

An ideological reading of *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories* using critical literacy

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Abstract

Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories stands as the principal and archetypal Seventh-day Adventist children's literature text. It is heavily inscribed with distinct ideologies, which are specifically referential to Seventh-day Adventist dogma and faith. As children read these texts, they are exposed to, and affected by, these ideologies. This thesis seeks to expose the overt and covert ideologies of the text so that their power can be recognised and their value evaluated. This is accomplished through a brief investigation of the author and the publishing institution that conceived the texts, then through an explanation of the development and aims of critical literacy reading processes. These reading processes are then applied to the text in order to render explicit the belief structures constructed into the text which sustain the stories' proposed 'truths' and 'meanings'.

This investigation has revealed that *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories* assumes levels of authority over truth, interpretation and the reader, which it does not intrinsically command. This assumption of authority allows the text to propose and defend one-sided 'truths', spurious arguments and potentially unethical behaviour.

Introduction

Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories were written in an era of fragility and upheaval in the post-war period of the 1920s. For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, however, it was a time of significant growth, especially through the Church's publishing arm. Arthur S. Maxwell made a substantial contribution to the church's mission through his literature, the most widely circulated of which was *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*.

Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories are arguably the most popular and influential Seventh-day Adventist

children's literature ever distributed. First published as a ten volume set in 1928, the books achieved a total circulation of over forty million books in twenty-one languages by 1982 (Jean, 1983; Neufeld, 1996; Schwartz, 1983). Part of the reason for this broad appeal comes from the texts' ability to traverse denominational lines; the books have been endorsed and advertised by people of varying faiths and in prominent leadership positions (Jean, 1983; Schwartz, 1983).

Designed and written as character-building children's storybooks, the texts aim "to lead boys and girls to choose the good way of life; to help them to be kind, honest, truthful, and obedient, and above all to love God with all their hearts" (vol 1, p. 12). The highly moralistic stories are presented as "true to life...about things that actually happened to real boys and girls" (vol. 2, pp. 10–11). The texts served the purposes of both reflecting the ideologies of their time, while also informing and shaping these same worldviews for the future. Maxwell attributed his worldview to his own near-death experience and "thereafter believed God had preserved him for a special purpose" (Jean, 1983, 24; Neufeld, 1996). This worldview of God's direct intervention in human experiences formed an intrinsic and foundational theme which ran through many of his children's stories (Jean, 1983).

A problem: Evidence of damaging social and religious effects of *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*

Despite the laudable aims of *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*, the response of some readers raises questions. Testimonial evidence compares the stories with the experiences of the reader. Berecz (1996, pp. 10, 12) questions the universal validity of 'Uncle Arthur's' "interventionist God", who "dispatches guardian angels to keep approaching drunk drivers from swerving over the yellow line

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and snuffing out...life". He argues that the "three major problems with such deliverance stories [are] probabilities, selective sampling, and linear theories of causality." McNiely (1996, p. 64) recounts the confusion she felt as a direct result of the tension between her lived experiences and her engagement with *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*. Having grown up with the texts in the mission field, she states that a tragedy that befell fellow missionaries "was a shock to me...I was never the same again". The problem created by *Bedtime stories* was so significant that she began writing her own stories that attempted to rectify the imbalance of 'Uncle Arthur's', "vivid scenarios of divine intervention" (Berecz, 1996).

The second category is the alignment of *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories* with distorted social and religious ideologies. The website, *whitefuture.com*, a propaganda text for a white supremacist organisation contains an article in which the author systematically and effectively deconstructs pictures from *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories* to endorse, apart from their "rock solid call to honesty, and other noble character attributes", the admirable lack of "non-white faces jumping up here and there, and everywhere, trying to invade the pleasant and relatively safe environment of White society". While obviously an extreme reading, it requires no distortion of the texts and reveals a dynamic that exists within *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*.

That a Seventh-day Adventist children's storybook series can be effectively utilised to defend worldviews as destructive and offensive as these warrants a detailed and critical investigation of the social concerns of *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*. In addition, a study that indicates the extent, if any, of confusion arising for children (especially those from within Adventist culture) out of the belief systems regarding God's intervention in the world would likewise be valuable.

Critical literacy and *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*

Literary theory and critical theory recognises that a reader's response to a text is shaped by a variety of perspectives and experiences such as race, gender, class and / or religion (Athanases, 1998; Fish, 1995; Harris, 1999; Morrison, 1992; Spears-Buntun, 1990). The resistant reading and decoding of texts allowed by postmodernism, coupled with critical theory's emphasis on the liberation of the 'causalities' of scientific and capitalist 'progress' brings us to the purpose of critical literacy process. At its most idealistic, critical theory process is a reading approach concerned with making explicit the ideological workings of texts in order to negate the power of the belief systems which constructed

them (Boutte, 2002; Christie & Misson, 1998; Langford, 2001). Through the negation of these power structures, readers are able to negotiate and call into question the 'truth' assumptions of texts, and to interpret the texts' significance and meaning in the light of their own personal experiences. Further, as, "reading is an act of coming to know the world (as well as the word) and a means to social transformation", it is hoped that critical literacy processes enable the "alleviation of human suffering and the formation of a more just world through the critique of existing social and political problems and the posing of alternatives" (Cervetti, et al., 2001, p. 5).

Pertinent to this study are a number of critical literacy questions adapted from Johnson (1999), which deal with issues of literature, culture, and power relationships and assumptions. These questions include author-reader relationship, 'truth', and intention concerns. The 'author function' is merely as an arbitrarily controlling and limiting obstruction to reading and understanding, but it is all the more serious in the case of children's literature because children's texts "serve as a form of education and socialisation that conveys society's deepest hopes, fears, expectations, and demands" (Boutte, 2002). Boutte notes that where the power relationship between the author and the reader is more pronounced, the conveyance of the author's ideologies is likewise. The purpose of applying a critical literacy process is primarily to establish how the constructed author-reader relationship relates to the possible relinquishment of the reader's authority over truth to the author. Where there is an apparently 'natural' power relationship of author over reader, the author's ideologies become more compelling.

The 'truth' concerns of the chosen text refer to the metanarratives that constitute the structure on which meanings are transmitted through the text. These universalising truth claims, while perhaps explaining one aspect of the human condition and the world, invariably "impose restrictive boundaries on an otherwise pluralist, diverse cultural formation" (Webster, 1996, p. 125). To this end, a number of critical questions and ideas are relevant. Firstly, the truth claims which run consistently through the text need to be identified and made explicit. In a referential step backwards, it then needs to be asked, from what authoritative platform or 'pulpit' are these truth claims made and to what ideological context do the metanarratives refer? Additionally, to what extent are the truth claims made to appear natural, given and irrefutable? Does the text include fundamental ambiguities which allow for discussion of, and resistance to, the proposed truth claims?

Also required is a critical re-evaluation of the

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notion that to know the intention of a work is to know the intrinsic truths that the work holds (Webster, 1996). For a text such as *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*, which explicitly and proudly professes its intentions from the very beginning, it is necessary to examine how the text works to realise these intentions, and how, in adopting its strategies, and the language used as a part of these strategies, the text holds other deeper-seated reasons for its creation and distribution (Boutte, 2002; Webster, 1996).

By applying critical literacy questions to *Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories*, it becomes possible to achieve some of its 'grand' aspirations, freeing the reader from institutional rhetoric which undermines the "train[ing of] the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts" (White, 1952, p. 17).

Ideology: Author-reader concerns

Arthur S. Maxwell—or more specifically, 'Uncle Arthur'—assumes a significant God-like presence in the texts. The pseudonym 'Uncle Arthur' 'naturally' confers the benefits of a trustworthy, wise and familial uncle to Maxwell. He has thus essentially breached a substantial interpersonal divide between himself and his audience, which might otherwise allow children to read his books from a more detached and sceptical perspective.

The presence of patriarchally authoritative 'Uncle Arthur' permeates the texts from cover to cover, despite Maxwell openly soliciting for submissions of experiences from his readers. Yet Maxwell also alludes to the subjectivity of the process of writing the stories. His own children were his original muse, providing "the ideas and the inspiration for so many stories". This recognition of the strong subjective nature of his stories runs in sharp contrast to his repeated assurances to parents and children that "every story is founded on fact" (Vol.3, p. 12–13), because factuality is based on objective observation rather than subjective interpretation. This assurance is especially questionable in light of the realisation that by the time these 'facts' are communicated to the child, they have been filtered and interpreted by at least two mediums, namely, the adult or child who wrote the story to Maxwell, and then Maxwell himself, as he recreated the letter into a readable and entertaining story for young children.

Through this confusion over the actual level of objectivity in the *Bedtime stories*, Maxwell adds another layer to the image of his authority and reliability. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, Maxwell is able to attach a level of legitimacy and accuracy to his stories that doesn't actually exist. He claims that his stories are "true" (vol. 4,

p. 13) and "true to life" (vol. 1, p. 12) because of the factualness of the accounts. However, he ignores, and by implication, encourages the reader to ignore, his own process of selection and rejection that must inevitably take place as he constructs the stories. What he proposes then as an objective reflection of life, and of the way the world operates and humans behave, through his conception of a genre that can be accurately described as children's "classic realism" (Webster, 1996, 54), becomes merely his own selective and ideologically motivated take on reality. What would happen, it can be posed, if he was sent a story that described the failure of God to intervene? Would 'Uncle Arthur' include this story in the collection? If he didn't, then by his own definition, he is no longer being true to life. At a more 'ordinary' and everyday level, if a child sent a letter that described the experience of divorce would Maxwell include it? Certainly, a scan of the stories in the volumes suggests not, because it quickly becomes obvious that his stories largely ignore pain rather than exhibiting a "radical sensitivity to suffering", the likes of which is demonstrated throughout, and which gives further legitimacy to the Biblical narrative and texts (Middleton & Walsh, 1995, p. 143).

Ideology: Intention concerns

One possible explanation for the lack diversity of experience in Maxwell's stories is that a significant part of the thematic editing process probably occurred at the point of submission. Having engaged with his texts, those submitting experiences would have perceived that any stories outside of the genre to which he adheres would not be considered for publication.

That Maxwell engages in a process of conscious selection and rejection of stories and experiences is demonstrated in, *Those prayers of yours* (vol. 1, p. 39–42). This narrative consists of a highly rhetorical exposition of Maxwell's belief in an interventionist God. Maxwell's theology of the nature and workings of God in the world are essentially encapsulated in this four-page statement, which proposes that "Jesus cares *and* that Jesus intervenes" (Berecz, 1996, p. 10). Without exploring the validity of this theology, a critical examination of the reasoning Uncle Arthur employs reveals not only the highly subjective and problematic evidence he uses to support his claims, but also his lack of discretion in presenting that evidence to young and impressionable minds so as to maintain a highly limiting and exclusive worldview.

He begins the segment by posing a question, which he then immediately and authoritatively answers, "Does Jesus really answer children's prayers? Of course He does" (p. 39). No sooner has

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he answered his own rhetorical question, than he demands that the young reader not “ever let anybody try to persuade you that He doesn’t”. Having set the tone for the piece in such a way as to disallow any voice that might disagree on any grounds, Maxwell then presents his case for his unequivocally affirmative ideology. He explains that he has come to his conclusion because he has “had so many children tell [him] that they have had their prayers answered, [that] they couldn’t all be mistaken, could they?” (p. 39). Again, the reader knows the question is rhetorical because of the unambiguous context in which it is asked. It is not a question of inquiry or uncertainty, as in ‘Could they possibly be wrong?’ but rather it is an unquestionable affirmation that Maxwell has come to the correct conclusion. However, the fallaciousness of his argument becomes evident in the light of the conspicuous and intentional omission of what is obviously the next logical question to ask in order to receive a balanced response, How many children have asked Jesus for something really definite, and have not been answered at all?

Another layer is added again to the authoritative patriarchal voice through the inclusion of a preface and lesson index at the beginning of each volume. The lesson index consists of two pages of headings such as “Cooperation”, “Grumbling, Cure for”, and “Temptation, Help in”, with ‘relevant’ stories listed under each heading. The explicit function of these prefaces is to communicate a number of facts about the texts, which Maxwell feels are important for the reader to know. These facts include such things as the intended purposes of the texts and the high level of consistency maintained in the stories. The explicit and obvious function of the lesson index is to “make the purpose [of each story] plain” (vol. 3, p. 13). From a critical perspective, the implicit function of these prefaces and indexes is to ‘prime’ the reader for the text, so that it is read in a prescribed and limiting manner. This perspective is bolstered by the fact that all but one of the prefaces direct the reader to move from the preface to the index and then to the text itself, in order to ensure that the text is read in the manner the author desires it to be read. Even the act of reading thus occurs under the direction and supervision of the author and the institution which published the texts.

In addition to the authority assumed over the meaning of the stories and the reading approaches to the texts, ‘Uncle Arthur’ is represented as similar to Christ and thereby gains the unimpeachable and incontestable authority of Jesus. Maxwell unsubtly places his claim to his connection with children immediately after pointing out the nature of Jesus’ relationship with children: “[Jesus] is the greatest

lover of little children...I love children very much.” The use of the key words “love” and “children” in quick succession work to bring the figure of Christ and that of ‘Uncle Arthur’ in closer relation with each other.

The use of language to position Maxwell in Jesus’ place extends beyond mere similarity and proximity. The manner in which the passage is constructed also leads to a pronounced link being made between the two figures. This can be seen where the focus of the discourse shifts from the identification of Jesus by name, to the replacement of his name with the personal pronoun “He”, then to the person of Maxwell, represented by the personal pronoun “I”. What in fact occurs through this transition is the blurring of the image of Jesus into the unnamed, and therefore to some extent unidentified “He”, and then onto the similarly somewhat vague identification of ‘Uncle Arthur’ in “I”. The effect of this language choice is to disseminate the identity of Christ from one direction and reconstruct this identity into ‘Uncle Arthur’ from the other.

This example of ‘Uncle Arthur’s’ assimilation into the image of Jesus does not stand alone in the texts. Another two examples occur in pictorial representations that similarly juxtapose the figure of Christ with the figure of ‘Uncle Arthur’. The first (Vol 1, p. 2) is where the reader is presented with a heavily constructed image of ‘Uncle Arthur’ sitting in an armchair, engaged in telling stories to three girls and two boys who sit either on his knees or attentively on the floor in front of him. In the picture, Maxwell occupies the central position of the page. His body language towards the children is intimate and affectionate, as theirs is to him. In the same volume (p. 322) is another image, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the one just mentioned, however, in this instance, the central space previously occupied by Uncle Arthur, is now filled with the image of Jesus. A second set of pictorial representations operates in the same manner as the ones previously mentioned (see Vol 4, p. 2 and 10). The messages that these visual representations contrive to inject into the text are no less powerful than the textual examples, which seek to elevate ‘Uncle Arthur’ into the position that Christ occupies.

Ideology: Truth concerns

The belief that ‘Uncle Arthur’ holds a similar status and authority as God is reinforced by the structure of the stories themselves and by the narrative voice used to communicate not only the circumstances of each story, but also the actions and motivations of the characters, and the meanings of the unfolding events. The over-simplification of each set of

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circumstances allows the narrator to present a world largely sanitised of ambiguities. In this heavily constructed environment, characters act and react in a limited and predictable way and stories close with each 'good' action duly rewarded and each 'bad' behaviour justly punished. Closure then is the narrative tool 'Uncle Arthur' uses to create and maintain a "utopian" world, which he rules over with a God-like presence (Webster, 1996, p. 54). In stories such as, *The hollow pie* (vol. 1, p. 30), *Through fire and water* (vol. 1, p. 291), *Bonfire night* (vol. 2, p. 38), and *Telltale Topsy* (vol. 3, p. 301) the reader is presented with narratives that run in tight straight lines of cause and effect. In each case, the child protagonist who transgresses one of the core values 'Uncle Arthur' is trying to teach, suffers some immediate calamity as a direct result. One such example in volume four is *Paul's lesson* (vol. 4, p. 152–157). Paul is working diligently at carving a boat from a single piece of wood. When Sabbath comes, Paul is struck with the dilemma of his desire to continue working on his boat against his responsibility to "la[y] aside... ordinary work" and spend the day as "a time of rest and peace" (p. 152). When his mother leaves the house Paul takes the opportunity to sneak into the workshop and try to finish his project. He is so nervous about what he is doing, however, that he hits himself on the thumb with the hammer, then splits the boat with the chisel, before finally cutting his hand open and fainting on the floor. When he is revived by his mother, the first thing that he sees as he opens his eyes is a plaque which reads:

A Sabbath well spent
Brings a week of content
And strength for the tasks of the morrow;
But a Sabbath profaned
What'er may be gained,
Is a certain forerunner of sorrow. (p. 157)

On seeing this Paul exclaims, "to think of that in front of me now!" (p. 157), thus revealing his perception that, as the poem notes, and as 'Uncle Arthur' consistently affirms throughout his texts, bad things happen to those who do wrong. In fact, it implies that God is watching for children to do wrong so that they can be swiftly and decisively punished.

At the other end of this narrative technique are those stories which highlight incidences where a child is recognised and rewarded, often in some material way for doing 'good' deeds. Again, in these stories, God appears to take an active role in the moral closure of the narrative, by intervening at some level to maintain the moral universe that Maxwell advocates. One poignant example of this is *Joe's quarter* (vol. 1, p. 43). This boy from a poor family is unable to find a quarter somebody

has given him. He goes to bed feeling "very much discouraged" and in his frustration he exclaims, "Why should I pray? I've lost my quarter, and what's the use of praying any more? If God won't show me where the quarter is, I won't pray to him" (p. 44). He is pricked by his conscience, however, and is unable to sleep, so decides that he'd "better say them after all" (p. 45). On kneeling beside his bed his knee presses on something which he discovers to be his quarter. Joe's adherence to the right belief structure pays immediate and recognisable dividends. While this event, and the myriad of others presented by Maxwell, may be based on an actual experience, the problem of Maxwell's claim to the stories being "true to life" (vol. 1, p. 12) arises out of the imbalance that is evident between those instances where things work out and those where things do not. As Berecz (1996, pp. 12–13) points out, when he speaks of the process of "selective sampling", truth and honesty about life, God and the human condition are lost when we leap "from one miraculous event to the other, as if there [are] no moments of ordinary living in between" and we fail to recognise that "*most of the time...miracles don't happen*". He adds, the "institutional bias" of 'Uncle Arthur' creates a narrative strategy that does "not include stories of failed miracles". If 'Uncle Arthur' is going to claim truth, balance and objectivity in his narratives, whilst disparaging "the usual run of children's stories" (vol. 1, p. 12) and "fairy tales" (vol. 2, p. 11), then stories which tell of such experiences are *siné qua non* to his voluminous collection.

A further problem which arises out of the creation of what appears to be a morally unambiguous universe is that almost any action is deemed appropriate and acceptable so long as it prescribes to the ideologies of the narrator, and works to realise the intention of the text. This includes behaviours that could be construed as unethical or destructive. A powerful example can be seen in *The I-know-that girl* (vol. 1, p. 105–109). In this story an eight year old girl (although the girl in the illustration is clearly much younger) is going through a phase of identity assertion and discovery, and is deemed by the narrator to be unlikable because, "She just wouldn't admit that there was anything she didn't know" (p. 105). In an effort to remedy this character flaw, her father decides to 'lose' her in Trafalgar Square in London. Of course, when the 'I-know-that girl' realises that her father is missing she becomes distraught, attracting the unwanted attention of a "big policeman" (p. 108), who tells her that he is going to take her to the police station. On embracing the child, the father tells her, "I only wanted to see if you really did know the way home, as *you said you did*, so I hid for a moment" (p. 109, authors' emphasis).

“Characters act and react in a limited and predictable way and stories close with each ‘good’ action duly rewarded and each ‘bad’ behaviour justly punished”

However, an unintended moral that could be taken from the story is that the father cannot be relied upon and that police officers are people to be feared rather than turned to in emergencies. Despite the potentially dangerous actions of the father, his role is not called into question. In contrast, it is all but applauded by ‘Uncle Arthur’: “When the little girl was tempted to say ‘I know that’ she thought of the big policeman and of Trafalgar Square—and didn’t say it” (p. 109).

Friere (1971) and Leland (2000) assert that the author’s (in this case, Arthur S. Maxwell’s) self-appointed role as teacher of truth and transmitter of values makes him complicit in the maintenance of a selective presentation of the realities of spiritual and moral life. Though defenders of the institution may argue that his position was ‘neutral’, critical literacy responds by pointing out that, “Those who dwell in the sacrosanct, unquestioned centre...are thoroughly implicated in the unfolding of our cultural world—with all its inequities, injustices and scabrous edges” (Davis & Sumara, 1999, p. 28).

Conclusion

The most significant finding here has come via the critical investigation of the relationship that is constructed in the text between ‘Uncle Arthur’ and the reader. The text consistently works very hard to establish and maintain a definite and distinct power relationship with the reader through the control of knowledge and the assumption of a degree of authority that doesn’t intrinsically exist for either the author or the institution. This is done via the narrative style employed, the representations proffered, and the structures of the text itself. This relationship means that the truth claims, though contestable, are transmitted with such authoritative force that the rejection of them is difficult, especially for very young children.

Aside from the findings of the application of critical literacy to *Uncle Arthur’s bedtime stories* is the disturbing discovery of some degree of distorted perceptions as a direct result of young children’s heavy and extended engagement with the texts. While every reader’s reading cannot be laid at the author’s door, the ease with which it has occurred in this case warrants further and more stringent investigation.

Arthur Maxwell was an influential and revered figure in the world of Christian children’s publishing for fifty years. His work has influenced many thousands of people, undoubtedly for the good in many cases. However, this study points out the limited worldview presented in his stories. A worldview that contrasts with the narratives of the Bible with all their morally flawed heroes, and a worldview that does not match the experience of

many children, who have to deal with pain, conflict, suffering and moral ambiguity on a daily basis, and whose prayers and the prayers of their parents do not resolve the problems, either in the short-term or necessarily in the long term. The potential effect, which has been realised in a number of cases, is to discredit faith, prayer and God, as it fails to deliver what has been implicitly and even explicitly promised. As one Christian writer sadly notes, “Christians are biased reporters...We leave it to pessimistic existentialists to deal with the darker side of life. In the process we fool ourselves.” Unfortunately, in the case of *Uncle Arthur’s bedtime stories*, we short-change our children of an important perspective on life, and on their future (Berecz, 1996, p. 13). Yet, this is not the model we have in the biblical account, where the actions of God’s heroes are sharply and accurately recorded, good, bad and indifferent, often with no clear moral outcome. **TEACH**

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