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Cultural Arrogance and Realism in Judy's Blume's *Superfudge*

In the Newbery award winner for 1933, Elizabeth Foreman Lewis's *Yung Fu of the Upper Yangtse,* the main character is admirable because he is intuitively wise enough to see through the clearly silly, rigidly illiberal, and just plain old-fashioned values of his Chinese ancestors; he has been born with the freedom-loving, superstition-hating, and innately capitalistic soul of an American. The cultural arrogance of *Yung Fu* is relatively obvious; our values have changed enough since 1933 so that what once must have seemed like tolerant pleading for the universal brotherhood of man now baldly announces its embarrassing prejudice. But a less obvious sort of cultural imperialism is still at work in children's fiction.

In one of the stories in Paul Yee's *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter,* for instance, a young Canadian girl despises the Chinese heritage that makes her different from others; and not surprisingly, the events of the story teach her that Chinese culture is not merely silly and dismissable. But underlying this plea for acceptance of cultural difference is an apparently unconscious assumption of the absolute rightness of values that are decidedly alien to traditional Chinese culture. Sharon Fong accepts a kite of traditional design from an old Chinese man, who tells her how he made such kites as a lonely young immigrant to Canada, separated from his wife, who was still in China:

Paul Yee, *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter,* p. 19

> once the kite was up I was a different man. My bones stopped aching, my muscles loosened. I thought I was a seagull flying free, lighter than air. . . . And somewhere over the horizon I could see my wife's beautiful face, waiting for me.

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The kite loses whatever traditional significance it might have had when it comes to represent familiar North American values: the need to feel free, optimistic aspirations, the healthiness of faith in an impossible dream, a romantically powerful love. Sharon then decides that "the kite and its story were finally Chinese things that made sense to her" (p. 26), and feels more comfortable about her heritage; ironically, she can accept "being Chinese" only because it means being North American. Not surprisingly, furthermore, the story makes it clear that her doing so leads Sharon to self-acceptance and a more positive self-image; both the Canadian author of this book and its characters simply take the rightness of these mainstream North American values for granted.

By definition, our culture defines the world for us, tells us what reality is; so it is exceedingly hard for writers *not* to take their own culture and its values for granted. When I taught a collection called *Best-Loved Folk Tales of the World* last year, the typical North Americans who were students in my children's literature course happily agreed with the editor's comment that these tales from many different countries "deal with universal human dilemmas that span differences of age, culture, and geography." My students shared the highminded but ingenuous faith of many North Americans, including many who work professionally with children's literature: the fact that they could equally enjoy and equally approve the moral thrust of stories from around the world showed that, despite our different colored skins and various costumes, we human beings are all basically the same. My attempts to persuade these students that they could so easily enjoy these stories exactly because the original versions of them had been rewritten and reshaped to suit North American ideas about what a story consists of, about how it should be told, and perhaps above all, about what it should mean, were met with disbelief—and more significantly, with outrage. Some students took my conviction that people might actually be different from each other as evidence of my intolerance, and were infuriated when I suggested that accepting different people only because you refuse to acknowledge the differences is hardly an act of tolerance.

Joanna Cole, ed., *Best-Loved Folktales of the World*, p. xvii

But then a student freshly arrived from Singapore began to discuss one particular story in the book, which, he said, he remembered from his own childhood. The story centers on a woman's conviction that she is meant to marry one specific man, who asks for her hand too late and then dies of remorse; on the day of her wedding to another man, she stops the procession, falls on the grave of her true love, and says, "If we were intended to be man and wife, open your grave three feet wide" (p. 533). The grave opens and the woman leaps into it; finally, she and her true intended become

rainbows. But, said my student, the title that the tale has been given in *Best-loved Folktales,* "Faithful Even in Death," is not true to the original, and reveals a cultural bias; the story is not at all about faithfulness, but rather, about fate working out properly. The title distorts the story in order to accommodate non-Oriental cultural assumptions: it implies that the woman's faithfulness is a matter of choice on her part, and therefore, a virtue that is being rewarded, whereas the story itself makes it clear that the woman had no choice but to love he whom she was meant to love, and that the situation has nothing to do with virtue or reward. Only someone whose conception of story derived from European fairy tales could have distorted this tale by making the moral health of the characters the driving force behind the events of the plot.

This student from Singapore taught some of the North Americans in the class a valuable lesson: if we are not conscious that other cultures offer different and, for those who live within them, equally satisfactory definitions of meaning and value, and that consequently, these cultures postulate quite different but equally satisfactory realities, then we are doomed to a dangerous solitude, a blindness that amounts to an unconscious form of arrogance. Like Sharon Fong and like many of my students, many of us live inside such a solitude—do simply assume without even consciously doing so that what we value ourselves is universally valued by people around the world. In *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes defines the bourgeoisie of his native France as

Ronald Barthes, *Mythologies,* p. 138

> *the social class which does not want to be named.* . . . Politically, the haemorrhage of the name "bourgeois" is effected through the idea of *nation.* This was once a progressive idea, which has served to get rid of the aristocracy; today, the bourgeoisie merges into the nation, even if it has, in order to do so, to exclude from it the elements which it decides are allogenous (the Communists). (Italics his; "allogenous" is a geologic term for rock found away from its rightful place.)

Indeed, many of us refuse to accept the idea that there *is* such a thing as a bourgeoisie; we say that nowadays we are all members of what we usually call the middle class—that there is no other class. Such ideas can be held only by those who either ignore the differences in the existence of those with different values and ways of living, such as the very rich and the numerous poor, or else define those others as insignificant, as ignorable outsiders; as Barthes goes on to say, "practiced on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order . . ." (p. 140). This is a sort of cultural arrogance that emerges from highminded liberalism, a democratic faith in human equality, rather than from narrowminded prejudice; but it is arrogant nevertheless.

The less thoughtful of the university students I teach reveal such a bias most clearly when they study books that most closely appear to represent their own class and culture; their primary assumption is always that the best books are the ones that depict a world they can best recognize, and that such books are worthwhile exactly because they are realistic enough to be universally recognizable. Judy Blume's *Superfudge* is one such book; many of my students responded to a test question on this book by almost unanimously telling me that this tale of an eleven-year-old boy confronted with a move from New York to Princeton, New Jersey and the various domestic problems caused by parents, friends, and younger siblings, is so realistic that it could be understood and enjoyed by everyone. One student wrote, "It's so realistic—all eleven year olds go through that." Another wrote, "This book is so real because anyone can relate to it—I have a younger brother myself, and I know just how Peter feels about Fudge."

We can make such statements only by forgetting about the existence of the millions of eleven-year-olds in this world who are too hungry or too poor to face problems as relatively frivolous as those facing Peter, and by assuming that all human beings of all cultural backgrounds respond to experience in much the same way. One can understand Peter's feelings about Fudge *because* one also has a younger brother only if one believes that all cultures countenance exactly the same attitudes toward siblings, and that consequently, all human beings feel the same way about younger brothers. In an earlier article called "How Typical Children Read Typical books," I discussed the dangerous implications of the idea of readers "relating to" or "identifying with" characters, a sort of reading that I believe we deliberately teach to children: "In training children to identify, to read only about themselves, we sentence them to the solitude of their own consciousness." But such reading not only enforces a dangerous solipsism; it also fosters the confusion of one's limited personal reality with universal truth—the sort of cultural arrogance I have been discussing.

Perry Nodelman, "How typical children read typical books," p. 184

I have suggested that my students' insistence on the universal truth of *Superfudge* ignored the quite different reality of eleven-year-olds in places like Singapore, who do not in fact live like Peter, who not only often look different, but who also live in different physical circumstances influenced by different traditions, and who therefore feel differently about themselves and their world. But one Singaporean in this year's children's literature class told me that he enjoyed *Superfudge* exactly because it reminded him of his own childhood back home—not, however, of his actual life, but of the American television shows he once watched. For him, such shows had been wonderful fantasies, depicting an exotic world quite dif-

indeed meant to be understood as the whole truth. Peter is right to believe that he is smarter than his parents, he almost always has a perfect understanding of the motivations of the other characters, and his view of experience as a series of discrete episodes is not qualified; apparently, his personal and highly solipsistic vision is directly in accordance with universal reality. So perhaps it is not surprising that so many readers confuse that solipsistic vision with actual reality and presume it to be universal.

But there are other and even more revealing reasons for them to do so: for, while it may not be realistic in any usual sense of that term, the world *Superfudge* describes is exceedingly familiar. As my student from Singapore rightly suggested, it is the world as depicted in numerous television situation comedies. There too the situations are discrete, and unconnected, and quickly resolved, and there too the children speak like cynical adult wiseacres. Indeed, *Superfudge* could easily be transformed into such a television show—a show like many over the past four decades, or like the current show *Family Ties*. The Hatcher family seem to be an ordinary, typical family living an ordinary life; but, like the characters in most TV sitcoms, they clearly have an upper middle class income. Father has a relatively glamorous job, mother has a traditionally feminine revulsion for worms, and they live in a comfortable old house, in a community which seems to have magically maintained some of the amenities of life in the days before the automobile made communities less complete: there is a local movie theater, a local art gallery, good neighborhoods of roomy old houses, and so on. The family's situation is equally nostalgic, and in that way different from the families depicted in most current sitcoms: mom and dad are happy with each other after many years of marriage, the family is complete, mom is happy to stay home and raise children. Most current sitcoms recognize the disruption of North American family life by centering around odd family groupings; but that these groups of single daughter/single mother/single grandmother, or of three unrelated older women living together, or of single father/son/housekeeper act as a family and undergo the typical family disputes of older sitcoms suggests how very much the family of *Superfudge* represents the essence of a nostalgic convention.

But while the Hatchers represent a nostalgic, or at the very least, utopian, idea of what a typical American family might be like, they also express the sort of significant abnormalities that define the "situation" as comic. Family sitcoms need a "concept"—a child who is actually a robot, a house guest from another planet, a conservative son who rebels against his parents' liberalism. In *Superfudge*, Fudge is an adorable brat who is always getting into trouble

and never realizing it, and there is a new baby in the house; both these are numbingly familiar "concepts" to viewers of TV sitcoms.

Equally familiar is the peculiar sort of characterization Blume provides. Her characters express the same paradoxical doubleness as that of many TV sitcom characters. On the one hand, they are rigid stereotypes, humorous because they can always be counted on to act out of their few clearly defined traits. Fudge will always be cute, Peter will always be offended by the unconventional. But on the other hand, the rigidity of the stereotype almost always hides a soft heart; Peter, who makes snide remarks when his mother worries about Fudge's disappearance, admits to a lump in his throat when Fudge is found. The comic rigidity almost always yields to an underlying softhearted sentiment, just as it does so often on television; we can laugh at the rigidity without worrying that we are undemocratically looking down on those we laugh at, for they turn out to be only superficially rigid, and in need of the scorn of laughter in order to reveal their true humanity.

The thematic content of both *Superfudge* and many TV sitcoms expresses a similarly shrewd doubleness that also relates to the idea of rigidity. The situations are all about change—about the flexibility required to face life responsibly, and about the immaturity of a rigid resistance to change. We are allowed to laugh at the rigid characters in sitcoms because their resistance to new ideas and possibilities defines them as dangerously limited beings; the theoretically liberal bias of most popular television tends to equate change with growth, and to see any rigidity or conservatism as stagnant and stultifying. Consequently, many episodes of sitcoms describe how a rigid character first humorously resists and then seriously learns to accept change—the birth of a new baby, the immigrant who moves in next door, a father's first date.

Nevertheless, the beginning of each new episode takes us right back to the beginning: in order to be laughable, the rigid character must go on being rigid, and thus, seems each week to have forgotten the lesson he or she learned last week; and in order to be instructive of properly liberal North American values, the character must learn once more each week to transcend rigidity. The audience then is allowed two contradictory pleasures at once: both the comedy of static egocentricity and the philosophic satisfaction of "growth." Furthermore, the contradiction implies the pleasing truth that "growth" is not real or dangerous—that to grow is merely to repeat the same old comfortable pattern, not the unsettling act of actually transcending it and moving on; the apparent focus on change disguises an intense conservatism, an absolute faith in the rightness of things as they are.

Superfudge seems to be about accepting change. The plot centers on conflicts surrounding having a new baby, moving to a new place, making new friends, and so on. And much is said about change: Peter's angry statement at the beginning of the second chapter that "Life at our house had definitely changed" (p. 22) is a clear signal that readers will soon get to laugh at his rigidity; and of course he is unable to understand when his father says he wants to try living somewhere else or when his mother says she wants to go back to college because "I'm ready for a change" (p. 23). Peter's father sums up what seems to be a central message when he says, "Changes take some getting used to . . . but in the long run they're healthy" (p. 96).

But as in TV sitcoms, the change in *Superfudge* is deceptive. Peter resists and accepts change after change as the book goes on, but he remains enough the same rigid character so that he can continue to resist the changes and thus create comic situations. Similarly, Fudge grows older but no less prone to comic disaster. Furthermore, the ending of the book undercuts its own apparent acceptance of the value of change. When his father says he moved to Princeton "for a change" (p. 163), Fudge wisely suggests that "Daddy ran away when he didn't want to work anymore" (p. 162); and father, mother, and everyone else happily acknowledge a basic resistance to growth when they decide to move back to the life they always lived before. As in sitcoms, the lip service paid to flexibility disguises an underlying conservatism, a bland acceptance of things as they are. But *Superfudge* ingeniously always manages to have it both ways: the "change" that Hatchers reject is a theoretically conventional family life in a small town, and they conservatively return to a more glamorous urban lifestyle, so that their refusal to change sounds like courageous individualism rather than conservative conformity—while at the same time, father gives up art for business, and mother gives up school for homemaking.

My students can "relate" to all this because they watch TV; they are familiar enough with the patterns of popular culture to recognize them. Yet until it is pointed out to them, the divergence of this novel from the specific conditions of the world they actually live in is not terribly obvious to them—no more obvious than the arrogance of saying that *every* eleven-year-old is like Peter. I'm happy to report that, when I question their assumption that *Superfudge* represents reality, my students quickly acknowledge its inadequacy, and wonder how they could have been so easily deceived by it.

Once again, Barthes offers an explanation, as he discusses the ways in which the artifacts and conventions of culture permeate and define reality for us:

Mythologies, p. 140

> our press, our films, our theater, our pulp literature, our rituals, our justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world. . . . practiced on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of the natural order—the further the bourgeois class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become. (p. 140)

Barthes' argument here would suggest that, by constantly reinforcing the same images and conceptions of reality, TV sitcoms and novels like *Superfudge* come to permeate our conception of the world—*become*, in fact, the world we believe we live in.

Unfortunately, however, the images and conceptions such TV shows and novels offer are untruthful ones that work to replace consciousness of the truth. The world they ask us to believe in is a cleaner, richer, and less distressing one than the one we actually live in; like much popular entertainment, *Superfudge* describes a comfortable and stable upper middle class life as if it were the norm. It also tends to leave out and thus imply the nonexistence of many of the unsettling confusions of actual reality, and it divests the problems it does describe of their real difficulty: each situation focuses only on one problem and quickly solves it, the same problem never recurs again, and the overall pattern of growth and reversion pays a sort of lip service to change that works to create a dangerous complacency. Finally, then, the novel tells a story that cleverly confuses truth with wish-fulfillment. While Peter may be like many real children in believing that he knows better than his parents, the fact that he obviously is right and that he does in fact know better is a clever confusion of truth with desire.

Barthes describes how the big weddings of the "bourgeoisie" are so much assumed to be the universal norm in media representations of marriage that poorer people scrimp and save to be "normal" in this expensive way; and as a result, "the bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness" (p. 141). I believe that my students' faith in the reality of *Superfudge* represents such an impoverishment. They can see this novel as "real" only if they recognize the world it describes from the repetitive depictions of such a world on television and elsewhere. In letting such depictions play their manipulative game of forcing us to suspend our actual knowledge of reality and believe in their truth, we allow ourselves to be captivated by a

doubly satisfying solipsism: the belief that our own perceptions of the ways things ought to be is in fact the way they actually are, and the equally comforting belief that our own perception of the way things are is the only possible way of viewing reality. These are comfortable but dangerous delusions.

Clearly, then, a book like *Superfudge* helps to foster personal and cultural blindness—an unconscious but nevertheless dangerous form of arrogance. Furthermore, the ways in which it does so offer a particularly significant challenge for those interested in introducing literature both to children and adults. The simple fact that my students and so many children and other adults find the novel so recognizable suggests how thoroughly the attitudes and patterns of popular culture permeate their lives. The novel is loose, episodic, fragmented in tone and content; in fact, it is constructed less like a conventional novel with a cohesive overall narrative thrust than like a series of episodes of a sitcom, so that a moral parable is followed by a slapstick joke. This is the narrative structure of most TV series; and because the narrative structures of TV are *not* the ones basic to most written fiction, those whose narrative experience is derived mainly from TV and books like *Superfudge* are likely to have trouble comprehending more conventional literary narratives.

Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, "An interview with Raymond Williams"

The lack of continuity between the weekly episodes of a TV show teaches viewers to focus purely on what is happening in each particular episode and to disregard the overall narrative thrust of a series as a whole; and what Raymond Williams calls TV "flow," the characteristic intermingling of parts of stories, commercials telling different stories, newsbreaks and so on, in a continuous flow of separate events that have no significant relationship to each other, means that even our attentiveness to any one episode of a TV show will be intermittent. Anyone expecting to be able to browse casually through a serious novel in the same way as one watches TV, paying attention to some episodes, ignoring others, and ignoring the overall thrust of the plot or the consistency of the characters or the language will miss much of significance.

People who read in this way—and many children and adults do—need to broaden their conceptions of the possibilities of narrative structure as well as their images of reality; yet the deliberate fostering of complacency implicit in the narrative forms they know is likely to make them unreceptive to different modes of narrative structuring that do actively promote genuine growth and self-awareness. It is the responsibility of parents and educators to teach those brought up on TV narrative how to respond to more demand-

ing narrative structures, so that they may transcend their solipsistic conceptions of the world.

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