Families of prisoners in children’s literature

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‘Belonging is...an exploration of the right to be included and the barriers that must be overcome’ IBBY UK/ NCRL conference, 8th November 2014
What children read is important

There is nothing natural about the children’s book scene today; it is a product of historical circumstances, ideology and market forces. Neither are children’s books neutral. We live in a text based society, and the books we give young people to read ... play an important part in acculturating them.

Reynolds (1998:xi)
Parental imprisonment can be one of the most critical life events for families [because] it can disrupt material and family relationships, have negative outcomes for children, and aggravate material and social problems.”

Losel et al( 2012:7)
A subversive, radical book about equality that reflects the author’s ideology

”The possibility of a prompt and rational altruism, the possibility, even the likelihood, of which we would always seek, to urge upon children. “

Inglis (1981:100)

- Exploration of social injustice with links to the real world
- New opportunities offered by the absent ‘perfect’ father and changed circumstances
- Secrets and why some have to be kept
- Individual transformations eg Bobbie
- Conservative forces – happy ending/ reclamation of Bobbie by her daddy/ ambivalence/ a realistic feminist novel of its time?

Noimann (2005) and Foster and Simons (1995)
Some current context

* An estimated 200,000 children have a parent who is sent to prison each year
* No official recording of figures
* No one statutory agency with overview of their needs
* The support needs of offenders’ families continues to be a neglected area of social policy
* Acknowledgement that the stressed and/or fragmented nature of many offenders’ family relationships results in an increased likelihood of inter-generational offending

Source: Action for Prisoners’ Families, 2013
A negative public discourse?

* The ‘undeserving’ poor- are parents responsible for the circumstances the children have to live in?
* Public attitudes towards crime and punishment- guilty by association?
* Bad genes/ runs in families?
* Bad parents get involved with criminal behaviour?
* The criminal spoils other people’s lives so why should we look after their families?
* Costs?

(See Condrey, 2007 and Casey, 2012 )
Stephen, aged 17 is a looked after child (in care since the age of 8), about to make the transition into independent living in a hostel

Father is a repeat offender for a range of violent crimes; a Gulf War veteran; has a transient lifestyle living rough and in hostels; lacking in generosity and reliability eg. p.63; p.184

Mother is a victim of domestic violence and has mental health problems

Elder brother, Selby died aged 17 as a result of glue sniffing

Beast (2006) by Ally Kennan
Stephen

* self-deprecatory: criminal (eg. p.1; p.44; p.137; p.188) poorly educated; indecisive; lacking in trust; defiant towards authority; a dropout; on the cusp of a terrible future like his dad (eg arrest p.102-103)

* more hopeful: caring; empathetic; self controlled; trustworthy; capable of friendship; a resilient survivor
Tiffany, aged 12 becomes a looked after child (firstly in an emergency foster home and then in kinship care) after the arrest and imprisonment of her mother.

Mother is a flamboyant character (p. 18); a single parent who ran away from a happy but dullish home aged 17 seeking adventure and has been involved in criminal activities relating to theft for some time.

Father is absent and unknown to Tiffany.

The discovery of an extended family on Sark.

The reinvention of this family – everyone changes.
Tiffany

* A ‘knowing’ child who understands and is increasingly embarrassed by her mother’s shortcomings eg p8
* Frightened by the arrest p.42
* Likes school; imaginative and practical
* Hopeful p. 81
* Lack of trust/ suspicious
* Experiences bullying p126...
* Angry, disappointed and guilty whilst separated
* Dreads the release
Bog Child (2008) by Siobhan Dowd

* Fergus, aged 18 discovers an Iron Age body in the bog when illegally cutting turf with his uncle Tally
* His elder brother Joe, a complex character, has been arrested for undisclosed terrorist activities and becomes one of the hunger strikers in The Maze prison seeking political prisoner status
* The impact on the whole family of the arrest p87; p113
* The horrors of the hunger strike
* The relevance of history
* The recovery of the family
Fergus

* A hardworking high achiever
* A kind elder brother to two sisters
* Misses Joe all the time
* Tries to save him through criminal activity
* The horror of a prison visit
* The negative impact on his studies
* Determined to escape
* Playing a key part in the solution to ‘Bog child’ identity and saving his brother
Ethan, aged 16 is born into difficult circumstances

His mother has suffered domestic violence from his ‘scumbag’ of a father’ p.35 who rarely appears and is despised by his sons p.49

His elder brother, Alex is part of a gang that is fighting for dominance on a poor housing estate p.14 and is eventually convicted of a violent crime

The impact of living in an relentlessly intimidating environment, p 9

The long stressful wait for the trial

Prison is no solution for the family

The impossibility of escape

Raining Fire (2013) by Alan Gibbons
Ethan

* A talented footballer and ambitious- suffers disappointment p. 102 and p.113
* A good hardworking son who likes to please his mother
* A strong sense of right and wrong
* A guilty son
* Brave: tries to save his brother through criminal activity p.229
* The horror of pre sentence; the trial; the imprisonment and release
* Positive solution through luck rather than good judgement
What do these texts have in common?

* Families affect by imprisonment come in all shapes and sizes
* Secrets and the place of the child in keeping/revealing them
* Dealing with terrible loss and grief
* Imprisonment of a family member changes everyone in the family forever – whatever the crime
* Adults are fallible
* Possibility of redemption through change – often expressed through nature
* Children can provide solutions to complex problems
A convincing illusion of life as we normally think of it... Realistic novelists are often moralists... In talking about a realistic novel, however, we should resist the temptation to discuss it as if it is real life.... The realistic novel attempts to reproduce something of the complexity of life itself’

Peck and Coyle( 1984: 115,116.)
Are happy endings still possible?

All the texts end on a positive and hopeful note, in some ways conforming to real life

* Beast
* Shine
* Bog child
* Raining Fire
Why are books like this important?

“It is the texts that surround us that tell us how to read the world”.
Evans, 1998: 99

“Our stories help sustain and create our society. They help to fashion who we are, and help us to know and feel what is right and what is wrong”.
Corbett, 1993:5
References