Images of Resilience: Children's Texts Modelling Survival in Threatening Environments

Elizabeth Parsons

Resilience, the ability to cope with adverse circumstances, is at the forefront of child-rearing strategies in both psychology research and pop-psychology circles. Techniques geared towards the resilience agenda represent a new focus on positive and preventative approaches to child mental stability, as opposed to the traditional assessment of problems and provision of solutions that has dominated older modes of psychology. A variety of implications for children's literature stem from this new methodology, particularly as The Search Institute, a well-funded research conglomerate in the US, has produced a list of forty key indicators of a resilient child which includes reading for pleasure. This suggests a significant point of interdisciplinary convergence between psychology and children's literature at the level of literary content.

In order to consider the question 'why does reading for pleasure increase resilience?,' I wish to consider the texts children typically gravitate toward for enjoyment, namely fiction. As the theme of the 2004 ACLAR conference suggests, fictional narratives 'image childhoods.' In order to be compelling, they construct convincing images of internal states, interpersonal relationships, cultural dynamics, and the causal relationships between behaviours and outcomes. They also demonstrate rewards and punishments, commonly encoded in narrative closures. Such textual representations, characterisations, and outcomes typically promote certain traits and behaviours in bids to socialise child audiences (Stephens 1992). But narratives for children can be re-approached and reappraised by using resilience theory as a lens through which to interpret their psychological import. A resilience-centered mode of examining texts provides a means of examining the ways in which characters look inward at themselves and outward at the world around them. This entails investigating how texts promote resilience according to the traits, behaviours, and circumstances psychologists have identified as contributing to resilience in children.

This article, however, can only form a starting point in this interdisciplinary project. Resilience-forming properties in narratives are yet to be examined with any kind of
rigour, perhaps because the psychologists involved in researching resilience are untrained in the area of literary research, while literary scholars are equally unlikely to be versed in resilience theory. So although reading for pleasure has been identified as one of the forty key indicators of a resilient child, neither literature scholars nor psychologists have had anything to say about how reading for pleasure builds resilience. Luthar et al point to the need for a closer examination of specific aspects of resilience when they argue that:

> Rather than simply studying which child, family, and environmental factors are involved in resilience, researchers are increasingly striving to understand how such factors may contribute to positive outcomes (Cowen et al, 1997; Luthar, 1999). Such attention to underlying mechanisms is viewed as essential for advancing theory and research in the field, as well as for designing appropriate prevention and intervention strategies for individuals facing adversity. (emphasis in original) (2000, p.544)

As Luthar et al further contend, 'with accumulated evidence that a particular variable does affect competence levels ... investigators need to focus their inquiry on understanding the mechanisms by which such protection (or vulnerability) might be conferred' (2000 p.555). It is precisely this shift in the focus of inquiry that this paper undertakes in examining 'how' reading for pleasure builds resilience in children.

The application of resilience theory to children's literature is also particularly timely in that contemporary children live and read within the context of a society underpinned by risk. This cultural background necessarily forms the preconditions for both reading children's literature and producing resilient children who can survive what Ulrich Beck calls 'Risk Society' (1992). According to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), development of resilience occurs through a complex reciprocal interaction between individuals and the people, objects, symbols, and institutions around them. This occurs predominantly during childhood and adolescence, thus making children's literature an ideal site for the examination of such processes.

Before reaching this paper's reading of the 'reciprocal interaction' between children and books, it is first necessary to examine the concept of resilience more closely. The Search Institute is an organisation that has devoted considerable amounts of statistical analysis to resilience formation, and they propose that reading for pleasure is one of the forty key assets of the resilient child. Their study of 99,462 youths in Grades 6-12 during the 1996-1997 academic year showed that students with the highest number of assets had the lowest rate of engagement with risk-associated behaviour or responses, including depression and suicide, substance abuse, criminal activity, and educational problems (Leffert et al 1998).

The assets are explained as follows:

The Developmental Asset framework is categorized into two groups of 20 assets. External assets are the positive experiences young people receive from the world around them. These 20 assets are about supporting and empowering young people, about setting boundaries and expectations, and about positive and constructive use of...
young people's time. External assets identify important roles that families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, and youth organizations can play in promoting healthy development.

The twenty internal assets identify those characteristics and behaviors that reflect positive internal growth and development of young people. These assets are about positive values and identities, social competencies, and commitment to learning. The internal Developmental Assets will help these young people make thoughtful and positive choices and, in turn, be better prepared for situations in life that challenge their inner strength and confidence (The Search Institute 2004).

To map this theory into children's literature methodologies, fictional texts are 'external' in being objects of cultural production made accessible to children, but they are also objects experienced internally through imaginative processes. Therefore, reading for pleasure crosses a number of these demarcations between internal and external in both direct and imaginative ways. In terms of direct impacts, reading typically aids and intersects with 'commitment to learning'. But, as argued above, reading can also be understood as modelling identity formation through character behaviours, responses to circumstances, and social competencies built through the mapping of relationships between characters. This implies the telling etymological connection between characters and characteristics in that a character is both read and built through behavioural signifiers.

Texts for children can therefore provide potential self-images through the characterisation of role models and the depiction of psychological coping strategies. Child readers can try on a number of personalities as they share the subjective position of protagonists. This is a means of identity experimentation through self-imaging. Narratives are also able to map forward to outcomes, solutions and the protagonist's survival of problematic events, illustrating that the passage of time will eventually if not resolve most issues, at least put them at a manageable distance.

In terms of external factors, the imaginative process of reading allows readers to exist in the social and cultural space of the fiction as a world that is typically both similar and alternative to their real socio-cultural space. These similarities invite assessments and comparisons between fictional and actual worlds. Thus, the imaginative process of reading creates both internal characterisations through alignment with a protagonist, and external spaces developed through settings.

However, the equation between reading and resilience is problematic because reading can also be a symptom of depression. Children can use reading to escape from their real worlds and isolate themselves from real relationships as a function of denial. This issue can be partially addressed by scaling back to the very operation of language itself. It is perhaps a statement of the obvious but one that we nevertheless often overlook in literary analysis, that language teaches us to know ourselves. Words not only give access to feelings, they, in many respects, embody them. One of the most resilient child figures in the history of Western culture, Helen Keller, writes of her
experience in ways that demonstrate this point. As a baby Helen became deaf and blind as a result of illness and therefore grew up mute. Helen was seven years old before she learnt to communicate, which means that she can remember a time before language in a way that is impossible for most people. Because the self she remembers is totally divorced from her post-language consciousness, she refers to that self mostly in the third person and calls her 'Phantom'. This is what she says about Phantom:

Phantom did not seek a solution for her chaos because she knew not what it was. Nor did she seek death because she had no conception of it. All she touched was a blur without wonder or anticipation, curiosity or conscience. If she stood in a crowd, she got no idea of collective humanity. Nothing was part of anything, and there blazed up in her frequent, fierce anger which I remember not by emotion but by a tactual memory of the kick or the blow she dealt to the object of that anger. In the same way I remember tears rolling down my cheeks but not the grief. There were no words for that emotion or any other and consequently they did not register. (Keller 1956, pp.36-37)

Perhaps this is why, anecdotally, reading has long been considered 'good' for children: good beyond the pedagogical aspect of literacy acquisition; good at humanising children. Language demonstrates to children that they are part of what Helen refers to as 'collective humanity' because language constructs the shared space between people. And also arguably 'good' for children, in line with the resilience agenda, is that language teaches the dynamics of emotion by naming feelings as though they are universal. The words indicating sadness and anger can stand for both my emotions and Helen's emotions, that is, connecting us as though we feel the same things. Language itself thus shifts the languaged-subject away from the solipsistic and toward the communal. As Stephens has argued, this movement is one of the key themes addressed in children's literature (1992). When Helen remembers Phantom's tears without sadness and violence, without conscious anger, her descriptions suggest the behaviours visible in infants and point to language's role in advancing children toward adult maturity, a connection that chimes with the now far-removed etymology of the word 'infant', that is, 'without language'.

Although a digression into the role of language is an important starting point for this discussion, the resilience agenda looks beyond language itself to the complexities and subtleties of narrative construction. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's suggestion that symbols play an integral role in resilience formation (as mentioned earlier) is particularly telling in relation to literary fiction as a symbolic codification of real world entities (be those events or settings in realist texts, or relational as in fantasy texts). Significatory content in narratives can always be extrapolated to the real world by logics of comparison. Thus readers can compare the character and setting of the novel with the people and places of their existence. In terms of the resilience agenda then, textual representations can include a range of characteristics typical of resilient children which readers are invited to recognise and imitate via the subjectivity inbuilt in typical narrative structures. Readers are equally invited to resist, question, and assess negative behaviours, especially those presented by antagonists. As an obvious
example, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* the reader is invited to admire and share Harry's subject position while judging and questioning the characteristics presented by Malfoy.

The qualities resilience researchers advocate are, however, more specific than this example indicates. The characteristics of the resilient child cover three significant areas, each of which will be now be considered in turn: exposure to adverse situations, social responsiveness, and the ability to empathise (Benson 1997; Rutter 1985; Garmezy 1993). Exposure to adverse situations is clearly not a desirable process for building resilience in children except through fictionalised narrative engagement. Thus, reading is perhaps one of the most important mechanisms for resilience-building in less 'at risk' categories of children. Reading offers a simulated exposure to adverse circumstances that requires the child reader's engagement with, and intellectual immersion in, such circumstances as a way of rehearsing how they would respond in similar situations. As avid readers know, to be engrossed in the events of a narrative can produce real psychological responses like, for example, fear and anxiety, sadness and empathy, pleasure, satisfaction, and humour. Living through this gamut of emotions as part of the reading experience but within the safety of fiction creates a space in which children can experience a variety of emotional states vicariously, as well as considering the textually proffered means of survival or triumph over such circumstances.

In terms of social responsiveness, the narrative contract depends on empathy to invite readers to share the experiences of protagonists through point of view and focalisation (particularly in terms of feeling the above-named emotive states). These literary imaging strategies enable shifts between self (reader) and other (protagonist), and work to encode a range of dialogic potentials with which children can examine themselves and their feelings. In particular, readers can employ important comparative logics when they consider themselves in the adverse circumstances depicted in the story, or equate the narrative’s situations to ones that are translatable or recognisable in their own lives. Such empathetic textual positioning intersects with psychologists’ focus on caring, compassion, and acceptance of difference, all of which are elements of the resilient child's outlook.

What I am arguing is that texts for children produce an image of childhood that models resilience strategies both in terms of individual characters and in terms of the operations of narrative as a form. In addition, the invitations in the reading process to inhabit another set of circumstances, another perspective (or a range of other perspectives) teaches children ways of reading not only fictional texts, but of reading their worlds, themselves, and other people. So perhaps it is no accident that we talk about people who are skilled at ‘reading’ other people, or that Helen Keller discovered that language put her in touch with her own humanity as it simultaneously put her in touch with other people. These acts of ‘reading’ as points of intersection between texts and real world situations will be addressed via a discussion of Michael
Gliksman’s novel for young adults, *Bad Boy* (2003). This novel models resilience in the form of a troubled child’s survival of damaging experiences. It is a realist fiction based on Gliksman’s experiences as a psychologist treating ‘at risk’ children. A kind of case study in structure, the plot describes (to child readers) the existence of a fellow child whose life experiences have led them to ‘badness’ and institutionalisation.

In terms of the resilience agenda, this represents a construction of an empathetic reading situation in which privileged access to the mind of ‘the problem child’ invites empathy. That is, by showing the internal workings of the child’s psyche, child readers are able to reassess the externalised behaviour of that child in the light of internal suffering. This ability to read motivations has been pinpointed in psychological research on childhood bullying. Daniel Goleman’s broadly ranging and accessible survey of emotional intelligence examines the issue and canvasses the supporting research for prevailing views. Despite being pitched at a popular market, the book, *Emotional Intelligence*, is a reputable, rigorously referenced discussion of many pivotal psychology experiments of the last fifty years. What Goleman says about childhood bullying is that bullies misinterpret events or behaviours; although ‘misread’ is perhaps a better word in terms of this discussion:

> perceptual biases can be seen at work in an experiment in which bullies are paired with a more peacable child to watch videos. In one video, a boy drops his books when another knocks into him, and children standing nearby laugh; the boy who dropped the books gets angry and tries to hit one of those who laughed. When the boys who watched the video talk about it afterwards, the bully always sees the boy who struck out as justified. Even more telling, when they have to rate how aggressive the boys were during their discussion of the video, the bullies see the boy who knocked into the other as more combative, and the anger of the boy who struck out as justified. (Goleman 1997, p.235)

Goleman then gives another example in which an aggressive boy is playing checkers with a peer who moves his piece out of turn. The aggressive child interprets this as cheating, as opposed to a mistake, he then makes an angry accusation, and conflict ensues. What I am suggesting about reading, and reader positioning, is that when child readers have privileged access to motivations, personal histories, and the myriad of factors that typically underpin behaviours, this constructs a readerly world-view flexible enough to accommodate reassessments, and to make sympathetic allowances for bad behaviour. These imaginative skills that most of us use to interpret other people’s actions are the skills that bullies lack. Bullies, then, are more likely to fail resilience tests (and to end up with problematic responses to a range of people and authorities in their adult life) in ways that the child who reads beyond surfaces is able to avoid. My claim is, then, that reading teaches the kinds of imaginative skills necessary for empathy and the reading of motivations, and
demonstrates the diversity of human responses and experiences.

This literary process seems to go further in terms of psychological resilience than the related psychological concept of bibliotherapy. Popular mainly in the United States, bibliotherapy involves giving children stories that mirror their own problems (like parental divorce, for example). The stories typically offer solutions and coping strategies appropriate to the specific problem. In some respects, *Bad Boy* is so deliberate in its psychological agenda that it is arguably closer to bibliotherapy than fiction. The following excerpt from the prologue demonstrates the deliberate nature of the psychological gestures that pepper the text:

Eighteen! How did I get to be so old so quick? But with age comes the vast wisdom to go with my mature years. I now know how screwed up I was back then. How I got to be so screwed up and how I got – um – unscrewed is what I want to tell you about. If I could get unscrewed, anyone can.

I had some help. Okay, lots of help. But in the end it was up to me.

*(Gliksman 2003, n.p.)*

If the agenda of the novel is not made totally obvious in this opening section, then the cataloguing information eradicates any doubts with the labels 'Problem families – fiction', and 'Sexually abused children – Fiction'. Given this overt positioning, the novel is structurally somewhat pedestrian, rather unconvincing in terms of voice, and often blatant and moralising in a way that seems to condescend to child readers. The plot traces the life of the bad boy protagonist, Joshua, beginning with his damaging relationship with his grandmother, and the absence of his father. These familial problems lead to bad behaviour at school. This antisocial behaviour then leads to institutionalisation. At this point in the causal chain, Joshua is raped by the bad psychologist before he is eventually saved by the good psychologist who seems to genuinely care about him. The good psychologist/bad psychologist schism operates like a realist revisioning of Bruno Bettelheim's psychological reading of the fairytales in which he claims that the wicked stepmother and the fairy godmother were split sides of the child's ambivalent love/fear of the mother (1979). There is clearly less subtlety in the realist landscape of this novel, however, which perhaps points to the impact of genre on resilience protocols and operations. The differences between fantasy and realism necessarily inflect the appearance and representation of resilience strategies across different texts.

By comparison to *Bad Boy*, Neil Gaiman's contemporary fantasy novel for younger readers, *Coraline* (2002), indicates the breadth and flexibility of the resilience agenda as an analytic tool. As in *Bad Boy*’s dichotomous split, good and evil are mapped between Coraline’s mother and her evil other mother from a parallel universe, although Gaiman’s presentation is less blatantly oppositional in various ways. *Coraline* is a deeply disturbing black-fairy tale that employs less empathy, than a process of immersion in terror. When psychologists claim that resilience is a badge
images of resilience

earned by exposure to adverse conditions, this text can be seen as a (relatively) safe place in which to experience trauma.

To counterbalance the construction of horror, *Coraline* presents a child protagonist who bravely faces her fears, and consequently overcomes her problems. But principally, the text invites readers to share Coraline’s terror at the supernatural events dominating her life, namely her potential incarceration in a timeless, deathlike limbo. Rather than simply advocating that all children should suffer some terror, it is with the same logic of the pleasurable fear of a roller-coaster that this novel is frightening in its use of gothic tropes and fantasy elements to construct a safe distance from the realist landscape which is also present in the text.

An entirely different style of navigating fear is part of the agenda operating in the realist world of *Bad Boy* when the rape scene is described:

> Does he want to spank me on my bare bum? I wish that was all.

> 'You know you want it,' he says, starting to unzip his own pants. 'I saw the way you were looking at me in the therapy room. The way your tiny prick went hard just now. All you little gaylords are the same.'

> I don't want to tell you what happened next because even now, talking about it brings it all back, like it happened this morning. You can guess well enough. Even telling you this much hurts.

> But in a strange kind of way, telling also helps. My mistake was to keep it in for too long, but then, who was there to tell? (pp.48-49)

In this passage, *Bad Boy* is rather spare in details. Despite what Joshua says about sharing his experience, all that readers are given is an invitation to imagine what might have happened. They are certainly not plunged into Joshua's experiential state. Rather than advocating such a description, a comparison between *Bad Boy* and *Coraline* has the potential to illuminate the alternative approaches that shape resilience formation across these two texts.

*Coraline* directly describes some very scary encounters with grotesque creatures of the gothic imagination including 'the other mother' who wants to sew black buttons in place of Coraline's eyes, and whose severed hand scuttles around under Coraline's bed trying to steal the key that is hanging around her neck. The narrative lingers on a gruesome encounter with combination pupa/rotting corpse that is the degenerating form of 'her other father', who tries to kill Coraline because he is being controlled by 'the other mother'. Despite the novel's use of 'other' terminology, the psychology of the text is more complex than the good and evil of traditional wicked stepmothers and fairy godmothers, mainly because Coraline's real parents are constructed as fallible and limited, but at least benign compared to the evil 'other mother' and her minion, 'the other father'.

That both these novels invite their readers to experience the fears of a character through imaginative processes is integral to reading in line with the resilience
agenda. The reader's self-saturation in the fears produced by fictional frightening circumstances allows for a rehearsal of anxiety that has the potential to help children develop an immunity to fear and violence. This process can, it has been argued in popular forums, have adverse outcomes in children, especially in terms of the acclimatisation to violence promoted by the visceral special effects of films, computer games, and even song lyrics. But there are inherent positives in the process as another example from Goleman's study suggests. He describes a game called 'Purdy' invented by children at the Cleveland Primary School where Patrick Purdy killed five children and injured twenty-nine more by firing a machine-gun into the playground in 1989. The children who survived the massacre replayed the events, Goleman argues, as a way to avoid the damaging effects of repression but also as a means of 'reconstructing the story of the trauma in the harbour of safety' (1997, p.211). This harbour, I would suggest, can also be constructed in fictional space which then serves as a way of reading through traumatic feelings. Coraline's fantasy world is a way for her to play out ambivalent feelings about her parents, and the book itself offers a similar scope to child readers. This suggests the novel can be read as a modern take on Bettelheim's reading of fairytales with their godmothers and wicked stepmothers, although Gaiman's appears to be a more deliberate and psychologically attuned gesture than those employed in traditional tales.

**Bad Boy**, operating without this level of subtlety, should perhaps then be read with an alternative approach to resilience in mind. When Goleman examines research on the reduction of depression, one of the most disturbing findings he quotes comes from the research of Shelley Taylor et al. Taylor et al's study of cancer sufferers found that no matter how serious the patient's condition, their mood improved when they compared themselves to another cancer patient who was in worse shape (Goleman 1997, p.74). Applied to a text like **Bad Boy** this offers a potential reading of the novel beyond the empathy approach described above. **Bad Boy** may well be classified as a fiction that produces resilience by building optimism and addressing feelings of self-loathing through a process of self-comparison in which the child reader will typically have a less troubled life than Joshua.

Such comparative logic brings me to the final point of intersection between this paper and resilience objectives in the real world. My mother is a psychologist and she loaned me *Coraline* with a preface. She asked me to give the book to my stepdaughter saying, 'I think Simone will enjoy this'. For Simone, of course, I am 'the other mother'. So the psychologist's agenda is to playfully (and terrifyingly) engage Simone in an examination of the roles occupied by the various mothers she must contend with in her real life. In Simone's real world, and in the fictional world of the novel, the logics of the real and the simulacra are always challenging each other in terms of motherhood. The complex and potentially fascinating interplay between psychology and literature that this gesture by the psychologist points to, indicates the potential for research in this area which goes far beyond what I have been able to canvass within the scope of this paper.
References


Elizabeth Parsons lectures in literary studies at Deakin University, Melbourne. Her recent research into interdisciplinary intersections between Risk, Resilience and Children's Literature has been in collaboration with Elizabeth Bullen and Clare Bradford. She is currently applying her work on cultural risk into theories of capital and class location as part of an extended project with this team.