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Worldbuilding: Depiction of War and Trauma in Select Works of Mary Pope Osborne's *The Magic Tree House Series*

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Dr. Raichel M Sylus**

War is a catastrophic event with intense consequences affecting the physical and mental health of people. Literature for children represents war and trauma in myriad dimensions handling the sensitivity of topic and considering the vulnerable mindsets of young readers. Many authors have attempted to delve into the emotions and plight of the survivors of war in their works. One such is Mary Pope Osborne who rebuilds the past worlds and provides her readers with a vicarious experience of different historical events. Her readers and her characters are transported to the past to experience war trauma thereby helping them to comprehend its effects. *The Magic Tree House* series by Osborne is an attractive read that embodies various literary elements to enhance the reading experience. Osborne has effectively used the technique of worldbuilding to represent war and trauma in her series. The study attempts to analyse the role of worldbuilding in providing the readers with a firsthand experience of war and trauma in the light of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The paper concentrates on the role of literature in representing trauma; providing resilience through stories; and educating children about the cruelty of war, a social reality through fictional means of worldbuilding.

Key Words: Trauma, war, worldbuilding, Magic Tree House series, children's literature

“You experienced firsthand what it means to live in constant terror You know what it feels like to be afraid to speak or move about freely You have seen cruel people hunt down the innocent—even children” (Mary Pope Osborne, *Danger in the Darkest Hour*)

Introduction

Literature replicates the primary world by subcreating alternate and fictional realities. Fiction is used as a channel to comprehend the incomprehensible truths of life. Authors simplify the complexities of life and convert them into exciting stories that can entertain and educate young readers. War and trauma in children’s literature play a crucial role in fostering empathy, emotional resilience and historical awareness among young readers. Owing to the emotional vulnerability of children, writers make use of well-crafted narratives that provides effective understanding of the events without traumatising the young readers. Therefore, literature conveys trauma’s complex, fragmented and unspeakable experiences through its symbolic, metaphoric and creative narrative structures which also goes beyond the usual representations in history and psychology. It creates a space for personal and collective testimonies that mirror the realities of traumatic experiences through fantasy.

The late 20th and 21st centuries saw the usage of fantasy as a tool to represent war and trauma in children’s and young adult literature. Works like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *War Horse*, *The Moomins Series*, *The Chronicles of Prydain*, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *His Dark Materials* series, *The Homeward Bounders*, *The Secret of Platform*, and *Inkheart* trilogy are renowned for usage of fantasy and themes related to war, displacement, loss and trauma in children’s literature. Fantasy and literature as a concomitant duo create an alternative world where the readers enter and gain a lived-in experience of the events narrated in a story. J.R.R. Tolkien’s idea of subcreation and its development by Mark JP Wolf offers insights into the role of worldbuilding in creating compelling stories.

Worldbuilding is a creative process that results in detailed and immersive fictional worlds that gives depth and context to the narrative making the setting more realistic and vivid for the readers. Writers with their creative license design the different elements of their story worlds that includes; geography, nature, language, culture, mythology, philosophy, history, politics and rules of physics that regulates the world. Wolf identifies primary and secondary structures in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, that aids in creating a rich and detailed story world. Maps, timelines, genealogies, nature, culture, language, mythology and philosophy are the fictional world's structures that make it complete and consistent. These structures provide a sense of reality to the young readers though fictional elements intervene in between the stories. They help to create a lived-in experience for the readers and helps to create a story world that appeals more than the narrative. The readers do not just listen to a story but enter the world and experience it in a fiction that involves world-building. Fictional worlds are created as a channel to comprehend the complex social realities of life. War and trauma are a significant topic of discussion considering the contemporary events. Worldbuilding acts as an effective channel to carry and represent the themes of war and trauma in children's literature.

Cathy Caruth offers profound theoretical insights on the representation of trauma in literature in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History*. Her propositions about the belatedness of trauma, its fragmented nature, its impact and the challenges of representing it provide a rich framework and help to analyse how literature approaches complex subjects such as war, trauma, loss and displacement. This paper analyses the role of world-building in representing trauma in children's literature through the lens of Caruth's framework. It discusses about the firsthand experience of war and trauma provided through story worlds. It aims to focus more on studying the effect of world-building as a whole in portraying the impact of trauma and strategies to approach the victims through Osborne's works than studying the contribution of each world structure.

Writers turn to fantasy to “integrate the various kinds of truth that give man and his universe their sense of meaning” (Hume, 1984, p. 50); therefore, this paper attempts to answer the question of why worldbuilding is an effective means to represent trauma in literature for young readers.

The Magic Tree House Series

The Magic Tree House series is a historical fiction that revolves around the life of two young siblings Jack and Annie, who discover a magic tree house that can travel through time and space. They visit different periods of the past and Osborne merges exciting adventures with learning in the series for young readers. War and trauma are significant themes among the spectrum of themes dealt within the series. Osborne subcreates the past worlds for the readers to visit and experience the emotions of those who lived in the past. The blend of fantasy and reality helps to curate stories that can address trauma in an emotionally resonant and understandable manner. The approach to trauma studies gained a fresh impetus after the occurrence of two World Wars where soldiers showed psychological symptoms like shell shock, long-term depression, anxiety, nightmares, fear, and restlessness (Kaur, 2023). Osborne has contributed her part to the war and trauma studies by introducing the cruelties and the aftermath of war through her historical fiction. *Civil War on Sunday*, *Revolutionary War on Wednesday* and *Danger in the Darkest Hour* depicts the plight of vulnerable people who fall prey to the traumatic experiences during war. Osborne creates a rich past world of the respective wars in the stories where the readers visit, explore, engage and learn. Osborne sub-creates her story worlds using different structures as mentioned by Wolf and creatively re-creates the past.

Discussion

Past centuries have borne witness to multiple wars that appear physically devastating but have left a deep psychological impact in the minds of survivors resulting in trauma. Initially, trauma referred to physical wounds but gradually gained a broader definition that relates to wounds of the mind. Trauma is a serious issue that raises concern as it is “Something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or

overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost” (Luckhurst, 2006, p. 499). Caruth defines trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996, p. 11). Traumatic experiences can cause severe mental issues that disrupt the condition of a healthy mind and life. Osborne presents aspects like belatedness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, survivor guilt, unclaimed experience as proposed by Caruth, and methods to deal with the survivors in her stories. Instead of merely representing trauma and its effects, Osborne immerses her characters and readers into the experience of the survivors through worldbuilding. *The Magic Tree House* series allows the reader to interact, observe, participate and immerse in the stories through effective worldbuilding. This approach allows the readers to witness the struggles of victims and fosters a deeper understanding of trauma and its effects.

The very nature of trauma lies in its belatedness, as described by Caruth. Traumatic events do not affect the individuals immediately but haunt them with a delayed response in forms not limited to depression, silence, hallucinations and nightmares. Jack and Annie meet African-American soldiers while helping Clara Barton in the field hospital in the *Civil War on Sunday*. Osborne transports the characters to the warzone and exposes them to harsh realities of war, hardships of the soldiers and suffering of civilians through fictional means of time travel. Jack talks to an African-American soldier who ran thirty miles to warn the Union soldiers that the Confederates were going to attack. He tells Jack that he can never be with his family again as they were sold as slaves. The narration states that “the man fell silent” (2000, p. 32); the soldier’s recollection of the past and his silence is a sign of belatedness. His reaction is a delayed recognition and acknowledgement of the individual and collective trauma of slavery. He realises he can never return to his family when Jack tries to assure him that he will get back with his family soon.

The plight of the soldier is similar to Freud's discussion of the train accident, "from which a person walks away apparently unharmed, only to suffer symptoms of the shock weeks later. . . ." (Caruth, 1996, p. 6). The belatedness of the trauma refers to the return of the traumatic memories of the past, which comes to haunt the victim in the present. The need to continue the fight suppresses the traumatic experience of the loss of the African-American soldiers and there is a delay in processing the emotions. Caruth refers to the time taken for realisation as "latency, the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (1996, p. 17), and the experiences remain unclaimed. The inability of the soldiers to process their emotions while being engaged in a war points towards their repressed trauma, which comes out during conversations with other people. Instead of narrating about belatedness, Osborne gives an opportunity to Jack to engage in a conversation with a victim. Though the exchange of grief is brief, the interaction allows Jack to understand the delayed psychological effects of war. Jack also observes and acknowledges the lamentation of the bereaved soldier and comforts him with words of hope. Jack understands the seriousness of war and trauma after his encounter with the African-American soldier whose pain and silence gives Jack a deeper understanding of the belatedness of trauma that influences a survivor's thoughts and behaviour. Thus, worldbuilding serves as a bridge to meaningful interactions with the victims and fosters empathy and gives a better understanding of their painful reality.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is another alarming condition that strikes the victims. It is concerned with the idea of how the events of the past affect the mind and body of an individual's present. In the words of Caruth, "Post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (1996, p. 58). Flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety are some of the common symptoms of PTSD. In *Civil War on Sunday*, Jack and Annie meet a drummer boy named John. He suffers from heat stroke and his fellow soldiers leave him under the care of Clara Barton, who takes good care of him in the

field hospital. The siblings are allowed to wait on John and they try to reduce his body temperature. Suddenly they find John shouting while being still asleep and “he was waving his arms as if he were having a nightmare” (2000, p. 57). A child’s immediate reaction upon witnessing such events would be fear and Jack and Annie express similar emotions when they observe John’s strange behaviour in his sleep and notice the internal psychological struggle in him due to the impact of war. The siblings wake him up and assure him of his safety. Fictional worldbuilding enables a close observation of survivors, acting as a mirror to the devastating effects of war and the trauma they have endured.

The boundary between adults and children is marred in war leaving everyone vulnerable to the violence and destruction. Despite their young age, the siblings take on the role of caregivers in the field hospital and provide food, water, and basic first aid to the wounded. Though they struggle initially, they quickly adapt and respond effectively to the situation. Along with Jack and Annie, the young readers also get a firsthand experience of dealing with war and trauma. Worldbuilding help to create stories that equip children with emotional intelligence to navigate through adverse situations in life by providing a fictional hands-on experience. The story worlds provide a realistic experience to the characters and readers where they develop emotional strength, build empathy and tackle hardships with confidence and compassion which also reflects in their actual life. A textual description of PTSD can only outline events that readers may not fully grasp. However, an immediate experience of a war zone through fictional means provides a powerful and immersive understanding of war and its aftermath.

Civil War was the last war in which the drummer boys gave orders to soldiers using their drum beats. Osborne has fictionalised a real character John Clem, an American general who served as a drummer boy for the union army. She throws light upon the vulnerable state and plight of a twelve-year-old boy who is pushed to become a soldier and participate in the war. John is thrust into a chaotic, violent environment where he witnesses traumatic events like battle and death which is far beyond his emotional and psychological tolerance. Jack

and Annie are startled by his reactions but they immediately try to calm him. The characters in the story and the readers do not hear the story of John but visit the battlefield and experience the critical condition of the soldiers themselves. Osborne presents a serious condition caused by war for the readers' observation. Worldbuilding helps to connect to the place by bringing it to life and allows the readers to experience the events in person, which in turn gives them a better understanding of events and emotions connected with it.

Moreover, Osborne deals with survivor guilt in *Danger in the Darkest Hour*. Jack and Annie meet a French family who save them from the Nazi soldiers and shelter them for a night. During their stay at Gaston and Suzette's place, the siblings learn about their brave twin sons who worked as couriers for the French resistance. The Nazis arrest Tom and Theo and their parents do not know about their whereabouts since their arrest. Gaston and Suzette continue to do their part and risk their lives even though they have to sacrifice their sons. The repressed trauma of losing their children and the guilt of surviving after losing them is evident in the actions of Gaston and Suzette. Caruth identifies that "What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (1996, p. 6). Gaston's eyes are suddenly filled with tears while bidding goodbye to Jack and Annie. At this juncture, the wounds inflicted upon the mind of Gaston are not fully processed, though he grieves remembering his sons. His surface emotions are purged through his tears but his deep emotional wounds remain still unclaimed.

Jack, Annie and the readers are put through a situation where they can situate themselves among people affected by war and understand their emotions. The emotions of the families who survived war while bereaving the death of dear ones could not be captured in mere words but need a closer examination which is provided through fictional means of worldbuilding. Gaston's sudden surge of emotions astonishes Jack and Annie. Osborne helps the siblings and readers to

observe the emotional duality of war survivors, balancing forced normalcy with deeply buried emotions that emerge when triggered by certain situations.

Ekman and Taylor discuss how worldbuilding increases “the pleasure of partaking in a story” (2009, p. 8). The word ‘pleasure’ could be replaced with experience in the case of war story worlds, where the readers experience emotions, pain, trauma, suffering and death. Worldbuilding enhances the readers’ experience of the story by transporting them to the setting making them an active participant of the events. The characters and the readers are provided with a firsthand experience of living in war times and experiencing trauma. The characters and readers may also succumb to trauma but are supplied with fictional relief that keeps them in a safe space. For instance, Jack and Annie visit different places in the magic tree house; they undergo various difficulties but return to their home, and the story ends on a positive note. Jack witnesses the sufferings of the soldiers and he also becomes a victim of shell shock and the brutal effects of war by just being a spectator. Jack’s venture on his “appointed journey”, as in the words of J.R.R Tolkien where confrontation with “peril, sorrow, and death”(2008, p. 58) gives wisdom, is fruitful as he realises “War is not a game, . . . It is definitely not a game” (*Civil War on Sunday* 2000, p. 67). Every experience of the characters is the readers’ experience as they imitate their child heroes. Jack’s encounter with war and trauma is a channel through which the readers are represented with trauma in the series. Osborne’s stories are time travel narratives that “send their protagonists into the past, suggesting that they can best learn about the past if they experience it themselves, similarly minimise traumatic memory” (Kertzer, 2022, pp. 404-5) through the use of fantasy.

The fictional tale of *Civil War on Sunday* requires Jack and Annie to find a special piece of writing that leads them on a journey back to the time of Civil War. Under Clara’s direction, Jack and Annie care for the victims ensuring they receive food, water, and comforting words of encouragement. As they follow the instructions, they are able to mark the difference it makes. As they follow the rules given to

take care of the wounded, they realise that the list of rules is the special kind of writing they have been seeking for to accomplish their mission. Osborne combines fiction and real-world lessons while disseminating historical knowledge to children through *The Magic Tree House* series. Her fictional narrative and story world provides a platform where the characters and readers get a deeper understanding of trauma and practical experience in handling traumatized individuals with empathy and care.

Osborne goes beyond deepening the readers' understanding of trauma as she also offers guidance on supporting victims through words and actions. She offers some strategies that can be considered as verbal first aid on recognising trauma symptoms in victims. Osborne attempts to suggest essential remedies that every ordinary individual can do to ease the traumatic suffering of any victim. In *Civil War on Sunday*, Jack is helpless on hearing the soldier's story, but he leans forward and whispers, "one day your great-great-grandchildren will be doctors and lawyers. . . . They'll help run the government and schools. They'll be senators and generals and teachers and principals" (2000, pp. 33-4). The narration states, "the man smiled a beautiful smile" (p. 34). The brief conversation between Jack and the soldier is therapeutic to the soldier, instilling hope to press forward. As James W. Pennebaker notes, "the act of psychologically confronting emotionally upsetting events is associated with improved physical and psychological health" (1990, p. 546). The soldier's emotional lamentation and confrontation with his past, blended with Jack's response, clearly show positive signs of uplifting the mood of the wounded soldier. The story world creates a space for the characters and young readers to understand, empathise and aid the victims and also provides fundamental lessons on caring for trauma survivors.

Similarly, an "individual, whose pain and suffering is acknowledged and validated, has a much better prognosis for recovery from disabling PTSD symptoms" (Stubbe, 2013, p. 369). Jack and Annie acknowledge and validate John, the drummer boy, and help him to calm down. Osborne's demonstration of dealing with victims through her characters helps the readers to learn the strategies for

coping with struggling survivors. Osborne also glorifies the power of words as a writer and proves the impact of positive affirmations that acts as a catalyst of hope during hardships. For instance, in *Revolutionary War on Wednesday*, Osborne teaches children how the reading of Thomas Paine's *The Crisis* instilled hope and courage in the wearied soldiers who were on the verge of giving up. The words of the text motivate the troops march forward, continue the fight and gain victory. The siblings become part of the historic moment near the Delaware River, witnessing how Thomas Paine's words reignite the soldiers' spirit. The story's narrative also features a moment where Jack and Annie offer words of encouragement to General George Washington saying, "Even if things look impossible, you should keep going, sir, he said. The harder things seem, the greater the triumph, right? That's what you read to your men. You have to keep going for their sake . Yes! And you have to keep going for our sake, said Annie. For the sake of the future children of America, sir" (57). The siblings realise the impact of their actions when George Washington assures them that they will march forward and achieve victory for America's future. Thus, story worlds offer a realistic experience for readers, while storytelling deepens their comprehension of the events being narrated. Participation and direct engagement with the war environment allows young readers to develop a clear perspective on its destruction and lasting repercussions.

The representation of trauma in children's literature has to be curated based on the target audience as the "Unsettled, traumatic histories of individuals and collectives present a number of challenges to representation, leading to questions ranging from what can and should be represented and what should stay buried in the past to how it should be represented and received" (Sheilds, 2017, p. 5). Shoshana Felman's assertion of the crisis in accessing the truth demands an effective way to address the various trauma experiences. Osborne's representation of trauma is effective with unique worldbuilding techniques that help to portray themes that resonate with the child readers. Themes related to family, responsibility, and courage showcase different coping strategies are presented in all the selected works.

Danger in the Darkest Hour portrays the plight of children separated from their parents, hiding in caves and empty chateaus. Children must take the role of grown-ups to survive under uncertain circumstances. The stories evoke the emotions and empathy of the characters and readers by transporting them to the actual world where the events occur. The experience may be traumatising to an extent, but hopeful endings and messages help to maintain a safe space considering the vulnerability of young readers. Jack and Annie's journey to the past is less distressing, as they can always return to the safety of their home and feel safe. They feel grateful to live in a time where they are spared from the horrors of bombshells, destruction, and the pain of family separations. Yet, if they ever encounter such hardships, they are now better equipped to handle the crisis as they have a practical experience of such situations. Osborne enables both the characters and readers to visit the past and gain a clear perspective of the events using worldbuilding techniques.

Children's literature attempts to depict wars and heroes to entertain and inspire children and to help them establish meaningful connections between their individuality and their culture, community, and circumstances (Brownlee, 2013).

Worldbuilding techniques help to entertain and educate young readers while providing valuable lessons that can shape their lives. Story worlds immerse the readers into the narrative allowing them not just to read but to fully grasp its depth and meaning. A deep immersive experience into the story worlds allows the readers to live through the moments and understand the narrated events and also the unsaid emotion as characters and readers experience it firsthand.

Conclusion

Literature is a tool of transformation and knowledge that readers use to combat the difficulties of their day-to-day life. The present times call for literary works containing multiple facets of life that provide a broad understanding of life and living. Great wars in the past have resulted in literary reactions that address the physical and emotional damages caused by war. War is an event that blurs the line between children and adults and demands the participation of people equally. John had to become a drummer boy, and Theo and Tom had to become couriers to meet the situation's needs. Difficult situations are inevitable, so literature plays a huge role in addressing adverse conditions by representing the various struggles and aftermaths of war and trauma. The representations are also lessons that help children to cope with similar circumstances. Literature of atrocity "not only help children to understand historical events and prepare them to face problems as they grow up, but they also teach them to empathise with other people that may be suffering around them" (Franco, 2011, p. 224). Worldbuilding is an effective literary strategy that enhances the literary representations of war and trauma.

Experience is the key takeaway of every story and serves as an ideological tool for the readers to face hardships in life. Worldbuilding involves a step-by-step process of reading that captures the attention, engages, transports and provides a live-in experience for the readers. The story worlds bring the setting of the past back to life, making the readers see, feel, hear and sense death, fear, anxiety and hopelessness. The abstract feelings of war and trauma are made accessible to the readers through worldbuilding. To provide impactful lessons on war and trauma, Osborne transports her characters to battlefields and makes them interact with survivors through world building. By placing characters and readers directly into the settings of events, writers ensure realistic experience and deeper comprehension. Thus, worldbuilding enhances young readers' experience through participation, interaction, observation and immersion in story worlds.

The paper has examined how story worlds provide effective, engaging, and firsthand experiences of war and trauma. Worldbuilding goes beyond the usual representation in creating a realistic experience while keeping children in a safe place using fantasy. Chances of re-traumatisation are limited as story worlds end positively, bringing the characters and readers back to the present or a comfortable space using fictional means. The recent wars have heavily affected children with a sudden catastrophe shattering the worlds around them. Writers can equip children with various emotional shields to protect themselves from the damages caused by war with the help of worldbuilding. Fictional worlds provide prior experiences to different aspects of life helping children to cope up with the complexities of life and serves as an effective means to create awareness about war and trauma in young minds.

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