

## **Illness and disability in Elinor M. Brent Dyer's Chalet School stories (1925-1939)**

### **Introduction**

1925-1970 – 59 books.

Set in Austria, Wales and Switzerland

### **EMBD's life**

Born Gladys Eleanor May Dyer in a terraced house in South Shields on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1894. Difficulty in establishing her own identity – she was first known at home as May, she began to use Eleanor in her teens. At college she called herself Patricia Maraquita (!), then reverted to Eleanor (Len). Mid 1920s (publication of first CS book) began to use Elinor, keeping May as a middle name and creating the surname Brent-Dyer from her father's full name – he was Charles Morris Brent Dyer (McClelland, 1981, pp2, 21).

Elinor's father abandoned the family when she was 3 and her mother lived as a widow. Elinor grew up with her mother, her grandmother and her brother Henzell Watson Dyer (b.1895), who died of meningitis age 17 in 1912.

"The themes of poor health, death and absence of family, particularly of fathers and brothers, which are characteristic of the Chalet School series, possibly originated with Brent-Dyer's early experiences" (Gosling, 1998?)

Her close friend, Elizabeth Jobbing, died from tuberculosis at the age of 16 (McClelland, 1981, pp36-7).

"It is certainly probable that...Brent-Dyer perceived poor health, death and absence of family as having greater significance in the average girl's family than was in fact the case." (Gosling, 1998?)

But I am not an average girl... [could now lead into my story]

### **My story**

### **Examples of representations of illness and/or disability in the CSS**

The major character of the whole series (Jo Bettany/Manyard) lives with ill health for much of her life.

*The Head Girl of the Chalet School* (1928) – Deira throws a stone at the Head Girl, Grizel, knocking her out. Also the use of Robin as a comforter (p. 150)

+ “Maureen’s lack of self-discipline brings down illness on both herself and Joey” (Gosling, 1998?)

Eustacia gets herself in trouble because of her bad character – leads to injury and illness (after being trapped on a mountain and having to scramble to safety)

She awakes to “pain and helplessness such as she had never known before.” (p.311). However, her suffering leads to her reformation of character and she is then fully integrated into the Chalet School community (Gosling in Aveling, 270)

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“...she does not have to wait for her recovery of good health and mobility in order to achieve this”

She is actually embraced by the Russell family and remains a part of the community even after leaving the school and into middle age (and probably old age as well), still ‘disabled’ as her back injury never fully heals.

Eustacia is a prime example of the use of the illness/injury plot device...

### **The illness/injury plot device**

Reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century morality tales (e.g. Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (1749) – the first English language novel aimed specifically at children and set in a boarding school, and Maria Edgeworth’s *Moral Tales* (1801).

Also a convention of 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction, e.g. Marianne in S&S (1811). (Gosling, 1998?)

In the Chalet School series only two characters are ever expelled (Thekla, who is seen to represent the spirit of “New Germany” and a girl who assists the Nazis). All the other girls (and there are many) are seen as capable of “reform within the community. (This is why the “Illness/Injury” plot device is essential in the series.” (Gosling, 1998?)

“...a pastoral convention is maintained [in classic children’s fiction]. It is assumed that childhood is simpler and more natural than that of adults, and that children, though they may have faults, are essentially good, or at least capable of becoming so.” (Lurie, 1990, pxiii, in Gosling, 1998?)

### **Implications of the IIPD**

Redemption (positive?)

“a plot device, functioning as a warning to those who resist being assimilated into the community.”

“...provides a vehicle for a character to change from representing undesirable to desirable qualities [...] it is not ill health, then, that separates a Chalet Girl from her peers, but bad character.” (Gosling in Aveling, 268)

Illness as punishment (negative)

How did I/do I feel about these aspects of it?

- The idea of assimilation as a good thing - wanting to fit in, to not be seen as the other. As a child – “what would it be like to be normal?”
- I have felt ill health as a punishment – what to do with that?
- What did the idea of ill health as punishment say to me as a child?

### **Sick people as angels (see also idea of heroes?)**

The idea of the angelic nature of ill/delicate children (Robin is often described as being at risk of developing TB like her mother) – also a convention of classic fiction, particularly 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic fiction.

The Robin “almost angelic” in her teens (Brent-Dyer, 1940, p.16; Brent-Dyer, 1941, p.18), eventually becomes a nun (1952b, pp.17-19) is “so good that she is able on one occasion to intervene to bring Joey back from near-certain death after Joey has contracted “pleuro-pneumonia”, while rescuing another girl, Maureen, from an ice-covered lake.”

Susan Sontag *Illness as Metaphor* “The dying tubercular is pictured as made more beautiful and more soulful” (1991, p.17)

- Being special in a positive way – depth of character, feeling, empathy
- Illness/fragility actually giving power (to heal) – to make people better in both senses of the word – physically and morally
- The beauty of Robin for me personally
- “Maybe I could be like this” – is that a good thing?

Mary-Lou, a major character of the whole series who suffers an accident that is not her fault – strength of character through suffering

### **Equality [think of a better way of saying this]**

“There is no question but that ‘delicate’ girls are capable of the same intellectual challenges as the rest.” (The opening Annexe on the Sonnalpe next to the Sanatorium for more ‘delicate’ girls in *The Exploits of the Chalet Girls* (1933)). (Gosling in Aveling, p. 266)

Gosling in Aveling, 280

**Phoebe Wychcote** *Jo to the Rescue* – disabled by “rheumatism” (including a weak heart)

“...Jo makes it explicit from the first that the relationship between herself and Pheobe is equal...”

Phoebe is not killed or cured (as would have been conventional at the time) but marries a doctor and adopts a child.

### **Why did EMBD choose to portray illness and disability in this way (different from her peers)**

Saving from illness – “perhaps these books were the only place she could actually be in control and save her characters from the harshness of the world outside” (Johnson, 2012). See also stories as sanctuary

Only a few people actually died “...you can kill characters. And you can save them. You can make them live and thrive in this world that you, perhaps, can’t” [sic] (Johnson, 2013)

### **Change after WW2**

Gosling in Aveling, 284

In later books EBD no longer equates illness/delicacy with ‘goodness’. E.g. Margot and Cherry Christy – bad *because* of their childhood illnesses/disability.

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Non-disabled girls are portrayed as “morally superior”.

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Naomi Elton

“...a girl who was badly stooped with a crooked shoulder” *Trials for the Chalet School* (1959), pp. 23-4). Does not become morally better until she is fixed (surgery as a result of another accident)

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Not known why EBD’s attitude to disability and illness changed after WW2. Possibly the discovery of penicillin – perhaps EBD no longer felt the need to ‘save’ people in her fiction as they could now be saved in real life?

Bad writing – large output of books – one every six months at some points (McClelland pp.238-51)

It is very problematic.

- I don’t think I ever noticed this as a child. Or did I? – I do remember Naomi now I’ve read about her again.
- Although negative and problematic for obvious reasons, it could be argued that this change in attitude actually provides balance in EMBD’s portrayal of illness and disability – e.g. Naomi is angry that she is disabled – that is surely a natural reaction and one that I have experienced more often than I have felt sanguine or angelic!

- Discussions about the role of positivity – not always seen as acceptable to be angry/sad about your condition, even within the community

### **Own reading**

Significance of 'Unseen Childhoods' – so rare to portray illness and disability in school stories (in those days/my childhood)

My childhood was unseen – all the medical stuff was out of sight of my peers - leading to lack of understanding and empathy from them (and adults). My childhood was not 'normal'

Also the idea of unseen (invisible) disability – much more 'visible' now in the age of the internet, more understanding (hopefully) by lay and medical people (support groups, etc)

CSS as sanctuary – different from real life – the idea of acceptance, fitting in, assimilation (that I wanted) – order, politeness, calm, happy endings, resolution, redemption.

### **Conclusions**

"What a horrible responsibility it is to write for the young!" EMBD, 1936, p. 87 – *Jo Returns to the Chalet School*