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

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*for Jessica and Abigail*

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# The promise of happiness

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FRED INGLIS

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My mind, because the minds that I have loved,  
The sort of beauty that I have approved,  
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,  
Yet knows that to be choked with hate  
May well be of all evil chances chief.  
If there's no hatred in a mind  
Assault and battery of the wind  
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,  
So let her think opinions are accursed.  
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born  
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,  
Because of her opinionated mind  
Barter that horn and every good  
By quiet natures understood  
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Considering that, all hatred driven hence,  
The soul recovers radical innocence  
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,  
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,  
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;  
She can, though every face should scowl  
And every windy quarter howl  
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house  
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;  
For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
Peddled in the thoroughfares.  
How but in custom and in ceremony  
Are innocence and beauty born?  
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,  
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.  
From W. B. Yeats, 'A Prayer for my Daughter'

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‘The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits . . . The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is, when he is happy; but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy.’

From ‘The Storyteller’, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Harcourt, Brace & World 1968, Jonathan Cape 1970).

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## Preface

It is worth emphasizing once more that an introduction is just that: the author inviting a possible reader to meet his book, or rather, those of his own ideas which are set down in a book. And, like anyone else making an ordinary sort of introduction, I am anxious that those waiting to meet and greet the book – eagerly, suspiciously, with reserve or openly, in all the different frames of mind with which we all of us do await introductions – should not completely mistake the sort of thing it is. While it is true that the first part of the book intends to set out something of my approach to my subject-matter and to suggest the ways of seeing and the contexts of reading and interpretation which I recommend to readers, it may be worth trying to prevent misunderstanding as soon as possible by way of these few introductory sentences.

My subject, certainly, is children's fiction. But this is neither an inventory of the available titles, nor even a critical guide to the best of them. I have used such guides, naturally, and it is right to pay the most generous tributes that I can to the best of them: John Rowe Townsend's really excellent *Written for Children*, a compendious list of the best texts which is also a lively read and, so I found, a stock book of brief, sympathetic, and accurate judgements. Nor could I have worked so rapidly and readily without the help of Aidan Chambers's boundlessly prompt and energetic, occasionally pugilistic writings on the subject. But in taking children's fiction as my ostensible subject, I have also been intent upon a wider and more impalpable subject: the nature of popular culture, and the way these particular forms of the social imagination try to fix admired social values in a story, give them place and name and continuity.

I am not, as is plain from a glance at my primary sources in the

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bibliography, trying to cover everything. Rather, I try to take the novels some very intelligent men and women have written for children, and to use them in order to understand what picture of virtue and happiness, what forms of experience, we believe may be given to our children so that they can live well in the world. I am therefore trying to write not so much literary criticism or, heaven help us, Education with a capital E, as social theory, and if that rather dismal phrase is any help, it means, I take it, a combination of theories about how the world goes *and* how it *ought* to go.

It is in this very general push of inquiry that I want to make this book take its place beside my previous books. Like any others who count themselves intellectuals, I am struggling on in the intolerable wrestle with language and experience, trying to make them lie still and shapely. I therefore want to remark upon the continuity of this book with its predecessors, not because they happen to be mine, but because they study very different materials with the intention of finding in the everyday lives and practices of men and women the values and meanings to which we give our lives, and which return to our lives the human worth that they embody. My last book, *The Name of the Game*, was about sport. The stuff of that book had been and remains some of the happiest experiences of my life, and one of its passions. At the same time, sport is also such a passion for a great many other men and women, and therefore a proper study for the human scientist who hopes not only to understand the world, but to make it a better place.

The emphasis of these inquiries falls, I hope clearly, on the human values carried, lived, renewed and replaced in the lives, the customary and educated lives, of men and women. In the case of the book on sport, for example, I tried to follow a recent and congenial admonition in social theory to treat social action as a 'text', to be interpreted for value and meaning, and to be judged accordingly, just as you would a novel or a film. This time, I seek to reverse the procedure, and treat the texts of these novels as social actions; treat them, that is, as the active processes of production, readership, membership, education, and leisure consumption which they are.

In these ways, perhaps, the lines may declare themselves between experience and theory; or to put the same thing another way, between culture and politics.

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For by these tokens, the energy behind this book comes not only from my own experience of reading as a child, but from the delight brought by my daughters' reading. Their active collaboration in the thought that has gone into the book is its real foundation. At the same time, their reading shades out into the broad constituency for whom I would most like to speak: their friends, their teachers, their favourite novelists, the reading public of children's fiction.

Within that large and loose agglomeration, its not unkindly indifference, there are of course particular listeners whose attention to this book has already been critical and essential. I am especially grateful to John Adams who gave me my first Puffin reading list when I first began to keep pace with my children's reading of novels a few years ago. I am more recently and deeply in the debt of Dennis Butts for his always kindly and forceful unseating of ready-made notions, and for his rapid and pointed reading and criticism of a first draft. I learned much from Frank Whitehead and Alan Wellings when I knew little about children's literature and was working with them in the early stages of the Schools Council research survey of children's reading habits. I owe much to Lesley Aers and her direct, brisk and affectionate treatment of my ideas. As always, and more than he will know, I have argued the form and substance of the book through in my mind with and against the ideas of Quentin Skinner. Although this conversation was largely sustained in his absence in Princeton, the sense of his generous, sympathetic, searching intelligence was with me whatever I wrote. I am grateful to David Mallick for his instigation of an invitation to speak to the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, during which visit I sorted out many of the ideas in the closing chapters, and I am grateful also to a long conversation with Hugo McCann at the same time, which gave me just the lead I was looking for. Lastly, I must thank my very dear Cressida for all her help: as a warm listener, as a critic of great stamina and good humour, as a source of books and suggestions of books. She also provided Joan Roberts as typist, who dealt calmly and elegantly with an impossibly double-crossed holograph. So also did my own long-suffering, equable and excellent secretary, Maureen Harvey.

The quotation from W. B. Yeats's 'A Prayer for my Daughter' is included by kind permission of Michael Yeats and

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