



The Language of Trauma

—Dorothy F. Lane

Ellis, Deborah. *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. Toronto: Douglas McIntyre, 2004. 144 pp. \$18.95 hc, \$12.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-608-X, 0-88899-554-7.

Griffin, Margot. *The Dance of Life: A Meggy Tale*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. 112 pp. \$7.95 pb. ISBN 1-55005-125-3.

Hardy, Leanne. *So That's What God is Like!* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004. 10 pp. \$12.99 hc. ISBN 0-8254-2782-7.

All six of these books—directed at a diverse audience of children, young adults, and educators—attempt to make sense of the past, unveil and challenge injustices, frame real-life experience, and describe non-mainstream or non-Canadian cultures; some raise deeper questions related to the meaning and language of suffering. As William Irwin Thompson suggests in *Transforming History: A Curriculum for Cultural Evolution*, descriptions of the past are reinventions:

Kacer, Kathy. *The Underground Reporters*. Second Toronto: Story, 2004. 156 pp. \$14.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-85-1.

Mazetti, Katarina. *God and I Broke Up*. Trans. M. Lundin. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. 127 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 0-888-99-617-9

Zhang, Ange. *Red Land, Yellow River: A Story from the Cultural Revolution*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. 56 pp. \$18.95 hb. ISBN 0-88899-489-3.

“Like an image before us in the rearview mirror of a car, the picture of where we have been keeps changing as we move forward in space and time” (1). Moreover, while one of the books was written and published in another country—but has now been translated and distributed for an English-Canadian audience—they all confront the picture of who we are in Canada, and particularly the multicultural vision that adults are eager to idealize. At the same

time, in some cases these books repeat the “imperial habits of mind” identified by John Willinsky (19). One wonders whether books designed to educate and enlighten children about “other” cultures in effect reaffirm the trope of the exotic and the right of the Western child to take “possession of the world” through knowledge and naming (13).

At the most simple level, Leanne Hardy’s picture book, *So That’s What God is Like!*, endeavours to explain the concept of the divine to young children through positive images in an “African” landscape. The picture book is certainly attractive, colourful, and lively, and appears to follow the publishing conventions of texts for preschool children. The main character is, for instance, a boy who is “the smallest in his family except for baby Hannah.” The primary message of the book is that “God” can be experienced in natural phenomena and humble, local images such as “wind, a rock, a hen, a mother, and a shepherd”—metaphors that are alternatives to Eurocentric, patriarchal, and narrowly anthropomorphic images. The character of “Granny” in the book summarizes the distinction: “God is not exactly like the minister . . . because God is not a man. . . . God is a spirit.” She continues by stating that “God is very big indeed. . . . But God loves little chicks, little babies, little goats. . . . And little children.” The book is also helpful in countering the barrage of negative, generalizing media images that

associate Africa with disease, poverty, and violence.

At the same time, the context and target audience of this picture book are ambiguous. Illustrations and borders depicting woven fabric, designed by Janet Wilson, are described in the publisher’s promotional material as “realistic” but reinforce positive stereotypes of rural African families, children, and styles of living. Moreover, the geographical and cultural setting within the continent of Africa is not explicit. We learn that the main character, Temba, spends his days taking care of goats and tending to the corn plants; as the narrator tells us, “When Mama carried a heavy tin of water on her head to the tiny corn plants in the garden, Temba could only carry a little can.” Temba, however, along with his family, also goes to church and Sunday school, and his grandmother sings in the choir. In the images throughout the book, the people are typically smiling and dressed in bright clothing. It is important to note that Hardy served as a missionary librarian in Africa, and this book is purported to be “inspired by her real-life experiences” (back cover). There is no hint of tension between the primarily Christian ideas communicated and the African setting. Moreover, although resisting some aspects of the patriarchal model of Christianity, the “Sunday school teacher” is still female and the “minister, who shouted and got excited when he preached” is male.

Another fictional reconstruction, Margot Griffin’s

The Dance of Life: A Meggy Tale, attempts to familiarize young adolescent readers with the world of eighteenth-century Ireland. In the foreword to the novel, the narrator asks, “what do you think your life will be like at thirteen or fourteen?” (ix), and then relates that vision to the description of Meggy MacGillycuddy’s life in the mid-1700s. Probing questions seeking the identification of readers with the main character—“Would you be brave enough to stay behind, alone, to rescue your favorite teacher from soldiers?” and “Have you ever faced the fear of losing a parent or becoming homeless?”—reinforce the familiarization of the unfamiliar. Griffin’s novel thus explicitly invites 21st-century readers to identify with the memories of other children. While the novel supposedly focuses on the life of a family in the context of County Kerry under the Penal Code, it creates a heroine who matches the stereotypes of 21st-century North American girls, finally relying on a romantic liaison between childhood companions Meggy and Roddy McSorley—and concluding with Roddy’s saving Meggy’s life and asking for “one sweet kiss on me head” to “rid me of the terrible ache I have there” (180).

In her author’s note, Griffin explains that “the Penal Code was a set of laws that were extremely unfair to Irish Catholics, forbidding them to educate their children in their own language and religion” (185); this revision—purporting to resist the official

history of Ireland by putting faces and voices to characters suppressed by the Penal Code—does not, however, address the constrictions of the Roman Catholic Church itself. Molly and her companions appear to integrate beautifully the pagan roots of the Celtic past and the faith of Catholic Christianity. For instance, the novel ends with Molly’s arrival at a Christmas mass held in a secret place, but with limited religious content. The names of characters and places are—Griffin admits—mostly coined by her. As she concludes in the note, “the beauty of their beloved County Kerry gave them comfort and joy” (185).

This novel, then, the third in a trilogy of books focusing on the dancing heroine Meggy, is disappointing in its reliance on the paradigms of physical beauty, romantic love, and one-dimensional images of the Irish: “With baskets and stools, grannies and babies, families came from the north, south, east and west. . . . Young ones, whose little feet could not walk another step, were perched on big brothers’ shoulders or carried by sisters not much bigger than they” (67). In contrast are images of the English landlords and soldiers—specifically “Lord Black” and his Irish envoy, the “smarmy” Seamus Fox, described as having “prissy eyebrows . . . [a] pimpled nose . . . [and a] fake English accent” (23). There is very little complexity in the moral vision created by Griffin. For instance, Meggy is given various items by the villagers as symbols of support for her quest to

become the first female dance mistress:

Fiona gave one of her dear departed brother's belongings. Johnny had died for Ireland and now her best friend would wear his boots. Meggy knew how much Fiona and her mam cherished these last earthly bits of their much-loved brother and son. She was surprised his boots weren't way too big for her until she remembered that Johnny was only fourteen and far from his man-size when he was killed. (85)

Although Griffin claims to have researched the effects of brain injury in her portrait of Meggy's father—and the narrative has a “feminist” element in its creation of a heroine who challenges the stereotypes of male dance master—I feel that this book underestimates its audience. It ultimately creates a hopeful and simple story, described by Lawrence L. Langer as “retrospective sentiment” (qtd. in Kertzer 32). As suggested by the other books reviewed here, North American adolescents would be capable of broaching the harder topics of gender and racial discrimination, and the dilemmas of ethical decision-making.

Another novel directed at an adolescent female audience is Katarina Mazetti's *God and I Broke Up*, a book initially written in Swedish and translated for English-Canadian children. It was shortlisted for a children's literature award in Sweden after its

publication in 1995. Although a decade has passed since its initial publication in Sweden, the issue of teen suicide seems particularly timely in Canada; the setting and characters also are also fairly easily transferred to middle-class mainstream Canada. The narrator of Mazetti's novel, sixteen-year-old Linnea, describes herself as “scrubbed and well-fed and Swedish and educated. I didn't even have anorexia. But if I did have anorexia . . . [i]t would be out of sheer protest against everyone who thinks you should be so grateful and happy to have been born in the Western world” (14). Canadians, like Swedes, tend to congratulate themselves on living in a free, democratic society, characterized by economic mobility and absence of racism. As Canadian humourist Will Ferguson writes in his 1997 book, *Why I Hate Canadians*, the prevailing myth of Canada masks historical and contemporary injustices: “Canada: where everyone is happy and kind, where children—all the colours of the rainbow—play in multiracial harmony, where the moose and the black bear frolic, where the Mighty Beaver stands majestically atop a rugged pine tree in Georgian Bay overlooking the vast Rockies” (8). Similarly, uncovering the grief underlying the middle-class Swedish discourse of optimism and gratitude, teenaged Linnea abruptly alludes to her relationship with Pia, which concluded in Pia's suicide. The death of this girl, however, frames the novel, and is foreshadowed throughout its narrative: “If your best

friend dies, after a while people get irritable and start asking what you're moping about" (19). From the beginning of the text, we know that Pia is dead, and we suspect that her death was by her own hand; at one point in a flashback, for instance, she advises Linnea flippantly that when she is rejected by her classmates she should "[g]o and hang yourself. It's your only option" (33). While the novel focuses on the hard contemporary topic of teen suicide, we never get a clear image of Pia or her motivations except through her interactions and discussions with Linnea. Her death is ultimately, it appears, meaningless and reconfirms the pessimistic sentiment of the title: *God and I Broke Up*. The book does echo hauntingly the self-consciousness, social anxiety, and confused body image of many adolescent girls.

The narrator of Mazetti's novel declares herself unable and unwilling to tell the story of Pia's death. Language itself fails in this attempt: "I don't want to. I don't want to tell you anymore. . . . I still can't handle thinking about it" (113). At this point in the novel, she inserts a newspaper clipping that explains the cause of Pia's death, and then reflects more closely on her intellectual and emotional responses to death: "I don't remember her, just my memories of her" (125). The book is therefore a self-conscious examination of the "way memory constructs an order, shape, and meaning to an experience whose first achievement was the disruption of the [individual's] ability to

make meaning" (Kertzer 32). It both reflects upon and ultimately avoids the "retrospective sentiment" that establishes a logical and moral vision of traumatic events.

The several books that focus on stories of the Holocaust also demonstrate this ambivalence of attempts to create meaning from traumatic events. Adrienne Kertzer has written several essays on how Holocaust stories can be told to children, describing the dilemma for writers for children: no matter how bleak the subject, children's literature must be "hopeful" (13) and present logical reasons for survival or non-survival. The discourse of hope and luck governs such narratives, while an adult narrative, she states, might allow "gaps. . . narrative disorder, the refusal of an overriding explanatory myth or a possible moral vision" (37). In a thought-provoking statement, Kertzer speculates that "all literature about the Holocaust may be a form of children's literature, trying to describe events with a very limited vocabulary" (39). Even in her own son's attempts to recreate his grandmother's Holocaust story, he concludes with the ending, "The sun was rising and we were free. We had lived and survived Auschwitz and Trutnov and Dr. Mengele" (43). The conventions of literature for children demand that suffering be framed within an ultimately optimistic narrative. As Hamida Bosmajian contends, the purpose of Holocaust literature is not to alienate the

child—not to traumatize the reader by recounting shocking events, nor to numb the child’s emotional responses to tragedy. In part, children’s narratives of the Holocaust aim to inspire commitment to preventing repetition of these events. However, a happy ending to the story also allows the reader to consign events to the past and sometimes to another country, therefore not demanding any action from the reader. In *God and I Broke Up*, notably, there is no happy ending for either Pia or Linnea; the questions raised by Pia’s choice to commit suicide remain. Moreover, Linnea communicates her ongoing bewilderment and awareness that the story is undergoing revision—including the construction of a “meaning”—in light of the present. Thus, Mazetti’s novel seems effective as a parable, awakening commitment in its readers to choose Linnea’s path of grief and confusion over Pia’s path of despair.

Kathy Kacer’s *The Underground Reporters* is part of a series of books titled Holocaust Remembrance Series for Young Readers. This book focuses on a group of Czech children who establish a magazine called *Klepy*, which ran from 1940 to 1942. Kacer, who has written other books for the series—*The Secret of Gabi’s Dresser*, *Clara’s War*, and *Night Spies*—reflects in her introduction on the difficulty of teaching sensitive material to children. Her book interweaves personal narratives of John Freund and other editors of *Klepy* with photographs, archival

materials from the Holocaust Museum in the United States, and images of the magazine from the Jewish Museum in Prague. Kacer must also address the fact that individuals involved in the production of this magazine were murdered in the Holocaust, along with many of their family members: “Most of the young people who had been underground reporters in Budejovice did not survive” (147). However, the narrative, again, struggles to find moments of hope; for instance, even in Theresienstadt, through the efforts of the prisoners, “the prison became a place where music, art, and poetry thrived”: “These activities helped everyone, especially the children, put up with the misery of their lives. When they created art and music, they dreamed of home, and remembered happier times” (125). The story also has a positive ending, with the “lucky” discovery of the magazines still held in Irena’s cupboard: “It was a miracle that the newspapers had survived” (153). Moreover, when John hears the “scraps of information” about the defeat of the Nazis in Europe, this news “provided renewed hope for John and the others” (142). Kacer’s book, then, while sensitive and painstakingly-careful in its reconstruction of the story of the magazine, still relates a narrative of hope and luck. The image on the cover shows a group of Budejovice children—not necessarily the editors of the magazine—smiling in the sunlight. The inclusion of pronunciation guides, simple language, and

many visual aids also suggests an elementary-school audience. Unfortunately, then, the book does not adequately challenge the conventions of “all literature about the Holocaust” described by Kertzer, though it does inspire admiration for the people described in the book, and particularly for John Freund.

In Kacer’s book, the image of Canada provides another focus of hope at the end of the narrative, as one of the main characters emigrates successfully from the land of persecution. In many ways, this book thus affirms the division of the world outlined by Willinsky.

In *Red Land, Yellow River*, Ange Zhang tells the story of the Cultural Revolution in China from a first-person perspective, framed by his own powerful paintings. Zhang’s book is intriguing as it provides a viewpoint on an event that has seldom been told for English-speaking Canadian children or adults; while books about the Holocaust are numerous, there is still a gap in learning about the history of Asia. The other refreshing element of Zhang’s book is its admission of moral ambiguity in its characters; Zhang’s father is a Communist Party member, who supported Mao “right from the beginning” (8). Thus, it is more confusing—particularly when viewed through the eyes of a child who does not understand all the nuances of good and evil—when one of Zhang’s friends becomes a Red Guard and tells him that his father “is one of the bad guys” because he is an intellectual (8).

Even more confusing, various divisions within Red Guard organizations rapidly multiply; Zhang himself establishes a group called the Beijing Red Star Rebel Corps, and several Red Guard groups fight against one another. The resulting moral confusion is related in a clear and simple manner by Zhang, to emphasize the absence of morality in the establishment of gangs. All that matters is to define the “other” as “black” or “false.” The author’s perspective on these events appears to downplay the importance of claiming moral positions, fundamentally suggesting that these divisions were nonsensical. The narrative of Zhang’s exile to the country to become a peasant inspires little sympathy for the proponents of the Cultural Revolution or the peasants who oversee Zhang’s work.

On the other side, a moral vision does emerge in Zhang’s book through his description of reading “Western authors like Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens and Jack London” (28). Zhang states that “for the first time I realized there were many different kinds of people in the world—some good, some evil, some strong, some weak. Yet each one of us had to face our own destiny, pursue our own future” (28). The narrative concludes with Zhang’s own decision to become an artist, and his description of a painting that represents freedom: “I was following that road to a place full of color, beauty, joy and kindness” (46). The decision to do this represents an acceptance of

western ideologies underscoring the significance of the individual; these ideologies are depicted as “white” as opposed to the “black” of the Cultural Revolution, which undermines individual desires and aspirations. While again such narratives demonstrate the notion of “retrospective sentiment” in the urgent attempts to construct a narrative of meaning out of suffering—and a meaning that accords with contemporary western values—Zhang’s book is admirable not only because it introduces a young audience to an unfamiliar story, but also because it stresses the moral ambiguity that challenges our dearly held concept of the child as “helpless, passive, and powerless in the violent social and political worlds we have made” (Bosmajian xi). In Zhang’s narrative, all children—even the narrator himself—are depicted as both perpetrators and victims in the Cultural Revolution. That image is missing in most of the Holocaust narratives directed at children.

Finally, Deborah Ellis’s collection of interviews and commentaries, *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*, is gathered from her visit to Israel and Palestine in 2002. Of these books, it is the one most free from “retrospective sentiment”—caught, as it is, in the moment—and from the tendency to present a foreign scene that can be readily appropriated by Canadian children. At the same time, the promotional material contradicts this boundary of unfamiliarity, stating boldly that “[t]his

simple and telling book allows children everywhere to see those caught in the conflict as children just like themselves.” The entire book, however, counters the notion that there are children “just like” the reader, or that there are universal childhood experiences. It incorporates images of preteens and adolescents from multiple perspectives, touching on such traumatic incidents as losing one’s close friends in gunfire or bomb attacks, watching one’s house demolished by soldiers, and living under curfew. These children are both complicit in, and victims of, political and military struggles; most of them confront questions about loyalty, labelling of the “other” and their motives, and the place of God and religion. Contradicting the title, many of them actually have no “wishes” beyond escape, typically to Canada or America. One twelve-year-old Palestinian girl describing how her sister became a suicide bomber, chillingly states: “I don’t think it would hurt if I blew myself up. I don’t think it hurt my sister. I think she was very brave, not scared at all. I think she was probably very happy” (103).

This book is an excellent example of publishing for children that does not avoid children’s trauma or sadness, but rather conveys these directly, with only clarifying commentary by the adult writer. The list of children killed in the conflict that Ellis inserts at the beginning of the book—their names and ages—is both haunting and numbing. It is also interesting that the children themselves do not hesitate to identify their

own emotional state as “not caring” about the other side or even about the people killed in the conflict. Most have little knowledge of this other side—often labelled “them”—and their focus is on school, Play Stations, dogs, bugs, friends, and chewing gum. Their repetition of official rhetoric—“I’ll be going into the army soon. It’s very important. The army protects our families, our friends and our country” (87)—reflects how children digest the discourses of adults. Most striking is the way statements such as “I don’t know any Israelis. I don’t want to know any” (85) or “I met some Palestinians once” (55) are interspersed with the idealistic “we have to have hope” (68) and “maybe we can just make music and have fun and not hate each other” (62). As the author emphasizes, “children in this book talk about how the choices other people have made have affected their lives” (10).

Maps at the front, historical background, photographs, and a list of further references make this a penetrating and useful book for young adults. The book does not shy away from the absence of meaning in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and the children’s sense that they are affected by random acts of violence that they struggle—often in vain—to interpret. Whether such a book would be effective with its young audience, without at least some

discussion of the meaning of suffering and language of trauma, is another question. Would children be able to read this book without guidance from educators or parents? I must say that I—as an adult reader—was personally moved by these narratives and accompanying photographs of children, by their lack of “retrospective sentiment” and their dubious simplicity, as well as by the challenge to the Western impulse to “take possession of the world” (Willinsky 13). The book falls into the category of what Ranjana Khanna calls “the work of melancholia” rather than the “work of mourning”—since that which is past is still visibly and painfully present in stories of contemporary Palestine. As Khanna writes, “While the work of mourning may relegate swallowed disposable bodies to the garbage can of modern nationalism, the work of melancholia, critically attesting to the fact of the lie intrinsic to modern notions of sovereignty, is the only hope for the future” (32). Books like this are effective in introducing children to the melancholia intrinsic in the lives of real children faced with inconceivable suffering and the difficulty of ethical decision-making. In such books, the authors emphasize that sadness is not only allowed; it is a genuine response to the trauma and grief experienced by both children and adults.

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