Children's books reflect harsh reality
Abandonment, alienation and homelessness are increasingly the themes covered in modern literature for children

There was no place like home for Dorothy in the Wonderful Wizard of Oz and Max returned to his "still warm" dinner in the classic Maurice Sendak tale, Where the Wild Things Are. But an analysis of award-winning children's literature has identified a dramatic change in the stories being told to young people today, where there is no yellow brick road to follow, the wild things are in the child's real home and there are no hot meals. Modern books are more likely to feature children who are abandoned, alienated and have no home to return to, than characters who voluntarily set off on adventures, according to Professor Kathy Short, president of the International Board of Books for Young People.

"For these children, childhood is not the happy, carefree time it is 'supposed' to be," said Short. "Children don't leave home on a lark. They are thrust out. These children are not wild things. They are too busy taking care of their troubled parents to have time to follow a rabbit down a hole; too frightened of abuse to trust the Tinman, and too fearful to set out on an adventure for fear that their unreliable parent might not be there when they return.

"These children have been caught in the crossfire of the gender, race, class and culture clashes between adults," she added. "Like all people in the postmodern world, children are confronted with multiple competing truths and a lack of absolutes."

In Goodbye Yellow Brick Road: Challenging the Mythology of Home in Children's Literature, published in the latest edition of the academic journal: Children's Literature in Education, Short and her co-author, Professor Melissa Wilson, analysed prize-winning books from 2003 to 2007 from the Carnegie Award in the UK, Newbery Medal in the US and Books of the Year Award in Australia.

Alice discovered her Wonderland when she chose to follow the rabbit into its warren. But she returned home at the end of her adventures, when she chose to wake up. But instead of having a home to return to and a loving parent to protect them – even if an evil step-parent temporarily disrupted that balance, as in Hansel and Gretel, or Snow White – children in modern tales come from failed homes and have no adult refuge. Parents are entirely absent – as in Andy Mulligan's Trash – or are ineffective, amoral or confusing, as in Ali Lewis's Everybody Jam. At best, adults in modern children's books were found to be loving but traumatised – as in Patrick Ness's A Monster Calls or Annabel Pitcher's My Sister Lives on the Mantlepiece.

The child often chooses to take on the adult role, by returning to their helpless parent and trying to save them by bringing them to a new home, which is the theme in Ruta Sepetys's Between Shades of Grey.
Short found the new "adultification" of children is matched in modern texts by the "childification" of adults: "This pattern, called a postmodern metaplot, begins with the child being abandoned, rather than the child leaving the home," she said. "The child's journey is to construct a new home. Ultimately, their postmodern journey ends with very modern ideal of the child leading the adults to a hopeful ending, a home."

Wilson, assistant professor at the University of Texas, said modern children's literature revealed a deep anxiety about childhood on the part of authors who wrote the books and parents who buy them. The "role of children's literature in the Western world generally does not serve reality," she said. "It serves the need of adults." "This break in modern metaphor is important as it may speak to a change in childhood and in what kinds of childhoods are being offered to children by adult authors," she added. "Children's books are a site where children's selves are revealed and offer adults an excellent place to rethink their own childhoods and childhood as it is happening now.

"The children in these novels have become the hope that will lead us, the readers and adults, to a better place," she said. "The child is the modern figure in the postmodern mess, the scientific, rational and reactionary figure."

Steven Butler, who was shortlisted for the Roald Dahl funny prize for The Wrong Pong – about a boy who leaves behind his selfish, ineffective parents for a new family of trolls – agreed.

"There are definitely more of these books now because the authors blossoming into writers now are the Roald Dahl generation," he said. "It's completely acceptable to us to write in this macabre, horrific and exciting way."

But Francesca Simon, author of Horrid Henry and The Sleeping Army, was more sceptical. "In these more protective times, a parent would get social services called on them if they let their child roam about, like Tom Sawyer's did, or the children in Swallows and Amazons. "The challenge in children's books is to get the parents out of the way," she added. "This method is just a variation on a theme. It's not a plot issue; it's a technical issue."

Written by Amelia Hill for The Guardian
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