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Performing Femininity
Storytelling and gender

The Eye of the Sheep and other novels told through the eyes of a child

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What does Sofie Laguna’s The Eye of the Sheep, named as the winner of the Miles Franklin Award last
week, share with Great Expectations and To Kill a Mockingbird? All of these novels unfold, at least in part, through the perspective of a child narrator.

Several best-selling novels published since 2000, including Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, and Emma Donoghue’s Room, present challenging and sometimes disturbing events from the viewpoint of child narrators.

In Laguna’s novel, a boy with learning difficulties named Jimmy Flick narrates his working-class family life. Jimmy’s father is an alcoholic, who is often violent towards Jimmy’s doting, but increasingly unwell, mother.

Both because he is a child and because he is intellectually different, Jimmy only has a limited understanding of what happens after his father reaches for the Cutty Sark. Yet this restricted perspective provides the reader with the opportunity to come to realisations that are not available to Jimmy.

Most works of children’s literature narrated by a child in first-person – as opposed to an all-knowing, external, or omniscient, third-person narrator – do not tend to work in this way. The child reader is not usually supposed to see through, question, or perceive the irony in the child narrator’s perspective on events.

In literature intended for adults, the child narrator fulfils some very different functions. In novels based on confronting premises, such as the Fritzl-inspired captivity of a mother and child in Room or the physical and verbal assaults that punctuate The Eye of the Sheep, the child narrator can act as a filter for the reader.

Donoghue, for instance, states that she chose a child narrator in part to make the horrifying story “more bearable”. His imagined innocence works to “partly shield the reader on their descent into the abyss”.

A child narrator can even make shocking incidents blackly comic.

Laguna’s Jimmy is frequently amusing in his insights and observations. When his older brother, Robby, finally steps in to stop his father’s violence by giving him a bloody belting, Robby yells, “That’s the last fucking time!”. In his subsequent recounting of his father’s more subdued behaviour, Jimmy begins his sentences with a serious phrase as a factual preface: “After the last fucking time …”

Many child narrators in adult fiction are precocious. This enables them to describe events and people in ways that would not be possible for ordinary children of their age. Foer’s nine-year-old Oskar Schell, “an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist”, is typical of the highly intelligent child narrator.

This attribute also makes these narrators outsiders in comparison with their peers. Likewise, their age
makes them unfamiliar with social conventions and keen observers of oddities or injustices that are banal and unnoticed by world-weary adults.

High intelligence is not the only way to mark the child narrator as an insightful observer.

A child narrator with a developmental disability, or abusive upbringing, heightens the unique perceptions of a child’s limited understanding.

Donoghue’s five-year-old narrator has a minimal vocabulary due to his isolated imprisonment. Haddon’s narrator is a 15-year-old boy who is likely on the autism spectrum. While Laguna’s Jimmy has difficulty processing and coping with everyday tasks and family conflict.

When Jimmy reflects on his father’s inability to speak about Robby, who leaves home soon after the violent confrontation, he observes:

> After the last fucking time he couldn’t get his words out because the apertures were blocked and to unblock them would need an operation that he might not survive, the way Pop Flick didn’t survive. Pop Flick died on the table when his heart wouldn’t start, it didn’t matter how many volts they gave him.

Much of the empathy generated by the child narrator flows from the reader’s perception of his or her innocence. From Jane Eyre to Jimmy Flick, when a child narrator seems alone in the world — a victim of adult failings — and continues to struggle forward, readers want the narrative to resolve with their success or happiness.

Although, there are examples, as in Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange, where a young narrator, such as the teenage Alex, is comparatively unsympathetic due to his deviant sexual and violent inclinations.

Whether likeable or distasteful, child narrators remain a construction. They share little resemblance with how an actual child might tell a story or view events.

As adults, we all possess recollections of our childhood selves that we can never re-inhabit. In fiction with child narrators, we nevertheless imagine that we can view the world through a child-like lens once again.