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Power of Darkness: Narrative and biographical reflexivity in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

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<Abstract>
This paper investigates the high-grossing children’s series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, in relation to the skills young people require to survive and thrive in what Ulrich Beck calls risk society. Children’s textual culture has been traditionally informed by assumptions about childhood happiness and the need to reassure young readers that the world is safe. The genre is consequently vexed by adult anxiety about children’s exposure to certain kinds of knowledge. This paper discusses the implications of the representation of adversity in the Lemony Snicket series via its subversions of the conventions of children’s fiction and metafictional strategies. Its central claim is that the self-consciousness or self-reflexivity of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* models one of the forms of reflexivity children need to be resilient in the face of adversity and to empower them to undertake the biographical project risk society requires of them.

<Keywords> reflexivity, metafiction, power, knowledge, resilience, Lemony Snicket

The question of power in children’s literature is inevitably an ambivalent one. As a technology of socialisation, children’s literature is a medium through which adults seek to manage and mould children’s cognitive, moral and social development into responsible and ostensibly empowered adulthood. It follows that children’s texts
are assumed to be invested with authority in a double sense: as authority over the reader who submits to the power of textual persuasion, and as an authoritative if fictionalised account of how the world works. Assumptions about the power of narrative and the subjection of the reader to the knowledge it discloses inform an adult desire to control what books children read and do not read. Formal control over what kinds of knowledge are conveyed to children via narratives – censorship – is, as Peter Hunt puts it, ‘in one sense […] a simple matter of power’ (102). However, the way adult power operates in children’s literature is typically far less direct, and is exerted for reasons often more nuanced than the politically polarising issue of censorship would suggest.

Ideas about what types of knowledge are too difficult or disturbing for children are complicated by social change and cultural shifts as much as they are by cultural constructions of childhood and the conventions of children’s literature – factors that are not necessarily ideologically or historically synchronous. Moreover, the decisions made by adult censors of children’s books, and the self-censorship of those who write them, are not simply reducible to the omission or suppression of information about the world. It could be argued that a great many children’s narratives construct a fictional world filled with misinformation or false knowledge, driven as much by an adult (authorial and authoritarian) desire to protect children from the unhappiness of the real world as by the conventions of children’s literature itself. These are, at least, some of the assumptions informing Daniel Handler’s A Series of Unfortunate Events (1999-2006), written under the penname Lemony Snicket. Cataloguing the travails of Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire after the death of their parents in a house fire, the thirteen-volume series subverts adult authority in order to
raise questions about what kinds of knowledge will empower the current generation of children.

This subversive stance, rather than their alleged excesses of horror, violence and dark themes, is perhaps the reason that some of the books have appeared on banned, challenged and restricted book lists in the US. The limited critical attention the series has received focuses on its ‘pessimism’ and ‘nihilism’, and the first book, *The Bad Beginning* (1999), was challenged in Texas because it promoted ‘negative thoughts’ (ACLU of Texas). In spite of this, a significant number of volumes have topped bestseller lists and, by late 2006, the series had achieved sales of over 51 million copies (Oleck online). This suggests that Maria Nikolajeva may be right when she argues that ‘[t]he elimination of taboos in children’s literature indicates that the general optimistic tone of earlier books is no longer relevant’ (222).

Nevertheless, well founded or not, optimism could be construed as a mode of empowering children. Regardless of the reality of their own circumstances in life, child readers are typically invited to believe that resilience in the face of adversity will lead to a happy future. The idea that a child protagonist is condemned by birth, accident or adversity to penury and misery, especially if he or she is good and virtuous, is antithetical to the traditional optimistic impulse. Nihilism takes things further, making meaningless the certainties that give reason or foundation for optimism or pessimism in the face of adversity. What are the certainties that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* subverts? What forms of knowledge does it call into question and what forms of knowledge does it offer instead? Are the novels pessimistic?

To answer these questions, this paper begins with a discussion of optimism in regard to the convention of the happy ending in children’s literature. It assesses its relevance to contemporary life by situating the series in the historical period of its
production, and draws on Ulrich Beck’s notion of risk society to contextualise its representation of adversity. However, the chief focus of this discussion is not the actual adversities themselves or, indeed, the qualities of resilience Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire display in the face of them. More significant to this analysis are the ways in which generic convention, narrative strategy and metafictional elements modulate the darkness of the novels in order to enlighten the reader. This reading goes beyond critics’ justification of the series’ nihilism and darkness based on the premise that ‘honest edgy novels help young people make sense of their lives by corroborating their sense that the world is often harsh and unfair’ (Templeton online). Its central claim is that the narrative reflexivity of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* models the sort of reflexivity children need to be resilient in the face of the adversities of contemporary life and empowers them by supplying the knowledge to help them author their own biographical journey.

**Beginning with the end**

In a paper based on a lecture first presented to the eighth IRSCCL Congress in Cologne (1987), Walter Pape links the convention of the happy ending in children’s literature with the historical contexts out of which it evolved. Charting a trajectory through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and focusing mainly on German literature, he argues that the happy ending has variously functioned as a ‘didactic device’ when used to reward virtue and good behaviour; expressed a utopian desire for happiness in a world fraught with ‘danger, misfortune or accident’ (182); and reflected the myth of childhood as a state existing outside of the exigencies and injustices of changing social orders. Although, as Maria Nikolajeva argues and the success of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* attests, contemporary children’s literature
may no longer be ‘utopian or Arcadian by definition’ (222), the happy ending continues to predominate in children’s literature and is informed by the three impulses Pape identifies.

The happy ending marks a restoration of order; indeed, as Pape shows, it often ‘reproduces a static social order’ (191). It constructs a chain of cause and effect towards immediate or long-term happiness for the child protagonist, which in its didactic aspect supposes that particular actions, behaviours and attitudes will produce predictable and certain outcomes. This sense of predictability is implicit in John Stephens’s view that the happy ending reflects the belief that ‘young children require (that is, both “demand” and “need”) certainties about life rather than indeterminacies or uncertainties or unfixed boundaries’ (41). Similarly, Farah Mendlesohn links the didacticism in children’s dystopian fiction, a genre distinguished by its dark subject matter, to the ‘perceived need to reassure children that the universe is stable, safe, and just’ (286, emphasis in original). Stability, safety and justice are not simply things children ‘demand’ and ‘need’; they are the conditions that allow individuals of any age to predict the likely risks and benefits of certain actions and thereby shape their future. However, the world in which the current generation of children are growing up is increasingly dangerous, unstable, unjust, and chaotic. The risks they face are more diffuse, less easily predicted, avoided or controlled than they were for previous generations. Risk, claims German sociologist Ulrich Beck, is a governing force in contemporary life.

Beck coined the term ‘risk society’ to describe our times, arguing that many of the adverse situations the world now faces are the unforeseen consequences of human action. Moreover, he says that many contemporary social, political, ecological, and individual hazards – climate change, pollution, disease, addiction, terrorism, social
inequality, drug abuse *ad infinitum* – elude society’s capacity to predict, prevent or control them. Risk, in Beck’s usage, encoding both the possibility and event of bad things happening, is a force of which children growing up in advanced economies – and their adult guardians – can hardly fail to be aware. Risk society is characterised by uncertainty about the future because, as Beck points out, ‘risks have something to do with anticipation, with the destruction that has not yet happened but is threatening, and of course in that sense risks are already real today’ (33). In this respect, risk society is characterised by a pervasive climate of fear and anxiety.

Risk society guarantees no happy endings and neither does *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. The first volume begins thus: ‘If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things happen in the middle’ (1). This opening would appear to create certainty rather than uncertainty, being simply an inversion of the happy ending. However, it also captures the anticipatory quality that Beck attributes to risk, that something destructive is about to happen. At a more fundamental level, and as the subsequent text makes clear, uncertainty in risk society is created by the fact an individual’s status, for instance, their class or education, no longer reduces the likelihood of encountering adversities formerly faced by more vulnerable groups. Thus, in spite of the fact that Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are intelligent, charming, attractive and resourceful children, they are ‘extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery and despair’ (1).

This opening also signals the series’ disruption of the utopianism, didacticism, and the mythos of childhood that informs not only the happy ending, but children’s literature more generally. In the novels, as in a world distinguished by new risks and
unpredictability, the causal link between happiness and a protagonist’s character, conduct or credentials is broken. In an interview, Handler states that ‘[t]he Baudelaires get out of predicaments pretty much by the skin of their teeth, not because they are good people, which they are. To me, this is something that everyone recognizes about the real world, but it is somehow very dangerous to say aloud’ (quoted in Templeton online). He is, of course, referring to knowledge of risk, about which children are assumed to be unequipped to read within the narratives produced for them.

According to Linda Christian-Smith and Jean Erdman, there is a tendency in the West to regard children as ‘low-status, economically dependent, incompetent individuals who achieve competency and normality through their interactions with adults who initiate children into larger cultural values’ (131–2). This perception leads some adults to regard them as ‘passive “recipients” of adult protection and control’ rather than ‘as social actors engaged in constructing their own worlds’ (Kelley et al. 17). Implicit in these claims is the assumption that children do not need to know (the truth) about certain things because adults have the power to safeguard them against adversity. However, as Lemony Snicket puts it: ‘Sooner or later, everyone’s story has an unfortunate event or two – a schism or a death, a fire or a mutiny, the loss of a home or the destruction of a tea set’ (The End 222). Even the most solicitous of adults cannot always protect children – or themselves, in the case of the adult Baudelaires – from accident or misfortune.

Violet, Klaus and Sunny’s secure and happy world changes irrevocably with the death of their parents. The foolish executor of their estate, Mr Poe, first sends them to live with their nemesis, Count Olaf, and over the course of the series, a succession of guardians. The orphans’ adult guardians are variously evil, exploitative,
corrupt, fearful, irresponsible, preoccupied, eccentric, anxious, autocratic, selfinterested, or kindly, but ineffectual. Adult-child power relations in the novels are patently unequal and the adults rarely relinquish their power status or authority, even when it is clear to the Baudelaires and to the reader that they are wrong. The adult characters generally regard the children as their moral and intellectual inferiors and, as such, in need of regimentation, surveillance and discipline. However, the series consistently subverts this authority by showing adults to be unreliable beings who misuse their power in a myriad of ways – in the case of *The Vile Village*, for instance, to ban books. Even the ‘noble’ adult characters like Charles (*The Miserable Mill*), Jerome Squalor (*The Austere Academy*) and Justice Strauss (*The Bad Beginning*) fail to protect the children. Indeed, adults are often the cause of the very adversities that Violet, Klaus and Sunny encounter.

The presence of flawed adults in children’s literature is by no means unusual. However, it is not only the adult authority figures who fail the Baudelaires, but also institutions of varying kinds, most notably the capacity of the law to ensure justice for the children and the press to report the truth. This has a particular significance in relation to risk society. Beck observes a decline in faith in the power of institutions, experts, leaders and other authorities to protect individuals and society against risk. Instead, it has become increasingly the responsibility of the individual to assess and manage it. How one does so is highly influenced by the social construction of risk. According to Debra Lupton, ‘what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledges and discourses’ (29). From this perspective, ‘anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event’ (Ewald, quoted in Lupton 28, emphasis in original). There are several issues at stake here in relation to the role children’s literature plays in
initiating children into risk society, and they go beyond what factual information about a risky world narratives makes available to them. More important is the attitude to danger and adversity the text positions the reader to take, and the resources it offers for interpreting and managing risk and uncertainty.

* A Series of Unfortunate Events* depicts a highly stylised world that is ambiguous in regard to its setting in time and place, and the calamities that befall Violet, Klaus and Sunny seem remote from the reality of twenty-first century risk society. They range from ‘a car accident, a terrible odor, a deadly serpent, a long knife, a large brass reading lamp, and the reappearance of a person they’d hoped never to see again’ in *Book the Second: The Reptile Room*, to such things, in *Book the Fifth: The Austere Academy*, as ‘snapping crabs, strict punishments, dripping fungus, comprehensive exams, violin recitals, SORE and the metric system’. As these examples show, some of the adversities the characters face are traumatic, but many are mundane, grotesque and absurd. What is significant about the novels is not so much what happens in them, but how problems or risks are presented and the attitude implied readers are positioned to adopt towards adversity.

The series mobilises many of the conventions of the gothic genre: the sadistic, theatrical villain; the use of confined spaces (first, Olaf’s gloomy house, and thence, not castles and dungeons, but the hostile hospitals, grim grottoes and carnivorous carnivals in which Violet, Klaus and Sunny are variously interned); and extremes of strong emotion (mostly negative). The novels conform to the gothic vision, which Janice Anne Radway explains is ‘characterized by an awareness of the pain, suffering, and death inextricably bound up with life’ (219). This gothic style could be seen to acknowledge the ‘darkness’ of risk society, its disruption of an orderly, rational and predictable world. The genre frequently deals with eruptions of the repressed and
taboo. Critics have attributed to *A Series of Unfortunate Events* a level of pessimism taboo in children’s fiction. However, there is more complexity to the tone and voice than this suggests.

The tone of the narrative voice is perhaps more accurately described as lugubrious: an exaggerated gloominess of outlook, which draws attention to itself and, thus, makes it an object of scrutiny. This lugubrious tone operates in opposition to and, thus, calls into question the ‘cheery optimism’ that Perry Nodelman suggests typifies children’s literature, or, at least, assumptions about the genre. Explicitly addressing the issue of optimism, Lemony Snicket explains:

‘Optimist’ is a word which here refers to a person such as Phil [an employee at Lucky Smells Lumbermill] who thinks hopeful and pleasant thoughts about nearly everything. For instance, if an optimist has his left arm chewed off by an alligator, he might say, in a pleasant and hopeful voice, ‘Well, this isn’t too bad. I don’t have my left arm anymore, but at least no one will ever ask me if I am right-handed or left-handed’, but most of us would say something more along the lines of ‘Aaaaah! My arm! My arm!’ (*The Miserable Mill* 26–7)

The subtext of the parody of cheery optimism in this passage and others like it is that a great deal of children’s literature not only promotes a view of the world of which the reality often falls short, but a level of optimism which that is impossible to sustain in real life.

By the same token, the unrelentingly lugubrious outlook of the narrator is just as unrealistic and positions the reader to judge his attitude to misfortune as equally unsustainable. While a severed left arm (or, in Phil’s case, in fact his leg) may indeed cause misery and despair, the same can hardly be said of lumpy beef casserole, violin recitals or household chores, other tribulations described in the novels. The
exaggerated tone in which *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is narrated invites the
reader to reflect on the discourse of pessimism and fearfulness that characterises risk
society, and thus a view of the world as unremittingly miserable and treacherous.

Lemony Snicket’s world-view is further disrupted by the role of humour,
which strategically destabilises narrative reliability. Parody, ironic distortion,
digressions and bathos conspire to produce a kind of anti-realism, and instead of
horror or terror, cathartic laughter. As Linda Hutcheon points out in *The Politics of
Postmodernism*, parody ‘works to foreground the politics of representation’ and
postmodern parody ‘is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form’ (92). The
redundancy and excess evident in the following catalogue of the dark times (literal
and figurative) that Violet, Klaus and Sunny endure do precisely this:

the dark nights [...] spent at Prufrock Preparatory School, participating in
Special Orphan Running Exercises, and the dark climbs up the elevator shaft
of 667 Dark Avenue [...] the dark pit they had built high in the Mortmain
Mountains, the dark hatch they had climbed through in order to board the
*Queequeg*, and the dark lobby of the Hotel Denouement, where they thought
their dark days may be over. (*The End* 192)

Such strategies work to disrupt child readers’ uncritical acceptance of the narrator’s
point of view, drawing attention to the social and narrative construction of risk as a
function of language and representation – here exposed in the process of an
overwritten and intertextual evocation of fear, darkness and an impending doom
implied by the allusion to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* in the image of the ship
Queequeg.

The narrative voice adopted by Lemony Snicket enacts a strategy of
‘disempowered authority’. He appears to be present and watching the orphans’
suffering in real time but, like a documentary voice over, he never intervenes to ‘save’
his protagonists in ways that would disrupt the natural order of things (or fate). The
narrator’s role, as the cover notes on a number of volumes make clear, is to research
and record the history of the Baudelaires as accurately as possible and it is a duty to
which he is solemnly bound. At the same time, however, by adopting such a passive
and powerless stance, by describing all unfortunate events as equally dreadful,
Lemony Snicket – both the implied author and narrator – undermines his authority as
an adult and story-teller. In again calling into question adult agency and power, the
series may in fact position the child reader to assume a more agential and empowered
attitude to a difficult world. In trivialising trauma and elevating the trivial to
traumatic, the narrative may also authorise children’s experience of their world.

On the one hand, to suggest that life-altering events like a car accident or the
death of a parent are equal to an exam or a bad smell is to trivialise them. Yet, child
protagonists in children’s narratives routinely resolve very difficult issues, overcome
great adversity and enjoy a happy ending, which is also to trivialise the on-going
effects of adversity that children experience in real life. On the other hand, the
equivalence the narrative establishes between very different orders of adversity might
actually acknowledge the fact that the intensity with which children subjectively
experience difficulty does not necessarily reflect adult judgements about their
severity. An exam can be, and often is, traumatic. So can a bowl of cold porridge if
Julia Kristeva is right about the abject. From this perspective, different adversities for
different children may require equal measures of resilience. Rehearsing resilience in
this playful manner potentially offers new ways for child readers to train their
responses to misfortune.
Addressing the question of whether *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a product of its times, and its success reflects a more ‘knowing’ and ‘cynical’ child audience, Bruce Butt suggests its life lessons are meagre. He judges that the appeal of these ‘little books’ lies in their subversive narrative style and not ‘the content of their message’ (285), drawing parallels between the Lemony Snicket series and Philip Ardagh’s *Terrible Times*, about which Michael Rosen writes: ‘If commentary and mock-commentary are to your taste […] you can’t allow yourself to get worried about what happens next’ (online). According to Butt, ‘This is very much the case in *Unfortunate Events* too; we do not take the ““blunt lessons” seriously as we laughed at them last time we saw them.’ (285). I agree with Butt that the novels’ appeal lies in the narration rather than the content. I would also agree that the point of view the series takes on adversity and risk and its use of parody and humour mean that the average reader is unlikely to feel frightened or depressed by its world-view. If Butt is right, they may even conclude that worry is pointless. However, I would argue that the series offers a much more empowered position to the reader than fatalism, and that its narrative features underpin some very important messages for children growing up in risk society. In proposing such a view, I am referring specifically to the metafictional aspects of the series.

**Not the end of the world**

Critics of metafiction such as Robert Scholes identify a ‘narcissistic’ self-absorption in fiction about fiction and the story-writing process which they say prohibits any meaningful or, indeed, political engagement with the world. Others, including Wenche Ommundsen and Patricia Waugh, argue that metafiction reveals the way in which narrative assumptions mediate reality and assists the reader to better
read and critically interpret the world. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* foregrounds the processes of reading within the narrative itself, an aspect of children’s metafiction recently discussed by Claudia Nelson. Klaus in particular is a voracious reader and libraries figure throughout the series, although the children’s attempts to access the books and the knowledge they contain are frequently thwarted.

Direct addresses to the reader, the construction of the implied author’s biography, and explicit discussion of literary convention, terms and theory link the constructed nature of the narrative world to the real world. Allusions to a large range of intertexts are sometimes explained and other times not: amid incomprehensible baby talk, Sunny also utters words like ‘Bildungsroman’, ‘Diaspora’, ‘Lethe’ and ‘Abelard’. Language and representation receive further emphasis via the narrator’s penchant for puns, acrostic poems, alliteration, lists of synonyms and hyponyms, alphabetical inventories, and trademark glossing of sophisticated vocabulary, clichés and aphorisms. These stylistic devices release tension, offer the pleasure of recognition and subversion. However, the manner in which the series goes about baring the ‘fictional and linguistic systems’, puzzles and codes of its construction does more than enhance ‘the pleasure and challenge of reading’ (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 154). The metafictional elements of the novels produce a reflexivity which resonates with the notion of ‘reflexive biography’ and thus the process of ‘writing’ one’s own life in risk society.

Beck uses the term ‘reflexive biography’ to describe the way in which individuals are increasingly expected to produce their own life in risk society. He argues that the ‘basic certainties of life conduct’ (87) have given way to new social, biographical and cultural risks and insecurities that are individualised. He demonstrates that social life is no longer strongly directed by tradition and social
roles, and that there is less support from institutions and community in the face of misfortune. As a result, individuals are required to take responsibility for their own welfare and to consciously plan and construct biographical trajectories which, according to Deborah Lupton, are ‘self- rather than socially-produced’ (70).

Beck has nothing to say about literary theory, and little about children. In apparently assuming parental management and control of the child’s biographical trajectory, he betrays some of the common assumptions about children discussed earlier. However, this is not to say that the notion of reflexive biography is not particularly pertinent to the analysis of childhood and, indeed, children’s literature. Children may not have the same degree of autonomy or agency as adults do in constructing their reflexive biography, but this does not mean they are not embedded in the process of learning the skills for constructing it. Lemony Snicket’s meditation on denouement and closure provides an indicative example of how metafictional reflexivity might assist them.

In Book the Twelfth: The Penultimate Peril, Snicket discusses the distinction between denouement and closure, explaining that the resolution of a problem or episode should not be confused with the end of the story. To clarify his point, he suggests that the denouement of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’ is when the bears discover Goldilocks and either eat or chase her away, but the end ‘occurs when a troop of young scouts neglect to extinguish their campfire and even the efforts of a volunteer fire department cannot save most of the wildlife from certain death’ (177). At this point in the penultimate book, the denouement of the orphans’ story is ‘fast approaching, but the end of their story still waited for them, like a secret still covered in fog’ (177). The image alludes to the moment in the very first book when Mr Poe emerges from the fog on Briny Beach to deliver the news of their parents’ death to the
Baudelaires. In this respect, what the future holds is always uncertain, making each episode and each novel in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* a denouement, with no certainty of closure, let alone a happy ending. Each novel ends only with the promise of more misfortune to come; in *The Austere Academy*, for example, with the motto, “Memento Mori” – “Remember you will die” (221).

Even the final chapter of the final volume, *The End*, evades closure. Count Olaf dies, the unwitting victim of his own treachery. However, many of the novels’ mysteries and the fate of secondary characters, although discussed, remain deliberately unresolved. Indeed, according to Snicket, ‘it cannot be said that *The End* contains the end of the Baudelaires’ story, any more than *The Bad Beginning* contained its beginning’ (287). After a number of characteristic digressions, Snicket returns to this theme, continuing:

One could say, in fact, that no story really has a beginning, and that no story really has an end, as all of the world’s stories are as jumbled as the items in the arboretum, with their details and secrets all heaped together so that the whole story, from beginning to end, depends on how you look at it. We might even say that the world is in medias res – a Latin phrase which means ‘in the midst of things’ or ‘in the middle of a narrative’ – and that it is impossible to solve any mystery, or find the root of any trouble, and so *The End* is really the middle of the story. (289)

To emphasise this point in a final instance of comic redundancy, the volume contains a further ‘final’ chapter, complete with front matter, entitled *Book the Last: Chapter Fourteen*. The orphans have lived a year as castaways on an island, living in safety and surviving on their considerable wits. But they decide to leave because although, as Klaus puts it: ‘You’d think we would have had enough treachery for a lifetime […]
there’s more to life than safety’ (3–4). The narrative ends with the children about to sail away – still in medias res.

I suggest that such metafictional elements in the novels provide critical resources for the formation of a reflexive biography, in this instance, by inviting child readers to reflect on their own lives as being in medias res and to consider the problems they encounter in life in terms of denouement. If, as Snicket says, how one understands the interrelationship between events in a story ‘depends on how you look at it’, one might also say that the difference between succumbing to adversity and being resilient in the face of it also depends on the way you look at it. Or, to recall Ewald’s point earlier about the social construction of risk, ‘anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event’. The novels in A Series of Unfortunate Events invite the child reader to understand adversity in their own lives and in the world around them as ‘not the end of the world’ so to speak, but a chapter in their life story and in the history of the world. This way of looking may not come down to pessimism or optimism, but knowingness and self-reflexivity. It is perhaps not surprising that, in The End, Lemony Snicket parodies not only adult anxieties about children’s knowledge of risk and danger, but adult efforts to insulate the young from them.

In the final book, Violet, Klaus and Sunny are shipwrecked along with Count Olaf and the narrator’s sister, Kit Snicket. The island is inhabited by colonists who have chosen to live far from ‘the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind’ and whose names allude to the literatures of castaways and utopias, including Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Samuel Butler’s Erewhon. The latter has a particular significance. In spite of the transposition of w and h, Erewhon is nowhere spelt backwards, and what at first appears to be a utopia is far
from so. This holds true of the island where the Baudelaires find themselves. They discover that the leader of the colonists, Ishmael (another allusion to *Moby Dick*), has commanded the islanders to lock up every object that washes ashore, including books and all manner of useful devices, in the arboretum, a massive apple tree. Explaining his reasons for this, Ishmael says to the orphans: ‘Don’t you see? […] I’m not just the island’s facilitator. I’m the island’s parent. I keep this library far away from the people under my care, so that they will never be disturbed by the world’s terrible secrets’ (227–28). It is for this reason that he forbids the children to read the history in their parents’ commonplace book, also called *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which he has in his possession: ‘No sensible parent would let their child read even the title of this dreadful, sad chronicle, when they could keep them far from the treachery of the world instead’ (230).

Given Count Olaf’s presence on the island, treachery cannot be kept at bay. When he deliberately releases deadly fungal spores, fear and panic ensue. Only the Baudelaires escape this literal and metaphorical contagion. Olaf succumbs and the colonists flee in search of another safe haven, their fate unknown. The children survive, for their parents’ commonplace book contains information about an antidote, which in a thinly veiled allusion to the Tree of Knowledge, is the bitter fruit of the apple tree. As Violet tells the departing Ishmael, their parents ‘didn’t want to shelter us from the world’s treacheries. They wanted us to survive them’ (297).

**Conclusion**

Clearly, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* presents knowledge as one means of empowering the young with the resilience to bounce back in the face of adversity. It is highly critical of adults’ attempts both to censor the information made available to
children, and to provide them with ‘misinformation’ about the nature of the world. Children, it suggests, need knowledge if they are to have the power to overcome adversities great and small and construct a positive and successful life story. They need resilience if they are not to be defeated by fearfulness. Children’s literature is an important site where biographies are modelled for children to consider and potentially to emulate.

However, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* offers a further and, in my view, much more significant repertoire of skills and knowledge which is particularly vital if young people growing up in risk society are to learn to produce their own reflexive biographies. The playfulness of the metafictional elements act as foil to the darkness, but they also offer an alternative means of understanding the nature of adversity and the reflexivity required to produce a positive and resilient biographical trajectory. These elements offer child readers the conceptual tools to think critically about the stories they are told, and to think reflexively about their own life story. Referring specifically to the censorship of children’s literature and the variable affective responses of individual children to dark themes, Joan Ahern argues that ‘one can’t legislate for fear’ (quoted in Hunt 95). Ahern’s point has a particular traction in the context of risk society. One cannot legislate against risk – which by its nature eludes control – or the fear and uncertainty that accompanies it. Nevertheless, critically empowered children are much less likely to be defeated by pessimism, nihilism, fatalism or false optimism. By harnessing the power of darkness *A Series of Unfortunate Events* shows one way in which children’s literature can be illuminating and potentially empower child readers in their negotiation of risk society.

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The author

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