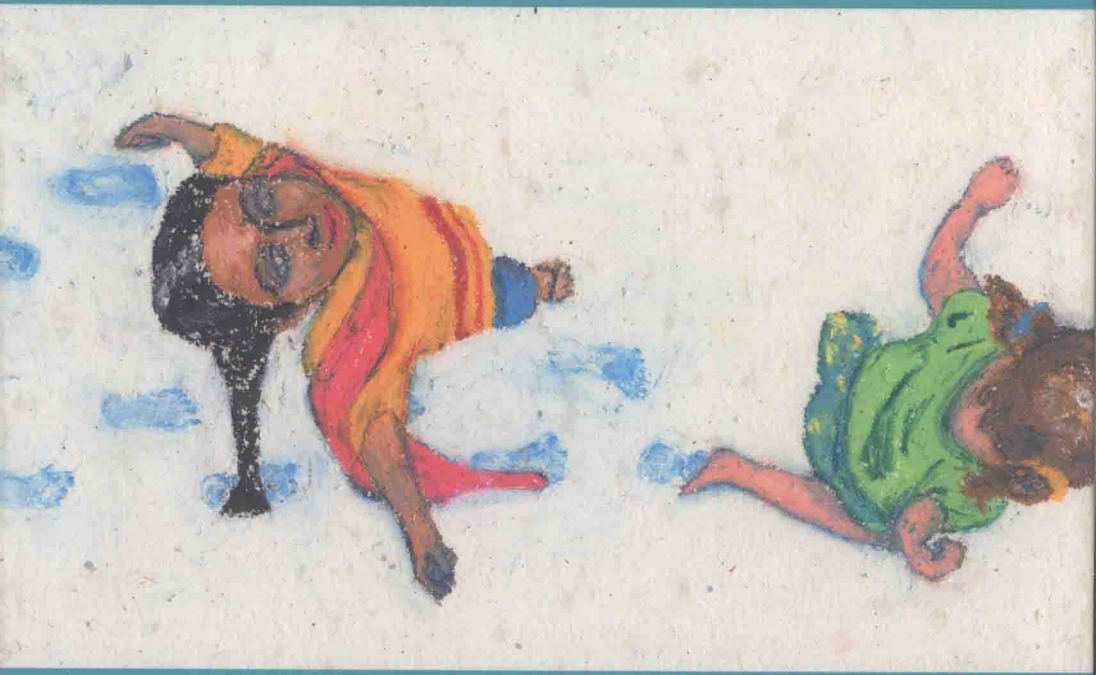
CHILDREN AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN TEXTS OF CHILDHOOD



Edited by Heather Snell and Lorna Hutchison

ROUTLEDGE

CHILDREN AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN TEXTS OF CHILDHOOD

EDITED BY
HEATHER SNELL
AND LORNA HUTCHISON

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CHILDREN AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN TEXTS OF CHILDHOOD

The essays in this collection address the relationship between children and cultural memory in texts both for and about young people. The collection overall is concerned with how cultural memory is shaped, contested, forgotten, recovered, and (re)circulated, sometimes in opposition to dominant national narratives, and often for the benefit of young readers who are assumed not to possess any prior cultural memory. From the innovative development of school libraries in the 1920s to the role of utopianism in fixing cultural memory for teen readers, it provides a critical look into children and ideologies of childhood as they are represented in a broad spectrum of texts, including film, poetry, literature, and architecture from Canada, the United States, Japan, Germany, Britain, India, and Spain. These cultural forms collaborate to shape ideas and values, in turn contributing to dominant discourses about national and global citizenship. The essays included in the collection imply that childhood is an oft-imagined idealist construction based in large part on participation, identity, and perception; childhood is invisible and tangible, exciting and intriguing, and at times elusive even as cultural and literary artifacts recreate it. *Children and Cultural Memory in Texts of Childhood* is a valuable resource for scholars of children's literature and culture, readers interested in childhood and ideology, and those working in the fields of diaspora and postcolonial studies.

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Children and Cultural Memory in Texts of Childhood
Heather Snell and Lorna Hutchison

For Lucien & Sierra: dreams, clarté, curiosity

LH

For my mother: faith, challenge, integrity

HS

Series Editor's Foreword

The Children's Literature and Culture series is dedicated to promoting original research in children's literature, children's culture, and childhood studies. We use the term "children" in the broadest sense, spanning from earliest childhood up through adolescence. The already capacious term "culture" encompasses media (radio, film, television, video games, blogs, websites, social networking sites), material culture (toys, games, products), acculturation (processes of socialization), and of course literature, including all types of crossover works. Since children's literature is defined by its audience, this series seeks to foster scholarship on the full range of children's literature's many genres and subgenres: fairy tales, folk tales, comics, graphic novels, picture books, novels, poetry, didactic tales, nonsense, fantasy, realism, mystery, horror, fan fiction, and others.

Founded by Jack Zipes in 1994, Routledge's Children's Literature and Culture is the longest-running series devoted to the study of children's literature and culture from a national and international perspective. In 2011, expanding its focus to include childhood studies, the series also seeks to explore the legal, historical, and philosophical conditions of different childhoods. An advocate for scholarship from around the globe, the series recognizes innovation and encourages interdisciplinarity. In Zipes' words, "the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world."

Philip Nel

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Heather Snell and Lorna Hutchison
May 2013

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Introduction

Fixing the Past for Young People

Lorna Hutchison and Heather Snell

> Participation in cultural memory is not diffuse in still another sense. In contrast to communicative memory, it does not spread itself around spontaneously but has to be thoroughly prepared and vetted. Its distribution is controlled, and whereas on the one hand it makes participation obligatory, on the other it withholds the right to participate. It is subject to restrictions that are more or less rigid.
>
> —Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*[1]

Memories are lost, reshaped, even challenged. Notwithstanding their susceptibility to change, shared memories contribute to identity formation and a sense of belonging; correlatively, they can help to provide the glue with which to hold a people together. For better or for worse, memories can also function as hegemonic tools in the name of nationalism. In this collection we are primarily interested in how young people fit or are made to fit into the processes and collective experiences associated with cultural memory and the operative structures, such as identity formation, patriotism, or political and moral values, through which cultural memory exists or operates. Adult general perception typically assumes young people to be lacking those experiences that may enable them to challenge popular or dominant interpretations of the past and present; not surprisingly, then, young people often become a target of attempts to consolidate these. In fact, one might argue that cultural memory comes (or is brought) to the fore only once a new generation of individuals who do not possess a living memory of the past begins to come of age.

Indeed, almost two decades after the abolishment of official apartheid in South Africa, one would expect a flurry of new books written for those who

cannot remember it. The children's international book market has not disappointed. At least two new books have been released in 2013 that engage, indirectly, the history of the brutal system of racial segregation that dominated social life in South Africa between 1948 and 1994[2]: Kadir Nelson's *Nelson Mandela*, and *Desmond and the Very Mean Word*, a picture book that Archbishop Desmond Tutu produced with Douglas Carlton Abrams and illustrator A.G. Ford. Both books seek to instill in their young readers a particular interpretation of the history of apartheid, the first through a memorialization of the heroic actions of Nelson Mandela, who fought against apartheid and eventually became South Africa's first black president, and the second by emphasizing the role that children might play in eradicating racism. Implicit in this second book is the notion that small, interpersonal exchanges, including and perhaps especially those that occur among children, affect the larger social body. The young Desmond in the story—clearly a reflection of Tutu, the former chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (or the TRC, established in 1995), learns that the road to freedom lies in forgiveness. The lesson is not an easy one, for the act that Desmond must forgive—the shouting out of a "very mean word" on the part of a gang of boys—hurts him profoundly: "His teeth were clenched, and the mean word kept repeating itself over and over inside his head like echoes in a dark cave."[3] When Desmond's mentor, Father Trevor, asks Desmond if he can forgive the boys, he responds in the negative, prompting Trevor to articulate the primary message of the book: "That is the problem, Desmond. You will get them back, and then they will get you back, and soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but 'getting back.'"[4] Desmond does begin to perpetuate this cycle—until he discovers that the same boys who are bullying him are bullying one of their own too: the unnamed "red-haired boy." The recycling of revenge is reflected in the reproach the mother of the red-haired boy makes in response to the bullying: "You are as bad as your father."[5] Desmond's discovery that the red haired boy is, like him, a victim of bullying, and more guidance from Father Trevor, proves instrumental in encouraging Desmond not only to forgive the boys who hurt him but also to appreciate forgiveness and the fleeting and precarious racial harmony that ensues.

What is interesting about this book is its refusal to name the very mean words exchanged among its characters and the racial and ethnic stigmas to which they are attached. We know that Desmond is black only because he is pictured as such in the illustrations; likewise, the boys who bully Desmond are clearly white, although they hardly comprise a homogenous bunch, making it difficult to place them within any one ethnic category. The book eschews naming race and ethnicity, with the expectation no doubt that young readers will cultivate color blindness or non-racialism. It thereby risks discouraging any real debate about racial politics in South Africa or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world, presumably because children are neither interested in nor capable of thinking about difficult social issues. As is typical of texts that so explicitly attempt to "imagineer"—that is, to imagine and engineer—

the past for the benefit of young people, *Desmond* reduces a complex social conflict to a simplified and highly individualized scenario in which there lies a simple solution to a simple problem: Desmond must forgive a gang of boys for repeating what is almost certainly, in the South African context, a racially inflected word. Part of the problem here is that young readers are not given the context; instead, apartheid, and the attendant history of colonialism in South Africa, is written out of the story. Apartheid and colonialism constitute background only for those familiar enough with the histories of South Africa to understand them. Given that most of the book's readers are bound to be children and, therefore, not in possession of a living memory of apartheid (such children are called "born frees" in South Africa), some contextualization seems prudent so as not to sanitize or diminish a complex reality. It appears more so when one considers that the book circulates internationally: we ourselves purchased it in Canada.

It is not that *Desmond* tells a simple story about apartheid; it is that the book refuses to tell a story about apartheid at all, opting instead for a universally applicable moral tale that emphasizes the importance of interpersonal forgiveness. This occurs at the expense of sparking critical thinking about how and in what form forgiveness can possibly occur in a nation in which an unofficial apartheid persists. In *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (2009), Julie McGonegal suggests that fiction ably

> supplements the public address (and redress) of grievance and pain with a form of discourse that recognizes the limits of legal remedy and that inhabits an affective register that may well aid in the creation of a future in which forgiveness and reconciliation are possible.[6]

Desmond seems to want to invest in such affectivity, yet in its refusal to name and contextualize racism, it threatens to merely reproduce the maneuvers of the TRC, which, as Mahmood Mamdani and other critics point out, tended to rely too heavily on theological discourses of forgiveness and so "individualized the victims of apartheid."[7] The book relies far too heavily on the emotions that take place around interpersonal forgiveness without ever really assessing the extent to which forgiveness is a necessary, or even desirable, element of political reconciliation. As Charles Villa-Vicencio points out, reconciliation may require "less than forgiveness" and it is "necessarily a modest exercise" involving "what has been called 'reconciliation for survival' rather than interpersonal forgiveness."[8] In its invitation to young readers to suture themselves into a romanticized scene of forgiveness, the book risks aestheticizing the core issues at stake. Consequently, the book might be read as one that encourages a forgetting of apartheid.

If we think about the ways in which memory and cultural understanding can be triggered, and if we think also about the conduit that facilitates or makes possible their transportation, then we can theorize cultural memory

through vectors—carriers, motion, forces, directions, and transmitters. In our reading of *Desmond*, adults and children alike participate in the cultural memory of apartheid; as if to confirm this, the book itself stages an encounter between child and adult even as it seeks to form a relationship with the child who is reading the book. That participation becomes an event, a kind of cultural vector through which the child's encounter with apartheid and its legacies is funneled through highly developed systems of religion, political drives, and ethics, which, regardless of authorial intent, together achieve a communal negation of apartheid. Recognition of the larger social issues that haunt the scenario *Desmond* sets up would necessitate an acknowledgment that the words the boys use are racist. Only then would readers be able to understand what Desmond gives up in apologizing to and subsequently forgiving those who bully him. Instead, the word that is never spoken, a word which, in its historical usage and existence as a weapon of apartheid, was a direct and thus authentic embodiment of hate and power, becomes in *Desmond* a mere, mediated side discourse. The title points to the word that remains unspoken, while the narrative enacts it as "stand-in" discourse repeatedly: the red-haired boy "spat" out the word, and the other boys "say the mean word again and again"; the image depicting the boy who is all mouth and angry raised fist also stands, in his mouthing of the word, as a substitute for the word itself. That the book reworks and carries over the past in this particular way prompts us to consider what the act of veering off facilitates, and what assumptions about children are reflected and legitimized in the willingness to present the topic of discrimination to them but only in a somewhat euphemistic manner.

As it stands, one wonders what Desmond really has to lose given the parameters of this rather predictable tale. In fact, Desmond has everything to gain, including, for example, the candy offered him by the red-haired boy near the end of the story—not incidentally, the same boy bullied by the others, who, in a maneuver that once again shifts focus from the sociopolitical to the individual, turn out to be the red-haired boy's brothers. One might ask, too, whether or not it is just as easy for the red-haired boy who forgives Desmond in turn to forget the racist ideologies he may contend with at home. But these are not just boys, after all; they are boys growing up in a culture that is much less post-conflict than it may appear to those living outside of South Africa. Tellingly, the gain and loss that comes about through religious instruction, social interaction, and the engagement with and rejection of harmful ideology occur through exchange: the exchange of cruel words, the exchange of forgiveness for (presumably) self-love. These conversions play out as part of the larger market system to which the subject of the book, apartheid (and its goal of material capital through the degradation of its victims), and its setting (a somewhat impoverished town) belong, and in the highly visible/literal commodities of Desmond's bicycle and the candy offered to him by the red-haired boy. For that matter, the "exchange" involving forgiveness transpires around the bicycle that Desmond is at first