Children’s literature, both as a category of cultural production and as a field of scholarly work, occupies a space in-between: between the agendas of the adults who produce it, and the needs, interests and desires of the children who receive it; between literary and popular; between the educational uses to which books are put in classrooms, and the entertainment and enjoyment which they afford. There is no other domain of publishing where there is such an imbalance of knowledge, experience and power between those who produce and those who receive texts. And because children’s books are directed toward readers who are self-evidently the adults of tomorrow, to grasp what they propose about values, politics and social practices is to see what adults envisage as desirable possibilities for the world. That is, children’s texts do not merely reflect what happens in national and global settings, but advocate ways of being in the world.

Very often the values and ideologies of children’s books are present in embedded forms, unrecognised by their producers — for instance, from the 1920s until the 1950s the Victorian School Readers depicted Aboriginal people as members of a dying race, a people left behind by modernity. This idea was so thoroughly naturalised that to authors and consumers of the School Readers it must have seemed ordinary and usual, a fact of life rather than a mistaken belief born out of ignorance and Social Darwinist notions about a hierarchy of races. In a hundred years time, the values accepted as natural in children’s texts at the beginning of the twenty-first century will undoubtedly seem strange to readers of these texts.

While authors are always apt to unknowingly reproduce ideas accepted as normal in their culture, many writers for children explicitly advocate social, political or moral beliefs, such as Morris Gleitzman in his novels Boy Overboard and Girl Underground. In his ‘Dear Reader’ note at the beginning of Boy Overboard Gleitzman says I wrote this story to express my sympathy for children everywhere who have to flee to survive, and my admiration for the adults who embrace them at the end of their journey. Gleitzman was sharply criticised for his novels by that authority on children’s literature, Amanda Vanstone, who in 2004 said this about his novels:

I think that one of the greatest things we can give kids is a childhood. Let them have a childhood as long as they can without burdening them with some of the difficult decisions that have to be made later in life. There’s no political gain to be had here. Kids don’t vote. Why ruin their childhood?

Vanstone’s utterances about childhood (or at least about some childhoods) evoke formulations of children as occupying a space separate from adults. The historian of childhood Hugh Cunningham says this in his study Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500:

...the root cause of much present concern and angst about childhood is that a public discourse which argues that children are persons with rights to a degree of autonomy is at odds with the remnants of the romantic view that the right of the child is to be a child. The implication of the first is a fusing of the worlds of the adult and the child, and of the second the maintenance of separation.

Cunningham 1995: 190

The romantic view of childhood in Western cultures as the ‘best part of life’ (Cunningham: 74) has its foundations in the seventeenth century in the writings of Locke and Rousseau and was popularised by Wordsworth in his ‘Ode on Intimations of Mortality’. As we can see from what Amanda Vanstone says, the idea that children exist in a separate sphere from adults persists in popular and political discourse. But over the last century this idea has been undermined by cultural shifts in the way children are regarded, demonstrated in the transformation of children into consumers; the increasing focus on the rights of children and on their evolving capacities, encapsulated in the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); and changes, over the last few decades, in the way the law deals with children, in both criminal and family courts.

The impossibility in the twenty-first century of maintaining the fiction of childhood as a garden of delight was made starkly clear on September 11, 2001. The global reach of mass media and its presence in the spaces where children play and work meant that
children could not be shielded from images of the planes, the towers, the tumbling bodies. One of the most common topics in media commentaries in the days after September 11 was how to mediate those events to children: what to say, how much to say, when to say it; and, of course, anxiety over long-term effects. In the three years since the destruction of the World Trade Center, over fifty children’s books have been published which deal with what happened on September 11, and I’m going to focus my discussion of children’s literature around a selection of seven such texts:

- Onthatday: A book of hope for children
- Bravemole
- There’s A Big, Beautiful World Out There!
- It’s Still a Dog’s New York
- New York’s Bravest
- The Man Who Walked Between the Towers
- The Here & Now Reproducible Book of the Day That Was Different, Sept 11, 2001, When America Was Attacked By Terrorists: Factual, Touching Information to Help Us All Help All Kids!

All these books were produced in the United States, so that their position of enunciation is from within the nation and is directed primarily to American children. Apart from The Man Who Walked Between the Towers, they are quite explicit about their purposes, signalled by autobiographical notes, the blurbs on dust-covers, and dedications such as these:

For those who, in a dark and terrifying hour, saw what needed to be done — and did it.

Bravemole
In memory of those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. Onthatday
To the memory of the 343 New York City Firefighters who gave their lives to save others on September 11, 2001. New York’s Bravest
This book is dedicated to American’s children—sad, angry, scared, and, ultimately, hopeful — in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. It’s Still a Dog’s New York

The authors of Onthatday and Bravemole include descriptions of how they began writing immediately after September 11, and how the writing assisted them. These accounts of the making of the books foreground the therapeutic functions of writing, and they focus not on child readers but on the adults writing. There is also the fact that the books were published so quickly — three of them in 2001, another three in 2002 — a swiftness of production which evokes questions about processes of commodification within a capitalist system where even the most tragic events have a dollar value.

Take, for instance, It’s Still a Dog’s New York, by Susan L. Roth. In September 2001 Roth published, with National Geographic, a travelogue entitled It’s a Dog’s New York, which consists of collages of photographs, arranged around a story about two dogs, Pepper and Rover. Pepper moves from Baltimore to New York City and misses his blue doghouse and his old backyard until Rover takes him for a tour and convinces him that it’s good to be a New Yorker. After September 11 Roth conceived the idea of using the same sequence of collages, with the addition of flags in the paws of the two dogs on the book’s cover, and of developing a new story about two dogs wandering the city in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center. This snatch of dialogue gives an idea of how the book works:

‘I can’t go to Central Park anymore,’ said Pepper. ‘Who wants to run around?’
‘If we see sad dogs and cats we could try to cheer them up,’ said Rover.
‘We never talk to cats,’ said Pepper. ‘At a time like this, maybe we should,’ said Rover.

In the collages in which they appear, the twin towers are whitened to appear as shining, ghostly shapes, in line with Pepper’s comment. Those two towers are still in my head, plain as day. This book, with its revised text, cover and subtitle (‘A Book of Healing’) is the most overt example of an author and publisher cashing in on the post-September 11 market, at the same time claiming a moral advantage through the announcement on the book’s half-title page that proceeds from its sales will fund the donation of the book to schools in New York City and Washington. The interplay of signs and agendas justifying in this book — its display of concern for children; its therapeutic aims; its promotion of an author and publisher who demonstrate a model of corporate responsibility — exemplifies the contradictory forces at play in cultural production for children.

Of the 9/11 books I’m discussing, three — It’s Still a Dog’s New York, Onthatday and There’s A Big, Beautiful World Out There — fit within the category of texts used in conjunction with the therapeutic intervention known as bibliotherapy. Its premise is the idea that a child experiencing a trauma or difficulty can be assisted if an adult identifies a book featuring a character undergoing a similar experience, and reads it with or to the child in order to encourage discussion. Events in such books are shaped to produce an ending where characters are seen to progress toward a ‘better’ or ‘healthier’ way of being; and literary and aesthetic values are subordinated to therapeutic agendas. These books are produced, selected and mediated by adults as means toward particular ends.

One of the books I’m considering, The Here and Now Reproducible Book of the Day That Was Different, is an instructional text intended for use in schools; and two, Bravemole and New York’s Bravest, might be described as hero narratives. The Man Who Walked Between the Towers stands apart from the other six.

I want to ask two questions of these 9/11 books: Who are the players in their narratives? and: How do these books position child readers?

The most dogmatic of them is …the Day That Was Different, which is also a book littered with errors of fact, played out in its formulations of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It enforces the idea of the United States as an innocent nation besieged by terrorists whose motives are inexplicable but who are marked for ethnicity and religion. While …the Day That Was Different presents itself as an informational text, the books I’ll discuss next deal with 9/11 indirectly, through analogies and the use of particular genres of writing.

Bravemole and New York’s Bravest are hero stories — stories where individuals stand for the nation. New York’s Bravest tells a tall story about a nineteenth-century fireman, Mose Humphreys, eight feet tall, [with] hands as big as Virginia hams and arms... so strong he could swim the Hudson River in two strokes. After a city fire, Mose disappears and is presumed dead, until the rumors start: that he is mining gold in California or working in Washington for President Lincoln. At last an old-timer pulls the matter to rest:  You know what? he said.  Mose ain’t any of them places. Truth is, Mose is right here! In this way, the figure of Mose is made available as a template on which is mapped the figures of the firefighters of September 11, who are the very spirit of New York City. There is no enemy in this story, only a hero, whose depiction saving a child positions child readers to trust in ‘the spirit of New York’ and, by extension, of the nation.

Bravemole features a contrasting version of an American hero, the ordinary man [sic], because Bravemole is a very ordinary mole, who wishes occasionally that he were less ordinary. Like members of the mole elites such as Smartmole, Bigmole or Starmole. However, he is a devoted father to his Babymole to whom he tells stories about dragons with terrible teeth and terrible claws and fire inside. When a dragon attacks the tallest molehill, the elites of the Mole world,
together with the ordinary Moles, discover themselves to be Moles afraid together. But Mole returns to dig out the survivors, and becomes a hero, feted by the elites who now appreciate the value of ordinariness. The narrative ends with Mole at home with his wife and Babymole:

It would not be easy, Mole thought, patting his wife's furry paw with his own sore one. But Overmole helping, they would get the hard job done. Because ordinary moles were strong. And brave. And steady. There was a city of them. A country of them. A whole world of them.

Bravemoles.

If Bravemole represents America, then America represents the world. But the dragon's wicked talons and teeth as sharp as knives locate the story of Bravemole within Western narrative schemata where heroes defeat dragons and save nations (and/or maidens). In this heavily gendered narrative pattern, the hero's return to home and family reaffirms a highly conservative social order. As an aside, it's impossible not to register the echo of Maurice Sendak's monsters in Where the Wild Things Are, who roared their terrible roars and grabbed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws in Mole's description of the dragon's 'terrible teeth' and 'terrible claws'. But Sendak's protagonist Max controls the wild things and so comes to terms with the potential wildness of his own inner being (Stephens 1992: 136), affording an empowering reading position where child readers can align themselves with Max. In contrast, the dragons in Bravemole represent forces external to self, home and nation and exercise arbitrary violence.

Just as there is a 'whole world' of Bravemoles, so in Ontheday, 'America' is conflated with the world:

The world is very big, and really round, and pretty peaceful.

But one day a terrible thing happened. The world, which had been blue and green and bright and very big and really round and pretty peaceful, got badly hurt. Many people were injured. Many other people died. And everyone was sad.

The question Is there anything we can do to make the world right again? is answered by a series of desiderata such as playing and laughing, taking good care of the Earth and being kind to people.

In There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!, the child character at the centre of the narrative experiences a pervasive fear:

There's a lot to be scared of, that's for sure! There's that mean-looking dog, and booming thunderstorms. There are roller coasters, and scary stories in the news. There's a lot to be scared of, like getting up in front of a whole bunch of people, and spiders and other very creepy creepy things. There are clowns, and spooky shadows in your room, and people who look different from you. All this scary stuff can make you want to hide under your covers and never come out.

The antidote to fear is to throw off the covers, because:

If you hide under your covers, you'll miss your mother saying everything is going to be all right... and you might never know how great you sound singing a solo... and just think of all the new friends you'll never meet!

In his essay The Spirit of Terrorism, Jean Baudrillard remarks that the repression of terrorism spirals around as unpredictably as the terrorist act itself (2002: 31). In the Day That Was Different and the two hero narratives, Bravemole and New York's Bravest, one thing that is repressed is any possibility of reading outside the subject positions which these texts impose. The Day That Was Different enforces 'correct' reading positions through maps, lists, yes-no questions and an authoritative narrative tone. Bravemole subjects its audience by its reliance on highly schematised versions of good and evil; and both Bravemole and New York's Bravest by the way they map heroism onto nationalism. In Bravemole, the appropriate subject position is modelled for child readers in an exchange between Mole and Babymole:

And Babymole, who was so little that he thought going after dragons was exciting, said, 'Will I get to go fight the dragons, Daddy? Can I go too?'

Mole looked at the soft furry body, and thought of the cold cruel talons of the dragon. And he held his son close, and closer.

'No,' he said gently. 'You will not have to fight these dragons. We grown-ups will fight them for you.'

Babymole pouted and said that he wasn't afraid of any old dragons, and Mole smiled a little...

With its emphasis on the childishness of Babymole, his smallness and his lack of appreciation of the dangers posed by dragons, the language of this exchange prompts child readers to smile, as it were, over the head of Babymole, who is the object of condescension.

Another strategy of repression, evident in Ontheday and There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There, is to normalise fear as the usual, default way of being in the world. In There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There, the spectacle of cultural and ethnic difference is treated as the climax of a litany of things to be frightened of: from dogs, thunderstorms, roller-coasters, scary stories, insects, clowns and shadows, to people who look different from you. A problem with books produced with an eye to the bibliotherapy market, like these two, is their dismissiveness, in that in the space of the 32 pages of picture books they are locked into narratives of resolution. The trajectory from There's a lot to be scared of, that's for sure... people who look different from you to the happy campers at the end of the book, is unmediated by represented actions or events involving shifts in affectivity or cognition, and presents a fantasy of nationhood where the charmed circle reassures readers that they live in a tolerant society.

At the beginning of this talk I discussed the differences between the romantic view of the child who is asked only to be a child, and the cultural shifts which have rendered unstable older lines of demarcation between child and adult. The books I've discussed so far revert to a ghettoisation of children through strategies of control, sentimentality and over-simplification. They conform with what Baudrillard says about the reversibility that is terrorism's true victory (2002: 31) and which is manifested by a slump in the value-system, in the whole ideology of freedom, of free circulation... on which the Western world prided itself (2001: 32). So it is a relief to find, in Mordical Gerstein's The Man Who Walked between the Towers (2003) a text which undermines the restrictions and constraints of post-9/11 discourse:

Once there were two towers side by side. They were each a quarter of a mile high; one thousand three hundred and forty feet.

The tallest buildings in New York City.

A young man, Philippe Pelti, sees these towers rise into the sky. He is a street performer, unicyclist and juggler, but most of all he loved to walk and dance on a rope he tied between two trees. When he looks at the towers he sees not the towers but:

...the space between them and thought, what a wonderful place to stretch a rope; a wire on which to walk. Once the idea came to him he knew he had to do it. If he saw three balls, he had to juggle. If he saw two towers, he had to walk! That's how he was.

Philippe and his friends disguise themselves as workmen and carry their equipment, including a reel of cable, to the top of the unfinished towers. At midnight his friends on the north tower tie a line to an arrow and shoot it across to Philippe on the south tower, one hundred and forty feet away. It misses, landing on a ledge fifteen feet below the roof. Philippe retrieves it. To it he ties a stronger line, which his friends pull back to the other tower. Then he ties the cable to this stronger line. As the sun rises, they are ready: Philippe puts on his black shirt and tights, picks up his twenty-eight-foot balancing pole and walks out onto the wire.

A crowd gathers, the police arrive and call out to Philippe through bullhorns. But he is safe, since,

Who would come and get him? For almost an hour, back and forth, he walked, danced, ran, and knelt in a salute upon the wire. He even lay down to rest. The city and harbor spread beneath him. The sky surrounded him. Seagulls flew under and over. As long as he stayed on the wire he was free.
When he has had enough Philippe walks back to the roof and holds out his wrists for the handcuffs. In court, the judge sentences him to perform in the park for the children of the city, which he does gladly.

The last two pages of the book read:

Now the towers are gone.

But in memory, as if imprinted on the sky, the towers are still there.

And part of that memory is the joyful morning, August 7, 1974, when Philippe Petit walked between them in the air.

By showing that the towers can be read in ways other than as a site of devastation, Gerstein offers the larger suggestion that the nation is not defined by discourses of terrorism and its defensive reaction to those discourses. The figure of Philippe, walking in the air, works against the pressures to conform which are apparent in all the other 9/11 books I’ve considered, with their monologic insistence on how child, nation and citizens are constituted.

Readers are positioned, too, by the varying perspectives of Gerstein’s illustrations. The audience is situated to see in a variety of ways: through Philippe’s eyes; watching him as he watches from the top of the tower, from below, through the eyes of the seagulls above and below him. The negotiations necessary to make sense of these shifting perspectives require considerable flexibility and position readers in multiple ways, so that they are invited at once to be empathetic with Philippe and to take a detached view of his walk in the air.

In the title of this lecture, *Children’s literature in the age of terrorism*, I seem to beg the question that we live in an age of terrorism. Rather, as Ghassan Hage says, we need to question the way we are invited to uncritically think of a particular form of violence as being the worst possible kind of violence, just by... classifying it as ‘terrorist’ (2003: 125). Most of the 9/11 books I’ve shown today enforce the notion that their implied readers do live in an ‘age of terrorism’. With the exception of *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, these books represent the first responses by authors and illustrators to September 11. It’s too early to judge the effects of September 11 on children’s literature. But perhaps *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* — which won the 2004 Caldecott Medal, the American Library Association’s prize for the most distinguished American picture book for 2003 — promises that books are now being published or written which will position readers as critical and intelligent members of families and nation, and which will resist the homogenizing characterizations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which are evident in several of these texts. What is certain is that authors and illustrators will continue to produce fiction which gives shape to children’s imagined anxieties and desires, and which in so doing discloses their own fears and hopes for the future.


