

Children's Literature and the social construction of ideas of family

Family has been socially constructed throughout Children's Literature for generations. Family is hard to define and one explanation suggests 'Family is a social unit consisting of parents and their children' (Collins, 1981, p308). However, Little (2014, Ch14.1) portrays family 'as a socially recognised group (usually joined by blood, marriage or adoption) that forms an emotional connection.' It is clear, no matter how many definitions of family there are, family can only be determined and represented from an individual's experiences or point of view.

The idea of the family being socially constructed through the use of Literature allows 'issues (to be) accessible' (Melrose, 2012, p.111) for children. Not all families represented in Children's Literature follow the standard ideology of what family life should consist of, a 'loving, respectful, preferably with two parents, contained in domestic harmony and sharing a wholesome home-cooked family meal' (Alston, 2008, p.2). Many families are part of the nuclear family for the beginning of the stories, but events take place, which cause a chain of events throughout, creating a clear representation of real life and how is it socially portrayed to the reader. Alston (2008, P.2) believes this to be 'inherent in and central to most Children's Literature.'

Family can be a mixture of the closest people in someone's life, work colleagues, friends, neighbours or the community surrounding you. In fact it does not have to be a person at all, it could be an animal, a pet. Family has been socially constructed throughout Children's Literature and the examples below express the deep and meaningful explanations of how views of the family have been constructed through the author's perspectives and experiences.

To begin, *The Railway Children*, published in 1906, starts with an example of the perfect upper class family unit, which sadly gets torn apart when the father is taken away and falsely imprisoned, leaving the mother and three children.

'They were just ordinary suburban children, and they lived with their father and mother in an ordinary red-brick-fronted villa' (Page 11).

The children are firstly represented as part of a 'nuclear family'. The nuclear family 'consists of a mother, a father and their young children still living at home' (Gerstel, 2011, p.1). It is clear from the beginning, Nesbit wanted to highlight the structure of the nuclear family as the reader read the story. This portrays how important the family is for *The Railway Children* as well as expressing construction of the family socially through Nesbit's perspective.

However, it is clear that the 'nuclear' family is not all Nesbit was trying to show throughout the beginning few pages of the book. These children are also represented as part of an upper class and wealthy family. This is quite uncommon during 1906 as life in 19th Century Britain, showed a quarter of the population were under the poverty line (Walsh, 2015). This is reciprocated again as the children are described as living in a 'suburban' area and in a 'villa'.

The family also does not solely consist of the father, mother and three children; it also includes their family pet, a dog-called 'James' (page 12) and a 'nurse-maid' (page 12). Although the children were 'living idyllic lives with their parents' (Beckford, 2012), they have also incorporated the pet and the maid as part of their family. Nesbit shows her own perspective of how she perceives family; therefore showing the reader socially her own construction of the family.

Thirty years after Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, the nuclear family is still socially apparent in Children's Literature. *The Family From One End Street* by Eve Garnett published in 1937, expresses the same occurring theme of the nuclear family, on a larger scale.

"There were a great many Ruggles children – boys and girls, and a baby that was really a boy" (page 2).

Garnett has begun with the same theme as Nesbit. At the beginning of the book, starts with the ideal nuclear family of a father, Mr Ruggles, a mother, Mrs Ruggles and their 7 children all living together at No 1 One End Street. This portrays the same construct as how Nesbit portrayed the family.

The idea of the family being together is created with the perfect illustration at the beginning of the book. The whole family is involved in this picture (Appendices: 1.0) and are all happy. The image represents a clear working class family with a small home. However, 'the family members sit close together (..), (creating) a sense of cosiness' (Alston, 2008, p.75). This shows a larger nuclear family, who are just as happy as Nesbit's 'ideal' nuclear family.

In contrast to Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, the Ruggle's family are working class. The Parents' are both breadwinners for the family, Mr Ruggles works as a dustman and Mrs Ruggles was a washerwoman. There has however, been a detection of 'patronising tone towards Garnett's characters' (Mangan, 2008), this could be due to the fact many writers of the time were middle class themselves and it is 'often represented through and seen from a middle-class perspective' (Alston, 2008, p.3). It is clear this was Garnett's perspective on a working-class large nuclear family and how she perceived it to be.

Although, Garnett is criticized for her portrayal of the family, Alston (2008, p.52) believes it is clear that 'poverty (..) is real, with the family taking in other people's laundry in order to make ends meet'.

There represents a similarity between the construction of the mother in *The Railway Children* and Mrs Ruggles, was they were both able to work from home and therefore could be around the children during the day. However, this does leave 'children liv(ing) with their loving but distracted mother(s)' (Reynolds, 2011, p.87). This shows the reality of living with a large family and both parents working to make ends meet, socially creating thought for the reader upon the representation of family through the eyes of Garnett.

Continuing the social construction of the nuclear family in Children's Literature, David Almond published a book called *Skellig* in 1998. This book is similar to that of *The Railway Children* with a father, a mother and two children living altogether.

"He was going to be off work today so he could get on with the house. Mum was taking the baby for more check-ups at the hospital (Page 11)".

It is clear they are the 'ideal' nuclear family. Alston (2008, p.23) argues 'the trend towards having smaller families increased the amount of quality time parents could spend with each child' which shows the change in social attitudes to having many children. However, the author's perspective shows neither parents in *Skellig* make time for their son in comparison to their daughter whom is suffering from an illness, showing Almond's idea of attention torn away from children when there is an illness within the family.

This is also experienced in *The Railway Children*, when their father is put into prison leaving the children with their mother as the breadwinner for the family, creating less attention for the children of the family.

In comparison to the three books above, *The Other Side of Truth* starts with a very different beginning to the story. It does not discuss who is part of the family; it describes the murder of the mother. Before the murder the family is made up of the nuclear family showing the same social ideas as the above author's.

"His arms drew the children in tightly as a high trembling voice quivered next to them."
(Page 2).

Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* was published in 2000, and begins explaining the death of the mother of the family. The quote expresses the aftermath of her death and how the father 'drew' the children close to him. They were a nuclear family until the tragedy happened.

The social construct of this family shows the representation of love from their father when the mother is murdered.

The beginning of the book, presents the 'issues accessible' (Melrose, 2012, p.111) to the reader, 'featuring (the aftermath) of an absent parent' (Reynolds, 2011, p.89). This is different from the style of the previous books, creating a shift in social change. Nevertheless Naidoo shows the love of a father towards his children at a time of need. Naidoo shows the reader their perspective of death and the need for love from other family members. The social construction of the family within *The Other Side of Truth* expresses how things in a child's life can change suddenly.

Children's Literature explores how the nuclear family does not always represent solely what exactly involves a family. It is apparent that some stories have to rely on outsiders, which would not be classed as part of the nuclear family. However, the author's portrayal these people as a reassurance for the individual when needed.

"Perks, is so nice to everybody.

There must be lots of people in the village who'd like to help to make him a birthday" (Page 125).

This is an example of how *The Railway Children* want the village to help them celebrate another member of the community's birthday. Perks is a working class man, who does not believe in charity. Although the children upset him by collecting things for his birthday, it is a really special part of the book as the children think of Perks as someone they want to celebrate his birthday with, even though they are not related to Perks by blood, marriage or adoption. This really gives a great sense of community and friendship, creating one large family.

Alike, the children from Nesbit's *The Railway Children* bring the whole community together for Perks' birthday, John Ruggles in *The Family From One End Street* tried to join 'The Gang of the Black Hand', allowing himself to participate in an outer family; shows Garnett's explanation of family.

"The Gang of the Black Hand was, in the words of its Captain, Mr Henry Oates aged twelve, son of the foreman at the gas works, A Dead Secret Society." (Page 94)

It is evident Garnett sees the social importance for children to have a wider 'society' which can be included in their family. John Ruggles' wants to be a part of the 'Gang', creating the idea of a wider family. Being part of such a large family, could be seen as the chance for John Ruggles to create his own family with the idea of 'a group of things having a common source' (Collins, 1981, p.308); the common source being the 'Gang'. This is a different kind of family, as the Ruggles child wants to be a part of the family, in comparison to *The Railway Children* enhancing the family community.

David Almond also creates the social construction idea of an outer family; Michael and his friend Mina take care of the so-called 'mythical' creature, which live in Michael's shed. They bring him things to try and make him better. This is the same behaviour families would do for family members.

" I poured more beer.
'I brought these as well,' I said.
I held a cod liver oil capsule out to him." (Page 72).

Michael and Mina are unsure what Skellig is, however this does not seem to bother the pair when trying to help him. This creates a sense of family, as 'Michael, the narrator (...) cares tenderly for Skellig as his family cares for his critically ill new born sister' (Latrobe, 2005, p.69). Sometimes family does not have to be the people you are related to, but the 'emotional connection' (Little, 2014), creates new members of the family and brings them closer together. Almond has created more thought for the reader, showing not everyone needs to be related for someone to care as much as a family does. This really expresses Almond's thought process of what is a family and how he believes it to be socially constructed.

The social construction of caring and helping someone and allowing them as part of a family also occurs in *The Railway Children*. Although the 'Old Gentleman' is not related by 'blood, marriage or adoption' (Little, 2014), he does not think twice about helping the children with items for their mother and to help the family bring father home.

" 'Its our own Old Gentleman!' Said Phyllis." (Page 188)

Nesbit creates an overwhelming feeling for the reader, as the children have been talking to the Old Gentleman throughout the book via the train, yet they do not really know him at all. The Old Gentleman is kind enough to help the children when their mother is ill, not through direct family, but nevertheless Nesbit manages to create a sense of love and caring as if he were family. Nesbit's use of the word 'own' really makes the reader think the Old Gentleman is a part of the family. By doing this it allows the reader in to the insight of her social construction idea of family.

The Old Gentleman could also be seen as the father figure for the children while their father is in prison. This could be part of Nesbit's life experiences coming through her writing. She also lost her father as a child and longed to 'feel part of a family' (Knoepfmacher, 1987, p303). Moreover this expresses no matter whether family is related or not, family can come from the 'emotional connection' (Little, 2014) of an individual to another. Nesbit does this extremely well by showing the social construction of the Old Gentleman as part of *The Railway Children's* outer family. Nesbit shows socially others are able to help and act as part of the family when in need which is a continuing theme throughout *Children's Literature*.

It is not always shown that help for the family comes from the wider community, or from the people who become a part of the 'outer' family. Sometimes it falls upon the eldest child to be the head of the family if something happens to parents, family members or adopted family.

It is a common occurrence that the eldest has to try and slip into the place as head of the family, to keep the family all together and safe for the younger siblings. This happens in *The Family From One End Street* where Mrs Ruggles is very busy and the eldest daughter 'Lily-Rose' tries to help out as much as she can.

"An expert at scrubbing the ears of her younger brothers and sisters." (Page 23)

This is an example of the socially constructed family being maintained through Garnett's work. Lily-Rose is named the 'Helpful in the home' (Page 21), although the children have two parents; Garnett's adaptation of Lily-Rose expresses that of a motherly figure. Garnett does this quite well considering she was an only child. Garnett presents Lily-Rose as unconsciously keeping the family together and as Alston explains 'the children are trained for their adult roles in life' (2008, p.51). This represents how families adapt children's life while they are growing up for adult life; they keep the flow of consistency throughout the family past down generations.

This also occurs in *The Other Side of Truth*, it is uncertain that Sade is older than Femi, however she is the strongest out of the two and keeps them going throughout the hard struggle they go through when they reach London.

“She stretched out her arm to touch her brother.”

(Page 18)

Out of the two siblings, Sade is the stronger one. Sade shows a sign of affection towards her brother by ‘stretch(ing) out her arm’ (page 18). Naidoo shows the affection through the use of social construction as the eldest is acting in placement of the mother, consisting with the above authors.

Moreover, further into the story they become more affectionate towards each other and learn they are alone and need one another, exploring the ‘shift in position’ (Alston, 2008, p.11) from their mother to Sade. This is a really heart warming book, that represents the struggles for the children who are taken away from their family, which have to look out for one another and change roles, showing what would happen in reality.

To conclude, there is no exact formula to make a family. Families are made up of what the individual deems to be the ‘emotional connection’ (Little, 2014) between oneself and others. Collin’s (1981, p.308) idea of family is ‘having a common source’ with other individuals. This is expressed throughout Children’s Literature, including *The Railway Children*, *Skellig*, *The Other Side of Truth* and *The Family From One End Street*. The nuclear family is seen as the ideal two-parent family with the children living at home. Children’s Literature from the past and the present explores this type of family, however many are not the ‘loving nuclear family’ (Alston, 2008, p.9), but children’s literature faces the reality of death, ‘divorce, abuse, homelessness and other socially-aware themes’ (Alston, 2008, p.2). Many of these themes are present in terms of a social construction of the present time when the books have been written. Children’s Literature presents the ‘issues’ throughout society towards family and how different families can be presented. *The Family From One End Street* presents different kinds of family; a ‘Gang’, something of which John Ruggles belongs to. Michael in *Skellig* be-friends Skellig and helps him throughout the story, allowing Skellig to belong and feel wanted. All kinds of family are reinforced socially within Children’s Literature; a way of opening the mind of a child to different struggles of family life.

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Appendices:

1.0 – The illustration from The Family From One End Street.

