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Article

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# Historical or Hysterical? Periodising Family Breakdown in Contemporary Children's Literature

*Sara Broad*

In all kinds of public discourse, political or journalistic, the past is continually brought up before us, its lessons read and reread as evidence of progress or decline (Johnson, 1982).

The family has always been a pervasive theme in children's literature, but a feature of modern children's books is that they often introduce the family as 'breaking down'. Many contemporary children's books choose to represent 'modern' families as 'failing' and specifically doing so in relation to earlier ideas about families. Critics of recent children's literature comment on the narratives in books by Melvin Burgess, Jacqueline Wilson and Anne Fine to suggest that the present moment is the most appropriate time to write about family failure. In this article, I will suggest that these ideas of modern dysfunctional family life in children's books rely on an idea of 'history' in order to produce this concept of 'hysteria' with regard to the family.

In order to consider this particular idea of the family, it is helpful to consider the language of 'time' in these texts. Frequently, historical change is measured in decades and it is often decades that are used by critics and writers of children's literature to argue change of one period over another. Social historians Baxendale and Pawling suggest that, 'Decades work for us because ... they rescue history from being an unstructured jumble of "one thing after another"' (1996: 2). Nonetheless, discussions of the 'significance' of a decade are arbitrary and necessarily retrospective.

Nonetheless, ideas of the 'meaning' of decades are often employed to write about the family in children's literature criticism. One of the reasons for this is that they appear to

offer the potential to locate a time when the 'correct' family arrangement was portrayed and to argue the point of its 'erosion'. Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble, for example, cite the 1940s and the 1960s as the origins of social 'diversity and fragmentation in society which led to family breakdown' (2001: 26). They suggest that these decades are markers of change which in turn have led to writers producing later novels about family dysfunction. In this way, however, the 1940s and the 1960s are set up as not only leading to change, but as periods of change in themselves. This suggests more similarity than difference between these decades and of the present. Thus, if both the idea of the 1940s and the 1960s, and the idea of the present are seen to represent 'change', the question arises as to whether it is ever possible to find the point of origin of change or of the period before that change.

Ann Alston, another children's literature critic, suggests that children's books of the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate the 'best' time for the family in children's fiction. However, Alston states that the portrayal of these decades is idealistic – that the families in these books did not equate to what was happening in society, since, as she states, 'many families had lost husbands, fathers and sons' at this time (2008, 47). Moreover, she considers there was a deliberate intention to use these decades as the period of the 'idealised family ... in children's fiction' (p.47). Alston's reading of this 'flawed' information relies on one agreed interpretation of what 1920s and 1930s society represented, an interpretation against which 'flawed' texts might be set; it is not in itself the location of the point of family change in children's stories.

Children's writer Melvin Burgess suggests in his 1987 novel *Junk* that changing society can be directly referenced through personal experience of a decade. In the 'Author's Note' at the beginning of this novel, Burgess includes a reference to his own time spent in Bristol in the 1980s in order to produce an idea of verisimilitude. Yet Burgess also implies the wholesale universality of the 'events' in the text, when he writes that the 'events' in the novel 'have happened, are happening and will no doubt continue to happen' (1987: ii). Thus, even an idea of a fictionalised 1980s is also associated with an idea of the past, present and future, thereby making the concept of the 1980s no different from that of any other decade.

So are discussions of family change in children's fiction better interpreted as a species of 'hysteria' rather than of 'history'? The critic Fiona Feng-Hsin Liu makes the argument that contemporary family life is better analysed through emotions than through an idea of period. Writing about *Thursday's Child* (2007) by Sonia Hartnett, Feng-Hsin Liu is more concerned with the way that the Flute family struggle to cope than with her historical accuracy about the Great Depression. She writes:

As the trauma narratives for children gradually move away from centring on major political events to placing the lived experience of the individual child in the foreground against a vaguely depicted historical background, they demonstrate our changed concept of the histories and realities that we must share with children. (2007: 186).

So it may be possible to discuss the 'child' in an ahistorical manner, in a 'periodised' novel. Yet even while arguing that history is movable and reducible, Feng-Hsin Liu reinstates the idea that history is 'true' since she stresses the importance of historical evolution and goes on to equate 'histories' with 'realities' as of parallel importance for 'children'.

I would suggest that the reason that family breakdown is so prevalent in contemporary children's books is that there is an understanding that by reading about dysfunctional families it may be possible to guard against family breakdown in society. This is why there is an ongoing idea of correlation between literature and society, and why this is served through the ideas of periods of time to make the stories 'real'. What is different in contemporary children's books is that the discourse of modern 'family breakdown' is achieved only through ideas of the 'past'. The current preoccupation with 'the family' centres on ideas of what went before, in order to produce the idea of the modern dysfunctional family. It is not a social truth in need of 'correct' representation in children's literature.

## Works cited

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## Children's Literature and the Family: A Reading List

*Pam Robson*

### Short Stories and Picture Books

#### **Joan Aiken, *A Handful of Gold, Red Fox, 009968361X***

A superb collection of fifteen short stories for older readers, illustrated by Quentin Blake. 'The Rocking Donkey' is a sad tale of child abuse; the stepdaughter of a rich, heartless lady suffers neglect at her hands. 'The Dark Streets of Kimball's Green' is also a tale of child abuse; in this story a young girl is neglected by a wicked foster mother. Each rich story captures the imagination – here is pathos, fantasy and humour.

#### **David Almond, *Counting Stars, Hodder, 0340784806***

The author tells true stories, aimed at teenage readers, about his own childhood in the north-east of England. He writes about the death of his young sister, Barbara, followed by his mother's death from arthritis, and later his father's death. He reveals the close relationship he shared with his father. This is a lyrical, emotional collection which makes no concessions to the reader.

#### **Berlie Doherty (retold), illus. Jane Ray, *Fairy Tales, Walker, 0744594030***

An outstanding picture-book volume of twelve well-known fairy tales, retold, but faithful to the original versions. Fairy-tale sources are supplied. Superbly illustrated in a sophisticated style using subdued tones.

#### **Berlie Doherty, *Tough Luck, Collins Educational, 0003300579***

This collection for older readers was written in collaboration with pupils whilst the author was a writer in residence at an urban comprehensive. Themes include multicultural issues, physical abuse and broken marriages. A realistic, readable collection.

#### **Tony Bradman (ed.), *Love Them, Hate Them, Mammoth, 0749709545***

These are stories about siblings and sibling rivalry for 9–12 year olds. Contributions from many famous names, including Michelle Magorian, Jan Mark, Ann Pilling, Vivien Alcock and Annie Dalton. Themes which feature include twins, fostering and a new baby.

#### **Penelope Farmer, *Granny and Me, Walker, 0774560438***

A delightful collection with black-and-white artwork, to read aloud to 5–7 year olds. Each story features Ellie, a small girl who is helped by her lively granny to accept a new baby brother. This is no ordinary granny; she wears bright colours and shares some unusual activities with Ellie. When Ellie does naughty things, because of the new baby, granny helps her put things right. Granny has time for Ellie and soon the baby is big enough to join in their fun.