

Through A Glass Darkly: The Challenges of Contemporary Children's Literature

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From its inception, children's literature has been closely linked with education and religion. Because children's literature always mirrors the society in which it exists, the relationship between children's literature education and religion is obviously subject to change. The secularisation of Western society and the anti-authoritarian educational system have influenced Western children's literature. On the other hand multiculturalism increases the need for a private (also religious) identity. Religious children's books therefore satisfy a real need by encouraging the process of socialisation. The innovation and emancipation of juvenile fiction – specifically the recent philosophical trend – have heightened sensitivity to existential themes..

This paper investigates the links between children's literature education and religion. In this first part we discuss children's books in which religion is treated as the believing acknowledgment of a supernatural reality or in which ethical behaviour implies more than horizontal involvement with the world. In the second part we look at books containing a deeper dimension without explicit reference to religion or traditional religiousness

Every major religion has books that familiarise children from an early age with the basic elements of their own religion: the doctrine, holy texts or books, holy places, feasts and rituals. Recent books make clear to young readers that there are different religions. Mutual respect for differences is the leitmotif in *How Do You Spell God? Answers To the Big Questions From Around the World* (1995), a book for teens tackling the difficult questions of life. It was written by two Americans: Marc Gellman, a rabbi, and Thomas Hartman, a catholic priest. Catherine Clément embeds the information on the different great religions of the world in a story *Le voyage de Théo* (1997), [*Theo's Odyssey* (1999)] quite similar to Jostein Gaarder's *Sofies verden* (1991) [*Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy* (1994)].

Since the 1970s historical stories about religious subjects also show signs of a new approach. 'New historicism' does no longer assume the superiority of one's own position. In descriptions of religious wars or conflicts the intolerance of church authorities, the sensationalism of the crowds and the human dignity of the oppressed are recurring motifs. The authors point out human weaknesses: greed, ambition and abuse of power are the grim face of idealism.

A last group of stories shows the impact of religion on the everyday life of the characters. Here-and-now stories like *Are You There, God? It's me, Margaret* (1970) explicitly relate the confrontation with faith since religion no longer forms the familiar setting in which the young characters grow up. God is also written about for young children. In *Robin en God* (1996) [= *Robin and God*] by Dutch author Sjoerd Kuyper, six-year-old Robin at Christmas quizzes his grandfather about God – his unreligious parents being unable to answer his questions. Authors often give their imagination free play, as in the picture book *God* (1999) by Flemish author Paul Verrept. In this story a little boys discovers God through his grandfather's telescope. God is a kind, gentle father of rabbits, unconditionally taking sides for his children.

This nonconformist attitude towards religion might be provocative for adults who want to familiarise children with their own religion in a more traditional and self-evident way.

In contemporary children's books religion has often been replaced by philosophy. Questions as 'Who am I?' 'Where do I come from', and 'What is my destination?' claim no longer a religious answer. They are open. Children's books invite to reflect upon these questions. *Ik mis me* [= I miss me] by Flemish author Wally de Doncker (2001) and *Hello? Is anybody there?* [*Hallo? Er det noen her ?*] written by Jostein Gaarder (1996) are good examples of the new philosophical trend. In several of these stories a non human being helps to make explicit fundamental questions. In this context the angel made again his appearances in children's fiction. Ariel in *Through A Glass Darkly* (1993) [*I et Speil i en g ate*] by Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder is a perfect example of an angel with a sound philosophical schooling. He keeps watch at the sickbed of the girl Cecilie and has profound discussions with her about God, man, life and death.

A large portion of contemporary juvenile fictions lacks explicit markers alerting the reader to the deeper ethical content of the book.

A first genre in which the religious or ethical message is often consciously veiled is fantasy. In the *Narnia Tales* by C.S. Lewis both the symbolism and the numerous references to the Bible add a second layer of meaning to the stories, allowing them to be read as allegories. *The Giver* (1979) by Lois Lowry is an allegorical tale about a future world where memories, emotions, feelings and moral consciousness have disappeared. Just one character, the 'giver', acts as the keeper of the past. The main character, Jonas, gradually realises the existence of another reality, 'Elsewhere', that transcends his own limited world. *The Last Children of Schewenborn* [*Die letzten Kinder von Schewenborn*, 1983], a dystopian vision of the future by German author Duitse Gudrun Pausewang, describes the ravage and misery following a nuclear disaster that has caused not just material destruction but also psychological and moral havoc. A small group of survivors faces difficult choices. This story forces the reader to consider responsibility, peace and fraternity.

In general 'new realism' has pleaded for openness and disregard for taboos in juvenile fiction since the 1960s. Young readers are allowed to be confronted with tales about suffering, death and the fundamental questions related to them. Narratives about the traumatic experiences of the Second World War often hide a concern for ultimate values. But death can also strike much closer to home. In *Ein Baum f ur Mama* (1995) [= A Tree for Mama] by German writer Sophie Brandes and in *Something Very Sorry* [*Ik moet je iets heel jammers vertellen*, 1996] by Dutch author Arno Bohlmeijer the mother of the family dies. Her faith offers the other family members a glimpse of hope and opens a perspective for the future. In other stories the young protagonist is faced with responsibility or guilt. In *Alan and Naomi* (1977) by Myron Levoy, Alan, in charge with the care for the Jewish girl Naomi, does not succeed in inspiring his friend with the courage to live. Other novels such as *Collision Course* (1978) by Nigel Hinton, *Blackwater* by Eve Bunting (1999) and *Preacher's Boy* by Katherine Paterson (2001) poignantly describe the moral dilemma and the psychological evolution of a young protagonist who caused a (fatal) accident and initially tries to run from his responsibility. Aided by others he can bear the confrontation with the truth and his own guilt. *What Jimmy saw* by Carolyn Coman describes the destructive impact of observed violence.

What makes today's children's literature challenging or even provocative?

With regard to the subject matter first of all the continuous shift of topics and the crossing of the borders between adult and children's literature. Former taboo topics such as suicide, homosexuality, incest, child abuse have become usual even common by now. Next to that new genres have been introduced i.e. dystopia, the philosophical tale. Finally the reflective tone lends contemporary children's literature an adult voice.

With regard to the narrative techniques it is obvious that the demand for more literariness in children's books is responsible for a more adult approach. To mention a few examples: the disappearance of the omniscient narrator, the open ending, the use of intertextuality. Characters are sometimes no longer good or bad but good and bad. Hence contemporary children's books often raise more questions than answers, they reflect the plurality of society itself.