

Leave Room for Questions! The Political Purposes of Discomforting Ambiguity in Children's Literature of Atrocity

Many scholars argue that children's "literature of atrocity" (Langer) must take an ethical stance against war. Adrienne Kertzer, Elizabeth Baer, Ruth Gilbert, Lydia Kokkola, Sarah Jordan, Jan Susina, and Paula Connolly have explained various criteria that responsible authors should adhere to when attempting to represent historically significant events – such as the Holocaust, 9/11, slavery, or the Vietnam War – to young audiences. The responsibility of the author to be historically accurate is prominent because the author for young readers is "creating a memory" (Baer 379). Kertzer says that "resisting the well-intentioned impulse to construct an unambiguous hopeful lesson" is one of the major challenges of writing in this genre (245). Yet, Zohar Shavit reminds us that "the protective approach in children's literature is no longer popular in Western culture" and that it seems authors and publishers have decided that presenting once taboo subjects "is the pedagogically and psychologically correct way to prepare children to cope with the world" (294). The need to remain historically accurate while not overwhelming or traumatizing child readers seems to be at odds with creating accurate memories in hopes that future generations will not forget nor repeat the mistakes of the past; however, the most impressive children's books of atrocity steer away from offering answers and neat conclusions and thus end with some discomforting ambiguities. Words and images cannot fully represent the realities associated with conflict, so many scholars of children's literature of atrocity advocate for leaving spaces for questions. Langer, and later Baer, explain this as "creating a framework of response" within children's literature of atrocity.

This paper will explain how authors of three children's books related to atrocity create frameworks of response and how these frameworks function. It will delve into the strategies the authors use and the potential effects on readers. Allowing spaces for child readers to ask questions and consider possibilities positions them to think carefully about power relationships in their lives and worlds. This has both a protective function, but also a political one. By taking an ethical stance against war and portraying child characters who make personal choices that affect the lives of others, children's books can increase awareness of historical events, advocate for methods of resistance, and build empathy for others. As Gerard Jones explains in *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes and Make-Believe Violence*, "stories of people wrestling with the fears, pains, and challenges of life bring us back to our own realities. Anxiety gives way to empathy, and suddenly we're not speaking in recycled newspaper headlines; we're discussing the endless individuality and unpredictability of human beings" (8). By reading fictional accounts of children in conflict, young readers become better prepared to identify and respond to discrimination and injustice in their own lives which may lead to taking an ethical stance against conflict.