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More than Just a Thing with Feathers: The Importance of Hope in Middle Grade Fiction

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Abstract
The children's publishing world speaks about hope like a magic spell, the X-factor of a Middle Grade book. Children's writers speak about it in terms of responsibility and narrative structure; and many industry professionals see it as non-negotiable. This article aims to unpack our understanding of hope – what it is and what it isn't – and how it informs the way we write for a Middle Grade audience. As storytellers, we play a part in shaping the minds of young readers. Through qualitative data from authors, editors, agents, and industry professionals, as well as through the lens of the history of children's literature and existing psychology research, I suggest that hope is a shared cultural value that we insist upon in stories for young people. Writing for young people is, in itself, a hopeful act, and by writing with a sense of hope – no matter how dark our stories are – we give our young readers the respect they deserve.

Keywords: *hope*, *middle grade*, *fiction*

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What Is Hope?

Have you ever tried to catch a pigeon? I caught one in a coffee shop once. In its bid to feast on croissant crumbs, the poor bird found itself stuck inside, surrounded by flapping humans. After several attempts at lunging and grasping, I finally managed to corner it behind a chair and capture it. As the pigeon struggled in my arms, I was surprised at the power of its pinned wings pressing against my fingers – I barely got out the door before it broke free of my hands, escaping back into the wilderness of Oxford's city centre.

Researching the topic of hope in Middle Grade (MG) fiction has felt strangely similar to catching that pigeon.

What at first seemed like a straightforward task turned into mental acrobatics that had me lunging and grasping at a concept that does not want to be pinned down. And in the few moments I did manage to wrap the fumbling fingers of my mind around it, hope quickly broke free again, morphing into something larger, more powerful, and much more complex than I had anticipated. I came to understand another facet of Emily Dickinson's poetic metaphor, '"Hope" is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul' (1951). But I did not give up. I followed hope into the wilderness and observed it in its natural habitat – and I watched it begin to take flight.

As someone who writes for Middle Grade readers and has the goal of one day being published in the UK, I wanted to know if there was something more I could be doing with my stories. As the Covid-19 pandemic began to unfold and I started my research, *hope* seemed to be on everyone's lips. We all needed it more than ever. Could hope, then, be one of the secrets to writing a publishable Middle Grade novel; a secret that was beginning to surface as a tangible prerequisite to publication? What critical issues face us as we consider the place of hope in our stories? And do authors of MG fiction have a responsibility to write hopeful stories?

I gathered qualitative data from authors, editors, agents, and industry professionals. I explored the history of children's literature, and looked at existing psychology research. I began to notice patterns emerging. The UK children's publishing world speaks about hope as if it were a magic spell, the X-factor of a Middle Grade book. Children's writers speak about it in terms of responsibility and narrative structure; and many agents see it as non-negotiable.

But what is hope, exactly? Some say it is the promise that everything will be alright; others, that it is confidence in the future. Author, Katherine Rundell (2020) describes it as a 'belief that the world has so many strangenesses and possibilities that giving up would be a mistake.' Psychologist, C. R. Snyder (2000) uses an equation to define it: 'a sense of successful agency' plus 'pathways'. Philosopher, Josef Pieper (1997) describes it as *status viatoris*, 'the absence of fulfilment and the orientation

toward fulfilment'. In other words: hope is being 'one on the way.' And author, Katherine Paterson (1988) describes it as 'a yearning, rooted in reality, that pulls us toward the radical biblical version of a world where truth and justice and peace do prevail.'

But do we really need equations, theology, and Latin to help us understand what hope is in children's books? As complicated and diverse as these definitions may seem at first, they are all connected. They each describe hope *moving* us in some way. Hope gives us agency. Hope takes us forward, pointing us toward fulfilment and possibility, even in the face of darkness.

As I pursued hope through the pages of Middle Grade novels, notebook in hand, eager to uncover industry secrets, I discovered that hope is embedded in the core of Middle Grade fiction in three key ways. First, the industry demands hopeful stories. Hope sells! Second, the very *process* of writing Middle Grade fiction is a fundamentally hopeful one. And finally, children's authors, insofar as they understand their readership, find themselves compelled to write with an innate sense of hope.

More Than a Happy Ending

If hope and happy endings were synonymous, we would have to answer the question, 'is hope important in Middle Grade fiction?' with a resounding 'no.' We know that children don't always need everything to work out perfectly in the end; nor does the industry insist on it. Author, Jo Clarke (2020) told me on Twitter that, 'hope in MG is important, but it has to be believable. Don't change reality just to make the reader feel better.' She observed that Christopher Edge's *The Many Worlds of Albie Bright* (2016) does this well. Edge could have easily concluded the story with Albie discovering a way to bring his mum back after she died. That's all Albie wants, after all. But Edge instead ends the story with Albie finding his mother in an alternate universe and still choosing to return to his own world.

English teacher and author Catherine Bruton says she has 'seen the capacity stories have to help young readers confront and work through the most complex of issues' (2020). These complex issues are illustrated through conflict, and often – like in real life – aren't resolved neatly by the end. But that doesn't mean these stories don't have hope.

A terribly sad book still has the power to move us forward and point us toward fulfilment and possibility. Author, Yarrow Townsend has put it this way, '"Hope" in a story doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the ending of the story itself. My theory is that "hope" has a lot to do with the momentum of the story' (2020).

Indeed, a conclusion that forces happiness would undermine all the hard work that goes into constructing a good narrative. Moreover, it might misconstrue reality in ways that are inappropriate or unjust. Bruton observes that it would have been, 'irresponsible to have a glibly "happy ending"' in her *No Ballet Shoes in Syria*, for it would have risked 'grossly misrepresenting a complex and tragic social situation in the experience of refugee children in the UK' (2020). Instead, she chose to resolve some

elements, but not all; the protagonist is granted asylum, but never finds out what happened to her father.

Paterson (1988), who has been criticised for her unhappy endings, cites a poignant comment on this subject made by a fan of her book, *Bridge to Terabithia*: '"I really respected this book," [the fan] said. "You stuck to reality, and you also stuck to a dream." There. That is what hope is in my books.'

The space between reality and dreams is where hope thrives. In this space we are stretched and challenged to grow; we move forward, toward possibility. Author, Alyssa Hollingsworth (2020b) explained it like this,

> 'I think [hope] works best when the character arc lands them somewhere they need to be that's not where they want to be [...] This is glowingly done in *PAX* – the ending is exactly the nightmare of the inciting incident, but we know both characters need it.'

Rachel Leyshon (2020), Editorial Director at Chicken House, agrees, writing that hope, 'can be related to the problem the MC is facing at the beginning of the story. How you leave that character is crucial to that uplifted, satisfied feeling at the end.' *PAX*, *Albie Bright*, and *No Ballet Shoes in Syria* are all examples of this – the protagonists don't get what they want at the start of the story; instead, they end up with what they *need*, resulting in character growth.

Our characters are challenged in the dark places – in the bleak and frightening moments that life throws at us. It doesn't matter whether that challenge comes in a magical world, or in the council house down the road, or even in the face of a global pandemic: to seek hope in these dark places is wholly human.

Townsend puts it beautifully by saying, 'I've got a suspicion that the more hope there is – and the more danger of that hope being taken away – the more powerful a story is, whether or not it has a happy resolution' (2020).

What the Industry is Looking For

We have identified what hope is and what it is not, but how does hope fit into the children's publishing world? Some historical perspective is helpful here. Writing for the British Library, M.O. Grenby (2014a) states that books, 'published especially for children before the mid-18th century were almost always remorselessly instructional […] or deeply pious.' But over time, writers began to criticise these moral tales. Sir Walter Scott wrote in 1823 that when children read them, 'their minds are, as it were, put into the stocks.' One might be inclined to say that a book written today that pushed morality and virtue so transparently would be scoffed at and deemed old fashioned or overly 'preachy.'

Or would it?

In our keenness to reject the prudish sensibilities of centuries past, we might imagine that our approach is entirely different: that we write so as to give children

limitless space to explore. But I don't believe that to be entirely true. While our methods might have changed and today's writers might have a bit more freedom to tackle bigger, darker, and more complex topics, there are important ways in which our value systems emerge in the stories we tell.

Grenby (2014b) states that, 'those who write children's books have always thought it part of their job to instruct their readers, whether in facts, religion, morals, social codes, ways of thinking, or some other set of beliefs or ideas.' When I initially read this, I rejected the idea that this instructive mindset is necessary to writing children's books. I recall Steve Voake advising my Writer's Workshop at Bath Spa University (2019) to, 'decide what you want to say, then go out of your way not to say it'. The point is that we don't get to tell our readers what they should or should not take away from our stories.

But upon further reflection, I realised that, actually, we *do* instruct our readers. We may no longer be so obvious about it, but we do have societally-accepted morals that sneak into our stories. One of them, I would suggest, is hope.

Katherine Rundell puts it this way, 'Children's books today do still have the ghost of their educative beginnings, but what they are trying to teach us has changed. Children's novels, to me, spoke, and still speak of hope' (2019).

Why is this? Well, one of the reasons is that hope sells. Or perhaps it would be better to say: the industry is looking for hope in the stories we tell.

Literary agent, Jodie Hodges says,

> 'I think it would be pretty extraordinary for there not to be any hope in a MG story. I can't recall taking on an author with a book that felt unhopeful […] and I definitely think it's something that would be a barrier to sales' (2020).

Naomi Colthurst (2020), Senior Commissioning Editor at Penguin Random House Children, concurs. She says that, 'having at least a shred of hope in MG stories is quite important.'

When answering a question on Twitter about whether hope is necessary in Middle Grade fiction, Chicken House's Barry Cunningham (2020b) answered with an enthusiastic 'Yes – a BIG YES – Hope is the main quality in good writing for children – and no time needs it more!' He went on to say that hope is something Chicken House actively looks for in submissions. Literary agents, Becky Bagnell, Amber Caraveo, and Claire Wilson all had similar responses.

But do these commercial reasons fully explain why hope is so ubiquitous in MG fiction? Bookseller, Tamsin Rosewell (2020) of Kenilworth Books told me that no child or parent had ever come into the bookshop looking for a book 'full of hope', nor had publishers ever tried to sell her a book based on its hopefulness. She went on to say that, 'a book full of hope isn't a story – there needs to be conflict.' I was surprised at this and, after pressing further, Rosewell qualified her initial statement, 'hope is just part of storytelling', she concluded, 'it's always been part of storytelling.' If this is true – and I

believe it is – every book a child picks up when visiting Kenilworth Books, or any bookshop, holds a bit of hope.

This raises a more profound question about how hope is present within the very structure of storytelling and its mediums. Emeritus Professor David Almond suggests that, 'the creation of a book […] is in itself optimistic – the book itself is an act of hope because it's a thing created and shared' (2020). When agents read a submission, they hope that it will catch the eye of a publisher; and when a publisher buys a manuscript, they hope that it will go on to sell. And where did this hopeful process begin? With the author's own hope that their story will move readers.

Indeed, hope is much more than just a commercially-advantageous feature of children's books; it reflects a shared value among publishers, agents, and authors alike. But why do we believe that this value is not only an acceptable one to include in Middle Grade books, but a necessary one? A short answer might be that something within us longs for hope – even insists upon it. And for good reason. Psychological studies have demonstrated correlations between hope and mental health. In her study on the subject, Michelle Valle (2006) concluded that, 'higher levels of hope would predict increased life satisfaction and decreased psychopathology.'

But where does storytelling fit into this picture? Author, Natasha Farrant (2020) quotes research by philosopher Kieran Egan in *Princesses, Dragons, and Helicopter Stories* (Lee, 2015), 'when we connect with a story, parts of our brains related to a particular emotion or action light up, and our neurons start firing as if we were engaged in the activity ourselves.' And when stories engage our brains, they are, as Philip Pullman (2017) puts it, 'building patterns of behaviour and expectation into [our] moral understanding.' Farrant (2020) goes on to say,

> '[children] live the books they love, and these books offer tremendous opportunity to learn about love and loss and everything in between. They will shape their young readers and make them who they are.'

This is our burden as authors, whether we realise it or not; we are playing a part in shaping young readers' perspectives on the world and on themselves.

Faced with the Covid-19 crisis, there has perhaps never been a more important time to tell hopeful stories. Certainly, the world has never grasped for it more desperately. Within the children's book world, Rundell felt this keenly as she mobilised an army of children's authors and illustrators with the brief to, 'write something that gives hope.' The result was the widely shared and acclaimed *Book of Hopes.* Rundell said that the response from authors and illustrators was, 'magnificent, which shouldn't have surprised me, because children's writers and illustrators are professional hunters of hope' (2020).

When asked if it is important to be marketing hope during a pandemic, Chloe Healy (2020), Marketing Director at Vintage, responded, 'I do! I think readers of all ages will be looking for hopeful books.'

As the world has shifted many times over since the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, hope seems to have persevered as an important (and marketable) aspect of Middle Grade fiction. 'Inspirational themes' and 'fantasy and magic' were trending in 2021 Middle Grade titles (Wood, 2021), and, 'books that help children develop skills that allow them to overcome challenges on their own', 'books with a focus on kindness and the value of being a good friend to others' and 'climate change and conservation' were on the rise in 2022 (Friedman, 2022).

This aligns with editors' predictions in May 2020 that, 'readers will be seeking solace in "uplifting' and "escapist" fiction … in a bid for distraction in a post-Covid-19 world' and that, 'there will continue to be an appetite for books that help us to feel hopeful and uplifted, but that also celebrate friendships or family relationships' (Toor, 2020).

Inspiration, fantasy, overcoming challenges, kindness, conservation – these themes find the most power when they are imbued with a sense of hope; moving young readers towards fulfilment and possibility in fictional worlds, even as the real world roils with uncertainty around them.

A Writer's Responsibility?

In that coffee shop, I was not required to catch the pigeon. There was no moral responsibility for me to get up from my pot of tea and flail about trying to corner a trapped bird. But as writers, do we have the responsibility to create hopeful stories for Middle Grade readers?

Speaking from her perspective as a teacher, Catherine Bruton says, 'if you offer no hope in a story, then I would almost go so far as to say that it is irresponsible' (2020). Jodie Hodges (2020) draws the same conclusion,

> 'Everything comes back to that idea of responsibility – a MG reader might be 8 or 9 years old; I'd feel rather uncomfortable in bringing to market something for a child of that age which might make them feel unhopeful about the future or life in general […] In any crisis we tend to see the word 'hope' – personal illness, war, climate emergency, our current pandemic…I think the fact we as a society circulate around that word is very powerful, and so of course, quite rightly, we'd want to engender that feeling in the youngest generation.'

In a similar vein, Farrant (2020) calls hope one of her, 'golden rules when writing for young people.' She continues,

> '[D]o not destroy that belief that the world can do better. I would suggest that if you see no future for humanity yourself, then perhaps writing for young people is not for you.'

Other writers caution against imposing a sense of duty upon the author. Author, Alyssa Hollingsworth says she tends to, 'shy from saying authors necessarily have a "responsibility" because it feels like it becomes a rule' (2020a). Emeritus Professor David Almond warns of beginning a book with a requirement, suggesting that a book written with that motivation can ostracise our audience because they can, 'sense that they're not getting the kind of respect they deserve' (2020).

Perhaps 'responsibility' is indeed the wrong word. Yet I would suggest that writing hopeful stories is an important way of showing respect to our readers. As Gríanne Clear (2020) from Walker Books says.

> 'MG books do in general need to contain some hope if you want to really write for your reader. A hopeless book can reflect reality, of course, but it can be hard to keep reading, keep wanting to come back. Being hopeful doesn't stop a book from tackling really dark, deep subjects – it just doesn't leave a young reader despairing.'

Perhaps, then, the question we need to ask ourselves as writers isn't, 'Is hope the secret to publishing my Middle Grade novel?' but rather, 'How do I want to leave my reader feeling?' Would I really want a child closing my book in despair? Hope is to some extent subjective; what's hopeful for me isn't necessarily hopeful for you. We can't control the way our stories are received, but we can, as Emeritus Professor David Almond says, 'tell the story in the right way.' He adds, 'When we're writing for young people, it comes out with a sense of hope because we have a sense of this audience' (2020).

When I set out on this journey to understand hope, my aim was to understand it as a feature of the children's publishing industry. But as I pursued hope as a possible prerequisite for being published as a Middle Grade author, I discovered that there's so much more to it than a commercial tick-box. Writing with hope goes beyond what the industry demands – beyond even our perceived responsibility as authors – into our innate, human insistence on hope in the face of adversity.

I wonder if, as children's writers, we are the ones with an extra dose of hope – so much so that it spills out of us as stories. Or perhaps it's the opposite; those of us who are searching for hope find it in the words we write for our remembered younger selves because we know that we needed hope. Not because hope will inspire a child to change the world, but because a hopeful child has the power to change their *own* world.

When I write, I hope on behalf of eleven-year-old me. I write hoping that she will grow up with agency and resilience; hoping that she will believe in her own stories; hoping that she will keep moving forward, toward possibility and fulfilment.

And now, here I am, all grown up – that girl who caught a pigeon in a coffee shop because she hoped she could set it free. And she did.

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Author Biography

Carley Lee is originally from Vancouver Island but spent six years in the UK where she received an Undergraduate Diploma in Creative Writing from Oxford University (2018), and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University (2020). She had the immense privilege of completing her MA and writing her first ever novel as a Scholar in Residence at the Kilns C.S. Lewis Study Centre in Oxford. Though she never managed to find access to Narnia, she did find inspiration at Lewis' writing desk. In September 2020, she returned to Canada and now lives and writes in New Brunswick alongside her husband and a very foolish ginger cat named Pippin.