

Perspectives on the New Realism in Children's Literature

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In one of Judy Blume's books, the narrator, a twelve-year-old girl, whose parents are in the process of separation, cuts her father off on the telephone: " 'I don't want to talk about it,' I told him."¹ In the context of this novel and others dealing with the more sordid aspects of death and dying, poverty, racism, mental retardation, alcoholism and drug abuse, Karen's protest is strangely ironical. The fact is that for over fifteen years a stream of children's literature has been going out of its way to "talk about it" to an extent that would have been inconceivable a generation ago.

Variouly known as "new" or "ugly" realism,² the trend has been spectacularly popular in the "young adult" shelves of public libraries and does not, apparently, show signs of burnout. In 1975, Sheila Egoff noticed that, with a few exceptions,³ writers of Canadian children's literature had not yet produced anything that might equal the huge American, British, and Australian output. Since then, however, more attention has been given in Canada to realism in fiction and it should be possible by now to assess the general trend with some degree of confidence. This seems to me an essential prelude to specific assessment of Canadian examples.

"Realism" is, at best, a tricky term to define; we think, of course, of the nineteenth-century movement away from Romantic idealism toward a precise, scientific, objective, and "truthful" rendering of nature in art. Yet from the very beginning there is confusion. It was, after all, that key figure of first-generation Romantics, Wordsworth, who not only hymned the imagination, but also glorified the accurate portrayal of the conversational language of the middle and lower classes of society as being closer to reality than the artificially ornate, Neo-Classic diction used in eighteenth-century pastoral poetry. He was followed by Dickens, George Eliot, and Flaubert later in the Victorian period, in their attempts to present "the faithful representating of commonplace things."⁴

Nineteenth-century writers of realism were, above all, interested in evoking a response in their readers. Emotion, we are told, “links itself with particulars and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstraction.”⁵ We do not normally get excited about a triangle, but put Orsino in one corner, Olivia in another, and Viola in a third, and the abstraction dissolves into a passionate conflict. Moreover, there are certain “particulars” which are going to evoke a greater reaction in the beholder. Take, for example, the description of the two women towards the end of Canto II of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. One, the wife of Bercilak, is ideally beautiful, the absolute perfection, by mediaeval standards, of feminine beauty. Beside her stands an ugly beldame, with bleared lips and swart chin.⁶ Although the beautiful woman is pleasingly attractive and “toothsome,” the other one makes us react more strongly – in the form of repulsion. If we were able to measure *quantity* of response (positive or negative) in a kind of metaphorical thermometer, we would have to say that our emotional mercury would rise much higher upon hearing the description of the ugly Morgan le Fay. Tolkien summed up the phenomenon in *The Hobbit*:

Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating, and even gruesome, may make a good tale and take a deal of telling anyway.⁷

It is due to this quirk of human nature (we seek endlessly after comfort, security, and beauty in our lives, but seem to be obsessed with various forms of evil, unpleasantness and sordidness in our art)⁸ that much of the ugliness in realistic literature can be explained.

How much “truth to Nature” can be portrayed in realistic literature? Concerning nineteenth-century realism, one immediately thinks of the scandals and legal prosecution subsequent to the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1856. More amusing is the correspondence between George Eliot and her publisher, John Blackwood, in which she defends, in reply to his concerned query, the somewhat questionable behaviour of Caterina in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story”⁹ and Mrs. Pullet’s graphic description of the dropsy patient in *The Mill on the Floss*. In the end, George Eliot convinced Blackwood and the offensive passage was retained:

‘Died the day before yesterday,’ continued Mrs. Pullet, ‘an’ her legs was as thick as my body,’ she added with deep sadness after a pause. ‘They’d tapped her no end o’ times, and the water – they say you might ha’ swam in it if you liked.’¹⁰

Obviously, there were other subjects of taboo that could not, until well into the twentieth century (as in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) be defended as art.

In nineteenth-century children's literature, there are several instances of "ugly" realism, which, if taken out of context, seem quite shocking even to jaded twentieth-century sensibilities. From *Treasure Island* and *Huckleberry Finn*, respectively, come the following descriptions of the sordidness of alcoholism:

' - and I lived on rum, I tell you. It's been meat and drink, and man and wife, to me; and if I'm not to have my rum now I'm a poor old hulk on a lee shore, my blood'll be on you, Jim, and that Doctor swab'; and he ran on again for a while with curses. 'Look, Jim, how my fingers fidges,' he continued, in the pleading tone. 'I can't keep 'em still, not I. I haven't had a drop this blessed day . . . If I don't have a drain o' rum, Jim, I'll have the horrors; I seen some on 'em already. I seen old Flint in the corner there, behind you' as plain as print, I seen him' and if I get the horrors, I'm a man has lived rough, and I'll raise Cain. Your doctor hisself said one glass wouldn't hurt me. I'll give you a golden guinea for a noggin, Jim.'¹¹

And, from *Huckleberry Finn*:

I don't know how long I was asleep, but all of a sudden there was an awful scream and I was up. There was pap, looking wild and skipping around every which way and yelling about snakes. He said they was crawling up his legs; and then he would give a jump and scream and say one had bit him on the cheek - but I couldn't see no snakes. He started and run round and round the cabin, hollering 'take him off! take him off! he's biting me on the neck!' I never see a man look so wild in the eyes. Pretty soon he was all fagged out, and fell down panting' then he rolled over and over, wonderful fast, kicking things every which way, and striking and grabbing at the air with his hands, and screaming, and saying there was devils ahold of him. He wore out, by-and-by, and laid still a while, moaning.¹²

The difference, presumably, between "traditional" and "new" realism is that formerly the alcoholic was a morally reprehensible villain, whereas he is now one of the youthful protagonists facing problems of acceptance and identity.

Explanations for the recent outburst of realism in children's literature are manifold. After the post-war return to idyllic domesticity in the 1950's and the about-face decade of questioning protest that followed, it was only natural that "thinking" children of

the '79's would be concerned with coming to terms with reality, rather than skirting issues or escaping from them entirely. Television, of course, brought it all together. The graphic depiction of violence or formerly "adult" material – visual as well as auditory – demanded an equally "satisfying" counterpart in literature (yet, how much more horrifying the imaginative violence could be on radio!).

Subject matter, as the seventies progressed, became almost wide open. If *Charlotte's Web* explored a taboo subject (death) in 1952, then *Where the Lilies Bloom*, by Vera and Bill Cleaver, barred few holds in 1969. There are now novels, described as appropriate for ages eleven and up, on teenage drug abuse, alcoholism and sexuality as well as on the perennial standbys, divorce, mental retardation, death and dying.

With such a wide body of realistic fiction to assess, the first question that comes to mind, quite naturally, is: are these books any good? Can they stand up to extensive literary criticism or are they merely sensational journalism aimed at attracting a morbid and self-indulgent generation? To be sure, there is going to be plenty of second and third-rate writing – novelists and publishers getting on the bandwagon to take advantage of a captive audience. There are also a number of books which have been created with sincere motives that might be best described as "bibliotherapy"¹³: books which might well have been written by concerned psychologists or social workers, well meaning, but contributing little of worth as literature.

All of this leads one to demand – or grope for – some standard by which the new realism can be fairly judged. To begin with, we must brace ourselves for the unpleasant or sordid detail – the insistently repeated description of an uncared for old man's urinary difficulties and his "yellow" "horny" toenails, for instance.¹⁴ On the other hand, there are shockingly repulsive aspects of *King Lear*, which have been staunchly defended on artistic grounds for three centuries.

Where do we begin? It seems to me that even more than in other modes, realistic fiction must be *credible*. This may seem naive to say since, by definition, realism is supposed to be as close to life (truth?) as possible. In her well-known fantasy for children, Mary Norton begins by challenging our belief in her theme and then hooks us to the point that we *want* to believe in *The Borrowers*; yet, in the end, she backs off and leaves us hanging in suspense. How much more so, then, should realism present an accurate and believable representation of life!

We ultimately return to the basic, universal rules for good fiction. Does the character act appropriately and consistently according to his personality and circumstances? In novels dealing with divorce, we anticipate some unexpectedly absurd behaviour on the part of both child and parent(s) and yet, there should be *something* – a sympathetic character or symbol, for example – which holds the inconsistent behaviour together to represent some plausibility and continuity to the befuddled reader.

In *It's Not the End of the World* Judy Blume presents a twelve-year-old girl's reaction to the various stages of separation and divorce, which could be almost as clearly marked out as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's stages toward final acceptance of death and dying. Each one seems to follow a logical sequence (if emotions are ever logical) and can be summarized briefly as follows: (1) immediate response: anger at parents for breaking up (p. 31); (2) security questioned: what will happen to *me* (p. 34); (3) feeling conspicuous among peers (p. 59); (4) guilt: trying to find reasons for the divorce (p. 95); (5) trying to win over parents by pleasing them with gifts (pp. 96-97); (6) reconciliation: with help from a sympathetic friend, an understanding grandfather, and high prospects for the future. In this novel, the mother's destruction of a cake with mocha icing (something the father hates) represents symbolically a stage in the progressive disintegration of the marriage, until she finally destroys a statue of a baby (something she treasures), an act that coincides with the daughter's destruction of her prized creation, a Viking diorama. The symbolism, simple as it is, does tend to divert emotionality from character to object and at the same time serve as an index to the emotional state of mother and child.

Credibility of plot is essential. In Norma Fox Mazer's depiction of old age in *A Figure of Speech* (1973), Jenny tries to protect her grandfather from being sent off to a nursing home. The actual portrayal of the home is a fine caricature of the stereotype of efficiency at the cost of personal identity that persists even to-day, but caricature is not realism. Quite obviously, the plot depends upon saving grandfather from the nightmarish nursing home, so the novelist's solution is to create an inappropriate one. To me, this is an example of realism cheating.

One of the original intentions of realism was to make art objective. While we may easily argue that Dickens and George Eliot, with all their authorial intrusion, never completely detached themselves from their works, we might well ask, what of the volume of recent children's books told "realistically" from the first person point of view? Surely, the child-narrator is going to colour his version of

reactions to death, divorce, or physical handicap. One way of checking for accuracy in reporting is to analyse a novel in terms of its dramatic presentation. In dialogue, for example, how much comment is being interspersed by the child-narrator? Do his remarks colour or change the total impression of the scene or act simply as a kind of Greek chorus commenting on the action?

Some novels are so consistently "dark" and unrelenting in their harsh realism that there is scarcely a positive or happy moment in the entire production. Surely life is not like this! Even *Macbeth* has its Porter and *Hamlet* its Gravedigger. Some plausible device ought to be used to alleviate all that pain. We may note that the Cleavers' book, *Where the Lilies Bloom*, despite its primitive setting and theme, is full of the positive urge for survival in the midst of seemingly overwhelming odds. There is even a sprinkling of humour.

All literature, even fantasy and nonsense, makes an (albeit implicit) comment on reality. In fantasy, we step out of the everyday world for a moment to survey what we already know – with a certain detachment. Nonsense, satire, and historical fiction, in their own way, do the same thing. Realism is actually the only mode of literature that seems to turn inward upon itself, without an external level of objectivity or judgment.¹⁵ For this reason, relief in the form of a humorous character or incident is absolutely essential.

An analysis of style in realistic fiction would require a separate essay. Suffice it to say that one's reaction to the measured, rhythmical lilt and unobtrusive poetic prose of the Cleavers' fiction, perfectly appropriate to the starkness of the setting in many of their novels, is going to place it many cuts above the run-of-the-mill portrayal of endless, middle-class, self-centred pubescents.

Where do we go from here? Presumably there are only so many things that can be done with divorce in literature for children, only so many variations on the themes of physical or mental handicaps. Canadian critics will be interested in assessing our local variations of the problem novel; but we should all – Canadians and other moderns – face also the task of assessing the general trend.¹⁶ We are left with a basic question about the relation of art and reality. Are we to be like Walter Pater, unsure of the surety of anything, and make reality the impression of the beholder, or like Bacon's jesting Pilate, and not stay for an answer?

As a mode of children's literature, the new realism has opened many avenues of hitherto unexplored thematic material. Some might

say that it has already outstayed its welcome. Whatever our reaction to it, we must conclude that the "truth" of harsh realism does not give a balanced view of life. What of beauty? Escape? Good, old-fashioned fun?

NOTES

¹Judy Blume, *It's Not the End of the World* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1972), pp. 138, 139.

²Both terms are used by Sheila Egoff in *The Republic of Childhood* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 173, 176. Egoff discusses realism in recent children's literature, briefly, p. 173.

³Kendal Wallis, *Just Gin*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973 and Peter Davies, *Fly Away, Paul*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1974 and several novels of modern Indian life.

⁴George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Chapter 17.

⁵George Eliot, "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: the Poet Young" in Thomas Pinney, ed., *The Essays of George Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 371.

⁶See Marie Borroff, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), pp. 20-21; 11. 941-969.

⁷J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin Books, 1973), p. 47.

⁸But, after all, there would have been no story if Beatrix Potter had written only of Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail!

⁹See Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), II, 298-99.

¹⁰George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, Book I, Chapter 7.

¹¹Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (New York: Airmont Books, 1962), p. 25.

¹²Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), p. 28.

¹³Egoff, p. 194.

¹⁴Norma Fox Mazer, *A Figure of Speech* (New York: Delacorte, 1973), pp. 11, 153.

¹⁵For a discussion of the relation of realism to other modes of literature, see my article, "Adults, Children, Didacticism and the Modes in Children's Literature," *CCL*, No. 14 (1979), pp. 14-23.

¹⁶An article dealing with "dark realism" in Canadian books for young readers will appear in a later issue of *CCL*.

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