

2019 ChLA - Paper Submission

KEY WORDS: storytelling, trust, deceit, ethics, secrets, empathy

Don't Trust the Storyteller: Story Consumer as Activist in *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

A significant challenge facing young readers in the 21st century is that of discerning truth and value amidst competing narratives and vast bits of information. Which stories can be trusted and allowed to guide one's actions? Texts that encourage children to exercise their own critical faculties are increasing as trust in conventional authority fades.

In her 2016 novel *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*, Kelly Barnhill employs fairy tale motifs and archetypal patterns to tell a story about truth, lies and narrative manipulation. Townspeople live under the belief that if not for the yearly child sacrifice they will be destroyed by an evil witch in the woods. Readers are guided through an exploration of how this belief is perpetuated, its repercussions, and how it is finally dismantled. A character who gradually uncovers the truth declares the book's theme, "Controlling stories is power indeed" (309). Readers are encouraged to contemplate the circumstances and choices that empower the young activists who uncover and dismantle the false narrative that has kept the populace in bondage.

Young readers, however, depend on the narrative guidance of an adult authority which leads to the question of how much agency they have and the extent to which they are still having childhood imposed on them as critics such as James Kinkaid and Perry Nodelman find children's text tend to do. I explore these questions from an ethical perspective relying Sissela Bok and Suzanne Keen, and by referring to Kerry Mallan's premise that questions of survival lie behind the secrecy, lies and deception in children's fiction.

Partial bibliography

Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Bok, Sissela. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Hopkins, Phil. *Mass Moralizing: Marketing and Moral Storytelling*. New York: Lexington, 2015.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel: From Aristotle to Brain Science*. Yale UP, 2010.

Mallan, Kerry. *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

McCallum, Robyn. "Would I Lie to You: Metalepsis and Modal Disruption in Some 'True' Fairy Tales" in Sipe, Lawrence R. and Sylvia Pantalio, eds. *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Preferentiality*. New York: Routledge, 2008.