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## The Portrayal of Children's Emotional Reactions to Divorce in Middle-level Fiction

Janyce A. Struthers Hancock

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## The Portrayal of Children's Emotional Reactions to Divorce in Middle-level Fiction

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The Portrayal of Children's  
Emotional Reactions to Divorce  
in Middle-level Fiction

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A Research Paper  
Presented to the  
Faculty of the Library Science Department

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts

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by  
Janyce A. Struthers Hancock  
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Read and approved by  
Elizabeth Martin

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Leah Hiland

Accepted by Department  
Elizabeth Martin

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## Chapter 1

### THE INTRODUCTION

Of all the changes in the American society in the last two decades, one of the permeating phenomena is divorce. Statistics vary with sources and years. In 1981 there were 1,213,000 divorces and annulments in the United States, with an estimated 1,180,000 children under 18 involved (National Center for Health Statistics, 1985). Of the 1982 divorces, 1,108 children were involved in every 1000 divorces. Preliminary reports for 1983 indicated 1,179,000 divorces in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985). In 1984 the rate was at its lowest since 1975, with 1,155,000 divorces and annulments, or 4.9 divorces per 1000 persons. (World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1986).

Divorce does not affect only adults, however. Children of divorcing parents bear an enormous emotional burden in their parents' divorce. They have to adjust to changes in family roles, housing, possibly new schools and new friends, different quantities and qualities of time spent with one or more parents and grandparents, and possible further hostilities between divorced parents over custody, visitation, holidays, and financial support. Such stressors affect children's emotional health.

Children from divorced families need a stable force in their lives for consistency and a feeling that someone cares and understands. The school most often becomes that stability. Professional educators are then left to give a large porportion of the human care and guidance that children of divorced parents need. Few classroom teachers, however, have adequate training in counseling, even though they may feel great concern for a child. Faculty members may then turn to materials to help the child. Frequently, those materials will come from a school's library media center. Then, the media specialist has the responsibility for selecting and acquiring appropriate materials.

As divorce has become a common occurrence in family life, it has also become a more common theme or factor in the fiction written for school children. The availability and the interest level of fiction about families experiencing divorce make the use of this literature a natural choice for educators who want to help a child talk about a stressful situation. The use of fiction for such a purpose is the first step in bibliotherapy, the use of books as a tool for helping children deal with behavioral and emotional problems (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1985). The bibliotherapy approach, at least this first step, is a technique which educators who are not counselors can use with children

whom they know need more information or an opening opportunity to talk about their problems.

#### Purpose of the Study

Because one purpose of realistic fiction is to portray problems and adjustments which persons face in their daily living, the researcher sought to learn how current examples of realistic fiction portray the problems faced by children of divorced parents. Such knowledge is necessary to media specialists, reading teachers, and counselors who may suggest reading materials to students as one approach to understanding the problems that students themselves or their peers may face.

If educators choose to use bibliotherapy with children of divorced parents, they

...should seek out books dealing with divorce that hold out hope for children without being unrealistic. The unlikely "happy ending," in which parents reunite, should be avoided in selecting books dealing with divorce. It is also best that books selected not point to any specific character as being entirely to blame for the divorce.

The most helpful books on divorce should explore the feelings and emotions, both positive and negative, that characters experience when their parents divorce, such as bewilderment, unhappiness, and perhaps a sense of relief that a tense home situation has changed. Books dealing with divorce should focus on coping with everyday life during the aftermath of a divorce--changes in the family financial situation, a possible move, and added household responsibilities for children. It is helpful if books on parental divorce mention ways in which a character has made adjustments to his or her new familial situation. (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1985, p. 315)



If educators follow the advice of Pardeck and Pardeck, they must know what fiction materials are available and what qualities those materials have. Since few educators have time to read all the fiction materials about divorce, and since the researcher found no recent published content analyses on divorce in fiction in the standard index for educational journals, Education Index, the researcher saw a need for such research.

#### **Problem Statement and Hypotheses**

Are the emotional reactions of characters who are children of divorced parents presented realistically in the literature written for middle-level readers?

The researcher believed that novels dealing with the theme of divorce would accurately portray the problematic feelings that children of divorced parents must face in their attempts to heal emotionally. Based on this assumption, the researcher believed that a majority (50% or more) of major characters in the novels dealing with the theme of divorce would undergo certain feelings. Those feelings may have been evident in the development of the novel, or they may have been stages which the characters have already reached. A majority of major characters would at some time:

H1. feel denial about the parents' divorce.

H2. experience grief or depression.

- H3. fear abandonment or rejection by one or both parents.
- H4. feel guilt for contributing to the separation, causing the divorce, or for choosing one parent over the other.
- H5. react to the separation or divorce with regressive manifestations of behavior or by taking on adult mannerisms, roles, and responsibilities.
- H6. experience internalized anger in one or more of a variety of behaviors.
- H7. feel preoccupied with thoughts of parental reconciliation.
- H8. feel anxiety or worry.
- H9. suffer loneliness.
- H10. feel torn by divided loyalty.

#### **Definitions**

"Realistic fiction" is defined as any imaginative writing which reflects events and the ensuing emotions as they actually happen or could happen.

"Children of divorce" refers to any persons 18 years old or younger whose parents have legally divorced or are in the separation or divorcing period prior to legal divorce.

"Divorce" is used in this study to indicate "a legal dissolution of marriage" ("Divorce," *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1983, p. 370).

"Middle school child" or "middle-level reader" refers to any student who is of the appropriate

intellectual, social, or chronological age to attend school in any of its programs for students in grades five through nine.

"Major character" applies to any novel's fictional character on whom the novel's plot centers. Actions, dialogue, description, and recorded thoughts of the character are essential to the plot of the novel. A novel might have more than one major character.

#### Limitations

The researcher limited the analysis of novels to those which are realistic fiction, with plots that focus on major characters who are children of divorced or divorcing parents. Books whose major characters are children of widowed or never-married parents were not included in this study. The books analyzed in this study were limited to those which are recommended for students in one or more of the grades five through nine. The researcher limited the study to novels which had a favorable review from the current standard selection tool Booklist or had been included in the retrospective selection tool Best Books for Children. Titles taken from Booklist came from "Notable Books for Children" or "Best Books for Young Adults" through 1985. For those books published too late to be included in any of these "superlative" sources, the researcher consulted individual issues of Booklist prior to July 1,

1986. The books analyzed were limited to those published no earlier than 1981, and no later than 1986. The researcher further limited this study to those novels which could be procured and read by the researcher.

## Chapter 2

### THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focuses on the stressors which children of divorced parents experience, the impact of divorce on children's self-concept, the emotional reactions of children to divorce and its stressors, and children's psychological tasks in the healing process. In addition, the role of the school in helping children of divorced parents adjust, with particular attention to the use of fiction materials available for those children at school, is included.

#### **Stressors**

Physical separation from one parent and the familiar neighborhood are two important stressors. In their five-year study of California children of divorced parents, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) point out several abrupt changes for the involved children. Of the 131 children who participated, nearly one-fifth of the children moved within the first six months following the parental separation. The new house and neighborhood forced some of the children to change schools, which caused further anxiety about making new friends. In fact, the mere talk of moving produced as much anxiety as did the actual moving. Often the move was accompanied by economic change as mothers, the new heads

of households, began searching for added income. Though only one-half of the mothers worked part-time or full-time prior to the separation or divorce, another ten per cent entered the work force following the divorce. Children worried about the need for added income.

Other stressors which children of divorcing parents feel include conflict and hostility between significant adults in their lives, whether between parents or between parent and grandparents. In addition, the eventual remarriage of one or both parents adds another stressor, that of the stepfamily, which includes not only stepparent, but also stepsiblings and step-grandparents. Visher and Visher (1979), cited by Jolliff (1984), refer to children's going back and forth between households as 'culture shock' (p. 173). Besides feeling helpless and out of control, children bear the inconvenience of moving clothing, hobby equipment, and toys from one home to the other. Some may have a bedroom in each home; others may have to share a bedroom or sleep on a couch. In addition to the physical inconvenience and the possible need to carry a suitcase to school in order to move from one home to the other, these children face the contradictory rules of two different households.

Parents, too, experience stressors, which they share with their children. Heatherington, Cox, and Cox

(1978) found several practical problems in living in separated households. One was routine household maintenance. Men, especially, lived "a chaotic lifestyle" (p. 156). Besides the economic and occupational difficulties, family disorganization was most marked in the first year after divorce. Children in separated households had pickup meals at irregular times, more erratic bedtimes, less parental reading to them at bedtime, and greater likelihood of arriving late to school.

#### Self-concept

All of these stressors pressure children in many ways, and the emotional adjustments most often relate to self-concept or self-esteem. Researchers have not always identified which comes first, lowered self-esteem caused by divorce, which may contribute to negative behaviors and emotions, or negative behaviors, acted out as an effort to cope, which may contribute to lowered self-esteem. Perhaps the sequence of relationships cannot be discerned.

Parish and Wigle (1985) point out that "Divorce is a process and not just a single event" (p. 243). They discovered that the most negative child outcomes occurred in the first year after the father's absence. In comparing children from three random groups, they studied the relationship between family structure and

children's evaluations of self, mother, and father. The three groups were the intact-intact families (intact at both the beginning and the end of their study, from 1979-1982); the divorced-divorced families (with the father absent in 1979 and still in 1982, without the mother's remarrying); and the intact-divorced families (intact in 1979 but with the father absent in 1982). In addition, the researchers used a control group of intact-intact families which had been nonrandomly selected to control for the factor of family process and its resulting happiness or unhappiness. The negative impact of divorce on children from the divorced-divorced families moderated with time, but evaluations of self and parents never became as positive as those for children from intact-intact families.

Their study found two groups of very troubled children. One was the group of intact-divorced families, whose children faced an immediate crisis and were acutely troubled by severe pain. Comparing these reactions to those of the divorced-divorced group, Parish and Wagle learned that as time increases, the equilibrium returns, the pain diminishes, and the evaluations of self and parents become more positive. The other group of children, called the "chronically troubled" (p. 244), were from intact families which were very unhappy. They evaluated themselves and their



parents less positively than did the children in other intact families. It seems that family happiness and time since separation have more to do with self-concept and family esteem than does the label of divorce.

Slater and Haber (1984) also discovered that self-esteem in children of divorced parents is related to time since divorce and to high familial conflict, regardless of whether or not family dissolution has occurred. Data collected concerning self-esteem, identity, behavior, personal self, family self, social self, trait anxiety, and locus of control of adolescents showed that "adolescents from high conflict homes had higher levels of anxiety and less internal control.... Since for the majority of these adolescents (84%), parental separation/divorce occurred over one year ago, the effects being measured were the long-term implications of family dissolution rather than the immediate response to the event" (p. 920).

Other researchers have found a correlation between self-concept, family conflict, and divorce. Beeson (1984) cites Abarbanel (1979), Ramos (1979), Sell (1979), and Steinman (1981). These researchers studied children in joint custody families and found that those children were adjusting better, had a better self-concept, and described fewer feelings of abandonment and

rejection than did children in single-custody situations. Beeson also refers to other studies (Rosen, 1979; Steinman, 1981; Ramos, 1979; Watson, 1981; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980) which found that whether the child is in a sole or joint custody arrangement, the cooperative relationship between parents is an important factor in the child's adjustment. Their findings relate to others cited by Beeson (Luepnitz, 1979; Lamb, 1977) which confirm that young children are better off when stress, conflict, and uncertainty are minimized.

Similar to the need for cooperation between divorced parents is the need for cooperation with grandparents. Blau (1984) and Derdeyn (1985) both summarize legislation and court cases concerning grandparents' visitation. Referring to an earlier study (Gardner, 1982), Blau writes,

Grandparents see children in an idealized way and tend to provide the unrestricted positive regard so much required by children for healthy psychological growth. Parents are too often prevented from doing this consistently because of the frequently frustrating, irritating daily interactions parents have with children. The grandparent is generally able to be more tolerant and accepting. When a parent discourages a good relationship between a child and a grandparent, the child is deprived of a growth-enhancing opportunity. (p. 49)

However, if grandparents and parent must settle their differences in court, it is because they are in high conflict.

It is probably unrealistic to expect that the situations which breed this type of litigation would often permit amicable resolutions after the grandparents have successfully gained court-enforced visitation against the will of the custodial parent or parents.

....It appears inevitable and unavoidable that children must suffer whatever degree of post-divorce conflict in which their parents engage. (Derdeyn, 1985, pp. 282, 283).

Knaub and Hanna (1984), in a study with a limited sample size, researched the perceptions of family strengths in children of remarriage. They found that, "in general, the children appeared to perceive their families as relatively high in family strength, especially in their perceptions of happiness with the remarriage, feeling of closeness within the stepfamily, and their own sense of self-worth" (p. 84). This feeling of relatively high self-worth may be tied to the number of people loving and caring for the child, as one child in their research noted about the positive effects of the stepfamily, "You get to love more people, you know!" (p. 88).

Other researchers have tied adolescents' self-concept to their behavior. Hypothesizing that "teenagers from maritally broken families will exhibit more health-risk behavior than those from intact families," Saucier and Ambert (1983, p. 404) studied the health risks of smoking, intemperate drinking, and non-use of car seat belts. They studied teens from separated or divorced families, intact families, and

widowed families. Their most conclusive findings were related to smoking. They learned that teens from broken families engaged more in the health-risk behavior of smoking and did so at an earlier age. The researchers gave several possible reasons for this. One was the modeling of parental behavior, since separated fathers smoked significantly more than did other fathers. A second explanation was that teens from divorced homes were less well supervised and, therefore, not as carefully socialized into adopting healthy behavior. Another explanation was that the adolescents were trying to raise their self-esteem by prematurely engaging in behavior considered not only adult but also "cool" by their peers. If that explanation is accurate, then self-esteem is indeed affected by parental marital status or by the emotional consequences of the family climate.

Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and McLoughlin (1983) studied the effects of positive relationships between children of divorce and their custodial and noncustodial parents. Better performance on good classroom behaviors, achievement, popularity, and general adjustment, all esteem-building qualities, were related to more positive custodial parents' relationships with their children.

Examination of divorced-parent child-rearing style revealed that authoritarian custodial parents

(who displayed such self-reported child-rearing approaches as rejecting the child when he/she misbehaves) had children who were described on teacher ratings as higher in intellectual dependency, and lower in originality, independent learning, and productivity with peers. (Guidubaldi et al., p. 315)

Better academic and social adjustments were also related to a positive relationship with the noncustodial parent. Those children who shared with the noncustodial father good news about something at school had better scores on WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) spelling and mathematics, better grades in mathematics, more likelihood of regular instead of special class placement, and less likelihood of repeating a grade.

These general findings about self-esteem and its relationship to children of divorced parents can be further analyzed in specific emotions which children feel as they struggle to adjust to the varied and abrupt changes which divorce brings to their lives. During that struggle, they will generally need to cope with several emotions common to children of divorce.

#### Emotional reactions

An early emotion is often shock or disbelief. Children are most likely to react with denial. They may engage in fantasy to restore the absent parent, displace worries over the well-being of the absent parent onto a pet or other substitute, insist that the absent parent still loves them, or make excuses for the absent parent.

Such excuses may include statements like, "Daddy's working late," "Daddy's on a business trip," "Mommy's coming soon," or "Daddy comes home very late, after I fall asleep. He leaves very early in the morning, before I wake up" (Gardner, 1976, p. 102). Fantasies abound when young children play house with family dolls. Then children are likely to put the parent dolls together in bed, hugging. They may also relate their fantasies, as did two young girls.

"My daddy sleeps in my bed every night," we were informed by a smiling child who had not seen her father for many weeks. "He will come back to me when he grows up," another bravely assured us and herself. (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 234)

A central emotion of the divorcing family is fear. The child generally has no assurance of continued nurturance for food, protection, college funding, or a home in which to live. The child may fear that if one parent can leave the home, the other may also leave (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Gardner, 1976).

It is likely that the fear of abandonment is a common concern for all children at a time of high stress. The particular configuration of stress during divorce, because it splits the centrality of the family, may well call this fear into prominence. (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 46)

Children may react with panic states, including sweating, palpitations, agitation, trembling, and fears of becoming ill with no adult care or of dying. They may physically look for the absent parent, lie to one

parent about the other in order to avoid abandonment, or cling excessively to the custodial parent. Frightened children may behave in negative ways to provoke punishment as a reassurance of parental care (Gardner, 1976).

Another emotion is sadness, also called yearning, grief, or mourning. Children may feel an enormous sense of loss. Over one-third of the 131 children in Wallerstein and Kelly's study (1980) experienced acute depression, showing such symptoms as sleeplessness, restlessness, difficulty in concentrating, deep sighing, feelings of emptiness, play inhibition, compulsive overeating, and somatic complaints. Older children and adolescents were preoccupied with the loss of a family as an ongoing presence. Included in the loss are familiar daily routines, symbols and family traditions, school, home, and neighborhood, and, for some, a way of life dependent on two parental incomes (Wallerstein, 1983). Grieving children may react with fantasies of reconciliation to "stave off the acute pain of loss" (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 47). Over half of the children in their study had vivid fantasies of reconciliation. Gardner (1976) also refers to reconciliation fantasies.

Normally such preoccupations diminish with time as the children become used to their new life style and become resigned to the fact of the divorce. However, there are

children who persist for many months, and even years, in trying to get their parents to reconcile even though they have been repeatedly told that there is no chance whatsoever of the parents' remarrying. There are children who will entertain fantasies of their parents' reuniting even after one or both have remarried. (p. 248)

Still another emotion is anxiety or worry. Many children worry about their own vulnerability and the well-being of their parents, especially the absent father. In addition, over half of those in Wallerstein and Kelly's study (1980) worried about their mother, for her health and well-being. They worried about her hectic schedule, moodiness, possible accidents, and chronic illness or even death of the mother, for if something happened to her, they did not know what would happen to themselves. These worries were in addition to those about the changed economic situation, the new house and neighborhood, the new school, their place in the parents' relationships as adults found new friends or lovers, and remarriage of parents to other adults.

Another strong emotion during the divorcing period is the feeling of rejection. Many children think of their parent's departure as lessened interest in the children. They also consider any interruption of care as further rejection. When children suffer rejection, they then wonder about their own lovability, if they are unworthy of the absent parent's esteem and affection (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).



Most children also feel loneliness during and following the divorce. The loneliness is due in part to the parent's decreased ability to parent, as evidenced by the long hours of waiting after school for a parent to return from work or from waiting for a depressed parent to waken, as the adult sleeps through the afternoon and past the dinner hour. Because the absent parent may live in another community, some children have only one parent to turn to in times of loneliness and sadness.

In general, the only youngsters not particularly lonely were those well-functioning adolescents whose capacity to rely upon peers for diversion and support was quite good, and who enjoyed the father's continued interest. (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 49)

Another negative emotion often experienced by children of divorced parents is divided loyalty. Two-thirds of the parents in the California study (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980) openly competed for the loyalty of their children, who felt pulled by love and loyalty in both directions. Children feared that a step toward one parent would be interpreted by the other as a betrayal, which might lead to more anger and rejection. However, children who tried to stay out of the loyalty battle felt alone, with no place to turn for comfort or parenting.

Anger is another strong emotion in most children suffering their parents' divorce. "Children and

adolescents of all ages experienced a rise in aggression" (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 49). The aggression was expressed in temper tantrums, hitting siblings and other children, or, in older children, in verbal attacks. One-fourth of the California study's children had explosive anger directed at one or both parents, and more than one-third of the children felt anger as a major part of the separation experience (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Often the object of the children's anger was the father, but children also exhibited crankiness and rebelliousness with their mothers about routines and discipline. Gardner (1976) points out additional causes of anger for children of divorced parents. Parental conflict, the feeling of abandonment, being different from peers, and scapegoating by one parent toward the children instead of the ex-spouse can all lead to hostility.

In experiencing anger, children and youth may internalize it, denying their negative feelings with rationalization, having occasional nightmares, experiencing tension and anxiety attacks, feeling compulsions or self-recrimination, projecting their own hostility onto a parent, and having phobias for their parent's well-being. (Gardner, 1976)

One more possible emotion in the divorce process is guilt. Though not all children feel responsible for the

divorce, it is a common emotion for children. "Children who do feel responsible for the divorce are more likely to be found among the very young" (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 50). Some feel guilt not for causing the divorce, but for choosing one parent over the other (Gardner, 1976).

Children may react to circumstances affecting their emotions with either immaturity or hypermaturity. It is common for traumatized children to regress to earlier stages of development. Very young children may revert to thumbsucking, baby talk, or bedwetting. Slightly older children may feign illness as an excuse to avoid other demands or stresses, especially school. In addition, children may regress with temper tantrums, increased irritability, and low frustration tolerance. Whining and clinging to the parent may also increase (Gardner, 1976).

Though some children may regress in reaction to the emotional trauma of parental divorce, other children take on increased responsibilities. Some of those who accept added responsibilities do so with exaggeration, an inappropriate and pathological form of maturity known as hypermaturity. Children who show hypermaturity may take on adult mannerisms and speech tones and habits. They may be condescending to younger children, often scolding, lecturing, or reprimanding them. Affected

children may take on the role of confidant for a depressed parent. Though a teacher may appreciate the new "teacher's helper," other students are more likely to label the child as "teacher's pet" (Gardner, 1976, p. 169).

In studying the emotions common to children whose parents divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) note that despite the negative emotions children face during the divorcing process, there is chance for healing. In the five-year follow-up to their study, they found that the first period after the separation was "profoundly stressful for almost all of the children and adolescents and for many of the adults" (p. 304). The transition period in over half of the sixty families lasted two to three years, covering many changes in social, economic, and family circumstances, plus changed relations within the family. "Although the initial breakup of the family is profoundly stressful, the eventual outcome depends, in large measure, not only on what has been lost, but on what has been created to take the place of the failed marriage" (p. 305).

The psychological health of adults and children did improve as time passed.

Five years after the separation, most of the adults approved of the divorce decision and only one-fifth of them felt strongly that the divorce had been ill-advised. Among the children, however, over one-half did not regard the divorced family as an improvement

over their predivorce family. (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 305)

### **Psychological tasks**

Despite the lack of approval for the divorce from children, "at the five-year mark, one-third of the youngsters were lively, well adjusted, and content with the general tenor of their lives" (p. 306).

Reaching adjustment and contentment is a process which requires time and effort. Wallerstein (1983) contends that children, in healing from the stresses of divorce, must accomplish six psychological tasks. These coping tasks are hierachical, "following a particular time sequence beginning with the critical events of parental separation and culminating at late adolescence and young adulthood" (p. 231). They are an added burden to the usual developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence. Not all families follow the same timetable; those in chronic litigation or continued conflict may never pass the first task. "The child's resolution of the tasks of divorce is profoundly influenced by the family ambiance and by the extent to which the family has made progress in addressing the many issues to which divorce gives rise" (p. 231). Even if the family does resolve the predivorce and postdivorce conflicts, the child himself or herself must master and resolve the psychological tasks.

Task I, Acknowledging the Reality of the Marital Rupture, requires that the child overcome the strong reaction of denial. It is tied to Task II, Disengaging From Parental Conflict and Distress and Resuming Customary Pursuits. "The child's successful mastery of the two immediate tasks is tied to the maintenance of his or her appropriate academic pace and overall developmental agenda after the initial dip at the time of crisis" (p. 233). Without mastery of these tasks, resolved within the first year, the child cannot go on with normal life. Obstacles to mastery of the first task include vivid fantasies of parental abandonment or disaster; overwhelming feelings of sorrow, anger, rejection, and yearning; and lack of parental help because of the parents' own lowered functioning. Obstacles to the second task include prior dependence on and closeness to parents in contrast to the new need for psychological distance from the parental depression and disorganization. The second distancing comes not only from the outward chaos, but also from the inner thoughts and feelings of the child. Teachers noted that not only did learning decline during this early period, but also that children were "unable to concentrate, daydreaming, preoccupied, bored, restless, inattentive in the classroom, and irritable, manipulative, aggressive, or withdrawn on the playground"

(Wallerstein, 1983, p. 236). Older children and teens in the same study also had difficulty concentrating, especially when they were preoccupied with their parents' new sexual activities.

The child is unlikely to resolve the next three tasks within the first two years following the parental breakup. Rather, the child works and reworks them over a period of years. They are Task III, Resolution of the Loss; Task IV, Resolving Anger and Self-Blame; and Task V, Accepting the Permanence of the Divorce. Just as adults need time to resolve their grief for the loss of a loved one, so do children need extended time. The losses are multiple, in home, neighborhood, school, family symbols and traditions, and physical presence of two protective parents, and the sadness and yearning do not simply disappear. The child must "overcome his or her profound sense of rejection, of humiliation, of unlovability, and of powerlessness which the one parent's departure so often engenders" (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 237). Because anger may be directed inward as well as outward, it, too, requires extended time to subside. "Children and adolescents do not believe in no-fault divorce. They may blame one or both parents or they may blame themselves" (Wallerstein, 1983, pp. 238-239). A child is generally not ready to forgive either parent until he or she can forgive himself or

herself for "having wished the divorce to happen or having failed to restore the intact marriage" (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 239). Children's denial and inability to realize that their parents will not reconcile, even after one has remarried, may continue for many years. Hence, the task of accepting the permanence of the family breakup may take many years. This task is even more difficult than accepting the permanence of death, because the living presence of both parents supports the child's hopes of their reconciliation and the return to the whole family.

Task VI occurs sometime during adolescence. Wallerstein calls it Achieving Realistic Hope Regarding Relationships. Past pain and vulnerability make such hope difficult for a child who wants to avoid further hurt, and therefore does not want to take a chance on another loving relationship which may fail. Adolescents, particularly, fear repeating the marital or sexual failures of their parents. This task of facing future relationships with hope, even after all other psychological tasks have been mastered, often causes the otherwise adjusted child to founder. Some react with the insistence that they will never marry; others find themselves caught in low self-esteem and promiscuity.

Faced with a number of outside stressors and a wide assortment of negative emotions, children of divorced



parents carry a heavy emotional burden. The six psychological tasks of adjustment

represent a substantive addition to the usual tasks of growing up. Successful resolution would enable the child to achieve closure to the divorce experience, a well-earned sense of independence and pride, and an intact capacity to trust and to love. It is likely, however, that even where these tasks are successfully resolved there will remain for the child of divorce some residue of sadness, of anger, and of anxiety about the potential reliability of relationships which may reappear at critical times during the adult years (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 242).

While children and adolescents experience these varied emotions and psychological tasks, they often have limited support from family and friends, though the period immediately following separation is one in which children need the most support. Though all people need affection and friendly, sustained support during a time of crisis, children especially need the help of adults. Parents, however, have a decreased ability to parent because they themselves are angry, bitter, or depressed (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). As the divorcing period continued, children aged 9-12 in Wallerstein and Kelly's study were "acutely aware of the lapses in parenting and felt aggrieved and neglected" (p. 42). Almost all the nine- and ten-year-old boys were greatly hurt because they felt that their fathers were totally unavailable to them. Girls, too, felt emotionally abandoned by their mothers. Both girls and boys had abrupt changes in the

amount of time with their parents. Because many mothers took full-time jobs, they were no longer at home in the hours after school. In addition, the adults adjusting to a new social life and new relationships with new friends had less time with their children. These changes from time with parent to time with a babysitter seldom followed any transition period for adjusting to the changes.

Helpful resources outside the family and outside the school were lacking. Fewer than five per cent of these children received help from a church congregation or minister. Fewer than ten per cent of these children had adult help from the community or family friends. Those children who turned to their peers did so not to share confidences, but rather to find activities and provide distance from the unhappiness of home (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

#### **Role of the school and fiction materials**

The school, however, was helpful to these children, "largely because of its continuing presence in their lives at a time of great discontinuity. The ongoing classes and the need to attend them regularly helped organize the children's lives. Schools also provided a refuge from family difficulties and sorrowing parents" (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p. 44). Despite Wallerstein and Kelly's findings that more than half of

the children had no support from their teachers, who did not know of the divorce unless the children told them, other researchers believe that the school is perhaps the most stable force in the lives of children new to divorce. "In the months following a separation and divorce, the teacher often becomes the central--and sometimes only--stable figure in a child's life" (Beeson, 1984, citing Schoyer, 1980, p.7). Other researchers agree. Goldman and King (1985) conclude that "the school may well be the single most comprehensive continuing resource for children during the divorce crisis" (p. 288).

If the school is indeed the most stable factor for a child experiencing parental divorce, then what is the role of the school library media specialist in attending to the needs of the whole child? Pardeck and Pardeck (1985) suggest that modern educators have realized that "books can not only have an impact on the personal adjustment of people, but also can be used as a tool for helping them deal with behavioral and emotional problems" (p. 313). They consider this bibliotherapy, an approach which helps a person solve problems through the use of books.

Other professionals who work with young people suggest that realistic fiction is the appropriate genre for helping students deal with their problems. Noting

that realistic fiction is "that imaginative writing which accurately reflects life as it was lived in the past or could be lived today" and that contemporary realism focuses upon the problems of living today, Huck (1979, p. 390) adds that the book publishing industry has allowed a relatively new freedom to present topics such as divorce that were once taboo.

Realistic fiction serves children in the process of understanding and coming to terms with themselves as they acquire "human-ness." Books which honestly portray the realities of life may help children toward a fuller understanding of human problems and human relationships and, thus, toward a fuller understanding of themselves and their own potential. (Huck, 1979, p. 390)

In addition, realistic fiction helps to assure young people that they are not the first or the only people to experience problems. Besides facing problems similar to their own, young people can learn from fiction a way of experiencing worlds or problems they do not know. The lessons they learn from realistic fiction can serve as warnings or preparations for living, by providing them models, both good and bad, in coping with the problems of the human condition (Huck, 1979). Realistic fiction also shows readers that people are more alike than different. Contemporary realistic fiction books "help children better understand the problems and issues of their own lives, empathize with other people, and see the complexities of human relationships" (Sutherland, Monson, and Abuthnot, 1981,

p. 308). A further use of realistic fiction for young adults is that it can give both teens and adults insight into adolescent psychology and values. In addition, it can serve as a discussion topic, relieving the embarrassment of talking of one's own problems, by using the third person to discuss adjustments and stresses (Nilsen and Donelson, 1985).

A high-school junior who had experienced parental divorce during the elementary school years felt that elementary teachers could help children of divorced parents with several techniques. "Another suggestion is reading books made for children in their situation" (Hrymak and Smart, 1984, p. 137).

Educators in general and school library media specialists in particular must remember that young adult fiction cannot cure emotional illness, guarantee that readers will behave in socially approved ways, or directly solve the reader's problems (Nilsen and Donelson, 1985). Still, its many uses justify both its inclusion in the school materials collection, and familiarity with its contents. If, however, realistic fiction about any subject is to be helpful, it must accurately portray truths about a condition and feelings of those involved.

The stressors which a child faces following the parents' divorce are indeed obstacles to healthy

emotional development. Reactions to such stressors can be grouped into categories of several emotions, and familiarity with postdivorce emotions can help adults understand the healing stages and psychological tasks yet to be mastered. Bibliotherapy is one technique for helping children understand their problems as part of the human condition. If fiction written for middle-level readers is realistic in its portrayals of young characters and their emotions as they struggle to cope with their parents' divorce, then school library media specialists should be familiar with novels with the theme of maturing after divorce.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The researcher used content analysis as the method for this study. Defined as "a procedure designed to facilitate the objective analysis of the appearance of words, phrases, concepts, themes, characters, or even sentences and paragraphs contained in printed or audiovisual materials," (Busha and Harter, 1980, p. 171) content analysis allowed the researcher to do an objective study based on predefined categories. Then the researcher quantified and ordered the categorized units. Following that, the researcher analyzed, compared, and interpreted the attained data.

Content analysis is important as a research method to ascertain if what young people read is accurate in representing society.

If children do gain ideas and impressions about the world around them from the books they read, as is generally believed, it is surely important for adults to know what kind of world the books portray. Content analysis can help to provide a more comprehensive view of the contemporary world as it is pictured in children's books. (Bekkedal, 1973, p. 124)

The researcher read and analyzed eighteen contemporary realistic novels identified from two selection tools. One source was the retrospective selection tool *Best Books for Children*, by Gillespie and Gilbert (1985). "The primary aim of this work is to provide a list of books, gathered from many sources,

that are highly recommended to satisfy both a child's recreational reading needs and the demands of a typical school curriculum" (p. xi). Because Gillespie and Gilbert usually required three recommendations in the sources consulted for reviews, the researcher assumed that the titles listed would indeed be of good quality. The titles were listed under the fiction categories of "Growing into Maturity," specifically "Family Problems." Only those books listed with a copyright date of 1981 or later were selected, because the researcher wanted to analyze only the most recent fiction for students. In addition, the researcher imposed the limitation of intended or recommended audience. Books used in the study were recommended for students in one or more of the grades five through nine.

The other selection tool was Booklist, with its annual listings of "Notable Children's Books" and "Best Books for Young Adults." The researcher imposed the same copyright and recommended audience limitations. In addition, the books chosen for the study carried a subject heading of "Divorce," "Stepfamily," or "Separation" following the fiction heading or had a Booklist review which indicated that the family had experienced or was experiencing a separation, divorce, or remarriage following divorce. For those issues more current than the latest "Notable Books" or "Best Books"



lists, the researcher checked reviews through June 30, 1986. No books reviewed after that date were included in the study.

The researcher assumed that *Booklist* included only quality books because the purpose of the reviewing tool is "to provide a guide to current print and nonprint materials worthy of consideration for purchase by small and medium-sized public libraries and school library media centers. A review in *Booklist* constitutes a recommendation for library purchase" ("Policy Statement," 1986, title page).

All novels used in the research study were available in the Eagle Grove (Iowa) Community School system, the Eagle Grove Memorial Library, Phillips Middle School (Fort Dodge, Iowa), the University of Northern Iowa Youth Collection, or through inter-library loan, with the requests placed at the Eagle Grove Memorial Library.

The researcher read and analyzed each novel, investigating the elements related to the hypotheses. Using a checklist, the researcher recorded occurrences or incidents of specific actions which illustrated negative emotions contributing to lowered self-esteem.

For a hypothesis to be accepted, 50% or more of the novels analyzed must have contained evidence of at least

one incident of a child's emotional reaction in that category. Categories of emotional reactions contributing to lowered self-esteem follow.

Examples of denial were excuses made to others for the absent parent, lies or fantasies about the parental separation, and worries about self or parent which have been displaced onto someone or something else, such as a pet.

Grief or depression indications included yearning for the absent parent, deep sighing, sleeplessness, restlessness, and difficulty in concentrating. Other signs included a feeling of emptiness or sadness, inhibition of play, compulsive overeating, somatic complaints, and preoccupation with a sense of loss for the family and its symbols and traditions.

Concrete expressions of the fear of rejection or abandonment included sweating, palpitations, agitation, trembling, physical searching for the absent parent, excessive clinging to the custodial parent, lying to one parent about the other in order to please, negative behavior to provoke punishment, worry about one's own lovability, and worry of the custodial parent's illness or death.

Feeling responsible for causing the divorce, choosing one parent over the other, accepting a

stepparent, or blaming a parent for causing the divorce were all indications of guilt.

Signs of immaturity included regressive behavior, such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting, or loss of previously mastered developmental tasks. Hypermatuity indications included the acceptance of one or more adult roles, such as caring for siblings, supplementing the family income, responsibility for a major portion of household tasks, or caring for the depressed parent.

Expressions of anger included verbal or physical aggression, temper tantrums, occasional nightmares, tension and anxiety attacks, compulsions, scapegoating, and rebelliousness in home routine and discipline.

Criteria for preoccupation with parental reconciliation included plots or actions to reconcile the parents with one another, or fantasies of reconciliation.

Anxiety or worry were indicated by concern for one's own vulnerability, concern for the well-being of either or both parents, and concern over changes in the family economic situation, housing, school, neighborhood, and relationships with parents as they acquire new friends and mates.

Indications of loneliness included physical distance from a parent and prolonged waiting for a

parent to return from work, socializing, or depression.

Signs of divided loyalty included fear that a step toward one parent may be interpreted as betrayal of the other, with the possible result of rejection; difficulty in choosing a parent with whom to live or to spend a holiday or vacation; and difficulty in dealing with the open competition between parents for the attention and loyalty of the child.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis of the Data

Using a checklist (See Appendix A), the researcher analyzed eighteen novels for evidence of emotional reactions and tabulated the results. Based on those figures and the condition that an emotion would be portrayed in at least 50% of the books in order for the hypotheses to be accepted, the researcher was able to accept nine of the ten hypotheses about emotions resulting from parental separation or divorce and leading to lowered self-esteem. In analyzing the data, the researcher has provided selective examples to illustrate the portrayal of emotions for each hypothesis. Table 1 displays the compilation of the data by which all hypotheses were tested.

The researcher accepted the first hypothesis that a majority of major characters would at some time feel denial about the parents' divorce. Nine of the novels, or 50%, showed the major character feeling denial. Some children made excuses for the absent parent. For example, Brian Cobb in *It Must've Been the Fish Sticks*, learned at age 13 that his parents were divorced when he was a baby. Prior to that, he thought that his mother had died when he was an infant and after his father remarried, the new wife adopted him. Disbelieving that

his biological mother would divorce his father and leave, Brian thought,

She'll probably explain why she had to leave, why she couldn't take me with her. There's got to be a good reason, like maybe she had amnesia. She'll want me to stay and live with her forever, and it will serve Dad and Mom right. (Bates, 1982, p. 30)

Leigh Botts in *Dear Mr. Henshaw* found other ways to deny his parents' divorce. He fantasized that "someday Dad and Bandit would pull up in front in the rig" (Cleary, 1983, p. 29) and then continued hoping that they would together show off in front of people Leigh knew. He also denied the permanent separation by insisting that "Dad should be phoning any day now. When I said that at supper (chili out of a can), Mom said for me not to get my hopes up, but I know Dad will remember this time" (Cleary, 1983, p. 49).

Ted Solomon in *The Solomon System* denied the reality of the coming divorce by displacing his worries over the well-being of his parents onto his dog, who had escaped and been hurt. "'You have to think about things before they happen,' I insisted. 'If you can't take care of a dog right, then don't have dogs'" (Naylor, 1983, p. 156).

The researcher accepted the second hypothesis that a majority of the novels would portray grief or depression in children of divorced parents. Thirteen of the eighteen books, or 72%, showed grief or depression.

Table 1  
Emotions Portrayed in the Eighteen Novels Analyzed

Emotion	Title	Bates, It Must've Been the Fish Sticks	Cleary, Dear Mr. Henshaw	Conrad, Holding Me Here	Danziger, The Divorce Express	Danziger, It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World	Fox, The Moon-Light Man	Giff, Rat Teeth	Hurwitz, Dedee Takes Charge	Klein, Robbie and the Leap Year Blues	Lowry, The One Hundredth Thing About Caroline	Mazer, Taking Terri Mueller	Naylor, The Solomon System	Oppenheimer, Gardine vs. Hanover	Pfeffer, Starting with Melodie	Sachs, Shyster	Stone, Half Nelson, Full Nelson	Voight, A Solitary Blue	Wolkoff, Happily Ever After...	Almost	Total	Percentage
Denial		X	X				X					X	X		X	X	X	X			9	50%
Grief/Depression		X	X	X	X		X		X			X	X	X	X	X		X	X		13	72%
Fear of Abandonment and Rejection		X	X	X	X		X		X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X			13	72%
Guilt		X	X	X	X		X			X		X	X					X			10	56%
Immaturity/Hypermaturity		X	X		X		X		X			X	X	X	X		X	X			12	67%
Anger		X	X		X		X	X	X			X	X		X			X			12	67%
Preoccupation with Reconciliation			X	X	X			X	X	X			X				X				8	44%
Anxiety/Worry		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		18	100%
Loneliness			X	X	X		X		X	X		X				X	X	X			11	61%
Divided Loyalty		X			X		X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X		13	72%
Total		8	9	6	9	4	9	4	8	5	1	9	9	7	7	5	7	9	3		119	-

A common reaction was a deep sadness or sense of loss for a familiar way of life. Phoebe in *The Divorce Express* experienced such pain. "While I'm changing I think about the marriage and the divorce. I do that a lot. I wonder if I'll ever get used to it and it won't hurt so much. I hope so" (Danziger, 1982, p. 23).

Other reactions showing depression were physical, such as compulsive overeating or somatic complaints. Jeff Greene in *A Solitary Blue* "lost" his mother more than once.

He felt so bad--sorry for himself, and angry at himself for losing her--and helpless. He didn't know what he should have done, what he could have done. He felt--rolling over onto his back and wrapping his arms across the pain in his chest and stomach, pain that wasn't even real--as if he had been broken into thousands of little pieces. Broken and then dropped into some dark place. Some dark place where he was always going to stay.

Because Melody was going away, again. Because she didn't want to stay where he was. And he wasn't sure he could stand that. (Voight, 1984, p. 79)

Melodie in *Starting with Melodie* also had physical symptoms. "I'd never seen her look so bad. There were circles under her eyes, and she'd bitten off her fingernails. She'd also developed a habit of chewing on her lower lip" (Pfeffer, 1982, p. 79). In addition, she had difficulty in concentrating, another symptom of grief or depression. Her friend Elaine, not understanding that, noted, "Melodie, I decided, was



determined to feel sorry for herself, no matter what" (Pfeffer, 1982, p. 58).

The researcher accepted the third hypothesis that books would portray children fearing abandonment and rejection. Thirteen of the novels analyzed, or 72%, showed evidence of that fear.

Leigh Botts in *Dear Mr. Henshaw* needed his father for nurturance and help at home. "I was thinking if I had a father at home, maybe he could show me how to make a burglar alarm for my lunchbag" (Cleary, 1983, p. 52).

Ted Solomon in *The Solomon System* nearly reached a state of panic. As he and his family were discussing summer camp, Ted's agitation grew. "An alarm went off inside me. I don't know what it was, but all of a sudden I felt they wanted us out of the way, that something was going to happen" (Naylor, 1983, p. 31).

Both Terri Mueller in *Taking Terri Mueller* and Brian Cobb in *It Must've Been the Eish Sticks* went looking for their absent parents, whom they could not remember and had previously believed to be dead. Terri demanded of her father the address and phone number of Aunt Vivian, who could furnish her with the information her father would not release. She eventually called her mother from a phone booth, away from her father.

Jeff Greene in *A Solitary Blue* lied to his mother in order not to be rejected. When Melody announced her

plans to leave Jeff again, "Jeff made himself accept it, right then. He knew that if he waited even for a second, he would start complaining, and then she really wouldn't like him. 'OK,' he said" (Voight, 1984, p. 79).

Phoebe in *The Divorce Express* used Krazy Glue on many of the items at school. Her provoking of punishment was her way of crying out for reassurance of parental care.

Several of the children experienced lessened or interrupted care from parents, often wondering about their own lovability. Brian, in *It Must've Been the Fish Sticks*, for example, wondered why his mother said he should stay with her after all these years of separation. "Does she really want me to stay? Maybe she's only being polite, trying to make up for neglecting me. Or maybe she realizes she needs me for protection" (Bates, 1982, p. 105).

Leigh Botts of *Dear Mr. Henshaw* wondered about his lovability, though he had also denied the separation. "I don't think Dad is that much interested in me. He didn't phone when he said he would" (Cleary, 1983, p. 57).

Robin in  *Holding Me Here*  felt the need to ask if she were loved.

"Do you love me, Daddy?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Then how could you leave me? How could you just leave me like that, Daddy?" I thought I was

all cried out, but my eyes filled with tears again. (Conrad, 1986, p. 144)

Some children also worried that the other parent would leave or that the children would be thrown out or sent away. Caroline Hanover, for example, in *Gardine vs. Hanover*, knew that her mother had not wanted the second child, and she feared that she would have to take care of her little brother. A few years later she realized that she had over-reacted, but when her mother actually did send the children to live with their father, Caroline thought, "'Mothers didn't give their children away.' As it turned out, she'd been wrong about that" (Oppenheimer, 1982, p. 23). Caroline also analyzed her mother and the career as a doctor. "She'd ended by rejecting every one of them, her whole life centered on her career, her patients" (Oppenheimer, 1982, p. 15).

Becky Rader in *Slyster* also feared the loss of her remaining parent.

"Yeah," Becky said. "How come everybody goes away from me?"

"What do you mean?"

"First Daddy and now the cats."

Mrs. Rader rested her chin on the top of Becky's head. "You still have me" (Sachs, 1985, p. 64).

The researcher also accepted the fourth hypothesis that guilt would be portrayed in at least half of the novels analyzed. Ten of the eighteen books, or 56% of

the novels studied, indicated that the major character felt guilt at causing or not preventing the divorce or for choosing one parent over the other or accepting a stepparent.

Jeff Greene in *A Solitary Blue* felt guilt when he told his mother that he preferred to live with his father. He did so, and not gently, because he could trust his father more than he trusted his mother, and also because he felt the need to stop Melody from hurting his father. "Jeff knew he'd done what he really wanted to do, and he knew why, and he even thought it was the right thing. But he wasn't too pleased with himself, all the same" (Voight, 1984, p. 167).

Caroline and Jill in *Gardine vs. Hanover* also felt guilt because their constant bickering forced the separation of the new family which had blended two families of divorce. However, when they finally realized their own guilt, they also felt the need to make amends, and their efforts did result in a reconciliation of Jill's mother and Caroline's father.

Some characters felt irrational guilt. Ted, for example, in *The Solomon System*, admitted to his brother, "It's all my fault, Nory. If I hadn't belched, maybe it would have blown over" (Naylor, 1983, p.44). Another time he still felt guilt. "I got the panicky feeling that maybe there was something more I could do to keep

them together--that I still hadn't tried hard enough" (p. 103).

Robin in  *Holding Me Here*  also felt guilt that her actions and personality had caused the divorce. Two and one-half years after the divorce, she finally admitted to her father her confusion and her guilt.

And you didn't even cry! At least Ma cried sometimes, but with you, nothing. I kept wondering if you left because you couldn't stand my orange peels in the TV room anymore, or if you hated class plays, or rock music, and you were just so relieved to be rid of me. (Conrad, 1986, p. 145)

The researcher accepted the fifth hypothesis that novels in the analysis would also portray emotional immaturity or hypermaturity. Twelve of the books, or 67%, showed one of the two emotions. In eleven of those cases, the children showed hypermaturity, taking on adult mannerisms and responsibilities. Usually they were responsible for cooking, shopping, or cleaning. In some cases, the children became responsible for one of the parents. In  *It Must've Been the Fish Sticks* , Brian took responsibility for Imogene, his mother, especially to protect her from her live-in friend Kelsey, whom Brian told to leave after Kelsey had threatened Imogene and later accidentally set the couch on fire.

Leigh in  *Dear Mr. Henshaw*  sent his beloved dog Bandit with Leigh's father, though it hurt to do so.

"You need him more than I do" (Cleary, 1983, p. 133) was his explanation.

Phoebe in *The Divorce Express* served as confidant to her mother. "It's almost as if my mother's forgotten that I'm the daughter and she's the mother" (Danziger, 1982, p. 99). She added, "Sometimes I think that I spend more time protecting my mother's feelings than she does protecting me" (p. 131).

Catherine Ames had to physically care for her father, who, in a drunken stupor, had to be driven home, undressed, and put to bed, in *The Moonlight Man*.

Ted and Nory in *The Solomon System* took newspaper routes to begin earning money for the next summer's camp, since their parents had explained that the expenses of two households would be greater and there would be less money for camp.

Starting with *Melodie* portrayed immaturity in regressive behavior. Not only because of extended weekends with one of her divorced parents, but also because she felt so terrible about her parents' fighting and the publicity aroused by them, Melodie missed school frequently by feigning illness.

The researcher accepted the sixth hypothesis that children of divorced parents would be portrayed as angry. Twelve of the novels, or 67%, depicted a variety of behaviors symptomatic of internalized anger.

Jeff Greene of *A Solitary Blue* verbally attacked his mother, making her angry by his own expression of anger.

He was making her angry, he could see that. But he couldn't stop. "And I don't like the way you lie. You make it sound like the Professor is so terrible, but you're terrible yourself. What you do to people," he said. "Lying to them so you'll get what you want" (Voight, 1984, p. 87).

Sixteen-year-old Nory Solomon, away at camp, had a temper tantrum, frightening his younger brother Ted.

He stopped and kicked a tree. Hard. Then kicked again. He was acting like a crazy man, and it scared me. Then about fifty yards down, we came to the dugout canoe. (Naylor, 1983, p. 132)

Continuing with his lack of logic and self-discipline, Nory, with Ted accompanying him, got into the untested canoe and headed away from shore, forgetting a paddle, and neglecting to sign the canoe log book, thus breaking several camp rules.

Crankiness and excessive rebelliousness were also prevalent indicators of anger. In *Starting with Melodie*, Elaine found her friend to be difficult.

"'Maybe it's time for a change, then,' I said. 'You've been pretty tiresome lately'" (Pfeffer, 1982, p. 55).

Another irritable character was DeDe in *DeDe Takes Charge*. When her mother experienced difficulty in parking the car, DeDe verbally attacked her mother.

"Dad would have just zipped into this space," DeDe told her mother as she got out

of the car.

"What can I tell you? I'm not perfect," snapped Mrs. Rawson.

"You can say that again," said DeDe. She was feeling angry, and angry words kept coming out of her mouth. (Hurwitz, 1984, p. 88)

Caroline's anger stemmed from a feeling of abandonment and parental conflict in Gardine vs. Hanover.

No way could she level about her own experience. Life with Mom. A mother who labeled her second baby a mistake, then rejected her husband, and ended up a couple years later by giving both her children to him. (Oppenheimer, 1982, p. 85)

Terri Mueller's anger at her parents, especially her father, was evident in a dream she had while visiting her mother in California. In the dream, her father was defeated, and though she thought he deserved it, which made her feel glad, she was also hurt by those feelings.

Leigh, writing his feelings in a pretend letter to Mr. Henshaw, described the tension he experienced. He had telephoned his father, who had indeed been home from trucking but had not bothered to call his son. While they spoke, a boy interrupted Leigh's father to find out when they were going out to get pizza. That same phone call furnished Leigh with the knowledge that his dog Bandit had been lost. "I hate my father" (Cleary, 1983, p. 67). Even after that anger had eased, however, Leigh still felt tension. "And I don't hate my father



either. I can't hate him. Maybe things would be easier if I could" (Cleary, 1983, p. 73).

Because only eight of the novels analyzed, or 44%, described preoccupation with thoughts of parental reconciliation, the researcher rejected the seventh hypothesis. Those eight novels which did represent the concern with reconciliation showed fantasies or plots for reunion and children pleading with their parents to reunite.

Nelson Gato, in *Half-Nelson, Full Nelson*, aware that his parents were having difficulties, as evidenced by two police calls to their home to settle domestic disputes, still expected his mother and sister Vanessa to return from a visit to Aunt Ruthie. When they did not, he and his friend plotted to kidnap Vanessa in the hopes of being caught and in the process shaming his parents into reconciliation.

Sitting on a roof to avoid others, Cliffie in *Rat Teeth* fantasized about the reconciliation of his parents. He was tired of spending three days with his mother and four days with his father each week, having to carry his laundry, homework, and suitcase with him to school each moving day. In his fantasy, Cliffie envisioned his father saying, "We'll go back to the old house. End the divorce. No more living a couple of

days with me and a couple of days with your mother" (Giff, 1984, p. 11).

More than once Ted of The Solomon System fantasized about his parents reconciling. "I was having one of those dreams that you wish was real. I dreamed that Mom said she and Dad were staying together" (Naylor, 1983, p. 146). He also pictured himself lying in a hospital after being hit by a truck. "Angry tears collected in the corners of my eyes. If Mom and Dad needed a calamity to get them back together, maybe Nory and I could think of something" (p. 74).

The researcher accepted the eighth hypothesis, that children would experience anxiety or worry. That anxiety might be caused by feelings of vulnerability, concern for the well-being of either or both parents, or by the many changes in their lives. All eighteen novels, or 100%, displayed anxiety or worry.

Jeff Greene in A Solitary Blue felt anxious because he was so vulnerable. "Jeff felt broken and bruised. He'd thought he wasn't really vulnerable any more and maybe not even angry now that he'd let some of his feelings steam out" (Voight, 1984, p. 88). However, Jeff still was vulnerable. "It wasn't good for him to get confident; just like he'd been confident about Melody. It was when you got taken by surprise and really banged around" (p. 127).

Robbie in *Robbie and the Leap Year Blues* worried about the moodiness and loneliness that each of his parents was experiencing after their relationships with Jill and Seth ended, for then his parents did not have each other and they no longer had substitutes.

Even Caroline, who did not think much about the divorce that had happened at least nine years ago in *The One Hundredth Thing About Caroline*, worried about money. She hoped her mother would marry a millionaire so that her mother could buy normal vegetables, not parsnips and eggplant and other strange vegetables on sale.

Kitty in *Happily Ever After...Almost* worried about new relationships in her family. In conversation with her mother, she could not understand why RJ, her stepbrother, felt threatened.

"My father lives with Peter and Sylvia," I said, "and I don't feel threatened."

"But you did in the beginning, honey. So did Sarah." (Wolkoff, 1982, p. 54)

Kitty also worried about her mother.

I think what caused us to act unnatural was worrying about Mom. Since the divorce, she had been having more downs than ups. At times Sarah and I wondered if she'd forgotten how to laugh. With Seth suddenly in the picture, she was becoming human again. That's a nice quality to see in your mother. It means better lunches, with an occasional homemade chicken salad sandwich, fewer fights, going to bed feeling happy with a smile on your face and good talks when you need them. (Wolkoff, 1982, p. 8)

Because eleven of the eighteen novels, or 61%, portrayed evidence of loneliness, the researcher

accepted the ninth hypothesis. Examples of loneliness, besides the physical distance from the absent parent, included the waiting for a parent to return for a visit or from work, socializing, or sleep caused by depression.

Jeff Greene in *A Solitary Blue* lived years without having any idea of where his mother was. Becky Rader in *Shyster* missed her father so much that "Every time a man with dark wavy hair hurried by, she would hope it was him" (Sachs, 1985, p. 3). In *Gardine vs. Hanover*, Caroline's mother was in New York, but her father was in San Diego. Jill's mother was in San Diego, but her father was in San Francisco. Terri Mueller hoped to get her father to move to California, so that she could have both parents in the same state and would more easily be able to see both of them.

In *Robbie and the Leap Year Blues*, Robbie felt loneliness because though his parents lived in the same apartment building, and he alternated weeks of living with them, his parents did not communicate with one another. Consequently, one weekend both his mother and father were out of town, assuming that Robbie would stay with the other parent, when actually, neither parent was caring for him. He also felt lonely when his mother returned to school for more courses.

Actually I didn't like it that much when it happened, because Mom was hardly ever around.

It was about when Dad moved out, and she said she wanted to be so busy, she wouldn't have time to think. It seemed like all the time she was studying or going to the library or going to classes. (Klein, 1981, p. 32)

Catherine Ames in *The Moonlight Man* was frequently left waiting for her father. At the end of the school year, she waited three weeks for her father to telephone, write, or arrive to take her on vacation away from boarding school. "Her father, she explained carefully, was always late, even for those short visits, themselves so infrequent, which had been their only contact over the last twelve years" (Fox, 1986, p. 3).

Thirteen of the eighteen books studied, or 72%, contained evidence of divided loyalty. Therefore the researcher accepted the tenth hypothesis, that children would feel divided loyalty by fearing that a step toward one parent would be interpreted as betrayal of the other; that children would have difficulty in choosing which parent to live with or vacation with; or that children would have difficulty in coping with their parents' open competition for the child's loyalty.

When Brian in *It Must've Been the Fish Sticks* cut his leg with the sickle, his birth mother attended to him and took him to the doctor, but that complicated Brian's feelings. "All of a sudden I feel very close to her...She was terrific too. I wish I could tell her that, but somehow I can't. Maybe it's because if I did

I'd feel disloyal to Mom, waiting for me back home" (Bates, 1982, p. 90). Terrific as Imogene, his birth mother, seemed to Brian, he could not be sure of his decision to stay with her. "My staying would hurt Dad and Mom a whole lot, especially Mom. It would make her think I like Imogene better" (p. 102).

Phoebe in *The Divorce Express* was aware of the conflict between her divorcing parents and the several stages through which they had passed. "Mine sure did--the fighting and anger--then the distance--and making me feel caught in the middle" (Danziger, 1982, p. 98).

Phoebe's friend and almost-stepsister Rosie also experienced divided loyalty in *It's an Armadillo-Eat-Turtle World*. Rosie's mother lived in Woodstock, New York, but her father lived in California. When Rosie chose to stay in New York for Christmas, her father accused her of "having no sense of family" (p. 130), so she promised to visit her dad over spring break.

Fourteen, or 78%, of the novels studied contained at least five (50%) of the ten emotions for which the books were analyzed. Overall the novels were realistic in portraying the range of emotions experienced by children when their parents divorce.

The researcher attempted to record the time since the divorce when marking the checklist, but not all novels indicated the elapsed time. Therefore, no

analysis was possible in correlating the portrayal of emotional reactions and the time since separation and divorce.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Recommendations, and Summary

Based on the analysis of the data, the researcher concluded that authors of better quality and more recent novels for middle-level readers realistically write about the emotions and reactions of children of divorced parents. However, because this study included only novels which were considered acceptable at minimum, and high quality in many cases, no such conclusion can be drawn for novels which did not meet the higher standards of the selection tools used in identifying the novels to be analyzed.

Another conclusion is that authors made conscious efforts to write realistically. Prior to the study, the researcher expected that all hypotheses would be accepted, because novelists who wrote about children of divorced parents would understand the children's emotional needs and reactions. The one hypothesis which was rejected, that children would portray a preoccupation with parental reconciliation, might be explained by conscious effort of the writers. Perhaps the novelists or their editors were aware of the advice of Pardeck and Pardeck (1985), who wrote that "the unlikely 'happy ending,' in which parents reunite, should be avoided in selecting books dealing with divorce" (p. 315). In assuring that children's wishes



were not granted for a happy but unrealistic ending, some authors may have chosen to omit the children's fantasies for their parents' reunion.

Because all eighteen novels portrayed anxiety or worry, one might conclude that such emotion is the most common reaction of children. That may be explained by the abrupt changes children face when their parents separate and divorce. Besides the sudden changes in the family structure, children face changes in discretionary income and sometimes in neighborhoods and schools. Like persons of any age, these children feel anxiety at accepting change and fear the unknown that change will bring. Another possible conclusion to explain the prevalence of anxiety and worry is the similarity in feeling between anxiety and fear of rejection and loneliness. Individuals experiencing these confusing feelings cannot always identify them; how much more difficult it is for the researcher to discern the difference and to interpret actions or words as the correct emotion.

Three emotions, grief or depression, fear of abandonment and rejection, and divided loyalty, were portrayed in 72% of the novels analyzed. Perhaps they were depicted so often because they, too, are prevalent emotions for children whose parents divorce. As divorce ends a type of life children have known, it resembles

death, in that the family relationship dies and must be re-established in new forms. Just as death causes grief, so does divorce, which is the death of the nuclear family.

It is natural, too, for children to fear rejection after they have seen their parents reject one another. It would be more unrealistic to expect children to perceive the rejection as being only for the other adult. Therefore, one might conclude that novelists would be more likely to include fear of rejection as a common reaction to the divorce.

One might also conclude that if a child has lived in a home with two parents who have been responsible for the child's welfare, the child would feel a strong emotional attachment to each adult. When the relationship between the two adults is severed, the relationship between each adult and the child is not necessarily severed. However, the child is very aware of the break between parents, which places the child "in the middle." The divided loyalty seems a likely outcome of the divorce, and, therefore, was probably a likely inclusion for the novelists.

Five of the eighteen novels analyzed portrayed fewer than five of the ten emotions studied. Perhaps one reason is the "time since the divorce." Caroline in *The One Hundredth Thing About Caroline* (Lowry, 1983)

showed only one emotion, anxiety about money in the single-parent family. However, Caroline was only two years old when her parents divorced nine years before the story's beginning. She had very little time to think of her parents as a family, and she then had nine years to accustom herself to life without her father, who lives halfway across the country. Perhaps she felt fewer or less severe pains when her parents divorced, and she had had more time to heal.

Such reasoning will not explain the portrayal of fewer emotions in all the novels, however. Cliffie in *Rat Teeth* (Giff, 1984) had had less than a year to adjust to his parents' divorce, but that novel portrays only four of the emotions. Like *It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World* (Danziger, 1985) and *Shyster* (Sachs, 1985), this book is a short book. *Rat Teeth* and *Shyster* both feature younger characters, Cliffie, a fifth-grader, and Becky, a fourth-grader. Though Rosie and Phoebe are both freshmen in *It's an Aardvark-Eat-Turtle World*, that novel is recommended as a high-interest/low-level-reading book, and like the other short books, appeals to less mature readers. The intended audience may have influenced the novelists to write with less complexity.

One more novel, *Happily Ever After...Almost*, (Wolkoff, 1982) portrayed only three of the studied

emotional reactions. It dealt not only with the divorce, but also with the remarriage of two divorced adults and the formation of a new blended family. The novel does not make clear how much time elapsed between Kitty's parents' divorce and the remarriage of Kitty's mother. However, her father had already been remarried, and Kitty tells the story in flashbacks. Her story begins one year after the new marriage. By then she and her sister have had more opportunity to heal emotionally, and they have gained a second loving father, another pair of grandparents, and a brother. With such security, Kitty's memory is less likely to include the negative emotions leading to lowered self-esteem.

#### **Recommendations**

Because this study considered only novels with recent copyrights and generally high recommendations, the study might be replicated to analyze the portrayal of the same emotions in the early novels written about children of divorce. The researcher could discover if early writers of the subject, those who first dealt with the problems caused by divorce, accurately depicted the emotional reactions of the children characterized. Perhaps they did; perhaps, however, as books with this theme have become more common, book editors and publishers have raised their standards for realistic

fiction, and today's fiction about children of divorce is of higher quality or realism. Another possibility is to study recent fiction that is not recommended in the "superlative" lists. Is it because of the high degree of realism and character's emotional reactions that the novels included in this study are so highly recommended? Are novels about children of divorce which do not accurately or realistically portray children's emotional reactions accepted for publication?

One more possibility in undertaking a similar study would be to study the portrayal of emotional healing in novels about children of divorced parents. Do those novels portray a hope or a healing? How long does the healing take? Are the healing itself and the time necessary for the healing realistic? Are there patterns in the healing process, or in the six psychological developmental tasks enumerated by Wallerstein (1983)?

If one does undertake a similar study, however, the researcher may wish to modify the checklist to eliminate some of the subjective judgments required. Because emotions overlap greatly, it is sometimes difficult for the person or character experiencing them, and for the researcher, to distinguish between some emotions, such as fear of abandonment and loneliness. Even with a checklist of emotions and probable manifestations, the

researcher had to make some subjective decisions about categories.

#### Summary

The purpose of this content analysis was to investigate how realistically novelists portrayed the emotional reaction of children when their parents divorced, in fiction written for middle-level readers. The researcher analyzed eighteen books with copyrights from 1981 to 1986, novels identified in *Best Books for Children* (Gillepsie and Gilbert, 1985) or in *Booklist's* "Notable Books for Children," "Best Books for Young Adults," or in *Booklist* reviews following the superlative listings for 1985 but prior to July 1, 1986. Specifically analyzed were depictions of ten emotional reactions: denial, grief or depression, fear of abandonment and rejection, guilt, immaturity or hypermaturity, anger, preoccupation with thoughts of parental reconciliation, anxiety or worry, loneliness, and divided loyalty. The checklist used in analyzing each of the ten emotional reactions included probable manifestations of each reaction.

Each emotional reaction was tested with one hypothesis, and nine of the ten hypotheses were accepted, based on the data recorded in the study. Only the hypothesis concerning preoccupation with parental reconciliation was rejected, because in every other

hypothesis, at least 50% of the novels portrayed the emotional reaction being analyzed.

Since this study has found that the eighteen novels are realistic, they are excellent resources for use in a realistic literature unit or for use as bibliotherapy with individuals. Library media specialists who work with middle-level students can purchase and recommend these novels with confidence.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## Bibliography of Novels Analyzed

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## APPENDIX B

## Checklist of Emotional Reactions

Title: Author:

Pub. Data:

Major character(s):

Time since divorce:

## I. DENIAL

- A. Making excuses
- B. Play/fantasy to restore absent parent
- C. Displacing worries over the well-being of absent parent onto pet or substitute
- D. Regression of hostility into fear of what will happen to the absent parent or a substitute
- E. Insistence that the absent parent still loves the child

## II. GRIEF OR DEPRESSION

- A. Deep sadness or sense of loss for familiar way of life
- B. Sleeplessness, restlessness, deep sighing, play inhibition
- C. Difficulty in concentrating, feelings of emptiness
- D. Compulsive overeating, somatic complaints

## III. FEAR OF ABANDONMENT AND REJECTION

- A. For food, protection, college funding, nurturance
- B. Panic states (sweating, palpitations, agitation, trembling, fear of illness/death without parental care)
- C. Physically searching for absent parent
- D. Lying to one parent about the other to avoid abandonment
- E. Excessive clinging to the custodial parent
- F. Provoking punishment as reassurance of parental care
- G. Thoughts like, "If one parent already left, what will stop the other from also leaving?" or "If one parent was thrown out, will I be thrown out, too?"
- H. Concern about own lovability
- I. Lessened care or interruption in care from parent(s)

## IV. GUILT

- A. At causing or not preventing the divorce
- B. For choosing one parent over the other, or accepting a stepparent
- C. Blaming a parent for the divorce, and feeling guilty about that

## V. IMMATURITY OR HYPERMATURITY

- A. Regressive manifestations (thumbsucking, bedwetting, baby talk, feigning illness to skip school), often aided by overindulging adults
- B. Adult mannerisms (teacher's helper, scolding younger siblings, adult responsibilities at home, parent's confidant, supplementing family income)

## VI. ANGER

- A. Aggression: temper tantrums, hitting others, verbal attacks
- B. Crankiness and excessive rebelliousness
- C. Caused by parental conflict, feeling abandoned or different from peers, scapegoating by 1 parent
- D. Denial of negative feelings with rationalization
- E. Occasional nightmares
- F. Tension attacks (hyperirritability, crying, tics)
- G. Compulsions

## VII. PREOCCUPATIONS WITH THOUGHTS OF PARENTAL RECONCILIATION

- A. Pleading with parents to reunite
- B. Fantasies or plots for parents' reconciliation

## VIII. ANXIETY OR WORRY

- A. Own vulnerability
- B. Well-being of either or both parents (health, schedule, moodiness, possible accidents, chronic illness)
- C. Changes in economic situation, housing, school, neighborhood, relationship with parents as they find new friends or remarry

## IX. LONELINESS

- A. Waiting for a parent to return from work, socializing, or sleep caused by depression
- B. Physical distance from absent parent

## X. DIVIDED LOYALTY

- A. Fear that a step toward one parent will be interpreted as betrayal of the other, which may lead to rejection
- B. Difficulty in choosing which parent to live with or spend the holiday or vacation with
- C. Difficulty in dealing with parents' open competition for child's loyalty

## XI. OTHER

## XII. NOTES



## ABSTRACT

A content analysis of eighteen novels for readers in grades five through nine was conducted to investigate the portrayal of children's emotional reactions to their parents' divorce. Novels were limited to those published between 1981 and 1986 and recommended in *Best Books for Children*, *Booklist's* "Best Books for Young Adults" or "Notable Books for Children," or *Booklist* reviews prior to July 1, 1986.

Using a checklist with manifestations of each emotional reaction, the researcher noted the occurrence of ten common reactions: denial, grief or depression, fear of abandonment and rejection, guilt, immaturity or hypermaturity, anger, preoccupation with thoughts of parental reconciliation, anxiety or worry, loneliness, and divided loyalty. The researcher accepted nine of the ten hypotheses, that the novels would realistically portray the ten emotional reactions. Every reaction but preoccupation with parental reconciliation was portrayed in at least half of the novels studied.