“I Write to Frighten Myself”: Catherine Storr and the Development of Children’s Literature Studies in Britain

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Abstract In Britain, children’s literature studies emerged in the late 1960s, largely through the activities of what is now the Graduate School of Education at the University of Exeter. This article uses the Catherine Storr archive to revisit some of the contexts and concerns of those early days, many of which continue to have relevance. Storr was involved in aspects of the initial Exeter projects. A children’s writer known for unsettling stories that often made use of supernatural or Gothic elements, she also spoke and wrote about the importance of fear in children’s literature. Her work provides the focus of this discussion of the relationship between frightening fiction for children, the interest in psychological approaches to reading and producing children’s literature evinced in the foundational work at Exeter and still evident today, and current concerns about the wellbeing of British children.

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Introduction

Archives are time machines: reading correspondence, looking through manuscript drafts, photographs, receipts and all the other items an archive may contain conjures up people and moments from the past. This effect is particularly strong when the materials relate to individuals and events known to the researcher, as I discovered when working with the Catherine Storr archive at Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the north of England. I began by thinking about the writer and her work, but found myself travelling back to the 1960s and 1970s and engaging with some of the gatherings, voices, debates and initiatives that helped establish children's literature studies as an academic discipline in Britain, not the least of these being the launch of this very journal.

I had been wanting to explore the Catherine Storr archives from the time they first began to be deposited by Storr's daughters in 2008. I have often taught *Marianne Dreams* (1958) and enjoyed reading her Clever Polly stories with children, but I knew she had written a great deal more; that she was unusual in her day for being a mother, writer and medical professional; that she was for a time married to Anthony Storr, the well-known psychiatrist, journalist, and broadcaster, and that she contributed to key publications about children's literature during the 1970s, including that excellent volume, *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading* (1977).¹ This unusual profile made me curious to see what the archives contained. The opportunity finally came when I was leading a project to develop an online "exhibition" that makes some of the material in the Seven Stories collection freely available over the internet.

The way into what eventually became "The Catherine Storr Experience" is a three-minute interactive virtual reality tour (see <http://digitalcultures.ncl.ac.uk/Catherine-Storr/>). The VR component comprises digitised items from the archives augmented by memories shared and personal objects loaned by members of her family. Reading through Storr's collected works while preparing the exhibition, the extent to which her writing employs supernatural and fantasy elements to draw decidedly ordinary characters into unsettling—sometimes very frightening—situations was striking. Since the rise of popular horror series such as "Point Horror" and "Goosebumps" in the 1990s, frightening fiction of many kinds has become an established part of the children's publishing industry, but in the middle of the last century, Catherine Storr's willingness to frighten and disturb her readers caught the

¹ Although not published until 1977 because of problems with the original publishers, *The Cool Web* (eds. Meek et al.) was prepared in 1974 in anticipation of the 1975 Bullock Report, *A Language for Life*. It brings together work by a range of literary critics (the Bullock Report was interested in the place of literature in teaching literacy), academics developing work on reader response, historians of children's literature, teachers, librarians, child psychologists, experts in child language and development, writers, psychoanalysts and others.

attention of the emerging world of children's literature scholarship and criticism. The frightening nature of her work was interrogated by the audience who heard her keynote lecture on "Fear and Evil in Children's Books" at the UK's first academic children's literature conference in Exeter in 1969. The transcripts of the discussion which followed Storr's talk reveal a great deal about the intellectual and philosophical context from which children's literature studies in the UK emerged. This article, therefore, begins by considering responses to Storr's lecture as a way of revisiting some aspects of that originary moment and asking why and how far the admixture of interests that came together in the late 1960s continues to influence the discipline nearly half a century later.

The Exeter Conference and Its Context

In the 1960s and 1970s, thinking about children and childhood was dominated by the disciplines and discourses of psychology and pedagogy. The emphasis on pedagogy is clearly reflected in both the Exeter Conference title, "Recent Children's Fiction and its Role in Education" and the journal that arose from it, *Children's Literature in Education (CLE)*. The prime mover behind the conference was Sidney Robbins, of the English Department of Saint Luke's College of Education, with the administrative support of the Institute of Education of Exeter University. Although education, psychology and a number of other disciplines could have provided a range of experts on the development of children's minds, bodies and wellbeing, the conference was principally concerned with hearing from writers for children. This focus is also evident in the journal: the first two numbers of *CLE* featured lectures given at the conference by the children's writers who had been asked to speak to the audience of 220 teachers, librarians, lecturers and makers of children's books. The journal's first editor, Sidney Robbins, used his inaugural editorial to explain the emphasis on writers:

... it is their creative achievements over the last 20 years, the resources of fine stories that they have made available to children and to us as parents, teachers and librarians, that have made the critical and educational enterprise that this journal hopes to stand for worthwhile. (Robbins, 1970, p. 5)

As the journal has evolved it has carried articles about children's literature from most periods, many countries, and in a wide range of formats; but, as this quotation shows, it was founded as a response to what is often referred to as the second golden age of children's literature. There was a strong sense of children's literature as *literature*, and in the many ways children's books were supporting professionals working with children as well as enriching children's lives.

Catherine Storr was one of a pantheon of authors who were invited to address the conference. Others included Joan Aiken, Edward Blishen, Leon Garfield, Alan Garner, Ted Hughes and William Mayne. These writers helped lay the foundations for the academic study of children's literature in the UK, and the participation of writers, illustrators, teachers, librarians, literacy experts, critics, editors, publishers and other professionals involved in facilitating or supporting the relationship between children and books continues to be a characteristic of children's literature

studies. Reading through the papers selected for publication in the first numbers of *CLE*, it is clear that the writers shared many interests and concerns with those who had trained to work with children, particularly with regard to children's psyches, emotional needs and behaviours. Their lectures and the transcripts of the discussions that follow them regularly refer to topics such as childhood depression, guilt, unconscious feelings, sexual fantasies, unresolved fears, neurotic conditions, dreams and the work of Carl Jung in relation to recent children's fiction. Not explicitly mentioned but, as will become apparent, also highly influential, was the work of D(onald) W(oods) Winnicott (1876–1971), a leading member of the British School of object-relations. According to Nicholas Tucker, who attended the conference in his capacities as a lecturer in developmental psychology at the University of Sussex and a children's literature scholar and critic, Winnicott and his circle were particularly relevant because of their interest in actual children rather than childhood as the origin of neuroses (Tucker, 2017).² Moreover, Winnicott reached out to the general public through radio broadcasts (between 1943 and 1962 he delivered some 50 talks for parents on the BBC) and accessible books, beginning with *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (1964). Catherine Storr was sufficiently interested in Winnicott's theories to approach him with a view to being analysed by him (Hartland, 2016). He had no capacity at the time; nevertheless, as will become clear, features of his theories are evident in her writing.

At the Exeter conference, Storr spoke about "Fear and Evil in Children's Books". The version of her talk reproduced in the first number of *CLE* speaks to the participants' shared interest in the relationship between children's psyches and children's reading; an interest that Kenneth Kidd has shown continues to shape writing for children and how it is understood. In *Freud in Oz* (2011) Kidd observes, "Children's literature... is now often understood as creative psychological work undertaken on behalf of the young subject" (p. viii). In her lecture Storr discussed the way books can depress as well as aid children, speculated about what Freud would make of Lucy Clifford's "The New Mother" (1882), and referred to the influence of "psychologically trained teachers" on what and how children read (1970a, pp. 22–27). Although her interest in the juvenile psyche was shared with other delegates, Storr was unusual in having both a degree in medicine and ten years of experience working as a psychotherapist.³ A core concern of her lecture is with how literature can help children understand and reconcile the feelings that exist inside them and which may be at odds with the codes of behaviour they are expected to follow. Anticipating Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), she argued that the many acts of cruelty and violence found in earlier children's books as well as on television may help children acknowledge the dark and conflicted

² Tucker's *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981) typifies the focus on the relationship between writing for children and young people and their psychological needs and development.

³ Over time Catherine Storr has mistakenly been referred to as a psychiatrist: see, for instance *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Hahn, 2015), *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (Watson, 2001), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (Zipes, 2006); Healy (2015). She never completed her training, but she did work as a psychotherapist in the outpatients' department of Middlesex Hospital in London for 10 years.

feelings we all harbour from infancy. “What we have to do,” she explained, “is to tell the children, ‘Yes, these feelings exist in us as well as in you and this is how in our society you should try to express them’” (p. 26).

The question and answer session that followed her talk largely focused on the possible psychological costs and benefits of frightening fiction. There is nothing in the transcripts or archives to suggest that either in Exeter or later Storr faced the same challenges and criticisms levelled at Bettelheim for his claims about the dark elements in fairy tales; for instance, that they place the blame for the ordeals child characters endure on their desires, demands and hostilities and so transmit repressive messages about the need to conform to expected social roles (Joosen, 2011 offers a useful summary of Bettelheim's critics). Indeed, several members of the audience supported her thesis; for instance, an unidentified speaker referred to as “Q8” argued that, “By avoiding the moments of real fear in their novels, you will be avoiding the fear in their own lives. The novel is a good place to experience real moments of fear” (Extracts, 1970, p. 37). Similarly, Puffin editor Kaye Webb invoked Walter de la Mare, who had once told her, “All children ought to have moments of fear and moments of awe and if you deprive them of that you deprive them of all their imagination” (pp. 37–38). One of the most challenging questions came from Alan Garner, another writer who, in novels such as *Elidor* (1965) and *The Owl Service* (1967), had shown he was not averse to frightening his readers. Like Storr, Garner favours fantasy stories in which impossible events or alternative worlds erupt in unpredictable ways into consensus reality. He began by observing, “I think you have been hiding behind the children,” and went on to suggest that Storr was disingenuous when she claimed that children and young people need stories which, like her own, engage with archetypal fears about loss, separation and death. His eventual question to her was, “To what extent are you writing to externalize your own fears rather than to do something for the children?” (p. 38).

Alan Garner's question is a product of some of the key attitudes to childhood and children's literature of the time. For instance, he assumes that children's literature should be in the service of its readers; that it *should* “do something” for them. This rather instrumental attitude is not usually applied to literature, but Garner's question is in line with the conference's focus on works that have educational value because of their literary merit.⁴ Storr's response opened up a rather different line of thought: “I am not writing to do something for children at all. I am writing, I suppose, to get rid of my own fears but it is mostly to discover what I feel and to discover some childish part of myself...” (p. 38).

At one level, in claiming to write for a childish part of herself, Storr was not saying anything new: many writers, past and present, have explained that writing for children puts them in touch with their childhood selves, or claim they can remember clearly how they felt when they were children and so write what they would have wanted to read then (think, for instance, of Frances Hodgson Burnett, Beverly Cleary, C. S. Lewis, William Mayne, Arthur Ransome, and Maurice Sendak).

⁴ Sidney Robbins concludes his first editorial, which is in many ways a manifesto for *CLE*, with the observation that books “are unlikely to be of much significance educationally unless they have this validity [i.e. they are valid in their own right as literature]” (1970, p. 7).

However, Storr's statement differs from most of these both in its informed and explicit psychological self-awareness and in the sense that her listeners had at least some familiarity with theories arising from psychoanalysis and child development. Many of the papers given at the Exeter conference used insights from psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic approaches to literary criticism to reveal features of writing for children that had long gone unrecognised. Among these insights are the role played by latent child selves in shaping what writers write.

In recent years, those working at the interface of children's literature and childhood studies have gone in search of "the child", "the child's voice" and children's agency in writing produced for them. More than four decades ago Storr suggested that former children, internalised within writers, constitute one aspect of "the child". As her response to Alan Garner indicates (and she made the same claim on a number of occasions), Storr was intent upon exploring and developing a relationship with her childhood self, a self that psychoanalytic theory teaches is for ever implicated in what we think and how we behave (Fig. 1). She saw doing so as essential to writing well for children and young people, maintaining, "Real children's literature [earlier defined in her discussion as work of recognisable literary quality that grows with its readers] is written by those who can conduct a dialogue between themselves as adults and the children they once were". It is "understood from the child's position, written for the child within the author, not the child whom the author observes" (1973, pp. 9–10).⁵ Her children's books and stories, then, can be understood in part as a means of giving expression to remembered feelings that at the time they were experienced were beyond her comprehension and powers of expression. At the same time, Storr's professional training and experience of psychoanalysis affected how she understood the child she had been and the children she observed, and also how she wrote for them. Consciously or not, Winnicott's ideas about the means by which children seek to unite their inner realities and the outer world—play, (day-)dreaming, drawing and what Winnicott termed Transitional Objects—are particularly evident in her fiction. Perhaps the most significant way in which Storr aligns herself with Winnicott is in her recognition that when the "intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes of childhood" are incomprehensible they can arrest development or create a gap in the sense of self that can be frightening and dangerous (Phillips, 2007, p. 2). Especially in her writing for adolescents and young adults, Storr frequently represents such crises and uses a combination of Winnicottian insights and disturbing plots to suggest ways in which gaps in the self can be filled. In doing so she was very much in line with the spirit and concerns of the Exeter conference and its associated activities.

⁵ Storr made this statement in her 1973 introduction to the French critic Isabelle Jan's *On Children's Literature* (1969). The fact that she was asked to provide an introduction to Jan's monograph is evidence of her general involvement in the development of children's literature studies: in addition to producing more than 100 juvenile publications, Storr also reviewed children's books for a number of journals and newspapers, and part of her Exeter talk/journal article was reproduced in *The Cool Web* as "Things that go bump in the night".

Fig. 1 1919 portrait of Catherine Storr, aged six with doll. Reproduced by kind permission of Sophia Hartland, Cecilia Storr and Emma Storr. Photo courtesy of Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books

Stor(r)ying childhood

Although she never worked professionally with children, Catherine Storr came to prominence as a children's writer in the 1950s, when she had three young children and so regularly moved between her hospital work and the domestic, educational and social worlds of children and families. Her reply to Alan Garner notwithstanding, as often as not Storr's writing began with a view to doing something for specific children: her children and grandchildren, who regularly inspired and were the first audiences for her tales, told either orally or in the form of handmade books. The books were often a response to particular incidents or an individual child's anxieties: the kind of "intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes of childhood" that fascinated Winnicott. The value placed on these books by the children who received them can be gauged by the fact that they have been preserved, some for many decades. A few have been deposited at Seven Stories, among them the first (1955) telling of the story that spawned the popular books about Clever Polly and her adversary.

This story for younger children is an early example of how Storr created stories that combine a child's personal fear with playing or day-dreaming, to help young readers understand something about themselves. The Clever Polly stories, for instance, were written to help Storr's five-year-old daughter Polly overcome her fear

that there were wolves under her bed. The first story features a fictional Polly who opens the front door to find the wolf (an amalgamation of many fairy-tale wolves) waiting to eat her. Instead of panicking, Polly calmly outsmarts the wolf by exploiting his greed: she suggests he starts by eating the nice things she is making in the kitchen, ending with some toffee which is still so hot it badly burns his tongue and paws. The wolf runs away and Polly returns triumphantly to the kitchen at the end of a most satisfying game or day-dream (Fig. 2). The strategy worked; Polly Storr remembers that defeating the wolf in the stories and being shown as clever not only helped her stop being afraid of wolves but gave her a more general sense of empowerment (Flood, 2015).

Just as she discussed in “Fear and Evil in Children’s Books,” Storr used her writing to give fears and anxieties form and, by showing children defeating their demons, encouraged readers to believe that even the small and young can be effective in the world. In a Winnicottian sense, her combination of real-life setting with elements of day-dream and play created a space in which children could explore the boundaries between inner reality and external life. Storr’s fictions dramatise and symbolise childhood crises in ways appropriate to different stages in children’s development, from the family-orientated world of young children to the upheavals of adolescents negotiating the world independently. In stories for younger readers, issues tend to be addressed quite directly, and though the books deal with fears, they are not actually frightening. For instance, Polly Storr’s fear of wolves turns into a story about defeating a wolf; similarly, in *Finn’s Animal* (1992), Finn’s fear of the dark is transformed into a joyful series of imagination-fuelled adventures when he faces and takes control of the creatures he has believed were lurking in the shadows. As the age of Storr’s implied reader increases, so does her use of fear as a means of illustrating the kind of crises that stem from a failure to distinguish between inner reality and everyday life; precisely the condition that Winnicott associated with mental ill health.

Fig. 2 Double-page from Storr’s handmade book, “Clever Polly” (1950). Reproduced by kind permission of Sophia Hartland, Cecilia Storr and Emma Storr. Photo courtesy of Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children’s Books

Interestingly, it is in her novels for older readers that Storr makes the most use of Winnicott's best-known contribution to psychotherapeutic theory, the Transitional Object (TO). Winnicott saw TOs—the dolls, toys, bits of cloth and other items that children for a time endow with great personal significance—as playing a key role in the work of balancing their inner and outer realities and so achieving healthy maturity. Initially they provide a comforting substitute for a primary carer, a substitute that significantly does not go away and is in the control of the child. Normally TOs are associated with infants and very small children, but in Storr's fiction objects that function like TOs are used by older children at times of anxiety or transition, such as illness, bereavement, or profound neglect. They are both compensatory and part of the creative work of self-fashioning that children undertake through play, art, dreaming and day-dreaming (Jacobus, 2005). For instance, in Storr's *Rufus* (1969), the eponymous orphan re-experiences abandonment when his older sister moves from the children's home where she has protected him to begin life and work outside. He becomes fixated on an antique knife a teacher has brought in to illustrate a history lesson and impulsively steals it and hides it under his mattress. Functioning as a TO, the knife comforts Rufus and helps him work through his problems by giving rise to a series of engrossing, sequential dreams in which he belongs to a family of ancient Britons. Rufus's dream family, complete with a little sister and a new baby, provide him with what he lacks in real life. With their love and support he discovers new competencies and develops a sense of self-esteem that he is able to transfer to his waking life. There he deals with a bully, confesses to the theft of the knife, copes with the departure of his sister, and finally learns to make friends. *Rufus* is a chapter book for competent prepubescent readers, and the knife as TO and the dreams it provokes are nearly as overt and satisfying as the animals in *Finn's Animals*. Storr's novels for adolescents, however, recognise adolescence as a second phase of individuation during which many of the anxieties and frustrations of infancy return in new guises, and in them TOs, dreams and supernatural events are used to explore fears more obliquely and disturbingly.

Although she did not succeed in her desire to work with Donald Winnicott, Storr briefly underwent both Freudian and Jungian analysis, developing her understanding of the workings of the mind and of the way the psyche can simultaneously conceal and reveal disturbing or unresolved feelings. As she explains in "Things that Go Bump in the Night", symbolic ways of representing fears and potentially disturbing topics such as sex, death, and violence offer what children "need to know, both more economically and at greater depth [than realistic fiction]" because children need to learn "what threatens [them] from the outside but also [their] own responses" to such threats (1977, p. 112). To explore external threats and internal responses, Storr uses themes and elements borrowed from Gothic fiction.

Twentieth-Century Gothic

In her analysis of Neil Gaiman's use of Gothic in his fiction for children and young people, Karen Coats suggests that it is a genre that does a kind of psychic work that is particularly valuable in certain modern contexts. Well-loved children in comfortable and stable homes, she contends, are deprived of the conditions that

help them understand the feelings and fears they experience in relation to their parents and which help instigate the ability to separate that is widely viewed as a precondition of maturity. For Coats, such children's "outer lives give them no actual contexts for the fear that accompanies the inner dramas and psychic losses that are an inevitable legacy of growing up" (2007, p. 91). The fear persists, however, because children know that eventually they will have to leave home and find their way in the world.

For the most part, it is loved and comfortable children who feature in Catherine Storr's fiction, and at some level she evidently reached much the same conclusion as Coats. In her novels, Gothic provides the fearful context for her characters' emotions by "giving concrete expression to abstract psychic processes, keeping dark fascinations and haunting fears where children can see them" (p. 91). Coats's take on Gothic offers some interesting ways of reading Storr's best-known novel for adolescents, *Marianne Dreams* (1958). It is also an excellent example of the continuity of children's literature's interest in young people's inner lives and the role literature may play in their psychological wellbeing so evident at the first Exeter conference.

Marianne lives in a stable, middle-class family. She has a comfortable home, an attentive mother, and enough money for extras: the book opens on Marianne's tenth birthday when she has been given much-desired riding lessons as her main present. But before she can enjoy her birthday meal, Marianne falls ill and is confined to bed for many weeks. The illness is real, but as the story develops, it also seems that, exactly as Coats suggests, it is also related to the fact that Marianne is worried about growing up, leaving home, and the approach of sexual activity and the effects of this on her relationship with the opposite sex. This is never said explicitly, but can be inferred through the sequence of dreams that form the dramatic core of the book and which externalise her fears about growing up, meeting boys, and becoming independent.

To pass the time in bed, Marianne begins to draw, using a pencil that functions as a TO. The drawings themselves are another echo of one of Winnicott's best-known innovations for analysing children, the Squiggle game. This involved Winnicott starting a simple drawing and inviting a child to complete it. Such drawings, he believed, offered a view of the child's inner world. In *Marianne Dreams*, Marianne functions as analyst and patient, starting and finishing the drawing herself in response to a compelling series of recurring dreams. The obsessive nature of her dreams and drawings is yet another link to Winnicott, who taught that compulsive or repetitive play was produced by excessive anxiety (1964, p. 144). The dreams begin when Marianne sketches a rudimentary building of the kind frequently drawn by children. Marianne draws a house and it soon becomes clear that the house *is* Marianne as she feels herself to be: Marianne ill in bed; Marianne somehow at risk in the dream. The house Marianne draws is a Gothic house: isolated, apparently empty, in a bleak landscape, fascinating but somehow sinister. Thinking of the house as Marianne's representation of her inner self, it is significant that it has no doorknob or knocker. She cannot get in. This is not the image of a happy, confident and forward-looking child.

Every time she wakes up, Marianne does something to her drawing, starting with adding a knob so she can open the door, and drawing a face at the window. When she gets inside, she finds another sick and isolated child, Mark. There is also a Mark in the real world—they share a home tutor because he too is confined to bed. Although she never meets him, Marianne is clearly fascinated by Mark, and rather resentful of the fact that their tutor thinks he is clever and is obviously fond of him.

At one level, learning to make friends with the dream Mark can be understood as a way working out her feelings about the opposite sex and how she should relate to boys as she moves towards adolescence.⁶ But this is Marianne's dream, and so Mark can also be understood as representing an aspect of herself. He is the male, rational capable side of herself that has not been adequately developed in a 1950s, patriarchal setting. However you read Mark (and, of course, readings need not be mutually exclusive), through her drawings and dreams Marianne nurtures her other selves including this male aspect. During her exploration of Carl Jung's work, Storr would have encountered his theories about the need for aspects of the self to be in balance if a whole, healthy psyche is to form. Thinking in terms of what Jung called the "collective unconscious" (1981), Mark can be considered the *animus*, or male inner personality, to Marianne's *anima*, or archetypal female aspect. From this perspective, one of Marianne's tasks is to learn how to create a balanced and reciprocal relationship between these aspects of herself.

As she and Mark become friends in her dreams, Marianne draws food and toys and furniture to make the house more homely. It seems the dreams are part of her healing process in the real world, but it is not as simple as that. At one point Marianne is unable to control her emotions, and she introduces dangers into the dream world when she angrily tries to scribble Mark out of the drawing and draws eyes on the stones outside the garden fence (Fig. 3). This is a turning point in the novel because when she resorts to violence on her drawing, Marianne loses both self-control and the ability to verbalise what she is thinking, which Mark has helped her develop. The regression has consequences. Both the dream Mark and Mark in real life become gravely ill, while Marianne, who had been getting better, also suffers a reverse, and the dream house is now menaced by the watching stones.

These are all examples of "giving concrete expression to abstract psychic processes"; Marianne is forced to see the consequences of giving way to fear and anger and of failing to take responsibility for her actions. After this incident, she learns to become more self-controlled, more confident and more effective in the dream world. She and Mark work together to defeat the stone watchers, leave the house, and set themselves up in a home of their own. It is not difficult to see this as practising in the dream world for the time when she will find a partner and leave her parents' home.

Marianne Dreams is the first and, to my mind, the most effective work in which Storr uses Gothic elements to explore what it is like to move from childhood to adolescence, especially with regard to sexuality and psychological development,

⁶ The 1989 film adaptation, *Paperhouse* (Directed by Bernard Rose), makes anxiety around her sexual self the dominant note by adding a backstory in which it is suggested that Marianne's father has been abusing her.

Fig. 3 Illustration by Marjorie-Ann Watts for *Marianne Dreams*. Reproduced by kind permission of Marjorie-Ann Watts

and how these may adversely affect a young person's mental health. Several of its themes, as well as its use of frightening and inexplicable events, would appear in later works. In *The Chinese Egg* (1975), for instance, Vicky, who was adopted as a baby, finds herself curiously bound to a boy she meets when she picks up a piece of a Chinese puzzle he has dropped. When they are together with the puzzle pieces, Vicky and Stephen see visions of the immediate future which make them witnesses to a crime. They are frightened by the power, which they are unable to control and which overwhelms them in unexpected situations. They are also angry and frustrated when people refuse to believe them. The detective story on the surface of the novel disguises the real business of the novel, which is to allow Vicky and Stephen to acknowledge problems in their family lives (she needs to find out about her mother; he needs to free himself from his domineering psychiatrist father) and the growing attraction between them. Other boy-girl bonds in Storr's Young Adult novels are also threatened by supernatural events: Bee's outsider boyfriend in *Thursday* (1971), a reworking of the Tam Lin ballad, nearly loses himself to the Fairy Queen; the university students who spend a vacation together in *Winter's End* (1978) find their identities and intellectual training dissolving in the sinister atmosphere of the house and need medical help to deal with a nearly fatal form of mental illness.

These adolescent fictions metaphorically depict the way selves can be lost through illness, drugs, toxic relationships, and despair. Tropes from Gothic fiction provide generic shortcuts to establish the unreal-but-not-untrue nature of the events, but no matter how strange and threatening the situations appear, just as in her work for younger children, Storr's characters prove resilient, and healthy normality is regained. This, I suggest, is what attracted so many of those who attended the conference in Exeter to the work of Catherine Storr. The point is illustrated by a

comment made by Julia MacRae, then a children's editor (she began as a children's librarian and later became a highly influential publisher) in the Q&A session following Storr's Exeter lecture. Her remark came after discussion of the role of violence in children's books; MacRae warned against readers being "left with an unresolved fear" so that "a tension is built up ... but there is nothing to balance this." Catherine Storr said she found this point "terribly important" (Extracts, 1970, p. 39). The responsibilities for writers and the potential for books to affect readers was central to Storr's account of the conference for a broadsheet newspaper:

We spoke of ... subjects which we felt should or should not be introduced into literature for children, of sex and violence, and horror and fear, and of how they could be rightly approached. We spoke of the power of books to corrupt or edify ... of the power of story to heal sickness in both the teller and the hearer... (1970b).⁷

As Storr makes clear, the Exeter conference was an opportunity for professionals to come together to stake a claim for the way they believed children's literature could help children and young people understand and explain themselves. That 1969 conference helped lay the foundations for many subsequent developments in children's literature studies in the UK, and through *Children's Literature in Education* also influenced it elsewhere; especially in North America where from the 1970s it had an additional editorial board. The close ties between psychoanalytic theory and children's literature identified by Kenneth Kidd (2011) continue to inform academic studies of children's literature. Arguably, however, the potential for books to edify and heal that was so widely accepted in 1969 by those from a range of professional backgrounds has largely dissipated in response to current scholarly, educational and government agendas. For instance, specialists in education and their colleagues in complementary areas such as children's librarianship are often required to give priority to such things as the acquisition of literacy and the impact of the digital environment. Does this matter? Currently British children are some of the unhappiest and most stressed in the world. This claim was first made in 2007 in a UNICEF report. Comparing 20 OECD member countries, the UK scored overall lowest in a survey of the wellbeing of children (*Report Card 7*). Things were no better in 2013–14: the Children's Society's Good Childhood report (2013) ranked the UK fourteenth out of fifteen countries, with only children in South Korea being identified as more unhappy and anxious. Since the start of the new millennium, studies have regularly indicated that ten percent of British children and young people have clinically diagnosable mental health problems, with 1 in 12 10–16 year olds suffering from depression and anxiety, conditions which often lead to a variety of self-harming behaviours including addiction, cutting, and eating disorders (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). The most recent report, undertaken in conjunction with the National Children's Bureau by researchers from University College London's Institute of Education and the

⁷ This quotation comes from a clipping that provides no information about the paper or the page on which the review appeared. The clipping was passed on to me by Nicholas Tucker, who attended the Exeter conference. The title of the piece is "New readers start here".

University of Liverpool, shows a general rise in this pattern, with a sharp increase in the early teens. Based on responses from 10,000 children surveyed at ages 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14, the researchers conclude that twenty-four percent of 14-year-old girls and nine percent of boys of the same age display symptoms of clinical depression (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2017).

The precarious state of British childhood and youth was widely publicised in April 2017 when Princes William and Harry and William's wife Kate launched their Heads Together campaign at the London Marathon. The initiative was in part prompted by the unhappiness Harry explained that he had suffered since losing his mother as a boy in 1997. Its aim is to remove the stigma associated with mental illness. This stigma has meant that the prevalence of mental distress in British culture, not least among children, has rarely been acknowledged, and people have been discouraged from talking about their feelings and symptoms for fear of possible social and economic consequences.

The Catherine Storr archives provide a useful reminder that one place where young people have been able to learn about and engage therapeutically with mental illness is in children's and young adult literature. Many fine writers continue to produce powerful, carefully crafted works in what here we might call the Storr or *CLE* tradition. David Almond, Neil Gaiman, Margo Lanagan and Philip Reeve, for instance, employ the same combination of fear and psychological insight used by Storr to address the anxieties of her day. At a time when many children are experiencing the kind of gap in the self that Winnicott associated with mental illness, it might be wise to consider how, in the diet of narratives they encounter from a plethora of sources, they can be helped to experience some that will help them begin the work of understanding their feelings, know that often these are part of the "natural catastrophes of childhood", and believing they can be healed.

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