Review: Challenges, Controversies and Ethics - Moral judgements in children's literature


Reviewer: David Beagley

"Much of the history of children's literature - indeed, much of the history of all literature - is predicated on the hope that stories have the power to change those who read them for the better" opens Claudia Mills in an essay in her new text Ethics and Children's Literature. She goes on, "This faith in the transformative power of literature also fuels many if not most projects of censorship, as adult authorities seek to shield children from moral corruption imparted through stories viewed as morally problematic." (p.181)

In the case of children's literature, this assumption, of the power of literature to change its readers, is usually accompanied by another less stated but probably more insidious, that the child reader is unable to discern and resist this power, especially of the morally negative. Therefore, this must be done for them by well-meaning adults.

The agency and empowerment (dis- and un-) of young readers underpins both these edited collections and, in both cases, demand that these well-meaning adults stop taking the readers for granted and think what they are doing.

In Mills' collection of essays, the moral dimension of literature is not questioned, but its representation to children, definitely is. For instance, Suzanne Rahm's "Lewis, Tolkien and the Ethics of Imaginary Wars" begins with de Brunhoff's Babar showing how one little 'wrong' act can escalate to terrifying proportions, but told in a simple linear narrative, then continues through the demonising of villains in Lewis' Narnia stories which enables a justified, but rather simplistic, "war between good and evil in its purest form" (p.169), to reach Tolkien's distinguishing in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings between "a war that would be unjust (and should therefore be avoided) and a just, defensive war that must be fought." (p. 173). However, what Rahm does not develop is how the early childhood readers of Babar might be different in their capacity to reach such judgements to the late adolescent readers of Tolkien. This arc, from the simple to the complex, underpins all modern educational theory with the developing taxonomic progression the foundation of pedagogical practice. If children's literature is to be a teaching tool, then it must be considered in these pedagogical as well as literary frames.

The four sections of the collection deal with historical expressions, contemporary texts, ethical criticisms and ethical responses, some essays in relation to particular texts and some in more general terms. For instance Mary Jeanette Moran's study of Madeleine L'Engle, and Niall Nance-Carroll on Winnie the Pooh, both observe how moral awareness (and, therefore, potential growth) may be enabled by readers encountering new or alternative schema, 'Otherness' in L'Engle's books and pacific anti-totalitarianism in The 100 Acre Wood.

Martha Rainbolt's essay, on the moral growth of Katniss Everdeen through the first book and movie of The Hunger Games series, puts more emphasis on moral progression and contradictions as Katniss faces, considers and chooses in her desperate sequence of confrontations. The simple protective impulse of her volunteering to save Primrose, is complicated each time she must justify her journey further and further into the role of rebel and killer. Yet the questions about those actual choices seem to resemble more the demonising noted by Rahm in the Narnia battles they than any philosophical analysis of intent or act. Careerist tributes can be killed and President Snow overthrown because they are 'bad guys' but Rue is a 'good guy' and her death is tragic and worth tears.

The range of texts considered in Mills collection is wide and the opportunities for these considerations most productive, but there is still just the nagging feeling through all the contributions that the well-meaning adults are still making the decisions for the younger readers.

Evans, and her contributors, take a very different approach in Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts. The capacity of young readers to make choices for themselves about troubling or difficult texts is a key element, particularly in the early introductory section of children's own thoughts on some of the challenging and controversial texts under discussion.

It should be noted that not all of the picture books considered in Evans' book are morally or ethically challenging. Several, such as Marsden & Gouldthorpe's Norton's Hut are complex exercises in interpretation and decoding, but other's like Greder's The Island and Fortes & Conjego's Smoke clearly represent social issues such as refugees, otherness, and the Holocaust.

As with Mills' collection, Evans has assembled a broad selection of studies, many focussing on particular texts while making points of wider relevance. Sandra L. Beckett, Elizabeth Marshall and Kerenza Ghosh all pick up the dark and fearful traditions in folk and fairy tales and track these through to modern styles and archetypes in storytelling through picturebooks. Ghosh, particularly, looking at the representation of the Wolf over past and present, and analysing young reader responses to these, shows the opportunities that these representations can offer in developing critical awareness in these readers. The richness and variety of the range of representations of the wolf motif demand that children read at deeper abstract levels than adult mediators would often recognize.

This seems to be the tenor of Evan's contributors - do not underestimate the capacity of young readers to make moral refer to human behavior where morality is the practical activity and, ethics describes the theoretical, systematic, and rational reflection upon that human behavior (Churchill, 1982). Obstacles in teaching morals/ethics and implementing character education in the sciences are discussed. A comparative study between the philosophical and theoretical basis of modern Western moral education and the universal Islamic moral values and education is outlined to the extent of gaining benefit and developing an enriched theoretical framework of moral and character education that may increase the universal acceptability of the Western theoretical framework of moral and character education. Political ethics (sometimes called political morality or public ethics) is the practice of making moral judgments about political action, and the study of that practice. As a field of study, it is divided into two branches, each with distinctive problems and with different though overlapping literatures. Both draw on moral and political philosophy, democratic theory and political science. But political ethics constitutes a free standing subject in its own right. Most writers on the
these judgements for themselves. It is reiterated through many of the essays and the readings of the challenging and controversial texts under study.

Both these collections offer considerable food for thought around the building of reader response and reader understanding in children's and YA literature, and both allow these readers more facility for analysis and appreciation of such moral and interpretive nuances than would generally be accepted by the usual gatekeepers of parents, librarians and publishers. Evan's final item, an interview with Klaus Flugge, a publisher often seen as a boundary-pusher, even renegade, highlights this tension between the adult's need to nurture the child and the assumed duty to control the world of children. "Give them credit!" is a strong and clear message.

These two collections provide great food for thought, and plenty of fuel for the never-ending argument about whether their literature should Protect young readers from the Nasties of the world, or Vaccinate them against the inevitable.

David Beagley  
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