



# *English Studies in Latin America*

## **Teaching Children's Literature: An Overview**

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## Teaching Children's Literature: An Overview

Jean Webb<sup>1</sup>

This article traces the development of the study of children's literature and demonstrates the power of writing for children to have a political impact. A case study is given to exemplify the political power of writing for children by discussing Michael Morpurgo's *Shadow* (2010) and the Yarl's Wood Detention Centre for asylum seekers in the UK.

KEYWORDS: children's literature, teaching

The intention of this article is to give an overview of the study and teaching of children's literature from an international perspective. The study of writing for children can reveal much about a culture since the constructs of culture, national identity and values are embedded in writing for children, no matter where it originates. The stories we tell and how they are told formulate and shape the reader whether the authorial intention is to imbibe or critique a particular perspective. The analysis of children's literature deconstructs the text and reconstructs an argument bringing a deeper

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understanding of cultures, societies, and wider concerns. The child is the future of any nation, culture or society; what they read when young shapes the next generation both nationally and internationally.

As an academic subject the field of children's literature studies has developed and expanded over the past twenty-five years. It principally began as being part of teacher education and librarianship programmes where there were two intentions. For teachers, it was to consider what they thought would be suitable books to read to their classes, and for their pupils to read, and for librarians, again, the question of suitability for an age range, plus a knowledge of texts to stock in public and school libraries. There had been a level of scholarly interest in the late 1960s which has since burgeoned. In 1972, in America, Dr Francelia Butler founded the scholarly journal *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded*. This was a specialist academic journal and is important since it enabled the publication of serious works of criticism, and helped to establish the subject as being accepted in universities and higher education institutions. A year later the first Children's Literature Association (ChLA) meeting was held emanating from the group who had engaged with the idea of the journal. ChLA was founded to provide a meeting place for the serious discussion of books for children as literature and made a great stride in the development of children's literature as an academic subject. The ChLA now holds a large annual international conference in North America and publishes the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *Children's Literature* which is "the annual publication of the Children's Literature Association and the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature. The journal seeks to publish theoretically based articles that demonstrate an awareness of key issues and criticism in children's literature". In addition these publications contain book reviews and information about activities and conferences in the field internationally. Recognition by the Modern Language Association means that children's literature is recognised as a bona fide academic subject, which is now taught worldwide in universities and higher education institutions. Doctorates

are awarded in children's literature and there are also professorships in the field. The term 'Professor' is here used in a European context in that it is one who is recognised internationally as an academic who has made a significant contribution to the field, rather than having achieved tenure as in the US.

Although the ChLA does attract international scholars, it is still principally a North American association focusing on texts and authors from the Americas, whereas the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCl) is a truly international society of scholars. The first colloquium of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCl) was held in 1970 in Frankfurt leading to the full establishment of the society. A Congress is held biennially in different parts of the world. Their journal, *International Research in Children's Literature* was only founded in 2008, however, it plays an important part in bringing knowledge to readers and awareness of writing for children from many countries.

Internationally the study of children's literature has expanded and strengthened over the past decade. The Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research came into being in the early 1990s and the Children's Literature Association, India, was founded circa 2006. These are important developments which take the study of writing for children beyond the English speaking communities, and give a voice to marginalized and indigenous writers and scholars. In addition to the associations, which all run vibrant conferences, there are a few dedicated children's literature research centres internationally; namely, in the UK: the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature at the University of Roehampton ([www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/ncrcll](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/researchcentres/ncrcll)); the International Forum for Research in Children's Literature, at the University of Worcester (<http://www.worcester.ac.uk/discover/international-forum-for-research-in-childrens-literature.html>); and the Centre for International Research in Childhood: Literature, Culture, Media, at the University of Reading ([www.rdg.ac.uk/circl/](http://www.rdg.ac.uk/circl/)). In addition there is the 'Seven Stories'

([www.sevenstories.org.uk/home/index.php](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/home/index.php)) which is a museum attached to the University of Newcastle, which has a particular focus on links with children, schools and the community, and acts as an academic venue. Other centres internationally can be found, for example, in Brisbane, Cyprus, Osaka, South Africa, Stockholm and Winnipeg.

This historical contextualisation points out how the study of children's literature and the teaching of such is now a recognised and important area of scholarship with emergent areas arising such as ecocritical approaches; interdisciplinary work which merges into cultural studies; notions of the body and post-humanism and the inter-relationship between texts for children and medical history. The study and teaching of children's literature varies with the target audience. Those engaged in teacher education will have in mind how texts may be used in the classroom, whilst others, like myself, are interested in the interaction with culture, history and theoretical approaches. The approach taken here is that of a literary scholar working in an interdisciplinary manner which includes an historical and cultural situating of the text.

Following is a hitherto unpublished paper which I gave at a ChLA conference. I am presenting the paper as an example to demonstrate how academic study can reveal the interaction between children's literature, politics and moral values. The author whose work I have taken as the subject is Michael Morpurgo. He is a leading award winning British children's author who has increasingly written novels which have an underlying political intention to raise awareness of injustices. In *Private Peaceful* (2003) Morpurgo took the subject of soldiers who were executed by a firing squad in World War I for so-called acts of cowardice, when they were actually suffering from the mental and physically incapacitating effects of shell-shock. The novel was used in a campaign to have the reputations of the men who were so executed by the British during the First World War restored and to posthumously receive a pardon from the British Government. The novel was made into a very successful film, a play and a radio drama. The novel played an active role in righting

injustice which had continued for almost a century and was a stain on British military and political history. Morpurgo's *Shadow* (2010), the subject of the case study is a work in a similar campaigning vein.

CASE STUDY: *SHADOW* OF ASYLUM, REFUGE UNDER SIEGE.

Embedded in Michael Morpurgo's *Shadow* (2010) is an outcry against the conditions under which the children of asylum seekers were kept in the UK. A report dated 2011 from an organisation called 'Corporate Watch' states that: "Nearly 30,000 people are detained in the UK every year for immigration control purposes - without charge or trial, and with no judicial supervision or time limit. Most of these are asylum seekers, ... Until the detention of children ceased in late 2010, nearly 1,000 children were detained every year."

Cessation of such detention of children was one of the election pledges of the Liberal Democrat Party, who governed by coalition with the Conservatives (2010-2015). Nick Clegg, Leader of the Liberal Democrats stated in 2010: "... our starting point is this: there is no greater test of civilised society than how it treats its children."

One of the Detention Centres which brought critical attention was Yarl's Wood which, according to the Institution of Race Relations "... was the main 'immigration prison' for women and children and has been heavily criticised in the past for its overcrowding, physical abuse, privacy infringement, communications restrictions, poor medical care, and so on."

Although the 2010 report states that detention of children has ceased the following appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper in January 2011 concerning a court case where children were detained at the Yarl's Wood Detention Centre in Bedfordshire:

The judge ruled the two families were detained unlawfully from the time they were taken into custody until their release.

He said that while government policy on detaining families with children was not unlawful, there was significant evidence showing that United Kingdom Border Agency staff had "failed to apply that policy with the rigour it deserves".

"The cases of the two families involved in this litigation provide good examples of the failure by UKBA to apply important aspects of the policy both when the decisions were taken to detain each family and when decisions were taken to maintain detention after removal directions had been cancelled."

Lawyers acting for the families presented evidence that even short periods in detention were unlawful as they caused serious harm to children.

The case was brought by Public Interest Lawyers (PIL), with the human rights group Liberty and the campaign group Bail for Immigration Detainees also intervening.

Suppiah and her two sons, aged one and 11, were taken to Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire in February and detained for 17 days. Bello was detained at Yarl's Wood for 12 days before being released.

Upon arrival all the children became sick with diarrhoea and vomiting. The children still suffer the effects of their detention, with one child, aged 11 at the time, now diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"It appears that the welfare needs of the families were not properly taken into account or even assessed prior to the decision to detain, and the detention experience has had a profound effect upon them," PIL said.

In June 2011, it was reported in the newspapers that there were still at least two asylum seeking families with children in detention in the UK.

The publication of Michael Morpurgo's novel *Shadow* in October 2010 was accompanied by a great deal of interest and coverage from the British national press concerning his campaign for the

closure of the family unit at Yarl's Wood Detention Centre. Morpurgo is a high profile author in the UK having been The Children's Laureate from 2003-2005. Coverage of the campaign was also included in the BBC news programme for children CBBC Newsround. They formed a potent set of paratexts to the novel. Morpurgo is thus looking to, and engaging in creating, an aware and responsible child reader/audience, combined with engendering the confidence and belief that the child's voice is an important and potentially effective part of contemporary British society. Morpurgo's media campaign made distinct associations between the moral case being made and his novel, linking his story of Aman, a boy from Afghanistan, and his mother with the real life situation of detained asylum seekers.

The Yarl's Wood campaign was not the first in which Morpurgo has been a very active participant. His 2003 novel *Private Peaceful* was the story of two English brothers fighting in World War I. The younger suffers from shell shock and his older brother disobeys an order by staying to care for his brother. He is executed by a firing squad. The novel linked with a campaign to clear the names of the British soldiers who had been executed under such circumstances and to reinstate their war pension rights. Success came shortly after the publication of *Private Peaceful*.

There are two central points I wish to emphasise in my discussion so far: firstly that writing for children can and does have a political impact. This is evident historically, for example, from the influence of say Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) which raised awareness to the dreadful conditions of working children and particularly chimney sweeps in the 1870s at the time the Parliamentary Commissions were gathering evidence to form legislation for the protection of children and factory workers, or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the effect it had in the anti-slavery movement both in the US and Britain. The second point is that there is an important difference between literature and propaganda. Morpurgo's intention regarding his writing fiction is, as he has stated a considerable number of times, his belief in the importance of telling a good story.



Added to this his work is always underpinned by strong and responsible moral attitudes. Although *Shadow* was employed as a catalyst for the media campaign against the detention of children, the novel is not presented as such.

The cover is a picture of a brown and white spaniel dog in the foreground, whilst behind the dog is a desert scene with helicopters circling above and a British soldier shaking the hand of an Afghanistani boy. The quotation on the back cover reads: “The dog is not like other dogs. She is more like a friend than a dog, a friendly shadow that does not want to leave us. You never lose your shadow.”

The values which are being depicted here in image and word are that of friendship, loyalty and crossing boundaries, both of culture and age. These are moral tropes which recur in Morpurgo’s work. In common with a number of Morpurgo’s other novels, *Shadow* circulates upon a relationship between a child and an older person, thus bringing together the generations. In this case it is a boy and his grandfather. The reader is introduced to the close and loving relationship between them in a safe family setting. The boy goes to stay with his grandfather because the old man is concerned about tending the tree planted as a memorial to his deceased wife. The weather has been very dry and hot.

There is a spaniel dog of which Matt, the boy, is very fond. His grandfather also asks him to take his Monopoly set so that they can play together. These elements of the introduction are seemingly innocent, logical and within normal experience. However, as the novel continues these introductory elements from everyday life relate to the extreme situations associated with the war in Afghanistan and the effect and impact it has on ordinary people, both Afghans and British, adults and children.

Morpurgo’s novel works as an intricate tapestry of word and image. As they sit quietly after their game of Monopoly Grandfather begins to sing a song of which his wife was very fond. The refrain runs ‘When stars begin to fall...’ which triggers a reminiscence in Matt of a conversation with his friend Aman when the two boys talked together of stargazing in the countryside on a school trip to a farm. (Incidentally Morpurgo has been awarded an MBE for his work with children in bringing

them from towns and cities to experience rural and farm life.) Matt recalls Aman linking these Devonshire skies with the absence of stars in Manchester and the abundance of the star-filled skies of Afghanistan. The way the text works is from the known to the unknown; from what would be familiar to a young British reader to coming to understand that which is foreign. Morpurgo's work uses the imagination as a bridge between worlds over which understanding flows.

Aman and his mother have been removed to Yarl's Wood Centre where they await deportation to Afghanistan. On learning of their plight the Grandfather is determined to visit. He takes the Monopoly set, for the boys used to play together. The description of Yarl's Wood Centre is graphic, a scene of repression in a prison-like atmosphere:

Like all the other visitors I was being processed. ...

Everywhere there were more of those unsmiling security guards. The pat-down search was done brusquely, and in hostile silence. Everything about the place seemed to be hateful: the bleak locker room where visitors had to leave their bags, the institutional smell, the sound of keys turning in the locks, the sad plastic flowers in the visitor's meeting room, and always the sound of some child crying.

Then I saw them, the only ones still without a visitor. ... Aman and his mother were sitting there at the table, waiting for me, looking vacantly. There were no smiles. ... there were officers everywhere, in their black and white uniforms, keys dangling from their belts, watching us.

Aman's mother sat there, shoulders slumped, stony faced, sad and silent. She had deep, dark rings under her eyes, and she seemed locked inside herself. As for Aman, he was even smaller than I remembered, pinched and thin like a whippet. His eyes were pools of loneliness and despair. (33)

Aman's mother is withdrawn, depressed, traumatised. The image comparing Aman to a whippet makes a link between the bouncy spaniel owned and loved by the Grandfather and the dog Shadow who will later figure significantly in the story. These small details make connections and links and produce emotive resonances within the text. Aman tells the Grandfather his history and begins with his grandfather, thus Morpurgo breaks down the barriers of anonymity surrounding Afghanistan, which is predominantly represented as a desert war zone. Through this reminiscence and family story Morpurgo presents the country and people as having an attractive and noble history, until political change occurs. Politics implode upon normal families and destroy people and lives. They have been forced out of their village and have taken refuge in a cave. During an attack by Taliban fanatics a stray dog, a spaniel, comes to try to rescue them.

The story of the dog, Shadow, who appears from nowhere and stays loyally with the family, until he meets again with the bomb disposal unit of which he was a part, is based upon a true story. There was an attack and an explosion during an operation being carried out by an Australian bomb disposal unit in Afghanistan. Their dog disappeared, thought killed. Amazingly it turned up a year later, its whereabouts during that time unknown. Morpurgo took this true story and wove it into his own to enable connections to be made, cultural gulfs to be crossed. As Morpurgo's story unfolds, during the family's escape to England from Afghanistan, they meet with the army unit who owned the dog Shadow. The bond between man and dog is employed to emphasise humanitarian relationships and values when other vestiges, shadows of humanity, have been destroyed by war. Finally Aman and his mother are allowed to stay in the UK. Morpurgo unfolds his stories of grief and love, dislocation and unity, cruelty and kindness, being displaced and finding a home, a haven. Beneath the cruel reasons for migration which are exposed in the sections where Aman's family are being persecuted in their own country, and the severe reception from the authorities in the UK, Morpurgo demonstrates and emphasises the moral and human values which override, or rather, should both

override and underpin political action. The happy outcome for Aman depends upon the actions of individuals: individuals against the power of the state.

The strength of this novel is drawn from the literary subtlety, the stark reality combined with a lyrical tone and intricacy of the writing where the reader is enabled to make connections, to piece together the silenced stories which are drawing upon real life events. Morpurgo's mastery of storytelling takes as its subject and mission the real life concern of the treatment of the children of asylum seekers, a matter which is a scar upon national consciousness and the conscience of a nation which is ostensibly fighting a war under the banner of humanitarian values and democracy, of human rights. He has thrust these issues into the face of Government and made children and their parents aware of such abominations. To return to Nick Clegg's speech, one hopes that it will not be but hollow rhetoric, but that the UK and other countries will withstand the test of a civilised country as it how it treats its children, and that maltreatment of children will be but a shadow of a memory for the next generation.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS...

To conclude, the study of children's literature is an essential component of literary studies which enables and provokes critical and analytical thought bringing communities of scholars, their students and readers to deeper understandings of how literature reinforces and critiques society in important and meaningful ways. If we do not understand how literature for children has and is operating then how do we understand the making of the future, for the future lies in the minds, values and critical awareness of children who will be the future decision makers and shapers of our worlds.

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