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# Still Catching Them Young? The Moral Dimension in Young Children's Books

Morality and children's literature are not easy bedfellows. Maybe it is appropriate to discuss the moral dimension in contemporary adolescent novels, since they deal increasingly with parental divorce, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, and problems of this kind. But in the case of books for young children, wasn't the battle between the moral tale and the imaginative freedom of fantasy waged and won long ago, so that now we properly regard them as a locus of play and delight rather than of moralising?

There is, however, a difference between moralising on the one hand and moral structure, development, and education on the other. I would argue that, although the moral tale and overt moralising are rightly a thing of the past, in books for children of all ages the moral dimension continues to be of importance and should not be neglected. Goodies and baddies, doing right and doing wrong, being treated well and being treated badly, are fundamental to these texts. And children's experience of reading their first books provides for them as significant an early learning experience in the moral as in any other domain of human knowledge and feeling.

My purpose therefore is to make clear this fundamental dimension, by describing the moral structuring of representative texts and by indicating the kinds of moral engagement they invite from their young readers. I use the term *structure*, since I want to direct attention not so much to the issues that are treated as to how moral assertions are made in the structuring of texts. For this, I shall discuss



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half a dozen, mainly recent, picture books. I shall venture further, into the problem area of how children engage with such texts, in part because the moral dimension cannot adequately be described merely by the static delineation of ideas in texts, and in part because developmental psychology is now substantially enough advanced to afford some indications of what may be expected of children in the moral domain—and thus of their moral engagement with the books they read. For a critical perspective on this engagement I shall use the work of Lawrence Kohlberg.[1]

Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education" and "Moral Stages and Moralization"

## A Moral Dichotomy

Fairy tales have a dual moral structure: that deriving from their archaic past and that constructed by their contemporary adapters. The former, with its clear opposition of good and bad and the final triumph of good, is a universal feature; the latter, a more particular matter for each generation. So strong is the traditional moral logic of the fairy tale, however, that it makes its presence felt in every kind of adaptation.

Rita Story, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*

It can, indeed, keep oldfashioned moralising startlingly alive in a contemporary text. Rita Story's 1990 retelling of *Goldilocks* proceeds unexceptionably, until, as the child tiptoes inquisitively into the strange house, the narrator informs readers in no uncertain terms: "Now Goldilocks was a very naughty girl," and, as she takes a tentative taste of the porridge, "Being greedy as well as naughty . . ." Nothing is left to chance at the conclusion of the story: "Never again did naughty Goldilocks pry into strangers' houses . . . uninvited."

What a barrage of didacticism! At the end of the narrative, poor Goldilocks remains "naughty," her childish inquisitiveness becomes "prying," and the last word reduces realistic prudence to a kind of social fastidiousness!

Tony Ross, *Jack the Giantkiller*

Lest it be thought that this is just a feature of run-of-the-mill versions, even Tony Ross, creator of striking children's books, is, in his own way, affected by the powerful moral logic of the fairy tale. In his *Jack the Giantkiller*, he feels obliged to append to the retelling a moralistic coda: "Really Jack stole nothing . . ."! The contorted justification for Jack's thieving is entirely gratuitous. In the convention of the genre, giants are baddies, so there is no need to explain why they should be robbed and slaughtered. Earlier in the narrative, however, Ross has characteristically intruded a vein of ironic burlesque for older, knowing readers of his version: The giant's terrifying attributes include, as the last item, "bad breath"! In ways like this, the conventional stereotype is modified; this giant is no longer the unquestioned

baddie, he has his endearing weaknesses. When the traditional moral structure is modified, however, such is the strength of the moral logic of the fairy tale that checks and balances immediately come into operation; if we now have a humanised giant, we must have him treated humanely—or know the reason why. Hence the moralising in the coda.

Anthony Kerins, *Lost*

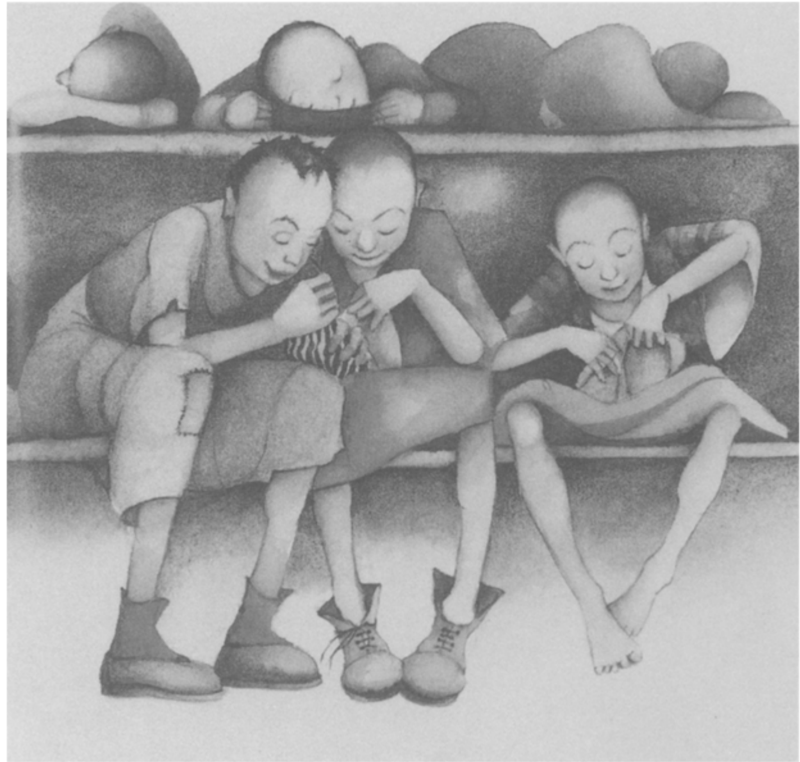
With contemporary realist texts, we enter a profoundly different moral world from that of the fairy tale. In Anthony Kerins's *Lost*, another little Goldilocks wanders off along the beach, experiences a dawning anxiety, and is finally recovered by an anxious grandma. The narrative describes what occurs and how the child feels; there appears to be no moral content. This becomes remarkable when the story is set against *Red Riding Hood* or other traditional wandering tales, in which, one way or another, the strays get wolfed up. They meet their fates, culpable or not, as a consequence of the fault of straying. But there is no hint of retribution, not even chastisement or berating, in Kerins's narrative, instead, there is simply mutual anxiety and mutual affection. This is in part a transformation of the moral into the psychological, but it betokens nevertheless also a new and quite different moral structure: nonjudmental, altruistic concern.

Margaret Wild, *Let the Celebration Begin!*

A second and most unusual realist text is Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas's *Let the Celebration Begin!* It is an account of the last days in the Belsen concentration camp, which disturbingly challenges our assumption that such a story cannot be told to young children.

The action takes place in the anticipation of release: "We are planning a party, a very special party, the women and I . . ." In the text, there are some flashbacks to prewar life, but the narrative focuses on toy making, for the children who have never had such things, from tiny scraps of material that can be scrounged together in the camp. The nightmare horrors of sadistic guards, gas chambers, and the rest are omitted; the gentle pastel drawings of gawky, shaven women contrive not to frighten; and the tone of the whole blends pathos with hope. This radical adaptation of a story of Belsen represents presumably what is judged appropriate for children. No longer for baddies the retributive torments of hell; wickedness is completely displaced by a celebration of the virtues of humankindness, which can flourish even in such an unpropitious environment.

These books for young children thus present a startling dichotomy: on the one hand, fairy tales which, either directly or in humorous and ironic modes, continue the tradition of moral retribution, and on the other hand, realist texts, from which any such nonhumanistic sentiments have been thoroughly bleached out.



"We are cutting and sewing. . ." Illustration by Julie Vivas from Margaret Wild, *Let the Celebration Begin*, published by The Bodley Head.

## A Critical Perspective

For older, knowing readers—publishers, reviewers, teachers, book-buying parents, the gatekeepers of young children's reading—these higher morality narratives may be ideologically acceptable. What kind of moral engagement, however, do they offer to young readers? Some of the feelings described—anxiety at getting lost, the comfort of the motherly presence, the pleasure at a party—are within the young child's range of experience. It is questionable, however, whether the narratives offer them significant opportunity for moral engagement.

Lawrence Kohlberg[2] sees the child's early "preconventional" moral judgments, first, as based on a fear of retributive punishment which can be inflicted by powerful superiors, and then, as an instrumental accommodation to avoid recrimination and to achieve one's ends. (If Peter Rabbit asked himself, "Ought I go into Mr. McGregor's garden?" at Kohlberg's first stage, the moral disincentive would be simply that,

like his father, he would have an accident there! And at Kohlberg's second stage, that he'd better not show tail or teeth in McGregor's vegetable patch if he didn't want the old man round the burrow with his ferrets.) Following these first two stages, there is a "conventional" level of morality based on the feeling of solidarity, first with one's own and then with a broader community. (Again, assuming that rabbit moral development is like that of humans: What would his mother think of him? What would happen if everyone started squeezing under everyone else's garden gate?) Only after these further stages do some, later in life, reach a "principled" level, in which universal altruism figures.

Reading children's books in the light of this developmental perspective, it is clear why fairy tales make so much sense to the young. They embody a rough-and-ready morality, not very congenial to humanistic adults—of any persuasion—but entirely meaningful to young children. Equally, the comparatively slow development of children's moral reasoning means that—congenial though they may be to adults—texts where altruism invites more mature moral response may well be operating at a level of sophistication mysterious to young children. They may get all kinds of things out of such stories, but they are unlikely to be significantly engaged morally.

### Three Structural Imperatives

It seems that, if texts are to touch young children morally, they must, like fairy tales, acknowledge our first retributive and prudential morality: a conservative imperative. Equally, however, if they are to encourage development to more mature moral judgment, they must be appropriately structured to facilitate this development: a progressive imperative. To complicate matters in this prescription, it must also be remembered that the second, adult readership, as providers of children's books, have a strong interest in inducting the young into their own moral world and must in practice also be taken account of. So, to the two imperatives deriving from the logic of psychological development must also be added a third, deriving from the politics and economics of book buying. Texts likely to be acceptable to both children and adults and valuable in helping children's moral growth must, therefore, take account of these imperatives and work at a number of levels.

But who is equal to these things? I shall take two picture books—one appealing to older and one to younger children, one recent and the other tested by many child readers—to exemplify texts which go a good way toward meeting these criteria.

Margaret Mahy, *The Great White Man-Eating Shark*

Margaret Mahy's *The Great White Man-Eating Shark* concerns a sharkish-looking Australian boy who capitalises on his talents by pretending to be a shark and frightening all the locals out of the water so that he can have the bay to himself. Norvin gets his comeuppance when the skill of his imitation attracts the amorous attentions of a female shark. He is not eaten, but for the rest of the summer, he has to watch his neighbours enjoying the water while he stays out.

The narrative is a morally powerful one. It contains a nice poetic justice for a stereotypical baddie and a form of punishment which doubtless touches its readers nearly. There is a danger that this might trap young readers into no more than retributive judgments about Norvin and his fate; it is, however, modified in two important ways. In the first place, stress is laid on relationships with neighbours. They figure importantly, in both pictorial and verbal narrative, as they are first upset and then settle down again in their bay. Norvin has to learn to come to terms with their interests and rights, and in sensing this, the young reader is nudged on from Kohlberg's "stage one" (retribution, in the shape of the amorous female: "Marry me at once or I shall lose my temper and bite you") to "stage two" (coming to terms with his neighbours in Caramel Cove). In the second place, Norvin's success and fall are treated, in Jonathan Allen's pictures, as knockabout comedy and, by the narrator, with wry humour. She comments on the figure in the deckchair on the final page, still drawn to the sea, but well back from it: "And I think he was very wise not to take any chances."

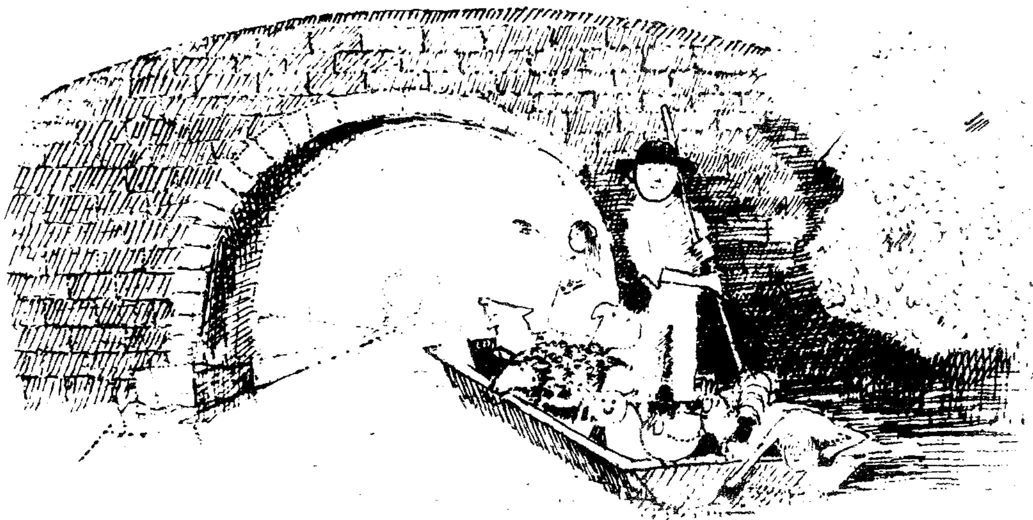
The comic and fantastic modes of a text like this take young readers beyond the closed confines of the realist text, to sense, if not yet understand, a larger world of adult value and judgment.

John Burningham, *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*

John Burningham's *Mr. Gumpy's Outing* is a deceptively simple text. Mr. Gumpy takes his boat out on the river and gives children and animals a "ride"—on condition that they behave themselves. But they don't! On the climactic page, all the conditions are broken (the long cumulative list represents the seriousness of the moment):

> The chickens flapped,
> The sheep bleated,
> The pig mucked about . . .

And the boat capsizes. Interestingly, not only is there no gratuitous intrusion of the narrator at this point, but Mr. Gumpy, who has grounds to complain, doesn't utter a word. He just tells children and animals that they will have to walk home over the fields. He invites them to tea and finally offers, "Come for a ride another day."



"Can you make room for me?" from John Burningham, *Mr Gumpy's Outing*, published by Jonathan Cape.

Unobtrusively, the story comprehends a number of moral levels. There is straightforward retributive punishment: You break the rules, so (Nature sees to it that) the boat capsizes. There is instrumental accommodation: We are all in the same boat, so don't rock it! There is also humanistic altruism, coded in a symbolism open to a Christian reading. For young readers, the story provides significant moral purchase: the capsizing (Kohlberg's "stage one") and the notion that, if you are going to enjoy your treat in the boat, you must come to terms with the boatman and with the other passengers (Kohlberg's "stage two"). Both of these stages are comprehended within a larger context. The patterned narrative, the gentle and impressionistic illustrations, and, perhaps most significantly, the use of symbols like journey, fall and reinstatement, wise old man, and common meal serve to open up a larger context of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value.

Both Margaret Mahy's and John Burningham's texts thus encompass a number of levels. They contrive not only to acknowledge our first, fundamental morality, but also, through their use of various narrative modes, figures, and other devices, to keep open the way to larger worlds and maturer judgments. Texts structured in these ways have the prospect of speaking meaningfully to both children and adults in the moral domain, and, even more important, of helping children in their moral growth.

## Notes

*Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child*

1. I use Lawrence Kohlberg's work, since it represents one of the most strongly theorised and empirically tested developments in the Piagetian tradition. There has been debate about Kohlberg's description of higher levels of morality and about consistency in progression, but the "preconventional" level, which concerns us here, remains comparatively uncontentious among theorists. Kohlberg's work is particularily useful to those who read and talk with children; it not only provides an instrument for analysing moral judgments but is also matched by a practical pedagogical strategy. He advocates discussion of situations and issues with consistent reference to moral judgments a stage higher than those which constitute the majority use—in order to nudge participants into this new way of thinking. The moral discourse of fictional texts can obviously play a significant part in such a process.
2. Kohlberg's theory is of an invariant sequence of levels and stages, through which human beings' views about what is right and their reasons for doing right mature. Each of the three levels, "preconventional," "conventional," and "principled," includes two stages. While minimum ages are identified for the attainment of each stage, these stages are not age-specific, and progression is normally a good deal slower in the moral than in the other cognitive domains.

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