

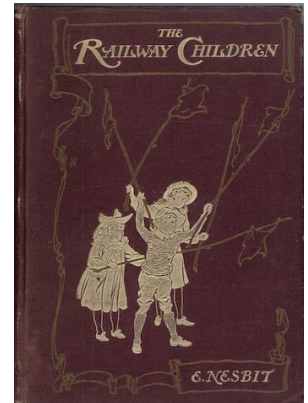
Families of Prisoners in Children's Literature

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This paper looks at how the families of prisoners are represented in children's fiction and reflects on why this appears to be a relatively neglected area of research in children's literature. Those left behind on the outside of prison are abandoned and sometimes separated from family members, which has always been a device used by children's authors to open up opportunities for children to enjoy adult-free adventures (Tucker and Gamble, 2001). This particular reason for abandonment continues to influence the story because the literary representation of these families even beyond the period of imprisonment therefore reflects and possibly influences societal perceptions about crime and punishment. The selected novels present families deeply affected by circumstances that could happen to any one of the readers:

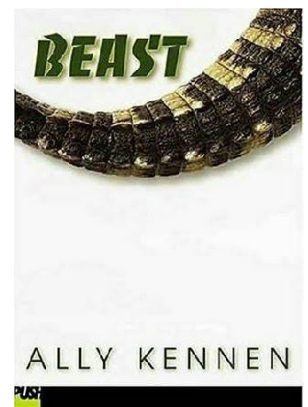
Parental imprisonment can be one of the most critical life events for families [because] it can disrupt material and family relationships, have negative outcomes for children, and aggravate material and social problems. (Losel *et al.*, 2012: 7)

The Railway Children (Nesbit, 1906) was probably the first children's book to include the trauma of an arrest in a middle-class family home. Father is taken away without any explanation to the children and the family is forced to temporarily relocate to more modest rural surroundings next to a railway where the mother becomes the sole wage earner as a writer and the children seek the charity of an old gentleman whom they befriend by waving to regularly as he travels past on the train. Bobbie, the eldest child, eventually discovers the secret of her father's wrongful imprisonment for fraud, and seeks the advice of the old gentleman, who conveniently has considerable legal influence. The father is proved to be innocent and is released to be reunited with his family. As a novel of its time, the author paints a somewhat rosy picture of a family life struggling to manage without its father at the helm, and the triumph of justice when he returns safely is a moment to be treasured.



A century later, the authors of four more recent texts: *Beast* (Kennan, 2006) and *Shine* (Maryon, 2010), where a parent's imprisonment has an impact, and *Bog Child* (Dowd, 2008) and *Raining Fire* (Gibbons, 2013), where an older sibling is imprisoned, are less sentimental than Nesbit's, and deliberately presented through a lens that is more akin to reality. Whilst these books do not have conventional happy endings, they present authentic, ordinary lives that may resonate with many readers, and provide a vicarious, thought provoking experience for others. The extent to which individual members of such families are treated sympathetically and sensitively by the authors of the selected texts is varied and also relates to the nature of the crime committed and the perceived guilt of the offender.

Beast concerns the story of Stephen, a seventeen-year-old looked-after child who defines himself from the first page as probably a criminal in the making when he lists ten very bad things that he has done in his short life. When we meet him he is about to make the difficult transition from living in a foster family into living independently in a hostel. We learn that he has had a complicated upbringing with a mother with mental health problems and who was a victim of domestic violence at the hands of his father. His elder brother, whom he clearly worshipped, has died some years before from a glue-sniffing accident. This is undeniably a harsh set of circumstances, but Ally Kennan explains that, despite his many childhood problems and consequent anti-social behaviour, she has diluted Stephen's story in comparison to that of the many children she came to know as the birth child in a family that fostered. The father in this book is a nasty character who is understandably hated by Stephen. As the plot unfolds, we come to know him as an ex-prisoner with a series of repeat offences for a range of violent crimes. There is a back story here which chimes with the lives of that of many of the



current prison population. He is a Gulf War veteran, fiercely independent and unable to settle to conventional family life outside the forces. As a result, he has adopted a transient lifestyle that combines periods of living in hostels and rough sleeping. The question that we are encouraged to ask through the self-deprecatory, first-person narrative voice of Stephen is, will he become like his father?

I wonder if this is the beginning of a new me. A me who will end up in the nick. A me who does terrible things. (p.144)

He is, by admission, poorly educated, indecisive, lacking in trust and defiant towards authority. He is bitter about his past life and his limited current situation:

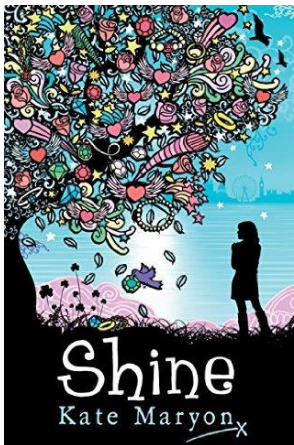
Some people reckon they are born under a lucky star, or that a guardian angel is looking out for them. That's not me. (p.101)

When he is arrested for a crime he didn't commit, he reflects on his fate:

I reckon all those cars I nicked, all the stuff I robbed, the vandalism, the broken bottles, the glue, everything; it all still shows, though I've been pretty clean for over a year. And that's why the plod nicked me. Every bad thing I've done before shows in my face. (p.101)

However, as he solves the dilemma of where to put and how to look after the rapidly growing 'beast' (a crocodile that was a thoughtless gift from dad when Stephen was a child), he reveals himself to be a caring, empathetic and self-controlled young man. So, there is a happy ending of sorts because he is essentially trustworthy, capable of friendship, and overall a resilient survivor who is cautiously optimistic about a future that will be better than his past:

[T]hings feel different. Like the world has shifted to one side. Like my eyesight has changed. I can't explain it but it makes life feel smoother. (p. 246)



We come to know a very different family affected by imprisonment in *Shine*. This is a story aimed at slightly younger readers, but it presents the keen pain of separation between twelve-year-old Tiffany and her mother that once again reflects the real-life experiences of many children whose relationships are fractured when a mother goes to prison, often never to be repaired. In this story, we experience the rather unorthodox childhood of a child whose self-centred and immature mother treats her as a confidante, rather like that of the relationship between Marigold and her daughters in *The Illustrated Mum* (Wilson, 1999). At the beginning of the book we see the pair living a flamboyant but potentially fragile life, funded by petty crime in partnership with a dodgy boyfriend. Tiffany's mother was brought up on the island of Sark in a happy but dull rural community, and ran away from home as a pregnant seventeen-year-old looking for adventure in an urban environment on the mainland. As her daughter grows up, she begins to crave a more conventional mother: 'I wish she was more like a normal mum' (p8). When everything eventually goes badly wrong, we witness the trauma of an arrest and subsequent imprisonment from the perspective of Tiffany, again an experience that many children have in the real world: 'I'm boiling mad because our life is always about her' (p.42). She becomes a looked-after child in an emergency foster family, but then is taken into kinship care by the wonderfully kind extended family on Sark whom she meets for the first time. This is a difficult transition for her to make, but ultimately it is an opportunity to reinvent herself. She also makes a delightful relationship with her newly discovered family on Sark, and, eventually, with her mother when she is released after serving her sentence. Kate Maryon explains that she was keen to explore a situation that challenged the stereotype of a family affected by such circumstances. Based on the real experience of a friend, she wanted to write a story that implied that crime can affect families of all shapes and sizes, but also to show readers that children can survive and grow through hard times. The happy ending here is perhaps a little romanticised as, despite Tiffany's dread of the disruption and

potential disappointment of her mother's impending release, she returns to Sark as a reformed character with completely different priorities and is embraced as the prodigal daughter with much enthusiasm:

I see my life as an empty white page stretching out before me, waiting for me to fill it. (p.81)

My mum feels different, it's like prison has stopped her pretending. (p.158)

Perhaps the message here is that essentially stable families like this will always forgive and provide sanctuary.

The effects of the imprisonment of Joe in *Bog Child* by Siobhan Dowd is coloured by the nature of the crime, which is based on the real history and politics of Northern Ireland during the Troubles. An ordinary young man who loves John Lennon and is adored by his mother and younger siblings is arrested for undisclosed terrorist activities and eventually becomes one of the hunger strikers in the Maze prison in a bid for political prisoner status. When asked why he wants to join the hunger strikers he explains:

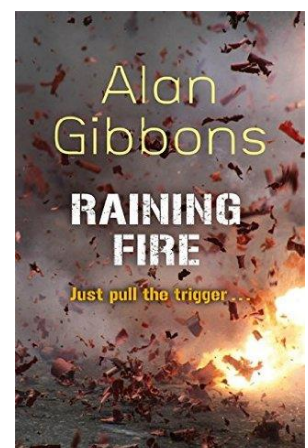
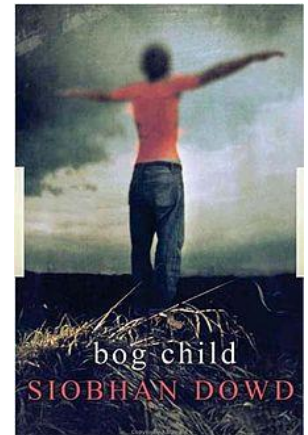
I'm not a common criminal. What I did was fight for freedom. I'd rather die free in my own head than live like the dregs of the earth. (p.78)

This is a visceral story where the whole family suffers and the reader feels their pain. For example, the agony of the arrest in the family home:

Da hollering like a shot elephant and ma gripping the back of the chair. (p.87)

Fergus is the eighteen-year-old, law abiding, high-achieving brother who is left behind to look after his stricken family while Joe serves his sentence. He is frustrated at his brother's involvement with violent politics, but then himself becomes involved in criminal activity in order to save him. Through his eyes the reader experiences the horror of the prison visits, which becomes a routine for so many children. Although Fergus is a hardworking pupil at school, the distraction of his brother's situation threatens to have a negative impact on his A-level preparation, as happens when family life is severely disrupted. The happy ending for this family is that Joe is persuaded to start eating again and the whole family, although fractured, begins to recover. Once again, we understand that this is a strong, resilient family that will always fiercely protect its members, no matter what their crime. This is reinforced when we learn that an uncle has been a secret bomb maker for many years.

Alan Gibbons was inspired to write *Raining Fire* in response to the real murders of Rhys Jones and Anuj Bidwe because he wanted to find some kind of explanation for the extreme, amoral use of firearms in some communities. As an ex-teacher who had often observed the effects of family imprisonment on children, he was interested to explore one family who had become tangled into the criminal justice system and to reflect on the unnecessary deep damage inflicted as a result. Once again we have two brothers who make very different choices despite growing up in difficult circumstances with a mother who has been broken by domestic violence and a 'scumbag' of a father who rarely appears and is despised by both his sons. This is a story about gang violence and the impact of living in a relentlessly intimidating environment. When the older brother, Alex, is convicted of a violent crime and sent to prison, the situation becomes worse for his whole family, but particularly for sixteen-year-old Ethan who is left on the outside. Before the conviction, we experience the stress of the long wait for the trial, the trial itself, the sentence, and then the release. At no point does the tension diminish because this family is on a long and difficult journey. Ethan's life is fraught with disappointment, guilt and anger at his circumstances. The happy ending is bleaker in this story because, although we are encouraged to hope that he will escape his circumstances eventually through the benefits of a good education, the arbitrary nature of the social environment and his opportunities cannot be ignored. If Ethan escapes to a better life, what about Alex and his long-term future?



All the novels discussed in this paper have complex plots whereby the effects of imprisonment play only a part in each story. However, the focus on this significant aspect and how it presents the main characters with on-going dilemmas and difficulties that shape their everyday lives relates very closely to the real-life experiences of children effected by imprisonment. As such, it provides an important purpose in terms of representing the lives of a huge number of families that have been invisible in children's literature for too long. In essence, these can be viewed as political books that aim to raise awareness about social injustice as part of the plot. On a positive note, they also emphasise the power of each child protagonist in challenging authority, demonstrating resilience, offering solutions and looking forward to more hopeful futures and happier endings.

So, why is this an under researched subject in children's literature? It may be that this chimes with persistent social attitudes that rarely acknowledge the effects of family imprisonment on an estimated 200,000 children every year (Action for Prisoner's Families, 2013). Perhaps this lack of attention and concern by society reflects a broader discomfort about the relative worthiness of children in these circumstances. Some social-policy writers suggest that this relates to a discourse fanned by some politicians and the media about the 'undeserving' poor, the notion that bad genes run in families, and the belief that the criminal ruins the lives of other families so that society is resistant to caring much about their families (Condrey, 2007; Casey, 2012). These books are therefore significant in shaping children's and young people's attitudes towards people in society affected by very difficult circumstances. This is important and deserves further attention because, as Pie Corbett explains:

Our stories help sustain and create our society. They help to fashion who we are, and help us to know and feel what is right and what is wrong. (1993: 5)

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