

Introduction

Children's books, films and TV-series should represent guiltless and guileless children. Indeed, guilt is for grown-ups; children are innocent. Adults are guilty of so much: war, racism, ecological disaster, child-abuse and much else. Thus, if guilt is represented in a modern children's book it usually focuses on the guilt of parents towards their children. Moreover, it is up to the child to right the wrongs committed by the older generation.

It has not always been like this. The religious and didactic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries did not hesitate to blame and shame children. The idea was that children were born sinful and needed to be prompted in the right direction. Today the dominant idea is that children are inherently good. "The kids are all right," at least as long they are left to their own devices.

Two examples of troublemakers from different periods may illustrate the shift in guilt-sensibility in children's literature: Wilhelm Busch's *Max und Moritz* (1865) and Astrid Lindgren's Emil books (1963, 1966, 1970). In both cases we are dealing with narratives intended to amuse and entertain rather than to educate. Guilt is not the primary concern – one could even say that it is nearly invisible – yet it is essential. The mischievous brats Max and Moritz feel no guilt over their practical jokes while Emil's pranks as a rule are unintentional. Thus Max and Moritz are morally guilty, whereas Emil is innocent in the eyes of his readers (if not his father's!). Consequently, Max and Moritz eventually have to pay with their lives for the mischief they have done (ground to flour and eaten by ducks). Conversely, Emil's final act of bravado is to save the life of the farmhand Alfred. The same surplus of energy, stubbornness and good will that in nine cases of ten spell trouble, this one time turns out to be what saves the day.

There is something altogether alluring and sympathetic about regarding children as innocent, that they always, like Emil, mean well, and that they have the ability to act accordingly. But how many children are like him? He turns out a pillar of society, but how? Is he naturally good; is that all there is to it? And do we also need children's books with characters who make real mistakes? Who fail? Or – even worse – who want to do bad things?

This issue of *Barnboken – Journal of Children's Literature Research* focuses on the theme of guilt in children's books, partly (as has

already been suggested) because it has featured importantly in older children's literature, but also because we see renewed interest among authors to bring up questions of guilt and responsibility. The "ethical turn" is affecting children's literature as well, it seems.

In the article "Guilt, empathy and the ethical potential of children's literature," Maria Nikolajeva shows how guilt is represented in some recent young adult books. Tabitha Suzuma's *Forbidden* is about forbidden love – incest – between the siblings Maya and Lochan. Nikolajeva asks how a reader is to interpret the characters' feelings of guilt (and sometimes lack thereof). Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* trilogy is also analyzed. Guilt may not be the central *motif* of Pullman's trilogy but it turns out to be an important theme. Nikolajeva shows how intricately Pullman addresses the problem of guilt.

Elizabeth Braithwaite's article is an altogether different kind of guilt-trip. She offers a reading of dystopian post-catastrophic narratives, that is, books about the world after a nuclear war or global ecological collapse. Here the focus is on collective guilt, occasionally so-called "survivor guilt", but mainly parental guilt. These are books where the adults (and all previous generations) have failed, while the young are fated to set things right again. Books about ecological disaster such as Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries* (2009) differ in some respects from other dystopian narratives. Braithwaite shows that these are books where guilt and responsibility is more evenly shared across generations.

These two articles form the starting point of a theme that will keep developing on the *Barnboken* website. We thus welcome more articles on Guilt!

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