

Stress and the Picture Book

Themes of stress and anxiety have increasingly appeared in picture books published during the last few decades. These stories are child-appropriate, entertaining, fictional experiences that present the child with situations and processes reflecting aspects of stress and anxiety and ways of responding, acting out, and coping with stress problems, usually leading toward successful solutions. The books are created by authors and artists who know something about the way in which children attempt to master the realities of their lives, as Sendak once put it.

We have to establish immediately that in this view stress is not a "dirty" word. It is not a concept referring to states that children should not know about, to matters not to be brought up in their presence or in conversations with them, and, therefore, not to be treated in children's literature, in order to leave unclouded the assumption that childhood is a predominantly carefree time. Such notions are still prevalent, especially in the wishful thinking of adults. Certainly, childhood is often a very happy period, but it is never carefree. Stress is one of the conditions of our lives. For children, it is one of the conditions of growing up. It is one of the natural reactions of our minds and bodies, of our whole organism, to feelings of inadequacy when we are unable to meet demands made on us by others or self-imposed demands, or when people in our environment do not accept us as we are, and, in consequence, we can neither accept ourselves nor the people and conditions in our environment as they are. The reactions to stress can take the form of mild emotional unrest, or they may create an upheaval that violently grips mind and body. Stress creates a need for adaptive behavior, for activities performed in reality and in fantasy, activities whose purpose is to restore our self-confidence, or at least to reduce the imbalance we find ourselves in.

Children's bodies and minds continually grow and change and are prone to developmental and existential stresses. These can be defined as responses, partly conscious and partly unconscious, to situations and processes occurring in the normal course of life, whether originating in internal, organismic stimuli, or arising from external pressures usually emanating

in the close environment. Feelings of inadequacy can come from many directions and take many forms—a sense of failure, of frustration, of worry, of loss of love, or of a crisis imminent or already acutely experienced. The symptoms are tension and anxiety. They trigger adaptive, more or less desirable and effective responses, such as a retreat into passivity, alienation, a craving for love, aggressive behavior, assertion, and others. In the course of trying to minimize their psychological imbalance, children often interchange and vary their conscious and unconscious strategies for escaping anxiety. They are motivated in this effort by their feelings about and observations of their own changing moods, and those of the environment. The child's world contains characteristic and powerful stressors, such as those arising from family relationships, from illness, and from death. Stress factors found in society include achievement demands; peer-group constellations; alienating circumstances in social, especially urban, living conditions; and war. However, we should not forget that a number of essential stress factors are inherent in the child's maturing personality: the child who has an intense need to be loved and cared for, to be close to "someone who loves him most of all,"¹ to be sheltered, and to be dependent also insists on experiencing adventure and danger, and wishes to become independent. The natural search for identity and the necessary quest for autonomy, the experience of discovering oneself and one's own powers, create conflicts and tensions necessary for growth.

A degree of stress is, therefore, an inevitable, inescapable condition of human existence, embodying essential developmental stimuli. Yet stress also entails manifold human suffering that has to be noticed and aided and, as far as possible and advisable, relieved or at least alleviated. Providing this supportive concern, among other things, is what loving a child means. Temporary stress situations and stress processes are necessary. However, an overload of recurring stress situations or chronic stress is a burden that stifles mental and physical health. Such a burden detracts from that measure of happiness which is the child's birthright.

Some stress factors appear in a child's life suddenly and harshly, as in dramatic crises. Other stressors operate quietly and persistently. The latter are frequently more significant, one reason being that they may last longer, and another, that children are unable or unwilling to articulate problems. They adapt, for better or for worse, by acting or acting out, or by dreaming and daydreaming. Adults become aware of such symptoms rather than of the underlying reasons and motifs, mainly because adaptive responses to stress differ greatly from one child to another. The stress response to the impact of stressors is a nonspecific one. Adults are often motivated to react to the symptoms—to punish, to threaten a loss of love, and even to add new demands.

This is the situation in which play, daydreaming, dreams, artwork, and

1. Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper, 1963).

other creative activities have a role, as do films, books, and picture books: these media help by generating symbolic communication from and toward the child.

Remarkable writers and artists working in the field of picture books are continually enlarging the scope and variety of themes and motifs and are producing books of great artistic distinction. The aesthetic quality and psychological subtlety of these storybooks call for attention, because they give genuine expression to the child's conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions. The illustrator and, particularly, the author-illustrator present with great symbolic force unconscious processes only hinted at in the text. True, this approach is not so new, since literature and the arts have for a long time proffered topics, metaphors, and symbols for the growing child's experiences. The innovation lies in the maturation of the picture book as a serious medium of communication, one that has taken on humanistic responsibilities.

Many authors and illustrators treat themes of stress and anxiety and present children with imaginative ways of working out their own problems. These authors use various genres to get their visual and verbal messages across to the child. For instance, there are many versions of the classical fairy tale with modern pictures, such as Luděk Maňásek's,² Mercer Mayer's³ and Binette Schroeder's⁴ illustrations for *Beauty and the Beast* (fig. 3); various editions of Grimm's fairy tales⁵; the genre of the contemporary fairy tale, such as Sendak's *Outside Over There*,⁶ Van Allsburg's books (fig. 4),⁷ and Herzka's *Do in den roten Stiefeln*⁸; the genre of the realistic story—for instance, Keats's Peter stories⁹ and Isadora's *Ben's Trumpet*¹⁰; the magic-realistic story, where reality and fantasy both clash and intertwine, as in Burningham's Shirley books,¹¹

2. J. M. Leprince de Beaumont, *La belle et la bête*, illus. Luděk Maňásek (Prague: Artia, 1969).

3. Marianna Mayer, *Beauty and the Beast* (retold), illus. Mercer Mayer (New York: Four Winds Pr., 1978).

4. J. M. Leprince de Beaumont, *Beauty and the Beast*, illus. Binette Schroeder (London: Walker, 1986).

5. Jakob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Dornröschen*, illus. Felix Hoffmann (Aarau and Frankfurt: Sauerländer, 1959); *Der Däumling*, illus. Felix Hoffmann (Aarau and Frankfurt: Sauerländer, 1972); *Hundertundein Grimm-Märchen*, illus. Felix Hoffmann (Aarau, Frankfurt, and Salzburg: Sauerländer, 1985); *Dornröschen*, illus. Bernadette (Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1984). *Frau Holle*, illus. Bernadette (Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1985); *Schneewitchen* (*Snow White*), illus. Bernadette (Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1989).

6. Maurice Sendak, *Outside Over There* (New York: Harper, 1981).

7. Chris Van Allsburg, *The Garden of Abdul Gazazi* (Boston: Houghton, 1979); *Jumanji* (Boston: Houghton, 1981).

8. Heinz Herzka, *Do in den roten Stiefeln* (*Do in the Red Boots*), illus. Heiri Steiner (Zürich and Stuttgart: Artemis, 1969).

9. For instance, Ezra Jack Keats, *The Snowy Day* (New York: Viking, 1962); *Whistle for Willie*; *Peter's Chair* (New York: Harper, 1967).

10. Rachel Isadora, *Ben's Trumpet* (New York: Greenwillow, 1979).

11. John Burningham, *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977); *Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).

Viorst's book about the little boy who sees monsters,¹² and Schindler's book *Sleep Well, Have Pleasant Dreams*¹³; and classical stories, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, with modern pictures (fig. 5).¹⁴ A comprehensive compendium attempting to list books dealing with stress exists. I believe that this compendium is very valuable for parents, teachers, librarians, counselors, and social workers. It indexes more than 450 psychological topics and briefly annotates 1,031 books, many of them picture books, relevant to those topics. It includes books published up to 1975. The stream of books that has appeared since then has caused two additional volumes to be compiled and published in 1981 and 1985, respectively.¹⁵

Over and above offering quality, such books demonstrate the courage and the high measure of involvement (with, not infrequently, a personal need) exhibited by their creators in taking up sensitive, difficult, irritating, passionate, and sometimes shocking themes, and executing them pleasurably. Thus, the authors and illustrators make children smile and think things over; suggest to them new avenues of amusing, often humorous entertainment; and encourage them to entertain new ideas in support of their own imaginary and concrete efforts to improve or even master their inner and outer realities. On the surface, these books deliver beauty, surprise, fun, adventure, and drama; on a deeper level, they illustrate—in words and pictures, and in metaphors and symbols—another form of drama for the workings of the child's unconscious. Providing appeals on each level in different ways, these stories endeavor to embolden children to experience vicariously, and to learn what stress may mean and how it can be dealt with—for instance, these picture books show that other children have to stand up to stress, too. Moreover, and probably most importantly, many of these books earnestly strive to lead children and adults toward understanding, either intuitively or cognitively, how other stressed children mobilize their physical and mental defenses and powers and succeed in turning tension and anxiety into growth stimuli, into impulses propelling them toward self-confidence.

Most, though not all, such books are superior examples of a growing, diversifying, lively, and, in the cultural context, daring trend. Many focus children's attention on a specific motif. The protagonists manifest a twofold, often alternating response to stress—they retreat into fantasy and, having gained strength, assert themselves by advancing into activity, both imagi-

12. Judith Viorst, *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*, illus. Kay Choro (New York: Atheneum, 1973).

13. Edith Schindler, *Schlaf gut, Traum schön (Sleep Well, Have Pleasant Dreams)* (Ravensburg, Germany: Otto Maier, 1982).

14. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, illus. Markéta Prachatická (Chicago: Wellington, 1989; originally published in Prague: Albatros, 1982).

15. Sharon Spredemann Dreyer, *The Bookfinder: A Guide to Children's Literature about the Needs and Problems of Youth, Ages 2-15*, 3 vols. (Circle Pines, Mich.: American Guidance Service, 1977, 1981, 1985).



Fig. 5. Markéta Prachatická, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*
Markéta Prachatická from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. Ill. © 1982 Markéta Prachatická. By permission of Wellington Publishing 1989. Originally published Prague, Albatros, 1982.

nary and real. This is the road along which these stories wish to lead children toward success in overcoming stress and growing up a little.

It is fair to state that this trend was initiated with Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963).¹⁶ The story has been so extensively researched and evaluated that there seems to be no need to go into detail here. Let us simply note that it was *Where the Wild Things Are* which, more than any other book, put on the agenda of picture books unfamiliar, somewhat uncomfortable, and yet irrevocably compelling ideas on how much goes on

16. Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

in the minds of children that we will never (maybe should never) know, on the importance of a retreat into fantasy, and on the extent to which children are able to help themselves. Let us remember, too, that Sendak's was practically the first major book to represent, so outspokenly and continuously, psychodynamic processes by aesthetic means and to achieve perfect execution of that aim. It took adults by surprise, which is astonishing, considering that the story translated psychodynamic concepts and strategies that depth psychology had known and revealed for two generations. Yet, art can convince where research may not reach.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS CITED

- BURNINGHAM, JOHN. *Come Away from the Water, Shirley*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.
- . *Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1978.
- CARROLL, LEWIS. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Illus. Markéta Prachatická. Chicago: Wellington, 1989. orig. Prague: Albatros, 1982.
- DE BEAUMONT, J. M. LEPRINCE. *Beauty and the Beast*. Illus. Binette Schroeder. London: Walker, 1986.
- . *La belle et la bête*. Illus. Luděk Maňásek. Prague: Artia, 1969.
- GRIMM, JAKOB AND WILHELM GRIMM. *Der Däumling*. Illus. Felix Hoffmann. Aarau and Frankfurt: Sauerländer, 1972.
- . *Dornröschen (The Sleeping Beauty)*. Illus. Bernadette. Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1984.
- . *Dornröschen (The Sleeping Beauty)*. Illus. Felix Hoffmann. Aarau and Frankfurt: Sauerländer, 1959.
- . *Frau Holle*. Illus. Bernadette. Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1985.
- . *Hundertundein Grimm-Märchen*. Illus. Felix Hoffmann. Aarau, Frankfurt and Salzburg: Sauerländer, 1985.
- . *Schneewittchen (Snow White)*. Illus. Bernadette. Mönchaltorf and Hamburg: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1989.
- HERZKA, HEINZ. *Do in den roten Stiefeln (Do in the Red Boots)*. Illus. Heiri Steiner. Zürich und Stuttgart: Artemis, 1969.
- ISADORA, RACHEL. *Ben's Trumpet*. New York: Greenwillow, 1979.
- KEATS, EZRA JACK. *Peter's Chair*. New York: Harper, 1967.
- . *The Snowy Day*. New York: Viking, 1962.
- . *Whistle for Willie*. New York: Viking, 1964.
- MAYER, MARIANNA. *Beauty and the Beast (retold)*. Illus. Mercer Mayer. New York: Four Winds Pr., 1978.
- SCHINDLER, EDITH. *Schlaf gut, Traum schön (Sleep Well, Have Pleasant Dreams)*. Ravensburg, Germany: Otto Maier, 1982.
- SENDAK, MAURICE. *Outside Over There*. New York: Harper, 1981.
- . *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York: Harper, 1963.
- VAN ALLSBURG, CHRIS. *The Garden of Abdul Gazazi*. Boston: Houghton, 1979.
- . *Jumanji*. Boston: Houghton, 1981.
- VIORST, JUDITH. *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*. Illus. Kay Choro. New York: Atheneum, 1973.