

VISUALISING DESPAIR: CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES FOR THE YOUNG FEATURING DEATH, DEPRESSION AND SELF-HARM

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Children's literature that deals with hopelessness and specifically with the response to it known as self-harming is a relatively recent trend. Texts such as these can provide new narrative strands that for some will simply be interesting, but for others may offer alternative versions of the stories they are telling themselves about themselves. In this way, children's fiction – even for very young readers – may prove a valuable antidote to the current conditions that lead young people to harm themselves and so become a force for positive transformations in young people's lives.

Key words: self-harming; depression; children's picture-books; mental illness.

Children's literature that deals with hopelessness and specifically with the response to it known as self-harming is a relatively recent trend. The role reading can play in transforming the lives of young people who are caught in cycles of despair and anger directed against themselves is suggested by reformed self-harmer turned journalist Nick Johnstone who explains how reading helped him concluding, 'A good place to start breaking the habit is in a library: find out why you are doing it, how you can stop, learn new ways to cope' [1, p. 9]. Even better than learning how to break the habit would be a prophylactic approach in which children's literature provided opportunities for readers to recognise and understand their hostile feelings, and offered them new ways of storying their lives. This paper looks at a selection of picturebooks that are attempting to fill this gap in provision.

Contextualising depressive fiction

Adults do not have the monopoly on powerful negative emotions or suffering. Indeed, often the things that lead to destructive and overwhelming feelings in maturity have their roots in childhood experience. As well as having their own difficult experiences, children also witness and are affected by adults whose anger, frustration and despair lead them to behave irrationally and sometimes dangerously, whether at home, as part of more general disputes or disasters, or in the media. In the UK, one in four people will suffer from a form of mental illness in the course of their lifetimes (see <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>; statistics for the USA are comparable), but even as some boundaries around children's literature are shifting, until recently, in Britain and America, writing for the young has rarely acknowledged this fact, preferring instead to shield children from even such a widespread form of illness as depression. This protective rationale has to date withheld one means by which even very young children could learn to recognise and articulate destructive feelings and behaviours, and in doing so, may have increased their susceptibility to powerful negative emotions. Recent research in the UK and USA suggests that 'record numbers of young people are on the verge of mental breakdown as a result of family break-up, exam pressures and growing inability to cope with the pressures of modern life' [2, p. 2], so it behoves us to look at ways of reversing this trend by including such topics in the fiction they read.

Since emotions are often captured better in abstract forms such as images and music than in words alone, the picturebook, with its combination of words and images and its tendency to be read aloud (so encouraging writers to explore rhythm and sound-sense as well as literal sense), can be a particularly effective medium for representing a range of emotional states, including depression and despair.

Pictures of darkness: the child in the book

The most explicit picturebook on the subject that I have encountered is Serge Kozlov's *Petit-Âne* (1995), illustrated by Vitaly Statzynsky, which begins, '*Il était une fois un petit âne qui désirait se pendre, mais ne savait comment faire.*' [Once upon a time there was a little donkey who wanted to hang himself, but he did not know how to do it.]¹ Petit-Âne asks several of his friends to help him, but all say they cannot, and the pictures, which are in a cheerful style reminiscent of folk art (bright colours, extensive use of decoration), show several of them weeping as they listen to Petit-Âne's request. The little donkey's original despair is compounded by their refusal. His bright colours fade to grey, with only some vestigial pink details. At last, as night falls, he meets his best friend, Ourson, and asks if he will help. Ourson is ready with a rope and a nail, and the deed is done by hammering the nail in the sky, where '*il se mit à briller comme une étoile*' [it shines as brilliantly as a star], and securing the rope over it. The final double page spread shows Petit-Âne hanging from the rope, watched from the ground by Ourson.

Petit-Âne received a hostile critical reception when it appeared in France, after which the publishers withdrew the book from their catalogue [3, p. 2]. Its depiction of suicide as something inexplicably longed for and accomplished in a book for children clearly makes adults very anxious, despite the fact that Petit-Âne is shown as a stuffed toy and there are familiar fictional tags ('Once upon a time') to make it clear that this is a story and to distance it from real life.

The author and illustrator also include intertextual links to Saint-Exupéry's much-loved *The Little Prince* (1943), another book which ends in the death of the main character. The Little Prince is a child who, from the outset, is filled with great sadness and who, it transpires, has been preparing for death in the course of the book. These links begin on the front cover, which shows Petit-Âne and Orson standing on a curved surface that is reminiscent of the Little Prince's astral universe. The unquestioning acceptance of Petit-Âne's decision is similar to the way the pilot listens to, accepts and witnesses the Little Prince's death. These links point to a reading of Kozlov's tale in which Petit-Âne's death can be read as symbolizing his spiritual rebirth [3, p. 6–7]. The links to *The Little Prince* are underlined in the blurb on the back cover: '*Tout le monde n'a pas la chance d'être le Petit Prince...Heureusement Petit Ours est là qui sait, lui, quell pays notre petit âne rêve d'atteindre...*' [Not everybody is lucky enough to be the Little Prince. Happily, Ourson is there and he knows which country our Petit-Âne dreams of reaching] suggesting that this is the reading author, illustrator and publisher intend. Whatever the intention, the manifest story confronts readers with a suicidal figure who, like Ungerer's blue cloud, clearly represents a child.

There is a long tradition of using animals and toys as substitute child figures in children's literature because of the connections and affinities between them. Anthropomorphising toys and animals (or, as in *Petit-Âne*, a combination of the two) provides a degree of disguise and distance which can be useful when dealing with sensitive

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the translations from *Petit-Âne* are mine.

or disturbing topics. In this case, it could be that the disguise is at least as much for the adult, for whom the idea of child suicide is devastating and unspeakable, as for potential child readers. Under normal circumstances (as opposed to conflict and natural disasters), children have little experience of death and find the concept strange – sometimes even amusing. Like sex, this area outside experience is something that interests them, and children's play often includes episodes of 'being dead', whether this is through being 'shot', or playing at being a ghost or acting out a story in which a character dies. Acting out violent impulses on toys is not uncommon either, though it is not always palatable to adults.

If a sibling, friend or classmate dies, children may seek to understand what this means and explore their feelings about it through fantasy and play. *Petit-Âne* can be understood as a narrative that enacts this curiosity about death as well as one that is concerned with suicide. Although the donkey is certainly hanged at the end of the story, the final image shows him suspended from his middle, not by his neck as the preceding picture suggests he will be, and his death is presented as neither traumatic nor dramatic. This lack of tragedy may associate the events with the world of child's play, reflecting the reassuring things adults often say to children when someone has died (they are out of pain, they have gone to heaven or a similarly happy place, they are not really gone because they live on in our memories); however, it was precisely the beauty and serenity of the final images that appalled French critics. For them, *Petit-Âne*'s smiling face on the last page of the book constitutes an invitation to young readers to imitate him. This ignores both children's understanding of the differences between fiction, play and reality, and the needs of those who, for whatever reason, have suicidal thoughts or know someone who has killed her/himself and are unable to articulate or understand their feelings, questions and reactions.

For some readers, *Petit-Âne* offers a point of identification and way of relieving emotions. It is not the only picturebook to address this kind of subject, however. Three more examples deserve attention. The first is a Dutch picturebook (references here are to the French translation) that explores the experiences and behaviour of the kind of child who might well develop suicidal thoughts. *Jules* (1996), by Gregie de Maeyer with illustrations by Koen Vanmechelen, features a character who is crudely made in the shape of a little boy from blocks of wood. He is tormented by his peers (who we never see) because of his appearance, beginning with his red hair.

To stop their teasing, he first cuts off his hair, then his big ears. Although he can no longer hear his abusers, he can still see them, so he takes out his eyes and so it goes on until nothing remains of him but a head without eyes, ears or tongue. Up to this point, nothing he does to himself eases his feelings of anger and self-loathing, and each time he attacks himself he looks more strange, provoking new bouts of bullying. Jules cuts, burns and violently mutilates himself to the point where he has virtually ceased to exist. He even places his legs on the railway track so that a train detaches them. Suicide would seem to be the logical next step.

Jules does not kill himself, although his tormentors attack him and pull him to bits. The book's powerful representation of what it feels like to be bullied shifts to a more optimistic, more didactic, register with the arrival of a little girl, who finds what remains of *Jules* and begins to care for him. She puts his head in her doll's pram, strokes him and draws a mouth on his blank face and inserts a pencil in it so that he can tell her his story. The last page sees him begin to write, but before he starts to explain how the others taunted him ('...un jour, on s'est moqué de moi'), Jules announces that he likes his name, likes his red hair, his red cheeks and all the things that previously had driven him to despair. This new self-acceptance and affirmation, a response to being shown – and recognising himself – as lovable, reassures readers that he will survive.

Not all children do survive, however, and the loss of a child is one reason why a parent may succumb to a period of depression. A rare picturebook that makes it possible for adults and children to share insights into what this is like is *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (2004). Michael Rosen has been writing and performing for children in the UK for many years – long enough for some of his first readers to be parents themselves. He has a large following, and because he is also an active broadcaster, is in the public eye more than most writers for children. Rosen uses his own childhood and his observations of family life with his children as the basis for much of his material. When one of his sons, Eddie, who had appeared as a young child in Rosen's books, but was by then a teenager, died without warning of meningitis, the loss was felt widely. Eventually Michael Rosen talked about his experience in a radio broadcast for adults and, with long-time collaborator, illustrator Quentin Blake, created *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*. Both the broadcast and the picture-book can be seen as ways of dealing with grief; they also provide generous insights that may help others understand their own emotions and reactions to bereavement or those of people around them.

The sombre front cover signals that this is not going to be one of Rosen's customarily zany and amusing books. It shows the usually exuberant Rosen as a grey figure walking under an enveloping grey cloud with Sid, a much-loved dog character from an early poem, also shown as grey. They are all contained within a frame, a controlling and distancing device that again is strikingly different from Rosen's usually expulsive energy and Blake's response to it. Solemn grey endpapers continue the mood, but the first page shows the familiar, smiling face of Michael Rosen in the yellow and red palette Blake often uses when illustrating Rosen's work, although Blake manages to capture a haunted sense behind the smile. The text reads:

This is me being sad.

Maybe you think I'm being happy in this picture.

Really I'm being sad but pretending I'm being happy.

I'm doing that because I think people won't like me if I look sad.

Over the next thirty pages readers go through the various emotions Michael Rosen explains he has at different times in response to Eddie's death, and get to see how he behaves in different situations. Simple sentences and descriptions reveal how at times the feeling of sadness is overwhelming and that this can make him behave in ways that are difficult for those around him (including the cat!). At points it seems that putting his feelings on the page is making it possible to manage them and remember more of the happy times: towards the end of the book, brightly coloured vignettes of Eddie in the school play, and the two of them playing football on the sofa lead to associations with other good memories and happy moments. But this honest book does not suggest that the act of writing has been an instant cure. The final image is of a haggard, grey, Michael Rosen writing by candlelight at his desk in front of a framed picture. Since the immediately preceding images have been of birthdays, it seems likely that this is what would have been Eddie's birthday, and he is feeling the loss as much as ever. It is a powerful image, and not an optimistic note on which to end, though by this point the reader understands that the sadness is not a permanent condition but swirls round to catch him more and less powerfully.

The insights Rosen and Blake offer in the *Sad Book* are clear enough to be understood by even very young readers – especially because the pictures show the moods so well. For children who are dealing with the sadness of an adult it offers insights into why they behave as they do and how hard it is to overcome feelings of desolation and despair. Readers of whatever age who have suffered from depression themselves will recognise its symptoms and the strategies Rosen uses to manage it – not least telling others about what

he is feeling and admitting that his fear of alienating people if he cannot manage his emotions.

All of the picture-books I have discussed so far have featured child characters or figures who represent them, and with the possible exception of *Petit-Âne*, each has ended on an optimistic note. Perhaps because its central character is an adult, and because Rosen is trying to explain the long-term effects of bereavement to the children to whom he performs and who ask him questions about the death of his son, *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* does not provide a happy or consolatory ending. By contrast, a child's depression is handled in an equally powerful way by Australian author-illustrator Saun Tan in *The Red Tree* (2001), but this book does hold out the promise that things will get better.

The Red Tree is visually stunning. Large, complex and eloquent images represent the feelings of fatigue, dislocation, inadequacy, inability to communicate, alienation, and purposelessness characteristic of depression. The first image, in place of a title page, shows a listless girl speaking through a megaphone, but all of the words are disintegrating and dribbling out of its bell as meaningless letters. The following page shows a weathered grandfather clock in a field. The hours are represented by leaves, eleven of them are dark, though the twelfth is a brilliant red. The body of the clock seems to be an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, and through the holes it is clear that insects have infested the works. Time – the way we measure our lives – is broken and rotten.

The story proper begins with a picture of the same girl in her bedroom. She sits in bed, eyes downcast, blind raised only a crack. Apart from her red hair and a framed image of a red leaf on the wall, the image is effectively in monochrome, combining pink and grey tones in a subtle way to give the impression of sameness. Dark (dead?) leaves are falling onto the bed, floor and surfaces. The text reads 'sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to' and is followed by images of the girl in a diving helmet trapped in a glass bottle, walking in a city like 'a deaf machine', marking off time on the back of a snail and other equally effective ways of representing the many bleak moods of depression. Yet the alert reader will soon spot that the little red leaf from the first page accompanies her somewhere in each of the surreal, confusing images. When she has struggled through the day (which has felt like an eternity) and returns to her room, she finds that the leaf has taken root in her floor, 'bright and vivid and quietly waiting.' The final page-turn shows the room filled with a beautiful red tree that is 'just as you imagined it would be'; the girl stands smiling beneath it.

The minimal text works with the images to convey powerful feelings. Little is verbalised, but together the words and images convey a state of mind and, without a preachy or false sense of hope, reassurance that things change and in time will get better. The tiny leaf works in an unsentimental way to symbolize hope, survival, creativity, and the ability to nurture the resources necessary to make change possible. *The Red Tree* is a sophisticated response to depression that uses the picturebook as an art form to great effect. Much of its strength comes from the counterpoint between the eloquent, detailed and complex visual images and the economical use of text.

Children's literature is one way through which children and young people receive stories about how the world works and ways of thinking about themselves and the things they do. Texts such as these can provide new narrative strands that for some will simply be interesting, but for others may offer alternative versions of the stories they are telling themselves about themselves. In this way, children's fiction – even for very young readers – may prove a valuable antidote to the current conditions that lead young people to harm themselves and so become a force for positive transformations in young people's lives.

1. Johnston, Nick. 'Blue Notes' in *The Guardian*, 8 June, 2004.
2. Goodchild, 2006 – full details to follow.

3. *Derrien, Marie*. 'In Search of the Future of the Book: Exploring French Picturebooks'. Unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Surrey, Roehampton (now Roehampton University), 2004.

ЗОБРАЖЕННЯ РОЗПАЧУ: СУЧАСНІ РОЗПОВІДІ ДЛЯ МОЛОДІ ПРО СМЕРТЬ, ДЕПРЕСІЮ ТА ЗАПОДІЯНУ СОБІ ШКОДУ

Кімберлі Рейнольдз

Документально підтверджено, що останнім часом у Великій Британії загрозливо зростає кількість дітей і молоді, які завдають собі тілесних ушкоджень та роблять спроби самогубства. У статті розглянуто можливість використання дитячих книжок з малюнками, щоб діти, ототожнюючись із персонажами, краще розуміли емоції, які можуть викликати такі дії (свої чи інших людей). Проаналізовано дитячі ілюстровані книжки з Британії та Європи, в яких показано дитячі самогубства і навмисні тілесні травми, а також дорослих та дітей у стані депресії. Такі теми не традиційні для дитячих книжок, бо вважаються потенційно шкідливими і здатними викликати наслідування. Однак кожен четвертий мешканець Сполученого Королівства у певний момент свого життя має розумові/психічні розлади, тому художня література має показати дітям, з чим вони можуть зустрітись у житті. Проведений аналіз показує як дитячі ілюстровані книжки за допомогою образів, ритму та звуків можуть передавати емоційний стан. Також розглянуто такі засоби передачі змісту як антропоморфізм і гра, що одночасно маскують справжню суть потенційно загрозливих ідей та образів.

Ключові слова: завдання собі шкоди; депресія; дитячі книжки з малюнками; психічна хвороба.