

Recuperating Darkness

Fear of the dark is common enough in childhood to almost be considered a cognitive schema. As diurnal beings with limited peripheral vision, we are certainly likely to be more comfortable in well-lighted spaces, but our relative comfort levels and dispositional wariness can be enhanced or diminished by the symbolic meanings that attach to particular phenomena. Moreover, the persistent western association of knowledge and reason with light and vision creates a binary whereby darkness comes to be associated with ignorance, evil, threat, and unreason. Social scientists in fields as disparate in their commitments as theology and psychology argue that, unfortunately, the symbolic meanings associated with darkness become generalizable conceptual metaphors that help perpetuate recalcitrant stereotypes against people groups. In times when Belief in a Dangerous World (Altemeyer 1988) is heightened through cultural unrest, unresolved fears of ambient darkness may in fact “trigger” the latent tendency for negative ethnic stereotypes to spring to mind” (Schaller et al. 639).

Most picturebooks that seek to intervene in a child’s fear of the dark do nothing to violate the schema itself; rather they locate the problem as one of irrationality and superstition in the child, which can be cured by seeing perceived threats properly in the light of day, thus reinforcing the underlying metaphorical associations. Enter Daniel Handler (*The Dark*), Joyce Dunbar (*The Monster Who Ate the Darkness*), Ella Burfoot (*Darkness Slipped In*), and Emma Yarlett (*Orion and the Dark*), whose picturebooks present a personified darkness that is not only nonthreatening, but actively friendly and helpful. This subtle difference in approach is important not only because it attacks the schema at its root, but because it effectively speaks to what we know about the cognitive schema of very young children, namely, that they see people who are helpful as part of their “in groups” rather than “other.” Reading these books in relation to relevant empirical studies, I will argue that such interventions at the schematic and metaphoric level may thus be more effective than more direct approaches in mitigating latent racist tendencies.