

SATIPS

Support and training in Prep, Primary and Senior Schools

English

Emotion in Children's Fiction

If you have anything you need to test run, a theory to prove, a notion to fret at, children, always authentic and straight talking, cannot fail to leave you knowing the true merit of your ideas. In our Teabag Club, (that's cake and Big Questions really, which has sort of morphed into cake, Big Questions and books), I recently asked four of my thinkers whether they felt the full range of emotions were well represented in fiction for children and further, whether there were emotions that they would like to read about in books for their age group (11-13 years). Quick as a flash, utterly unprompted, one of the group came back with an answer I had not anticipated: 'genuine amazement', she said, followed by a further quip about Pinterest posts now being the pinnacle of all wonderment. Then the supper bell rang and my thinkers were gone.

In the space left by this 'bomb blast', I reran the conversation which had unfolded in the preceding 45 minutes. I had pre-prepared questions about 'emotion' in children's fiction, carefully anticipating their responses (very narrowly, I now realise) in order that I could guide the conversation and weave in a specific book that I thought covered a range of emotions well. Instead, what I got was a glimpse of the depth with which children engage with stories and, to be truly useful in helping them explore and develop their own emotional index, how much they want their fictional characters to display emotions which are finely nuanced and modelled realistically.

To my question 'From the books you read, what do you consider are 'acceptable' emotions, as shown in children's fiction?' responses included those we would expect (happiness, anger, sadness) but there was huge debate about the authenticity (and therefore acceptability) of the 'sadness' shown in their fiction. According to my group, adults are quick to say that children cannot understand sadness since they have not experienced life, but this was hotly denied; being sad, they thought, was something they felt confident to read about and they wanted it portrayed convincingly. Happiness also received a bit of a drubbing from the thinkers; 'fake' was the word used to describe the sort of happiness they found in many stories and it was an automatic book closer, too. They did not necessarily need happy endings, it seemed, they preferred the process of watching over a character

as they negotiated with difficulty and if the final resolution was not a positive one for everyone, well that was okay.

'What are the 'unacceptable' emotions, as portrayed in children's books?' was my next question, and how confounded I was by the complexity of their replies. In our throw-away society, 'abandonment' they did not think was particularly negative, but 'abandonment without hope' was a definite no. Meanness they saw as quite routine, but in the context of 'meanness without mercy', it was highly frowned upon. Optimism they liked in their fiction but 'sickly optimism' was deemed a travesty of what is everyday reality for many people and therefore not an acceptable state to be in. Ambition and arrogance were dismissed as highly unhealthy and much to be avoided, and they felt children's fiction generally modelled these well (thank you Harry Potter).

Looking to books from the YA (Young Adult) category, we all felt that here there might be less emotions on view, but that those which were shown, were looked at in horrid, minute detail and this often made for uncomfortable reading. We teens need to explore difficult emotions, they said, to see how they might play out in our own lives, and YA books allow these complicated feelings to be looked at from a safe vantage point; through them, we contemplate the worst of ourselves and others.

Such is 'Why We Took the Car' by Wolfgang Herrndorf, a study of the teen misfit (financially ruined father, alcoholic mother) or the highly controversial (and banned in the author's native Italy) 'Girl Detached' by Manuela Salvi. The latter examines how girls are so very easily victims of sexual grooming, often without a hint of childhood deprivation or social exclusion, only a simple vulnerability easily exploited. It isn't a book that can be 'recommended', as that seems too simplistic a term for such seismic reading matter, but in the ugly and destructive emotions it examines and the ease with which it shows how we are able to lose control over our lives, I have never encountered a book so important. But back to 'genuine amazement'; are there any such books which portray this emotion strongly enough to please the thinkers in Teabag Club? No, such a feeling they thought could not be captured for their age range; for the very young reader perhaps, (have a look at the wonderful 'Sliding Surprise

Editor:

Charlotte Weatherley
Assistant Head
at Knighton House
cweatherley@
knightonhouse.co.uk

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Reg. no. 890301 England.

Registered Charity
no. 313688

Reg. office:
West Routengill,
Walden,
West Burton,
Leyburn,
North Yorkshire DL8 4LF

Tel: 07801 370973
www.satips.com

Books: 'Who's There?' by Charles Reasoner), but few books can shape it onto the page for this teen audience, there is just too much competition from elsewhere. It is therefore a tough emotion to master; if everything is amazing, they thought, what is 'genuinely' amazing?

Research from classical antiquity, to Darwin and beyond, have identified the eight basic emotions which motivate us as anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy, but our tea party needed something much more to engage with and learn from; but how to choose the best books for learning about how and what we feel? The answer lay, we decided, in looking to the light and shade of a character's emotions; it was not simple anger we wanted demonstrated, but its close relation (and friend to injustice), 'indignation'; not joy, but the release that is given by 'relief', and finally, not the high symbolism of forgiveness, but the activism and the energy of 'reparation'. So, this is the list:

Best Books for Learning about How and What We Feel

Minnie McClary Speaks Her Mind by Hilary McKay: open-mindedness, prejudice, mental health collapse, indignation, compassion and inner conflict.

Girl on a Plane by Miriam Moss: terror, guilt, confusion, acceptance, resilience and relief.

I Lived on Butterfly Hill by Majorie Agosin: sacrifice, intolerance, self-awareness, reparation and unity.

Tin by Pdraig Kenny: grief, loyalty and betrayal. A Separate Peace by John Knowles: admiration, anguish, rivalry and remorse.

Wolf Hollow by Lauren Wolk: cruelty, empathy, discrimination, acceptance and forgiveness.

The Journey by Francesca Sanna: displacement, discrimination and faith.

Boundless by Kenneth Oppel: loyalty, motivation, self-belief and first love.

The Midnight Zoo by Sonya Hartnett: brotherly love, captivity, brutality, isolation and compassion.

FaRther by Grahame Baker-Smith: self-belief, freedom and filial love.

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli: wonder, popularity, non-conformity and separation.

Tales from Outer Suburbia by Shaun Tan: every emotion you care to name is explored in these tales; read the story of the dugong which appears in a little boy's garden as a tiny study of belief.

Walkabout by James Vance Marshall: trust, confusion and alienation.

May B by Caroline Starr Rose: duty, loneliness, anguish and separation,

How to Speak Dolphin by Ginny Rorby: sorrow, independence, self-determination and redemption.