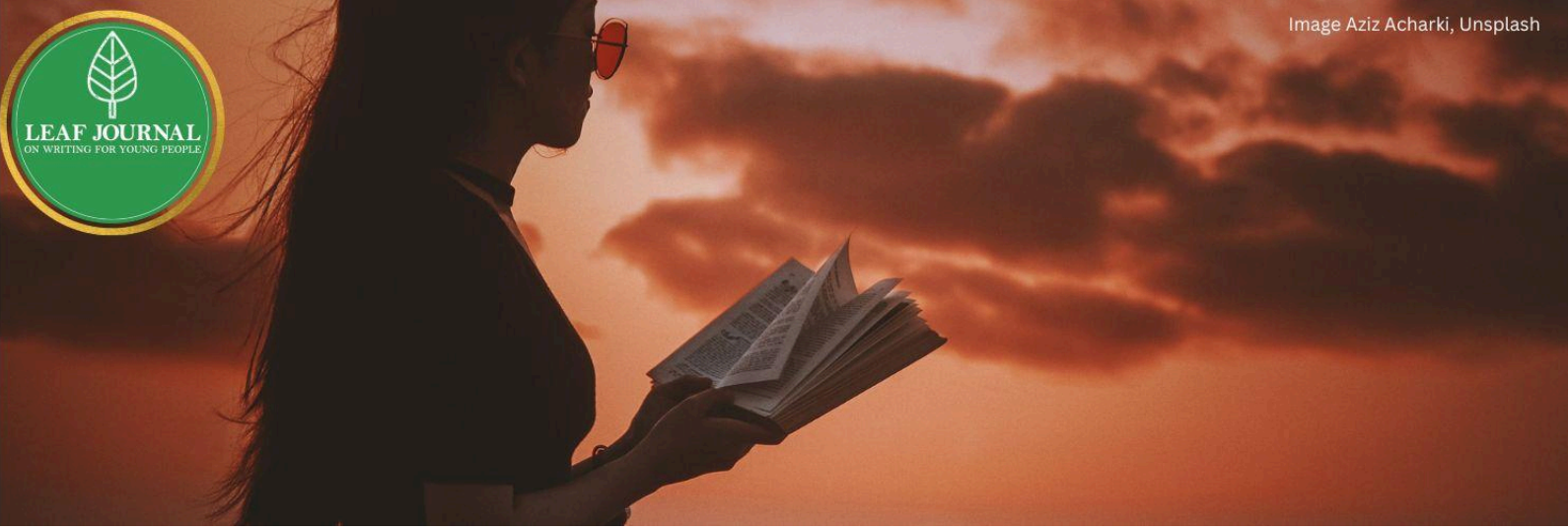

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How to Write Children's Literature About War and Other Vulnerable, Controversial Topics

Viktoriia Medved

Abstract
Difficult times require expanding the range of topics covered by children's literature. Over the past year and a half, Ukrainian literature has been enriched with many topics of children's literature, which were not accepted for discussion before February 2022. I am researching the question of how to translate the unspeakable into plain language and protect Ukrainian children through multilingual fairy tales about the war, engaging the concepts of cognitive metaphor, narrative psychology, fairy-tale- and biblio-therapy. The aspect of fairy-tale-therapy (in other words, the option to create a narrative to discuss things thoroughly with a young reader) offers a wide range of possibilities for those who are interested in writing for young people. Writing on such a vulnerable topic, a writer would need to consider a wide range of issues to make their texts non-traumatic. When creating texts as a future tool to relieve stress for the young audience, we must be attentive to the main principles, which I highly recommend are followed by any young/young adult fiction author (I am specifying this particular genre because this is what I am specialising in).
Questions arising include: how best to write Ukrainian children's literature – and texts in general – about the war and other controversial topics? What to expect from the vulnerable matters' discussion development in the text? Is it better to get rid of all the

expectations before writing a book? Or to filter diligently not to traumatise your reader? And will the usual, common metaphors work in the field of the unusual?

Keywords: *Young Adult*, *children's literature*, *migration*, *war in Ukraine*, *narrative psychology*, *generational memory*, *cognitive metaphor*, *how to support and defend children through narratives.*

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> ‘The generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience. To our great good fortune, in our youth, our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn that life is a profound and passionate thing. While we are permitted to scorn nothing but indifference, we have seen with our own eyes, and it is for us to bear the report to those who come after us.’
>
> Oliver Wendell Holmes

We write to make our voices eternal, to give a sense of permanence to our ideas. We write because we believe, at some level, that we have something worth saying, worth saving. We believe that we have some commentary on the human condition that is of value and should be remembered.[1] But this is far from the only reason we tend to turn to writing. Researchers and psychologists posit that employing writing as a therapeutic intervention is a judicious and beneficial approach. That is why, when times come that can hardly be written about in a children's fairy tale (unless it is uncensored, not adapted for reading by anyone except psychologically tough adults), there is a need to turn to writing as a means of therapy – a tool that will be able to ensure that there are no unspoken situations between parents and children, and instead of gaps in the exchange of knowledge about the surrounding reality, trust (albeit frightening) remains.

Addressing the delicate task of narrating traumatic events within the realm of children’s literature poses a challenge, necessitating a balance between fostering remembrance and mitigating the risk of re-traumatization. The intricacy of this endeavour lies in formulating narratives that evoke recollection without inflicting distress, raising the profound question: how can one articulate traumatic experiences in a manner that is both impactful and non-traumatic, especially within the sensitive confines of children’s literature? But to answer that question it is important to define what children’s literature is.

Children’s literature has a wide range of definitions (both enunciated with scientific precision and not so much):

- everything from folk- to fairy-tales, myths and legends, ballads, and nursery rhymes – many of which date back to preliterate epochs – to such embodiments of our transliterate age as ebooks, fan fiction, and even computer games[2];

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[1] Capps, Ron, Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story (Washington DC: The Veterans Writing Project, 2013, p. 2.

[2] Reynolds, Kimberley, *Children’s Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2011), p. 2.

- a codified commercial art form that must sell[3], supervised and verified by an army of market-savvy, pedagogically-minded adults;
- a trove of material for the performing arts and Hollywood[4];
- a layer of literature that is less dry and less difficult, but richer in interest – more true to nature – more exquisite in art – more abundant in every quality that replies to childhood's keener and fresher perceptions[5];
- a remarkable area of writing: it is one of the roots of western culture, a foundation of shared intergenerational, national and international culture; a barometer of beliefs and anxieties about children and childhood and a body of literature with its own genres, classic texts, and avant-garde experiments, which is enjoyed passionately by adults as well as children, and has exercised huge talents over hundreds of years[6];
- an international corpus of books for children, texts by authors from different linguistic and cultural areas, which also includes translated works that have been adapted to the readers' cultures, sometimes deviating extensively from the source texts, written or adapted specifically for children by adults.[7]

However, in the framework of this study, I will adhere to this definition of the term, which was offered by Dr. Huck, author of children's books and the first-ever graduate program in children's literature: 'Books that have the child's eye at the centre, where by *child* we address the group of children from birth to 14,'[8] but it is fair that even this definition needs to be narrowed to an exact age range, since this paper deals with the question of illustrating books, and gets very specific when it comes to delving into the pictures that accompany children's books' texts. Even when the age difference may not seem significant, the criteria for children's publications differ. Therefore, it should be noted which age category is referred to in the context of this paper, and it should be done now. So, in the context of this paper, I consider children's editions (illustrated, picturebooks, text only, comics, etc.) for ages 8 to 9 (middle elementary). This means that its readers will: accept some books with a less-than-happy ending (which helps them explore their own feelings); enjoy books that collect facts and other information (which is important for books with key national identity principles); show high interest in language play (which is meaningful for writers who want to focus on multilingualism and, in the Ukranian context, draw a line between two so-called brotherly languages that used to improperly be considered similar without any scientifically proved

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[3] Beauvais, Clementine, *Complete Writing for Children Course* (London: John Murray Learning, 2014), p. 8.
[4] Marcus, Leonard, Lisa Von Drasek, *The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter* (London, 2019), p. 180.
[5] Hunt, Peter, *Children's Literature: The development of criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 20-21.
[6] Maybin, Janet, Nicola J., Watson, *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1.
[7] O'Sullivan, Emer, *Comparative Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-2.
[8] Kiefer, Barbara, Cynthia Tyson, Bettie Parsons Barger, Lisa Patrick, Erin Reilly-Sanders, *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature: A Brief Guide* (New York, 2023), p. 3.

linguistic background to support these beliefs), and last but not least – require guidance in locating explaining information[9], which gives space to further discussion, using therapeutic materials, or thematic conversations with professional psychologists.

Because children's literature is one of the earliest ways in which the young encounter stories, it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think and understand the world[10]. As the saying goes, try changing yourself – and realise it's impossible to change other people. But it is possible to bring people up in the right way, so there's no need to change them, and by *right* I mean capable of making up their own minds, able to think critically, contemplate on any matters, and be content with their own life choices.

The imperative for open discourse on traumatic experiences emanates from the understanding that the suppression of negative emotions stemming from such events can contribute to a gradual erosion of mental health over the course of years. Failing to engage in constructive dialogue and processing of these experiences may lead to the accumulation of unresolved psychological distress, potentially resulting in detrimental long-term consequences for mental well-being. The act of verbalising and discussing traumatic events is posited as a crucial mechanism for mitigating the adverse effects of emotional suppression, facilitating cognitive and emotional integration, and fostering resilience in the face of psychological adversity.

The ethical obligation incumbent upon the survivor generations, shaped by traumatic events such as wars, natural disasters, and global crises, resides in the imperative to candidly and comprehensively communicate the veracity of their experiences to succeeding generations. This obligation is grounded in the recognition that the deliberate and honest articulation of historical traumas serves as a protective mechanism against the inadvertent transmission of unresolved psychological distress and societal insecurity. Engaging in open dialogue not only prevents the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma but also catalyses a transformative process wherein the act of verbalising traumatic experiences becomes instrumental in traversing through the various psychological stages, from initial denial to eventual acceptance. The elucidation of historical truths facilitates a collective journey toward psychological healing, enabling subsequent generations to navigate the complexities of their own historical context with a foundation of truth, resilience, and eventual acceptance.

Recent empirical investigations reveal that even *Escherichia coli* exhibits transgenerational memory[11], while paradoxically, humans frequently exhibit lapses in recollecting prior experiences. This leads to a recurrent pattern wherein individuals unwittingly engage in repetitive and detrimental behaviours, analogous to persistently stepping on rakes and enduring recurring blows from ostensibly familiar neighbours or siblings. The imperative to document and preserve historical narratives emerges as a

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[9] Kiefer, Barbara, Cynthia Tyson, Bettie Parsons Barger, Lisa Patrick, Erin Reilly-Sanders, *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature: A Brief Guide* (New York, 2023), p. 45.
[10] Marcus, Leonard, Lisa Von Drasek, *The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter* (London, 2019), p. 4.
[11] Kataliina Markush, 'Escherichia coli demonstrated the memory of generations', *Nauka*, <https://shorturl.at/oFKP0> [accessed 24/11/23].

vital strategy to foster remembrance, thereby mitigating the likelihood of recurrent missteps and facilitating a collective avoidance of repeating errors.

Some will argue that creating works of literature of or about war glorifies it and encourages the next generation to go to war rather than to do anything possible to stop it. Others have said that in the wake of so much killing in the 20th century, and particularly the Holocaust, that to create poetry or other works of art about war is barbaric. Again, words are not always sufficient, but they are all we have (sometimes the words exist on their own, sometimes they are accompanied by pictures – and this is how we have a chance to cherish illustrated editions, sometimes pictures take all the space – and this is the way so called *silent* books are created). With pictures or without them, we have to make words work[12].

It is essential to answer *why* we must write about traumatic things before doing so. When a person has been through something physically and/or mentally injurious, it might feel like they have all those bad memories stuffed into little boxes and hidden away under the bed pretty neatly. So why in the world should they want to open the boxes and play with those memories? The answer is that they are going to come out sooner or later and it is better to bring them out on your own, under conditions you can control, than to have them start oozing out when they are not ready[13].

Having explored *why* it is desirable, now I move on to *how* to write about traumatic things non-traumatically for the reader.

General recommendations for a writer:

- it works exactly as the aeroplane emergency recommendation we all are well-acquainted with: put your own oxygen mask on first. In other words, never write, being in trauma yourself, don't therapy yourself on your children's novel text, don't rub all your problems off on it. A book's author is (even if implicitly) a role model, and they need to become this reliable person, who will remind us that we should be better versions of ourselves, that we have no right to bully others, since everybody does what they can, and nobody is able to compare efforts of two different people. Your life experience must be bigger, and greater than the most traumatic experience of a child;
- even if you are not a big fan of beta-readers, go through the text at least with a child psychologist to make sure your text is appropriate for your target audience (depending on what age range is considered to be your target audience);
- even if ten psychologists have confirmed that your text is safe, make it your rule number one to observe the child's reaction; bear in mind that a child mustn't

[12] Capps, Ron, Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story (Washington DC: The Veterans Writing Project, 2013, p. 10.
[13] Ibid, p. 126.

face the experience of hopelessness and helplessness, your narration has to be full of hope, promising light at the end of the darkest tunnel;

- each therapeutic book must include three stages: stabilisation (we are building on some resource); confrontation (we pass different tests, and go through several challenges), and integration (putting an end to something; hopethat we have something to lean on) – and then the text becomes non-traumatic and will contribute to post-traumatic growth[14]. If your book lacks any of them, you should indicate that on the cover (beware: sensitive content, appropriate for reading with parents/teacher, etc.), make sure any of your therapeutic books should direct a young reader into feeling a particular emotion, and give an insight;
- if you are, as a writer, not sure whether the content is appropriate (in terms of sensitive topics, tricky approaches to discussing essential matters with vulnerable readers, etc.), add a note/label 'sensitive content', it will help prevent traumatising readers because parents will know that they have to be extra conscious about what might be in the book;
- observe children in real life more, try to project your outlook on life on a child's way of seeing and understanding things;
- as a pre-writing procedure, it is a good idea to ask your audience what they want to read about and to stick to their ideas, even though they might seem a little irrational: any reader has a right to show you the way they see the development of your story;
- when writing about the war, try to shift focus onto life, its beauty and joys, and – more importantly – how children cope with all the difficulties, making them heroes rather than victims;
- and last, but not least, do your best in creating your texts (light, fairy tale-ish, optimistic, and soothing) as opposed to the reality of a complete (human-caused, but still!) disaster and horror, avoid the sense of hopelessness, frustration, and fear, the unnecessary atmosphere of tragedy, try to balance ethics and aesthetics levels.

Recommendations Regarding Illustrations:

- illustrations should use the colours of optimism and vitality: yellow; red; blue; green; their halftones, and shades;
- don't depict any kind of destruction;
- don't show any scary photos (even if your book is nonfiction aimed at children; when you are listening to disturbing news near children, you switch to your

[14] Svitlana Royz, Interview by Tetiana Stus, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDJRU6WUqcA, [accessed 24/11/23].

earphones, or leave the room, so why does a book have to be any kind of an exception?);
- try to be as sympathetic as you can; even the safest picture of a house can be a stimulus for a very strong reaction to a child who has recently lost their home. As adults, we can separate the past and the present; unfortunately, children cannot distinguish between the present and the past as they are reading your text, they consider everything to be happening right here, and right now;
- try to make illustrations complete, whole, and in all the possible meanings finalised, body parts and proportions should not be distorted (as trauma often reveals itself in the loss of imagination, it puzzles our reality, and we don't have enough strength to tell apart the play on forms, we want something whole, we need to have a safe space at least in the text, we need the right and reasonable world to rely on; we don't have time/energy to dive into anything mutilated, insane, or both);
- since we don't know in what state a child is being introduced to these pictures, we are not sure if their nervous system has all the necessary resources to cope with it all, so we need to be, to the greatest possible extent, careful.

Recommendations Regarding Genres and Forms, Appropriate Ways of Narration, and Parts of Speech:

- we need poems (anything rhymed – a rhymed fairy tale would be just great!), since rhythmicity is a trance, it gives a sense of protection, it gives our sense of stability back, it positively affects breathing, heartbeat, we begin to feel better on a physical level (but make sure that your verses are filled with strength, not weakness, and leave your reader with a cheerful aftertaste);
- fairy tales are now a win-win option, because all people who have been through any traumatic events are more or less in regression, and fairy tales are a great choice for both children and adults – by choosing them, we see there is a happily ever after; after all, we all need a happy ending and hope for some magical power;
- diaries: they not only should, but they must be written because they give us the chronology back (under the influence of cortisol[15], we often lose touch with chronology, but we still need to see the dynamics of our condition, that's why a diary will be a great choice of genre);
- realistic prose for teenagers: any teenager is an equal, who understands and realises everything even better than an adult. So it is not necessary to avoid or keep silent about some topics, perhaps. There is no need to delve into details, but there are no topics that should not be discussed with a teenager, and on top

[15] Svitlana Royz, Interview by Tetiana Stus, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDJRU6WUqcA, [accessed 24/11/23].

of that, you should design your book so that the reader will identify themselves with the main character;
- comic books are an awesome idea too: any trauma deprives us of imagination, so when we don't need to visualise what the character looks like by ourselves, it saves a lot of effort and is a great choice so as not to be left depleted; also, it helps to get rid of unnecessary metaphorizing: being through trauma, we need to simplify, not to overcomplicate things in both real life and our reading routine;
- regarding parts of speech, use more verbs (when we use no verbs, it means we are paused, we have no energy), it will stimulate your reader to get out of the pause into action;
- use more soft adjectives (any trauma leads to sensory deprivation – the perceptual channel is either overstimulated or it is shut down): they are about our vitality, and trauma robs us of it, but be gentle – don't use loud, sharp, or intrusive adjectives;
- be careful with adverbs: they tend to strengthen and emphasise states and conditions, so use adverbs with verbs only, and make sure you've led your reader out of any amplified state/condition you let them in with adverbs.

Recommendations Regarding the Text Itself (General Tips):

- make sure you have a guide (a role-model character, anybody that the young reader could relate to in the text) who could make it easier to follow the narration;
- illustrations have to be a separate and fully functional part of the story, and they are not here to replicate the text itself;
- as a writer, provide a young reader with a chance to escape the real world by giving them something magical, but still believable (an act of kindness is pure magic indeed!), extraordinary, or adventurous.

Recommendations Regarding the Shape (and Size) of an Actual Paper Book, or its Chapters:

- a square shaped book stabilises;
- a rectangular one invites its readers to a conversation;
- regarding the chapters, they have to be very short because we have to see that we can finish them very quickly – it adds dopamine[16], the happiness hormone, which we are aiming for when writing about trauma for children (we need to

[16] Svitlana Royz, Interview by Tetiana Stus, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDJRU6WUqcA, [accessed 24/11/23].

relieve their stress, not to add to it by creating a never-ending story for 1000 pages);
- once again: if the story is about something controversial (or traumatic), it should not be too long; we are also not looking for grand, ground-breaking metaphors now – on the contrary, what we are looking for is simplicity, brevity, and (at least!) a grain of common sense in any explanations given to us;
- don't make your texts too heavy, or too complex (or both – if you do so, please, indicate that they should be used under the supervision of a psychologist so that the child can react in conversation with a professional);
- if you write the book and expect it to be read now, make the text less emotional (do not overstrain the limbic system, which is already trying to do its best while coping with a trauma[17]).

Recommendations Regarding the Truth:

- to cut a long story short, never hide the truth;
- any truth heals, it gives us a complete picture;
- a child doesn't have a formed narrative, they have no book of being, and when we give them our words of knowledge about what's happening, it becomes their story, their experience of awareness. Our words become the words that they use to make their own judgments about the world in the future (it needs to be truthful and reliable);
- we hold the responsibility of making a child used to naming what is happening; it gives them awareness, and helps order the world;
- avoid meaningless euphemisms ("well, the things that are happening here are violent", "what happened is awful", "this thing, you know what I'm talking about"), get rid of them in your texts, as well as from impersonal sentences; be courageous and name things as they are – be honest while guiding a child through something difficult. Give them tools to understand the way reality works.

To Sum It Up:

- not everything we think of as trauma is traumatic: trauma is an event that overwhelms our resources to the point that we are left helpless; it is an experience that we face directly or face with the proximity of death and injury[18];

[17] Svitlana Royz, Interview by Tetiana Stus, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDJRU6WUqcA, [accessed 24/11/23].
[18] Svitlana Royz, Interview by Tetiana Stus, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDJRU6WUqcA, [accessed 24/11/23].

- two people going through the same experience, hearing the same air raid siren, may or may not be emotionally injured – helplessness is only traumatic if a person is unable to act;
- we cannot know for sure how a reader will react to our texts (because somebody's best friend drowned, it shouldn't mean we have to avoid any mention of the pool in our texts);
- being honest, direct, caring, and respectful is the best strategy for a writer. To prevent any possible re-traumatizing, we would have to be completely silent, but is that a good option?

In conclusion, it is advocated that writers liberate themselves from preconceived notions and allow the organic evolution of their narrative to shape the ultimate trajectory of their work. While an initial synopsis may provide a conceptual framework, the denouement of the actual manuscript may markedly differ, a divergence that is entirely acceptable within the creative process. The overarching guidance is to approach the writing endeavour with a delicate sensibility, acknowledging and valuing the emotional responses of potential readers. A foundation of kindness, honesty, and respect should underscore the narrative, discouraging the use of manipulative tactics, hyperbole, or obfuscation. By adhering to principles of transparency and sincerity, a literary work is poised to resonate authentically with discerning readers who share these values.

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Author Biography

Viktoriia Medvied is a Ph.D. student in Creative Writing and Modern Languages at the University of St Andrews. Her research is about writing Ukrainian children's literature after February 2022 and the translation of the unspeakable into language through cognitive metaphor, narrative psychology, fairy tale, and bibliotherapy. Other research interests include multilingualism in Ukrainian children's literature, specifically the use of *surzhyk*, a speech practice mixing Russian and Ukrainian, that is underrepresented in Young Adult prose. Viktoriia is a published author for children in Ukrainian and translates contemporary Ukrainian children's literature into English. She used to be a journalist for the UTG (Ukrainian Tourism Gazette), where she spoke to a broad audience, and that makes her an experienced author who can share her ideas on how to create a good, relatable text.