Value and Meaning in Children's Literature

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The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction, Fred Inglis. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981. 333 pp. $39.95 hardcover. ISBN 0521 23142 6.

In this most persuasive book, social realism is pummelled, bibliotherapy is laid low, Enid Blyton is damned and even Tolkien does not fare very well. It is refreshing to read a critic of children's literature in possession of such strong and well- reasoned convictions and the courage to express them in a straightforward, unembarrassed fashion. There is nothing coy or bashful about Mr. Inglis. His faith in the power of literature to transform and sustain is contagious.

We all have a particular author who has been a major and formative influence upon us and who acts as a touchstone for our aesthetic judgements. Dickens is such a touchstone for Inglis and although he hedges a bit, it is nevertheless in terms of Dickensian literary and moral criteria that all other works are ultimately laid bare, examined, endorsed or found wanting.

Inglis proceeds to recall the most memorable books of his childhood — an essential introspective activity for anyone exploring, as he is, the ethical influence of childhood reading upon moral development.

> For those who are lucky, remembering the stories they read as children is a delighted, gleeful sharing. In remembering the stories loved and lost in childhood, the stories in which the now grown men and women were once lost, they are joined again in a vivid life which their culture occasionally makes it possible to share. This is what we mean by recreation (p.45).

Thus literature read to or by a child becomes in Lovat-Dickson's phrase, the "very armour of God" protecting, encouraging and consoling the grown woman or man.

Inglis recalls with gratitude and affection not only the comics like "Korky the Cat" and adventures such as "The Lone Ranger", but also "Bulldog Drummond" and the works of Buchan, Kipling and Bunyan, biography such as Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise*, Stephen Spender's *Autobiography* and Robert Graves' *Goodbye To All That.* He remembers growing out of Buchan, Kipling, Jack London, Baroness Orczy, Rider Haggard and into Conrad and Dorothy Sayers. While poems from those of Shakespeare to Walter de la Mare to the Nonconformist hymns left their mark, it is the novel that commands his greatest

remembrance of things past. *Little Women, Jo's Boys, The Secret Garden, The Railway Children,* as well as the novels of Ransome and Wodehouse are cherished. Inglis states unequivocally that "the novel is the best way to think through each strenous moral struggle in the explicit detail which it deserves" (p.44).

Just how essential it is to have not only the rhythms and cadences of the *Bible* but also the elementary and thrilling power of the music of great prose and poetry is stressed throughout by Inglis. If a child never thrills to the music of finely-wrought prose, says Inglis, there is a stop, a blankness in both sensibility and intelligence. Perhaps this is as telling an argument for the selection of certain kinds of literature for the young and the rejection of others as we — the "children's literature constituency" — will ever get.

Inglis identifies the various views of childhood and rightly names Blake and Wordsworth as "the first geniuses of English Romantic literature to place the meaning and experience of childhood at the centre of their picture of morality and the growth of the imagination". The change in the family, the rise of industrialism and the children's novels that "sprung from the impulse to change the scale of childhood" will be familiar territory to anyone sufficiently interested in the topic to open the book. Inglis does, however, present a somewhat startling change of emphasis — what he terms a "modest revisionism". According to him, the images of childhood and happy family life did not spring straight from the heads of the Romantic poets. Childish misery and happiness are pretty well distributed through world history, cruelty to children having shown only modest diminution in the richest countries during the past four or five generations. He goes on:

> The critical innovation of industrial society has been the mass institutions and the advent of their bureaucracies: factory, prison, asylum, hospital, school. These separate edifices, and the labour relations they generated, threw an enormous weight of significance upon family life. As I am about to argue, it was naturally the fluent and the powerful amongst the social classes who sought to name and understand this new weight of significance. For the past century or so, some very intelligent men and women have conducted that inquiry through the novel and on behalf of their listening children (p.77-78).

The books which loom large in this era are, as we might expect: *Mrs. Tittlemouse, Jemima Puddleduck, Wind in the Willows, Little Grey Rabbit, The Hobbit, The Railway Children, Swallows and Amazons,* and, most important perhaps, the *Alice* books. The influence of the Freudian and Marxist models upon the attitudes to childhood and its literary fare is obvious and sensible and not over-stated.

Inglis' position concerning literature and ethics is a central theme of *The Promise of Happiness*. He speaks of "staff- room" platitudes

with the scorn they deserve:

> "I've no right to impose my views on them", "It's just my opinion; you must choose for yourself", "Who's to say that this is a good book — it's up to the individual", "Isn't it rather arrogant to claim you know best?" The most notorious elision of moral arguments transpires in the complacent phrases, "true for me" or "true for them". The phrase exemplifies the extreme attenuation to which recent history has brought our moral language. Truth is no doubt a complicated property, and truthfulness a rare quality not only by virtue of its inconvenient consequences, but because it's hard to know how to give it body and language. Nonetheless, what is true, is true, however hard to find. The truth can't just be my truth and his falsehood. The existence of God or ghosts isn't just a matter of personal preference (p. 93).

Inglis reminds us "that individuals must live in social structures of some kind in order to be individuals at all, and that the Grand Inquisitor's terrible trio, miracle, mystery and authority, must have their due place in public rituals, lest they be compelled upon us by men in uniform, over whom we have no control at all" (p. 276). Naturally the children's literature of oppression crumbles under Inglis' tough gaze. Speaking of Cormier, Inglis writes:

> What is deeply wrong with *The Chocolate War,* is its grossness and indelicacy in telling its child-readers that heroism is, strictly, such a dead end (p. 277).
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> Hero-victim and reader are left with the pain, and the cliché of concussion. The crude lesson is three-fold: that all institutions systematize violence; that violence upholds power without reason; that individuals cannot hope to change these facts. These are the sentimentalities of disenchantment (p. 278).
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> Truth-telling is replaced by lie-seeking, and the radical-without-a-history is become just a terrorist (p. 280).

Throughout his book, Inglis is resolutely against personal bibliotherapy as anyone with more than a little learning of literature and psychology is likely to be. He is just as clear about social bibliotherapy:

> Social bibliotherapy, or the repair of social ignorance by novels, is a wrongly conceived enterprise not because the sacred domain of art must not be contaminated by the impurity of real political and moral convictions, but because conviction is only adequate when it is completed by both judgement and understanding (p. 283).

All the social realist's goals may be met, says Inglis, by such books as Joan Aiken's *Midnight is a Place,* Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and*

His Child, and Jane Gardam's *A Long Way From Verona.*

> Their exemplary success is won because they attend not to social realism as a matter of conscience, but to the real world as a matter of their responsibility, and to its life as lived in their language (p. 291).

For the many parents and teachers who have been too squeamish to make honest choices and to answer the question "Which are among the best books"? Inglis offers sanity and gumption. "Read very great novels", he admonishes, and we realize that unless this is our battle cry too we as adults are abdicating our responsibility as "teachers, parents, novelists, librarians, kindly aunts and uncles and nice neighbours".

When he wrote *The Promise of Happiness,* I'm sure that Fred Inglis was not writing a text. He was, however, doing several necessary things. He was questioning the value — literary, moral, cultural and personal — of most novels of the contemporary school of social realism. He was affirming the values of much traditional and contemporary literature. He was celebrating literature which sticks to telling stories in the conventional manner — creating other worlds and showing its readers — imaginatively — possibilities of moral grandeur as well as moral squalor — stories with shape — with finesse — with style — with polish, and above all with enduring hope. "It is surely a necessary virtue in children's novelists to offer their readers confidence and hope in the future (p. 297).

No, most emphatically, this book was not intended as a text, but because of the areas — history, value, language, quality — that Inglis treats with understanding and flair, I shall consider moving it from my suggested to my required reading list. As a professor of children's literature who reads a plethora of books on the subject, I can scarcely give higher praise.

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