

KERRY MALLAN

**SECRETS, LIES AND CHILDREN'S FICTION**

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Should we advise children to tell the truth or to lie for them to be able to survive the trials and tribulations of modern life? Is telling the truth always the best ethical choice? If so, what is the truth and how do we know it? Are there some truths that we should not tell, some secrets that we should keep? These are some of the questions that arise in Kerry Mallan's *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* that stems from the ethical paradoxes that we face when opting for telling the truth, or lies, in various situations in our lives. Mallan discusses the ways in which children's fiction addresses "the contradictions, choices, dilemmas and problems that arise when we choose between truth and its alternatives, between openness and concealment, between public and private" (1) and the varied moral solutions that it offers to these problems. While one's gut-feeling might suggest that a number of children's books do offer fairly straightforward lessons of truth-telling as the moral absolute à la Pinocchio, as Mallan demonstrates, representations of situations where deceiving, lying, or keeping secrets are more favourable options are also commonplace in children's fiction. Mallan's book is an inspiring treatise about the ethics of truth-telling and lying in children's fiction, but, to tell you the truth, it perhaps opens up more questions than it answers.

Apart from the introduction that addresses the starting points for discussing and defining the "truth" in works of fiction by drawing on philosophy of language and poststructuralist theory, the book is divided into three sections, 'Truth, Lies and Survival', 'Secrets and Secrecy' and 'Tangled Webs'. The first part deals with the problematic nature of truth and the potential risks involved in revealing it on both personal and collective level; tropes addressed include the veil and the scapegoat, and the focus here is on both realistic fiction, as well as (auto)biographical works. The second part continues the discussion of secrecy and deception as survival strategies and examines these in relation to political or social oppression in dystopian and realist fiction, as well as in connection individual subjects' attempts at

(re)constructing the self after experiences of trauma. The final section provides perhaps the most surprising take on lies, secrets and survival by, on the one hand, exploring representations of mendacious animals and non-linguistic strategies of deception and, on the other hand, the linguistic and visual metafictional play that enables children's narratives to challenge and question the entire categories of truth, lies and fiction. The theoretical framework draws eclectically on numerous thinkers ranging from classics, such as Kant and the early-twentieth-century sociologist Simmel, to the usual poststructuralist suspects – Derrida, Foucault, Lacan et al. – and contemporary feminist and queer philosophers, including Butler and Halberstam. Throughout the book, Mallan forwards the compelling argument that the aim for survival is the main motivator for departing, one way or another, from the moral guideline of always sticking to the truth. Whether it is the survival of governments or resistance groups, individuals figuring out their historical, embodied identities (often in relation to trauma), or animals being maltreated by humans, it becomes clear that often deception, lies and secrecy are represented as necessary, sometimes even more desirable options than telling the truth, and, moreover, that truth is often relative and subjective, also in fiction for young readers.

While the varied theoretical notions and concepts are mostly well woven into the examination of the primary texts and allow Mallan to explore a range of contexts where moral dilemmas in regard to truth-telling arise, sometimes the links to theory seem more like an afterthought. From the perspective of a discourse analyst, this concerns especially Foucauldian theory – almost the whole of Foucault's oeuvre is cited in the bibliography but in the text itself references to Foucault are sparse; definitely more could have been made of his theories of language, power and knowledge in relation to constructing truth, as well as his notion of surveillance and the concept of panopticon in relation to discussion of subjectivity, secrets and deception. As a feminist scholar I was also hoping for a discussion of Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge – which is, in a sense, a theory of truth – in relation to both human and animal behaviour in one of the most exciting chapters of the book, 'Mendacious Animals' that explores the parallels between animal mendacity and human strategies of deception. Haraway is mentioned at the beginning of the chapter but does not make it into the analysis of the primary texts.

As regards the corpus of primary texts, the backcover blurb promises that the book offers readings of "a wide selection of international texts, spanning several decades, including picture books, novels and

films". In terms of genres, this promise is fulfilled but, as is often the case with English-language children's literature scholarship, "international" here refers to English-language children's book from countries where English is the main language. Truth be told, I do not find this a flaw, but think it is worth stating as a fact. Scandinavian readers might be thrilled to know that Pippi Longstocking makes an appearance in the chapter on Artful Deception – yet this may also be disappointing, since Pippi's moment in the limelight is brief and only illuminated by a secondary source. A closer inspection of characters such as Pippi who tell tall tales and spin stories or lies for fun and amusement, to create make-belief worlds and to play rather than to survive, might have brought more complexity to Mallan's argument about the various uses and functions that telling lies may have in children's fiction.

Furthermore, while I appreciate the inclusion of a range of genres and works aimed for different age groups, there are some borderline, or, perhaps, cross-over cases, such as Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels *Persepolis 1* and *2* (2003, 2004) and George Orwell's dystopian novel *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (1945) that probably do not fit into everyone's categories of children's or young adult fiction. These examples illustrate well Mallan's main argument about how the aim for survival can provide the moral ground for deception and secrecy, but I wonder if this argument would have looked somewhat different if more books for younger readers had been part of the corpus. The word "fiction" that is used to categorise all the primary materials may also be slightly misleading in the sense that while all the books discussed can indeed be classified as fiction, there is a great difference between those examples that actually make some truth-claims about the text-external world – such as Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novels – and narratives that do not make such claims and may even highlight their fictional status through various metafictional strategies – such as *The Name of This Book is Secret* (2008) by Pseudonymous Bosch. While Mallan does provide intriguing discussion of the various strategies that fiction and literature use to (de)construct truth, I would have liked to see the limitations and possibilities of different genres more explicitly addressed.

The essayistic feel and chapters that move between topics ranging from political oppression to mystery games and genres covering picture books as well as dystopian young adult narratives might give some pause to readers who are looking for a more straightforward argument or clear-cut categories of the various takes on the ethics of truth-telling in children's literature. However, I regard this kind of

an approach as a strength in a book that charts what is possible rather than what is representative, and opens up space for discussion rather than tries to close it down. Indeed, the most valuable thing in *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* is the imaginative way in which Mallan draws connections between various philosophical ideas and different works and genres of children's fiction. While Mallan's subject matter is potentially limitless – where does one end the discussion of lies in *fiction*? – her efforts to track down important themes and illustrative examples are admirable. I also appreciate Mallan's avoidance of falling into either side of the didacticism/clear morals versus subversiveness/ambiguous morals debate, and particularly her avoidance of embracing the view that morally subversive and questioning children's narratives are also necessarily more complex and aesthetically pleasing, or the other way round. As Mallan's discussions demonstrate, in terms of moral takes on the value of truth-telling or lying, children's fiction is much more versatile than one first might think.

*Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* offers food for thought for anyone interested in ethics of children's literature but in its theoretical focus on philosophy and language theory might be of special interest to those in the fields of discourse analysis or philosophy of children's literature, or – in its discussion of truth, authenticity and literature – to those examining life writing in children's literature. While I have above outlined some concerns that I have with the book, rather than shortcomings, I view these as signs that Mallan is onto some key concerns of children's literature criticism and able to invoke further ideas and debates. *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* is, truly, a thought-provoking work.

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