

# Write4Children

---

## Where are the Big Political Ideas in Pre-teen Children's Books?

Kerry Mason

Letterbox Library

### Abstract

Is it appropriate to explore political ideas or ideology in children's books? Are books that validate society as it is any less "political" than those that ask children to question society? This paper explores these questions through the examination of four children's books, all aimed at the pre-teen age group, which address racism, socialism, asylum and even anarchy. Through the exploration of these books, this article suggests that it is possible to create interesting and entertaining literature for children while simultaneously encouraging the reader to explore complex and sometimes controversial ideas and issues. It proposes that these types of books are not only acceptable but desirable in creating inquiring and thoughtful minds.

### Keywords

political; ideology; prejudice; discrimination; equality; socialism.

---

Letterbox Library is a thirty year old, not-for-profit, children's booksellers, specialising in books which celebrate equality, diversity and inclusion. In the early days we would regularly be accused, by adults – believing they were the ideologically neutral protectors of the innocence of children's literature, of two things: either that we were self-appointed, leftist censors, withholding numerous volumes of beloved books from children, or (a part of the same sinister side of the coin) that we were the pushers of ideology and '...isms'. However, while some lambasted, others – parents, carers, teachers (all adults themselves) – found their way to us, desperate to find books that tackled, head on, the issues that children faced as they learnt to live in a rapidly changing world. But also, to find books that simply included child characters who were like their own children. Books that, for instance, actually featured; BME<sup>i</sup> children and adults; girls in a leading role; disabled characters beyond the stereotypical 'baddies'. These adults *themselves* felt censored by the choice of books that were available to them and the children that were in their care. They recognised that children don't have freedom of choice in what they read; they only have freedom to choose from what is available, and even then their choices are often policed by gatekeepers. These adults wanted to encourage access to books that would lead to a critical or

# Write4Children

---

questioning response from children. They wanted children to see the world in its complexity and variety and be encouraged to ask the question ‘why?’ For, if we don’t ever question or criticise our basic beliefs and practises, how can we ever make progress? In short, like us, they wanted to increase children’s access to books and, at the same time, make the world a better place.

In the foreword of *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children’s Literature*, Jack Zipes describes how politics have always been present in children’s literature:

From the very beginning, when books were first explicitly printed for children in the sixteenth century, politics played a “radical” role in primers, the Bible, and alphabet books. To become literate did not mean simply to develop the ability to read; literacy entailed (and still does) a learning process that produced responsible citizens who functioned in a hierarchical society according to its rules. To become literate involved learning to read the world according to letters and words that were to govern one’s beliefs and views and that were regulated according to specific guidelines and norms established by the church and state... [O]ne of the earliest alphabet books, *The Childes Guide* (1667), included such phrases as “In Adam’s fall / We sinned all”; “This Book attend, Thy life to mend”; “The idle Fool / Is Whipt at School.” Every alphabet book from the sixteenth century to the present was and is ideological. (Mickenberg and Nel, 2008: vii)

As Zipes explains here, a book that is ideologically conservative is still political. Children’s literature can help to perpetuate and validate our society as it is, and it can help to transform it by presenting ideas through new perspectives that encourage new ways of thinking. In both cases, they are political. Children’s literature can be didactic, regressive and conformist but, much more excitingly, it can be a visionary space, a utopia, where anything is possible.

In *The Silence Seeker* by Ben Morley, illustrated by Carl Pearce, the protagonist, Joe, decides to befriend the rather sad-looking boy who has moved in to the house next door. Mishearing ‘asylum seeker’ for ‘silence seeker’ he sets about trying to find some peace and quiet for his new friend. In this brilliantly understated children’s book, the simple, evocative text and manga-style artwork fuse beautifully together to convey some very powerful and complex ideas, easily and eloquently. Ben Morley’s character, Joe, literalises the meaning of asylum and tries to help his new friend find sanctuary, a place of refuge and safety. And, in his attempts, he discovers that even his own ‘peaceful’ country doesn’t always offer a place of sanctuary to someone who needs it. This is a very contemporary book, both in terms of its subject matter and the graphic illustrations that bring to life a

# Write4Children

---

modern city. Talking about his book, Ben Morley has said that he wanted to write a book that the children he had taught would relate to; many had first-hand experience of immigration and asylum. He felt that much of the fiction available to the children at his school just didn't resonate with them (Random House Children's Publishers UK: 2010). While understanding fiction as a place to escape into the imagination, he also understood the need for books to be relevant. So he decided to make a central theme of his book asylum – a politically fraught issue that includes problems of discrimination, prejudice and racism; not subjects traditionally associated with children's books or, more specifically, picture books aimed at young children.

Surveys and opinion polls in the UK consistently show negative attitudes towards asylum and immigration. We are confronted with these attitudes every day in magazines, newspapers, books and on the television. Children are not immune to these attitudes and many have been affected by asylum or immigration, yet we rarely think to engage children on this issue. *The Silence Seeker* is a wonderful example of how books can examine complex political issues with children. It does this simply through ideas and feelings that children understand; through notions of friendship and companionship, and feelings of loneliness and acceptance. It encourages its reader to ask questions: Why is the boy here? Where did he come from? Where has he gone? In a creative move, which only enhances the affinity between Joe and the boy, the narrative begins with Joe approaching the boy, who doesn't speak throughout, sitting alone on his doorstep.

I have never met a Silence Seeker before.  
Every morning  
He sits on the doorstep.  
Sometimes he closes his eyes.  
I think he's listening for a Silence. (Morley 2009, p3)

In a deftly touch of circular narrative, this is exactly where we find Joe at the end of the book.

I sat on the doorstep and  
Ate both pieces of toast...  
Before I went inside,  
I closed my eyes and listened.  
Just for a moment the city stopped  
And took a breath and  
Everything was quiet...  
But only for a moment. (Morley 2009, p23 and p26)

For Joe, there are no preconceptions about who the boy is. His concern initially is simply that the boy is a potential friend, and then that he might be able to help

# Write4Children

---

him find what he needs. These two characters don't even need to communicate with words in order to feel companionship. They simply accept each other for who they are and enjoy each others' company. As an adult reader of Ben Morley's book, it is the children who show compassion, caring and acceptance. They who are better, wiser even. Far from being a pusher of ideology or indoctrinating children, if this book *is* preaching to any audience, it is adults – those adults who have allowed their prejudices to get in the way of the social qualities we have traditionally associated with humanity.

Another superbly engaging picture book dealing with some very big ideas is Michael Rosen and Bob Graham's *This Is Our House*. Set in an urban park surrounded by tower blocks, Bob Graham's bright and lively illustrations work to challenge notions of the dreary, dangerous city and enhance Michael Rosen's humorous, energetic and compelling text. The narrative begins:

George was in the house.

"This house is mine and no one else is coming in," George said.

"It's not your house, George," said Lindy.

"It belongs to everybody." (Rosen 1996, p1)

The concentration of power and wealth – a cardboard house – within a small segment of society – George? Surely more than a nod to Socialism! While being extremely funny and deceptively simple, *This Is Our House* manages to explore ideas of common ownership, exclusion, democracy and prejudice and it does it all with a light touch and lots of humour.

The main character, George, has taken control of the cardboard house and is resisting all attempts by the other children to enter it. In his bid to keep control and bar entry to the other children, he resorts to discrimination e.g. "This house isn't for girls" (Rosen 1996, p4). Rather unluckily for George, his discriminating ways lead to everyone else eventually turning things back on him and refusing him entry to the house. After the revolution, in a delightfully positive twist, George decides that perhaps a house that is open to all is a better option.

Simply put, this book is about learning to share, a theme to which all children (and adults) can relate. George doesn't want to share, he finds it difficult but, ultimately, he realises that things can be better if you do. Michael Rosen doesn't wrap this up in a trite or lecturing conclusion to the story: he leaves you wondering if George changes his mind because it's the only way to get himself back into the house, or if he really has had a change of heart and discovered it's more fun to share with other people? Adults invariably feel more comfortable with the central theme of this book being sharing, but sharing in the adult world is much more politically complicated. The children in this book decide together (George more reluctantly) on a system of common ownership. In the adult world we would

# Write4Children

---

actually call this socialism. Again, a theme not generally associated with children's fiction.

Also important are the themes of democracy and exclusion. George's prohibition of the other children, based on being small, or twins, or because they wear glasses and even because they like tunnels, is exposed as ridiculous. George is clearly coming up with any absurd excuse to keep sole control of the house. This dictatorial behaviour is irrational and understood by the other children to be unfair. Children learn prejudices themselves and experience discrimination from a very early age; the situation in this book will be very familiar to many children. By openly exploring these themes, Michael Rosen encourages his readers to engage in concerns that are relevant to them and the world in which they are learning to find their place. He is also inspiring them to think about alternative ways of living, in the knowledge that they will also contribute to our society.

In *Wasim and the Champ* by Chris Ashley, illustrated by Kate Pankhurst, Wasim and his friends are due to enter the local football competition, but an attack on the town mosque suddenly divides the team between Asian and white boys. The division is fierce and seems insurmountable, but a visit by the town's home-grown super hero, boxer Sayid Akramreturn, forces some harsh self-evaluations.

Wasim thought back to the terror outside his mosque last week, the smell of the firework and the hating face shouting at his family when they got out. (Ashley 2011, p88)

The 7/7 London bombings; an act of supposed retaliation on a local mosque; racism; a divided community, which extends to the playground... It takes a deft and skilful author to tackle such powerful and controversial issues in an age appropriate way, but author and head teacher Chris Ashley pulls this off superbly. With its thoroughly contemporary UK setting, its brave approach, the victory of wisdom and wit over violence, and overall agility, there is much to explore in this book. Religious conflict, racism, discrimination, community and violence are all themes that are explored superbly through the recurring motif of 'Us and Them'. Like Ben Morley and Michael Rosen, Chris Ashley utilises ideas and feelings that children can identify with and relate to. Readers then have a foundation on which to build their own thoughts, ideas and opinions.

*Wasim and the Champ* is a chapter book and will garner a slightly older audience than the previous two books. This opens up more opportunities for exploring the central themes, through discussions on how children form their own friendship groups; what they would do if their friends engaged in behaviour they did not agree with; whether they have felt excluded before; whether they think there are any divisions in their schools (along lines of gender, race, faith, etc.). In tackling these big issues – racism, religious conflict, discrimination and prejudice – Chris

# Write4Children

---

Ashley is also asking his readers to think deeply about problems of morality and ethics. He is asking his readers to think deeply about concerns that tower over modern society and affect us all.

In this article I have tried to concentrate on books published in the UK, but it would be a terrible omission not to mention a very recent book published in the US, *A Rule is to Break: A Child's Guide to Anarchy* by John Seven and Jana Christy. It is a superb example of big ideas wrapped in the covers of a children's book. The book begins:

The opposite of rules is  
ANARChY!

There are plenty of ways to make anarchy. (Seven and Christy 2012, p1)

As I write this I can hear a collective grown-up gulp! Anarchy discussed in a children's book? Can this be right? Well no, not if you belong to the Tea Party, who call the book 'horrendous' and 'downright shocking' (Flood 2012). The political right in the US do not find the ideology acceptable and I wouldn't expect them to. It is, after all, anti-capitalist.

The story follows its protagonist as s/he learns to question ideas of conformity. This takes the truly terrifying guise of, 'Use your brain', 'Give away stuff for FREE', 'Listen to the tiniest voice' and 'Make music'. The most controversial statement in the text is, 'When someone says, "Work!", you say "WHY?"' Instinctively, this might seem to some an irresponsible statement to make to children. We generally believe that we need to nurture children to work hard at school, for instance. But, what would happen if we asked children to think about work and what working means? Is it always important to work? Is work only a positive experience? Children are capable of exploring ideas and formulating their own responses. Asking, 'Why?' seems to be a perfectly sensible question. Just as asking, 'Why?' in other areas of life is a sensible thing to do. The book doesn't suggest to the reader that they don't work, it simply suggests we ask questions about work.

*A Rule is to Break* has caused outrage in the US already, but why? This book doesn't tell children to be mean or cruel (maybe slightly badly behaved, but then so do lots of children's books). It doesn't use bad language or have sexual content or promote violence. Yet it does say, 'BE NICE'. It is a celebratory book about discovery and it encourages self-determination, but also fairness and community. It ultimately encourages its readers to be thinking and informed children. Is this not what we aspire to for our children?

2013 will be the first year of a new prize for children's fiction, 'The Little Rebels Children's Book Award'. It is run by the Alliance of Radical Booksellers (a group of

# Write4Children

---

independent booksellers), and administered by Letterbox Library. As the name suggests, it is an award for radical children's fiction. This is literature that Jack Zipes describes as exploring, or getting to the root of phenomena, and it does this in order to help children better understand their world (Mickenberg and Nel, 2008: vii). The aim of the award is to raise the profile of radical children's fiction and promote it as a force for good. The response by the book world has been inspiringly and, slightly surprisingly, positive. Much of the encouragement has come from people expressing delight at the award's overt promotion of radicalism. There clearly is a desire for radical children's books among adults as well as children. However, some of the submissions, particularly from the big publishers, have been occasionally puzzling. The most common of these are books that include amongst their characters *any* underrepresented group in society. One example of this is the submission of a book simply because it has a BME protagonist. Invariably, there is nothing about the book that could be described as radical, but the inclusion of this character alone has been deemed a 'radical' move by the publisher. Apart from what this says about the under-representation of BME characters in children's fiction, what this reveals is a need. This award is, significantly, an advocate of those 'radical' books that inspire it.

While children's literature is undeniably a space to escape from the confines of the real world into the imagination, it is also a place to explore reality in all its complexity, its difficulties and its delights. Sometimes the reader can even do this through imaginary worlds like Tolkien's 'Middle-earth' or Carroll's 'Wonderland'. These 'radical' books were the books I always found most exciting when I was a child; the unconventional books where children got to be disobedient or critical of adults who were sometimes stupid or cruel, or both, just as we are in real life; the books where I got to imagine a different reality.

Yes, the books discussed here are political or ideological, but then, I would argue, so are *all* books to a greater or lesser degree. Having political content doesn't have to arouse fear or dismay among adults, afraid for the innocence of their children. Children will take from culture, including books, a range of ideas, messages, meanings and morals, and they will begin to formulate their own ideas. Hopefully they will be enlightened and entertained along the way. What this collection highlights is that it is possible to be simultaneously interesting, entertaining and thought provoking. These are the qualities that make wonderful books for children to enjoy, reflect on and remember. And, just maybe, help inspire them to change our world for the better.

## End Notes:

i "BME" is an acronym for Black and Minority Ethnic.

# Write4Children

---

## Biography:

Kerry Mason has been a director of Letterbox Library for seventeen years. Letterbox Library is a not-for-profit children's booksellers celebrating equality and diversity. Kerry is a former teacher and has an MA in Arts Education and Cultural Studies from the University of Warwick.

## Works cited:

- Ashley, C. (2011) *Wasim and the Champ*. London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books.
- Flood, A. (2012) Tea Party Condemns Children's Book on Anarchy [online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/dec/12/tea-party-childrens-book-anarchy> [Accessed 26 February 2013].
- Hunt, P. (1991) *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lurie, A. (1991) *Not in Front of the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) London: Sphere Books Ltd.
- Mickenberg, J. L., and NEL, P. (2008) *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*. New York: New York University Press.
- Morley, B. (2009) *The Silence Seeker*. London: Tamarind Books.
- Random House Children's Publishers UK, (2010) Ben Morley Speaks about Picture Book The Silence Seeker.MP4 [online]. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvHlzSf4oRo> [Accessed 26 February 2013].
- Reynolds, K. (2010) *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosen, M. (1996) *This Is Our House*. London: Walker Books Ltd.
- Seven, J. & Jana, C. (2012) *A Rule is to Break: a Child's Guide to Anarchy*. San Francisco: Manic D Press.

[Back to Contents Page](#)