Child Abuse & Neglect 54 (2016) 78–85

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Child Abuse in American Storytelling

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Masterful storytellers can make it possible to speak not only of child abuse, but of the abuse of 'our children'

In an interview on National Public Radio, historian Bernard Wasserstein concluded his discussion of the current refugee crisis in Europe with the remark: "...these people are not just victims. They're not just the flotsam and jetsam driven hither and thither. They are our brothers and sisters." Wasserstein was comparing the suffering of refugees after World War II with the plight of those now fleeing from the Middle East. The emeritus professor of history at the University of Chicago makes it clear that more important than the historical context of the suffering is the suffering itself. Further, as people witnessing this suffering, we are called upon to respond in human, not simply analytical, ways.

The historian did something that we often associate with a different kind of storytelling. Literary artists create stories that grab us by the lapels and do not let go until we see what they want us to see. Fiction personalizes experiences so that we are forced to look at them from a human vantage. Like the refugees that Wasserstein wants us to see as our brothers and sisters, children who are victims in literature often compel us to relate to them personally. Even circumstances as painful as child abuse are rendered in literature in ways that invite us to linger, to explore them deeply, to be affected by them, and to be changed by them. "If literature matters today," writes literary scholar Terry Eagleton, "it is chiefly because it seems to many conventional critics one of the few remaining places where, in a divided, fragmented world, a sense of universal value may still be incarnate; and where, in a sordidly material world, a rare glimpse of transcendence can still be attained."

By looking at the representation of child abuse in classic works of American fiction, we see that authors handle the issue in a variety

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.12.003

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of ways, ranging from sardonic satire to moral outrage. Although the depiction of abuse in literature can be difficult to absorb, it is a process that marks a kind of progress. Indeed, although child abuse seems persistent, our feelings about it change. Over the past couple of centuries, American authors have broken silence and given voice to abuse. They have moved from recognition to heart felt examination. They have also ignited our imaginations: If it is possible for our cherished characters to move past victimization, is it possible for all of us who give those characters life in our imaginations to help ourselves or others transcend violence?

What is possible becomes a central theme in stories of physical, psychological, and moral survival. We learn from the child characters themselves, from their resilience, and from their courageous sense of right-mindedness. The children become our mentors, our heroes, our companions in the course of charting a moral course. Child maltreatment is often part of a web of obstacles faced by some of America's best known juvenile characters. They can experience abuse, witness it, or be put in a position where they have to try to make sense of it. They can also succumb to it, but this too, in the hands of a visionary author, can connect us to characters in unforeseen ways and point us in new directions. It is the fact that we respond to masterworks personally that make them so compelling. They paint a group portrait. They remind us of what is important, and they speak to our collective conscience. By giving us words to name universal struggles and characters to care about, authors give us tools to look at even pernicious dilemmas and to address them both rationally *and* emotionally. We are often moved by their works, and ultimately they encourage us to make change, even if that change is within ourselves.

Kempe and Lee

The 1962 publication of C. Henry Kempe's landmark article "The Battered Child Syndrome" describes patterns of physical abuse experienced by children brought to hospital emergency rooms. Kempe notes in the article that one of the problems in identifying abuse, despite the X-ray results of battered children, is "the emotional unwillingness of the physician to consider abuse as the cause of the child's difficulty. . . To the informed physician, the bones tell a story the child is too young or too frightened to tell." The people who *are* talking are often the parents responsible for the injuries. Kempe encourages physicians to become sleuths, asking parents questions that might help the doctors discover the truth.

Two years before Kempe's article appeared, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a very well known and popular novel about discrimination in the United States. It is also a novel that touches on the way children are raised. Just as comic book heroes reveal important cultural themes and values about *good* and *evil*, a nation's literature can unveil hidden personal and societal experiences and norms. Lee's novel peeled away the veneer of genteel Southern life to reveal an underbelly of racism and the abuse of power. Child abuse was part of the fabric of the life of the fictitious town of Maycomb, Alabama. Lee knew in chronicling small town life what Kempe made clear in his publications: There is violence behind the closed doors of private homes. In Maycomb, the Haverford's are foolish; the Cunningham's do not take loans; the Radley's are radically punitive; and the Ewell's are dirty, hungry, and battered. The tragedy of child maltreatment is accepted as part of family culture.