

CHILDREN'S FICTION ABOUT 9/11

Ethnic, Heroic and National Identities



Jo Lampert

ROUTLEDGE


CHILDREN'S FICTION ABOUT 9/11

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JO LAMPERT

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Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term 'children' to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, there have also been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

Chapter One

Children's Literature and Its Cultural Influence

“But then on September 11, 2001 something so huge and horrible happened that the whole world shook.” (Kalman, 2002, p. 23)

The Impact of 9/11 on Children's Literature

On September 11, 2001, (9/11) amidst attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a new context was set for considerations of identity and culture. The idea that the world will never be the same again has become commonplace and part of a now taken-for-granted discourse. ‘9/11’, as the attacks have come to be known, is often described as the “day that shook the world” (Hawthorne & Winter, 2002, p. xvii), with the popular press post-9/11 repeatedly claiming that the world has changed in profound and lasting ways (Sullivan, 2002; Eccleston, 2003). So great has been the attention given to this notion that, according to Murphet (2003), the target of the attack, Ground Zero, is now one of the great consecrated fetishes of our time. In a similar vein, Jones (2003) claims that the term ‘September 11’ has become more than a date. ‘Since September 11’, we say, ‘prior to September 11’, or ‘in the wake of September 11’. September 11 is thus an historical moment from which the cultural forces and identities that emerged may be examined.

The focus of this book is on cultural identities within fiction written for young people about 9/11. In some ways, it is surprising enough that any children's books have been written about 9/11 at all. This fact in itself shocks, given the startling images evoked by the event, and the complexities of information with which the young readers of these books must grapple. Indeed, some of the books *are* truly graphic. They come complete with apocalyptic images of planes crashing into buildings, and references to despair, evil and seemingly inexplicable horror. Nonetheless, children's books have an honorable tradition

of dealing with themes of good and evil, and the presence of these books is no surprise. Children's books are, of course, always political in nature. Children's literary critics such as John Stephens (1992) and Peter Hunt (2001) have regularly reviewed the political work of children's books, and although 9/11 at first glance seems an inappropriate or unlikely topic for a child's text, current events have often provided impetus for such books (more so in young adult fiction than in picture books), though not usually following so closely after the event (Saxby, 1993; Nodelman, 1992; Stephens, 1992).

As literature is "often a site where cultural and moral conflicts are invoked and analyzed, indeed encoded" (Salaita, 2005, p. 147), an examination of children's books about 9/11 may prove significant in understanding how identities emerge and compete in the stories. Since 9/11, world events continue to change in ways we can only begin to anticipate. So too the shifts we see in children's literature are in constant revision. The shifts, however, are slippery, sometimes subtle. Indeed, things may not superficially appear to have shifted at all. They may be continuations of cultural attitudes that existed prior to 9/11. Or the shifts may be dramatic. Whether or not we can identify the world as having been 'really' changed (whatever might be meant by that), 9/11 immediately did become, as Baudrillard (2002a) claims, the 'absolute' event, "the 'mother' of all events" (p. 4). As such, both the 'moment' of 9/11, and the identities produced by it became presences in children's fiction produced in the West.

Through an analysis of a selection of children's books about 9/11, we can examine how changes are played out within the texts, specifically relating to the formation of the cultural identities produced through the workings of discourse (Baker, 1999). The supposition that literature represents cultural and historical change is especially meaningful in a post-9/11 context because of the aforementioned assertion by the popular press, and also claims by academics (such as Giroux, 2002) and literary authors (Atwood, 2006) that the world has indeed changed fundamentally and significantly. Children's literary critic Perry Nodelman (1992) states, if nothing else "our knowledge of history and culture can help us understand which of our possible interpretations of a book are the most likely ones" (p. 92). If the world has changed since 9/11, this should reveal itself in children's literature. It is through the workings of discourse that meanings are made and beliefs constructed about who and how to 'be' in the world (Baker, 1999). One of the most significant trends in the political aftermath of 9/11 is the emergence of new discourses about what it means to be a good and responsible citizen and about the nature of national identity. Also emerging have been complex notions of ethnicity including how ethnicity is (or is not) related to good and evil, questions about racial profiling, and talk of border protection. Additionally, it seems that there is now a new demand being made of the American subject in particular: to perform heroically in the face of this hypothetically changed world (see Tickner, 2002; Hyde, 2005). Adults and children alike are being offered what seem to be

shifting identities of ethnicity and citizenry in this post-9/11 world contributing to the myth-making that produces new heroes for new times. If the children's texts about 9/11 involve this notion of shifting identities, then how do they contribute to the process of 'educating' young readers about themselves, others, and the world in which we live?

The central purpose here is to understand some of the shifts in the performance of ethnic, national and related heroic identities as evidenced in children's literature since 9/11, and how the books represent these emerging identities. Within these performances of identity the politics of representation and social change are interrogated. Maurice Saxby (1993) asserts, for instance, that "children's books, perhaps more than any other print media, reflect social change" (p. 416). Moreover, the politics within children's literature are believed by many (Stephens, 1992; Hollindale, 1991) to parallel social movements, and are inevitably contested, revised and changed alongside historical moments.

In the early stages of this project it was only speculative that there would, indeed, *be* a corpus of books produced for children about 9/11. Court (2002) predicted, for instance, that it would take time for the events of 9/11 to appear in children's books. Historically, it has usually not been until subsequent generations that we have been able to see the influence of historical events in children's texts (Wyatt, 2005). For example, children's books about World War II did not appear until those who had been children in the 1930s and 1940s reached adulthood and were motivated to write about it (Scutter, 1999). However, in the years following 2001, more children's books than anticipated were published about 9/11. The appearance of 9/11 in children's texts as a real or theoretical moment of change is, therefore, worthy of examination. If children are indeed constituted by what they read, as John Stephens (2003) asserts, then the books written about major critical events will be an important source of new and competing discourses with respect to identity, culture, race, and citizenship. What Stephens highlights by way of this line of argument is the profound importance children's books have in producing performances of identity, and thus their significance as sites for socio-cultural investigation.

In coming to terms with the topic, some key issues emerge. The event itself, the attack on the United States, would seem to be significant enough. Yet, since that date other events have, if not superseded, then certainly added to a growing list of historical events. For instance, 9/11 was immediately followed by the threat of anthrax. The War on Iraq has continued its link to the collective memory about 9/11 on Westerners. For example, Hurricane Katrina posed a new national crisis in the United States. Time goes on. All of these moments could at some point appear in children's literature, and may contribute to new discourses on cultural identity. 'Change' is non-linear. All of these 'moments' work on cultural identity simultaneously and in dynamic ways, yet 9/11 remains pivotal. When these subsequent moments

are brought together along with the claims about the importance of the event of 9/11 itself, then children's books written about 9/11 take on a special significance as cultural markers or artifacts. The work that they do in opening up and shutting down possibilities for identity becomes crucial as pedagogy of the present.

While this book also draws on children's texts about 9/11 from Canada, Australia and Britain, most of the young people's books considered here are American. Though, in a demonstration of sympathy, the French newspaper *Le Monde* famously reported "We Are All Americans" as a response to 9/11, the date holds obvious special cultural significance for the United States. In this respect, the books examined are specialized texts. They may seem like universal, or at least universally Western responses to the attacks, but in fact they often represent views of the world that are focally 'American' (a term used tentatively here, since they are views highly contested by many of the other Americas, including Canada and Central and South America). That these 9/11 books, varied though they are, are mostly written and published in the U.S.A. is obviously important. This strongly guides any reading of the texts, as they themselves are written from this narrative perspective and use social and political registers that resonate in familiar (though sometimes mythical and imaginary) 'American' ways. The significance of 9/11 on American culture explains in part why these books are important and both highly patriotic and complex in their ambivalences. There's no point in pretending that they are not mostly American books. 9/11 is essentially an American narrative, and the attacks were largely seen as an American tragedy. 9/11 is an American story. The attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon took place on American shores, in the two hearts of political, corporate and popular America: New York and Washington. America claimed terrorism as its own after 2001, no matter what other terrorisms took place in other parts of the globe. In this way, America suddenly colonized a much bigger issue.

What, then, has been the cultural significance of 9/11 in America? Beyond what 9/11 meant to American politics, global relationships, military activity and economics, there are those who believe that the way 9/11 became popularized was American in other ways as well. How horror was immediately turned into spectacle (material for books and films) seems to Sontag (2003), Giroux (2006) and Klein (2007) an especially American activity. Judith Butler (2004, p. 7) goes further, claiming that 9/11 opened up "an enormous narcissistic wound". Susan Faludi (2007) writes that America responded to the crisis with an almost mythical cultural anxiety. One way or another, 9/11 and its aftermath became a particularly American event, with the remainder of the Western world panicking alongside it, worrying about its repercussions, and worrying as well about their own vulnerabilities if the strong American center lost confidence, or fell. The majority of these 9/11 books for young people are therefore predictably American in

every way: their authorship, their implied readership and their focalization, their orientation to the world.

Children's Literature and Identity Formation

In order to gain an understanding of how identity formation may occur in texts for children, it is useful to examine what has been written about the politics and practices of children's literature. Often critics take a particular focus to explain how children are positioned through the books that they read. Since the 1970s, key theorists (e.g., Leeson, 1977; Dixon, 1977; Dorfman, 1983; Sutherland, 1985; Stephens, 1992; Nodelman, 1992; Watson, 1992; Saxby, 1993; Pinsent, 1997; McCallum, 1999; McGillis, 1997; 1999; Scutter, 1999; Bradford, 2001; Hunt, 2001; Zipes, 2001, Mallan, 2002a; 2002b; Johnston & Mangat, 2003) have offered analyses which, when taken together, provide powerful explanations of the historical, didactic and pedagogical work of children's texts. Peter Hunt (2001) claims that children's books have had massive cultural influence on contemporary society. Hunt is one of many scholars who have analyzed children's books in terms of being sites of identity formation, seeking to understand how this literature not only responds to changes in social and political climates, but also contributes to the changes.

The three identity categories that form the chapters of this book have all been previously identified as useful by children's literary critics. For instance, Meek's (2001) edited book *Children's Literature and National Identity* provides a range of essays on how national loyalties are played out. Numerous children's literary critics (such as McGillis, 1997; Bradford, 2001; Johnston & Mangat, 2003) have written about national and ethnic identities in books for young people, while Margery Hourihan (1997) has written about heroic identities. These identity categories are not, of course, the only ones that could be explored, but for the purposes of this book, these three categories are *consistent* with what others have noted in children's literature; *current* in post-9/11 focus and criticism; appropriately *ambiguous* in that they represent shifting and emerging post9/11 identities.

Why, then, children's books? Understanding the nature of children's narrative fiction and its role in the production of identity formation can serve as a reminder that the discourses in these texts, as in all texts, are multiple in meanings (Stephens, 2003). Children's literature needs to be examined not only on the basis of its aesthetic literary qualities, but in an effort to understand the ways these texts work on and are worked upon by their readers. It has been suggested that children's literature, because of its pedagogical nature, can provide a microcosmic look at how discourses emerge subject to ongoing contestation, revision and change as a precise effect of world events (Hollindale, 1991; Stephens, 1992), although this is, of course, not fixed. This brief review of what some of this critical cultural theory says provides a basis

for understanding how discourses in children's books about 9/11 may produce particular performances of identities.

As previously suggested, literature for children is significant in that it can reveal much about the changing world and the way in which narrative textually represents this world. Children's literature is generally understood to have the multiple purposes of entertaining, instructing and informing, or, rephrased, to serve the purpose of contributing to children's intellectual, moral and 'personality' development (Temple et al., 1998). More significantly, though, and from a socio-cultural rather than a psychological perspective, it is both performative and productive. It is performative in the sense that metaphorically characters perform acts which reiterate norms about how one should behave or perform one's identity (Butler, 1993). It reproduces cultural ideas, values, identities and politicizing positions, which are "constructed in language as contextualized social discourse" (Threadgold, 1986, p. 29). Thus the socializing function of children's texts is popularly believed to be persuasive in numerous ways, such as cultural relationship with the world and identity formation. It is the understanding of children's literature as a social practice contributing to identity politics that drives this research. Because children's texts are discursively organized in ways that have the potential to achieve powerful effects, or indeed to write dominant discourses into existence, stories about 9/11 both respond to and shape cultural understandings.

There is a large body of work which explores the historical role literature has been believed to have played in informing, maintaining and even subverting identity in young readers. Children's literature responds to changes in social and political climates, while at the same time contributing to such changes in multiple ways. The historical and didactic pedagogical nature of children's texts is often overtly stated in children's literature (Hillman, 1999; Collins, 2002; Neubauer, 2001; Jacobs & Tunnell, 2004).¹ Children's authors might state their intent to 'shape' their readers, whereas adult fiction rarely overtly makes that claim. Put another way, children's books in the West may 'announce' their identity project, whereas adult fiction rarely does.

Literary criticism of children's books has regularly been concerned with how discourses organize identity, and how identities are produced by text (see Stephens, 1992; McCallum, 1999; Scutter, 1999; Mallan, 2002a). As just one example, Clare Bradford's (2001) examination of Aboriginality in Australian children's books illustrates the socio-political work done by children's literature alongside the socializing practices of families, schools and social groups. She states that children's books seek to promote socio-cultural values which incorporate views about the cultural meanings and traditions of the past, about the moral and ethical questions important to the present, and about a projected future in which child readers will become adults (Bradford, 2001, p. 8). Bradford claims that children's texts reveal tensions, uncertainties and political divisions in ways which may not be evident, even to the authors themselves. She points out that books for children are written by adults who