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Newsletter Guidelines

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The effects of stress in early childhood: society's view as reflected in Australian children's literature

Abandoned children finding their sense of self and independence alone in the face of adversity

Kim Warner

Psychotherapist in private practice

Abstract

Children's literature provides an important resource for analysing society's pervasive ideas about childhood and parenting. It represents adult constructions of familial characters and interrelations. Adults write, award and purchase books that they think will provide something that is good for children to read, either because the novels reflect what they think family life is, or what they think it should or could be.

A brief exploration of a range of the typical genres of Australian children's literature from the last century reveals the outstanding feature of abandonment of children by parents in the stories, through being lost, bereaved, sent away, neglected or abused. In this abandonment the child protagonists must somehow find the inner resources which allow them to survive and in doing so find their identity. The narrative ends with this defensive identity frozen in time – an assumed resource to solve the problem in a future only to be imagined. The irony is that the next generation of books plays out the same problem in a different genre.

This paper seeks to explain this view of society, where children develop alone, outside of a meaningful and nurturing parental relationship. In addition, to examine the implications of it being counter to the knowledge gained from psychoanalysis and developmental studies, which testify that it is abandonment that causes frozen futures – frozen in the sense that there is no emotional growth. We know that the likely outcome for these abandoned child protagonists is that they will become the next generation of abandoning parents.

Background

If you were to look through some of the classic and successful titles of Australian children's literature from the last 100 or so years, you would be surprised and alarmed to discover that the child protagonist is more than likely to be missing something. Often it is a mother, or maybe a father, sometimes it is both. For example, in the classics, such as in *Seven Little Australians* (Turner 1894), the mum is dead and dad is preoccupied with himself and in *A Little Bush Maid* (Grant Bruce 1911), mum is dead and dad is busy. An example from the bush-as-haven story is *The Nargun and The Stars* (Wrightson 1973), in which both parents die in a car crash. If it is not a literal absence due to death or desertion, then it is an absence of parental love and attention. Contemporary novels abound with emotionally unavailable parents, for example *Fox Spell* by Gillian Rubinstein (1994), which is a realist/fantasy novel; dad has left the family to go overseas, while mum is a self-

centred stand-up comedian. In *Deadly Unna* (Gwynne 1998), a realist drama, dad is alcoholic, violent and mostly absent, while mum is also unavailable as she is overworked with eight children and retreats into Mills and Boon romances.

Foster, Finnis and Nimon (1995) have identified the major themes and genres of Australian literature and Niall (1984) has compiled a comprehensive refinement of genres. The list is too numerous to outline; however, the recurrent abandonment of the child protagonist in all genres as a feature of the story is startling. Children are lost, bereaved, deserted, sent away, neglected or abused.

The other disturbing part to this theme is that child protagonists abandoned in the face of adversity are forced to draw on their inner resources and in the act of doing so find a sense of self and independence to survive and strive ahead. It is the aim of this paper to examine this theme critically in relation to society's pervasive ideas about childhood and parenting, and to comment on the irony that this theme of abandonment is not resolved, but is re-enacted time and time again in the literature. It will be argued from a relational psychoanalytic and developmental theory perspective that these fictional characters, instead of developing a lasting sense of self, would in reality move towards frozen futures, that they would develop a fragile, brittle sense of self that is emotionally immature and incapable of close relationships. In fact they become the next generation of abandoning parents.

Why we should be concerned

So why should be we concerned about children's literature? Children's books are shaped by the authors' attitudes to prevailing conditions of the culture and children. Authors can condone or challenge such views. One of the functions of stories for children is that they teach children to conform to society's expectations of appropriate behaviour and, through the stories, children learn about society's values and ideas. So the books in turn shape and influence society's view of what it is to be a child, and adults' wishes, fears and hopes about children. Clare Bradford (2001:3) states, "the books themselves tell us much more [than just a story]. In the ways in which they address child readers, in the language through which they position children to prefer one character to another, and to approve certain behaviours but not others, in what they say and do not say, children's books yield up the ideologies which inform them."

That fact that children's literature is often viewed as innocent and unproblematic means these powerful ideological messages can be internalised by child and parent readers free of critical scrutiny.

The implications of the proliferation of stories where children not only survive but strive ahead, is the perpetuation of an ideology in the society that sends a clear message to parents and children who read them, that is, children are to be responsible for themselves. It is the Australian view of "she'll be right mate" and "you have just got to get on with it" restated for children. Note these stories operate like screen memories where the abandonment is emblematic of earlier infantile experience, which has no evocative memory associated with it, but instead leaves powerful procedural memories, that need narrative explanations. The ideology of this view suggests a general denial of the emotional developmental process that each and every child goes through. There is a denial that this emotional development takes place in relation to an empathically responsive human who is a constant presence, someone who helps the infant to regulate its feelings by recognising and reflecting back to the baby its feelings, in a processed and thoughtful way. There is a denial of the idea that psychopathology is an outcome of failures in this relationship, when the caregiver cannot reflect back to the child what it is feeling but something else. The infant takes in the mismatched affect as an aspect of the self that is wrong. Fonagy and others in *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of Self* (2002:11), calls it an alien self. This directly affects the infant's ability to regulate affect and interferes with their capacity for reflective functioning, which Fonagy says refers to the operation of mental capacities that generate mentalization (2002:3) and the ability to think about one's self and others in the world. This lack of empathy and the prevalence of psychopathologies that are of great concern to our society lead me to think that we should notice the reflection of these phenomena in our children's stories.

Some of the most striking examples of this defensive ideology in Australian children's literature are found in the realist survival genre of the 1960s and 70s. Niall (1984:231) states "it is as though the most talented Australian authors competed with one another in devising appalling situations" for the child protagonists to come up against on their own or in groups.

Climb a Lonely Hill by Lilith Norman (1970) features two child protagonists. Jack and his younger sister Sue suffer from a number of abandonments: the early death of their mother, the abuse and neglect by their hopeless long-term alcoholic father, the endless succession of his short-term girlfriends, an absence of friends, and the traumatic and violent death of their uncle in a car crash, the only relative to show any interest in them. This leaves them lost in the bush with little food and water as

well as no clear way to proceed.

In the face of such of such an onslaught of abandonment, it is not surprising that the author not only denies the trauma of such specific loss but also defensively transforms the abandonment into a generic attribute that all children desire. The narrator (Norman 1970:82-3) states, "To be responsible for their own survival, without adults, and without help, was part of the universal dream of childhood."

This survival fiction that was so popular saw Australia as a harsh, alien, interminable environment, a place that wants to take life. This is in contrast to the less popular genre, which saw the country as paradise and a haven that gives and sustains life. This paradoxical duality of possibilities recalls the position of the child in relation to the mother. But the fiction where bush represented purgatory was more popular and children took in messages of what it was that they had to do to survive if and when they were abandoned.

A passage near the end of the novel when Jack realises that they have survived is even more interesting and problematic.

"… we'll be back soon to look after him." He heard his own words with amazement, yet he knew they were true.

Suddenly he understood that he and Sue were the strong ones: they would go on surviving, no matter how long it took. … They had fought the odds and survived – it was Dad who was weak and sick and defeated.

(Norman 1970:189)

Here the message is that children will care for their parents but we know from case studies of children of addicts who care for their parents, that when it comes time to care for their own children, the deficit of never having been cared for themselves results in severe difficulties in their ability to parent.

Literary critics Foster, Finnis and Nimon (1995:83) collude with this myth. In explaining the popularity of the survival genre, they say,

… probably because the end result justified the means, that is, the emergence of decent, better adjusted little Australian citizens from the traumatic experience of surviving in the bush is an outcome worth achieving, despite the cost."

You will be staggered to hear that the cost is explained as perpetuating a feeling of ambivalence about the environment rather than a oneness. Given that the relevant critical theory is bereft of knowledge from psychoanalysis and developmental fields, it could be assumed that they really do not understand the cost.

Just as in *Climb a Lonely Hill* (1970) where the trauma of the home environment is displaced into the bush, where the children can have some agency, it seems that critics of Australian children's literature have displaced the trauma in the fictional family to the site of society, about which they are most knowledgeable, and where they feel they have some agency. Thus society is seen as the source of all problems and childhood is only a product of that society's ideology. This is a conclusion linked to the historian Aries, who argued that the notion of childhood was an invention that was developed after the Middle Ages. Nicky Gamble (2001:3) in her introduction to the book, *Family Fiction,* notes that although this Arieian view has been "refined, the understanding that the family is a dynamic construct rather than a stable form of social organisation remains intact."

I propose that this ideology, which colludes with the denial of abandonment in the literature and focuses solely on the society, explains the continuation of this literature and to some extent the abandonment that it reflects in our society. This is because this view denies the existence of underlying stable biological structures in humans, which dictates how an individual will develop in relation to another. Solms and Turnbull (2002) and other neurologists, who are doing such exciting work, are really beginning to map these structures and processes that constitute what happens with development of self and what happens when this development is impeded. So I would argue that childhood in all its different forms is a given condition of humanity, that processes of development of self or psychopathology continue whether a society is aware of it or not.

Now I want to explore possible origins of this denial of abandonment in our children's literature. Ethel Turner's (1894) *Seven Little Australians* is a nationalistic, realist novel that was popular in the first four decades of the 20th Century. While it is widely agreed by the critics that Ethel Turner was writing against the tradition of didactic and moralising children's books, we can also view it as a rejection of mothering and as denying the pain of the resultant abandonment suffered by her seven child characters. It must be noted that Turner seems to have doubts about this position of rejecting the mother.

These doubts are suggested by the different views she presents in the book. On the one hand, Turner (1894:2) opens the book with the view that, "Not one of the seven is really good, for the excellent reason that Australian children never are." She ventures a reason: "It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children's spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadow of long years' sorrowful history." She is of course referring to Britain. On the other hand, the

paradoxical view is revealed (1894:149) in Mr Gillet's introduction to a second-hand aboriginal myth. He relates to the children the line "…when their [the aborigine Tettawonga's ancestors] worst nightmare had never shown them so evil a time as the white man would bring their race…". The introduction is melodramatic and Pip, the eldest boy, interrupts impatiently and tells him to "Oh, get on!" so that the statement is minimised and not to be dwelt on by readers. However, Clare Bradford (2001:5) states it does show that Turner was aware of "the illegitimacy of the colony's beginnings and its sorrowful history of displacement and death."

I would venture that Ethel Turner did not only want to deny the shadow of history on race relations, but also on the history of those who came to colonise. Just as the mother can facilitate growth of her child or not, depending on her own experience, so too a government can hold its people by being aware of their needs and distributing its resources. The government has the mothers' great power to enrich or destroy the lives of its people. Many of those who peopled the colony were discarded by Mother England; they lost their family and they were powerless over their circumstances. We can imagine that those who did not have the benefit of an enriching early experience would have in place the defensive mechanisms that we see today, denial, displacement and acting out on those in a position of powerlessness. If not, they would not have had such disastrous race relations. These people needed to deny the abandonment to survive; they had to make the best of it.

Turner's (1994) novel has obliterated the role of mother, the mother is dead and the stepmother is ineffectual, thereby allowing her fictional children to be unfettered and uncrushed. This seems to be a reaction to the historical loss of mother England suffered by all in Australia who had been transported or migrated from that place – a defensive statement: well if we cannot have her, we do not want her and anyway we are better off without her.

Again, this view is doubted by the paradox that the most clever and mischievous main character, Judy, is literally crushed to death by a falling gum tree. This suggests some level of awareness of the consequence of her idealised, unfettered child, that she lacks motherly containment and protection. Also it can be noted that Judy becomes a child sacrificed to the bush, and provides a safe focus for the nation's grief over the loss of childhood. They cannot cry for themselves but they become preoccupied by the idea of a lost child. Peter Pierce (1999) has written a book on the subject.

The paradoxes in Turner's novel seem to be indicative of the origins of this phenomena, the denial of the pain of abandonment in Australian children's literature, as belonging to all the traumatic consequences of transportation and immigration of those who came originally, and those who continue to come from the various countries of the world.

Conclusion

These examples have briefly demonstrated that these parts of Australian literature work not only to naturalise the trauma of abandonment but also to make a virtue of it. Thus the problems of society, which result from impoverished emotional functioning in adults, are not associated with this early abandonment. Like the critics who want to believe the sense of self does not depend on parental care and containment, parents also condone and perhaps find relief in the message that children will care for themselves and be better for it.

The adults who take in this message without question can be hard to convince to be mindful that children need more. This has direct implications for those who advocate early intervention in the family as they are up against these entrenched ideologies that are so powerful in children's literature, and which are the antithesis of what they are advocating.

Knowing about the irony that what the books celebrate is opposite to what we know children need, pointing to this inconsistency, this denial, actually confronting the layers of denial in our society, is what is necessary. As people working with families, we have to be aware of society's attitudes because we treat people in a society.

The humanities in the universities need to know about the developmental process to allow them to fully comprehend and understand the complexities and paradoxes of human behaviour, which they struggle to understand within the limited tools of post-structuralist and feminist theory. So although this message in children's books is essentially Australian and directly related to the historical trauma, its implications are universal. If we are to heal our massive problems of individuals and relationships we need to confront the reality of children's futures frozen by neglect, abuse and abandonment.

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Conference Report

World Association for Infant Mental Health

9th World Congress, Melbourne

January 2004

Over the past 15 years I have worked in a variety of capacities as a Maternal and Child Health Nurse working with families, and am a relative newcomer to the field of Infant Mental Health. At the insistence of a treasured friend, I attended the 9th WAIMH Congress in Melbourne, not really knowing what to expect.

The worldwide expertise brought together in the Congress was overwhelming. Works and papers of a small number of the presenters I had read, but the breadth of knowledge and passion I had never experienced.

The Congress provided the "missing part" of my professional puzzle, in that the presented theory and research linked my academic/theoretical base to my experience, observations and intuition. The information I absorbed has enabled me to formalise my observations and extend upon them when working with/beside families. The vast knowledge pool and information exchange was inspiring, leaving me with a heightened sense of awareness and desire to know more. Also I gained a true sense of hope. I feel I am professionally 'heading in the right direction' now - at last.

Thank you to the organisers for the coordination and facilitation of such an inspiring event and I look forward to developing my knowledge in this critical area, before I get my next dose of WAIHM expertise in Paris.

Thanks to the World Association for Infant Mental Health 9th World Congress, my clinical focus has shifted and I can see more clearly 'the baby's place in the world'.

Helen Stevens

State News Update

NSW

It's been calm sailing for the NSW committee with our recent AGM held on 15 July 2004. The committee is a strong 16 with me still at the helm. Our clinical evenings have been becalmed due to a busy calendar for our committee members, however we hope to see a fairly stimulating second half of the year. Sarah Murphy is flying up from Victoria to extend our deep-seated ideas around the roots of child analytical and psychodynamic/ psychoanalysis theory.

We are planning a one-day forum for the early childhood teachers and carers working with Learning Links. This will be a big step in crossing the psychodynamic-clinical practice divide. The theme will be on the attachment approach to working with young children and families within the centre based care context.

We are continuing our support toward the Summit to be held in Bourke this October that will address the issues that create concern for early childhood services in rural and remote Western NSW.

I would encourage any members from other states to embrace a focus on the values of strong connections with early childhood professionals, as it is these people who provide care and encourage Infant Mental Health awareness.

Victor Evatt

Victoria

The momentum of inspiration and interest from the World Congress has continued and been fostered in our monthly general meetings, which have included lively presentations:

- Tess Kingsley presented their current working model from the Southern Mother Baby Unit.
- Michele Meehan, Clinical Nurse Consultant, Maternal and Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, presented a case discussion on 'Infant feeding refusal in Vietnamese clients'.
- Dr Jan Smith, psychotherapist and Head of Child Psychology at Southern Health, presented the PEARS program.
- Kerry Judd, clinical psychologist from the Parent-Infant Unit of Albert Road Clinic, presented 'Playing with babies: what do we think we are doing? Theoretical musings: potential space around Winnicott, affect regulation and symbolism'.

We have arranged to coincide the Victorian branch AGM with the national AGM on 25 August 2004, at which we look forward to consolidating and reflecting on what has been a very big year and planning for further growth.

Jennifer Jackson

Queensland

The main focus for Queensland currently is next year's national conference. We have our upcoming state AGM for which we will have an invited speaker. Otherwise there has been much work already happening related to next year's conference. For the next newsletter, I will report in more detail on any Queensland events and provide more information about next year's conference.

See you all next year in Brisbane.

Michael Daubney

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Western Australia

The Annual General Meeting of the WA-AAIMH was held on the 16th May 2004 and a new committee elected. This followed many months of hard work by the working party to make the necessary changes to our constitution, undertake a financial and member audit, and rebuild the branch through a number of well attended seminars. All of the working party members are now on the committee. The committee membership comprises:

- Trish Sullivan - Chairperson
- Joanne MacDonald - Vice Chairperson
- Dr Lynda Chadwick - Treasurer
- Ms Trish Wells - Secretary, membership
- Ms Anne Clifford - Secretary, minutes and correspondence
- Dr Cathy Nottage - Committee member
- Ms Shanette Simms - Committee member
- Ms Sue Coleson - Committee member
- Dr Caroline Zanetti - Committee member

People wanting to join the WA chapter, or update their membership, can contact us on telephone (08) 9382 6828, or mail PO Box 1886 SUBIACO WA 6904

Presentations

There have been three presentations over the past few months:

Bridget Boultwood's seminar on *Trauma and attachment: the impact of domestic violence on preschool children*. Bridget presented her doctoral research that explored the experience of the child in terms of the child's attachment relationship to the mother as well as the child's behavioural, emotional and developmental functioning. Research findings in terms of their implications for the development of appropriate interventions with young children who have been exposed to domestic violence were discussed.

Robin Jones: *Maternal depression from an attachment perspective: some clinical implications.* Maternal depressive disorder was found to be associated with 'insecure' attachment patterns in Robin's research undertaken for her doctoral dissertation at Murdoch University, Western Australia. Mothers with antenatal depression showed more 'dismissive' attachment styles in contrast to 'pre-occupied' attachment styles found more in postnatally depressed mothers. Robin discussed these findings as they relate to questions of treatment intervention.

Dr Helen Milroy and Ms Jill Milroy: *Black Milk.* Jill Milroy provided a conceptual overview of the place of children in Aboriginal society and the subsequent trauma and displacement following colonisation as well as the idea of Australia having a 'black' mother. Jill is Head of the School of Indigenous Studies at UWA. Jill has worked in education for many years and has a special interest in Aboriginal history and its ongoing legacy. She has assisted in the training of psychiatric registrars in indigenous mental health and in developing curriculum for many other programs. Helen Milroy looked at some of the contemporary issues of Aboriginal mothers and infants in Australia from a broad-based perspective, raising issues for service provision and outcomes. Helen is the Director for the Centre for Aboriginal Medical and Dental Health at UWA. She is a Child and Adolescent psychiatrist and a research fellow with the Telethon ICHR. Helen's research interests include childhood trauma, holistic medicine and developing the Aboriginal medical workforce.

The next seminar will be held on the 25th August where there will be a video presentation, *When the Bough Breaks,* followed by panel discussion. The video is a documentary of the "Wait, Watch and Wonder" program and its application to three families and their infants' sleep and feeding issues.

Seminars are held bi-monthly and members are encouraged to contact committee members with suggestions for future seminars.

Trish Sullivan

South Australia

The South Australian branch has held a meeting in conjunction with Early Childhood Australia, at which Beth McGregor and Anni Gethin presented a seminar on controlled crying that was very well received. They have developed the Controlled Crying Position Paper into a well-presented document.

Mary Hood, who attended the STEEP training given by Marti Erickson in Sydney in January, will be presenting at the next general meeting in July. Mary is also training the Child and Youth Health staff involved in the home visiting program in using this model in the program.

The SA branch is hosting a public meeting at the Child and Youth Health Parenting Conference on 6-8 September this year, presented by Meredith Small on her work on the impact of culture on parenting. Meredith wrote the book, 'Our Babies, Ourselves'. For more information about the conference check the website *www.cyh.com*.

We are pleased to have Anita McPherson return to the branch after an overseas working 'holiday'.

Pam Linke
Branch President

Events Diary

Parenting Imperatives

A National Parenting Conference

New perspectives, new directions, new connections

Adelaide Convention Centre
North Terrace, Adelaide
6-8 September 2004

Recent research and the National Agenda for Children highlight the importance of parenting. This conference is the primary national forum for those in this field and will provide special opportunities for attendees to connect with each other and share ideas and practice. The conference is for people who provide support and education to parents and for professionals who care for children.

Child and Youth Health in partnership with the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia welcomes you to hear international and national parenting leaders and researchers, to make connections and share your expertise.

Speakers engaged so far –

James Garbarino

Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, doctorate in human development and family studies. His current research focuses on the impact of family and community violence and trauma on child development and interventions to deal with these effects.

Pilar Bacar

Pilar has worked with Professor David Olds and colleagues at the University of Colorado on the research and development of the Nurse-Family Partnership, a home visitation program for high-risk, first-time mothers. She is co-author, with Jo Ann Robinson, of the home visitation strategies for Partners in Parenting Education, an experiential and interactive curriculum that fosters attachment, self-regulation and emotional development for infants, toddlers and their caregivers.

Meredith Small

Professor of Anthropology, Cornell University, who works in the field of ethno-paediatrics – the study of parents, children and child rearing across cultures. Professor Small asserts that our ideas about how we raise our children are culturally more than biologically or individually determined so that parenting styles are not "right" or "wrong" but appropriate or inappropriate for the culture the parents live in. Her insights are particularly relevant to parenting in a multicultural society.

Conference Secretariat contact details

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National Parenting Conference

Centre for Parenting

Child and Youth Health

295 South Terrace

Adelaide SA 5000

Australia

Every effort has been made to make this conference relevant, accessible and affordable. The early bird cost for the 3-day conference (until 30 June 04) is $350 with an in-depth workshop on Sunday 7 September with Professor Garbarino for $110.