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Abstract

The children's books published about 9/11 provide an opportunity to explore pre-existing and shifting discourses on a range of subjectivities. This paper explores the ways in which the heroic identity in particular is present in some of these texts, continuing a liberal humanism found throughout children's literature, and constructing an understanding of the events which both continues familiar heroic narratives and shapes them in new ways.

Tugging on Superman's Cape: Heroism in Children's Literature Post 9/11

But then on September 11, 2001 something so huge and horrible happened that the whole world shook.

(Kelman, 2002, p.24)

On September 12th, the very day after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, an issue of Superman hit the stands. This issue showed an imaginary image of twin sky towers in flames after an alien attack. The staff of DC Comics, working overtime, quickly offered refunds to retailers who wanted to return the DC Comics' issues. "We regret the misfortune and untimely concurrence in a recent story line", spokeswoman Peggy Burns said. "[It] was shipped prior to the horrific attack on America. Obviously, who would have predicted something like this?" (Colton, 2001, p.D.02). DC Comics apparently had 'morale-boosting' meetings after the attacks and Burns said at that time it was too early to say if the terror attacks would lead to any changes in story lines.

Since September 11, world events continue to change in ways we can only begin to anticipate. So too the shifts we see in children's literature are unfolding and in constant revision. The idea that post 9/11 the world will never be the same again has become commonplace and part of a now taken-for-granted discourse. The shifts, however, are slippery. They may be subtle. They may be continuations of cultural attitudes that existed prior to 9/11. Things may not superficially appear to have shifted at all. Or the shifts may be dramatic. Whether we can identify that the world has *really* changed (whatever might be meant by *that*), 9/11 immediately became, as Baudrillard (2002, p.4) claims, the *absolute* event, "the 'mother' of all events". What seems undisputable, however, is that children's literature as a site of societal values, and a place where cultural identity lives, is always a contested space.

The central purpose of this paper is to understand any shift in the construction of heroic cultural identity in particular as evidenced in children's literature since 9/11. This question derives its purpose and logic from the understanding that children's literature both influences and is influenced by historical events (Hillman, 1999). Saxby (1993, p.416) asserts, for instance, that "children's books, perhaps more than any other print media, reflect social change". The ideologies within children's literature (Stephens, 1992; Hollindale, 1988) parallel social movements, and are always and inevitably contested, revised and changed alongside historical moments. Despite the fact that it is sometimes not until the next generation of adult writers that we are able to see the influence of historical events on the text (as these authors look backwards to their own childhoods) (Scutter, 1999), the appearance of 9/11 in children's texts as a real or theoretical moment of change is worthy of examination as the ways in which heroism is played out in these texts.

Why 'heroic' inquiry?

Despite claims about the death of the Grand Narrative (Lyotard, 1989) and the challenges to unilinear history (Appignanesi and Garrett, 1995), the American media in particular sustains the illusion that 9/11 is a pivotal moment of change and a watershed moment in history. This thinking alone makes it timely to use 9/11 as a starting date for an exploration of shifting ideologies, and a moment in time when subjectivities may be looked at anew. It also provides an interesting tension: on the one hand, a postmodern scepticism that things have changed as much as is claimed, and on the other, an unusual opportunity to look freshly at new material, produced in the context of change (whether real or imagined).

An investigation of children's literature post 9/11 also provides a unique opportunity to take the 'ideological temperature' of a culture. Children's literature is highly significant both in its cultural transparency (in its intent to instruct and induct children into the culture) and in its obscurity (in making the complex simple enough for children, and from sometimes intentionally shying away from difficult things). Importantly, children's literature provides a useful choice of text to investigate, in this instance because of its relatively rapid production since 9/11. For instance, within days of 9/11 student writing and poetry began to appear on the web and authors began to speak about their sense of obligation to write for children about 9/11 (eg Park, 2002). By 2004 at least 50 books (non-fiction, fiction and poetry) had been published for children about 9/11 (see <http://wtckidsbooks.tripod.com/wtc/htm> as just one example of a source listing children's books about 9/11). Moreover, an analysis of books for children is significant because contemporary children will construct their memory of 9/11 and their own cultural practices and judgments out of these texts.

This paper begins with a brief overview of some of the ways in which books for children construct identity. Next, it discusses some of the books for children which have been written since 9/11. What then follows is a brief outline of deconstruction as the analytic tool used in this project. Here, some of the problems associated with doing this investigation will be explored.

The second section of this paper will probe some of the heroic subjects of a very few selected texts, written about 9/11 for young people. These are *Bravemole* (Jonell, 2001), and a set of DC Comics written about 9/11 (Kahn, 2002; Levitz, 2002) as examples for texts that explicitly put heroism at the forefront. These examples of children's cultural texts will be deconstructed in terms of the heroic identities depicted within them. Put another way, the analysis will show how power and knowledge are legitimised and privileged by these 9/11 stories as heroic narratives.

Children's literature and identity formation

Understanding the performative nature of children's narrative fiction (Stephens, 2003) and its role in the social construction of identity formation can serve as a reminder that the discourses in these texts, as in all texts, are inherently "ideological" (Gee, 1992). Thus children's literature needs to be examined not merely on the basis of its aesthetic literary qualities, but in an effort to understand the ways these texts work on and are worked upon by their readers. It has been suggested that children's literature, because of its pedagogical and political nature, can provide a microcosmic look at how discourses emerge subject to ongoing contestation, revision and change as a precise effect of world events (Hollindale, 1988, Stephens, 1992), although this is, of course, impossible to say conclusively. Nonetheless, this supposition is especially relevant in a post-9/11 context because of the assertion by academics (Giroux, 2002), literary authors (Kineally, 2002) and the popular press (for example, Eccleston, 2002; Sullivan, 2002) that the world has changed fundamentally in significant ways. Once again, Jones (2003, p.1) claims that "the term 'September 11 is now far more than a date. "Since September 11," we say, or "prior to September 11", or "in the wake of September 11".

Literature for children is significant in what it can reveal about the changing world and also in the way it constructs this changing world. Children's literature is understood as having the multiple purposes of entertaining as well as instructing and informing, or rephrased, serving the purpose of developing children's intellectual, moral and "personality" development (Temple et al., 1998). As such, it is productive: constructing and reconstructing cultural ideals,

values, identities and ‘ideologies’, which are “constructed in language as contextualized social discourse” (Threadgold, 1986, p.29). It serves the purpose of regulating children’s thoughts and their actions, an “agent of social engineering” (Hunt, 2001, p.13). Thus such texts function as persuasive in numerous ways, and are, as one aspect of a cultural relationship with the world, identity forming. It is the understanding of literature as a social practice that is at the same time an identity politics that drives this research. That is to say, the texts are discursively organized in ways that achieve certain power effects, and, in effect, write 9/11 into existenceⁱ.

There is a large body of work which explores the historical role literature has played in informing, maintaining and even subverting identity in children. According to Hunt (2001) the study of children’s books involves very large numbers of texts with massive cultural influence. Children’s literature both responds to changes in social and political climates, and, at the same time, contributes to such changes in multiple ways.

One of these ways is the pedagogical nature of children’s literature which is unique amongst literature, with its historically didactic intent (Jacobs and Tunnell, 1996; Hillman, 1999; Collins, 2002; Neubauer, 2001 amongst others). An examination of the literature post 9/11 allows for a look at a broader range of sociocultural identities based on shifting knowledges and understandings.

Additionally, the authors of children’s literature often express a civic responsibility to inform their readers about the world as they perceive it. Julian Murphett (2003, p.2) sees the implication of this position thus: “those who have access to knowledge and *can write* might have a responsibility to do so”. Other writers for children, including Anglo-American young adult fiction author Joyce Maynard (2003) and the Arab-American children’s poet Naomi Nye (2002), have also expressed a compulsion to respond to 9/11. Paul Levitz (2002) in his introduction to the two volume publication on 9-11 produced by comic book writers and illustrators identifies this same sense of urgency. The perceived social responsibility of children’s authors is often raised. In an article lamenting writers’ silences on political issues, academic Philip Neilsen (2003, p.7) voiced his fantasy:

At a press conference, J.K. Rowling calls on the US to co-operate with the United Nations... I can see the headlines – “Harry Potter speaks out”. And the next day – “I’ve been a dumb muggle, says President: policy changes promised”. Well, one can dream”.

What these authors appear to share is a conviction that writers should meet their historical responsibility in the education of their young readers.

September 11 and literature

There is no doubt about the level of interest and the speed of uptake on the part of librarians, publishers and children's writers in 'responding' to 9/11 and subsequently, events of terrorism and war. For instance, one of the leading Canadian children's book publishers, announced on its web page soon after 9/11:

Childhood is changing and the world we live in faces crises unknown to previous generations. Many children live with adults who despair over these difficulties and struggle to cope. It takes great energy and faith to help children evolve into confident, capable adults. The books published by Annick Press mirror reality honestly, reassure and support, and build self-esteem. They share fantasy and stimulate imagination, while encouraging children to trust their own judgment and abilities. They try to give children faith in their own and the world's survival.

(Annick Press, 2002)

This seemingly alarmist call for child-protection capitalises on immediate fears post 9/11, but also continues a frequent crisis narrative of childhood (Beck, 1992; Ungar, 2002).

Immediately after 9/11, expositions and editorials began to emerge, imagining the kind of impact the events were going to have on literature in the West. A variety of texts for children appeared in the months after the attacks. These included short fiction by children's authors, such as *The Book of Hope* (Harwayne, 2002), books of children's artwork such as *The Day our World Changed: Children's Art of 9/11* (Goodman and Fahnestock, 2002) and quantities of text on the internet (children's recounts and poetry, in particular). Soon afterwards, picture books began to appear, for example, the allegorical *Bravemole* (Jonell, 2002). Paralleling this literature, which dealt directly with 9/11, was the publication (or re-publication and rapid sequelling) of a group of books that seemed timely, in particular, books exposing the oppression of Islamic girls and women (Deborah Ellis's *Parvana* and *Parvana's Journey*, Latifa's *My Forbidden Face*) and non-fiction which may be related to 9/11. These include the publication in 2002 of *Saladin: Noble Prince of Islam* (Stanley, 2002), as well as several books for young adults about terrorism, including the British publication *Terrorism* (Hibbert,

2002) One of the first young adult books to emerge after 9/11 which mentioned the ‘Twin Towers’ event directly, was the Australian young adult text *girl x-recreated* (Rowe, 2001), the fictional email correspondence of a group of teenagers. In the midst of the writing of the book, 9/11 ‘happened’, disrupting the text and changing its tone. In 2002, DC Comics published a two volume edition of their artists and writers responding to 9-11. The audience for these texts are both young adults and the adult aficionados of comic books. Now, in 2004, we see the emergence of other books as well, such as those intended for young adults, such as Maynard’s (2003) *The Usual Rules*ⁱⁱ,

The work, then, is to perform an investigation of these works in terms of their politicised and politicising agendas, with a particular interest, in this paper, in the construction of heroic identities, as just one available subjectivity.

Probing the Texts (1): a deconstructive approach

This research project uses deconstruction as an approach to interrogate the ideological nature of heroes in a few children’s texts produced about 9/11. It is framed by the critical theory identified by Perry Nodelman (2003) as ‘new historicism’, a blend of literary practices that emerge from deconstruction, and political and cultural practices.

We are not far from 9/11. In the few years that have passed, many attempts have been made to understand the ways in which the world has consequently changed, and the lessons that are to be learned from the events. Postmodernism, however, blurs the difference between fact and fiction, without a need to identify a ‘truth’. If we understand the signifier to be the words in a text (at least in the case of this text- based study) which we invest with meaning (Belsey, 2002, p. 114), then a poststructuralist approach enables a troubling of versions of 9/11, presented as positions of truth in these texts. As Catherine Belsey (2002) reminds us, “the most familiar notion of truth is the idea that what we say corresponds to the actual state of affairs. But how, independent of the signifier, can we ascertain the state of affairs itself?” (p. 70). Poststructuralism enables a way to look at systems of meaning and relations of power and to look at the ways the subject of 9/11 has been produced ‘outside itself’ (Belsey, 2002, p. 73), as both continuing and disrupting pre-existing ideas and ideologies.

The conceptual framework of this paper comes from a body of contemporary theorizing regarding ideology in children's literature and the broader discourses of subjectivities. Writers such as Henry Giroux (2002), Edward Said (2002), Michael Apple (2002) and Stanley Fish (2002), for instance, have now responded to an event which appears to be signalling a political and social shift in Western thought. Such writers are also contributing to the thinking around 9/11, suggesting the ways in which poststructuralism can explore the Western world in a post 9/11 context.

Cultural theory also contributes to a socio-political critique of the ways in which events are viewed through the lens of culture, and how people represent and tell stories about the world in which they live (Hall, 1997). Thus, through its application of cultural theory, this study of children's literature post 9/11 enables an unpacking of the ways in which constructions of heroic identity emerge in new books for children. A close deconstructive examination of binaries in children's literature post 9/11 will be useful in furthering an understanding of discursive continuities and shifts. This paper is concerned with a deconstructive approach: that of looking at the text and its referents, and the bond between the signifier and the signified.

A significant volume of the literary criticism of children's literature employs critical theory in its analysis. Two of its main concerns are the role literature plays in our perception of culture and knowledge, and how literary themes are grounded in history (Bradford, 2001). In particular, the marriage of literary criticism and critical theory has created the method of reading known as 'deconstruction', a philosophy attributed to Jacques Derrida, and applied to popular literature by such theorists as Diane Elam and Catherine Belsey. The ways in which these authors have demonstrated how deconstruction may be applied is especially useful to this project. Various examinations of ideologies in children's literature (Dorfman, 1983; Bradford, 2001; Stephens, 1992; McGillis, 2002) would also suggest the appropriateness of a deconstructive approach to analysing children's fiction, in that it opens the door to asking political-ethical questions of the texts (Bradford, 2001, p. 3; Scutter, 1999).

Deconstruction as literary analysis is understood by Elam (1994, pp.4-11) to be a philosophy or a textual strategy, rather than a method, of reading literature in its relationship to other forces, such as historical moments. These assumptions underpin the conceptual work of this analysis. According to Elam (1994) and Belsey (2002), deconstruction involves:

- Literary analysis as an understanding of binary oppositions, for example the ways in which the meaning of a text depends on a familiarity with its antithesis;
- A political and ethical agenda, and a way to explore the tensions within a text and an exploration of the ways some terms may be valued and others found wanting; for instance the privileging of particular views over others;
- A refusal to privilege the answer over the question: a refusal to make sweeping statements about ‘meaning’ of texts and as such recognizes diversity of meaning and the plurality of identity;
- An understanding that all texts are mediated by cultural systems, which allows for an intertextual reading and lends itself well to interdisciplinary studies, such as post colonialism or feminism;
- Suspicion of a universal truth; a refusal to essentialise which enables one to explore rather than come up with definitive answers;
- A separation of the goals of an author from the text itself, with an understanding that the subject is constituted outside the author and the reader.

Belsey’s (2002) explanation of the differences between traditional literary critique and deconstruction also clarifies the goals of this paper, and the larger study of children’s literature post 9/11. In the case of deconstruction, the purpose is not to find the weaknesses of the arguments of the text, and not to persuade the reader that one text is better than the next. Instead, deconstruction points to oppositions within the text. Mansfield (2000) explains this as a genealogical rather than a metaphysical approach. It does not look for the real, imagined or desired one truth (in this paper an ultimate answer to what has happened to the heroic subject in children’s literature post 9/11) but is instead engaged in tracing the development of the topic, compiling a picture.

There is a substantial body of work which uses deconstruction in its critical textual analysis of children’s literatureⁱⁱⁱ. Through deconstruction of the chosen texts, the ways in which signifiers are invested with meaning may be explored more thoroughly.

Probing the Texts (2): Complications

In seeking to come to terms with certain opportunities and limitations inherent to such a study, some key issues emerge.

Firstly, since the events of 9/11, 2001 the Western world finds itself in a period of rapid historical change. Immediately after 9/11 the destruction of the Twin Towers and parts of The Pentagon seemed bigger than anything imaginable: the “day that shook the world”

(Hawthorne and Winter, 2002). Ground Zero has been described as one of the great consecrated fetishes of our time (Murphett, 2003). In itself, *this* event seems singular in its significance. Yet since that date other events have, if not superseded, then added to a growing list of historical events of significance to this study. 9/11 was immediately followed by the threat of anthrax. In Australia, the Tampa incident and the Bali bombing are related, at least in the national imagination, to 9/11. The War on Iraq has developed a place in the collective memory of 9/11 on Westerners. All of these moments may appear in children's literature, and contribute to new discourses on cultural identity and citizenship. 'Change' is non-linear: all of these 'moments' work on cultural identity simultaneously and in dynamic ways. Furthermore, it may take time for the events of 9/11 to appear in children's books (Court, 2002, p.1).

Second, certain complications are embedded in the study of children's literature. For instance, except for the categories constructed by publishers, educators and libraries, it is not always possible to distinguish between a children's text and an adults' text. If a text is accessible to children, and has been popularly taken up by children (as is the case with the DC Comics), it may 'count' in this study, as a children's cultural text. It may also be necessary to consider the complicated nature of children's literature, as being written by adults for children. For example, Watson (1992, p.20) reminds us that children's books may in fact be billed as such, but are mostly reflective of adults' concerns: "Children's books make constant allusion to social, political and cultural issues which are important to adults". Thus this focussed look at the way heroes are constructed in exemplar texts defines them as children's cultural texts, rather than as children's books, since their audience is somewhat blurry.

Snapshot: The bottom-up superhero in performance

The aspect of concern to this study of children's literature post 9/11 is its treatment of heroism. Since books for children have a long-standing tradition of telling stories about heroes and courage (see Hourihan, 1997), an examination of the hero in recent literature is useful, and the heroic identity in these children's texts may be seen as a "cultural symptom" (Belsey, 2002, p.70).

In this section of the paper, a small selection of texts will be examined to explore the ways in which heroism is constructed in children's books post 9-11. There are many other texts which could have been selected, but these are significant in that they appeared soon after the attack on the World Trade Centre, and in that they are overt examples of authors and publishers attempts to present children with heroes. First, the picture book *Bravemole* (Jonell, 2001) will provide an opportunity to examine a direct allegory, written for a very young audience. The

second group of texts to be examined are included in the edited stories and illustrations by DC comic book writers and artists. These texts will be explored as examples of an emerging body of work. Analysis of these texts assists in the work of understanding continuity and change, providing insight into what themes are continuations of older ones, and what, if anything is new in the ways post 9/11 heroes are discursively organised.

A newly constituted performance of 'heroism' is in evidence in the new children's literature about 9/11, although traces of more familiar cultural understandings of heroism are, as always, discursively present. In the picture book *Bravemole*, the myth-making seems didactic in intent, stated clearly in Jonell's (2002) dust jacket about her rationale for the writing of *Bravemole*, where she explains that, in her view, children "...needed a story. Something safe, that they could pick up and read, or keep out of sight on the shelf, as they wished". Deconstructive work on the text of *Bravemole* makes the politicising agenda transparent. For example, *Bravemole* makes a hero of the mole who finds his molehill destroyed by the evil dragons. Just an 'evermole', he finds his world shattered and makes an individual, heroic choice to dig through the rubble to find missing moles. He finds community with other 'average' moles who also take it upon themselves to perform acts of bravery, and although they act separately, in their collective actions they provide evidence for the fact that individuals, as small and insignificant as they seem, are the real heroes.

This allegorical treatment of 9/11, which stays very close to the story as it was told by the American media, provides children with an understanding of heroism as popularly defined. The decision to make the character a mole is in itself interesting: moles are small, innocuous, and most significantly, workers. They are also blind, but have more 'vision' than those who are evil. They are the builders of the world, not the destroyers. They are not their binary opposite, predators (as are the dragons that destroy their mole hill). Interestingly, a similar story is illustrated in the DC Comics anthology of comic book illustrator's responses to 9/11 in a comic called '*I Never Thought of Myself as a Hero*'. In this case, it is an ant and its ant-hill that is destroyed. These ants identify themselves as 'just another salarybug'. Their honey hives are attacked by a dragonflyer. To this protagonist, an ant headed to work (as is the industrious mole) the destruction of the twin tower is "like getting kicked in the thorax" (Veitch in Levitz, 2002, p.78). Although it is the fireants (firemen playing a prominent role in these heroic depictions) that are the real heroes, the little ants play a crucial role. Ants too are workers, they are powerless, and they can be 'crushed like bugs'.

Both moles and ants belong to the kinds of community that work together for a common cause. They are small, local heroes: no real threat to anyone but easily trampled. This

understanding of the hero as small, blind and mortal competes, on one level, with the largeness of the Superman pop-myth (Wolcott, 2002) and expresses shifting understandings of what a hero now 'is', at the same time as it continues an understanding common to children's texts – that the smallest and most humble of characters will be revealed in the end as heroic (as in traditional folk tales, or in Tolkien, for example). This familiar characterisation as the hero as small but strong may serve a political purpose in these new narratives, positioning Americans as the underdog (or undermole), needing to band together to overcome a collective axis of evil. Wolcott (2002, p.1) suggests that after 9-11 America now "cares once again about whether its young men – and women – can fly into battle", and these books prepare them to fly in formation, not as super-human individuals. These American heroes are unlikely. They are diminutive rather than larger-than-life and they take collective action, focussing more on relational and collective work rather than on individual agency. This seems a predictable construction of heroism by a nation needing to mobilise support for its military. The construction of community solidarity and spirit is also a useful way to encourage surveillance 'at home'. Collective heroism is necessary for the good of all of 'us'^{iv}. In this way, the members of the community are produced by these texts and required to 'act heroically'. At the same time, there is a highly sentimentalised call to heroism in these post 9/11 texts.

Since texts always exist in relation to other texts, it is arguable that they are always 'dialogic', a property which is sometimes referred to under the general heading of *intertextuality* (Fairclough, 1989). For instance, the ubiquitousness of heroic firemen in children's literature post 9-11 (*Bravemole, New York's Bravest*) works alongside other texts about firemen for children, most significantly the ever-popular *Fireman Sam*. Similarly, images of superheroes cannot help but remind us of other what we know already about Superman and his like. This dialogic relationship to other texts (and our shared cultural constructs, familiar to children and the adult readers of these texts), contributes to readings of these new texts.

In Elam's terms (1994), we can see these texts as mediated by cultural texts easily recognisable by the young people who are the audience for these texts. We understand the new hero because we know the old hero so well. We know what strength is (humility, community spirit, smallness in stature but largeness in citizenship and spirit), because we also understand, from these texts, its binary opposite, weakness (physical force, facelessness, inexplicable violence). Importantly for individuals facing, for the first time, a threat 'at home', we are presented with a shifting vision of heroism: smaller is stronger. This interest in emphasising the agency of the small protagonist (against the evil foe) continues, (with new significance) a trope from earlier children's literature, most notably continuing ideas familiar

from *Bob the Builder* (“you can do it”) or the oft-revived *The Little Engine Who Could*. As part of a political agenda, this is revealing. American is the vulnerable but morally upright hero: terrorists are the stronger but evil forces. These images were timely, too, as America, positioned itself as the aggrieved victim, and waged its first pre-emptive war. The evocation of a sentimental vision from the past (Superman, for instance, who first appeared after the first world war as a direct attempt to invoke nationalistic allegiance) is powerful. In offering up the superhero narrative post 9/11, a sentimental objective is fulfilled. Scutter (1990, p.108) explains how this sentimentalising of the past works in children’s books, evoking

the notion of a sense of loss, a looking back with a yearning gaze, a self-conscious and manipulative nostalgia; a reconstruction of memory divorced from any reality, a link with the ideological habit of idealising and romanticising; and fascinatingly, a strategy of using the past to help cope with the present.

Certainly some of the selections from the DC Comics offer up the anticipated superhero, the Superman who stands atop a plaque that aggressively says, “First things first. Then we come for you” (Adams in Levitz, 2002). This hyper-brave, super-masculine hero still exists.^v Yet often this new Superman is, in these comics, emasculated, looking on in despair much in the same way as does the mole, in *Bravemole*. He is a weakened superhero, searching for a way, in an illogical world, to make a difference. And the difference, for this hero, is to be made in joining forces with others like himself, and in finding national community. He is a humbled and meek hero, and where Hourihan (1999) claimed that the hero is typically a man of action, rarely contemplative, the reverse is true in these comics. For example, The positioning of heroes as David (rather than Goliath) is, in many ways, a continuation of a theme which already exists in children’s fiction. His (for he is mostly male) potential for strength lies in the generally humanist sentiment that it is within our individual or collective power to control our own destinies. In this sense, a Superhero (in the form, for instance, of Superman or Wonder Woman) will not help us. Salvation is only available to individuals who are working for the good of the whole, who have the ability to “give meaning and shape to their own lives” (Humanism Online, 2003).

This is common in children’s books as Stephens (1992, p.129) in his discussion of post-disaster fiction suggests. Children’s literature has often constructed a world where “qualities such as Altruism, Love, Honour, Loyalty, Courage, and so on, are essential human nature, whereas the will to power for its own sake, and the evil that goes with it, a lapse from that humanity”^{vi}. Many other children’s literary theorists (Saxby, 1993; Sarland, 1999; McCallum, 1999; Bradford, 2001) have noted these traits of liberal humanism as well. Rod McGillis

(2002, p.3) lists these traits as “right of the individual, celebration of the natural, the goodness of a meritocracy based on the paternal virtues of tolerance, justice and a sensible hierarchy” Nodelman (1992, p.92) too refers to the prevailing liberal humanism in children’s books, in his case making note of its usefulness in the social transmission of the American Dream. He avers that “American children’s novels take it for granted that any child, no matter how humble, can improve his or her lot in life to achieve a dream. This basic unquestioned assumption defines [such children] as Americans”.

So this liberal humanism remains, now doing timely political work. These are still common heroic stories about superiority, dominance and success, good and evil, but as agents of cultural transmission these stories perform in modified ways. The qualities of the hero appear to have shifted. Whereas Margery Hourihan (1999, p.9) describes the typical hero of children’s literature past as “strong, brave, resourceful, rational and determined to succeed” this superhero presents as nearly defeated, sick at heart, doubting.

The Hero-next-door

As already suggested, American Superhero comics became popular in the 1930s, with Superman launched in 1938. Superman was, from its beginning, a symbol of patriotism, and a response to a threat to democracy (Wolcott, 2002; Hourihan, 1997). Pompe (in Watson 2001, p.682) claims that “superheroes are 20th-Century replacements for the gods and superior beings that once walked the earth”. The superhero’s new incarnation post 9-11, as portrayed by DC Comic book illustrators, is ironically un-victorious. Superman now stands alongside the more heroic, ‘authentic’ and powerful mortal hero: Clark Kent is now the real hero and Superman bows down to him. Although the superhero has always assumed the dual role of average citizen and super-strong upholder of justice (Hourihan, 1999), it is now the former persona – the mortal side – that makes him heroic.

This shifts our ideas of heroism, brings deity into question suggesting a culture of uncertainty. It is no longer strength, or the perfect athletic body that will save us, but a certain nobleness and purity of spirit, embodied in anyone who stands for a particular kind of freedom (democracy meets capitalism). This is not heroism on a grand scale. We no longer believe in the permanency of the grand scale, such tall, grand buildings so easily destroyed, but in a smaller, humbler heroism. The solitary super-hero (Superman, or Spiderman, or any of these lonely outcasts in their everyday identity) is replaced – it’s the collective hero that will prevail – not alone in the world but part of the world. It is the alter-ego – the Clark Kent persona, which now becomes the hero. It is Superman in his tights that we recognise as the fake. An

interesting parallel exists in the real world in a perfect meta-fictive coincidence: Christopher Reeve has proven himself to be mortal after his riding accident, and is now more heroic in his real more impotent self – advocating for spinal regeneration – than in his filmic role as nearly invincible superhero. This highlights the current competition between the mortal Superman and the invincible Superman. Both the strong and the weak hold appeal, and vie for primacy. On an additional intertextual note, these depictions of heroism cannot help but point to the well- noted blurring and spilling over of fiction into reality. For example, that the feature film *The Incredible Hulk* was shelved after 9/11 for its unpatriotic look at Uncle Sam abroad (Andrews, 2003, p.13). Wolcott (2002, p. 58) reminds us that it has been “fascinating and slightly unsettling to see how many incidents in (the older Superman) films toy with catastrophic perils that after September 11 no longer seem like pulp fiction. Reality has caught up with escapism”.

The Superman of post 9-11 in the selected texts is no longer the saver of the world (the future is too uncertain) but a co-creator, sometimes emasculated and impotent against forces too big, sometimes a kind of a proxy counsellor. The new hero’s symbolic attire is no longer the cape, but the fireman’s hat. In a continuation of the superhero narrative, though, these new heroes were also created from cataclysmic disaster – the destruction of the World Trade Centre shows these heroes not only their true worth, but defines their quest and their life mission. In the tradition of superhero stories, the setting of urban cities and sky-scrapers fits easily. The Superhero is a logical place for the reinvention of cultural identity post 9/11, since “superheroes are reinvented to express current aspirations and fears” (Pompe in Watson 2001, p.683).

In some of the DC comics, the narrative voice explains to its readers that superheroes were all very well in the past, but they’re not real. It’s people (rather than superheroes) who have to stand up and make the difference now. In one strip, Superman says,

the one thing I can NOT do
is break free from the fictional pages where I live and breathe
become real during times of crisis
and right the wrongs of an unjust world.
A world fortunately protected by heroes of its own.
(Seagle in Levitz, 2002, p. 16).

The final frame shows who those real heroes are: the American people as symbolized by a muscled, iconic fireman carrying an American flag. ‘Us’, if you will. Again, the books contribute to the construction of the ‘coalition of the willing’. We are all in it together, and

we are one of many. We cannot rely on the broad shoulder singular hero of the past, but only on each other.

Jpeg 2 multicultural superman cover

A clear examination of the cover of the DC Comic book anthology suggests some further shifts in the construction of identities post 9-11. This is a multicultural group, constructing America as the whole world – representing the best of a global, international society, and working nicely to fulfil the political agenda of inclusivity. The heroes are men wearing ties (with a few women at the margins). The former bastions of the capitalism are now being constructed as downtrodden heroes. America pays the price for its goodness. Both *Bravemole* (with its powerful image of a despairing mole who finds strength when he realises at last that he is not alone) and the 9/11 DC comics claim a seemingly universal message, one which Scutter (1999, p.136) has seen in other children’s texts. This is a message that

gestures grandiosely in the direction of globalism – world religion, a caring universal but personal God, international racial equality, global compassion...it is notably a rhetorical, floating piece, unsupported by any politicising of the personal, or personalising of the political...”.

Insert bravemole illustration jpeg 3

Major critical events in time, such as 9/11, are likely to reflect a range of new and competing discourses with respect to cultural identity and citizenship. The ways in which heroes are portrayed, and the role of hero myths in cultural identity formation, provides useful information in a discussion of the impact 9/11 has had on children’s books. This paper argues that this post 9/11 literature has an impact on the construction of children’s cultural identity in this context. As time passes and events unfold, an examination of the ways in which the ‘story’ of heroes is told provide a way to examine the political and ethical agendas performed by post 9/11 children’s books written in English.

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ⁱ In a different context, unrelated to 9/11, the idea that literature writes dominant ideologies into existence is explored by Margaret Fee (1995, p.245).

ⁱⁱ Joyce Maynard's book tells the story of Wendy whose mother dies in the attacks of 9/11.

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, amongst Australian children's critical theorists, Mallan (2001) employs deconstructive analysis with respect to cultural identity in her reading of two books for young adults. Bradford (2001) employs a deconstructive approach in her exploration of Aboriginality in Australian children's literature, and Scutter (1999) asks political-ethical questions of texts in her *Displaced fictions: Contemporary Australian books for teenagers and young adults*. All of these writers demonstrate that deconstruction is a particularly useful approach for this sort of textual investigation because it allows for a 'reading' of the texts in the contexts of the ethical-political discourse that will necessarily shift as further post 9/11 events unfold (such as additional terrorist acts or wars). Ariel Dorfman's (1987) book, *The Empire's Old Clothes* is especially interesting in its examination of Babar and Disney's Donald Duck examining the colonising agendas served by these children's cultural texts.

^{iv} This active construction of the West (and in particular, America) as 'us' is also a strong feature of this post 9/11 children's literature. For instance, in the 9/11 picture book, readers are told that "The world, which had been blue and green and bright and very big and really round and pretty peaceful, got badly hurt" (Patel, 2001). This suggestion, that America is the whole world, is pervasive.

^v Henry Giroux (2002) predicted a return to the hyper-masculine soon after 9/11

^{vi} This theme is strong in these children's books. For example, Andrea Patel's post 9/11 picture book, *on this day* (2001, p. 11) explains that "goodness is in this world, and it's stronger than badness".