

This isn't the population CUNY draws from in 1999. The contemporary "proletariat" of New York City is the product of underperforming high schools, broken families, and different cultural aspirations for education. The college degree has become a necessary credential for entering the middle class, and CUNY students strive hard for it, often in the face of overwhelming odds. But they take a largely instrumental view of their education. A substantial amount of first-rate intellectual work still goes on at the CUNY senior colleges, but the center of gravity has shifted. No amount of "raising standards" can restore the "Harvardness" of City College.

Nevertheless, the campuses of CUNY can be made better. There are different possible paths to that goal. The path chosen by the Board of Trustees is a high-risk gamble that will be known by its fruits—as a bold and daring innovation that lifted underperforming high schools out of their apathy and prompted irresponsible students to get serious academically, or as a disastrous and rigid miscalculation that eviscerated the senior colleges and had to be undone not long after its adoption.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Sources: The Board of Trustees of the City University of New York, text of Resolution 9 (January 25, 1999) and minutes of the Board meeting held on May 26, 1998; James Traub, *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (Addison-Wesley, 1994); Morris Freedman, "Sad City," *American Scholar*, vol. 64 (Autumn 1995); Rudolph Giuliani, "1999 State of the City Address" (January 14, 1999); David E. Lavin and David Hyllegard, *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (Yale University Press, 1996); David E. Lavin, Richard D. Alba, and Richard A. Silberstein, *Right Versus Privilege: The Open-Admissions Experiment at the City University of New York* (Free Press, 1981); Heather MacDonald, "Downward Mobility: The Failure of Open Admissions at City University," *City Journal* (Summer 1994); Report of the Evaluation Team of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1998) (noting City College's critical need for enrollment growth); William Trombley, "Remedial Education Under Attack," *National Crosstalk*, vol. 6 (July 1998) (providing recent pass/fail rates for the freshman skills tests); statement by Trustee James Murphy, minutes of the Board meeting held on May 26, 1998 (citing the Chancellor's estimate of the enrollment drop that will result from the Board's action); SUNY Office of Finance and Management, *SUNY Facts & Figures* (October 1996); CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, *CUNY Student Data Book: Fall 1997* (July 1998); Clifford Adelman, "The Kiss of Death? An Alternative View of College Remediation," *National Crosstalk*, vol. 6 (July 1998); Karen Anderson, "Classes Are Full at Catch-Up U," *New York Times* (May 31, 1998); comments by Kathleen Pesile, CUNY Trustee, minutes of the University Faculty Senate meeting held on January 26, 1999 (describing the effect that the Board hopes its action will have on high school students); "Good Summer News at CUNY," *New York Post* (June 6, 1998).

The Ethics of Representation: Realism and Idealism in Children's Fiction

In a recent article for *Horn Book*, a journal devoted to children's literature, Anne Scott MacLeod takes a number of well-regarded historical novels to task for imposing contemporary values and ideals upon the past. For example, in *Catherine, Called Birdy*, a Newbery Honor book, a medieval heroine is portrayed as an outspoken feminist; in another Newbery Honor book, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, a nineteenth-century girl becomes captain of a mutinous sailing ship.

I want to use MacLeod's criticisms of historical novels to raise ethical questions about realism and idealism in children's and adolescents' fiction more

generally. The kinds of questions I will address are already familiar to authors and educators who must decide how to interpret and fulfill their obligations to historical (but also contemporary) truth. Should they present figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., simply as heroes, concentrating on the towering achievements for which they are now famous, or offer a more problematic portrait of these real human beings, warts and all? Similar questions surround media portrayals aimed at a broader, largely adult audience. Does a program like *The Cosby Show* perform a useful social function by showing the

success that African Americans can achieve, or should it be criticized for failing to acknowledge the grave problems of poverty, crime, and substance abuse afflicting many minority communities?

My decision to focus on children's fiction stems both from the fact that children (a group presumably in need of and entitled to some special protection) are the audience, and from the distinctive characteristics of fiction, which seems to have a greater latitude than nonfiction to show us not only the world as it is but also the world as it might be. I also have a personal interest in this subject, as I am myself a writer of children's fiction—and, I might as well say, one who was once castigated in the most public of forums (the *New York Times Book Review*) for writing fiction that portrayed a child in a relatively happy and intact family dealing with problems of sibling and peer dynamics rather than, in the charge of the reviewer, drive-by shootings and prenatal crack addiction. (The reviewer called the book "science fiction about a family in a parallel universe"!) Finally, I have chosen this topic because the arguments for realism and idealism in children's fiction can provoke discussion of broader issues—social, historical, and educational—in the ethics of representation.

Looking for Realism

Anyone who reads reviews of children's literature will have noticed that the bleak books (the ones with the drive-by shootings) are often described as realistic, while the hopeful books (the ones without the drive-by shootings) are called idealistic. I want to begin by challenging these labels themselves. For it is a mere prejudice of the gloomy that portrayals of the darker side of life have a monopoly on realism. Indeed, many books widely praised as "realistic," such as those of Robert Cormier, are in my view extremely unrealistic, bordering on fantasy. Cormier's novel *The Chocolate War*, for example, is a grim tale of the mayhem and sadistic violence that can erupt when a lone individual challenges a monolithic system—here, when a child refuses to participate in his school's annual candy sale. Apparently Cormier based the novel on a real-life incident, his son's refusing participation in a similar fund-raiser. The only difference is that in real life—unlike in the "realistic" novel—school officials told the boy, no problem, it wasn't a big deal, he could participate or not, as he chose. Realism?

Still, we can draw some rough distinctions between fiction that tries to show us the world as it is versus fiction that tries to show us the world as it should or could be. We can then ask which sort of fiction—as authors, editors, teachers, librarians, parents—we should be offering our children, and why. Here we encounter two kinds of arguments, both of which, I will argue, are problematic.

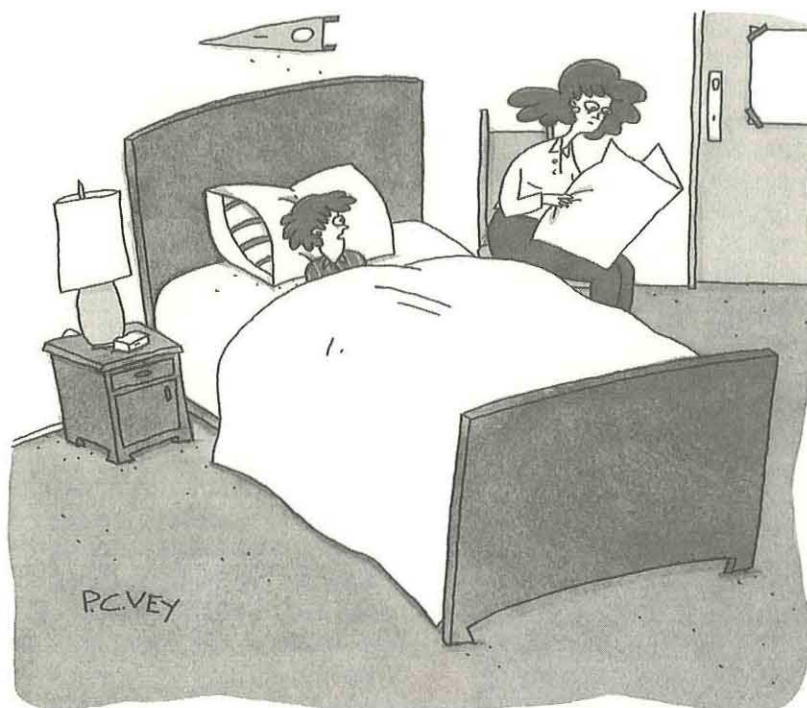
First, in defense of realism, is the argument for the value of truth, for "telling it like it is," for an honest witness to the world as we actually find it. Children, this argument goes, have a right to be told the truth, as best as we can tell it. Besides, if we don't tell them the truth, they'll find it out anyway, eventually, and then distrust us for having withheld it from them.

The problem with this argument, put simply, is that there is no one truth out there that fiction can be required to mirror. Even with nonfiction, the question of what is truth is highly contested. MacLeod writes, "The German historian Leopold van Ranke said that writing history was saying 'what really happened'—but according to whom? Writers of history select, describe, and explain historical evidence—and thereby interpret. Not only will the loser's version of the war never match the winner's but historical interpretations of what happened, and why, are subject to endless revision over time." If this is true of nonfiction, how much more so of fiction, which is by its nature, well, fiction. So long as it is true to its characters, to its own story, it arguably need make no claim of being statistically representative of some larger reality. Judith Lichtenberg, writing on portrayals of minorities in TV dramas as well as in newscasts, points out, "A cop show is not a statistics textbook. Actually, a news story isn't, either. What's news, as any elementary course in journalism will tell you, is what's new, different, out of the ordinary. So even in the allegedly real world that news reporters are supposed to cover, the relevance of the typical is unclear." We go to fiction, in particular, to see characters who defy the typical, who break the mold, who dare to do what the rest of us may only dream of doing.

Nonetheless, we still expect in realistic (as opposed to fantasy) fiction some attempt to anchor its story in reality. Indeed, even in fantasy fiction, we expect an author to be true to the grounding rules of the fantasy world he or she has created: either animals can talk in this world, or they can't; either one can go backwards in time in this world, or one can't. The rules don't have to be the rules that govern our world, but what rules there are must still be obeyed.

Time-Travelers

With historical fiction, especially historical fiction for children, it is hard not to see some necessity for trying to be faithful to the actual past. If you aren't going to give a fairly faithful portrait, why write about the past in the first place? Why set your book in this or that century, this or that historical epoch? Many historical novels do have at least some implicit educational objectives—to acquaint children with another time and place, to make history "come alive" for young readers; many are adopted for curricular use, to flesh out text-



"Do you have any bedtime stories that aren't about the former Yugoslavia?"

© The New Yorker Collection 1993
P. C. Vey from cartoonbank.com
All Rights Reserved

book accounts of the period under study. At the minimum, authors need to do their research and give accurate descriptions of the clothing, utensils, food, and so on of the period in question. Anachronisms here spoil our enjoyment of the story and make the reader regret her willing (and now seemingly gullible) suspension of disbelief. Likewise, one could argue that historical fiction should strive to be true as well to the intangibles of its period: to the attitudes, values, and worldview of the people who inhabited it.

This is the argument that underlies MacLeod's critique. "Too much historical fiction," she writes, "is stepping around large slabs of known reality to tell pleasant but historically doubtful stories. Even highly respected authors snip away the less attractive pieces of the past to make their narratives meet current social and political preferences." For example, in the case of novels about girls or women, "authors want to give their heroines freer choices than their cultures would in fact have offered. To do that, they set aside the social mores of the past as though they were minor afflictions, small obstacles, easy—and painless—for an independent mind to overcome." MacLeod continues, "These protagonists experience their own societies as though they were time-travelers, noting racism, sex-

ism, religious bigotry, and outmoded belief as outsiders, not as people of and in their cultures."

What exactly is the problem with this? MacLeod argues that by denying us a realistic understanding of the past, such novels subvert the special purpose of historical fiction: to convey the widely divergent possibilities of human experience. "Historical fiction writers who want their protagonists to reflect twentieth-century ideologies . . . end by making them exceptions to

*By denying us a realistic understanding
of the past, some novels subvert
the special purpose of
historical fiction.*

their own cultures, so that in many a historical novel the reader learns nearly nothing—or at least nothing sympathetic—of how the people of a past society saw their world." People of the past, MacLeod insists, "were not just us in odd clothing. . . . To wash these differences out of historical fictions is not only a denial of historical truth, but a failure of imagination and understanding that is as important to the present as to the past."

Now, while historical fiction may have the special mission of presenting another time and place with reasonable accuracy, much of children's fiction is freed from this charge. Some fiction may be overtly sociological in nature—trying to show readers, say, what it is like (really like) to live in a housing project, or to be a migrant worker; other novels, though, are just trying to entertain, or perhaps to teach some lesson about how to get along in the world, against the backdrop of a social milieu more or less taken for granted.

Living Without Philosophy: On Narrative, Rhetoric, and Morality

Peter Levine

In *Living Without Philosophy*, Peter Levine examines how we derive moral lessons from stories. Some theorists argue that any story with a moral meaning must contain—either implicitly or explicitly—general doctrines or principles. If that were true, then we would have to analyze narratives to discover their assumptions, and we would need philosophy to decide whether these assumptions were right or wrong. Levine argues, on the contrary, that narratives can carry moral meanings without relying on general principles. Further, he reveals some of the moral pitfalls that arise when we reason from ethical rules or doctrines. He provides both a philosophical argument for his position and readings of literary texts in which moral theorists are portrayed as characters. These works include Plato's *Protagoras*, selections from the Gospels and Dante, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

"*Living Without Philosophy* is very well written, clear, and easy to read. It relates previous debates in the history of ideas to contemporary issues in an enlightening and unusual way and its topic is centrally relevant to current debates about the proper nature of moral theory."

—Jonathan Dancy, University of Reading

292 pages
\$68.50 (cloth)
\$22.95 (paper)

State University of New York Press
<http://www.sunypress.edu>
orderbook@cupserv.org
Tel.: (607) 277-2211
Fax: (800) 688-2877

Yet, here, too, I think we know when authors are deviating from reality as they know it—to try to establish a role model, defy a stereotype, make a point. In one of my own easy-reader books, Gus learns to ride a two-wheel bike without training wheels and finally catches up with the superior neighbor boy; the book is based on my own son's struggle to ride a bike, at an age when he was eclipsed by our superior (and wealthier) neighbor boy. Now, in my personal real life, the perfect neighbor boy was white. In the pictures for the book, his fictional counterpart is African American. The illustrator was free to draw the character this way—authors aren't supposed to dictate details that aren't supported by the text, and I had made no reference at all to the boy's race. Still, in real life more generally, few of us live in integrated neighborhoods, and seldom is it the nonwhite child who is more privileged than the white.

Why did the illustrator want a black character in the book? For obvious reasons: to let black children see themselves in the pages of fiction, as they still relatively seldom have the opportunity to do; and perhaps to take one small step toward the day when integrated neighborhoods and mixed-race friendships will be less of a rarity.

Similarly, I often take pains in my books to depict fathers participating in household chores to a much greater degree than, to take one salient example, my own husband does. I've also made the mothers in my books kinder and gentler than, to take another salient example, I am myself. When children in my books play cruel pranks, these are much less cruel than some I've seen in real life; when they indulge in coarse humor, it's much less coarse than humor that delights my own boys. In softening the contours of both cruelty and coarseness, I am deliberately trying to avoid suggesting that cruelty and coarseness are the norms in children's culture—and, by so doing, to avoid reinforcing these as norms. After all, the world that children experience is in some significant part the world we create for them. And I am trying to create a certain kind of world for children—in the books that I write for, and read to, those few children I am able to reach.

In Defense of Idealism

We have now clearly segued into the argument for at least some degree of idealism in children's books. I think that in defense of idealism, perhaps the most compelling argument is a consequentialist appeal to results: We will do better at producing moral children, who will actually try to improve the world, if we make solutions seem at least possible, if we offer role models and heroes. Writing on the presentation of history to young students, Robert Fullinwider suggests that if we want to cultivate patriotism and civic pride

in our children (a legitimate objective, in his view), the history we present to them "cannot be 'debunking'; there have to be forefathers and foremothers worth admiring and emulating, and moral enterprises in which pride can be taken. Nor can it be 'objective' where this means introducing the full complexity of all the issues surveyed. Just as teaching the virtues must start with simple rules, teaching national history in order to develop civic attachments must start with simple (and thus selective and distorted) accounts of the course of national development."

In assessing the case for idealism, I must remind myself that we writers enforce certain norms, in however small and subtle a way, whatever we write. Even if we are only trying to present "the world as it is," if we present that world without calling it overtly into question, and if we populate it with likeable characters with whom the reader identifies and who themselves seem to endorse that world, we suggest, if only by our silence, that the world as it is is the world as it ought to be. Which is why authors who present unpalatable features of the "real world," past and present, often do try to distance themselves from them in various awkward and unconvincing ways. This is why, in the books to which MacLeod objects, sympathetic characters are introduced to question slavery, or witchcraft trials, or anti-Semitism—because otherwise the author feels she has left these unchallenged, even implicitly endorsed.

In fact, even when characters within a book do voice objections to certain unsavory attitudes displayed there, some readers may still feel disturbed that these attitudes are not denounced more vehemently. In the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, for example, Ma consistently expresses hatred of Indians, while Pa and daughter Laura question these attitudes and at points feel a strong identification with Indian characters. That Ma remains a basically sympathetic character despite her prejudice—a prejudice, moreover, that was widely shared in the period—has given some Native American parents cause to refuse to share the *Little House* books with their children.

Requisite Rainbows

I want to develop (briefly) two lines of objection to the argument from idealism. First, though it may seem plausible that idealistic portraits help children grow morally, while realistic portraits can inhibit moral growth (or, at the least, cause significant, uncompensated pain), such an argument is impossible to evaluate in the absence of empirical evidence—and it is highly doubtful that such evidence will ever exist. There are so many moral influences on children that it is exceedingly difficult to isolate and identify the effects of any single one. As Lichtenberg points out,

looking at the empirical research on media portrayals of minority characters, "Studies of audience effects . . . are often vague and inconclusive; it's always hard to know whether the 'effects' alleged result from the particular viewing in question or from other phenomena, such as more pervasive social attitudes." Moreover, we would need some way to decide whether the portrayal of specific attitudes was ultimately harmful. One might, for example, learn from the portrayal of Ma in the *Little House* books the valuable lesson that adult wisdom is not always commensurate with adult authority. If so, children might on balance gain rather than lose from their literary encounter with Ma.

The second objection to an insistence on idealism in children's fiction is that a certain politically correct form of mandatory idealism in children's books has become oppressive both to writers and to readers in its own right. A friend of mine who does textbook illustrations has stories that are both comic and sad about the rigidity of the requirements imposed on textbook illustration: no female character can ever be shown as anything other than strong and triumphant (an illustration was rejected that showed a little girl making a gesture of shyness and hesitation upon her introduction to the queen; the illustration was accepted when the same shy, hesitant gesture was made instead by a little boy).

*A certain politically correct form of
mandatory idealism in children's books
has become oppressive both
to writers and to readers.*

I recently had occasion to do a study of children's books about urban gardens—a spate of books in which inner-city communities reclaim vacant lots to create thriving, multicultural spaces. All the books present the requisite rainbow of ethnic diversity; all show characters transforming themselves and their communities with conflict-free ease. The most extreme of these books is Paul Fleischman's much-praised *Seedfolks*. Fleischman's story of the communal transformation of the garden and the individual transformation of all those involved in it is narrated by thirteen different characters: his speakers are Vietnamese, Rumanian, Guatemalan, Jewish, Haitian, Korean, Mexican, African American, Indian, British, even plain old American white. And just when the cynical reader asks herself, "But where is the person in a wheelchair?" in rolls Mr. Myles, black *and* in a wheelchair. Fleischman's characters are typically transformed instantly—literally instantly—by their very first glimpse of the garden. Thus Gonzalo's great-uncle Tio Juan, who has become childlike and dependent after

his move from Guatemala to the United States, goes out to plant some seeds and *that very day* his eyes become "focused, not faraway or confused. He'd changed from a baby back into a man." While the book affects a flavor of gritty realism (in its descriptions of the litter, the trash, the obligatory scurrying rat), at a deeper level, it is, in my view, offensively unrealistic.

Now, the argument from idealism can reply that there is something wonderful about offering to young children a harvest of hope that we, individually and collectively, can transform ourselves in this positive, life-affirming way. The yearning for a return to and redemption in a garden has haunted the poets and mythmakers of virtually every culture; why shouldn't

*The argument from realism says that
we need to understand the world
in order to change it.*

it haunt us still? Gardens *are* magical places; our cities *do* need whatever help we can give them by planting whatever seeds we can plant. Yet the clichés of *Seedfolks* affront me. Cultural diversity should be celebrated, but not so mechanically; individual and communal transformation is possible, but not instantaneous. Our problems are real; the solutions to them will not be easy.

Books for Thoughtful Readers

We have now come full circle back to the argument for realism. Karl Marx famously remarked that the task of philosophy is not to understand the world, but to change it. The argument from realism says that we need to understand the world *in order to* change it—that if you're going to plant a garden, you're going to have to dig in the dirt and emerge from your garden with some dirt under your nails.

What then, are my conclusions? Do I want to say that it is wrong to portray interracial friendships out of proportion to their occurrence in the population? That it is wrong to soften the cruelty of children, to temper the excesses of their humor, to blunt the expressions of racism and sexism and xenophobia as we move from real life to children's books? No. Children are children; they need to be introduced to the harsh realities of the world both gently and gradually. (We also need to remember here the earlier point that not all realities are harsh.)

As a fairly tentative suggestion, I want to close by making a recommendation against what I will call "incidental realism" and "wholesale idealism." By "incidental realism" I mean "touches" of negative realism that don't play a central role in the larger

story: minor characters who make a racist remark that is left unchallenged within the framework of the story, throwaway lines of gratuitously coarse humor (even though this is indeed the kind of humor kids would be cheerfully sharing on the playground), and so on. Here, the effect of such negatively realistic touches, I think, is merely to reinforce features of the culture that we would prefer instead to moderate or banish altogether. However, in novels of "wholesale realism," the negative features of the world in which we live—or in which others once lived—can be presented in all their complexity for the examination of the thoughtful reader, who would be done a disservice by the simple-minded skewing of reality that MacLeod decries. I would place the *Little House* books, for example, in the category of wholesale realism, though their joyful portrayal of prairie homesteading has idealistic elements as well.

With idealism, I want to suggest, the situation is reversed. I would encourage "incidental idealism"—showing the dad doing the dishes, drawing the boy next door as African American, giving a glimpse of a few small possibilities for social change—but I would discourage "wholesale idealism"—the icky, smarmy, blatant political correctness that hits us over the head in Fleischman's *Seedfolks*. This, too, does the thoughtful reader a disservice.

And of course, this tentative recommendation is accompanied by the further conclusion that what we need to do most of all is to provide children with *lots* of books, both realistic and idealistic, in a wonderfully broad range of ways—as well as lots of opportunities to talk about these books, and some of the deeper questions they raise, with parents, with teachers, and with each other.

—Claudia Mills

Claudia Mills, assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder, will publish two children's books this year: *Gus and Grandpa and the Two-Wheel Bike*, illustrated by Catherine Stock (ages 4–8), and *You're a Brave Man, Julius Zimmerman* (ages 8–12), both from Farrar Straus Giroux. Sources: Anne Scott MacLeod, "Writing Backward: Modern Models in Historical Fiction," *Horn Book*, vol. 24, no. 1 (January/February 1998); Judith Lichtenberg, "Truth, Ethnic Stereotypes, and the Media," lecture presented at Webster University (February 1999); Robert K. Fullinwider, "Civic Education and Traditional American Values," in *Values and Public Policy*, edited by Claudia Mills (Harcourt Brace, 1992); Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*, illustrated by Judy Pedersen (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler Books, 1997).