

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27070-0 - The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction

Fred Inglis

Excerpt

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Part I

Theory and Experience

I

The terms of reference

The great children's novelists are Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Arthur Ransome, William Mayne, and Philippa Pearce – to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point on an uncertain list. But nothing is safe in the discussion about bringing up children, in and out of school, and the mildest first response to that opening is likely to be, 'Says who?' And if the proper answer is that a lot of serious, grown-up people say so, what sense does it make to call them writers for children at all? Even if we find, as we do, that plenty of children admire these authors' books, the crudest gangster-Philistine can point out that a lot more children admire the novels of Enid Blyton, admire them in millions and in 128 languages.

These are the most immediate tangles anybody gets into who starts to talk about children's fiction. In no time at all, as temperatures climb, the teacher, the parent, the critic and the child are caught up in the savage wars of playground and library, wars of class, sex, race, status and intelligence. The old categories are down; democracy is just an Augustan name for a riot of opinion.

And yet there is a plain, blunt way through cant, just as there is through any well-intentioned, jargon-laden, heavily schematic theory of education. It is to ask who would not want his or her child to read the best books. We begin there. We try to say what some of the best books are like, so that we can hand them to our sons and daughters. It is this expression of the gift relationship which most gives spine and structure to this study. It is an attempt to answer the question, 'Which are among the best books?', so that people like ourselves, who are teachers, parents, novelists, librarians, kindly uncles and aunts, nice neighbours, may give them away.

The intention of this chapter is three-fold: it is to give an elementary version of the argument that true judgements as to value *are* possible; secondly, to try to show that the best prose is itself evidence of human goodness and a way of learning how to be virtuous; thirdly, to suggest how the intrinsically human habit of fiction-making is essential to the making and maintenance of identity.

Only a monster would not want to give a child books she will delight in, which will teach her to be good. It is the ancient, proper justification of reading and teaching literature that it helps you to live well. No one can be sure it will do this; no one can be sure his or her child will grow up to be an excellent and happy person. But they want it, more or less passionately, and they do what they can to make it possible. The report of the five hundred years or so of good and great men writing about post-Renaissance literature is that good books help to make happiness and virtue possible. Childhood is the time, and imagination the faculty, which we have spared from Kant's awful separation of the two; our hope is that the joys of strong imagining conduce to virtue. Shelley's conviction in 'The Defence of Poetry' has become our rather more watery, pale hopefulness:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others: the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. . . . Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.¹

We have too many examples to hand in recent history of extremely imaginative beastliness to suppose that the imagination leads only to good. But it is surely a fact in morality that the imaginative capacity to put oneself 'in the place of another and of many others' is a necessary condition for the understanding of other people's actions, and that such understanding is in turn a necessary condition of the quality of attention to others we know as compassion and forgiveness. For morality on the one hand must square the facts of life with a

¹ P. B. Shelley, 'The Defence of Poetry', in T. L. Peacock, *Four Ages of Poetry* (1921), p. 107.

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radical recurrence of absolutes in the way that so many alien cultures arrange their attitudes to death and killing, to sex, to property and shelter; on the other hand, those same cultures ungainably insist on the truth in relativism.

'Relativism' we may define roughly as the doctrine not merely that there are different moral views (which is just a fact) but that these views cannot be compared for their truth or superiority one to another; truth is relative and 'true for them'.² Given these conflicting demands on morality, free imaginative play must surely be 'a great instrument of moral good'. What is more, like any and all of the faculties of mind, the imagination must be strengthened, in Shelley's words, by exercise, just as a limb must be. Nobody could make too much of the analogy of physical exercise; the imagination is far too tricky a thing for us to speak easily of its growth and development. We cannot, to speak flatly, educate girls and boys to become women and men of syncretic imagination, in the sense in which we can make exercises and build programmes for the development of powers of criticism or to educate people to think logically and clearly and recognize nonsense when they see it. Stuart Hampshire says: 'In so far as we could plan the work of the imagination, we should not think of it as the imagination; we should have no further use for the concept. It is a power which we do not expect to understand, and, we may even say, we do not want to understand it.'³ The imagination is desirable not only because the giant extension of world communication means that we have to understand what it is like to be someone else in another country, but also because the same extension and the technology which went with it bring unprecedented strangenesses which only a quick leap out of the received frames of mind into a quite different cognition of the world may oppose and control. One consequence of the truisms about the rates of change has been that men have to think faster. Whether they will keep up with themselves is the biggest question to ask of the world as it picks up speed towards 2001.

The celebration of imagination was a measure of its novel place in the map of the mind from 1800 onwards. The poets put

² See Bernard Williams's paper, 'The Truth in Relativism', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XIV, 1976.

³ In 'The Future of Knowledge', *New York Review*, March 1975.

imagination at the centre of human creativity, and, in Yeats's great phrase, the 'radical innocence' of children as capable of its most uncontaminated play; the theoreticians of childhood followed them. Today, the dullest and most dead-eyed of primary teachers pins up smudged finger-paintings and empty doggerel in the name of developing the children's imagination. Such tinsel tribute-money is worth more, one supposes, than the tawse, and dictation in copperplate. But it is no less likely to kill off the life of the imagination. Contrariwise, the greatest poets of English literature flowered inside what sounds at this distance like the inexorable treadmill of the dark Elizabethan grammar-school curriculum. The best *we* can do by way of a creative environment is to fill the shelves with the best books and persuade children to read them.

Which brings us back to the questions, 'Who chooses the best?' 'Are they best for children or adults?' Now it is clearly true that we all of us may improve in our powers of imagination; we may intelligibly speak of that faculty as growing and developing. We may also speak of its decline and demise; plenty of staffrooms have dead souls in them, plenty of fiction shelves have dead books on them, too. The cause of either growth or decline will be personal and it will be social. Heaven knows where it lies in the chemistry of the cortex, or, come to that, in the solar plexus: it is self-evidently true that some individuals, with every opportunity in the world, just are without any imagination at all. On the other hand, we may with rather more confidence point at details of our social life and say not only, 'Look, there, that's dead as a doornail', but also, 'That's deadly, that'll *cause* death in the imagination.' And whoever asks, 'Who's to say what kills and what gives life in the imagination?', the only reply is that good and intelligent parents and teachers and custodians of children try to say, as they always have said (as, moreover, they *ought* to say), what is good for their children. The shocking ugliness and cruelty of image and action in the latest horror comics and movies can only be horrible and harmful, and any sane teacher will want to keep his children out of such harm's way. It is a peculiarly nasty symptom of the relativizing of values that any such careful adult may be accused of an arbitrary and bullying authoritarianism simply for stopping children from reading what is not only unimaginative – the routine stereotypes of

horror comic images⁴ are as garish and inexpressive as Korky the Cat at the *formal* level – but also inhuman. In their content, the pictures say loathsome things.

Isn't there a contradiction in saying so? If we say something is unimaginative, surely it can't do our imaginations any harm? The first answer is a blunt one; it implies much about the assumptions from which this book works. It is this. Never mind if it does you no harm: to be unimaginative is to be in the wrong, is to be enfeebled and less than adequate, is to be partly dead or crippled. By the same token, for pornography to be described as such not by a lawyer but by a teacher or a critic, it is only necessary to show that it *is* obscene and depraved, not that it causes these conditions in others.⁵ It is therefore of the first importance that the adult concerned (*sic*) knows what he thinks about children's books or television or films, just as he would naturally want to know what he thought of his children's schooling, his children's treatment of other children and of other adults, friends, enemies and strangers – in short, their manners and their morality. He would want to judge these things on the basis of a sufficient knowledge, compatible with not being nose-y or officious or oppressive. The point stands, however. Irrespective of what the child makes of an experience, the adult wants to judge it for himself, and so doing means judging it for *itself*. This judgement comes first, and it is at least logically separable from doing the reckoning for children. *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *Puck of Pook's Hill* are wonderful books whoever you are, and that judgement stands whether or not your child can make head or tail of them. The joy they bring revives in us the childlike qualities of freshness and innocence and delight which, for instance, traditional Christianity has always required grown-ups to keep alive if they are to be at all redeemable. They are the same qualities which the secular conscience of the West has sought, ever since the Romantics drew attention firmly back to children, so that it may counterpose such innocence to the advance of industrialism and its grimly utilitarian and computational machinery. So a beautiful novel

⁴ Is it 'arrogant' or 'sweeping' to condemn them all? A measure of relativism's influence is that I have to ask such a question. The interested may care to look up a copy of any Marvel comic, and then turn to P. M. Pickard, *I Could a Tale Unfold: Violence, Horror and Sensationalism in Stories for Children* (1961).

⁵ A point I take from an editorial on 'Pornography', in *The Human World*, 7 (1971), pp. 1–18.

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[More information](#)

for children touches that quality of mind and spirit in us which issues as a cadence of attention – the attention (and responsiveness) we call innocence. The best children's books reawaken our innocence. That is the pleasure they give. The richness of a grown-up world is partly paid for by a loss of that quality. Tolstoy and Shakespeare are giants whose human capability remains so astonishingly large and inclusive that they can express innocence in an Imogen or a Perdita or a Levin when everything around these characters is heavy with experience, knowingness, and the chance of corruption. But even their works are, as we say, mature; innocence lives in an enclave of the author's. The music of their work *is* so full and grand because there is so much experience in it.

There is another kind of writing, as there is of everyday discourse, which renders innocence in the pure, radical way of William Blake's great songs. It is there in men and women of a peculiar gentleness and naïvety; it is there in some writers: T. F. Powys, at his rare best, Tolstoy in his stories for children,⁶ Hans Andersen, Wordsworth in some of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Oscar Wilde in *The Happy Prince*, James Thurber in *The 13 Clocks*. There are plenty of examples. These few must do to suggest the quality of attention to the world, and of rendering the reality of that world in language, which characterizes the best writing for children. I do not mean that these writers are naïfs or primitives, nor that the men and women who exhibit this strength are unworldly or simple in anything but an admirable way. These names suggest the moral and intellectual quality which must occur somewhere in the sensibility and intelligence of a good writer for children. It is perhaps included in what Hazlitt called, to Keats's applause, the 'gusto in the voice',⁷ and it issues finally in stories which meet Tolstoy's impressively simple criterion for any novel: that 'he alone can write a drama who has something to say to men – something mighty important to them – about men's relation to God, to the universe, to all that is infinite and unending'. It is this combination of seriousness and simplicity which is quite unlike the forced earnestness of the bibliotheraputicians⁸ ('Here's a book

⁶ Ian MacKillop put these back on the reading list in his essay in *Children's Literature in Education*, 11 (1973).

⁷ William Hazlitt, 'On Gusto', *Works*, xviii (1855).

⁸ A notion borrowed from Dennis Butts in his introduction to *Good Writers for Young Readers* (1977).

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[More information](#)

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

9

which I think will help you with your problem') and their favoured authors, who would serve up the diet of the devout *New Society*-and-*Guardian*-reading PTA, and make children's stories from a recipe of divorce, urban poverty, young sex, car thefts, all roundly beaten up with a couple of muggings.

The simplicity I speak of is at first glance a question of style, and the question of style is now approached very variously: by linguists of their various persuasions, by critics, by men and women. This, for instance, is an example of style in a story which was once staple for children:

In this combat no man can imagine, unless he had seen and heard as I did what yelling, and hideous roaring *Apollyon* made all the time of the fight, he spake like a Dragon: and on the other side, what sighs and groans brast from *Christian's* heart. I never saw him all the while give so much as one pleasant look, till he perceived he had wounded *Apollyon* with his two edged Sword, then indeed he did smile, and look upward: but 'twas the dreadfulest sight that ever I saw.

Now there are those who believe that this style is one which, if children are to know their culture at all, and are to be able to speak its poetry and know that for the serious thing it is, they must meet in *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Authorized Version, and elsewhere. There are also those who reckon that the unfamiliar archaism of this prose makes it incomprehensible to children, and further, in this instance at least, that the style is as it is because it carries a view of life which is bigoted, narrow, primitive and joyless.

This division works not so much between groups of educators as within individual ones. Upright and excellent men and women believe that children should read the Bible and feel its strength, but do not believe that what it says is true. At the same time, they want their children to make their own decisions about what they read, and to understand this reading for themselves in such a way as to make it tell in their experience of the daily world. To put the opposition briskly, they want to say, 'Here are good books; read them, they'll do *you* good', at the same time as they say, 'My books aren't necessarily your books: you must (within limits) read what you want to read, and choose it for yourself.' In other words, there is, as always, a

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

necessary high tension between teaching and learning, between morality and identity. For anyone to be said to be teaching, it must follow that others are learning, but it is a much harder business to say what they are learning, and how wide the gap between teacher's (or parent's, or novelist's) intention and child's behaviour has to be before anyone can say teaching and learning are not happening (though both parties may still be very busy).

The argument is harder yet with imaginative experiences. Can the novelists of whom this book treats be said to be teaching anything? Is Bunyan teaching in the passage I quote? He certainly intended to teach that your adversary the devil walketh abroad as a roaring lion, and his story was a vivid and memorable way to present this truth to the Baptists of Bedford. But what could a modern child make of the story, especially one brought up in the rinsed-out doctrines and thin prose of the Series III Prayer Book?

Our secularized answer is that such a child must know Bunyan's style for what it is. That, however, is too readily priggish an answer of the type forever put in its place by Michael Frayn's hero at the funeral of an elderly colleague:

'For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.' Yes, thought Dyson, at that I can feel a pricking behind the lids of my eyes! And yet . . . do I in any sense believe that poor old Eddy shall put on immortality? Isn't it rather terrible that what brings the pricking behind my eyelids is not old Eddy's death, or even the thought of human mortality in general, but certain strokes of rhetoric – certain alliterations, repetitions, and verbal sonorities which don't hold any literal meaning for me? I'm more moved by literature than by what it describes!⁹

Is this what the admonition to write in a proper style turns out to mean: that children will be moved by biblical resonances, and perhaps be able to write in some of them for themselves?

Not quite. For you can only write in such a style if you are capable of the quality of mind and spirit which it betokens. Prose isn't an infallible test of anyone's virtue, but it is as good as we have. Bunyan's simplicity of seeing is perfectly unselfish;

⁹ *Towards the End of the Morning* (1967), p. 174.

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[More information](#)

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

11

the words seem to withdraw, and become transparent, so that we see with Bunyan's eyes, and Bunyan matters, not for himself, but because his writing makes the scene visible with a proper dread. To write such prose – and hence to read it – is to see the world in such a way; it is to fix the world in such a light, not that it is held forever in the colours of this man's temperament, but that his prose, drawing on the forms of language which his genius found in his culture and his historical models – the Bible, the Elstow tinkers, the Civil War, the new Baptists and Quakers, Bedford prison – catches hold of the truth that is truthfulness.

This is more than a flourish. I take the view in this book that formal Christianity will never recover a unified and social form in this country; if it were to, Bunyan's version, for all its undoubted strength and the meaning it gave to life, death, salvation and hellfire, would be one of its grisliest and most foreshortened versions. When, therefore, I quote Tolstoy to demand of writers that they deal seriously with the infinite and unending, this is not to require of a novelist that he recommend religion to his audience. It is to ask that he or she be capable of writing with the seriousness and simplicity which can suggest what Tolstoy wanted, which is capable also of moving into central areas of experience and saying what it has to say, plainly and intelligibly. Ah, if only more novels and poems could speak with such directness, then if literature is what we take it to be, the world would be a better place! But literature, as Wallace Stevens surprisingly noted, will only be the better part of life, if life is the better part of literature. And so the seriousness of the good novelist is of a piece with his gift to create life; his delight in the energy of the world issues in a creative energy of its own, whatever it makes.

As to the poetical character itself . . . it is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen . . .¹⁰

Well, yes; the supreme fiction-maker gives malignity and evil a heartiness and good appetite they all too obviously have. That

¹⁰ John Keats, letter to Woodhouse, 27 October 1815, from *Selected Letters*, ed. F. Page (1954), p. 172.