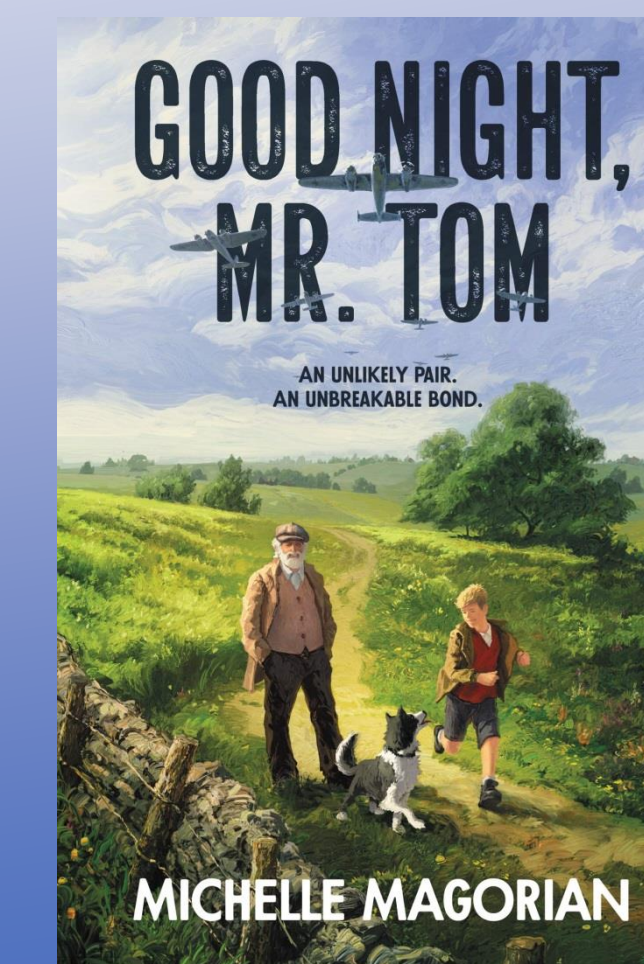




The Liminal Child: Trauma in Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr. Tom*

Kara Cybanski, M.A. Candidate



Introduction

After World War Two (1939-1945), the deadliest military conflict in history, even children's authors published war-inspired novels as society collectively searched for a way to understand the tragedy that had befallen the world. In Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr. Tom* (1981), young Willie Beech is evacuated from London, England in preparation for WWII. He is paired with Mr. Tom Oakley, a grumpy old man who, in helping Willie overcome years of abuse-related trauma, finds his way back into his community. In fact, Tom's position in the periphery is ultimately what allows him to help Willie find his voice and rise above his life of neglect, while Willie's need for affection and trustworthy adult guidance helps Tom heal from his own grief.

Arguments

1. Willie's physical/emotional traumas and how he overcomes suffering
2. The two types of relationships with adults that affect Willie's journey to healing and self-discovery
3. The importance of post-war writings, specifically children's literature used to depict images of war

1. Trauma and Healing

Physical Trauma	Emotional Trauma	Healing Process
Willie is "thin and sickly looking" (Magorian 7)	"He was such a bad boy. Mum said she was kinder to him than most mothers. She only gave him soft beatings" (Magorian 7)	"an upright, well-fleshed boy ... his cheeks were round and pink" (Magorian 217)
-Bruises, scrapes, scabs -Malnutrition -Regularly beaten -Frail, pale	-Fear of punishment -No self-esteem -Narrow worldview -Anxiety/PTSD -Accustomed to violence	-Confidence -Friendship -Fatherly love -Independent space -Open to the world -Physically healthy
"active/passive physical ... [and] mental maltreatment and medical neglect" (Thunes 79)	"children who are victims of abuse will have difficulty forming relationships, including the therapeutic relationship, which is inhibited by the child's fear of being hit for doing things wrong" (qtd. in Pardeck 84)	"there is a drastic change in his character, almost making him appear to be a different person in the end compared to the beginning" (Thunes 69)

Poor Willie is so convinced that his mentally ill mother's ways are the only way children are treated that he initially assumes Tom will beat him for any minor 'error', including talking out of turn or breaking something. Mette Celin Thunes describes how "Every time he is experiencing something new to him he imagines how his mother would have reacted to the situation. By looking at these comparisons, the reader can construct an image of the horrible conditions he used to live under" (70).

2. Relationships

Consider the following: "The home is a complex environment essentially controlled by adults. It is more than likely to be the first place in which children encounter such controlled space and it is in this space that we increasingly find the child occupying a liminal and powerless place on the borders of the family" (Alston 15).

With Mr. Tom	With Mrs. Beech
"He didn't understand. Did Mr. Oakley mean he was going to have a room to himself?" (Magorian 18)	"Willie crawled under the bed and curled up into a ball" (Magorian 32)
-Own bedroom (privacy) -Own belongings -Allowed to roam the house freely -Adult/child spaces combined -Goes by Will	-Small, broken-down apartment -Under the stairs (liminal space) -Sleeps under the bed -Separate adult/child spaces -Goes by Willie
The bedroom becomes "a sanctuary to run to in times of emotional distress" (Alston 25)	"The time she locks him under the stairs with his sister is not the first time. ... he wakes up under the stairs and immediately seems to recognize the place and the feeling of lying there, naked and beaten" (Thunes 75)

Tom not only gives him his own space, but invites him to share the adult space he occupies, namely his house and even his bedroom. Willie's healing process begins the moment he steps into Tom's cottage; Kerry Kidd affirms that "The only way for him to flourish is to be removed permanently -- into another home, as an effective experience of adoption and fostering. ... Will is clearly an abused child, and rightly receives support" (8).

Mr. Tom

Mr. Oakley has by no means lived an easy life; his young wife died in childbirth, and their newborn son only outlived her by a few days. Since then, he has been a recluse, only beginning to reintegrate into the community after Will's arrival in his home. Tom describes his isolation as such: "In his grief he had cut himself off from people, and when he had recovered he had lost the habit of socializing" (Magorian 89). After Willie's appearance, the townsfolk are struck by the many changes in Tom; he attends public meetings and even volunteers—all of this for Willie's safety and wellbeing. Rose-May Pham Dinh compares Mr. Tom and Mrs. Beech: "From the beginning, Magorian emphasizes the contrast between William's mother's less than adequate parenting skills and Mr Tom's ability to embark on what he refers [to] as this 'motherin' lark' (*Goodnight* 20), despite his own masculinity and childlessness" (3). By helping Will, Tom is effectively helping himself overcome his loneliness (Thunes 77).

Mrs. Beech

Willie's destitute, single, super-religious mother only likes him when he is quiet and out of her way. She sets him up to fail by detailing all the impossible rules he must follow to avoid a life of sin. But Willie's mother, instead of creating another conflict at the end of the book, is conveniently erased "to help provide a happy ending" (Kidd 8)—Willie and Tom are told she has committed suicide (Magorian 329). Kidd goes on to explain that the mother is "a stereotype of the 'mad, bad and dangerous' category. ... she is presented as implicitly 'evil,'" (8).

From a mental health studies perspective, the fact that "no efforts are made in the text to help [Willie's] mother, who is in equal need" suggests that mental illness and child-rearing are inherently incompatible (8). Of course, the mother's treatment of her children is unacceptable on all fronts, but her "chronic psychotic illness culminating in her suicide" (Bokey & Walter 394) could likely have been treated, had an adult in her life taken the time to help.

How Does Willie Help?

According to Melissa B. Wilson and Kathy G. Short, children in postmodern plot structures, like Willie Beech, help by "saving adults from the despair of growing old, saving adults from themselves, and saving adults from bodily, spiritual, emotional, or financial harm" (138). They continue by explaining that children take on the position of moral compasses when "confronted with complicated and messy adults who challenge the idea of a static right and wrong" and then keep secret the failures of their adults (139). Willie is the perfect example of both: not only does he save Tom from himself and his emotional turmoil, he also attempts to help his mother and cater to her whims, and even keeps her abuse secret. Wilson and Short underline that postmodern children stories "begin with a failed or absent home, replete with absent or ineffective parents displaying amoral, confusing behavior, and conclude with the children making their own homes either literally or metaphorically" (134). This is the case for Willie who, after his mother's suicide, stays with Mr. Tom.

3. Post-War Children's Literature

Goodnight Mr. Tom fits into a collective effort to represent World War II and its aftereffects, using a unique perspective: a child living both an individual and a collective trauma. Kathleen Bokey and Gary Walter propose that "Literature is a forum for the depiction of human suffering, both physical and psychological" (393) and that "there seems to be a dramatic shift in how children are perceived as suffering psychologically" in more recent children's literature, as compared to Hans Christen Andersen's tales, for example (394). Pham Dinh highlights that "in *Goodnight, Mr Tom*, Magorian suggests that war acts as a catalyst for self-discovery in all kinds of ways" (4). In other words, Will's evacuation from London not only saves him from the frequent bombing of major European cities, but also gives him the opportunity to create a new home and a new identity—this experience transcends Willie's unique situation as it was shared by millions at the time.

Conclusions

While *Goodnight Mr. Tom's* title character takes on the role of father-figure and guide, Willie himself grows into his identity and becomes the son Tom needed to find his place in society after losing his family. When two characters operating on the periphery come together, they learn to overcome their respective traumas and see the world in a refreshing way. Even so, Magorian takes on the challenge of using a child's perspective to explore war, suffering, and grief, giving young voices a chance to share their unique experiences. Children's postmodern literature is an ideal medium for portraying how both individual and collective trauma can affect a community. In fact, there is a lot to learn from children's books, regardless of the reader's age.

See attached Works Cited.
Contact kyba084@uottawa.ca with any questions or to read the full paper.