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## Introduction

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# Introduction

## Elizabeth Goodenough

“I was a kid in age but my mind has the reality of a grown-up, ‘cause I seen these things every day!”

—LeAlan Jones, 13

*Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (33)

Suffering and remembering longest, children lose most in war. Recent memoirs by “hidden children” of the Holocaust, adolescent diaries from war zones, and oral histories of teenage victims of domestic and urban violence challenge the glamorous stereotypes of war stories. As a sense of lost childhood and fear of violence pervade our society, it is important to re-examine and evaluate the place of violence and war in children’s books. In *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, Martin Green argues that juvenile literature, “invented” by the Puritans, was “captured by the aristomilitary caste” in the nineteenth century (220). Is this assertion accurate? And if so, in what ways do Empire and Frontier continue to influence narratives for the young? What roles do gender, classic war stories, national identity, family resilience, issues of guilt and innocence, cross-writing, amnesia and recovered memory, terrorism, and expectations of a “happy ending” play in writings about children in war?

Responding to these questions, contributors to this volume explore the complex ways violence and war have been written and interpreted for young readers since the Great War. From a variety of critical perspectives, they look at fairy tales and picture books, illustrations and photographs, histories, memoirs, and young adult novels. Together they extend a discussion of war, poverty, disaster, and injustice taken up by *Children’s Literature* in 1987 where editors Margaret Higonnet and Barbara Rosen observed that “in the literature of violence, the child takes on special symbolic value” (iv). The stories we tell about at-risk and risky children model our public understanding of victimization and trauma. In the last decade, Claudia Nelson, Millicent Lenz, Marina Warner, Anne Higonnet,

Eliza Dresang, Perry Nodelman, Jack Zipes, and many other scholars have also enabled us to consider more deeply the violent ambivalence that underlies cultural fantasies and visual histories of childhood over several hundred years. On the one hand, adults protect and idealize childhood innocence; yet, on the other hand, they fear and punish those children perceived as demonic, discontented, or disorderly. In 1986, Britain's House of Commons struck down the longtime practice of punishment by caning in state-run schools by only a single vote ("And the Beat Goes Out" 40). In our rapid-fire society, connections between childhood, injury, and death headline concerns about living in a culture spinning out of control. Stories in the media mirror to the young how power is exercised, especially in war, but also in the civilized aggression of sport. Globally, several hundred thousand child soldiers kill, rape, and maim, while tens of millions of children are trafficked as bonded labor or sex slaves. Locally, a suburban father, seeking to protect his son by protesting rough play at a hockey practice, is charged with manslaughter in the fatal beating of another father.

In a climate of information overload and image-shock, the perennial question raised by Higonnet and Rosen recurs: "Will honest representations of the human capacity for evil overwhelm the young mind in despair?" (vi). Mass murder, nuclear holocaust, gang activity, and berserking—widely visualized in films, television, news stories, video games, popular music—confound efforts to demarcate children's literature according to age-appropriate labels. Maurice Sendak has said, "It is a sad comedy: the children knowing and pretending they don't know to protect us from knowing they know" (5). Speaking to this private knowledge with which children struggle, Mary Galbraith and Donald Haase's essays here examine psychological refuges constructed by imaginations *in extremis*. Drawing on trauma studies and Holocaust memoirs, Haase shows how fairy tales and storytelling provide secret spaces for the young to frame, interpret, and relieve atrocious anxieties related to bombings, hiding out, exile, persecution, and even Auschwitz. Within the context of identifying authors' survival strategies encoded in classic picture books from between the two World Wars, Galbraith turns to the case of Wanda Gág. Using attachment theory and the anthropology of mothering, Galbraith shows how Gág's early developmental crises and adolescent apprehension of the Great War resonate and finally find expression in the lyrics and drawings of *Millions of Cats*. Only through the practice of art, Galbraith argues, was Gág able to integrate the wins and losses of these consecutive contests for survival.

In direct portrayals of war for older readers—especially narrative, pictorial, or photographic representations of the Holocaust—the function of art is far more problematic and controversial, as demonstrated by the essays of Elizabeth Baer and Adrienne Kertzer. In framing her bibliography and defining a taxonomy of a “children’s literature of atrocity,” Baer builds on the work of Langer, Clendinnen, Totten, and Feinberg, among others. She contends that “the evil that is new in the post-Holocaust world” makes unprecedented and paradoxical demands on writers and readers, asking them to recognize both that the history of this subject is “unspeakable,” and yet something that must be spoken about, “so that the next generation is vigilant about the hatred inside all of us.” Her conclusion, that Holocaust literature for children should leave space for questions, is exemplified by the style and substance of Kertzer’s work in this field. Developing Susan Sontag’s notion that photography provides “an ethics of seeing,” Kertzer focuses on the ambiguities of response and complex epistemological problems that photographic representation brings to Holocaust education for children, particularly when these images are formulated as illustrations or captioned in ways that seek to redeem their horror.

Kertzer’s emphasis on what viewers bring to transactions of seeing underscores the intersubjective nature of reality, of putting ourselves “in a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge,” as Sontag describes this process and as Virginia A. Walter analyzes it in three novels by Robert Westall: *The Machine Gunners*, *Kingdom by the Sea*, and *Gulf*. Each adolescent protagonist must, in the societal stress of war, piece together an understanding of himself and the world. This sequence of increasingly alienated novels suggests how “knowledge is socially distributed between the author and reader” and implies the need to interrogate both the value system of the world and the text. In this emphasis on what the reader must do, Walter prepares a rationale for understanding the work of Robert Cormier, who in a masterly way “does a number” on expectations of how things should work out. His interview with Mitzi Myers reveals a career dedicated to finding a language and structure for those personally damaging formative events in an unsafe world whose aftershocks punish the imagination. The bizarre realism inhabited by Cormier’s heroes, caught by forces omnipotent and anonymous, makes us consider the immanence of evil in human affairs. What happens when the cocoon of childhood safety is rent and adolescents are subject to tigers like Emile Janza who “thinks the world is out to put the screws on him so he puts the screws on everyone else”? In trauma literature, zones of

violence that carry with them memories both terrible and transgressive can become ironic sites of growth. Paradoxically, they ease the way to adulthood for readers as well as characters if they catalyze possibilities for resistance, resilience, and resolve.

“Not to act but to be acted upon—this Kafka perceived as tragedy” (14), Czeslaw Milosz reminds us. In the face of the disturbing menace of “the State conceived as an owner of human beings, both their bodies and their souls,” the poet calls for language that “should strive towards a sufficient degree of *being* and thus to redeem its original sin” (13). The extremely negative but also polarized reception of Holocaust fiction and Cormier’s work maps a vital frontier where becoming—like aging—struggles to be seen as a trek into enemy territory. As the thirteen-year-old killer in Virginia Walter’s *Making up Megaboy* writes about a soul “in great pain”:

Megaboy’s real parents are from another planet, but he had to come to Planet Earth when a comet destroyed his family’s city. His parents saw it coming and put him in a rocket with lots of Earth money and a lifetime supply of megachips so that he could survive here. He lives in a regular house, and people think his parents are there, but he really lives alone. (38)

That Cormier experiences his craft as both “the sweaty work of creation” and a daily revelation valorizes the planet of narrative as secret space. There the imagination mediates, repairs, and presides again through young eyes over a mysterious new world in which solo survival depends on making up meanings, as if for the first time. Matters of life and death have always been at the heart of enduring works for children, but perhaps it is adults’ compromised understanding of tragedy that makes the discussion of images, issues, and stories in this volume so vital.

*Elizabeth Goodenough, who teaches at the Residential College at the University of Michigan, has published on Jung, Woolf, Hawthorne, Wilde, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. She coedited Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature (1994), guest-edited a double issue, “Secret Spaces of Childhood” for Michigan Quarterly Review (Spring/Summer 2000), and is the editor of The Child and the City (Wayne State UP).*

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