

‘The third space’ in Adolescent and YA fiction.

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In his article ‘Narrative matters’ Gordon Bates (Bates, 2016) discusses the relevance of the humanities and in particular that of fiction in ways of understanding the experiences and problems of adolescents suffering mental health problems. Notably the number of novels published for adolescents and Young Adults which focus on mental health problems has risen considerably since the beginning of this century. The ‘Goodreads’ (Goodreads, 2016) website lists more than one thousand fiction titles on matters pertaining to mental illness published for the UK and US markets since 2000. Literature reflects and critiques culture, and this is no less so in writing for adolescents and Young Adults. Subjects which are resonant to the cultural moment vary across time. For instance in the nineteenth century a particularly American subject in the novels by Horatio Alger was the achievement of the American Dream in the rise from rags to riches experienced by his protagonists such as *Ragged Dick* (1867). At the same time in England, similar stories of poverty and salvation by Hesba Stretton in works such as *Jessica’s First Prayer* (1866) were being published. Poverty and the moral condition of the nation as reflected in childhood were seen to be major problems. Although they differed in terms of the final goal, with riches in the US and a Christian conversion in Britain, the novels shared the commonalities of hard work, morality, honesty, trustworthiness and a sense of social responsibility. That is, such writers promulgated the values and attitudes required by expanding industrialised nations in response to the concerns they harboured and exposed. As a literary expert who is not associated with the medical profession, I am not placed to comment upon statistics related to adolescent and Young Adult mental health. Nonetheless, the phenomenon in the publishing world indicates that authors consider the subject matter of importance and that there is a readership for such work across an expanding range of subjects. In 2007 Prof Kimberley Reynolds wrote ‘Self-harm, Silence and Survival: Despair and Trauma in Children’s Literature’, the first piece of literary criticism tracing the development of such work (Reynolds, 2007). She proposed that:

By making it possible for children to encounter such emotions and situations on the page, these works are not only reshaping children’s literature, but also creating the opportunities for young people to gain insights into themselves and those around them that may have positive long-term social and emotional benefits.’ (89)

Increasingly children’s literature, a term which covers the span of work for pre-readers to Young Adults, is becoming more sophisticated in terms of exploring and depicting a projected inner

mindscape of the young subject. Such depiction depends upon knowledge of the subject matter; emotional and cultural understanding; command and fluency of language; the understanding of narrative structures and the desire to communicate.

In the medical context Gordon Bates writes of the need for ‘shared subjectivity or a third space’ and suggests that the Humanities provide such a space. I would like to explore his suggestion from a literary perspective in briefly discussing two texts which variously create a ‘third space’ through their differing narrative techniques. My approach is that of a reader, not a clinician. My intention is to give brief readings of these texts and not to make suggestions on how they might be used, for this is not my expertise. I have selected a verse novel and in contrast a picture book where there is very little text and the illustrations dominate. Each of these texts rejects an omniscient narrator who ‘knows all’ and who would create a realist, ‘cause and effect’ narrative structure, for such subjects resist omniscient knowledge and clarity in identifying and understanding cause and effect.

Sonya Sones’ *Stop Pretending: what happened when my sister went crazy* (2002) is an American verse novel which draws on her personal experiences. The novel traces the effects on the family of a mentally ill teenager from the perspective of the younger sister. The structure is that of a series of short poems which can be read individually or as a sequence tracing the observations and emotions of the younger sister and how her sister’s illness has affected her family and school life. The chapter headings indicate the passage of time and the disintegration of the coherence of her life. For instance the first chapter is entitled ‘My Whole Family’ and the second, ‘My Sister’s Christmas Eve Breakdown’. The narrative is thus controlled by short headlines which enable the identification of key moments and events in the confusion which surrounds both sisters and the family. The first chapter is comprised of the following poem:

I can
remember what
things were like before she
got sick: my whole family climbed
into

the big
hammock on the
moondappled beach, wove
ourselves together, and swayed
as one. (3)

The opening line, ‘I can’ emphasizes her capacity and inner confidence. There is an assurance that she has a clear memory and is able to focus on particular moments. The arrested lines break what could be a continuity, as though the subject is focusing and choosing the words carefully. The emphasis is on a coherence which will be shattered by the effects of the illness. The family is woven together in an harmonious scene which depicts cohesion and comfort in the swaying movement in a hammock on the beach in the moonlight which is close to the natural world. This

recollection immediately introduces the themes of family cohesion and memory which run through the work. Both the closeness of the family unit and the collective memories will be disrupted and destroyed by the illness. The sister is described as being severely ill and is placed in a psychiatric hospital where she is given electric shock therapy. One of the results of such therapy is to eradicate and cloud the function of memory. One of the results of the hospitalisation and state of the teenager is to divide the family who, in their living grief, find it difficult to communicate and to continue with a normality. The poems endeavour to capture this disintegration and are in themselves a series of memories and recollections of events, situations and emotions. The hospitalised sister is incoherent or silent for long periods. It is the sister who from her viewpoint constructs a narrative to piece together her own experience and that of her family members. The narrative thus becomes a 'third space' and a shared subjectivity, for writing is to be read. A turning point is when the mentally ill sister views herself in a mirror and confronts an image of her subject self. Memories gradually return to the sick sister stimulated by her sibling's conversation with the triumphant assertion of 'You remember that/ You do' (Sones, 137). The literary strength is in the interwoven complexity of the work, which has only been touched upon here. An attempt to bring understanding to the reader of an experience which is beyond comprehension to the child is achieved through literary skill and the embedded connections. The poetic nature of the text evokes wider associations than recounting fact, for there are emotive images which the reader creates through their own experiences and projective faculties, by connecting with their inner landscape.

Picture books may also create emotive images which have a poetic effect, the text primarily being supplied by the reader who is interpreting the pictures. The picture book is a form which can be popularly under-appreciated being seen as aimed at pre-readers, however, there are highly sophisticated picture books which do not pertain to any particular age of readership, and which also tackle demanding subject matter. Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (2001) is an Australian picture book about a depressed girl. As Kimberley Reynolds observes it:

is a visually stunning book. Large, complex and eloquent images represent the feelings of fatigue, dislocation, inadequacy, inability to communicate alienation, and purposelessness characteristic of depression. (Reynolds, 99)

The phrases which accompany the images are brief and poignant such as 'nobody understands'. Here the child is encased in a large an old-fashioned metal diving helmet which simultaneously emphasises and hides her head. She sits within a narrow necked glass bottle on an empty darkened beachscape. She is trapped; unable to communicate; a hunched figure. She is the depressed, silent and silenced message. The illustrations follow her through 'a day' where each image takes her deeper into alienation and confusion. The conclusion, however, is one of hopefulness, for in her bedroom there is a small bright red seedling which blossoms into a vibrant tree, leaving her looking at the plant in a shaft of light coming through an open door. The emotions evoked by Tan's artwork go beyond continuous narrative as they capture a mental and emotional journey where words are inadequate.

These texts, which are but exemplars of the varied and evocative literary production focusing on adolescent and Young Adult mental illness, create and open up a 'third space' where the inexpressible may be expressed, and silences may be prised open in efforts to understand and combat these oppressive and destructive illnesses.

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