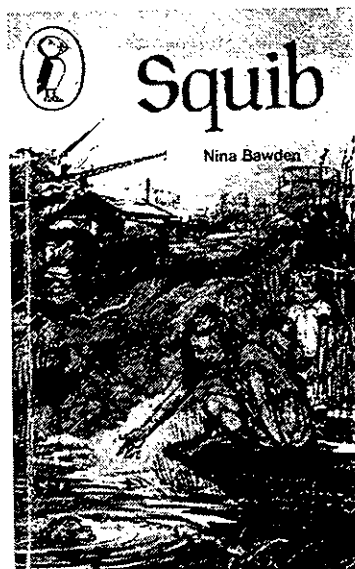


## 'You Have To Get Used To Things As They Are' Writing The Child As Victim: Revisiting Nina Bawden's *Squib*.

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In an era where the boundaries between the categories 'adult' and 'child' are continually being contested Nina Bawden's fictions are of particular interest. Social attitudes to children and fictional representations of the child have altered during the forty years in which Bawden has been producing 'realist' fictions for both adults and children. *Squib* (Bawden 1973), first published in 1971, represents a conscious departure from the safe adventure formula in writing childhood for children, previously practised by Bawden. It demonstrates also the limitations of writing within a set of generic boundaries designed to position the child as other. *Squib* is of interest for the ways in which Bawden attempts to fuse the demands of a more stringent realism with a desire to protect the sensibilities of her pre-adolescent implied reader. However, through denying the reader access to the point of view of the abused child at the centre of the text and through imposing 'a happy ending after all' (p.107), which serves to disempower the child protagonists, Bawden confirms a view of childhood as protected site.

The world of *Squib* is marked by the absence of a secret place of escape for recovery and healing available to children in many of her earlier fictions and strategies associated with the discourse of realism are more obviously employed too in the construction of characters and their



backgrounds. One of the consequences of Bawden's consciously more realist approach is that childhood powerlessness is foregrounded. The emphasis is not on the child's need to escape but rather on the child's need to be rescued.

At the centre of the text is the symbolic outline of the child victim which functions as the catalyst for action. The child *Squib* recalls the pathetic child of Victorian fiction: orphaned, abused and trapped. His virtual silence and the absence of focalisation effectively serve a dual function. Significantly Bawden protects the implied reader from direct access to the terror and misery of *Squib*'s situation, a subject she foregrounds in her later adult novel *Anna Apparent* (1972).

Further, in his silence *Squib* is a figure of mystery, a blank space on which possible identities and situations can be inscribed. The child focalizers Kate Pollack and Robin Tite construct identities for him and interpret his past and present situation through fantasising from the shreds of evidence available to them.

In seeking to define the discourse of realism Stephens describes a number of strategies a writer may employ in creating the illusion of real characters:

*To construct in realistic fiction a character able to make sense of what is happening in her life a writer needs to endow that character with inner mental processes and with access to another . . . Inner mental processes can be portrayed by the use of first person narration or character focalisation but the portrayal of an active fantasy life in the every day sense of day-dream or make-believe is a further strategy common in realism.*  
(Stephens 1992, p. 260)

'Inner mental processes represented through character focalisation', 'access to another', 'the portrayal of an active fantasy life', are all strategies employed by Bawden in the construction of her child characters to suggest not only the richness and intensity of a child's inner life, free from adult surveillance but also as a means of constructing individual focalizers whose versions of *Squib* emerge

from their own needs and situations. Bawden's comment on the novel is pertinent:

*[It] is not about Squib himself but about the children who rescue him and the fantasies they pin on him.* (Bawden 1974, pp.7-8)

While these individual fantasies are played off against each other the dominant movement is towards testing them against reality, with the intended message that fantasy can imprison rather than empower.

The pattern of constructing compatible gendered opposites established in earlier fictions, like *The Runaway Summer* (1969) is extended in *Squib* through the use of two pairs of children. While Kate Pollack and Robin Tite are constructed as principal focalizers, the points of view of the younger pair Sammy and Prue Tite are not only individualized but they too, have important roles in the action. Each child responds to Squib and interprets him in terms of his/her own carefully constructed frame of reference and situation. The archetypes and motifs of fairytale and myth which each child draws upon to create meaning suggest both his/her own individual terrors and needs and work to create a complex representation of the secret world of childhood as a troubled state of which adults have only a very limited understanding.

Bawden not only suggests subtleties and tensions in the

relationships between the children but effectively provides justification for why the four children each respond as they do. Sammy, at five and a half, for example, is the Wordsworthian child, intuitive and imaginatively responsive, with the ability not only to communicate with the silent Squib but also to confer an appropriate name and thus to fix metaphorically and permanently Squib's identity. Sammy knows the 'truth' of Squib's situation but this truth is so overlaid by wicked child-eating witches and enchanted woods that the older children are unable to extract the thread of 'truth' from the rich embroideries of his fantasies. Sammy is endowed with the special qualities of the Romantic child's imaginative reasoning. He uses literal identification of fairy-tale motifs with real characters so that even when he speaks the 'truth' about Squib the wicked witch motif weakens the strength of his testimony:

*'He won't go till we've gone...He's not scared of the Wild Ones he's scared of you taking him home. You'd be scared too if you did. His Auntie's a wicked witch, she'd catch you and tie you up and never let you go.'*

*'Oh, Sammy,' Kate said.*

*His eyes were round as pennies and solemn. 'Well she ties him up in the laundry basket sometimes,' he said. (pp.13-14).*

In spite of his uneasiness about Squib's appearance and behaviour, twelve year old Robin, closer to adulthood, knows that Sammy's version would be discounted by adults. The adult wants hard, 'real' evidence not speculation or the stuff of fairytales. Robin is inhibited by his own understanding of how adults construct the boundaries between themselves and children:

*'You can't go tearing off to the police or something and say look, there's this kid in the park, we don't know who he is or where he lives or anything about him at all, but he's shy and he's got odd eyes and a bit of a bruise on one leg and Sammy, who's only five and a half and tells the most whopping lies, says his Auntie's a wicked witch, so please will you do something about it?'* (pp.17-18)

Prue at eight is represented as less confused by the relationship between reality and fantasy. She expresses scorn for Sammy's fears and Robin's caution but comprehends that Squib's situation was 'something more frightening than a hundred old witches.' (p.79). Prue knows that children are powerless to control the horror that adults are capable of inflicting.

Prue's strength and forthrightness connect her directly with her mother and Bawden uses Kate's mother, Mrs Pollack the children's book illustrator, to signal Prue's difference. One of her drawings shows Prue 'looking out over her

shoulder' not into 'the dark tangled wood' like the other children (p.22). It is she who offers an explanation to Kate of the source of Prue's strength which only serves to fuel Kate's sense of inadequacy:

*'A good face, that child. Strong, no nonsense. She'll grow up like her mother. . . . She was [an Olympic swimmer when she was young]. . . . Prue will be something too, by the look of her.'* (pp.22-3)

Prue is the only child who directly attempts to challenge adult authority, embodied in her mother, a challenge which of course meets with defeat. In matching Prue against her strong, no nonsense, mother, Bawden suggests not only the kind of adult Prue will become but also the reasons why she would instinctively seek her mother in a time of terrible danger:

*Mrs Tite looked at her daughter and Prue looked back at her. Both pairs of eyes were clear as green glass: they met for a long moment and it was Prue's that fell.* (p.31)

The lesson here is that a strong child is no match for a strong adult. Because Prue is the child who seeks adult help when the rescue expedition at the caravan spills over into nightmare, Bawden ensures that the lesson is well learnt.

Mrs Pollack also makes this clear to Kate after adult intervention has prevented tragedy:

*Kate began to cry: 'You said Prue was the only one of us with any sense!'*

*'Oh, Kate. . . . ' Her mother sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. 'I'm sorry darling, I only meant Prue did the right thing, going for her mother. It wasn't the sort of situation children could deal with.'* (p.104)

Significantly too, Prue's most troubling fantasies centre around the loss of her role model her Olympian Mother, the 'Human Life Belt'. Squib's 'Auntie' and the punishments she inflicts on him are all too much like her worst nightmares of loss.

*Prue thought of her mother dying. It was something that often troubled her in the middle of the night, especially if she had gone to bed angry. Her mother dying and her father marrying again, some wicked stepmother who would beat her and lock her up in the dark cupboard under the stairs.* (p.74)

One of the great strengths of this novel is the ways in which shifting focalization is utilised. There are no adult conversations carried out behind the backs of the child focalisers. Nonetheless some very important ones are implied. For example, Mrs Pollack's final realisation of the depths of her daughter's distress seems to have been brought home to her by 'the Human Life Belt,' Mrs Tite, after she has rescued Kate and Squib from the quarry pit. The 'happy

ending' too, implies a great deal of off-stage adult negotiation to bring about Squib's convenient fostering.

Because dialogue, and access to 'the inner mental processes' of individual children are effectively utilised, Bawden is able to suggest 'the extraordinary gulf between what people say and what they really mean' (Bawden 1974, p.8). It is a gulf which not only separates children from each other but compounds the gulf between adult and child, as for example, when Robin tries to articulate his growing sense of unease about 'wafy', 'touchy', 'broody' Kate, to his mother:

*Robin said, 'I don't think it's so sensible leaving his room like that, all his toys and things. Like a sort of shrine.'*

*'I wouldn't say it was like that . . . more like she just never bothered. Why should she, the house is big enough? And she had other things to think about, earning a living for one thing, so she just shut the doors and carried on.'*

*'I don't think it was like that I mean, it doesn't feel like that,' Robin said obstinately. But he didn't know how it did feel. Whether it was the room or just Kate, that seemed so strange to him. He would have liked to say, Kate thinks he's still alive, but it was not the sort of thing he could say to his mother.'*

*Instead he said 'Why didn't Mrs Pollack sell the house when they died? I mean it's so huge, just for two.'* (p.34)

The gap between child and adult appears insurmountable. Mrs Tite is the voice of adult reason, judging from the point of view of common sense, but her perspective denies the validity of a child's instinctive feeling. Robin is trapped into childhood, unable to articulate his concerns: 'it was not the sort of thing he could say to his mother.' He is in effect, silenced.

Childhood is a separate state as Sammy makes clear (after his initiation into smoking) to the socially marginalized Wild One who treads an uncertain line between childhood and adulthood: 'Oh, we won't tell anyone, we never tell people things' (p.43).

The relationship between Robin and Kate makes clear Bawden's conviction that it takes a child to know a child, a concept which owes much to Rousseau's 'Childhood has its own special ways of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself' (Rousseau in Coveney 1967, p.44).

Robin functions as significant other for Kate and the use of dual focalisation is particularly effective in suggesting the seriousness of Kate's obsession with Squib. The reader participates in Kate's own inner mental processes as she shifts from the delusion that Squib is the

ghost of her dead brother Rupert, to an even more disturbing delusion that he is Rupert alive. Alignment with Robin's growing sense of unease and his attempts to puncture Kate's obsession provide the reader with a more rational position. His own fantasy about Squib while still improbable has, on the face of it, rather more credibility.

Robin and Kate are constructed as complementary opposites, male and female, working class and middle class, and the fantasies they each construct around Squib emerge as much from their constructed gendered differences as from their familial contexts.

Robin, reliable and responsible in his relationships with his parents and younger siblings is something of an outsider to his peer group. 'A Grammar school yob', cautious, intelligent, unathletic, whose aspirations to classical scholarship set him apart from his working class background. While Robin's ambitions are tested and assented to by his Olympian mother her advice to him, 'Tell your father that [it's all you want to do] then, don't hide behind me' (p.47), installs the silent Mr Tite as patriarchal head of the family in spite of Mrs Tite's maternal power.

The working-class home is 'the good home' idealised in its abundance of food, children and big caring women. Mrs Tite as the archetypal nurturer regards the

men of her tribe 'as really rather unimportant, poor, weak creatures to be indulged and petted' (p.31), and creates a desire in Robin to prove otherwise. In convincing himself that Squib has been kidnapped, he casts himself in the role of school boy hero imagining fame in the form of a newspaper headline: 'Local Boy in Rescue Dash' (p.87).

His fantasy is essentially about gaining power and takes the form of a hero myth embodying the male virtues of courage, aggression and triumph. It serves as a compensation for his own feelings of powerlessness and for his place in a family dominated by strong females. As Mrs Pollack comments, 'It's the sort of thing a boy might think' (p.105). Because the dominant message of the book is to reinforce the powerlessness of childhood, Robin is denied the affirmation of fame that a newspaper headline would represent. He does however succeed in rescuing Squib from the caravan but his heroism is seen to be relative. His enemies are not a desperate band of kidnappers but a couple brutalised by ignorance and the inescapable squalor and hopelessness of their situation. His triumph is carefully limited to a court appearance but in terms of the limited scale of action that Bawden's view of childhood allows, it is supposed to be triumph enough.

While Robin's fantasy is conceived

as a vision of heroic action, Kate's is of quite a different order because it is an attempt to rewrite the past. Having its origin in unresolved grief, loss and guilt at her part in the accidental drowning of her father and little brother three years before, Kate's fantasy is female and maternal, a quest for recovery of the lost child and by implication, recovery too, through appeasement, of the emotionally absent mother.

All the details of Kate's situation serve to create a wholly convincing representation of a character who is so withdrawn that her fantasy is more of a dangerous obsession than mere compensation. Kate is in clear need of rescue but no adult support seems available. She is isolated by her class, her school which has equipped her with a 'very polite but distant private school voice' (p.10), and her identity as the survivor of a family tragedy for which she carries an intolerable burden of guilt:

*She heard her mother's voice in her head. 'Oh Kate, if only you hadn't gone in the sea without telling me . . .'* (p.66)

Her head is filled with memories of her inadequacy; 'We think Rupert is quite exceptional . . . I'm afraid Kate's talents are purely domestic' (p.52), with no promise of alteration, of gaining her mother's approval.

Kate's situation is defined by lack.

The great dark house she inhabits with her mother stands on the other side of the road to the 'good' home of the Tites'. Its emptiness and darkness serve as a perpetual reminder of loss. While the 'good' home is defined by its overflowing abundance of family life, shared meals and crowded rooms, Kate's home functions as a memorial to the dead, rather than an environment for the living. There are no shared meals here, Mrs Pollack makes do with sandwiches on a tray while Kate is relegated to the kitchen to eat the fish pie, prepared not by her own mother but by the 'Human Life Belt' from the other side of the street.

It would be an over-simplification to reject Mrs Pollack as 'a bad adult'; she has qualities of imagination which Mrs Tite lacks but she is clearly in need of mothering herself. The implications are that she is not 'a proper mother' nor it would seem was she intended to be, despite her expressed desire for a large family to fill the house. Mrs Tite's comment to Robin, 'such a little thing, thin as a lath and all eyes' (p.34), is a description of a child-like waif, perfectly appropriate for a children's book illustrator but not the potential mother of six. The terms in which she is reported to have described her proposed family suggest a very naive, rather romantic view of ordering children from a catalogue, 'three boys and three girls' (p.34).

While three years are supposed to have passed since the drowning there is a static quality about the lives of Kate and her mother. The text is silent about their every day lives during that period. All that is suggested is a closing-off, a withdrawal of the mother from the child and a transformation of home to tomb. In her representation of Kate and her mother, Bawden offers the potential for a parallel study of grief but there is no boundary breaking here. Mrs Pollack is never focalized; she remains emotionally absent.

The 'good adult' Mrs Tite, offers a sympathetic report on the reasons for her behaviour after Kate's hospitalisation with appendicitis:

*'Poor soul, she was so upset, blaming herself for not being here, for not noticing the child was ill, for everything under the sun! Even for working so hard! "I don't need to" she said, "it's become like a drug to me!"'* (p.54)

Three years of such addiction seems rather extreme and Mrs Pollack cannot be absolved from blame for failing to attend to her daughter's emotional needs. She fails to see, for example, Sophie's manipulative exploitation of her daughter's need to find a substitute for Rupert. Further, her frequent refusals to be drawn into discussing Rupert or the accident effectively silence her child. The distance between mother and child is a significant contributor to

Kate's disturbing withdrawal from reality.

Kate's sense of guilt is never really confronted and all she can do is to try to make amends by rescuing Squib from the watery pit in a symbolic replay of the earlier tragedy. Even then she is denied success. It is the 'good adult' who averts another tragedy. Certainly Kate is not burdened with the guilt of being responsible for another little boy's death and the incident does allow her to make apparent the extent of her delusion, when she gasps to 'the Human Life Belt': 'Get Rupert, not me' (p.101). But for *her* mother Squib is the wrong child. Kate's desire for recovery can never be satisfied.

The passage which concludes the rescue is significant because it images the gulf which separates the adult perspective from the child's. To Kate as she swims towards Squib, the distance between them seems vast but the adult observer sees it very differently:

*To the watchers on the shore, it was all over very quickly. Neither child was far from the bank, and they were quite close together. A minute's struggle with Kate, but the little boy was sensible: he wound his hands into Mrs Tite's hair and rode on her back, high out of the water. No need for anyone else even to get their feet wet: Mrs Tite rose up in the shadows on to dry land, a vast dripping figure with a child under*

*each arm.* (p.102)

Adult power is reaffirmed in the form of the Olympian mother. The text is notably silent in acknowledging the extraordinary courage that Kate and Robin demonstrated in rescuing Squib from the horror of his imprisonment. Although Robin is allowed the excitement of a court appearance, Kate is merely put in her place by her mother: 'It wasn't the sort of situation children could deal with. What did you and Robin think you were up to?' (p.104).

Kate and Robin acted on their own instinctive feelings of dis-ease initiated by the little boy's difference (his solitariness, his silence, his babyish out-grown clothes, his inability to play, the bracelet of bruises around his leg, his fear of home and his sudden disappearance). These differences had passed unnoticed by the adults in the park, including Mrs Pollack, who in retrospect 'can't place him' (p.23), although she had actually sketched him. Children's different way of 'seeing, thinking and feeling', has saved one of their own.

While Mrs Pollack emerges from her studio long enough to administer to Kate during her recovery from shock and to explain what real life is all about; 'getting used to things as they are' (p.107), she is conspicuously absent in the last chapter as Mrs Tite urges

Robin to 'try and cheer [Kate] up a bit now, her mother's half out of her mind with the worry.' (p.107). It appears that Mrs Pollack is destined to play out the withdrawn artist/mad woman in the attic. In the interests of realism Bawden refrains from transforming her into a generous, accepting 'real mother', prepared to accept a foster substitute for the lost child. Kate's emotional rescue has to be engineered by the 'good' home on the working class side of the road, which will always be over there, another country, a perpetual reminder of her own lack.

In a novel in which the purported message is that fantasising can be dangerous, that children 'have to get used to things as they are' delivered by that most unlikely exponent of clear-sighted real life, Mrs Pollack, Squib's story turns out to be just as unlikely and romantic as Kate's and Robin's versions. A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggested some of the problems involved in the closure of *Squib*:

*It is unlikely not because it couldn't happen but because it is insufficiently explained and motivated.*

(*Times Literary Supplement* July 2 1971, p.775)

In setting up 'off-stage', Squib's fostering by Emerald, Mrs Tite's clone-like daughter, Bawden provides Kate with a substitute brother. While everything in the

text suggests that Kate both needs and deserves this, the closure simply reaffirms children's powerlessness because it is so imposed. Closure offers the implied reader sympathetically aligned with Kate, a soothing consolation as compensation for an impossible desire.

Within the context of the seventies Bawden's choice of the subject of child abuse can be regarded as an attempt at boundary breaking but it rests uneasily within a view of childhood as protected site. In an effort to introduce children to an adult view of a deterministic universe she endeavours to humanise Starvation Sal and her brutish husband as victims of ignorance, poverty and deprivation, to condemn the deed not the doer. What is denied by this is the terror the children have observed through their own eyes. Kate's reaction, 'But those awful people . . .' (p.105), is in the context of what she has witnessed, a much more valid one than her mother's charitable rationalisation: 'She meant to be kind, perhaps' (p.105).

Closure fails to satisfy because too many of the troubling aspects of damaged childhood are sealed over. Kate's sense of lack is never confronted; instead the child to be fostered by Emerald is offered as an appropriate object for the displacement of impossible desire. More disturbingly, this child's relocation is set up to deny him a

past, a relationship with his recently deceased parents and the significance of his true name. 'Henry Lincoln Gladstone McAlpine' is effaced and he is fixed forever as Squib.

Bawden's own sense of dissatisfaction is reflected in her exploration of some of these issues in the two novels which followed **Squib**. Both **Anna Apparent** (1972) and **Carrie's War** (1973) connect childhood experience to the formation of adult personality. There are however significant differences in the attitudes to childhood registered in these texts. The adult novel, **Anna Apparent** explores the long term effects of child abuse which are partly resolved by placing them within a context of adult experience and working through them. In contrast **Carrie's War**, a novel for children, seems to resolve the trauma of childhood guilt through allowing an adult to return to the bounded site of childhood with the promise of recovery of the past.

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#### Acknowledgement

The illustration is from the art work of Shirley Hughes for the cover of *Squib* by Nina Bawden (Puffin Books, 1973).

#### Biographical Note

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