, imagining how sweet it would be inside, a bit cold, imagining its smell, slightly sour. Finally I peeled the orange and began to suck it. It was such an enormous pleasure, and I felt so happy that I thought, this orange is mine, and this pleasure is mine too. Nothing can come between this orange and me. Nothing, not even God.''
>
> ''Oh, Joao, What a lovely story! Why don't you write it?''
>
> ''Maybe I will some day. And you know what? When life is difficult or painful I think about that orange and ...
>
> When I was in jail, when they tortured me, I thought about that orange. It grew and grew ...''
>
> Suddenly I shivered. ''Joao, I said, don't you think you may have put that orange in God's place?''[11]

Once again politics and power become decisive in *My friend the painter*, by Lygia Bojunga Nunes, (Brazil).[12] The author, who was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1982, is renowned as a defender of freedom and dignity in works that denounce fundamentalisms of all sorts.

My friend the painter, is about the friendship between a boy and an artist. The latter's suicide makes the protagonist ponder over the feelings and values underlying

human behaviour. The painter's involvement in the political life of his country brings upon him imprisonment and the loss of his beloved. Nothing will ever be the same again. The impossibility of love and the freedom to express himself politically, denied by an all embracing power, deeply hinder his creative will. Thus, the subtle balance between art, love and politics, based on the closest links, breaks, and the artist chooses his own death as a final exile.

In the process of transforming his experience of the misery of the world into literature, Bojunga Nunes has developed a technique of estrangement. The delicate connection between realism and fantasy, in a style bordering on magic realism, is achieved in different ways: oneiric experiences, metafiction and the materialisation of concepts in an appealing and effective imagery: the button to button up ideas or the thought preventing sewing of a cock's brain. Bojunga Nunes puts forward a multiple and enriching perceptive field, the decoding of which, by means of a permanent exercise, will finally enable us to reach reality in its most meaningful content.

In *Kike*, by Hilda Perera, a celebrated Cuban writer living in Miami, the author renders her rich experience of exile in a story full of feeling and understanding. *Kike* is an emotive first person narration by an eight-year-old Cuban boy who is sent to Miami with his brother and little cousins in a first wave of exiles.

The parents' departure from the island suffers a delay and this event will be of great consequence for the children. Kike will have to endure, in turn, a bitter uprooting, his grandfather's insanity, the separation from the rest of his family and neglect on the side of an American couple that accepts him only to obtain a government subsidy.

Filthiness, hunger and loneliness will also haunt Kike, in spite of the foster homes and the goodwill of a society, nevertheless racist and biased, that feels powerless vis-à-vis the influx of undesired refugees.

Little by little, Kike's early, happy unconcern gives place to a full awareness of his painful condition. His friendship with Osceola, an Indian of the Micosuki tribe, exiles in their own land, reveals a new vision of the world to him and enhances with different nuances his "white" reading of reality.

Eventually Kike enjoys the happiness he has long been looking for in the heart of another American family, but then, the unwanted meeting with his parents, after years of separation is the cause of more grief and a poignant recognition of his split identity.

In the end, it is at the side of his biological parents, through an enormous and courageous effort of mutual support and understanding that Kike will be able to reverse the grievous process of physical and spiritual distress that all exiles provoke and find his own significant space amidst solidarity and love:

> I am 27. I am in Cayo Hueso. I've come with a group of volunteers to meet the ships arriving from Cuba, from the port of Mariel, all jammed with people. The ships dock and the Cubans jump ashore. Some kneel and kiss the ground. They look like shadows. Disoriented, sallow, hungry. They don't know what will become of them. They don't know when they will again see the children, parents, and brothers and sisters they left behind in Cuba. All they have are the clothes they are wearing. But they fall into lines and march. They march before me, these men, women, children, haggard old people, immigrants without a country. I feel I too am a child alone, marching with them fifteen years ago.
>
> I get a lump in my throat. I would like to tell them that we have demonstrated in the streets of Miami for them to be admitted, that everyone who could afford it has hired

> a boat or mortgaged his house if necessary to come and meet them. That we have formed committees and organizations to collect food, medicines, clothes. But I can't. I can't. Words won't come out. I can only stretch out my arm and place it on the head of a child, perhaps, like me, without parents, and I say "Welcome, brothers!"[13]

Exile is also the only way out for Angelica, a little stork, the protagonist of an ingenious, homonymous book, by the previously mentioned Brazilian author, Bojunga Nunes.[14] Angelica learns the truth about how babies are born and from that moment on she refuses to submit to her family's insistence on sustaining the ancient myth, known the worldover.

Unable to base her life on a lie and mad at her father's refusal to let her go, Angelica suffers, torn between her own present unhappiness and the sorrow she would cause her family if she disclosed the truth. In a Gandhi-like mode of pacifist resistance, Angelica chooses an inner exile as the last refuge for her distressed soul. Going back decidedly into the past, getting younger and younger, Angelica is about to disappear into her own prebirth egg when her father agrees to her going away. Thus Angelica emigrates in search of a place of her own.

Once in Brazil she will get to know Puerto, and they will fall in love. It is with him and other peculiarly charming people that Angelica will engage in an artistic project (the staging of a play that tells her own story). In turn, this common effort will help to demystify and overcome unequal power relationships so deeply rooted among men.

The underworld of poverty is also a major subject in Latin American children's literature. The unredeemed conditions of crowds of illiterate outcasts living in

ghettos and usually falling prey to violence and crime have frequently found a place in fiction.

The Adventures of a street urchin, by Julia Mercedes Castilla is the story of two boys, who, having been abandoned by their own parents are obliged to roam the streets in search of a living.

The daily life of Joaquin and Armando, with its sadness and joy, its moments of danger, tenderness and despair include a wide range of experiences where happiness rests on friendship and freedom and survival depend on work and art:

> "Pretend you are ill," Joaquin whispered to Armando. He stretched and relaxed his body and looked as if he was hanging from a wall; he even went pale under the muck that covered his face. The gentleman took a few coins from his coat and shared them out between the two boys.[15]

It is in this daily successful acting that pride and mutual admiration help to draw paradigms of redemption:

> "Good job, Joaquin."
>
> "You didn't do too badly, mate, we're becoming professionals ..."[16]

Many are the enemies that the two boys must learn to face: the sporadic rain that confines them to inaction, the gangs whose violence they must endure and the permanently and urgent presence of hunger. But Joaquin and Armando are not alone. God and Pingo Pingo, Joaquin's invisible friend are two instances of the same miracle the two boys need to avoid the daily dangers of their precarious life. Pingo Pingo shares, admonishes and helps; he offers comfort, hope, courage and advice. He is a confidant, psychologist, a friend, a pal.

Pingo Pingo is an alter ego in a parallel ethic dimension; he fixes limits to the street amorality of Joaquin and Armando's real world:

> Pingo Pingo: "What's this? Drinking and smoking? Behave yourself, Joaquin."
>
> Joaquin: "We're having some fun. Fair, isn't it?"
>
> Pingo Pingo: "Yes, but ..."
>
> Joaquin: "Don't preach at me, help me. What are you waiting for?"[17]

The gloomy style in the description of violence and dereliction in the boys' lives emphasises the desolate side of this aesthetics of destitution:

> Armando: "When you are small, people give you money. Ma sent me out to beg, she pricked me and hit me for me to scream so people felt pity. Sometimes she scratched me with a knife for blood to come out so I could bring home more money."[18]

Joaquin and Armando will complete a true ordeal through which their friendship will be strengthened. Imprisonment, the proximity of death, kidnapping and separation are some of the hardships they will have to undergo but in spite of that neither a fixed job nor a safe shelter seems alluring enough to them. In the anarchic childhood of Joaquin and Armando, poverty, homelessness and unemployment are legitimised by the freedom they imply.

By the end of the book, Pingo Pingo appears to restart the dialogue with conscience and otherness:

> At eleven that night, Joaquin and Armando found themselves in the street again, with the sky for a roof. They looked wistfully at the house which had been their home for a week.
>
> "We'll come back and visit," said Joaquin. "Maybe they'll let us stay here from time to time for a day or two. Or maybe they'll let us come back and also go out."

Pingo Pingo cut in then:

Pingo Pingo: "Sure they will. You can't become a prince overnight."

Joaquin: "Don't mock, Pingo. Oh, well, with you for a friend we've nothing to worry about."

Pingo Pingo: "I don't know. I may get tired. You fag me out. See the mess I got into."

Joaquin: "Now don't you say you are no longer my friend."

Pingo Pingo: "How could I not be? I'd be bored to death."[19]

The book ends with a reassuring message in a hostile world, hopeful but naive, given the naked facts that show how often street gamins fall victim to crime, prostitution and drugs long before adulthood. In *Cuentatrapos* by the Chilean author Victor Carvajal, the eight stories of the book depict different social problems with poverty as a common trigger. In this other kind of violence and while under an autocratic regime, it is possible to suffer still more deprivation: layoffs, eviction, hunger and further still, the eventual loss of freedom and life are hazardous factors causing lack of safety and fear. But even in times of want it is still possible to retain some dignity. Matilde is having a baby in the middle of an eviction and she refuses the help of a policeman, representative of an order both arbitrary and violent. Solidarity also crosses the desolate landscape of poverty like a hopeful bird. A group of friends make illegal, electrical connections to help those who cannot afford these indispensable services. The use of poetic language softens the effects of a encounter with a subject that does not fall within the reader's daily range of experience and adds a melodramatic touch.

The following is part of a monologue by a shoeshine boy who has left school to support his family:

> "In the shiny point of my customer's shoe I read the words that my teacher's hand draws on the blackboard, how she places them nicely one by one till she has a complete sentences. Like clouds in the sky. Like little trees and shrubs in bloom because maybe that is how the flowers and bees make their language and the birds can read there because the flowers write them letters full of perfume."[20]

The deep contrast between the seriousness of the facts that the stories disclose and the election of an exalting aesthetics demands a thorough intellectual effort to close the gap between literature and reality, lest the formal structure of the text damage its verisimilitude and the understanding of the underlying ideology while exempting the reader from all commitment.

In the work of the Argentinian author Maria Elena Walsh, "highly commended" by IBBY in 1994, the principal subject is language. Her poetry, songs and stories for children and adults appeared in a country that up to the '80s was characterised by its state of subjection to an oppressive social and political order.

Walsh introduces nonsense and the absurd into the Argentinian Literature to disrupt the order of discourse. Her linguistic disobedience and her semantic audacity are irreplaceable tools used to denounce the rules in force and the society that makes them.

The texts disclose the real idiosyncracy of nonsense: a "metacultural"[21] phenomenon that creates an alternative reality with a time and a space of its own. Walsh pierces the armour of logic and common sense, epistemological pillars of reality; frees words from their referents and thus brings forth our own liberation.

Hers is a joyful literature that going beyond any "semantic truth or falsehood"[22], provides not only musicality and pleasure but also the basis for a critical and transgressive reading of facts.

She fights her ideological battle in the world of the absurd where her iconoclastic work shakes the intellectual foundations of power by means of poetry, humour and play.

Walsh speaks in a mild colloquial tone, with a demystifying language of unexpected turns: The ambiguity of a text that condemns arbitrariness and correction, a poetry achieved through sheer sonority or a nonlinear discourse with unusual and multiple points of view.

Manuelita la tortuga[23] tells the story of the tortoise Manuelita who, in order to keep the affection of her beloved, swims the Atlantic to have her wrinkles removed in Paris. The surgery is a success but her journey takes so long that she arrives home looking as old as she did when she left.

The little tortoise's effort beyond measure, her antiheroic condition, her naïveté have become deeply attached to the Argentinian spirit and Manuelita is often sung in public gatherings, in the celebrationary style of a hymn.

In Walsh's world, the characters become intensely appealing when from the privacy of sleepers in their nightclothes they disclose their fragile and flagrant humanity. The sun, the wind, monkeys, toads, kings, cats, policemen, dogs, queens, mice, colonels and ants are frequently forgetful, they easily get lost or desperate or

drunk, they naively disclose their ambitions and wishes, they criticise, complain and demand, they snore, sneeze and cough and they die out of fear, love or just bad luck.

During the military process, Walsh raised her voice at the risk of her own life, against censorship and other forms of oppression that had reduced the country to the state of a ''kindergarden'' and its citizens to mere subjects under an absolute power.

To all Argentinians then, Maria Elena Walsh is an obligatory ethic referent. Without grandiloquent speeches or revolutionary manifestos, only through humour and poetry, denouncing intolerance and authoritarianism she has taught us that it is possible ''to recompose the world on the basis of benevolence, charity and peace''.

Argentinian authors have found their own singular way of expression faced with the outstanding events that took place in our country in the past decades: the civil war in the '70s that led us into the so-called ''Military Process'' and the Malvinas War.

It is only natural that a literature predominantly fantastic would resort to allegory when speaking about subjects so dear and painful to all of us.

Otroso, by Graciela Montes,[24] tells the story of a group of adolescents who build an underground secret refuge in response to the clear threats of a gang. The story begins with the removal of a kitchen floor tile and ends with an

intricate network of tunnels and galleries: Otroso, a space of freedom won from the arrogance of a violent and unfriendly way of life that will be overcome in the end.

After the last battle is fought in the wet entrails of this territory, the hopeful reverse of an oppressive reality, after punishment has been inflicted and expiation achieved, Otroso, its cycle completed, closes, keeping in its heart, like a living flower, the assurance of an eternal human commitment to freedom.

In 1976, *Un Elefante ocupa mucho espacio*, by Elsa Bornemann,[25] was included in the IBBY Honour List. A year later, the Military Process banned the book and accused the author of ideological indoctrination. Finally, with the arrival of democracy in 1983, the book was republished achieving a great success.

Un Elefante ocupa mucho espacio speaks of justice, freedom, equality, common action in pursuit of better life conditions and love. Only a haughty, paranoic government could have seen subversive traits in these deeply human stories. In 1988, the same author published Help, a series of horror stories, thus beginning a period in which this genre became most popular with thousands of books being sold.

I am really persuaded that it is in these horror stories that the real ghosts which have been haunting recent Argentinian history appear: cruelty, sadism, disappearances, kidnappings, terrorism, panic, complicity, desolation and death with frequent references to reality:

> Soon there was hardly a family in the place who had not lost one of their children. It was only then when the older people stopped thinking that tragedy was something that

> only happened to others and understood that nobody is free from terror when that terror – arrogantly, the offshoot of pitiless crass stupidity – settles over their own land.[26]

It is meaningful that one of the very few stories about those who disappeared during the Military Process was again included in a book of love, humour and horror stories, also by Bornemann.[27] In Sudaquia (a pejorative term for South America) an adopted girl, daughter of a couple who disappeared in the course of a civil war, meets her twin by chance and this event leads to a series of conflicting situations.

Anyway, these decontextualised stories without of any explicit frame of reference fulfil only partially a cathartic function of recognition and acceptance. I think that our children's and youth literature is still missing a story like *The Official story*, which won the Oscar for the best foreign film in 1986, by means of which we Argentinians might overcome our historical past and question our individual and collective conscience to find out who we really are.

As regards Malvinas only one book has been published till now, *The Deserter*, by Marcelo Eckerman.[28] The book is about an Argentinian soldier who deserts from battle together with a Gurkha. A first approach to the book is that of an interesting postmodern, mass mediatic reading of the subject with video-clip techniques, though deprived of all deep feelings that would allow any emotional engagement on the part of the reader. We have by now paid thorough attention to some of the most renowned Latin American authors and to their most relevant works. At the beginning of this paper we contemplated the possibility that Latin American children's and youth literature could throw light on the

polemic problem of identity. The voices of our authors rise, like a living and obstinate memory against autocratic power and the spiritual and material destitution it provokes. They remind us that the authoritarian impulse is always latent and that it is necessary to fight the battle for freedom day after day.

In the continental fashion that has always marked the political phenomena in our land, a democratic process, that reaches many countries of Latin America is taking place. Although with great difficulty and hesitation, men are moving forwards in the only direction possible, to reach a state of development which may guarantee a dignified living within everybody's reach. To achieve this my people have both the will and the vitality that have so often blossomed in our children's literature, among others, in the shape of gigantic trees bursting out of the entrails of great cities.[29] Meanwhile, in this short time we have shared an honourable prison, poverty, marginality, exile, derelection and grief. In the darkest hours of hopelessness we have not been alone. The impulse of love has sprung up: solidarity, friendship and familiar links turned into a moral imperative are natural havens in the long night of Latin American indigency.

From this vital substance, as from a prodigious source, our identity flows, and children's and youth literature, in the manner of an unofficial story, bear testimony to it. From this complex Latin American literature, the weakest echoes, almost whispers, for ever remain the portentous voice of truth.

Notes

1 Lyll Becerra de Jenkins: *Prison de honor*. Editorial Norma, Colombia, 1989.
2 ibid., 27.
3 ibid., 27.

4 ibid., 32.

5 John Stephens: *Language and ideology in children's fiction*, Longman, London, 1992, 115.

6 Becerra de Jenkins, op. cit., 32.

7 ibid., 285.

8 ibid., 246.

9 ibid., 288.

10 A. Dias de Moraes: *Tonico y el Secreto de Estado*. SM, Barco de Vapor, Madrid, 1990, 123–124.

11 Vilma Areas: *A Golpes de Relampago*. Libros del Quirquincho, Buenos Aires, 1991, 51–52.

12 Lygia Bojunga Nunes: *Mi Amigo el Pintor*, Editorial Norma, Colombia, 1989.

13 Hilda Perera: *Kike*. SM, Barco de Vapor, Madrid, 1990, 121–122–123.

14 Lygia Bojunga Nunes: *Angelica*. Editorial Norma, Colombia, 1991.

15 Julia Mercedes Castilla: *Aventuras de un Nino en la Calle*. Editorial Norma, Colombia, 1990, 12.

16 ibid., 12.

17 ibid., 73.

18 ibid., 67.

19 ibid., 191–192.

20 Victor Carvajal: *Cuentatrapos*. SM, Barco de Vapor, Madrid 1991, 50.

21 Ilse A. Luraschi – Kay Sibbald: *Maria Elena Walsh o el Desafio de la Limitacion*. Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1993, 66.

22 ibid., 70.

23 Maria Elena Walsh: *El reino del reves*. Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1980, 59.

24 Graciela Montes: *Otroso*. Alfaguara, Madrid, 1991.

25 Elsa Bornemann: *Un elefante ocupa mucho espacio*. Ediciones Librerias Fausto, Buenos Aires, 1985.

26 Elsa Bornemann: *Socorro*. Rei Argentina, Buenos Aires, 1988, 87.

27 Elsa Bornemann: *Socorro*. Rei Argentina, Buenos Aires, 1988, 87.

28 Marcelo Eckhardt: *El Deserter*. Editorial Quipu, Buenos Aires, 1994.

29 Graciela Cabal: *Barbapedro*. Libros del Quirquincho, Buenos Aires, 1989. Graciela Montes: *Y el Arbol Siguio Cresciendo*. Libros Del Quirquincho, Buenos Aires, 1989.

Children's literature in Turkey

serpil ural

A dominant theme that I realised would be running through this conference, is "being multicultural", and I said to myself, "What can be more multicultural than Turkey: a country, which because of its location in the world, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is committed to being multicultural?"

A country which, for centuries has been affected both by Europe and by Asia; by those who were going from East to West or from West to East. They all have left their traces. A nation that is built on the remains of various civilisations dating back to 2000 BC: Hittites, Assyrians, Urartaeans, Phrygians, Tracians, Lydians, Persians, Ionians, Romans, Byzantines, Mongols, Seljuks and Ottomans. Their reminiscences have formed a highly diverse and unique culture. What can be more multicultural?

This variety of cultures, this co-existence of differences has, certainly, affected all fields of life in Turkey. Naturally, children's literature is also a reflection of this unique atmosphere.

Let me give a short history of children's literature in Turkey before going on to the present situation, which, I believe, is more of interest to you all.

The history of Turkish children's books dates back to the early 18th century. The first examples were mainly instructional and, mostly by using poetry, taught children how to behave. In the mid-19th century, translations of international children's literature, like *Gulliver's travels*, Jules Verne's novels, et cetera, started to appear.

The beginning of the 20th century was a time of transition which ended with a major change: the establishment of a new state, the Republic of Turkey. In other words, starting with the year 1923, which is the date of the founding of our Republic, Turkey began to experience an era of renewal which your country, South Africa, is now undergoing.

''Progress is a nice word. But change is its motivator'' said Robert Kennedy in one of his addresses. How right he was. Looking over the first years of our Republic, one sees a lot of changes that were made to better living conditions which meant progress. One has to admit, also, that they were very brave changes, indeed.

The founder of our Republic, set out to institute many changes which, eventually, had positive consequences. One of these changes, which is of particular interest to our subject here today, is the change of alphabet in 1928. Before the Republic, Arabic letters were used in Turkey. Ataturk replaced them with the Latin alphabet which made reading and writing easier for everyone, plus Turkey could now link easily with the literature of the Western world. Nationwide public education courses followed this change of alphabet, so that illiteracy could be overcome.

In children's literature, the years following this change of alphabet, was a period of rewriting earlier publications using the new letters. New works started to appear in the late 1930s.

Changing the alphabet was not the only factor that affected children's literature in Turkey. It was a state policy to develop children's literature. Consequently, famous authors of the New Republic and poets of the day, made numerous contributions to this field. They were trying to convey the principles of the Republic to the new generation.

Turkish children were lucky to have a policy-maker that cared for them. "Children are important. They will shape our future" said the founder of our Republic and its first president, MK Ataturk, and proclaimed the date of the first parliamentary session (April 23, 1920) to be a "Children's Day". Turkey is the first country in the world to have had such a special day, celebrated as a national day every year, for her children.

As a result of the new policies affecting children's literature, there was a boom in the number of books for children published in the 1940s and 1950s. The generation that lived through the changing of the alphabet and those that were educated in schools that were set up after the founding of the Republic, held office in positions where decisions were made. Children's magazines, encyclopaedias for children, comics and picture books started to appear and grew in numbers. Samples of oral literature and folktales were collected and published.

Nineteen seventy-nine was the International Year of the Child. It focused attention on children's literature. Along with numerous new publications and several awards in this field, conferences, seminars, and panel discussions were organised and people interested in children's literature got together to talk about matters of common interest.

Unfortunately the following years were not as favourable as the year 1979 for children's literature in Turkey. The development of television, new channels with so many cartoons for children and the introduction of VCR systems drew attention away from books. Just when many qualified authors and illustrators had begun to create good books for children and when the number of publishers for children's books had increased, the number of consumers decreased considerably. The effects of economic bottlenecks and the high rise in paper prices also contributed to these negative developments.

At present, Turkey is a country with a population of almost 60 million people. It is a young nation, as 42 percent of its population comprises children and young people under the age of 17 years. This means over 25 million potential consumers for the children's book market.

However, it is an unfortunate fact that books are not among the list of priorities of most of these potential consumers. An average of 700 different titles are published annually and each is published as a print run of 2000, 3000 or 5000 copies. Only the Ministries of Culture and of Education publish 10 or 15 thousand copies of children's books.

The development of technology and of internationalism motivated Turkish publishers to improve the quality of their products. They now have to compete with other countries' books at international fairs. Also, their consumer group in Turkey is now travelling more and are exposed to books on foreign markets. This means they can see the differences in quality and in content. At the same time, authentic works are required for the international market: children's books written and illustrated by Turkish authors and artists. Consequently there are now very high quality children's books published by Turkish publishers.

Picture books, story books, novels and fairy tales rank first among the different types of children's books published in Turkey. Roughly speaking, about one third of these are translations. Translated books are mostly the classics like Grimm's tales, Andersen's tales and Jules Verne's novels. Publishers are still in favour of translations simply for economic reasons: getting the colour separations from foreign publishers and only having to translate the text means lower costs. In addition these books have been tried and tested over the years. They always sell. Therefore it is safer to publish these instead of works by new local authors and illustrators whose works have not been tested. ''Will it sell well?'' is always a question on publishers' minds.

On the other hand, the number of qualified authors and illustrators of children's books is rapidly increasing in Turkey. This development is the consequence of the following:

- the public's increasing consciousness about the importance of children's books;
- an increase in the number of publishing houses that call for books written and illustrated by local authors and artists
- an increase in the number of art schools that include book illustrating courses in their curriculum.

The authors and illustrators of children's books in Turkey have various problems. A major one is that of royalties. What the publishers pay to these people is never high enough to make a living. Therefore, writing and illustrating children's books is always an ''on the side occupation'' for them. Another problem is the limiting expectations and demands of publishers who do not know enough about the specific requirements of a children's book.

“What concerns everyone, can only be resolved by everyone” is a quotation from Friedrich Durenmatt. This could apply to the situation and to the problems our authors and illustrators are facing. To tackle the problems of royalties and uneducated publishers, authors, illustrators and all others concerned are coming together in Turkey to find ways of reaching solutions. An Association of Children’s Publications has finally been officially formed. Its objective is to promote the quality of children’s literature in Turkey and to protect the rights of those involved in the field of children’s books. In 1986, the Ministry of Culture formed several professional organisations that act as related legal bodies to protect the copyrights of authors and artists working in various fields.

On the other hand, various government organisations and NGOs have started public training programmes to educate young parents, mainly in the rural areas, so that they will include children’s books among their priorities. What I hope and foresee will follow, is a training course to raise the level of understanding of publishers.

A new attitude towards education, which is still very textbook oriented, is developing. A new system that will emphasise the use of libraries and books other than textbooks, is slowly being introduced to replace the present system.

All of the above are positive developments that are taking place in the field of children’s books in Turkey. Although the present picture with its small figure for book sales, is not a very bright one, personally, I am hopeful as I look toward the future. Things may not progress at the pace I would like them to, but things are moving in the right direction; that is, to better and more books on the Turkish market.

When I entered this field in 1979 with my first picture book, even the concept of books for preschool children was not as widely accepted as it now is. When I was first confronted with the question "Are there many authors and illustrators in Turkey who work on children's books?", the fingers of my two hands were more than enough to count the number. Now, I am not even familiar with all of them. Nor do I know all of those who have won international recognition in various competitions. These are all very encouraging developments.

I hope that this brief history and explanation have given you an idea about the present state of children's books in Turkey. To further your knowledge on this subject, I recommend that you look at the original works of a few of our illustrators.