# *The Silver Sword and The New Windmill: the legacy of Ian and Anne Serraillier*

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ORIGINAL PAPER

# *The Silver Sword* and the New Windmill Series: The Legacy of Ian and Anne Serraillier

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## Abstract

Ian Serraillier is best remembered for his children's book, *The Silver Sword*, first published in 1956. However, along with his wife Anne, he was also instrumental in creating The New Windmill Series, an imprint of Heinemann Educational Books, and one of the first collections of teenage fiction aimed for the education market. This article discusses the way in which Serraillier's ideological beliefs, rooted in his Quaker faith, can be traced not only through his nuanced depiction of children displaced by war in *The Silver Sword*, but also in his objectives for the New Windmill list. It explores the Serrailliers' progressive approach to the provision of reading material for young people moving towards adulthood, and their early understanding of the need to broach the contested and complex boundaries between children's and adults' fiction. The New Windmill Series was created in 1949 and the Serrailliers remained the list's editors and driving force for over thirty years, throughout a period of great sociological and political change. Both *The Silver Sword* and the books selected for The New Windmill list reflect the way in which attitudes towards the sharing of difficult truths and challenging ideas with this audience changed for ever during this time, due in no small part to the work of visionary authors and editors such as the Serrailliers.

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## Introduction

Picture the bookshelf lurking at the back of a standard British secondary school classroom of the early 1950s. There will probably be an elderly edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, flanked perhaps by several dog-eared collections of fables and folklore. A once-loved but now over-familiar copy of *The Wind in the Willows* might jostle for space with a dusty anthology of poetry. The books' binding is drab, the illustrations crude and the paper quality poor. All in all, there is not much here to inspire teenage readers, or to tempt them away from the lure of comics, and the excitement of the newly accessible youth culture filtering through from the US.

When Ian Serraillier, the editor of the soon to be launched New Windmill Series, conducted a survey of the books on offer within British schools in 1949 he encountered just this sort of material. He was determined that New Windmill, an offshoot of Heinemann Educational Books, would provide an altogether more fresh and engaging list of hardback fiction and non-fiction for secondary school libraries and classrooms, produced to a higher quality. During his editorship of New Windmill – a period of time which stretched over thirty years, during which he was joined by his wife Anne Serraillier – the list was to become a major source of what modern readers would recognise as Young Adult fiction.

In this article I discuss the way in which the Serrailliers approached the selection, editing and marketing of the New Windmill list, in order to understand how the ideological beliefs which underpinned their choices were tempered by the need for commercial viability. Ian Serraillier, teacher, poet, writer and editor, is now best known as the author of *The Silver Sword*, a children's novel which has remained in print since its first publication in 1956. It tells the story of four children's escape from Nazi-occupied Poland, their journey across Europe, and the challenges and adventures they face. Serraillier's pacificist ideology, his approach to adult/child relationships and his early awareness of the long-term effects of trauma on mental health are central to *The Silver Sword's* narrative and themes. As I will discuss, these same beliefs can also be detected in his selection of books for the New Windmill list. It was an approach which was to situate the New Windmill Series as a prototype of what we would now understand to be a Young Adult fiction list: although its stated target age group was 11–16, the majority of the books were geared towards the upper end of this range.

The Serrailliers were ahead of their time in their attitude towards children's literature, and their understanding of what children should and could be exposed to in terms of difficult, nuanced topics. Simultaneously, however, their belief in the importance of reading material that would give children the opportunity to learn values important in their adult life, corresponds with earlier, more didactic approaches to children's literature. As such, the work of the Serrailliers can be viewed as a fascinating example of publishing for young adults situated at the crossroads of two eras: the earlier, more protectionist view of children's literature as sharply delineated from adult output, and the beginnings of a new understanding of the opportunities and demands proposed by what Serraillier refers to as "new adult" readers.

Ian Serraillier's ideology, rooted in his Quaker faith, is clearly – even didactically - expressed in *The Silver Sword*. The novel ends with the family reunited and begin-

ning to rebuild their lives at a Swiss village, created to house the refugee children that had been displaced from across Europe during the war. It presents a Utopian vision of the future, with a new generation of Europeans coexisting happily:

> a village where abandoned and orphaned children could forget the misery of war, where their minds and bodies could be healed, and they could learn to live in peace. Here at last they would find a real home, with no fear of being driven out among strangers again. They would be educated in "mind, hand, and heart". When they grew up, they would be able to meet the future with goodwill and courage (Serraillier p.173).

It is a vision which resonates acutely with the tragic scenes played out in contemporary news reports, and the conclusion that very little has improved since Serraillier wrote those words some sixty years ago is inescapable and depressing. However, Serraillier dealt in hope and in action, and, although the children's village initially suggests a rather too neat conclusion to the messiness of war and displacement, a closer reading of the novel does reveal his keen awareness of the long term effects of war and trauma on mental health. As the passage quoted above also demonstrates, there is also an impetus to equip young people with the emotional and moral strength to face the future as adult citizens, and this very much chimes with the Serrailliers' thinking behind book choices for the New Windmill list.

## Ian Serraillier and The Silver Sword

Ian Serraillier, at the time of his appointment as New Windmill editor, was an English teacher at Midhurst Grammar School in Sussex, a poet and author of several novels for children. As well as retellings of ancient myths and folktales, including *Beowolf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he also wrote two classic "adventure" stories, *They Raced for Treasure* (1946) and a sequel, *Flight to Adventure* (1947). A third book, *There's No Escape (1950)* was a wartime spy story. Although it does not have the depth or thoughtfulness of its more famous successor, it was, as Jane Serraillier Grossfeld points out, "hijacked by an increasing interest in the refugees encountered on the way, and even in the humanity of "'the enemy'" (1998, p.16). This more complex and nuanced approach to the traditional portrayal of wartime adventures meshes with Serraillier's ideological, political and religious stance. Having become a Quaker in 1939, and a member of the Peace Pledge Union, he was a conscientious objector in World War II.

*The Silver Sword* was the result of this shift to a more questioning approach to the use of conflict as a setting for an adventure story. It tells the story of three siblings, Edek, Ruth and Bronia, who find themselves alone in war-torn Warsaw when their parents are arrested by the Nazis. Accompanied by another parentless boy, Jan, the children travel across Europe to Switzerland before finally being reunited with their parents. The book is based on true accounts of events experienced by children and its episodic format provides a swift-moving narrative as the children encounter hardship, danger, and the kindness of strangers in equal measure. An aspect of the book

of particular interest to the contemporary reader is Serraillier's portrayal of attitudes towards refugees, which is brought into focus as the children make their way from Poland to Switzerland: "Some villages refused to admit them, having neither food nor shelter for any more refugees. But for the most part they met with kindness and were not refused food if it could be spared" (1956, p.91). Indeed, it is a scenario that will be more familiar to contemporary readers than it might have been to audiences in the 1950s, despite their greater historical proximity to the Second World War. Serraillier demonstrates his awareness of different perspectives: a British officer observes that refugees – "loot mercilessly and murder for revenge. Of course, they are not all like that. But it is in everyone's interest that they should go home. The Americans are inflexible on this point, and I don't blame them" (1956, p.126). Although the central plot of *The Silver Sword* revolves around the children's travels from devastated Warsaw to the relative safety of Switzerland, Serraillier avoids some obvious pitfalls in his portrayal of refugees. As Evelyn Arizpe observes, "a decontextualised focus on the journey or on the arrival often means the historical and political circumstances that led to displacement in the first place are ignored" (2021, p.314). Serraillier does not shy away from discussing the context against which the children are forced to make their escape and although the narrative ends with a positive resolution - the children are reunited with their parents, against considerable odds – the impact of the war remains in sight.

It is significant that this book has achieved lasting popularity whilst Serraillier's earlier, more formulaic stories have long been forgotten. It suggests that, although the appeal of adventure stories to children is unquestionable, the more considered, nuanced approach of *The Silver Sword* struck a chord with many young readers. A selection of letters written to Serraillier by students from an Australian school in 1981 draws attention to facets of the story that moved beyond traditional tales of "people running around getting shot like in other wartime stories." (List, 1981). This more thoughtful style is revealed particularly clearly in an episode of *The Silver Sword* which describes the children's conversations with the Wolffs, a German farmer and his wife who temporarily provide shelter. Their son Rudolf died fighting in the war and Jan struggles to reconcile these two positions: "That there could be any connection between these homely folk and the soldier in the photo was beyond his understanding. After a moment he turned to the farmer and said, "You and I ought to be deadly enemies." […]""You wouldn't have hated Rudolf, Jan," said Frau Wolff" (1956, p.116). This sort of meaty, thought-provoking content is another reason for *The Silver Sword's* longevity: it has gained a reputation amongst adults, and a place within several classics collections, as a useful book to introduce children to discussions about the fall-out of military conflict and the treatment of refugees.

At the time of its first publication, *The Silver Sword* was unusual in its depiction of World War II, and its effects on huge swathes of the European population. There was little to compare it with, particularly in its depth of research, and its portrayal of child refugees, written for a child audience. Serraillier spent five years researching and writing the book, drawing upon accounts of refugee support work undertaken by the Quakers, and recorded in their magazine *The Friend*. As Julia Hope observes, it was "the first widely known Children's book, written in English, where the refugee experience is the major theme of the narrative" (2008, p.296). Hope points out that

when *The Silver Sword* was first published there were concerns about its suitability for children, due to its unflinching portrayal of war. Over sixty years on, such attitudes have changed, and the book reveals itself as an early prototype of literature for children which unflinchingly discusses the collateral damage inflicted on civilian populations, particularly children, by war and conflict. Hope lists the messages that these books promote: "citizenship, tolerance, respect and integration, as well as the enduring nature of the human spirit in the face of terrible circumstances"(2008, p.296).

Serraillier wrote *The Silver Sword* with the educational market in mind, initially aiming for a simple, fast-paced story which would appeal particularly to girls (although it ultimately became a book that was universally popular). Although the story involves adventure and jeopardy, when a new edition of the book was proposed in 1982, Serraillier was concerned that the accompanying illustrations were "somewhat crude", warning against adding "any gratuitous aggression." He was keen to stress that it was not a violent book. Indeed, he described it as "an anti-violence book" (1982). Despite Serraillier's aversion to any kind of glorification of violence, there had been some early objections to the book from some quarters, and it was questioned whether children should be exposed to such difficult subject-matter. The fact that the story was not framed as a traditional adventure story of cartoon-like derring do, but rather a more realistic portrayal of the collateral damage caused by war, made it more hard-hitting, despite the lack of graphic violence.

Whilst *The Silver Sword* can be read on one level as an adventure story, complete with the familiar trope of children separated from their parents and striking out on their own, its insight into a mental and emotional impact which lasts longer than physical injuries, and is not as easily overcome, is intrinsic to the story. Of the two leading boy protagonists, Edek nearly dies from TB, but returns to health after 18 months in a sanatorium. Jan's mental trauma is not as neatly resolved – his healing is clearly a longer, more complicated process and Serraillier does not shy away from this, rejecting the temptation to neatly resolve this plot strand at the culmination of the novel: "he did not take easily to a secure and peaceful life" (1956, p.175).

Despite early reservations, the novel received excellent reviews and its growing popularity was reinforced by a popular BBC TV serialisation in 1957. The book was translated into 12 languages and published as *Escape from Warsaw (1958)* in America, although not without overcoming some initial resistance. It appears that Serraillier's political affiliations were perhaps more pronounced than he intended, particularly to American audiences: his sympathetic portrayal of Russian soldiers, and his condemnation of the political abandonment of the Polish people, left to their fate until the Russians moved in to defeat the Nazis, caused publishers in the US to hesitate. Their view was that the timing of this pro-Russian sentiment would not be received well in a country deep in the throes of the Cold War. Serraillier, perhaps naively, professed surprise that his book could be read in this way. He argued that his themes of humanity overcoming suffering were timeless and transcended politics or race.

## The New Windmill Series

The Serrailliers, in their work at New Windmill, revealed their understanding of the liminality of the territory between adult and child. Indeed, a central theme within *The Silver Sword* is the shifting boundaries between adult and childhood-states: at some points in the narrative, Ruth's maturity and resilience makes her appear as essentially the adult of the party, yet, when we view her through the eyes of others, she reverts to being a child. Another example of these blurred boundaries is in the relationship between the children and the adults they encounter, as the chaos of war subverts received notions and constructions of childhood in the hierarchy of age. Although the wartime setting of *The Silver Sword* certainly magnifies these confusions, the Serrailliers believed more generally that children on the cusp of adulthood required a particular sort of book. As Karen Sands-O'Connor observes, the New Windmill Series was "one of the earliest imprints to publish and promote books specifically for the teen audience" (2017, p.20). The trajectory of the list was such that, having started by predominantly publishing books written for children, albeit at the older end of the spectrum, by the middle of the 1960s, a significant proportion of the list was made up of books originally published as adult novels.

In a file within the New Windmill Archive, dated between 1949 and 1955, is a cutting from *The School Librarian* journal. Entitled "The Future of School Libraries", it highlights the fact that there were now some 3000 Secondary Modern schools in the UK. The Education Act of 1944 stipulated the need to equip these schools with school libraries, which meant the largest ever provision of its kind. This obviously provided huge scope for publishing companies such as Heinemann to meet the demand for titles that would, alongside educating pupils, support children's hobbies and interests. As a handwritten report from Ian Serraillier (written in 1949) reveals, the provision of reading material for schools was less than inspiring. A number of publishers, including Ginn, Methuen, John Murray, Harraps, Longman, and Blackwell, sold educational series but the quality of production was poor and the selection of titles unimaginative. Serraillier's assessment of this material included damning comments such as "about the level of the "twopenny blood", "crudely drawn and reproduced", "poor binding and abominable blocking", "God knows what intelligent questions one could set on such texts!", "Classic juvenile novels, collections of fables, etc. Poorly printed, ordinary binding".

The idea behind New Windmill was to provide fresh and engaging literature for secondary school age children (11–16 age range). These editions were, importantly, designed to look like novels, rather than school reading books – there were no notes or comprehension questions at the end. Alan Hill and Tony Beal, directors of Heinemann, worked with the Serrailliers to establish New Windmill as one of the key players in educational publishing. Hill recalled Serraillier's approach: "From the start, in fact, Ian deliberately extended the series beyond the middle class world of Arthur Ransome, whose *Swallows and Amazons* was outsold five times over by Sylvia Sherry's *A Pair of Jesus Boots* - a story of the back streets of Liverpool today"(1988, p.84). This impetus reflects the Serrailliers' recognition of the need to provide teenage audiences with books with timely, contemporary themes which would be of immediate appeal. The fact that, for example, *A Pair of Jesus Boots* was so successful at the

time of its publication but is now out of print does not undermine its significance but rather speaks to the way in which many of these titles tapped into the contemporary concerns and interests of readers within a specific period. As Lucy Pearson observes, in her study of Aidan Chambers' Topliner imprint for adolescent readers, "books which dealt directly with the experience of being a teenager in the 1970s were quick to date" (2013, p.165).

Both Ian and Anne read extensively, and were continually on the lookout for potential New Windmill titles. There was a two-way stream of books which travelled between the Serrailliers' cottage in Singleton, West Sussex, and the Heinemann offices in London. The Serrailliers would often write to request copies of books they had heard good things about; Beal and Hill would, similarly, send books to them for their opinion. It was a time-consuming process, particularly when one recalls that Ian was still teaching, and Anne had four children to look after. Blurbs were written, and other opinions sought from colleagues and pupils – the Serrailliers capitalising on their position as teachers and parents to secure reviews from young readers. In some cases, correspondence with authors was required, as well as negotiations over royalties, illustrations and cover design. The Serrailliers were involved in all aspects of the publication process and were keenly aware of the financial pressures that needed to be met in order to make the list profitable.

To add to the workload, there was, in many cases, considerable labour involved in editing manuscripts to make them suitable for the series. Editorial files for each title contain lists of proposed cuts and changes that were required, for reasons of length and/or content. Some of these adjustments were relatively clear cut, and combined the need to reduce the length of books as well as ensuring their contents would be suitable for the intended audience. For example, Serraillier wrote of *Tschiffely's Ride* (A. F. Tschiffely): "I propose to omit whole chunks which would not be of interest to children, reducing the book to about half its present length.[…] Schoolchildren will not be interested in the lengthier descriptions and much of the lore, and the references to prostitution and suchlike would have to go" (1949).

With so many facets to the role, it would have been understandable had the Serrailliers bowed to pressure and been less exacting about some of their choices for the list. However, their crystal-clear vision of what was and wasn't a New Windmill book was matched only by their absolute focus on the audience for whom they were catering. It was not straightforward. Not only did the Serrailliers have to keep in mind the differences between a reader at the bottom end of their age range (11 years old) and at the top (16 years old) and the progress between the two, but also the adult gatekeepers of this material: the teachers. With school budgets tight (it was ever thus), teachers had to be sure that the books they chose were right for their students. The element of trust was vital to the success of an educational list: one wrong choice would potentially dissuade teachers from putting their faith – and their precious funds – in a list, no matter how appealing their catalogue might be.

The Serrailliers had not only to consider whether their young readers would enjoy a book, but also whether their teachers would be happy to have it in their class libraries. This assessment of a book under consideration in 1972 – *The Thundering Good Today* (J.M. Cooper) - encapsulates much of what Ian Serraillier believed in terms of the audience New Windmill was aiming for:

> The appeal of this salty and lively novel is to "young adults", thoughtful, questioning, intelligent, of the calibre to study for "A" levels […] 15+, with some political awareness, disillusioned with society as at present organised and anxious to explore new ways of doing things, and new solutions, conscious too of the gap that yawns between themselves and the older generation, having to follow along the accepted grooves of examination-passing, and wanting to make a hit with their girl-friends when they feel they ought perhaps to be at their books, studying." (1972)

Despite his appreciation of the book's qualities, however, Serraillier expressed doubts that the all-important second audience – the teachers – would react in a similarly positive way to the book. He asked, "How many teachers are going to write in objecting to the number of times the word "crap" is used (v.frequent) or "bugger", (less frequent), quite unimpressed by the fact that is the way that many 15 plus-ers speak…" The title was, with regret, rejected. On other occasions, however, the Serrailliers judged that the benefits of publishing a more challenging, "salty" book outweighed the risks of alienating teachers, and their instincts were generally strong. There were, inevitably, occasional complaints. Despite being aware of the need to reassure teachers whilst engaging teenage readers, sometimes they had to defend their choices. In 1969, Ian Serraillier responded to a letter of complaint received from a Scottish teacher regarding a book called *A River Ran out of Eden*, and its appropriateness for her pupils. He acknowledged that: "There is a wide range of views among teachers as to where the line should be drawn between "suitable and unsuitable" books for these near-adult readers." It is interesting to note here the use of "near-adult" as another definition of this age group: it is adjacent to the now well-defined Young Adult market. Serraillier goes on to defend the selection of this book: "…we feel that it is a highly moral tale, emphasising as it does the author's reverence for life in general, and for family life in particular. It also places a high value on truth and integrity in personal relationships. It does, certainly, treat the reader as a mature person…"(1969). Serraillier's concern that *The Silver Sword* was not to be seen as glorifying violence is echoed here: adult themes are present for a reason, rather than simply providing cheap thrills.

Although, as this letter demonstrates, the Serrailliers did make decisions with adults in mind, they also took pains to ensure that the books they chose would appeal to contemporary child readers, rather than relying on their own memories of what they enjoyed as children. For example, Anne Serraillier gave her assessment of *Anne of Green Gables* to Tony Beal, having consulted with her own young daughters: "I am convinced that it is too cosy and corny by half for modern readers, and Helen and Jane confirm that it is "soppy". Anne is too often "deliciously athrill with excitement". I fear I must have been a soppy child to have lapped this up so uncritically" (1961). When selecting titles, the Serrailliers applied judgements about the age, gender, and interests of their potential readers. For example, recommending *My Mother's House* by Colette in 1967, Ian Serraillier comments: "This is real literature, marvellous stuff, and can be recommended for mature readers of both sexes, but especially girls of a literary bent who enjoy true stories of happy family life" (1967).

Of course, the New Windmill series was not unique in having to split its allegiance between two audiences. Any publisher producing children's books needs to

acknowledge this duality: adults as well as children are their customers, regardless of who ultimately reads the book. For school lists such as New Windmill, it is even more complex, however. Particularly in the earlier years of the list's existence, books that were deemed acceptable for private reading were more questionable when considered for use in the classroom. The editorial file for Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet* is a clear example of this process. When the title was proposed for inclusion in New Windmill, Ian Serraillier suggested that various cuts would be needed, and approval was sought from the author. Bagnold reacted vociferously to this, however, refusing to alter any aspect of the text. She objected to the suggestion that words such as "damn" and "blast" should be removed, as well as references to characters being naked to the waist. Her argument was that as parents professed to love the book, there was no reason that teachers should be allowed to censor it.

Ian Serraillier's response was philosophical and acknowledged the issue from a teacher's perspective:

> Of course, boys and girls read the Penguin of this book and take it in their stride. I should have no hesitation in giving it to any boy or girl to read as it stands. But to a teacher reading it aloud in a mixed class or using it as a reader, these are obvious objections. What is the standard which you, as publisher, wish to adopt? Teachers' opinions will differ. Are you prepared to take the risk of letters objecting to damn's, blast's, hells and so on? or does it get a bad name for the series and put teachers off and affect sales? (1953)

*National Velvet* was published as a New Windmill, but this assessment reflects the continuous balancing act that the list needed to achieve: it had to compete for young readers' attention with popular paperbacks, but its titles also had to earn their place on a class library shelf – and they had to sell in sufficient numbers to cover the costs of production, and make a profit. Fortunately, although the scope of the list did not change over the years – if anything, its ambitions grew - the parameters of what was deemed acceptable did. Evidence from correspondence shows that attitudes to censorship were subject to change, according to mores of the day. By 1964, Ian Serraillier, giving his approval to *To Kill A Mockingbird*, commented: "At the upper end of our age group we think Windmills should reflect the earlier maturity of their readers today, and while keeping a sense of responsibility we should not be too quick on the draw with the blue pencil." The book's "humanitarian attitude and very sound values throughout can have only a beneficial effect upon young readers, and it would be a great pity to reject the book for fear the fifteen references to rape might offend the prudish" (1964). Four years later, Tony Beal reinforced this view: "as the years go by the amount of expurgation necessary becomes less and less – until now we are astonished at some of the things we thought we had to cut out a few years ago" (1968).

In the same letter, Beal sets out the broad aims of the New Windmill series: "to provide good contemporary reading for the 11–16 age group". He discusses the challenges they faced in sourcing appropriate titles written particularly for children, although he adds that another difficulty is that "children stop being children at about 11 and expect to read adult books." This contention raises interesting questions about the potential disconnect between how children view their passage to adulthood and

how this transition is perceived by adults. The audience for the New Windmill Series becomes more complicated when considered through this dual lens, and it echoes Serraillier's portrayal of his young protagonists in *The Silver Sword*: "They were to endure hardships and conditions which made them think and plan and act more like adults than children." (1956 p.1). As Serraillier portrays in *The Silver Sword*, children, particularly in wartime (although not exclusively), were forced into situations where they had to confront danger and uncomfortable realities that might otherwise be associated with adulthood: hunger, the need to physically defend oneself, to make difficult decisions and to decide who to trust and who to fear. Here the lines between child and adult are certainly not clear cut.

## Linking ideology between *The Silver Sword* and New Windmill

Back in the comparative safety of the mid-twentieth century Secondary Modern School, the Serrailliers were convinced of the importance of giving children difficult reading material that hitherto might have been aimed at adults. It was an attitude that was increasingly gaining traction amongst educators and other decision-makers, in line with a growing awareness of the need to provide appropriate material to help young people bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. Following the BBC serialisation of *The Silver Sword*, the programme-makers had to face a "pile of protesting letters". As Owen Reed, the Head of Children's Programmes recalled in an article, the letters questioned:

> How could we possibly imagine that it was right to show children of all people this terrible chapter of human history? [...] Significantly none came from children, by whom this story is remembered with gratitude because it treated them as responsible citizens who could be trusted with a frank account of what the war and its by-products, like juvenile delinquency and refugees, was really about." (1958)

This view is key to Ian Serraillier's ideology, both as an author and an editor. An analysis of key themes and episodes from the book reveals threads which can be traced from a fictional depiction of children in wartime through to an educational book list which anticipated the changing commercial and cultural construction of adolescence.

In the chaos of war, when traditional roles are swept aside in a fight for survival, normal modes of behaviour are subverted, as Serraillier portrays in the early meeting between Joseph, the children's father, and Jan, the street child. Joseph has escaped from the prison camp in which he was detained, and is considering his next move. Hoping to jump a train, he asks Jan for his advice on the best place to do this. Already, the traditional adult/child hierarchy is overturned. Jan's response reveals not only his superior knowledge in this regard, but also the hardship and brutality to which he has been exposed:

> "'You will be caught and shot,' said the boy. 'Or you will freeze to death in the trucks. The nights are bitter. Your hair will be white with frost, your fingers will

turn to icicles. And when the Nazis find you, you will be stiff as the boards at the bottom of the truck. That is what happens to those who jump trains.'
'You seem to know a lot about it,' said Joseph
'I have seen it,' said the boy." (1956, p.24)

Whilst in this passage Joseph defers to Jan's knowledge and experience, the perception of children's ages changes throughout the story, according to whether the story is being told from their perspective or through adult eyes. In an Alice-like process of shrinking, Jan's presence is diminished once more when viewed through the eyes of a British soldier: "A boy stepped out of the crowd, one of the thousands of urchins that lived?about in the ruins here – about eleven or twelve years old, I should say, but you can never tell with these kids, they're so undernourished" (1956, p.83). Philip Nel's observation, that "The precarity of displacement amplifies the vulnerabilities inherent to childhood, making young people feel their liminality more acutely" accurately describes the situation faced by the young protagonists of *The Silver Sword*, in which the naturally blurred boundaries between childhood and adulthood are problematised by the need to act and behave with maturity beyond their years (2018, p.359). This juxtaposition is particularly jarring in the portrayal of Ruth. Here she is described by an army officer: "She's a remarkable girl, quiet and self-assured, with the most striking eyes – they have a deep serenity, a sense of purpose and moral authority quite unmistakable. No wonder they look up to her as a mother, and a leader, too" (1956, p.86).

In an earlier passage, Ruth's perceived age is foregrounded when she encounters a detachment of the Russian soldiers who are occupying Warsaw'"Don't stand there staring at me, little girl,' said the burly sentry who was on duty. 'I'm not a little girl. I'll be eighteen next week' said Ruth. 'And I want to see your officer.'" She forces her way past the sentry, and into the building and, in the space of a paragraph her perceived age shifts repeatedly as she crosses and recrosses the boundary between child and adult:

" 'Hey, you young hussy, come out!

You're a determined young lady,' said the lieutenant.
'I'm not a little girl, anyway,' said Ruth." (1956, p.48).

The liminality of childhood played out in this passage, and throughout *The Silver Sword*, also reflects the particular complexities faced by the editors of the New Windmill list, in order to provide suitable reading material for students whose reading skills were not in step with their chronological age. Although utilising the harsher language of the 1950s, this head of a Secondary Modern in the West Midlands articulated a gap in the material currently available, in a letter to Ian Serraillier: "There is a need for primers for illiterates of 11+. Language scientifically controlled but matter "grown-up", active and adventurous, also copiously illustrated" (1950). In another example of the way in which chronological age does not necessarily match reading age amongst adolescents, Anne Serraillier gave her assessment of an American novel by Mary Stolz: "READY OR NOT is consciously "wholesome" and precocious teen-

agers who are already reading Salinger may find Mary Stolz rather tame. But most girls of 13–15 will thoroughly enjoy the story…" (1964).

This review also reflects the gendered approach to age classification: the books that teenagers were attracted to, in the view of the Serrailliers, was not only dictated by their age, but by their gender. For example, Ian Serraillier, in a letter to Alan Hill in 1960, writes of Georgette Heyer's *Beauvallet*: "I3 year old girls are no longer interested in Children's books and demand something more emotionally mature. There is not nearly enough material available for them, and it is not surprising that they make a bee-line for Heyer's romantic stories." The Serrailliers were not alone in considering these striations of readership. An article about "Bodley Head's new venture in American writing for teenagers", by Joan Murphy in *The School Librarian*, September 1969, discusses the conflicting currents within this particular market:

> …how far do European readers of between thirteen and sixteen really appreciate this new genre of specialised American fiction? For me at least a great deal of it reads as fantasy and I should suspect this to be the reaction of the average English reader. Remember that the intelligent child will by fifteen be reading Hemingway and James Baldwin, Harper Lee and Mary McCarthy, therefore these novels should, if they are to succeed, appeal to non-academic readers?, and this I very much doubt.

The content of the books selected by the Serrailliers was not simply more challenging because it dealt with sex or violence, or other more "adult" themes. It also presented more nuanced debates, beyond the archetypal hero and villain narrative. Again, this approach can be traced back to *The Silver Sword* where Jan, in particular, plays out the contradictions and stresses posed by war on traditionally accepted moral tropes. Jan is a thief: he steals bread from the Nazi barracks to distribute to those in need: "I borrow for everybody," said the boy. "They always send me. I'm so small I can wriggle under the barbed wire. I run so fast the soldiers can never catch me…" (1956, p.26). Here are knotty questions for the young reader to untangle: is stealing ever justified? If it is acceptable to steal from Nazi barracks, is it also alright to pilfer from other German households? Should citizens be held responsible for their rulers' decisions? Should villagers sacrifice refugee children to the occupying force in order to protect their own families? These are complicated ethical and moral arguments that do not invite easy answers, but Serraillier's novel – in common with many of the titles selected for the New Windmill List - encourages readers to develop the emotional maturity necessary to tackle them.

Inevitably, war is a disruptor of what Anne Malewski has termed "the grand narrative of upwards growth" (2021, p.25). Much of the material selected by Ian and Anne Serraillier for The New Windmill Series focusses on this important point of development, whilst acknowledging that children mature into adulthood at different stages and in different ways, and at a pace which adults might not always find comfortable. Serraillier was particularly prescient in his portrayal of the long-term impact of war and other traumas on mental health in *The Silver Sword*. Years before the impact of PTSD was recognised and acknowledged, Serraillier's portrayal of Jan, in particular, reveals a clear understanding of the damage that fear and trauma can cause. When

Ruth discovers that Jan had met her father and been given the talismanic silver sword she wonders, "Why had the boy not spoken earlier about him? Surely he had been told the Children's names? But Jan had forgotten them. War does strange things to young people. Months of strain had blotted from his memory many of the details of his meeting with Joseph" (1956, p.54). The gaps in Jan's memory are further evidence that "During the war his mind had suffered more than his body, and minds usually take longer to heal" (1956, p.175). Whilst this is an understanding that has now filtered through to the mainstream, it was not universally recognised at the time of the book's publication.

In another example of Serraillier's perception, perhaps stimulated by his own experience of mental health challenges, he also acknowledges that trauma does not just manifest itself in the difficult behaviours demonstrated by Jan. Ruth, in her maturity and resilience, has suffered too: "She had all the time been so brave, wise and unselfish that you might have expected her to present no problem at all. But she had grown up too quickly and shouldered responsibilities far beyond her years" (1956, p.176). Ruth's role as quasi-mother to Jan is equated with her grasp of morality as it should be, not how war has twisted it. When Jan is caught after another episode of thieving, the British army officer who is to decide his fate voices the long-term impact of war on young minds:

> As he reflected on the punishment he had given the boy, he realised that for all his noble intentions he had only been scratching on the surface of a problem he could not begin to solve. A week's detention would not prevent Jan from stealing again. Could Ruth prevent him? She was a remarkable girl and, if anybody could help him, it was she. But after five years of war and twisted living, such cases were too often beyond remedy (1956, p.106).

This is another facet of the shifting boundaries between childhood and adulthood which Serraillier plays with throughout *The Silver Sword*. Regardless of children's ability, in nightmarish circumstances, to adopt adult behaviours, there is, as this passage suggests, a danger that, in doing so, a vital stage of the process of maturity is missed, to the detriment of long-term well-being.

## Conclusion

*The Silver Sword* is still recognised as an early and important representation of World War II in fiction for children and it has remained constantly in print since its first publication. Its most recent edition is in Puffin (2015). Whilst much of its appeal lies in its pace, and in the adventure story at its core, its portrayal of children caught up in the bureaucracy of war is particularly resonant for modern readers. Displacement and confusion are as much a by-product of conflict as fear of violence, and this is an issue which continues to ring true. Serraillier's portrayal of a transit camp in Berlin sounds only too familiar to anyone who has watched recent news bulletins with horror:

> "...the children were given blankets and straw-filled mattresses and ushered into a dark corner of the hall. Here a seedy-looking flag and a scribbled notice on the wall indicated that they were in "Poland". […] As far as they could see, the whole floor was carpeted with mattresses. They threw down theirs where they stood – in the no-man's-land between "Poland" and "Yugoslavia."

Indeed, ideologically, Serraillier is more in sync with today's fictionalised depictions of war and the plight of refugees than with the Biggles-era tradition of wartime adventure stories. This evidence of his forward-looking approach prompts us to acknowledge that, although he is remembered primarily now for *The Silver Sword*, Serraillier's work with Anne on The New Windmill Series had a considerable impact. It inspired and encouraged a range of reading material for – and about - a wider socio-economic range of teenagers than had hitherto been the case. Clearly, the Serrailliers were operating within a culturally heteronormative framework during a period of time in which the cis-gendering of readership and literature was an unexamined practice. The New Windmill archive, therefore, offers a rich source of material for future research in order to discuss and contextualise these themes further.

The Serrailliers saw opportunities to deepen their readers' thinking about the world in quite unlikely places. For example, reviewing John Christopher's science fiction novel, *The Lotus Caves*, for possible inclusion in the New Windmill list, Anne was enthusiastic:

> Though not normally drawn to science fiction, I really enjoyed this book, partly for its powerful visual imagery, but mainly because it is the kind of book that makes its readers think about modern living conditions, and question assumptions society too often makes about the value of technological "progress" whatever the cost. (1974)

As Nel observes, "scholars and creators of literature for young people can play at least a small role in helping readers to imagine a future that overcomes the follies of the past and present" (2018, p.360). Whilst it is depressing to say the least that, as a civilisation, we do not seem to have moved on at all in the seventy years since *The Silver Sword* was written, and children are still suffering the displacement and trauma described by Ian Serraillier, the fact remains that, due to the work of visionary editors such as the Serrailliers and their New Windmill Series, there is more material than ever before available to children and Young Adults, to help them understand their place in the world, and to suggest a vision of a better future.

Finally, as this article demonstrates, the use of archival material to contextualise the complex decision-making process behind a book's selection and publication is extremely valuable. There is great scope for future work in this area, both in terms of research within collections, but also in the classroom, where primary sources can be used to interrogate the way in which ideological and commercial practices intersect, and the implications this has for readers.

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