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A Call to Mind: How are MG Authors Challenging the Stigmatisation of Mental Health?

Elaine Lambert

Abstract
With primary schools experiencing a mental health crisis, there is a rising need for the conversations around mental health disorders (MHD) to become normalised so that children at this age feel seen and heard. I am interested in how these children are being represented in Middle Grade (MG) fiction. How may anthropomorphism be used in MG fiction to defamiliarize MHD to render them less threatening? How may characters who exhibit MHD be drawn in a sensitive way so that the experiences are normalised and to remove stigma? Using five contemporary MG novels, I explore how animal or toy characters with MHD may provide a safe distance between the child and the subject. There is also the suggestion that animal characters allow the child reader to reflect upon the unspoken, primal feelings, which they would otherwise be unable to articulate. I also examine how metaphor may be a useful tool when representing MHD as it provides an image onto which the feelings may be safely externalised and even accepted. I look at how multifaceted characters enable the child reader to view such experiences as normal, and only one aspect of a character arc, thereby giving the child reader hope.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, Mental Health, anthropomorphism, stigmatisation, taboo*

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In the UK, anxiety and mental health issues in young people are at a crisis point. I am interested in the relatively new debate surrounding the power of the Middle Grade (MG) novel to address these concerns by challenging the stigma that still exists around mental health disorders (MHD). Sadly, recent findings from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) has reported that mental illness is common in primary school age children, and that amongst 5-to-10-year-olds, "14.4% had a probable disorder in 2020" (APPG, 2021). Mental health disorders are normally diagnosed illnesses such as depression, obsessive compulsive disorder or schizophrenia. The Sage Journal reports that "Rates of mental illness among children have increased by 50% in just three years" (Lowry *et al*., 2022). But, there are other manifestations to be mindful of which may be referred to as mental health difficulties, such as stress, social anxiety, loneliness and grief. When I refer to MHD, I will be addressing these in addition to the diagnosed illnesses referred to above . These can be very isolating and so for young children to encounter protagonists that are dealing with such issues can be incredibly empowering and transformative.

I am interested in exploring how I may externalize MHD in my writing without alienating the reader. In order to challenge stigmatisation, authors must create a dialogue around MHD that is positive and makes talking about such feelings permissible. I will explore the use of anthropomorphism as a device that defamilarizes MHD and engages the reader in a less threatening way. This powerfully communicates the expression of feelings which may be hard to articulate or understand, whilst also providing a humorous tone at times, making the MHD conversation more palatable. Indeed, Imogen Church, award-winning screenwriter and Masters' graduate in Children's Literature, agrees with this, noting how in Willis' *Misery Moo (Ross and Willis, 2006),* "Not being human also helps distance the characters slightly which might be particularly beneficial with a topic like mental health" (Church, 2018).

Furthermore, I am interested in how MG authors are challenging stigma by normalising MHD. According to Sanders, "It is reassuring […] and ego-building for children to discover that others have emotions similar to their own" (Sanders, 1967). By identifying with MHD, "authors help remove stigma and open the doors to conversations" (MacGregor, 2022, p.33). I will look at how MG authors are normalising MHD through characters who journey positively through MHD whilst still being well-rounded characters with other aspects to them.

My focus is on non-specific MHD as this is often how MG authors approach this area. Whilst some of my study looks at specific areas (grief, OCD) other texts reflect more generally on anxiety and depressive states. Primarily, I will focus on *The Land of Neverendings* (Saunders, 2018), *The Last Bear* (Gold and Pinfold, 2022), *Goldfish Boy* (Thompson, 2017), *Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot* (Clare and Matthews, 2015); and I will briefly touch on *The Longest Night of Charlie Noon* (Edge, 2019).

Anthropomorphism

Stigmatisation occurs when there is a lack of dialogue about a given subject, leading to prejudice and stereotypes. So when MG authors utilise anthropomorphic characters encountering MH themes, they open up dialogue because the MHD is less identifiably human and therefore, less threatening. Arguably, fiction can enable children to unlock their own hidden narratives that are largely being ignored, such as in the use of anthropomorphism wherein writers seek to dissociate the MHD through the use of animal characters or toys. It may be interesting to look at the cathartic use of displacing problems from the human world, thereby allowing the child to recognize the 'voice', the 'feelings' of the animal protagonist rather than being drawn to like representations of self. According to Derby, anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to non-human entities) is one of the key ways we explain the world around us (Derby, 1970, 190). Burke concurs that it is because the risk is transferred to the animal or toy protagonist that the child reader is able to face issues that normally they would "find so frightening or so debilitating that [they are unable to] face it directly", and in turn the "psychological distance" allows the child reader to critically explore that which they would not be comfortable exploring directly. Having animals or toys role-playing and experiencing life's difficulties provides the child reader with a degree of emotional space wherein they can reflect (Burke and Copenhaver, 2004).

Indeed, Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* (2022) is a very reflective narrative that touches on themes of grief, depression and isolation. According to Wearne, traditional approaches to MHD have focused on repression and "gaining control" and yet if we do not remove this stigma and allow time for MH conversations within literary narratives "the feelings will surface later" (Weare, 2000, p. 27). Not only have MHD been stigmatised but so too has talking about such difficulties.

Grieving after the loss of her mother, April moves to the Arctic with her father so he can work on his research. But he doesn't have much time for his daughter, nor does he prioritise the conversations they really need to have to share their loss and regroup. Rather than April being didactically taught how to express her loss and anxiety "a feeling that April never quite knew how to put into words" (Gold, 2022, p. 13), Gold develops a pseudo father-figure in the Bear, who helps her to express what is locked inside. It is through the wild animal's emotions that she is able to reach her own feelings. Notably, these are not expressed in words, but in roars. This is a very powerful metaphor for young children who can recognise, but not give words to, the wild, untamed feelings of grief, loss, trauma: "Bear's eyes spoke of hunger, desperation […] Perhaps loneliness […] although April wasn't sure if that was a reflection of her own feelings or not" (p. 90). The Bear teaches her to get out the grief – he allows her to roar, and to do it well: "And with the roar any last bit of remaining hurt disappeared" (p. 119), "it came from the deepest, wildest part of her" (p. 161). And from there, April begins to say the things that have tacitly been forbidden: "I wouldn't mind a new Mum" (p.126).

Longing is expressed and a new way ahead is given permission. This expression of April's inner feelings enables Bear and April to communicate without words.

As Burke explains, "animal characters as people, can add a degree of emotional distance […] when the story message is very powerful, personal, and painful" (Burke and Copenhaver, 2004). And so the narrative continues with April now able to read Bear's mind and vice versa, because they have both roared out grief together. Both have lost a mum and both feel abandoned. It is through his tutelage that April learns to not just roar out her feelings for her own expression, but to roar them to her father, forcing once again, a connection, even if at first this is full of tension and conflict: "it was the loudest roar she'd done so far" (p. 230). Perhaps one of the advantages of animal characters is that it allows for the implied suggestion that feelings are quite primal and even animalistic, and should be accepted as part of our human nature. In this way, Gold challenges the stigma that MHD should be pushed down and ignored and instead presents April gaining agency as she roars

Another form of anthropomorphism that MG authors employ is the idea that when we are looking away our toys come to life. Dewan refers to the well-known narrative of *Winnie the Pooh* when she discusses how "Christopher Robin learns to cope by removing himself from the site of his anxieties, attributing them to his toy animals, and dealing with them safely by proxy" (Dewan, 2022, p. 8). Likewise in the MG novel *The Land of Neverendings* (Kate Saunders, 2018) the author explores the grief (of Emily and Ruth) at a safe distance, through the toy world. As the toys, belonging to those they have lost, come back to life and introduce Emily and Ruth to *their* world (called Smockeroon), it is here that the internal battles of the real world play out. As author Leon Garfield notes, "It is very hard to represent the familiar strikingly against the familiar. It is like writing on red paper with red ink. It becomes invisible […] and it is only when we move them to another place […] that their qualities leap out at us" (as quoted in Dewan, 2022, p 19). Dewan goes on to say that by "journeying to a new and unfamiliar place" readers gain a fresh perspective that perhaps challenges our previously held mindsets. Indeed, Saunders takes both the protagonists, Emily and Ruth, and the reader to Smockeroon where we witness the invasion by a black toad causing chaos and sadness.

The toad is described as squatting: "its eyes slits of pure spite, looming out of the doorway like a storm cloud […]" (Saunders, 2018, p. 250). The way it is seemingly guarding the doorway between the two realms is suggestive of it being the great separator, death itself. Later it is presented eating the toys: "lashed out a long black rope of a tongue and pulled the stuffed penguin into its revolting mouth" (p. 282). This disruption of the formally paradisiacal world of the toy realm metaphorically represents the idea of death 'eating' our loved ones, consuming them. It suggests that death causes a disruption in our understanding of the world. It's no longer a secure and controllable place but is now exposed and vulnerable. Interestingly, the toys view the toad as trading in a banned substance: "SADNESS!" (p. 81). Just as Gold's character

April learns to roar like Bear, here Saunders expresses Emily and Ruth's grief through the toys who rail against sadness squatting in their otherwise happy world.

Saunders carefully navigates the many and varied stages of grief; she doesn't over simplify it but recognises the feeling of injustice. Therefore, rather than focus realistically on Emily's feelings (although these are sometimes detailed in italics or in her journal), Saunders provides a vehicle for exploring the devastation of loss: it seems that Emily's and Ruth's pain has been transferred into the dysfunctionality of the toys. Suddenly, there are militant dinosaurs and rag-doll kidnapping gangs, with resulting mess and disorder everywhere. There is a great deal of humour in Saunders' portrayals of anthropomorphised toys. The Barbie dolls are now nuns with veils because their owners wrote "bum" and "Willies and balls" on their faces in biro, and a toy self-help group is started (p.100). According to author Matejek-Morris in MacGregor's article (MacGregor, 2022, p. 35), "Bookending the hard conversations about mental illness with amusing [episodes] helped to show that even when things are tough, there is hope and humor on the other side." Certainly, the comedic effect that Saunders produces is welcome relief around the MHD of grief and loss, rendering the exploration of this less threatening and hopefully promoting dialogue and reducing stigma.

Anthropomorphism also allows the MG author the freedom to present MHDs as having their own separate identity and shape, thus distancing each one from personhood and rendering it more as an experience. This has the potential to disrupt stigmatisation – promoting the idea that a MHD is not the identity of the child but something they are dealing with. In *Goldfish Boy* by Lisa Thompson, Matthew externalises the inner voice of his OCD through the Wallpaper Lion: "His wonky eye looked down at me reassuringly. *You're doing OK*, he was saying" (Thompson, 2017, p. 71). Perhaps the choice of a lion is quite apt as a defence mechanism. This is shown when anyone approaches his room, infringing on his 'clean' space: "I could hear the Wallpaper Lion growling quietly behind the door" (p.107). These interactions are not always benign and the lion appears to represent some of Matthew's inner squalls. It refuses to provide answers, highlighting that sometimes the MH sufferer doesn't really understand what they are doing, or why: "The Wallpaper Lion stared back at me, blankly" (p. 74). Sometimes, it challenges Matthew: "*Surely you know how that feels...don't you, Matthew?"* (p. 91) illustrating how Matthew's subconscious is not happy with the way things are and that he wishes to challenge his own thinking and entrenched position. This is highlighted further by Thompson's portrayal of the Lion laughing at Matthew when he is engaged in one of his rituals (p. 178). Clearly, this outlet/voice is likened to breathing for Matthew as the redecorating of his room and the removal of the Wallpaper Lion triggers an enormous attack of OCD: "You've killed him, Dad. You've killed him!" (p. 315). "Thirty-seven times I washed my hands. thirty-seven times. My worst count ever" (p. 317). In this way, Thompson suggests that the MHD is both separate to the child sufferer but at the same time connected to them, introducing to young readers the idea that MHD are not integral to personality but are

something relational. In this way, the writer avoids stigmatising MHD, by rendering them as an experience rather than a fixed identity to be shunned or judged.

In *Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot* (Clare, 2015) Horatio Clare explores parental depression, and interestingly, he, like Thompson dissociates the MHD – into an insect, specifically a beetle. This is similar to SANE's 2012 campaign with the "Black Dog" metaphor: "first coined by the Roman poet, Horace" it gave those suffering with depression an image with which they could externalise their feelings of depression and in doing so combat the taboo that surrounds this illness (McVeigh, 2011). In a fantastical quest, Aubrey sets out to discover what is responsible for his father's changed state of mind. He knows he is looking for the Yoot, but only later discovers that this is homophonic for U.T.E, an acronym (the Universal Terror of Existence). The narrative quest builds with some trepidation only to fall on the discovery that the Yoot (or U.T.E) is in fact a small black beetle: "Aubrey was extremely surprised that such a monster should appear as such a small beast – admittedly quite big for a beetle" (p. 153).

In Thompson's *Goldfish Boy*, Matthew also likens his OCD to the same insect: "The black beetle woke deep within my stomach. Its sharp little feet began to dig in as it scurried around again" (p. 88). The way Thompson animates the feeling into a dark insect, often associated with occultic symbolism, is telling but at the same time she creates almost pity for this creature: "little legs'' – and humour as it seems to pretend to "snooze" before beginning a counter attack. In this way, there is some assimilation between the boy and his trauma – it is as if he is both repelling it and accepting it. Often the biggest hurdle for those suffering MH trauma is in being able to accept the dark narrative they are carrying and to be able to work with it. To be able to move beyond the urge to just "plunge my hand in my tummy and pull that beetle out" (Thompson, p. 37). In a similar way, Clare also explores the Yoot empathetically: "OH HOW I HATE BEING TRAPPED IN ME!!" (Clare, p. 159) and so perhaps there is a warming now towards the Yoot and its predicament rather than a judgement of depression. This is a powerful sea change and one that can't start too young. Indeed, the novel contains an illustration of the beetle, pushing the enormous camel dung uphill cast in the mythic role of Sisyphus, which implies pity for a MHD as something small, ineffectual and struggling with a repetitive task.

This is also powerfully illustrated in *Goldfish Boy*, with Matthew's large (if somewhat repulsive) image of the beetle with a person sitting within it. However, this image does suggest agency, with the person perhaps able to affect change from within the MHD. Challenging stigmatisation of MHD, Thompson and Clare utilise this insect metaphor in a way that both dissociates MHD from personhood and at the same time creates empathy for the condition and its trials.

Normalising

According to MacGregor, a compassionate portrayal of MHD is achieved when "These books say, hey, it's OK to not be OK, there is hope and help, and you are not alone."

(Barnes, 2018, p. 33). By normalising MHD, authors may challenge the stigmatisation – illustrating that such difficulties are not isolated but are (sadly) all too common to the human condition. In *Neverendings* Saunders presents not just Emily (the child) suffering from the grief of losing her sister, but also Ruth (her adult neighbour) who encourages Emily to talk: "And while you're here, you can talk about Holly as much as you like without worrying about my feelings" (Saunders, 2018, p. 16). The adult identifies with the pain and stories are shared, normalising the feelings of grief. Saunders includes not just Ruth suffering loss, but Emily's teacher: "When I was nine, my little brother died" (p. 53). This identification is consoling: "she felt a little less of a freak for the rest of the day" (p. 55). According to Sargent, such role models offer children reassurance "so that [they] may feel less alone and stigmatized" (Sargent, 1985, p. 627).

Despite the rejection of her prior best friend who is unable to accept Emily's grief, Saunders does present Emily with new friends who start to include her in their plans. In an interview, children's author Tae Keller explains the importance of this in reducing stigma around those suffering from MHD: "I wanted to show that it's OK to continue on, to experience life beyond the pain" (Barnes, 2018, p. 38). In *Publishers Weekly*, Pinkney, editor at Scholastic agrees, "it's important to remember that MG characters coping with mental health issues are multifaceted [...there is an] opportunity to pull off that veil of stigma and present the characters as fully rounded individuals" (Maughan, 2020). This has encouraged me to reflect on the planning of my MG writing, ensuring that my protagonist is 'multifaceted' and not only a product of a MHD. Indeed, Saunders shows Emily preparing for a drama production and going to a sleepover with her new friends; and although she feels unsure of herself, we see her growing in confidence as she steps out.

In *Goldfish Boy*, Thompson also goes some way to normalising MHD as it's not just the boy protagonist who is suffering with OCD, but adults are also shown to be burdened with their own MH issues (Thompson, 2017). Mr Charles has OCD obsessions with the tidiness of his garden which seems to escalate following the crisis – triggering his urge to control. Thompson also portrays Matthew's peers as having their own hidden pains: Jake Bishop is, at first, Matthew's nemesis but is shown to be suffering from a chronic condition which in turn leaves him exposed to bullying: "I didn't see you sitting next to me when no one else dared. Where were you, eh?" (p. 290). Furthermore, Matthew meets Melody, who is broken over her family split: "I started coming here after school before Dad moved out, to avoid all the arguing" (p. 205). Her anxiety is evident by the way she collects grave memorial cards to comfort herself with other loving family messages, almost to drown out the arguing family she has. This 'cast' of other hurting characters makes it easier for Matthew to 'confess' his fears to others, starting with his newfound friendship with Melody: "I've – I've got this problem. A fear of germs. That's why I needed the gloves. I'm sorry. It's not you…. There you go, you know my secret now" (p.198). Author, Lisa Allen-Agostini also emphasizes the importance of showing readers they are not alone: "In my family and my country

mental illness is not talked about, which is I think quite damaging and isolating" (MacGregor, 2022, p. 34).

This sense of shared anxieties is something that the author of *The Longest Night of Charlie Noon* also does well (Edge, 2019). The motif of the trackless wood (a liminal space between realities – a wilderness with its own rules) implies they are all lost in their own traumas and yet, as they journey through it together, even the bully, Johnny, starts to transform. Charlie is suffering anxiety with repeated visions of domestic abuse, whilst Dizzy suffers from bullying due to his disability and Johnny's home life is also implied to be suffused in anxiety. The MHD is not specified but this is another strength of the book. Indeed, in the *Guardian's* recent article (Ferguson, 2018) Tom Percival explains that in writing about MHD in *Ruby's Worry*, "I deliberately didn't make it about a specific problem, I wanted to explore the idea of worry, concern and anxiety." Church concurs that children's literature may "externalise internal suffering without alienating the reader with over-specificity" (Church, p. 137).

Despite there being 'dark times' still 'ahead', Edge encourages the child reader to "smile at my friends" and "keep walking into the future" (Edge, 2019, p. 179). It is interesting that Charlie untangles the young adult, Johnny, under the water and also beckons the adult, Dizzy, to save the child from a building burning in the Blitz. In this way, Edge suggests that it is our present influences on our friends that will save them in the future and equip them to also save others: "We made it through the woods'' (p. 179). There is a sense that the journey through the woods is a 'together' experience, one to be endured as part of a community. Although there are moments such as when Charlie is up the tree and can hear through the bark the music played during her father's drunken spats, she also comes down from the tree to Johnny's "face […] looking down at me" (p. 87). They are the solution for one another; together they uncode each other so that they are different when they leave the wood. "We don't have to be like we were before […] we can be what we want to be" (p. 177). In discussing the novel with fellow students, some suggested that Edge could have handled the safeguarding better here: as the implied message that Charlie is returning to a domestic abuse scenario, a welcome addition could have included the suggestion of some adult intervention. As I reflected further on this – perhaps Charlie's older adult self could have modelled what to do in order for her younger self to be safe.

On the other hand, both Saunders and Gold provide modelling of what *not* to do when responding to MHD. They present characters who respond badly to MHD, encouraging the reader to reflect on unhelpful and potentially damaging behaviours. As editor Peter Carver suggests, books need to offer "mirrors that will help them navigate the world" (Maughan, 2020). Undoubtedly, sometimes those mirrors reflect unhelpful reactions and behaviours that surround MHD. Saunders challenges the stigma evident in behaviours that marginalise the sufferer of MHD. Both Emily and Ruth experience a kind of 'freezing' from their friends and acquaintances: "Maze looked back at her as if they had never met" (Saunders, p. 73), "If she saw me in the street she ran away" (p.91). Emily's prior best friend continues to disappoint her and

even weaponises grief, suggesting Emily has only been given the lead role in the school play as an act of pity. In a similar way, Gold illuminates unhelpful behaviours by the way April's father is shown to be ineffectual and a disappointment. He is presented as cold and emotionally deficient. Gold illustrates the insufficiency of him: "looking as thin and fragile as one of his books" (Gold, 2022, p.38). When April's father does communicate with her it is to put her in her place: "he barked that it wasn't work for little girls" (p.52). And once again she is made to feel like the island, insignificant and barely there on the map. However, we see him restored to his position as her protector and Pinfold's final illustrations of their physical closeness provide a wonderful synergy between what the roar of the bear unleashed and the closeness with which they now communicate. Joyfully, Gold places him in the role that Bear did so well, that of one who caresses her and embraces her: "with her Dad stroking her hair as she cried" (p. 285). Tellingly, he lets her cry: grief is now permitted. The character arc of April's dad challenges the stigma of internalised shame that surrounds MHD and helpfully models a transformation of an adult.

Of course, adults may also be challenged when reading such books for children. Arguably, *Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot* is best read aloud by an adult to a child. On being awarded the Branford Boase Award in 2016, the book was provided with CLPE teacher notes to accompany the reading of this book, stating that "it may be more appropriate to read this in a more supportive context." (CLPE) No doubt, Clare is encouraging a conversation between adults and children about MHD and how they navigate this together.

In conclusion, I believe that with the current MH crisis amongst children, MG authors can be part of the conversation that gives voice to previously stigmatised emotions and feelings, enabling the young reader (and often, the adult carer also) to feel seen and heard, and hopefully find their voice. As author Sam Copeland puts it: "Dealing with big problems can […] be wrapped up in embarrassment" (Ferguson, 2018). I believe that if we create a dialogue around MHD in children's fiction we can enable child readers to feel, like Saunders' character Emily, a "little less of a freak" (Saunders, 2018, p. 55).

In my research I found anthropomorphism to be a useful tool in distancing MHD so that readers can reflect on difficult realities. I was inspired by how Clare and Thompson used this in a symbolic way, so that the MHD was characterised as an insect, rendering it as separate, identifiable and also quite pitiful.

Particularly powerful was the way I found MG authors are not necessarily writing a work about MHD but are non-specifically reflecting on it as part of their well-rounded characters. Edge, Gold and Saunders all include characters that exist with some level of anxiety or MHD and yet also gain agency within their worlds beyond these issues.

In writing this essay, I have begun to reflect on the characters within my own work and how I might normalise MHD without making the book specific in this regard. Part of the success of these books is the way they present multiple characters

suffering a MHD (both peers and adults) which, whilst this is a sad reflection on the times, is also comforting for children to be reminded that they are not alone.

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Author Biography

Elaine Lambert was a Head of English for over 25 years, teaching in England and Kenya, in state schools, boarding schools, as well as a children's home. Born in Northern Ireland, she has a degree in English and American Literature and is working towards a Masters in Writing for Young People. Her first novel, *Ancestral Voices* was shortlisted for the Impress Prize and she is currently writing *The Wimbling Woods*, a Middle Grade, period, adventure story.