

BATTLE OR GRATITUDE? ATTITUDES CONVEYED TO CHILDREN BY
POKÉMON, BAKUGAN, AND MAGIC TREE HOUSE BOOKS

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Although research has been done on the violence of children's television and video games, less attention has been paid to recent children's books. The Bakugan and Pokémon games (owned by Sega and Nintendo, respectively) include a series of books for young readers published by the educational publisher Scholastic. Bakugan and Pokémon teach children that the default position in their daily interactions with others should be the battle stance. The emphasis that toys like Bakugan or Pokémon place on the issue of power disrupts the complex and delicate processes of aesthetic, moral, and intellectual discernment just beginning to take shape in young children. Psychologists and peace activists often encourage parents to replace TV cartoons and games with reading, an activity that ordinarily helps children to develop imaginative solutions, verbalize rather than act out, and acquire skills in symbolic conceptualization. However, the creative power of the book, just as with other media, can be infiltrated and appropriated by commercial and warlike causes. This paper contrasts Bakugan and Pokémon entertainments with the Magic Tree House books by Mary Pope Osborne, which feature attributes that children prize: adventure, physical courage, independence, and the collection and categorization of information. In addition, Osborne's constructive and benevolent books instill the value of gratitude.

Shooter games, gangsta rap, Pokémon all become tools for parents and teachers to help young people feel stronger, calm their fears, and learn more about themselves.

—Gerard Jones¹

We have been wasting away for want of gratitude for some time.

—Mary Jo Leddy²

INTRODUCTION

Every month flyers from the Scholastic Book Clubs come home from our youngest child's school. We have been poring over these flyers since about 1997, when our eldest was in elementary school. On the Scholastic website, their mission statement sounds impressive: "Recognizing that literacy is the cornerstone of a child's intellectual, personal and cultural growth, for nearly ninety years Scholastic has created quality products and services that educate, entertain and motivate children and are designed to help enlarge their understanding of the world around them." The credo of Scholastic builds on this mission statement and one of the tenets is this: "Scholastic produces educational materials to assist and inspire students to help build a society free of prejudice and hate, and dedicated to the highest quality of life in community and nation."³ Although it can be difficult to see how these high standards connect to the latest toy and movie tie-in titles related to Shrek, Lego Bionicle, Star Wars, Transformers, and Iron Man, all found in the May 2010 flyer from the Seesaw division (aimed at grades K-1), in the same flyer there are genuinely educational books like *Look Inside the Human Body*, the *Planet Earth Phonics Reading Program*, and *Eating Fractions*.

A few months ago, my youngest son would consider ordering only Pokémon and Bakugan books, and it was vain to suggest classics by Arnold Lobel or E. L. Konigsburg or, even better, that it was not necessary for him to get caught up at all in a constant round of acquisition and consumption at the age of seven, especially since we have a houseful of books. A child of seven is facing incessant challenges to his or her worldview, encountering daily a surfeit of clamouring, competing, and baffling ideas, facts, and values. The primary purpose of the Bakugan and Pokémon series (which are owned by Sega and Nintendo, respectively) is to sell games and related

merchandise; the method these companies use to sell their product is to insist that children accept that the default position while playing their games should be the battle stance. It makes a dreadful kind of sense, if you are a small child, to align yourself with Bakugan monsters which have names like Fear Ripper and Terrorclaw. However, that a book called *Bakugan: The Battle Brawlers* is being promoted by an educational publishing company which asserts that it wishes to help children “enlarge their understanding of the world around them” and “build a society free of prejudice and hate” makes much less sense.

This essay is both an analysis of these children’s entertainments (and some worthy alternatives) from the standpoint of a literary critic, and an appraisal of some aspects of the commercial, educational, and domestic environments in which such entertainments are created, disseminated, and consumed. I have chosen the opposing concepts of “battle” and “gratitude” to differentiate between the Bakugan/Pokémon class of book and a more beneficial children’s series, the Magic Tree House books by Mary Pope Osborne, because these concepts are the ones which demonstrably present themselves to readers of those books. It is true that the Magic Tree House books encourage other values aside from gratitude. The children in the books often say, “We come in peace,” and they learn patience, persistence, and compassion. However, gratitude has a palpable solidity for young readers, rather than the more abstract concept of patience, for example, and I am in agreement with social historian Margaret Visser, who makes a strong case for the foundational nature of gratitude in her study *The Gift of Thanks*: “The fundamental human struggle for identity, relationship, and belonging is practised and expressed in the reiterated drama of giving, receiving, gratitude, and returning the favour, where one recognizes and is recognized at each stage of the action.”⁴

THE MORAL WORLD OF THE YOUNG READER

Activist and theologian Mary Jo Leddy says in *Radical Gratitude*,

Of those who feel they have little or no control over their lives, there are some who will inevitably turn to violence. We tend to think that most of the violence in the world takes place through the exercise of power. While it is true that terrible violence often attends the use of what could more appropriately be called

force, it is also true that violence often arises from a sense of powerlessness.⁵

No human being experiences powerlessness like a young child does. But it is not merely that young children are vulnerable. The elementary school years are also a time of great promise, a time when creative and ethical capabilities are being shaped and exercised in a very significant way. In *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, Robert Coles writes, “In elementary school, maybe as never before or afterward, given favourable family and neighbourhood circumstances, the child becomes an intensely moral creature, quite interested in figuring out the reasons of this world: how and why things work, but also, how and why he or she should behave in various situations.”⁶

Some researchers believe that children are already capable of considerable sophistication at this stage of their development. The unrelenting emphasis that toys like Bakugan or Pokémon place on the issue of power, however, disrupts the complex and delicate processes of aesthetic, moral, and intellectual discernment that are just beginning to take shape. As Wendy Josephson has written, “it is surprising to find children adopting such one-dimensional heroes, given how much more complex and sophisticated their perceptions and mental processes are supposed to have become by this age.”⁷

Considerable research has been done on violence in children’s television and games, but what can we say about the “tie-in” children’s books that trail in the wake of these entertainment phenomena? Little notice has been taken of them. The parent who turns eagerly to the chapter “Evaluating Your Child’s Literature” in Jan Arnow’s *Teaching Peace: How to Raise Children to Live in Harmony* will find advice only on how to evaluate issues of sexism and racism in books. Many of the studies about violence in children’s culture counsel parents to have their children turn to books for solace and enrichment. Madeline Levine, for instance, in *Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child’s and Adolescent’s Development*, encourages parents to “insist on reading” and sounds a note of warning because “non-school related reading clocks in at less than ten minutes a day for the average child.”⁸ But when the reading material most readily available to children is based on precisely the same characters and values presented in the electronic media, what does it mean to “insist on reading”?

It is obvious that parents need to provide guidance when their children choose books to read and should also discuss the appropriateness of the scenarios found within these books. However, to describe the pressures

on parental time and energy in our era as frantic and fierce would not be an exaggeration, and it is also difficult to keep up with the rapid shifts in publishing and entertainment trends. (A few decades ago it would have been unexpected for books like *The Day My Butt Went Psycho* or the Neil Gaiman horror tales *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* to be enthusiastically marketed to young children. This is not to say that such books are necessarily harmful, but rather that the changes in publishing mores are considerable.) Most importantly, most parents would assume that the books promoted through their schools by a company such as Scholastic should not need careful scrutiny.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POKÉMON AND BAKUGAN

If you want to be a Bakugan Brawler, you have to get this handbook! Inside you'll find everything you need—and want—to know about the hottest game around. It's a guide to the best brawlers, the fiercest Bakugan, and the biggest brawls. (Advertising copy for *The Bakugan Official Handbook*, recommended for ages 6+)⁹

In the 1990s one of the toy rages was Pokémon. Gerard Jones, a writer who was part of the creative team that translated Pokémon for North American audiences, describes it in his book *Killing Monsters* as “the most intense and most universal kid craze I'd ever seen.”¹⁰ Pokémon creatures are cute—Togepi looks like a baby creature half-hatched from an egg, while the enterprise's flagship personality, Pikachu, has two charming red spots on its cheeks as if permanently flushed with excitement. The creatures have precise attributes: Slowpoke is a water Pokémon with psychic abilities and its weaknesses include bugs, water, grass, and ghosts. A child “plays” Pokémon in two ways: by becoming a “trainer” who competes against other “trainers” of Pokémon, or by simply amassing a collection of Pokémon cards (or toys or figurines). There are 493 Pokémon to collect.

Although one is tempted to look back to the 1990s origins of Pokémon with considerable nostalgia for the comparative peaceableness of the kingdom, belligerence was the bedrock of the realm from the beginning. The Pokémon children's book *Coal Badge Battle*, published by Scholastic, in its thirty-two pages manages to use the word *attack* seven times and *battle* five times. (The book is just over eight hundred words long.) In this book, the trainers urge their Pokémon to do moves like Headbutt, Zen Headbutt,

Focus Punch, and Iron Tail to smash at each other. Not surprisingly, the Pokémon frequently faint from the exertion.

“Use Head Smash, Rampardos, now!” Roark cried.

Rampardos charged across the field. Its body glowed with super strength.

Bam! Rampardos smashed into Turtwig. The little Pokémon flew up. Then it landed in the dirt.¹¹

The vocabulary is simple, the sentence structures basic. The rare multisyllabic words are mostly the nonsensical/fantastic or vaguely Asiatic names of the Pokémon monsters (Pikachu, Aipom, Onix, Buneary, Piplup, Totodile, Staryu).

Emerging about ten years later, Bakugan, like Pokémon before it, developed from Japanese anime and quickly extended into the realm of merchandise, video games, television shows, guidebooks, and novelizations. Whereas the kid characters of Pokémon—Ash, Misty, and Brock are the chief heroes—are younger, less aggressive, and ostensibly going after “gym badges” (but really waging “gym battles”), the teen and tween brawlers of Bakugan are markedly more confrontational.

In the merchandise world of Bakugan, the key entities are beasts or monsters represented by a dual system of cards and small spheres which spring open when thrown in the correct manner. (Children often become more interested in amassing collections of cards and spheres and discussing them with their friends rather than actually engaging in play). The book *Bakugan, Field Open! The Official Brawler and Monster Guide* explains the myth which undergirds the game.

[One fateful day] the Bakugan fell to Earth, raining down from the sky in the form of Gate Cards. Dan and his friends had no idea who sent the cards or where they came from. All they knew was that these were no ordinary playing cards. It was their lucky day, and it didn't take long for the young group to create a card game called Bakugan Battle.

Once the friends began battling, they realized just how powerful the cards were. Each one held its own beast that came to life when the card was thrown down onto the field. The fights were fast and furious. One wrong move and a player not only lost a card but also the creature inside it.

What Dan and his friends didn't understand was that Bakugan Battle was much more than just a game. It affected an entire universe, and if played responsibly and correctly, it had the power to restore the peace in Vestroia. The very fate of the universe depended on them.¹²

Several aspects of this description, this "Genesis" account of the Bakugan realm, are worth contemplation. One is that Dan and his friends immediately turn the cards into a battle game. This is the alpha and omega of the fun: no other possibility is considered. Another point is the extremist language used even here in the opening phase of learning about Bakugan: "fights were fast and furious"; "one wrong move" means disastrous consequences. This is no place for careful consideration or slow deliberation; a child entering this world is immediately faced with dire costs. Second chances or gradual learning are not in order. Next, note the emphasis on the belief that this is "more than just a game"—children are encouraged to take this very seriously indeed. Finally, this game apparently has "the power to restore the peace" of two parallel universes, Earth and Vestroia. The logic is inexorable: Dan and his friends only know one way to interact with the Bakugan cards, and that is battle; this battle is the only way to achieve peace.

The Cast of the Pokémon and Bakugan Books

The main character in Bakugan books is Dan, who starts out at the age of twelve, and is described as someone who "loves riding his bicycle and talking to his friends online. But nothing compares to his love for playing Bakugan. Dan's ultimate dream is to become the number-one ranked player in the world."¹³ What follows is a typical passage about Dan, on his way to a brawl with the villainous Masquerade:

"C'mon, c'mon, out of the way! Move it!"

Dan raced through the streets of the city, pushing people out of his way.

"This is gonna be sweet. I am so pumped, he won't stand a chance," Dan said as he ran.¹⁴

Phrases like "you're toast" and "you're going down" are common. If we consult the "game tips" in *Bakugan, Field Open! The Official Brawler and Monster Guide*, we learn that the Ability card "Backfire" will "ruin your opponent's move" and the "Copycat" card will "copy your opponent's ability

and use it against him.” The Command Card “Doom Companion” will “take a friend or enemy down to the Doom Dimension.”¹⁵

It must be admitted that the camaraderie of the kids in the Bakugan stories is one important source of appeal for the young audience. Dan and his friends (Shun, Marucho, Runo, Julie, and Alice) are admirably varied in appearance and personality, and their sense of loyalty to each other is important. Just as Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators books promoted teamwork in the 1960s, and The Hardy Boys would have been lost without the help of Chet, Tony, and Biff, Bakugan and Pokémon stories captivate in part because they involve collaboration. And unlike these popular series from earlier decades, Bakugan at least features gender parity: three of the Bakugan kids are female. However, even a cursory look at the female characters should give one pause. Although Runo is described in *Bakugan, Field Open! The Official Brawler and Monster Guide* as a tomboy “not interested in girly stuff,”¹⁶ the visual representation of Runo features a short, flared skirt that barely reaches her thighs, an off-the-shoulder midriff-baring mini top, and long blue hair in two ponytails. Julie is the “very girly, bubbly, and outgoing” one who “may appear ditzy, but she can still play Bakugan with the best of them.”¹⁷ Bosomy, with a very short pink top and matching pink shorts, and white hair in a high ponytail, Julie (like Runo) is supposed to be twelve years old.

The Bakugan Official Handbook lists “Ten Best Brawls,” including “Dan vs. Shuji” and “Runo vs. Tatsuya.” If one has any notion that the inclusion of female characters in Bakugan might possibly signal an interest in values of nurture, this description of the “Runo vs. Tatsuya” brawl quashes the idea: “Runo was one of Masquerade’s first victims. It made her really angry when the masked brawler sent her Bakugan to the Doom Dimension. She wanted revenge.”¹⁸ One can describe Bakugan as a game of strategy, but does a story which insists that all strategies are in the service of the sole activity—brawling—offer any of the sense of plenitude or choice that the word “strategy” should entail?

Values Taught by the Pokémon and Bakugan Books

The primary purpose of Bakugan activity is the selling of the cards and toy spheres; the television series on the Cartoon Network is secondary to and supports that commercial enterprise, as is the case of the books sold by Scholastic. In North America the TV series is created by the Canadian

entertainment company Nelvana, whose mission statement includes the promise that “Nelvana will create entertainment that families can trust, building brands that enrich children’s lives by making them laugh, entertaining them and teaching them.”¹⁹

That there has been little attention afforded to the books which often accompany these children’s entertainment enterprises is understandable. For one thing, as there is little or no originality in the books, it seems pointless to analyze them as creations of an individual imagination. Bakugan and Pokémon books (like the “readers” based on *Cars* or *Toy Story* or *Spider-man*) are adaptations of television, film, or game scenarios. It is telling that most of the Bakugan and Pokémon books available through Scholastic are described as adapted, but not written, and nearly all by the same person, Tracey West. (West specializes in re-packaging children’s stories from cartoons and other media and has over 200 titles to her credit.) Neither do any of the colourful Pokémon readers I studied for this paper have illustrators. Instead “designers” are credited, and they have largely used images generated by the animated TV show. Some of the image transfers are decidedly sub-standard—blurry, with the colour registration not matching, almost as if images had been cut-and-pasted by a computer amateur. The noise level and overheated rhetoric of the television show, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Monster Truck TV spots (with the addition of squeaky-voiced girl characters), is replicated in the books by an abundance of exclamation marks and the relentless use of aggressive vocabulary. The following vocabulary list has been generated by a casual perusal of the *Bakugan Official Handbook*: *brawl, raged, battle, captured, argue, crazy for power, obliterated, strike, attack, explosive power, smash, ruthless destruction, cruel, warrior*.

I offer here two brief observations about how particular examples of lexicon might influence children. One is the way that both Bakugan and Pokémon have made use of the word *evolved*. Evolution is used by these enterprises in the sense of becoming more powerful or dangerous. For example, in the world of Pokémon, a Squirtle (a cute Turtle-like creature) will evolve into a Wartotle and finally into a Blastoise, both of these becoming increasingly menacing in appearance and ability (although, given that they are Pokémon, cuteness is never completely abandoned). The complexity of “evolution” is flattened and limited to become a process focused on the acquisition of power. Another situation to note is the way in which the word *versus* is used by children who are indoctrinated by books and games such as

these. *Versus* is a preposition meaning *against*; the Oxford English Dictionary has no record of any recent change in its form or usage.²⁰ However, it is common for young children in my Winnipeg neighbourhood to use a new verb, “versing.” They describe the mini-soccer game they are about to play not as “red team versus green team” but as “red team is versing green team.” In a way it is delightful to observe the flexibility of the English language in action, and to see children exercising their creative powers to invent new words to suit their own activities. However, what is apparently needed by these children is a new verb for adversarial action. Just as Squirtle turning into Blastoise is a dubious sort of evolution, so too the evolution of the term *versus* is depressing, moving from the rather neutral world of the preposition to the more forceful world of the verb, and an oppositional verb at that.

RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN’S MEDIA

It is assumed that our cultural media are increasingly visual and given over to physical sensation, and although a book is, of course, a medium just as television is, the further assumption is that books are, relatively speaking, a safe haven for children. However, in a definition of media violence offered by Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano in *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, several of their criteria can be applied to the Bakugan and Pokémon books under consideration. Their criteria include plots driven by quick-cut scenes of gratuitous violent acts, violent acts delivered via special effects that deliver glamour or coolness, and depictions of people holding power primarily because they are using weapons, or using their bodies as weapons.²¹ In particular, Grossman and DeGaetano offer this criterion: “Violent acts shown as an acceptable way to solve problems or presented as the primary problem-solving approach.”²² This is the entire premise of the Bakugan Battle Brawlers; battle is not only the “acceptable way” to solve problems but indeed the only solution explored. These elementary-level readers offered by Scholastic fulfill at least four of the seven criteria in Grossman and DeGaetano’s definition of media violence.

There have been many studies and reports on the effects that media violence has on children. Grossman and DeGaetano write, “Portrayals of violence in the media that glamourize and/or sensationalize violent acts toward other human beings or animals and show them as acceptable behaviour provide a socially aberrant environment in which it is difficult to raise emotionally healthy children.”²³

In 1993, William H. Dietz, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Subcommittee on Children and Television, made a statement to the U.S. Congressional Hearings on Violence on Television: “The rewards that the heroes receive for their violent behavior legitimize and tacitly endorse violence as a means of solving problems.”²⁴ Joy Osofsky, Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry at Louisiana State University notes the following:

Commercial television for children is 50 to 60 times more violent than prime-time programs for adults, and some cartoons average more than 80 violent acts per hour. . . . Exposure to violence can have significant effects on children during their development and as they form their own intimate relationships in childhood and adulthood. . . . Infants and toddlers who witness violence in their homes or community show excessive irritability, immature behavior, sleep disturbances, emotional distress, fears of being alone, and regression in toileting and language.²⁵

There are also, of course, dissenting opinions. Jonathan L. Freedman, a University of Toronto psychology professor, states in his book *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression: Assessing the Scientific Evidence*:

Films and television programs that contain violence are not designed to convey the message that violence is good or that people should engage in violent acts. They do not contain information that is likely to convince anyone of anything; they do not contain explicit messages in favour of aggression or violence. They are just entertainment.²⁶

One of the most tenacious arguments about violence in relation to small children (or, for that matter, adults) is that it is inborn and natural. In the social sciences this can be discussed under James A. Schellenberg’s “individual characteristics” theory of conflict, including the question of whether biological instincts are a major cause of human aggression.²⁷ In psychoanalysis, Freud’s influential but pessimistic theories about the deeply ingrained destructive instinct, or *thanatos*, have been difficult to dislodge. Another commonly submitted precept is that human aggression must have an outlet or the resultant inhibition will be debilitating. Recent defenders of this theory insist that media violence is merely cathartic, both for children and adults. Most people who insist that human beings are naturally violent base their beliefs on no particular theory but just accept, as Sir James Frazer

does in his 1922 anthropological study *The Golden Bough*, the “proneness to revert to savagery which seems to be innate in most men.”²⁸

All of this is at variance with the tenets of the 1986 Seville Statement, issued by a prominent group of behavioral scientists, which states, among other points, that “it is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature.”²⁹ Likewise, Madeline Levine and many other researchers say that the catharsis theory “has found no substantiation in any social science research.”³⁰ More fruitful has been recent research into topics such as “operant conditioning,” which suggests that aggression is learned and will escalate if rewarded; therefore, if favourable conditions for aggression are removed, humans can be expected to be more peaceable.³¹

Gerard Jones claims that “the point from which any discussion of children and violent fantasy should begin is that most of them do like violence of one kind or another, and they know it.”³² The opinions offered by those who see no harm in violent children’s media tend to be influenced by commercial interests (Jones, above, makes his living in the comic book industry). These commercial interests, however, are exceedingly powerful. The following statement was made by media executive Warren Littlefield of NBC: “The limited depictions of violence on network TV are generally not inappropriate or excessive, but are essential to the development of drama, appear principally in programs for an adult audience, and generally are shown later in the evening.”³³ Littlefield’s claim is so problematic that one hardly knows where to begin when pointing out its flaws. The practice of scheduling shows with violent content late in the evening was abandoned at least two decades ago, and the statistical analysis of children’s TV offered by Grossman and DeGaetano is representative of many studies: “A preschooler who watches about two hours of cartoons a day is exposed to nearly ten thousand violent episodes each year.”³⁴ Littlefield’s use of the terms “limited” and “generally not inappropriate or excessive” in relation to media violence is audacious but hardly surprising. Those with vested interests in violent media tend to flatten resistance with their assumption that human violence has existed perennially, or that it is too widespread to withstand.

THE CASE FOR READING

The violence in the Bakugan and Pokémon books is qualitatively different from the violence assuredly found in other books for children.

Psychoanalytical critics declare that violent fairy tales, for example, may be useful in allowing children to work through anxieties which would worsen if repressed. According to many psychoanalytic scholars, if the quite remarkable violence of tales by Grimm, for example, is purged, overprotective editors will be merely displacing a fully functioning monster that cannot be so easily dismissed and will surface elsewhere. This is, in Bruno Bettelheim's words, "the monster a child knows best and is most concerned with: the monster he feels or fears himself to be, and which also sometimes persecutes him."³⁵ In earlier centuries cautionary stories for children used violence as a pedagogical tool, impressing upon children, for example, the horrors consequent upon being careless with candles. The instructive value of the violence inherent in the classic tales written or collected by the Grimms and others is arguable, to say the least, but scholar Maria Tatar notes that "cruel as these stories may seem to modern-day sensibilities, they were not entirely without merit, for they offered a program for survival in an era when open fires and flames put children at nearly constant risk."³⁶ The nineteenth-century German tales of Struwwelpeter are notoriously violent stories about the results for children of disobedience. But Bakugan and Pokémon, these products of current children's culture, are plainly celebratory in their enactment of adversarial positions and aggression. No moral lessons are being taught, aside from the imperative of acquiring power.

In their book *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, Grossman and DeGaetano offer a chapter of advice for parents. Among the expected recommendations to converse with children about TV news, discuss TV special effects that make violence seem cool, confront peer pressure, and listen to your child is this suggestion: "Build children's language and reading skills."³⁷ However, the books increasingly available to our children, and promoted by their schools, are the same tales they are experiencing on their PlayStations and watching on Cartoon Network. (This is particularly true in the wake of the recent bankruptcy and closure of many North American quality publishers and booksellers.) Books, it is assumed, help "children develop both logical, sequential thinking patterns and metaphoric muscles capable of imaginative thought";³⁸ the creative power of the book, however, can be infiltrated and appropriated by commercial and even warlike causes, just like other media can be. If reading helps children to develop imaginative solutions, to verbalize rather than act out, to acquire important skills in symbolic

conceptualization, which of these proficiencies are being encouraged in this Bakugan excerpt?

Drago did not want to fight Fear Ripper. But he had no choice. “Boosted Dragon!” Drago yelled. He shot a big ball of fire from his mouth. The fireball took down Fear Ripper!³⁹

We live, supposedly, in an adversarial culture, and those who wish to promote an ideology of adversity are cannily educating the next generation in their beliefs. Communications researcher George Gerbner’s phrase, the “mean world syndrome,”⁴⁰ describes a perspective that the entertainment industry has been inculcating in its audience for years: to see the world as far more dangerous than it actually is. Mary Jo Leddy, in *Radical Gratitude*, laments the fact that after World War II “we became defined by what we were fighting against—more than by what we were for. . . . [It was a] war against whoever or whatever has provided a basis for summoning sacrifice in a culture where, on a day-to-day basis, most pursue their own self-interest rather than the common good.”⁴¹ Leddy promotes gratitude as an alternative social force:

[This book reflects] critically on why it seems so difficult to sustain gratitude as an all-encompassing attitude to life. The difficulty will defy our efforts to resolve it personally, for ingratitude is ingrained in our economic system and in the worldview that has shaped our imaginations for more than 200 years. We have been wasting away for want of gratitude for some time. Gratitude will not come easily here and now—not, or at least not primarily, because we are morally or psychologically weak but because the predominant values of our culture are so subtle and all-pervasive.⁴²

The combination of gratitude and reading is an important one in the formation of compassionate, ethically-engaged children. In his book *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word* Barry Sanders insists that our very humanity, our sense of conscience and selfhood, will be lost if we lose the ability to read.

The idea of a critical, self-directed human being we take for granted as the working foundation of our humanness develops only in the crucible of reading and writing. . . . [Y]oung folk who have bypassed reading and writing . . . have been forced to

fabricate a life without the benefit of that innermost intimate guide, the self. . . . [Y]oung people . . . have been barred from reading and writing by becoming prisoners of electronic media.⁴³

Reading books which are spin-offs of violent electronic media is not truly reading.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAGIC TREE HOUSE BOOKS

What alternative reading experience for a child can be offered that will teach values such as gratitude instead of aggression? Is there a contemporary series of children's books that will provide excitement and action and, in addition, satisfy a child's desire for collection and categorization, all alluring attributes of the Bakugan and Pokémon series? Looking back at quality children's books of the past, one recalls E. B. White's books and Mary Norton's *Borrowers* series of the 1950s, and Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* series of the 1960s. More recently, the Canadian author Kenneth Oppel has provided the award-winning *Silverwing* saga. The reading range of all these books is beyond the young readers for whom Bakugan and Pokémon books are accessible. Cynthia Rylant's many books for children are an attractive alternative, but her three beginning reader series *Henry and Mudge*, *Mr. Putter and Tabby*, and *Annie and Snowball* have none of the excitement that Bakugan and Pokémon offer.

One author in particular who is providing children with adventure books which feature physical courage, independent accomplishments, and the constant compilation, cataloguing, and analysis of data is Mary Pope Osborne. Since 1992, when *Dinosaurs Before Dark* initiated the Magic Tree House Series, she has published 43 titles in the series, with *Leprechaun in Late Winter* the latest entry in 2010 (more are likely to have appeared by the time this essay goes to print). Osborne, in addition to the Magic Tree House books, has written for children adaptations of tales from the Odyssey, medieval tales, and Norse myths, as well as *One World, Many Religions: The Ways We Worship*; *The Life of Jesus in Masterpieces of Art*; and the revisionist fairy tale *Kate and the Beanstalk*.

The Cast of the Magic Tree House Books

The Magic Tree House books offer the characters of Annie and Jack, siblings who are seven and eight when the series begins. Using a magic tree house which can go anywhere (back in time, to the Moon, to any location in a

myth or history book), the children go on missions under the tutelage of either Merlin or Morgan le Fay, of Camelot. This message from Merlin, in *Season of the Sandstorms*, is typical:

Dear Jack and Annie of Frog Creek, Your mission is to journey to Baghdad of long ago and help the caliph spread wisdom to the world. To succeed, you must be humble and use your magic wisely.⁴⁴

Books are pivotal to the plot of every Magic Tree House adventure—the children are never sent on a mission without a book to support their investigation. However, a book, Osborne insists, is not all the children have to guide them. While Jack tends to rely heavily on the authority of the printed word and the efficacy of making notes, Annie is curious, spontaneous, and inclined to act with compassion and friendship. The two children in each story combine their varied intellectual and social aptitudes to solve the tasks at hand.

In addition to instilling in Jack and Annie a strong sense of moral purpose, and sending them on trips to places like New York City in the Depression, Antarctica, and ancient Japan, the Magic Tree House adventures also introduce the children to a large cast of influential figures such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Louis Pasteur, Gustave Eiffel, Shakespeare, Clara Barton, and (in two recent surprising entries) Louis Armstrong and Lady Augusta Gregory. Annie and Jack are often charged with the task of heartening young people, not yet famous, who have the potential to be innovators but have lost confidence in their ability to make a difference or be truly heard. This is the task as it is set out in *Moonlight on the Magic Flute*: “You must seek out a brilliant artist . . . to help put that artist on the right path . . . to share his or her gifts with the world.”⁴⁵ Morgan le Fay, liberated from her usual wicked persona in the Arthurian saga and re-envisioned by Osborne as Camelot’s good librarian, manages to inspire the children by setting them on the quest to be “master librarians.”

Values Taught by the Magic Tree House Books

Osborne encourages young readers to be appreciative of small wonders. In one sequence of four books, starting with Number 26, *Stage Fright on a Summer Night*, which features an encounter with Shakespeare, Morgan tasks Annie and Jack with becoming Magicians of Everyday Magic. In

this sequence the children discover in turn the magic of theatre, animals, community, and friendship. In *Night of the New Magicians*, set at the 1889 World's Fair at Paris, they gather up four "secrets" from the inventors they meet. These secrets turn out to be small bits of advice perfectly appropriate for the lives of small children. These are

- Gustave Eiffel: "I have a taste for adventure and a love of work and responsibility."
- Louis Pasteur: "Chance favours the prepared mind."
- Thomas Edison: "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."
- Alexander Graham Bell: "When one door closes, another door opens."⁴⁶

In most of these books Osborne avoids formulating quests involving material objects like swords or golden cups or jewels, as is so common in romantic tales, and instead insists that the children go in search of knowledge that may not necessarily be quantifiable.

Although the Magic Tree House series is purposefully patient, peaceful, and intent upon cross-cultural (and cross-species) understanding, Osborne introduces enough action and excitement to keep this demanding elementary-school age group interested. Annie and Jack face considerable danger when Vesuvius explodes in *Vacation Under the Volcano*, and their visit to the battlefields of the American Civil War is a sobering one. There they meet Clara Barton and learn the advice she has given her nurses:

Be cheerful.
 Lessen sorrow and give hope.
 Be brave.
 Put aside your own feelings.
 Don't give up.⁴⁷

In *Tigers at Twilight* they save a tiger caught in a trap and are rewarded with a snarl; in the wake of that shock, instead of anodyne comfort, a wise hermit gives them a lesson on the sometimes harsh complexity of nature:

"When you saved the tiger, you saved *all* of him," said the blind man. "You saved his graceful beauty—and his fierce, savage nature. You cannot have one without the other."⁴⁸

In only one of the books, Osborne hints at a Christian source for the ethical lessons that Jack and Annie learn. In *Blizzard of the Blue Moon*, tasked

with the liberation of a unicorn (a common symbol for Christ) from famous tapestries at the Cloisters in upper Manhattan, Jack and Annie discover that the freed unicorn, running through the desolate streets of 1930s New York, brings new hope and revitalization to all who encounter it:

As the unicorn ran, he held his head high. His long, spiraled horn pierced the raging storm, seeming to calm the winds and snow. Jack realized he could feel his fingers and toes again. His whole body began to feel warm.⁴⁹

Common to all of the Magic Tree House stories is Osborne's demonstration of the importance of gratitude. In every book, Jack and Annie learn not only to give thanks but also to accept thanks gracefully.

The unicorn's horn glistened, and the snowy field reflected gold and copper light. Not until the unicorn came to the tree that held the tree house did he stop.

Annie hugged the unicorn's long, graceful neck. "Thank you, thank you!" she whispered, and kissed him.

"Yeah, wow," breathed Jack.⁵⁰

In *Dark Day in the Deep Sea* they have to stand up to belligerent nineteenth century sailors intent on killing a giant octopus. They children have a magic wand (the horn of the unicorn Dianthus, above) to help them, but they must (as usual) do their best on their own before they try magic, use the magic only to help others, and are limited to five words of magical invocation. Once Jack has used his five words ("make them hear the truth"), then the sailors are able to hear the octopus saying "Let me go home. I'm no monster."⁵¹ A scientist, Henry, explains the value of the lesson that the children have taught the adults in this plot.

". . . Today you taught me—no, you taught all of us—an important lesson. It is a dark day in the deep sea when we cause innocent creatures to suffer. The professor said we can conquer our fears through knowledge. But you taught us that our fears can best be conquered through compassion. Even we scientists must never forget to have compassion for all living creatures. . . ."

. . . Henry held out the gleaming nautilus shell, and Annie took it from him. "Thanks, Henry," said Annie. "We promise to take very good care of it."

“Thank *you*,” said Henry.⁵²

The children say thank you to gorillas, to Cro-Magnons, to a ninja master. (Admittedly, Bakugan and Pokémon kids also say “thanks,” but infrequently.) Osborne does not insist too obviously on the theme of gratitude, and it might take some time for readers to even notice her strategy. It may be beneficial, in fact, if children do not notice this “lesson” at all. But the adult reader will likely notice the weird and wonderful interplay of gratitude when it involves eight-year-old Jack and the philosopher Plato.

“I had a great time. But I have to go home now,” said Jack.

“Thanks for everything.”

“Have a safe journey,” said Plato.⁵³

Mary Pope Osborne’s books are not brilliant. The prose style is generally straightforward. Like many writers for young children she shies away from complex sentences and uses too many one-sentence paragraphs. But the cumulative effect of the Magic Tree House books is a feeling of constructive and benevolent growth. And in daring children to think that being a “master librarian” might be a worthy and even thrilling mythic quest, and that saying “thank you” can be one of the most important aspects of their missions, Osborne has performed a distinct service.

CONCLUSION

There is, Mark Kulansky points out in his study *Nonviolence: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, no proper word in English, or in most languages, for nonviolence, merely a negation of another term. “The concept has been praised by every major religion. Throughout history there have been practitioners of nonviolence. Yet, while every major language has a word for violence, there is no word to express the idea of nonviolence.”⁵⁴ If our language and our culture allow conflict to occupy the default, or “natural,” position, those of us who seek peace are in a particularly confining and difficult place. Increasingly, children’s culture presents violent stories to which we are expected to give our consent, perhaps because these stories are just so prevalent or are presented by our schools as having educational value. Perhaps we are expected to automatically assent to *Bakugan: The Battle Brawlers* because the scenarios are encased in books, and books are, supposedly, trustworthy and relatively innocent. Just as many of us do not notice that we have no

real word for nonviolence, we also may not notice the insidious effects of children's entertainments like Bakugan and Pokémon.

If we believe gratitude and other virtues are automatically present or easily instilled in children, that assumption in all probability has no more validity than the notion that violence is natural to children. Margaret Visser in *The Gift of Thanks* believes that "children do not thank unless they are taught to do so." She goes on:

Being grateful is apparently not natural at all. . . . One proof . . . may be found in the real difficulty young children undergo in grasping the concept of gratitude. Parents spend years and years demanding from their offspring the saying of "thank you." Children who have been brought up to say these words do not manage to produce them spontaneously until sometime between the ages of four and six.⁵⁵

It is precisely these foundational years of young childhood that are at stake when we consider the values being communicated to children through the Bakugan, Pokémon, and Magic Tree House books. Gratitude is a value that takes effort to instill; this will be nearly impossible to do if books for young children insist that life is all about the biggest brawls.

ENDNOTES

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