

An Awfully Big Adventure: Killing Death in War Stories for Children

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In her useful summary of the growth of discourses dealing with issues of death and dying Kerry Mallan offers a list of 'causes of death [which] covers all possibilities: disease, accident, suicide, murder, execution, old age, childbirth, birth defects and so on' (Mallan 2002, p.176). A curious omission is death in war, from the legal killing of and by soldiers, to the horror underlying the euphemism of 'collateral damage'. Mallan goes on to note that children's books have 'contradictory approaches' (p.176) to the subject of death. As one may expect, many of these contradictions are not found in war stories for children, where there is an expectation of death, and violence. The possibilities range from picture books which may offer graphic images of the dead and dying to blunt descriptions of death on battlefields in fiction for young adult readers. Nevertheless in the texts where one may expect the brutality of death in war to be most explicit it is often shaped in unexpected ways.

Discourses of death in war need to be considered within the wider cultural and social contexts. There may be cultural inhibitions and lingering notions of the taboo or prohibited (Scutter 1996, 3) but more recent years have seen a proliferation of discourses dealing with many manifestations of death so that Mallan is able to note that death has been removed as a taboo of children's literature (Mallan 2002, p176). Nevertheless I would suggest that there is evidence of a lingering taboo in dealing with death in war stories, especially in those for older readers. This may be partly a function of the ambivalent nature of war stories; they are at best discourses of hope, or at least of knowledge, but are also texts which show the brutality and violence of death on a battle field or during war.

The increase of discourses dealing with death, violence or brutality in times of war, may be due to two factors. First there is a perception of a global increase of fields of war. This, in turn, may be dependent upon the second factor: the ready availability of images and information about war, from newspapers, histories of war events, and cinematic documentaries, to video games and, as I explore in this paper, fictional texts for children.

In war stories for children death is usually at one remove because children do not normally fight as soldiers. For the child in war time their position is usually that of the

equivocal observer. This then reveals a basic problem of how to tell of the brutality of war, how to underline an apparent fundamental ideology of war stories for children; that is, to create a sense of anti-war ethos, when the child narrator and focaliser is not a combatant. Nevertheless it seems that war stories should, and do, attempt to show that war is about 'killing soldiers' and often others as well. But in so doing it is rarely this simple. There may be many reasons why this blunt and necessary aspect of war is re-shaped for the child reader; but in this paper I want to concentrate on the ways and means of this re-shaping.

There are several strategies and narrative techniques used to tell of violent death and killing in a time of war, so that these deaths are not too shocking to the sensibilities of young readers (or to the gate-keepers: their parents and teachers). The ambiguous position of death in war texts (there but not *really* there) is shown not only by the actual narratives but also by the presence of forewords, introductions, afterwords, authorial explanations and dedications, present in over 50% of the books read for this paper. These parts of the texts have three aims: first, to explain the historical veracity of the event being re-told, reinforcing the didactic sub text (knowledge of wars is important in forming an anti-war sensibility) which is present in every one of the texts; second, to show how important these past events still are, and the need to remember and memorialise; and third, in many cases, to account for the personal involvement or motivation of the writer. With reference to the latter Spinelli says 'how could I not write this book' (2003, foreword, unpaginated), while Lawrence comments about the war veterans in his own family: 'My mother's three uncles went off...all three were taken prisoner. My father ...went back to the fighting [having been wounded] and lost an arm' (Lawrence 2002, p.263). With these paratextual inclusions, the balance or gap between fiction and reality is underlined, perhaps distancing the implied reader from what is within the actual narrative.

The strategies used in these texts, often overlap and layer one upon the other in a single text, positioning death as eliminated, transformed and re-shaped in particular ways. I am referring to 15 novels in this paper, the majority for adolescent readers. I have deliberately omitted picture books on war, having looked at these powerful



representations of death, loss and violence elsewhere.² Moreover it is not unreasonable to imagine that it would be in fiction for older readers that death in war would be foregrounded, as it may be assumed that these need not be censored for the young adult reader.

Absence/Vanish/Silence

It seems almost incongruous that we can have war stories without death. It might be that these reflect an overly sensitive cultural sensibility about death for a young adolescent reader, but I think that it is due to either a deliberate use of the power of silence³, a focus on what is not told, (a narrative gap that demands, at the least, questions of the reader). Alternatively, it might be something that is being positioned as too terrible in this context to be comprehended, either by the implied reader or by the narrating character. *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne 2006) concerns Bruno, a boy who sees and reports but has no knowledge or understanding of what he sees. The first death is that of Pavel who drops a bottle of wine which spills into the lap of Lieutenant Kotler: 'What happened then was both unexpected and extremely unpleasant', but we are not told what this action is only that 'no one – not Bruno, not Gretel, not Mother and not even Father – stepped in to stop him doing what he did next, even though none of them could watch. Even though it made Bruno cry and Gretel turn pale' (Boyne 2006, pp.148/9).

This so-called fable ends with the disappearance of Bruno, the focalizing character. At the end of the book, Bruno slides under the wire into the camp named 'Out-with' to help his friend Shmuel look for his father. The two boys, who share a birthdate, a friendship, and are physically alike, except for the size of their hands, are swept up in a crowd which is pushed, out of the rain, into a concrete room:

And then the room went very dark and somehow, despite the chaos that followed, Bruno found that he was still holding Shmuel's hand in his own and nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let it go.
(p.213)

We are then told that 'nothing more was ever heard of Bruno after that' (p.214). Like Shmuel's father and grandfather,

Bruno and Shmuel simply disappear. They vanish into dark, into chaos, and become that which is not known or, by implication, knowable. In taking the two boys into the death camp this text is a rare but necessary example in Holocaust fiction (Williams 2003, p133). Here death is seen as happening to those who have no power, it occurs at random, and the means is unknown. It is implied by the absence of the positives of light, order, the familiar and the comprehensible.

Similarly in *Hitler's Canary* (Toksvig 2005), where a Danish family is involved in the protection and escape of their Jewish friends and neighbours, people are threatened, shouted at, but those who die vanish from the discourse. Thomas is the narrator's effeminate family friend and his mother's theatre 'dresser':

"There's just the two of us," we heard him say as he picked up Gilda and held her close. "There is no one else here but me and my Gilda." Gilda clung to his neck and Thomas didn't look back once when the soldiers opened the door for them to get in. It was a long time after the car left before we were able to move again.
(Toksvig 2005, p.280)

Some of the war texts make use of parallel narratives, and in *Fireshadow* (Eaton 2004), for example, the most significant deaths are not those on a battle field but those by fire, in a bush fire and in a car accident; one occurs in the past amongst the POWs and one occurs in the present. The war in Europe is an almost silent and opaque shadow of the reality of the dual narratives.

Transformed

Death is transformed in different ways in the texts. It is part of the background of war in the adventure story where war time is the framing setting and where children struggle for survival. In *Blitzed* (Swindells 2003), a time-slip story set in the present and during the 'home front' in London in WWII, war becomes the setting for 'an awfully big adventure', and even when characters die it is flagged as important, too frightening, and too 'real'. A boy named Shrapnel is killed under a railway viaduct during a bombing raid. The narrator is luckily absent during the air-raid and reports the aftermath. The sensitivity of this reporting of

death is prefaced within the text: 'I'll tell you why, but I warn you, it's a *real* war story, the sort they never show on telly. Skip the next bit if you like; I won't blame you' (Swindells 2003, p.100).

Another obvious and early example of war-as-background is in the *Biggles* series where the stories focus on aerial combat and on the 'death' of the plane rather than of the pilot. Published before and during WWII, the early texts (which have been re-issued in recent years) focus on 'the great days of 1917 and 1918' (WWI), as this excerpt from *Biggles and the Camels are Coming* (Johns 1932/2003) demonstrates:

A Fokker triplane, looking like a Venetian blind, flashed down on his flank and the sight sent him fighting mad. The Camel made the lightning right hand turn for which it was famous and the twin Vickers guns on the cowling poured a stream of bullets through the Fokker's centre section. The Boche machine lurched drunkenly and plunged down out of sight below, and Biggles continued on his way without another glance.

(Johns 1932/2003, p.174)

Death assumes less importance in some texts allowing other ideas such as endurance and hope to emerge. Any story of war has to battle the strong assumption that children's literature should ultimately reflect ideas of hope, the development of agency and a possible future. The preferred alternative is clear in *AK* (Dickinson 1990) with its double ending: one offering hope which is embodied in game park with elephants grazing in a peaceful country, and the other offering the ongoing chaos of civil war and famine. In Morris Gleitzman's *Once* (Gleitzman 2005) and in *Hitler's Canary* (Toksvig 2005) the use of first person, posits both survival and hope. The validity of the discourse is dependent on the survival of the narrator. Similarly, Tommo survives in *Private Peaceful* (Murgurpo 2003), although his older brother is shot by firing squad for an assumed act of cowardice. Tommo hears the birds singing, knowing that 'I must survive. I have promises to keep' (Murgurpo 2003, p.185).

Other examples of narratives that offer a discourse of hope are *Fireshadow* (Eaton 2004) and *Boys of Blood*

and *Bone* (Metzenthien 2003). These novels are structured as parallel narratives that are temporally separated: the past describes the war, death and violence, whereas the present is the time where characters reflect on war, learn and grow in themselves, and remember familial or even personal involvement. In *Boys of Blood and Bone*, Andy and his descendents' courage, honesty and 'Australian-ness' are reinforced in the complex pattern of multiple voices, and different time periods (past and present). His diary forms the direct link across time and in it his experiences are deliberately understated, often expressed in colloquial clichés: 'Settling in. Firing constant now. Never a dull moment' (Metzenthien 2003, p.135). His words are illuminated by the third person framing narrative, but the horror belongs in that past time. His equally laconic present day counterpart, Henry, sums up the death of Andy as 'he was just a young guy who'd been brave enough to put himself in a place where there was a chance he could get killed, and he was' (Metzenthien 2003, p.248).

The most potent transformation of death occurs through metaphors, which are often structured as positives, of the continuing of life. In *Milkweed* (Spinelli 2003) the plant, both as itself and as physical evidence of the existence of angels, increases its significance as a metaphor of hope through repetition until it is finally planted in peace time by the narrator who says 'Angel plants must have sun' (Spinelli 2003, p.269)⁴.

In Sonya Hartnett's *The Silver Donkey* (Hartnett 2004) the metaphor is explicit as the children learn that the donkey 'belongs to the trustworthy and the brave' (p165); a position reinforced by the role of the donkey in the four embedded stories told to the children by the soldier. Nevertheless, despite the obvious significance of the donkey (both Christian and military), there is an ambiguity to its power as a talisman, for the soldier is one who is deserting the army, suffering from temporary blindness, going home.

Candles at Dawn (Ural 2004) is a modern re-telling of the Gallipoli story from the dual perspective of an Australian girl and her Turkish counterpart. As the title suggests, the candle is a metaphor for the lost lives of soldiers, on both sides, and conflated as memorials at the annual dawn service: 'She saw candles wavering on a chilly silent shore

before the break of day. Endless tiny flames piercing the darkness. Hundreds and thousands of burning candles at dawn. On the same shore, hundreds upon thousands of young men flickered and were extinguished in the dawn of their lives' (Ural 2004, p.158). Candles are significant as objects of light, but they are also tiny flames of fire.

As mentioned above in *Fires shadow* (Eaton 2004), fire is used as a metaphor in several of the war stories, carrying with it a certain weight for it is also ambiguous, both destructive and purifying. The physical damage of fire for the survivor, in *Fires shadow*, is often an outward manifestation of inner psychological damage and trauma.⁵ The ambiguity of fire is emphasised in *Secrets in the Fire* (Mankell 2000) and *The Fire-Eaters* (Almond 2003). In the latter, fire is used to denote security and comfort that comes from sharing the warmth of the domestic fire in the home or the fires of driftwood and sea-coal on the beach; there is also the ambivalent attraction of fire for the fire-eating McNulty whose 'brain'd been boiled. Too much war, too much heat...' (Almond 2003, p.15); and within the political climate of the book's setting of the Cuban Missile crisis there is the distant but very real threat of the ultimate fire, that of an atomic explosion: 'All over the world people behaved like we did in little tattered Kely Bay. We trembled and quaked and were filled with dread' (p.244).

Metaphor is most complex in *Lord of the Nutcracker Men* (Lawrence 2002) where the young narrator (whose father is away at war) imagines that he is influencing the course of the war in the trenches by how he plays with his toy wooden soldier figures. Underlying the connection between toy and soldier is the cultural positioning of war as a game, reinforced by the sub-title 'when war's not a game any more'. Some of these figures were given to Johnny before the war but his father continues to carve and send new figures from the Front. The figures themselves become almost alive, blurring the distinction between the living and the dead, they are representations of those involved in the fighting: the wounded, the despairing, the French and German, the generals and the ordinary soldier like Johnny's father (toy-maker and one who is toyed with). As in many of the texts, references to real events, in this case the Christmas armistice, are integrated into a subtle

debate about the ambiguity of truth and lies, of games and reality, in events, character and language itself.

Other narrative techniques/structures

Several narrative techniques and structures shape death in war so that it is positioned as significant but something that is apart from the reality of war. I have already mentioned the use of the first person narrative and this is intensified in some discourses by making the tone one of almost exaggerated or determined innocence. This is used in *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (Boyne 2006) where Bruno not only never realises who the Fury is, but also the key iconic reference terms and signs for Holocaust stories are misunderstood or reinterpreted, from the name of the concentration camp – 'Out-with' – to his desire to wear striped pyjamas with a star. It is also found in *Once* (Gleitzman 2005) where young Felix thinks he is caught up in a war where books are the motivation for the enemy, and his reaction to seeing the dead is simply 'oh'. He cannot speak of what he cannot comprehend. Similarly, in *Milkweed* (Spinelli 2003) the narrating character (of many names, and none chosen by him) reports on all that happens in a remote objective tone.

I want to finish by briefly looking at how setting is used in positioning death in a small selection of Australian texts as compared to some texts from other nations. In war stories available to the Australian reader death is usually in another time and another place, often unfamiliar to the Australian reader. Temporal displacement is implicit in many of the texts for most are set in WWI or WWII. These are texts of now versus then, and of the difference the time-gap makes for the focalizing narrators. As I mentioned earlier, it is emphasized in *Boys of Blood and Bone* (Metzenthen 2003) and in *Fires shadow* (Eaton 2004) because of parallel narratives, one in the past and one in the present. Also in *Blitzed* (Swindells 2003) all that remains in the present is a museum full of objects, one character, now an old lady, a 'miserable old bag' (p.11), and her memories. It is the reader and focalising narrator, who have to attempt to make the connections between the past lives and events and the present.

In all of these, place is used as a linking factor across time but in some war stories there is considerable spatial

displacement. This is most apparent in *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2005), *Secrets in the Fire* (Mankell 2000) and *AK* (Dickinson 1990) which all take place in Africa, 'another country'. The discourses of war set in Africa offer a negotiation (and compromise) between killing and adventure. There is further distancing here because of the nature of the war: civil, guerilla, with no enemy. Here too are the only examples of the child as soldier. Death is found when this happens, but it may not be foregrounded. The worst that young Paul does in *AK* is to blow up an empty car, and imagine killing one of the gang leaders 'an easy simple target. Three shots rapid, to make sure' (Dickinson 1990, p.171). In *Secrets in the Fire* (Mankell 2000) the focus is on the aftermath of war, the survival of a victim of landmines. When death is present and brutally explicit as in *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2005) then it might be thought that the book is not really for the child or young adult reader.⁶ That is, cultural pressures about appropriateness of reading material and consequent censorship occur. In this text there are descriptions of a brutal homosexual rape, and, as a repeated dream-memory, the first killing by the narrator of a girl and a woman: 'I am liking the sound of the knife chopping KPWUDA, KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feet. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark' (Iweala 2005, p.63). Like so many war stories this text owes much to *All Quiet On the Western Front* by Erich Remarque (1963/1972). It is a story told in the close focus of the first person by a young soldier, in this case a boy on the cusp of puberty, rather than Remarque's young man. Between these two is *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh (1994/1998, in Vietnamese, 1991), a novel written by a north Vietnamese army veteran. Here too is the story of the destruction and corruption of a whole generation of young men, of 'the days when all of us were young, very pure and very sincere' (p.217).

Finally, we have to ask: is it really possible for these narratives of war to negotiate between the adventure story with deeds of heroism, more subtle discourses with death disguised or transformed, and the killing of soldiers? Ted Smout (1898-2004) was a stretcher-bearer in World War 1:

I still dream occasionally. Wake up at night and realize, 'Oh, I'm in bed'. Just occasionally but not much now. I think there's a subconscious way of putting it in the background. And you never talk about it 'cause there's nobody to talk to about it. All the diggers are dead and anyone else wouldn't understand. I mean there's no way you could convey to the ordinary civilians the horrors that happened in the war. No way. Indescribable. (Caulfield 2006, p.528).

From the number of war stories written for children it seems that the challenge is to try to achieve what Smout and many others see as impossible.



NOTES

1. With three exceptions, all the texts examined in this paper have been published since 1990, and the majority in the 21st century. There is a strong possibility of a *fin de siecle* effect in this recent interest in war stories.
2. An unpublished paper presented (*in absentia*) to the IRSCS conference, Dublin, 2005. The title 'Looking and looking away: the impossibility of picture books on war'.
3. The nexus of silence, power and disempowerment is most closely examined in Ruth Wajnryb's *The silence: how tragedy shapes talk* (2001).
4. The use of milkweed as a metaphor in Spinelli's text bears a close parallel to the position of fireweed in Jill Paton Walsh's *Fireweed* (1970). Here it too is a weed growing in bombed and deserted urban places and is a reminder of life, resilience and the natural.
5. Several of the characters in these war texts show the symptoms of post traumatic stress syndrome, known as 'shell-shock' for WWI combatants.
6. I have included this text in this discussion because it has been marketed as a YA novel.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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