

Children in War: The Pursuit of Happiness in Three Children's Books

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What is happiness? What does it mean to be happy? How is happiness achieved? Can such questions ever be answered without a context, be it emotional, social, historical or cultural?

As a genre, children's literature provides a particularly engaging and meaningful context within which to explore the concept and experience of happiness. As children are rarely in control of the means to secure their own happiness – or even to understand it – representations of happiness in texts for children are especially affective and enlightening. Ian Serrailier's *The Silver Sword* (1956), Anne Holm's *I Am David* (1963) and Martia Conlon McKenna's *Safe Harbour* (1996) are three narratives for children that interrogate the possibility of happiness in childhoods disrupted by conflict and war.

Children are not often afforded control of their own happiness. This is especially true in the context of war and thus in these three children's books: Marita Conlon McKenna's *Safe Harbour* (1996), Ian Serrailier's *The Silver Sword* (1986) and Anne Holm's *I Am David* (1965). Childhood is traditionally synonymous with happiness, with innocence; these narratives present the reader with child protagonists who have been denied this traditional happiness, whose innocence has been compromised by traumatic experience. I argue that the treatment of their struggles to survive their disrupted childhoods represents a unique opportunity to interrogate the possibility of happiness and the trauma of displacement in the context of World War II.

Adults control almost every aspect of the lives these children lead; even the ways in which they think about the war and their place in it. They exist within the ideology of war even as they struggle to survive its consequences and assert themselves as independent figures capable of taking responsibility for their own happiness. War becomes the controlling ideology which governs the narrative of their lives, displacing them from their homes and relocating the possibility of

future happiness. The adults' voices in these texts change when they address the child protagonists; there are stories that the children are not permitted to hear, truths that are edited for their consumption. In *The Silver Sword* (1959) the Balicki children are told to be patient, that their mother will return – but she does not and they must learn to fend for themselves in her absence and in the ruined landscape of Warsaw, torn apart by World War II. In *I Am David*, David, the central protagonist, escapes from a concentration camp in an unnamed Eastern European country in order to survive, in order to live – but he must learn to be a child before he can learn to be happy. Having been taken in by an affluent family, he realises just how different he is from other boys and girls. He writes a letter to tell Maria's parents that children must be told everything; they must not be denied the information that allows them to create and shape their own identities. In *Safe Harbour* (1996), a text set in wartime London at the height of the Blitz, it is clear that the nurse in her mother's ward is not telling Sophie the full extent of her condition following the bombing of their home; the truth is being parsed, diluted, abridged. The children in these texts do not achieve happiness by surviving their traumatic childhoods. In fact, I argue that these children do not achieve happiness at all; rather, through their experiences, they gain knowledge, insight and the capacity to believe in the *possibility* of happiness in the future. There are no happy endings in these texts, only the reality of life after trauma and war.

The pursuit of happiness in the midst of war often becomes a physical, emotional and spiritual quest; the journey out of conflicted zones or spaces towards a promised land where happiness is possible and families will be restored is a common theme in each of the texts this article discusses. In these texts the reader is presented with child figures whose lives have been fundamentally altered by the outbreak of war. In each narrative, the children struggle to assert their agency and independence in a world dominated by adults who are, to all intents and purposes, seeking to destroy it. The pursuit of happiness in the context of war is linked to the restoration of the family unit and the preservation of a childhood which memorializes the experience of happiness.

Within what Ann Alston calls the 'living reality' (1) of the family unit, the sustained experience of happiness is often linked to parental figures; to their constant, stable and loving presence in the life of the child and the space of the home. But when parents leave or are taken away, the resulting absence negates the safety and security of the homes. The children who are left behind are suddenly vulnerable to the outside world and to the forces and consequences of war. Their childhoods are threatened. In the space between the desolation of the home and the eventual restoration of the family, these children must actively pursue their own happiness; they must become responsible for their own survival. In leaving the homes which have been destroyed, these children embark on adventures; happiness becomes the goal of a journey which links self-development and the formation of identity to the survival of childhoods fundamentally damaged by war (Wadley 1983).

Fear of the unknown and the unknowable results in much of the anxiety that child characters experience when they contemplate the future (Byrnes, 1995). The children in these texts each have different methods of coping with the future and with the instability war causes in their lives. If Bronia, the youngest child in *The Silver Sword*, draws in order to preserve her memories, Sophie, the central figure in *Safe Harbour*, sings in order to forget the horror of the war as it worsens around her. Ruth, Bronia's older sister, finds emotional and spiritual comfort in the story of David in the lions' den; she sees the biblical episode as a parable for her family's situation and in the

midst of their suffering takes hope from it. As Anne Holm's David slowly learns how to live after life in a prison camp, he begins to draw sustenance from the beauty of the landscape he journeys through, indeed from the existence of beauty itself. David's is a journey into recovery, a movement away from the traumatic experience of the prison camp that was once his home and towards the possibility of happiness. In each text, the children try to exert control over certain aspects of their lives; Ruth and Sophie take charge of their younger siblings, David draws strength from Johannes' idea that he alone controls his internal self, his identity. Jan, the orphan Ruth embraces into her traumatised family, focuses on protecting the silver sword, the symbol of the family's future, while Edek, the only Balicki boy, worries about providing for them, against the odds. In exerting these small amounts of control in the chaos of war, the children enable themselves to move through a world that is itself out of control.

In each narrative, there is a moment when innocence is lost and the experience of war intrudes into a childhood that is fundamentally altered. In these moments and their aftermaths, the children in these texts become irrevocably aware of their vulnerability in the world. In these moments of realisation they come to understand that they will not be rescued and that it is only by accepting the responsibilities of adulthood that they can in some way hope to preserve the memory of their childhoods.

Marita Conlon McKenna's *Safe Harbour* (1996) is the story of Sophie and Hugh, siblings who are evacuated out of wartime London to neutral Ireland when their mother is hurt during an air raid. Removed from their loving home into the strangeness of a new country and a new relationship with the grandfather they barely know, the children must re-negotiate their notions of selfhood and happiness. In the moments before she finds her injured mother in their back garden, Sophie becomes aware of the still, strange feeling of an empty house. It is this awareness that signals the end of her childhood as she has known it and of the happiness that she has associated with her family home. In this moment, Sophie's happiness is captured within an image of the house as it once was, even as it suddenly ceases to be a home and is transformed instead into a ruined space, made unsafe by war. When Sophie finds her mother, it seems, to all intents and purposes that nothing is wrong – except for the dark stain of blood on the path under her. This dark stain under her mother's body becomes a physical sign of violence within the text and of the vulnerability of Sophie and Hugh's childhoods: in war, childhood ceases to be a sacred, protected state and becomes vulnerable to the violence and senselessness that conflict engenders.

Anne Holm's David has no memory of happiness. He has, arguably, no experience of childhood; his time in an Eastern European prison camp is the only existence he has ever known. When he escapes and makes the decision to live, he encounters many different figures in his journey across the European landscape and from each learns more about the ways in which happiness can be experienced. He saves a little girl called Maria from a fire and his sojourn with her family is especially enlightening for him. His time with Maria and her brothers throws his own experiences into sharp relief, and he suddenly becomes keenly and painfully aware of the childhood that he has been denied. Though his body is that of a child, he has seen so much in life that he no longer cares to go on living. The children's mother does not understand him because she realises that he is not a child like her own. She does not want Maria's innocent, carefree childhood to be spoiled by the knowledge David has learned through his experiences in the camp. He knows the miseries and sorrows of an adult world because in many ways, emotionally at least, David is not a child; he

is an adult, bound to be an observer and never a participant, bound never to experience a childhood like Maria's.

This newfound awareness of their vulnerability and isolation weighs heavily on each of the children in these texts. Sophie can no longer engage in the pretending game she and Hugh would play when they were sick or bored or scared. As she watches Hugh pretending to be somewhere else, enjoying the innocence of his childlike perception of the world, she realises that she herself cannot imagine anything beyond her present circumstances. She wonders if she is getting too old for the game. The freedoms of childhood are slowly being stripped away from Sophie as the experience of war closes in on her. Ruth Balicki experiences a similar realisation in *The Silver Sword*, the story of three Polish children and their epic journey to be reunited with their mother and father following the collapse of Warsaw during World War II. On a train with Bronia, as the little girl lies sleeping and dreaming on her lap, Ruth becomes suddenly and permanently aware that she herself is no longer a child; that she can no longer be a child who believes in the power of fairytales and happy endings. In assuming responsibility for her family's future happiness she must sacrifice her own childhood. That sacrifice becomes part of the happiness she will experience when her family is restored. The children's happiness, in many ways, depends on Ruth and on her capacity to fulfil the role of mother for them. Various adult figures she encounters in the narrative describe her as serene, self-assured and possessed with a sense of purpose and moral authority. If Ruth is no longer a child in emotional terms, she is not yet an adult either; she exists – in a world that has been utterly changed by the war – in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Hers is a heightened and charged experience of childhood; in the chaos of the war, when all identities are in transition, are shifting and inconstant, she has created a new meaning within the sphere of childhood; she has redefined what it means to be a child.

The various responses the children express towards the idea of war raises the question of whether or not they are capable of experiencing happiness in the aftermath of the traumatic rupture of their childhood. Sophie hates the war with the clarity of a child's perspective; it has changed everything, turned her world upside down and made the world around her unreliable and unstable. Even her home is no longer her home; even her mother has been changed by the violent impact of the conflict. She muses that grownups have forgotten what it means to be a child; the knowledge of knowing that one cannot control the events of one's life and the fear that creates at the heart of the childhood experience. Sophie is scared because everything is changing. Jan hates the war with the same single-minded clarity; he condemns all soldiers, irrespective of their circumstances. David hates the way a grown man hates, with the conviction of experience. He believes his hatred is an appropriate and righteous response to the violence Carlos displays towards him; he does not appreciate that Carlos is a child because he does not appreciate – or even understand – that he is a child himself. For David, such actions are final, their consequences irreversible, unforgivable. The experience of war teaches the children how to hate; the happiness they are striving for becomes, in this context, a source of rehabilitation.

Bronia, as the youngest of the Balicki family, remains a child within the text. She sees Ruth as her mother and takes comfort in her assurances. She has the largest capacity for happiness of all of the children, perhaps because she herself has not been as traumatized by the conflict; she has not been forced to grow up; rather she has become a child of the war. Ruth rarely desponds throughout the text. Her faith, symbolized in her love of the Old Testament story of David in the lions' den,

sustains her, not least because of the associations it holds for her of her mother and of past happiness. She survives because she assumes the role of mother and leader of the family. Though she is initially slow to adapt herself to the new life they must lead, she realises that she can make sure that Bronia is shielded from the experience of war. By investing in her little sister's happiness, Ruth creates the possibility of a future for herself and the other children. When Edek tells the story of his ordeal riding in the undercarriage of the truck, Ruth takes his hand again and clasps it as though she means to never let it go again. She tells her brother that nothing like this must ever happen to him again. But crucially she does not categorically say that nothing like that *will* ever happen to him again; this is the adult awareness of their vulnerability in the world that Ruth has had to shoulder. It is this adult awareness that traumatizes her childhood and forces her to grow up so quickly.

David responds to the war by choosing to live. When he escapes from the camp, David exists very much outside his own life, even outside the possession of his own body. In the quiet nights, he can hear a whimpering sound; it is only later that he realises the sound must have been coming from him. His journey into happiness becomes a journey into himself, into a possession of his life and his freedom. Initially he will not even allow himself to think; survival in the camp means living at a distance from oneself, from one's mind and body. David is close to death for much of the narrative. The Italian sailor he encounters cannot shake off the feeling that the little boy in front of him is going to die. He has lived with an awareness of his own death for much of his childhood; it is only as his journey progresses, as he moves deeper into his life and further from the barren periphery of his previous existence that he begins to be affected by the landscape and the people he encounters. Standing on a mountainside, gazing at the colours of the landscape around him, he discovers that he is crying. He has lived independently of his body for so long that he does not recognize his own reactions, his own urges and desires. Experiencing the beauty of the world for the first time, he realises that he does not want to die. More than that, he knows he wants to live. This is when David begins to fully inhabit his body and his own existence. He looks 'again and again upon the blueness of the sea' (Holm 30) and it is in this act, in this looking and looking *again* that he begins the process of living, the movement towards eventual happiness.

Hugh learns how to be happy again in Ireland, living in the moment, playing in the safety of a neutral space; his face loses the frightened, tense look that Sophie recognizes from the faces of the children at home in war-torn London. As the younger of the two children he does not develop the same awareness of the gravity of their situation as Sophie does. He remains, like Bronia, in a dream world, removed from the total reality of the war. As such, his childhood can be rehabilitated; memory for him does not hold the same primacy that it does for Sophie. She does not want to forget. For Sophie – and for the other children as well – surviving the way becomes a matter of remembering, of constantly reaffirming the existence of a former life. It is only when Sophie articulates her fear, in the moment when her grandfather takes her in his arms and physically holds her that she begins to come to terms with the effect the war has had on her childhood. She is a child who knows that she is no longer child, that she can never be the same little girl she was before the war. She is aware of the 'awful sadness of war' (Conlon McKenna 128); she has experienced it herself and she has realised that the idea of home will now forever be associated with the conflict that destroyed it. Happiness then is founded on the acknowledgement of trauma and on the belief that that trauma can be healed.

In each of the texts, in the face of the chaos created by the war, happiness becomes a matter of memory, a feeling and an experience to be preserved. Life becomes a matter of survival until such a time as happiness becomes possible again. In *Safe Harbour* (1996), Hugh and Sophie exist outside of the normal course of life in Ireland; they live in a house that is a home but is not their home. When Sophie finds her father's carved initials during a game of hide and seek it comforts her to think of him as a child, hiding as she is hiding now. This moment speaks to the central role memory plays in war when the preservation of happiness and childhood is dependent on the ability to memorialize and remember them. The game of hide and seek becomes more than just a game; it transcends the limitations of time and the trauma of war; in connecting the experiences of Sophie and her father, it strengthens and re-affirms the power of the childhood experience and the primacy of memory.

That same primacy of memory runs throughout *The Silver Sword*. Memory forms a bond that binds the Balicki children – and later Jan – together. They survive precisely because they never cease to think of themselves and to act as anything but a family. The promise or goal of happiness lies in maintaining the roles and structures that governed their lives before the war; the family unit contains within it the memory and the promise of happiness. Survival becomes an investment in that future happiness, in the belief that the sanctity of the family unit will be restored. Survival in itself becomes a memorial; survival is based on the memory of happiness, on the faith that it will be attained again. Survival in the absence of happiness becomes the pursuit of a future founded on memory. In the wilderness of the post-war landscape, people still manage to go on living.

Home, as both an emotional and a physical space, is often a 'privileged place' (Clausen 143) in children's literature. All these texts conclude with a homecoming of sorts; the children are restored to their rightful places at the centre of a loving family unit, in a series of homes that have been made safe and secure, often by the parents they have been separated from. In these reunions the children's capacity for happiness even in the face of trauma is vindicated and the link between living in a home and belonging 'to a given place' (Norberg-Schulz, 12) is re-established. The moment Ruth is reunited with her father and mother is infused with a happiness that the text's narrator cannot describe. The physical act of moving from her father's arms into her mother's embrace become an image within the text of the bond between child and parent, of the love and happiness that each have invested in the other. Like Edek, her mother bears the marks of her suffering on her face but Ruth sees only the joy and happiness there; this is the restorative power of the love that has bound the family together, despite the distances and circumstances that have separated them for so long.

For the entirety of their parents' absence, Ruth has been self-sacrificing and brave; she has existed in a kind of temporary adulthood, undertaking responsibility not only for her own happiness but for the happiness of her family. Her childhood has also been lost – she has grown up too quickly. Ruth's recovery into happiness involves her acceptance of that loss, of moving beyond the traumatization of her childhood experience and allowing the prospect of happiness to restore her faith in the world. The international children's village in the Swiss mountains becomes a place where the orphaned and abandoned children can learn to forget the misery of war, to become children again; to remember how to be happy. This is a real home where their minds and bodies can be healed. The Balicki family's story ends – initially at least – in the utter happiness of reunion. But they must learn once again how to be happy together; they recover gradually into happiness

as we realise that the reunion and the restoration of the family is only the foundation in the process of healing they must work through together.

Unlike the other children in these texts, David does not have the memory of happiness to sustain him through his journey; he does not expect to be happy because he has never been happy before. He does not even expect to survive when he leaves the camp; life for him becomes a continuous present. He does not know how to project himself into a future, how to imagine himself being happy.

The first time David experiences happiness, the first time he smiles, is when he looks into Maria's face. She is the external influence that allows him to access the feeling of happiness. Alone, when he tries to smile, he finds he cannot. Maria is the only person who can make him smile. She comes to personify the idea of happiness for him. Johannes taught him that joy passes but happiness never completely disappears; here, as in the other texts, the link between happiness and memory is established as fundamentally important. Happiness and the memory of happiness can be the same thing, and it is the memory of his time with Maria that allows David to perceive the difference between happiness and unhappiness, between longing and fulfilment.

Having left the family, David becomes unhappy; he recognizes now that he was happy with Maria at least. Everything he encounters looks the same as before and yet is somehow different. He has been deeply affected by his time in the house; he lived for a time in a home that was safe and filled with love. Once more, he finds himself alone and suddenly – for the first time – homeless. He wishes that he had never entered the house because there he has seen what he can never have, what he can never be a part of. In the camp, Johannes warned the other men not to tell David too many stories of the outside world; what he had no knowledge of, he could not miss. Now he realises that he does not belong anywhere. Now he is unhappy because he has known, however briefly, what it is to be happy.

Senora Bang tells David that all suffering has an end, if one can only wait long enough. But for David it is not a matter of waiting, it is a matter of enduring, of surviving, of learning to live through the sorrow. His childhood has been founded on sorrow, on suffering; he must grow into happiness, using his memory of sorrow to augment his experience of happiness, of belonging. Indeed, happiness becomes contingent on belonging; he is determined not to die now because there is a possibility of a future available to him; a place where he belongs and a mother to love him. He sees a tree in full bloom and it reminds him of Maria, the little girl who looks like a flower. Here and in this moment, it is the memory of happiness that sustains him. David smiles because he has known happiness and because he might know it again; it is good to be alive, for the memory, the experience and the possibility of happiness.

The narrative ends – as do the others discussed here – in a homecoming. David's mother greets him with an affirmation that he is her son David. His journey has ended in the same manner in which it began; with an affirmation that he is David, that he is a child who has a right to be free and to be happy.

What then does happiness mean in the context, experience and aftermath of war? In each of these texts, childhood is disrupted or even destroyed by the consequences and chaos of war. Home and happiness are the twin goals of the journeys the children embark on. The narratives are

resolved only when those goals are attained; when David reaches his mother's house; when Sophie begins to think of her grandfather's house as her home; when the Balicki children are welcomed into the home their parents have made for them. Seemingly, happiness is achieved with the restoration – or re-creation – of the family; happiness is apparently secured when the children come home. Life, for all the children in these texts, becomes a matter of adapting to existence in a world where the concepts of home, family, childhood and even happiness have been fundamentally compromised. Surviving a childhood traumatized by war means achieving a balance between remembering past happiness and believing in the possibility of future happiness. But what of the experience of happiness in the present? Emerging from the trauma of the past and faced with the uncertainty of the future, can these children be happy? Or is happiness, in this context, a process rather than an achievement? An ongoing dialectic between forgetting, remembering and *being*? Insofar as these three narratives can be seen as representative examples of "war literature" for children, the definitions of happiness they offer are strikingly similar. When childhoods are disrupted by war, the experience of happiness – or the parameters of its meaning – is compromised. What these narratives communicate is the notion that after trauma, it is the *potential* for happiness that remains to be recovered and regained, rather than the experience of it. Though the child protagonists in these texts are eventually restored to safety and to the security and love of reunited family units, their homecomings do not secure happiness for them. They must learn to be happy again. These are the stories of children who must think and act more like adults than children, of children who must grow up before their time. War makes adults out of the child figures in these texts; they are defined by their experiences as children who have seen and known too much, as children who can be children no longer.

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