

INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

Kirstie Blair

In 2002, Peter Hunt, one of the world's leading scholars of children's literature, argued in a conference talk:

[R]eligion of all kinds has been virtually silenced in mainstream children's literature, and this has left both a philosophical and a sociological void, perhaps uneasily filled by myth and fantasy. Secondly, religion has actually taken on strong negative connotations.ⁱ

Yet while strongly asserting that children's literature had been overtaken by secularism, Hunt also noted that the contemporary debates over Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series (1995-2000), in tandem with controversies over the banning of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (1997-2007) on religious grounds in parts of the U. S., suggested that 'religion and children's books have once more become intertwined, in a highly paradoxical way.'ⁱⁱ In the decade since Hunt's talk appeared in print, this has arguably become ever clearer to scholars of children's literature. Although we can agree with the editors of two previous special journal issues on children's literature and religion that mainstream children's literature 'has long since evolved away from its religious roots' in the Christian didacticism of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that 'overt and even covert advocacy of religion (particularly Christianity) in secular children's literature has become increasingly suspect and subject to censorship', there also seems to be a general

consensus that the late twentieth and twenty-first century has witnessed a notable revival of interest in religious and theological themes in children's literature.ⁱⁱⁱ

If this renewed engagement is evident in children's literature, it is also seen in the willingness of scholars in the field to engage with theology. To take only one possible example among many revisionary readings, Karen Coats's recent essay on David Almond (a highly respected British writer, whose fiction frequently draws on themes inherited from the Catholic theology of his childhood), argues convincingly that prior critical readings of Almond's works in terms of 'magic' are problematic, because from a theological standpoint, Almond's miracles do not so much defy natural law as supply evidence of something beyond it.^{iv} As other essays in the recent Palgrave casebook on Almond show, it is now difficult to conceive of studying Almond without taking into account the major investment of his fiction in Christian theology, irrespective of the author's own beliefs.^v New work on children's literature and theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has increasingly moved beyond studies of didacticism and ideology, and also beyond Christianity as necessarily the primary – or indeed only – theological framework. This is evident, for instance, in Peter Bramwell's study of Pagan themes in British children's fiction from the mid-twentieth century, or Alana Vincent's discussion of Tolkien not simply in terms of Catholic theology, but in relation to 'inter-religious exchange' with a Jewish fantasy tradition.^{vi} Studies such as Jane Suzanne Carroll's *Landscape in Children's Literature* also show how discussions of the 'sacred' in children's literature are inevitably built into wider themes.^{vii} As several of the essays in this special edition similarly suggest, children's literature has the capacity to speak to current issues in theology that may lie well outside the original contexts of the work's production and the author's own religious affiliations, or lack thereof.

In soliciting proposals for this special issue, we were surprised by the strength of the response (especially from early career researchers), which indicated very clearly that children's literature and theology is a rapidly developing area. There would easily have been enough strong proposals to fill two additional special issues, one on transatlantic Victorian children's literature – we eventually regretfully decided to limit our range in this issue to post-1900 works – and one on twentieth and twenty-first century fantasy. It was apparent from the proposals that fiction, predominantly novels by British, American and Canadian authors, dominates critical discourse in this field. We received one proposal on verse culture (hymns), none concerned with drama or picture-books, and only one (Daniel Pinti's) on comics or graphic novels: much more remains to be done in these areas. Reflecting the continued authority of the Christian tradition in Western children's literature, most proposals considered Christian theology, and fantasy was by far the most popular genre. There is, of course, considerable justification for this, given the strength of the (Christian) fantasy tradition in negotiating theological themes, from George Macdonald and Charles Kingsley, via C. S. Lewis, to the deconstruction and remaking of faith in writers including Madeleine L'Engle, Ursula LeGuin, Philip Pullman, David Almond, Patrick Ness and many others. Indeed, as Sarah Winters has argued, when a contemporary fantasy writer like Suzanne Collins deliberately attempts to eschew theological norms and produce 'atheist high fantasy', it creates significant problems for her work; Winters nicely concludes (summing up a widespread perspective on Pullman's trilogy) that, 'where Pullman betrays atheism by fidelity to fantasy, Collins betrays fantasy by fidelity to atheism.'^{viii} It is difficult to think of a contemporary fantasy writer whose works do *not* lend themselves in any sense to a theological reading,

although often their depiction of theology and religious practice (as in Ness's fundamentalist dystopia) appears relentlessly negative.^{ix}

Yet we should not dismiss other genres, especially realist fiction, in this period. Areas not explored in this special issue, but ripe for further development, might include the depiction of Islamic theology and identity in contemporary works for children and young adults: author and critic Rukhsana Khan's valuable reading guide lists twenty-seven picture books and thirty works of fiction or short stories, from the 1990s onwards, concerned with Muslim themes and characters.^x Critics have identified a line of coming-of-age novels from the mid-twentieth century onwards in which religious identity (usually Christian or Jewish) is integral to adolescent development, including Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) and Aidan Chambers' experimental *Now I Know* (1987).^{xi} As Susannah Cornwall argues in this special edition, not enough attention has been paid to the presence of religious and theological themes in 'realist' writers like Antonia Forest, whose adolescent characters spend considerable portions of each novel discussing and negotiating religious identities: Jewish, Catholic, Anglican and agnostic. Forest's works are, however, not in print from a mainstream press (despite the advocacy of her numerous fans), and it would be interesting to investigate whether this might be partly due to her engagement with religion. As several critics have noted, twenty-first century children's publishers assume that overtly religious themes will not appeal to a predominately secular reading audience: the greater presence of theological debate in the fantasy genre may represent current publishing standards and norms, as much as an inherent fit between contemporary fantasy and theology.^{xii}

The essays presented here, approaching children's literature from a literature and theology perspective, add to the work done by the three previous special journal

issues of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* on children's literature and religion (1989, 1999, 2011). While our selection shows the bias of the field towards fantasy, and the continued importance of established, well-known authors (Montgomery, LeGuin, Pullman, Rowling and others), it seeks to balance this with considerations of other genres, and to investigate new perspectives on contemporary theological interests and their resonance with children's literature. The opening essay starts by reading a writer who has attracted growing attention for her depictions of religion and theology, L. M. Montgomery. It argues that her interest in the pagan revivals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century leads to a portrayal of her heroines' investment in the natural world that resonates with recent accounts of ecotheology. Montgomery, whose work in many ways provides a bridge between Victorian religious didacticism and twentieth-century explorations of alternative theological perspectives, is secure in the children's literature canon and increasingly recognized as a major Canadian author. As noted above, this is not true for Forest, a mid-late twentieth-century British author of a family saga, which is also a series of school stories. Cornwall's "Not Something I'd Ever *Dream* of Dying For!": Religious Identity and Belonging in Antonia Forest's Marlow Novels', explores the complexity of theological discussions between Marlow's characters, and shows how she builds difficult questions about the place of religious identity in modern Britain into her young adult novels. The third essay, by Michelle Ann Abate, then turns to a genre and authors little-discussed in relation to religious content or themes: the Nancy Drew stories and Mabel Maney's more recent queer revision of them. Abate's suggestion that 'mystery' in these works is always bound up with its original theological meanings, leads us to perceive the unnoticed engagement of the Nancy Drew books with different varieties of religion.

The next cluster of three essays considers fantasy authors from the U.S. and Britain. Elizabeth Anderson's essay on theological alterity in Le Guin concentrates on Le Guin's more recent works, deploying postcolonial theology to show how she uses fiction to explore issues of theological difference and reconciliation – highly relevant in current international affairs – and to question the pre-eminence of monotheism. Emanuelle Burton's 'Moral Horror and Moral Maturity: Philip Pullman's Theological Anthropology for a Godless World' revisits Pullman's trilogy and its focus on difficult questions of ethics and moral responsibility, suggesting that Pullman rejects the usual emphasis on (Christian) goodness in fantasy works in favour of a more conflicted take on morality and evil. Carissa Turner Smith then turns our attention to relic discourse and theories of intersubjectivity in fantasy literature, comparing J. K. Rowling's take on this to the representation of saints and relics in a fascinating recent fantasy/historical novel by Merrie Haskell, *The Castle Behind Thorns* (2014). Finally, Daniel Pinti, in 'Theology and Identity in Gene Lueng Yang's *American Born Chinese*', argues that readings of Yang's very highly regarded graphic novel have not adequately considered its theological investments, and its negotiation of Chinese culture and Judeo-Christian theology in shaping an Asian-American religious identity.

Collectively, these essays suggest the reach of theology in twentieth and twenty-first century children's literature, and the continuing potential for theology to illuminate writing for children, and indeed vice versa. It is our hope that this group of essays assists in opening up further directions for research, both for scholars of children's literature, and for those interested in the broader intersections of literature and theology.

University of Stirling

ⁱ P. Hunt, 'The Loss of the Father and of God in English-Language Children's Literature (1800-2000)' in J. De Maeyer et al (eds.) *Religion, Children's Literature and Modernity in Western Europe 1750-2000* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), pp. 295-303, p. 295.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

ⁱⁱⁱ J. Miskec, 'Religion and Children's Literature: A Decennial Examination', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 36.3 (2011) 255-8, p. 257; N. Wood, 'Introduction: Children's Literature and Religion', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24.1 (1999) 1-3, p. 1. See also A. Trousdale, 'Honouring the Questions: Shifts in the Treatment of Religion in Children's Literature', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 16.3 (2011) 219-232, in which she argues that the last quarter of the twentieth century saw a significant revival of interest in religious themes in children's literature, but that religion is generally viewed critically.

^{iv} K. Coats, 'The Possibilities of Becoming: Process-Relational Theology in the Works of David Almond' in R. R. Johnston (ed.), *David Almond* (Houndmills: Palgrave 2014), pp. 67-83. For a study of Almond that focuses on 'magic' and magical realism without reference to theological contexts, see D. Latham, *David Almond: Memory and Magic* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

^v For instance, V. Coghlan, "'A sense sublime": Religious Resonances in the Works of David Almond', in Johnston (ed.), pp. 84-99.

^{vi} P. Bramwell, *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction: Green Man, Shamanism, Earth Mysteries* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009); A. M. Vincent, *Culture, Communion and Recovery: Tolkienian Fairy-Story and Inter-Religious Exchange* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012)

^{vii} J. S. Carroll, *Landscape in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), chapter 1 and *passim*.

^{viii} S. F. Winters, 'Religious Faith and Secular Hope in *The Underland Chronicles*', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 36.1 (2012) 1-19, pp. 1, 8.

^{ix} P. Ness, *Chaos Walking (The Knife of Never Letting Go)* (London: Walker, 2008); *The Ask and the Answer* (London: Walker, 2009); *Monsters of Men* (London: Walker, 2010). Ness's trilogy opens in a repressive and violent religious community, consisting of those who fled earth for a new planet, loosely modeled on historical Puritanism. It won numerous awards including the Carnegie Medal, Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and Costa Book Award.

^x R. Khan, 'Children's Books with Muslim and Related Cultural Themes', <http://www.rukhsanakhan.com/muslimbooklist/Muslimbooklist.pdf> (consulted 4.4.16).

^{xi} See, for example, on U. S. realist children's fiction and religious identities, J. Cummins 'What Are Jewish Boys and Girls Made Of?: Gender in Contemporary Jewish Teen and Tween Fiction', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 36.3 (2011) 296-317 and Trousdale's survey of religious fiction.

^{xii} A. F. Howey, in 'Secular or Spiritual: Rereading Anne of Green Gables', *Christianity and Literature* 62.3 (2013) 395-416, discusses the 2001 controversy over HarperCollins' desire to produce further Narnia sequels that would evade Lewis's Christian framework and notes how adaptations of *Anne of Green Gables* have similarly 'glossed over its religious content' for a presumed secular audience (pp. 395-6). Miskec notes that Catholic YA authors interviewed for her research project all experienced difficulty in gaining acceptance from mainstream publishers (p. 256). V. Coghlan comments that in contemporary Ireland, 'publishing houses are wary about publishing anything that has a specifically religious aspect' ('Religion: Overtones and Undertones in Irish Children's Books', in De Maeyer et al, eds, pp. 165-74, p. 174).