

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

The construction of childhood at the end of the millennium A clash of adult symbols

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I will start with a prediction. I am about to do something that I will never be able to do again. In fact, I am about to do something that, on balance, I hope that I never have the opportunity to do again. I have to admit, however, that should the opportunity arise, I might just change my mind – if circumstances have themselves changed sufficiently. But I doubt that I will, or they will.

What am I blathering on about? I am starting this contribution to *Children Australia* in a year beginning with 19 and I will finish it in a year beginning with 20. Whether or not you believe that we are passing from one millennium to another, or one century to another, the chances are that by the time 20 changes to 21 I will no longer be capable of putting finger to keyboard, let alone pen to paper. I feel reasonably confident in making such a prediction, in spite of all that I have read recently.

As most people have decided to celebrate the end of a millennium and the start of a new one (why pass up the chance to party?) the newspapers have been full of millennium features. It finally occurred to some writers that the Y2K bug might be an exaggerated threat, and that some computer people might have magnified the problem in order to line their pockets. The prediction that computers crashing will bring about the end of the world as we know it will almost certainly prove to be false. Making predictions (I have made two already), like making resolutions, seems to be something we are compelled to do.

Prophecy may have a poor track record, but I have to conclude the century with another. Children may grow in symbolic value but we will continue to discover new ways to abuse and neglect them. One of the concerns that I have had over the years that I have been writing for *Children Australia* is that, while we appear to be capable of expressing more public concern for and about children, there are now more children than ever living lives blighted by poverty, disease and abuse around the world. Our public concern has not succeeded in changing the lives of all children for the better, even though we surely now have the technologies and resources to do so. This contribution to *Children Australia*

will examine how childhood is constructed and how it is reconstructed in the media as the twentieth century changes to the twenty-first.

Children in the Western world are becoming rarer, with birth rates falling below replacement rates. This fact has been subject to a great deal of analysis as to its possible meanings. Children have been variously described as too costly, too inconvenient, even unfashionable. That we enter into such debates also provides us with many layers of meanings about how we view the world, ourselves and each other.

And yet, if anything, it appears that children are acquiring greater symbolic value in the wealthier parts of the world even as they become rarer in those same parts. I think that this increased symbolism is happening on two levels at least. There is the first, more obvious level, where images of children are used to convey messages. Amongst its Millennium features, for example, *The Australian* provided an end-of-year supplement entitled 'A decade of division' (Waldren 1999), lavishly illustrated with photographs. The largest photograph, on the front page, was of a nine-year-old refugee, 'one of 900,000 who fled Kosovo this year' (Waldren 1999:13).

If a photograph is wanted to illustrate a problem (in this case, the 'refugee tide'), the chances are that a photograph of a child will be used. This tearful, nine-year-old girl's face is framed by a rain-soaked anorak and she is staring down the barrel of the photographer's lens. Across the top of the photograph, across the tightly-framed hood of the anorak, is the sub-heading of the article:

How will we judge the 90s? It was the cyber decade, the era of the Supermodel, capitalism's time of triumph. But most of all, the period is symbolised by the growth of great wealth – and of numbers of poor, the homeless and refugees. (Waldren 1999:13)

This photograph of the nine-year-old girl, who lost her mother, father and three sisters, is used as a symbol of the real horrors of the wars of the last decade. Children and women are likely to suffer most in today's wars. It is ironic that the technology that brings us pictures of a child's suffering is closely linked to the technology that ensures that such suffering recurs. Missiles can be guided from miles away to ensure that those with the most advanced technologies can bomb and destroy buildings from a safe distance. The photographs of the damaged buildings and

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children can be sent to the other side of the world in a split second using similar technology.

Children are now regularly the major casualties of wars and their aftermath. Photographs of them suffering, symbols of lost innocence, do not however appear to have the power to prevent the horror of war. The wars go on, increasingly it seems amongst the poorest of the poor.

Children are symbols in yet another way. Quite what they are symbolic of, I have yet to fathom. They appear to have become symbols of everything, from adulthood to nationhood. Some stories, involving children, lend weight to this.

The first story involves twins born to a 'surrogate mother' in America. The twins, a boy and a girl, were conceived using donor eggs from one woman and born to a second woman. The eggs had been fertilised in a laboratory by sperm from one of two British men who had paid approximately half-a-million dollars arranging the birth. The men are named as 'parent one' and 'parent two' on the babies' US birth certificates but this was not accepted by British immigration authorities when the men arrived in the UK with the babies. According to *The Daily Telegraph* in the UK, 'the parentage and legal status of the babies is complex' (Graves, undated).

The aspect of the case that appears to dominate media coverage is that the British men are homosexual. That should not be the issue that sets the debate. The real problem, the child welfare problem, is that four adults have acted to create two babies with no clear indication of where those babies will live. The technology has been used to create two lives whose futures may be somewhat uncertain. I have written elsewhere (Goddard & Carew 1993) about my concern about using women's (usually poor women's) wombs to breed children for others and about the costs to women of IVF and similar procedures. These babies symbolize many of our inconsistencies towards children. Article 8 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires us to respect the child's right to preserve his or her identity, just as we think of ever more complex ways of confusing such an identity.

Karl Popper wrote that there is no single history of mankind but rather many histories of different aspects of human life. The history of childhood is inextricably and unavoidably interwoven with the history of adulthood. At times, it appears, every gain for childhood is countermanded by a reaction from adults. Just as we recognise children's rights, it is suggested that we must also recognise adults' rights to children:

...no one who wants a child should be denied the chance to have one, regardless of sexual orientation or age (Boseley, Ward & Hartley-Brewer, 2000:11).

Children can be symbolic of a nation's rights as well as an adult's rights. Another child welfare case has had a good run in the newspapers in the weeks over Christmas. This time the tussle is between Cuba and the US. In brief, a six-year-old boy has been staying with relatives in Miami since being rescued by the US Coast Guard off the Florida coast where he was found clinging to an inner tube. The boat that had been carrying him, his mother, step-father and ten others seeking asylum in the US capsized and sank a month before Christmas. The boy was the only survivor.

The boy's father remains in Cuba and wants his son back, but the child is at the centre of a wrangle between the US and Cuba. As Fenton reports, the boy has become:

...a symbol for the large Cuban community of Miami, of their spirited fight against the communist regime in their homeland.

Equally, his fate has been used by Fidel Castro to engender anti-American protests and is the focus of attempts by the Cuban regime to alter Washington's immigration policies towards potential refugees. (2000: 21)

Newspapers report that millions have marched in Cuba to demand that the boy be returned to his father. Need I add that photographs tend to accompany each and every twist in these child welfare sagas – photographs of the twins, for example, sleeping together, or of the little boy from Cuba in his American school uniform. Photographs enhance the symbolism, with children as symbols of nationhood and adulthood.

Australia has had its own child welfare *cause célèbre* during this period. Just as we have read of the Cuban boy in America, so Europeans have been reading of the death of a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy in custody (see, for example, Zinn 2000). The boy (who will remain unnamed in this article) was near the

end of a mandatory 28-day sentence for stealing pens and paint when he committed suicide in a Northern Territory detention centre. The terrible tragedy of such awful consequences has been examined in many pages of newsprint, some of it less enlightened than it should have been. (Should the boy's name have been used, for example, or is the publication of his name a breach of customary laws?)

He is not named in *The Age* of 11th February (Schultz 2000) or in *The Guardian Weekly* (Zinn 2000), but his first name (or nickname) is used in *The Age* of 15th February (Mandell 2000), and appears across the top of page one of *The Australian* of 11th February (Toohey 2000). An editorial in *The Age* on 14th February appears to name the boy but the editorial earlier in *The Weekend Australian* does not (12-13 February, 2000). The use of the dead boy's first name or nickname somehow belittles him in his death just as our

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bizarre laws and inadequate child welfare system demeaned him in his life.

These stories led me to reflect upon how differently childhood was viewed a hundred years ago. Ellen Key's book, *The Century of the Child*, was published in 1900 (cited in Cunningham 1995). I have been unable to track the book down so I am dependent on Cunningham's summary:

Key was in no doubt that the future would be determined by the way children were reared, and she blamed failures in child-rearing for what she saw as three of the scars of the modern world, capitalism, war and Christianity (1995:163).

She was also, according to Cunningham, opposed to schools and believed that it was the mother's role to bring up the children. Her book, one or two eccentricities apart, in many ways appears to be a reflection of many of the beliefs of that time. The nineteenth century had been described in a drama of the time as the woman's century, and the twentieth was to be the century of the child (Cunningham 1995:163). Some have argued that no sooner had we discussed childhood than we lost or destroyed it.

Postman describes the irony of a situation where enormous efforts were made to achieve high levels of literacy in the US between 1850 and 1950 but, at the same time, 'electric speed and mass-produced imagery were working together to undermine that effort and attitude' (1982:74). According to Postman, television destroyed childhood, and:

Like many other social artefacts, childhood became obsolete at the same time that it was perceived as a permanent fixture (1982:74-75).

The book culture of the period stretching from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries created a 'knowledge monopoly' which separated children from adults; children had to go to school to acquire access to the information available in literature (Postman 1982:76). When 'Literate Man' was created, children were left behind:

...in the Medieval world neither the young nor the old could read, and their business was in the here and now... That is why there had been no need for the idea of childhood, for everyone shared the same information... But as the press played out its hand it became obvious that a new kind of adulthood had been invented. From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement. From print onward, the young would have to become adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read...(1982:36, emphasis in original)

Television, Postman argues, has thus destroyed childhood in three ways:

... first, because it requires no instruction to grasp its form; second because it does not make complex demands on either mind or behaviour; and third, because it does not segregate its audience. (1982:80)

These three means of eroding the distinction between adulthood and childhood are all connected to television's 'undifferentiated accessibility' and the resulting destruction of secrets: 'Without secrets, of course, there can be no such thing as childhood' (Postman 1982:80).

Cunningham describes Postman's work as a 'dirge' but nonetheless argues that his explanation for the 'disappearance of childhood' does require attention:

To learn to read required certain characteristics: delayed gratification, persistence, sitting still and sequentiality. By contrast a visual culture, represented by television, requires no such qualities; we do not have to be taught to watch. (1995:180)

The media have other influences on childhood. Our media are constructing childhood in ways that would have been hard to imagine a hundred years ago. The stories of babies created by new technology, of another child wanted by thousands in two nations, and of yet another child, miles from home, dying alone after inappropriate punishment, touch people all around the world. These stories, written from an adult perspective, construct childhood as a symbol of adult preoccupations with how adults and countries are seen. These stories rarely consider children in their own right.

Childhood is very much a construct of where we are and when we are there. Time touches everything. Mark Day made this point in the much-quoted analogy:

...if Gutenberg had invented the Internet instead of moveable type in the middle of the 15th century, and the newspaper had been the scientific achievement of the late 20th century, imagine the amazed reaction from the populace.

Here was a dead tree which provided news, information, and entertainment, comics, games, and interactivity without any batteries, without wires, without computer crashes, eye strain from flickering screens, no download time, and no plug-ins or peripherals.

It can be cut up, bent, rolled, soaked and screwed up and still be used; it can be saved for another day, requires no training to manipulate, contains great graphics in full colour, is portable, cheap as chips, and useful even after you've finished with it – starting a fire, growing potatoes or even, in an emergency, in the toilet.

Try that with your Apple Mac! The newspaper would be the coolest piece of technology around. (2000: 2)

Making predictions is a risky business. Time can make fools of everyone. David Dale, in one of the first articles I read after we reached the year 2000, summarised some of our best known predictions:

- Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?
H.M. Warner Bros., 1927.
- Everything that can be invented has been invented.
Charles Duell, US Patents Office, 1899.
- I think that there is a world market for maybe five computers.
Thomas Watson, IBM president, 1943.
- There is no need for any individual to have a computer in their home.
Ken Olsen, President, Digital Equipment Corporation, 1977.
- A rocket will never be able to leave the earth's atmosphere
The New York Times, 1936. (quoted in Dale, 2000)

