

# Operation Pied Piper and the Second World War: A Discussion on Children's Literature and the Evacuation of English Children During The Second World War

Neetu seth

Assistant Professor

Rr bawa Dav College batala

While the World Wars ravaged, directly and indirectly, most countries around the world, and destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives, one section of the British population suffered in a peculiar manner. The evacuation of children during the Second World War was termed as Operation Pied Piper (1939-1942) fractured deep familial bonds and led to the birth of many underlying psychological issues that cropped up later in the lives of the children. The children from bigger cities like London, Leicester, Leeds and Manchester etc. were dispatched to live with complete strangers in the English countryside. Although these places were scenic and the cities were unsafe due to the bombing, the separation from parents and forced living with unrelated persons was, if not always traumatic, certainly a life-altering experience for these children.

What the British government could not understand, or did not have the capacity or time to do so, was that though children are adaptable, they are also vulnerable, especially in the houses of strangers who do not want them. There was a fraction of unfortunate children who had to endure sexual abuse, starvation, abandonment, class discrimination, labor exploitation, and theft, and no succor was available since their letters to their parents were censored. These children, on the fringes of a pseudo diaspora, were bound to get affected by the new environments they encountered at the houses of their safe keepers. The dichotomy between their own shaky past filled with threats of air raids and violence coupled with the psychological effect of early familial separation sets the stage for an assessment of the diasporic values inherent in the narratives discussed herewith. The evacuation led to underlying psychological issues that cropped up later even though many chose to shy away from them; and thus, they lingered, sometimes shaping their entire perceptions towards their lives much in the same way that the compulsive dwelling on the past of an individual in any diaspora might affect their present decisions.

While these issues are yet to be addressed formally, the evacuation of the children is best glimpsed through some of the children's books written about the evacuation, even though they do not always provide an accurate picture. Why were they written, who wrote them, and how and what were written – answering these fundamental questions will get us closer to understanding the effects of the war on children. But since 300 books with war-related themes were published for children during World Wars I and II in England alone<sup>1</sup>, only three famous and loved novels form a part of this survey - Johanna Reiss's *The Upstairs Room* (1972), Michelle Magorian's *Good Night, Mister Tom* (1981), and Michael Morpurgo's *Friend or Foe* (1977).

<sup>1</sup>Pringleton, Laura. 'World War II as Seen through Children's Literature', (<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1997/2/97.02.03.x.html>, accessed on 15 Aug. 2014).

The authors of all the books that were examined while compiling this research stress the same point: inter-war and wartime developments remain very crucial factors in promoting what can only be termed as new attitudes towards children as psychological persons, especially paying attention to their emotions with regard to their intellectual, social and emotional growth in imaginative landscapes and dreamscapes that were their reminders and memories of the past. All of them are poignant, adventurous and heart-warming tales, and all of them stress on the futility and devastation of the war in their own unique ways.

Reiss, in her novel *The Upstairs Room* (1972), discourses with a realism and grimness that is rare in children's books. Since the story is autobiographical, Reiss not only depicts the confusion and shock of a child that has seen cruelty at a tender age, but also brilliantly captures the palpable tensions, fear and reactions of the various members of her family as they slowly, but steadily, come to comprehend the utter horror that awaits the Jews. Annie is the observer and keeps shuffling around rooms and in between conversations to report to the readers the historical events of the period, and the fear it caused. This realism, the lack of any childlike gaiety or fun in the novel, gives the pre-teens a very deep, dark and pessimistic insight into the impact of war on the families destroyed by it. Furthermore, the fluidity of the locale along with the fluctuating emotional graph paint a picture in flux, with Annie's imaginative world in the center. The whole tense episode is certainly brushed over with the confusion inherent in a diaspora.

In *Good Night, Mister Tom*, an impoverished eight-year-old boy William Beech, son of a mentally sick mother, gets evacuated to the village called Little Weirwold. He gets billeted with a reclusive, taciturn and gruff sixty-year-old widow called Mister Tom Oakley, who soon realizes that the welts and bruises on William's frail body are due to beatings by his Puritanical and overly religious mother.

However, it is a touching and tender tale of the deep friendship between a painfully timid boy and a withdrawn old man. They both grow; the boy learns his alphabets, discovers his talent for painting, and makes many new friends who love him – he finds a home. Mister Tom, widowed for forty years, matures too, when he surprisingly finds himself protecting and loving a lad so different from him. Magorian's novel starkly different from Johanna Weiss's is that it the book does not directly showcase the atrocities of war, and is written not to shock or horrify the reader, but to delight and comfort him or her – it is a warm tale, instead of a starkly realistic and gloomy one. The countryside of England, and its people and the evacuees, are depicted in a positive light when this wasn't the truth. Magorian treats the countryside as a pastoral idyllic abode, with delicious food (like in *The Famous Five*), lush greenery and crystal clear streams. The people are shown to be warm and hospitable, and full of community-feeling and camaraderie.

It is when William goes back to visit his mother in London that the happy cocoon that Magorian built in the countryside breaks down. This is depicted in the novel as Will's exceptional change creates tensions when he returns to his mother in London. This scenario encapsulates the dislocation that a creeping change in lifestyle can befall a migrant in a diasporic situation. In such situations, individuals tend to develop habitual changes in aspects like food and religious practices to better suit the environment. However, on relocation to their habitat, they find themselves unable to revert back to their old routine causing a rise in feelings of rejection and betrayal amongst their nation-mates. William's mother, being mentally sick, locks and abandons William and his newborn sister in the basement, an act that results in the death of the sister. She does this because she cannot stand William's transformation and fears the loss of her authority. Mrs. Beech later commits suicide.

Michael Morpurgo, in his *Friend or Foe* (1977), is more rhetorical in his approach to the matter of war. In the novel, the two evacuees from London, David, and Tucky witness the crash of a German bomber plane while they are alone at the farm of their foster parents Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds. The

reason that this novel is important is because it centers upon the humanity of the Germans, and asks the reader whether they are truly foes, or simply humans fighting for the other side. Morpurgo makes it easier to digest since both the bombers are eventually captured, but he does also pose the ultimate reality of war – that war causes havoc and devastation on all sides fighting it, and is thus simply futile and unnecessary. It is a vision based on justice and humanity, and thus this children's novel is so popular with both adults and children alike. In contrast to the other two, this novel does not present the diasporic realm of the mind but creates an open-ended space wherein a real change in attitudes can be witnessed at leisure. This attitude mimics the amalgamation of foreign and traditional values that migrants and evacuees are subjected to. The representation of humane German soldiers at the time of inhumane Nazis is a testimony to a successful attempt wherein the author portrays the mixing of values inherited by the children and their own understanding of what makes a man.

Many not belonging to the working class found their prejudices weakening after the experience. And since these children were the future of Britain of the times, the evacuation resulted in a mind-altering experience that rendered their prejudices futile and baseless. Whether they chose to act upon their new ideas or beliefs is a different matter altogether, but the evacuation was part of a quiet revolution of the society. Britain would definitely not be the same again, despite the attempt to revive the old order. The children would not be the same either; with the romanticized memory of home and the history of the war coalescing into each other, they inhabited an in-between world that sought to confuse any sense of belonging they might have possessed at such a young age.

The authors of children's books based on the World War all lived through the war, or were born right after it, and thus provide an educational account of the horrors that it entails. Some, like Michelle Magorian, wrote escapist novels, whereas some like Johanna Reiss – directly tackled the ugliness and cruelty that they suffered. Others, like Michael Morpurgo, from a more detached and idealistic stance, showcase the destruction suffered and the humanity on both sides, and hence strove to endorse ultimate justice and peace.

While the existence of such literature draws our curiosity and enables us to relive those moments, it would be incorrect to assume that such moments are peculiar to only England. All such excursions, however, would conclude that casualties of war are not only the dead and wounded: it is those who remain alive, those young souls who have a whole life ahead of them, that suffer the most. The wars, albeit on a less grand scale than World Wars, have continued, and perhaps would continue until such time as the world remains fractured on many fronts, caused by the colonial and post-colonial as well as real and imagined justices. So long wars occur, the children, women and the elderly would continue to suffer more than the rest of the population in societies.

There is a need to develop redressal mechanisms with respect to children and war. The experience of a child should not be sidelined because of a supposed lack of maturity but should be examined for its own worth, as an integral part of a balanced family and society unit. So long as wars occur, children, women and elderly would continue to suffer more than the rest of the population in many societies. However, the evacuation of children during the Second World War in England, and the emotions generated due to their dislocation as evidenced in the writing of/about children in English would serve as a reminder to the present and future generations of the perils of war and the trauma inflicted on a young psyche. It would also bring to the light testimonial evidence of stress that might be post-traumatic in adulthood but surfaces as a little boy's imaginary inhabitation of his diasporic imagination.

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