It'll End in Tears: Melancholy in Contemporary Australian Picture Books

ELIZABETH PARSONS, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

In 2002, two melancholy picture books featured in Australian children's literature awards. Libby Gleeson's *An Ordinary Day*, illustrated by Armin Greder, won the Children's Book Council of Australia best picture book award, while honour book in the same category was Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree,* which also won the NSW Premier's Prize. As bleak representations of childhood sadness, these two books are relatively unusual texts for children. Their narratives map a disconnection with humanity in ways that intersect with Alphonse Lingis's postmodern theoretical trajectory, outlined in *The Community of Those who have Nothing in Common*. What Lingis says about a world in which surfaces of otherness are far from superficial has much to contribute to a reading of the illustrative surfaces in these texts, particularly because the pictorial plains are indicative of the emotional landscapes of the protagonists. Lingis says:

> I find myself afflicted with the imperative that commands the other. I feel its weight as a force that weighs on my understanding. I find myself compelled to see his or her surfaces as ordered surfaces, exposed to me and ordering me, that is facing me. (27)

In these picture books, the illustrations face and order both protagonists and readers simultaneously, constructing a shared territory of sadness. This reading examines the dialogic interaction in these texts, an interaction that works in counterpoint to gestures of othering. Reading in this way exposes a transformative agenda, that is, a textual movement from sadness to hope. This may seem simple and obvious enough, but it is by way of a circuitous semiotic route that these picture books demonstrate this conversion of emotional states.

Before addressing textual content, it is important to note that the books as objects are complicit in this hopeful trajectory; a sense of community can be extrapolated by child readers of these texts. By this I mean that the act of sharing loneliness, even with a fictive protagonist, goes some way to counteracting a sense of disconnection to the world. These books also offer a possibility for recognition between the reader(s) and the other(s) who made the book, and who share these sentiments. That picture books are most commonly read to children shifts this process outside the texts to encompass the reading situations in which the books are nested. This shift can be taken further still when we consider that both these books are copyrighted 2001, the year made famous by the September 11 bombings, a year in which many parents were more engrossed in the newspapers than usual.

Newspapers as a source of this human detachment figure in both texts. In *An Ordinary Day*, Gleeson describes Jack's parents as "the newspapers," which Greder illustrates as adults so preoccupied in reading they fail to acknowledge their son. In *The Red Tree*, Tan uses a collage of printed text, including newspapers, in an illustration prophetically depicting planes flying towards the tall buildings in an oppressive and dystopic city. In addition to the role of print media, 2001 was a year in which the politicised world in danger also became highly visible on television, particularly to children living in privileged western cultures like Australia. In tandem with the visual potency of the symbolic moment when planes crashed into the twin towers, these texts invite children to read symbolism in ways that expand illustrative surfaces. The books depict surfaces that map psychological interiors as well as sociological, cultural and political external worlds in a time when consciousnesses were, in the real world, shifting in response to such dramatic visual symbols as those created by terrorist activities.

German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was roundly criticised when he described the twin towers falling in these kinds of terms, labelling them, more directly than I am game to, as a work of art. This is what he said: "What has happened is—now you all have to turn your brains around—the greatest work of art there has ever been." The compelling parenthetical comment, "now you all have to turn your brains around," is partly readable in the spirit of a warning, because Stockhausen is about to say something contentious, but this warning encodes the notion that the symbolism of the terrorist act requires a complementary artistic act of reconceptualizing. His comment was interpreted as laudatory by those who failed to turn their brains around, but what Stockhausen points to is the evocative potency of symbolism—the mythic centre of western capitalist enterprise crumbling. In its manifestations as image or text, language as a symbolic construct can separate and collide human beings: it produces both catastrophic misunderstandings and comprehensions that allow for sympathetic alli-

ances. These extremes and their various shades of grey are negotiated between people, and between people and their external environment. What failed for Stockhausen is a community that imposed a particular reading of those symbols. He is trapped in the community of those who have nothing in common with his conceptualization. These two picture books trace an identical set of tensions between the symbolic and the communal.

An Ordinary Day principally imagines a version of the western world which child readers are invited to inhabit alongside the protagonist, Jack. This becomes a landscape in which the power of symbolic associations promotes a lesson to child audiences: that turning their brains around in order to think transformatively is an act critical to human survival—in particular, the survival of despair. Child imagination is the key to these transformations. The process works in the text by way of complementary visual and verbal strategies. The full written text for *An Ordinary Day* consists of three sentences describing a child's tedious morning before school. These printed words are interspersed with three thought bubbles rehearsing lies to tell his teacher as excuses for failure to complete homework and lateness to school. Laid out as a paragraph, the work reads like this:

> Jack woke up to an ordinary day, where he stared at stone grey walls, got up and dressed, said "Good morning" to the newspapers and ate his toast in silence. Everything looked the same. He passed the baby with the red balloon,
> the dog with the golden jacket,
> *I'm sorry I couldn't do my homework but the dog ate my worksheet*
> and the lady with the ladder in her crimson stocking.
> *I'm sorry I couldn't answer the questions but my mother made me go to bed early… I'm sorry I missed the first class but the bus was really really late.*

In addition to this bleak prose, the book offers Greder's visual counter-narrative, which depicts positive imaginative processes as child coping-mechanisms for survival on this specific "ordinary day." In the grey city that Jack must traverse, the traffic, both human and automotive, provides moments of visual and conceptual refiguring. Glimpses of details on the people around him, the spots of colour and shape described in the prose, including the red balloon and the golden jacket, proliferate in the illustrations. Trucks and cars are not mentioned in the text, but they are the visual objects that shape-shift into whales cavorting across a peach-coloured dawn sky, the child flying among them.

Perhaps one way to read the whale-filled sky that the child flies through in the last (textless) half of the narrative is as a vision. In an article about visionaries called "The Dreadful Mystic Banquet," Lingis lays down a challenge which can

be taken up in relation to these texts:

> There remains for us to map out the rupture into the practicable
> world the vision effects, the ways the vision makes practicable and
> social considerations, feelings, and initiatives alienated or impossible.
> (n.p.)

But, as Lingis goes on to argue, in opposition to this idea of alienation, there are transformative possibilities inherent in the vision:

> Far from fabricating out of fragments of the macrocosm a private
> domain in which the individual can take up his abode, the vision of
> the visionary opens up on immense spaces inhabited by vast
> populations of human and extrahuman beings. (n.p.)

These vast populations constitute the sense of a community arising from the vision, while, on the extrahuman front, the whales become more than sea mammals; they underpin the text's deployment of a symbolic logic that will now drive this reading. The calendar picture of a whale hung above Jack's bed on the opening page of the story is crucial to reading the protagonist's vision. The fish emblem reappears overleaf as decoration around the edge of the plate Jack doesn't use for his toast. The symbol is then actualised in a microcosm of Jack's tedious existence when he walks past a real fish alone in an empty round bowl. But the transformative nature of the symbolic landscape that takes hold in the narrative moves this emblem beyond the fish-trapped-in-bowl negativity in order to allow for alternative possibilities. The line "everything looked the same" sets up a kind of reverse psychology by which the reading of the story progresses, that is, the book contests the notion that "everything looked the same" by changing everything with imaginative process.

This reversal presents Jack's survival of unhappy circumstances as dependant on the pleasure of symbolic associations. The metamorphosis begins with the construction of relationships—a gesture of much significance in a text that chronicles loneliness. The red balloon held by the baby is linked to the red balloon on the cover of the book held by a passer-by, and the red circle with narrow string made by the bubblegum on the footpath as it sticks to the sole of a shoe. These relationships are constricted by logic of similarity in that each of these visuals is very similar in terms of shape and colour.

In the second instance of relationship, the dog's golden jacket is linked only in terms of colour to a sun on a t-shirt, a gold star earring and a yellow hair tie. These looser symbolic relationships (colour consonance, but no requirement for shape similarity) are accompanied by another version of the powers associated with symbolic shiftings, namely, the shiftings organised through language. These are produced in the form of a rehearsal of lies invented to protect the child from negative

consequences. Jack thinks through the stereotypical response: "I'm sorry I couldn't do my homework but the dog ate my worksheet." This choice of the familiar lie is part of the way the text indicates the untruth of the statement. In this way the book models, not the appropriateness of lying to teachers, but the role of symbolic codes in reordering the universe in potentially self-preservatory ways. This is directly linked to the text's construction of the equally transformative powers of visually symbolic associations. Thus overleaf the symbols become more laden, no longer simply a repetition of red balloon shapes or yellow things, and the snakes and ladders that appear to the child have a metaphoric significance in terms of the ups and downs of his existence (see Figure 1). In each narrative movement, then, the symbolism becomes more flexible, more expansive in its transformative capability.

Figure 1. From *An Ordinary Day* by Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder. (Permission to reprint by Scholastic Australia.)

The game of snakes and ladders involves the dice giving the player great rewards in the forms of ladders, and terrible disappointments in the form of snakes. This symbolic universe becomes a game that can be played in the protagonist's reality so that he is able to read the seas of traffic in which he must swim as encoding possibilities for positive relationships. When the traffic produces a symbol intrinsically linked with his home life—the fish from the opening pages—as an advertising symbol on the side of the truck, the attendant vision goes some way to healing the breach between the child's private and public spheres of existence. Here the home and the outside world merge, so that the world becomes an imaginary sea of whales and the child "flies" in this sea, thereby also collapsing the traditionally opposite natural elements air and water. The outcome of the process is that the child's ability to make transformations extends from the smaller visual symbols (the balloon and the yellow objects), which he notices in associative patterns of relationship, to a grand refiguring of his world outside of the logics imposed by reality. This is a process dependant on perception. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue in relation to "becoming" that "[p]erception will no longer reside in the relations between a subject and an object, but rather in the movement serving as the limit of that relation, in the period associated with the subject and object" (282). It is the child's chronological passage across the dawn of a day, narrativised by the book, which serves as these limits. This is also a clever mirroring of childhood as the metaphoric dawn of life, described as morning in the riddle of the sphinx. This external manifestation of childhood aligns itself with the time span of the text. But the chronological here also signals the chronic nature of repeated experiences that halt development; it is this stultifying tediousness and sadness that is challenged by the movement of the transformative imagination in the text.

In the article on visionaries referred to above, Lingis cites anthropological studies of the biographies of shaman and medicine men that indicate relationships between visions and depression. He records that these visionaries had suffered depressive episodes and sicknesses as precursors to becoming visionaries. In making the link between associative symbolic metaphors that are the bricolage of visions, and depression (including hallucination), both Lingis and *The Ordinary Day* seem to be recognizing that a map of escape from depressive states is a map that traces the symbolic associations from negative to positive investment.

In *The Ordinary Day* the transformations are dependant on relationships of similarity that can overturn negative events through the pleasures of pattern-making. But the imagining of cars and trucks as whales takes the process another step: the association is no longer only about relationship; it transforms one object into another. This treatment of objects becomes, by the narrative's close, applicable not only to traffic, but also to people. In the final image of the story, the bus

driver appears as a walrus. At one level, this is a comic gesture, as Jack's grinning face on this final page indicates. This is a direct reversal of the child's negative collapsing of his parents into newspapers in the opening pages. But the walrus bus-driver can be moved beyond a comic gesture if we consider that, as a sea mammal, he is closely linked to the whales via natural environment. In terms of relationships, this gesture indicates the child protagonist's ability to forge connections between elements of the external world, including the people who occupy that world. He has learned that such connections are based on the both associative and transformative power of symbolic language.

Similar logics are at play in *The Red Tree's* map of melancholic emotional states. The prose in this text is arguably a poem broken up across pages and double-spreads; it reads:

> Sometimes the day begins / with nothing to look forward to
> and things go from bad to worse
> darkness overcomes you
> nobody understands
> the world is a deaf machine
> without sense or reason
> sometimes you wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and wait
> and wait
> but nothing ever happens
> then all your troubles come at once
> wonderful things are passing you by
> terrible fates are inevitable
> sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do
> or who you are meant to be
> or where you are
> and the day seems to end the way it began / but suddenly there it is
> right in front of you
> bright and vivid
> quietly waiting
> just as you imagined it would be.

Again in this book, the visual landscape offers some kind of antidote to sadness. The empty pronoun "it" in the written text is made visually present as the red leaf that, by the narrative closure, becomes a seedling and then a fully grown tree, covered in beautiful red leaves and firmly planted in the centre of the child's bedroom.

These emblems of hope—red leaves and trees, whales and walruses, each of which are mediated via childhood imaginative power—rely on plots that are focussed on the bleakness of the human condition as it is experienced by children. Like *An*

Ordinary Day, *The Red Tree* challenges populist conceptions of what children like to read about, and mainstream notions of what kinds of stories should be promoted to children. In a children's literature landscape dominated by the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, these stories are completely at odds with the kinds of messages sent by J. K. Rowlings' feel-good adventures in which the vestiges of a mother's sacrificing love will protect a child from the most powerful evil imaginable. By comparison, these two books offer a pessimistic vision of the contemporary world, perhaps a contemporary Australia, wherein solutions are measured by the imagination's capabilities.

They are thus curative in their agendas, but the cures come in pictures rather than in words, given that in both texts words are represented as less powerful modes of escape. That positive conclusions are coded visual rather than verbal perhaps says more about the linguistic competence of child audiences than it does about actual differences between these types of transformations. In *The Ordinary Day* the final 10 of the total 15 double spreads after the title page are wordless. In *The Red Tree* the fragility of words on paper is illustrated on the front cover in which the female child-protagonist is aboard a paper boat covered with sections of the text including: "nothing . . . bad to worse . . . trouble . . . deaf . . . dark . . . fate . . . don't." The flimsiness of the paper craft's construction is heightened by these despairing words. The image tells of the dangers inherent in traversing the world aboard (melancholic) words on paper.

There is also hardly any sense of narrative in the text, even though the mythic structure of initiation, journey and return is discernible. The journey is, rather, a series of comments describing despair and pointlessness, while the illustrations speak of incomprehension, fear and disappointment. The first illustration of an empty world has the protagonist standing on a stool to help the projection of her voice through a megaphone from which an ineffectual stream of white and grey letters tumble meaninglessly across the margin and off the page. This failure of words is repeated when she is illustrated as the message in the bottle cast up on an uninhabited shore, unable to speak through a diving helmet which serves no legitimate purpose (like the provision of air). It seems only to obscure and silence her.

Linguistic (as well as cultural/political) disempowerment is a condition of childhood. In addition, as children's literature critic John Stephens has argued, the most pervasive themes in texts for children trace the individual's transition from "infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness" (3). This is, of course, the child's movement into community, his or her negotiations with the other. Lingis argues that:

> the production of rational discourse transforms action. Actions
> driven by mute drives and cravings of one's own are transformed into

Figure 2. From *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan.
(Permission to reprint by Lothian Publishers.)

> actions motivated by reasons, which, as reasons, are not one's own,
> and solicit the assent of others. Such initiatives can enlist the efforts
> of others in common motivations and become collective actions.
> (*Community* 4–5)

Applying this logic to these texts, they can be seen as conscripting children to the rationality of adulthood, teaching them the reasons and rationales that, Lingis claims, underpin community. The process involves the navigation of the symbolic universe, which, to reiterate a central concern in these narratives, suggests that, as in a vision, the image is more powerful than the word.

After *The Red Tree*'s illustration of the message-less bottle, the overleaf text reads "The world is a deaf machine," indicating that language is failing in both directions, both unproduced and unheard. The central two pages of the book show the protagonist trapped in a dystopic city constructed from an incomprehensible

collage of text fragments underscored by the narrative line: "without sense or reason." These surreal illustrations appear to be fantasy internal landscapes signifying despair, hopelessness, danger and disconnection. Transformation is again the key to this text's symbolic map of survival of these places. These, and other, melancholic pictures are countered by the red leaf, which is metonymically a symbol of the red tree of the final page. The tree is, in turn, symbolic of hope and a quiet happiness indicated by the child protagonist's final smile when she looks to this tree. This hope is visually symbolic, not verbally, because the written text refers to the tree only in the guise of the pronoun "it." The redness of the leaf is crucial: the entirely bright red tree seems to come from the province of imagination, but the visual is complicated by its referential relationship to reality, in which autumn leaves are red. Thus this redness signifies the process of change, given that green leaves metamorphose through red before dying to brown. Anachronistically, the brown leaves appear, falling in the opening pages of the narrative as emblematic of the descent into despair. Still, on each page throughout the book one red leaf is hidden in a kind of "Where's Wally" game of "find the hope."

It is a repeated pattern, one that child readers are invited to seek out, in the same way that child readers of *An Ordinary Day* are invited to investigate the patterns between found objects demonstrated as Jack navigates the city. This is a process by which, according to Lingis:

> We collect impressions by exposing our sensory surfaces to the things about us, by moving over the solid surfaces and against the obstacles about us, maneuvering with and manipulating their forces, and by interacting with other sentient and self-moving agents. In order to comprehend the passing patterns as consistent units and to recognize constellations of units that recur, one has to be able to command one's sensory organs to collect sensory perceptions in ordered ways. (*Community* 17)

It is precisely this process that is envisaged, played out and demonstrated in both of these texts' use of the symbolic patterns of recurrence. But more than how to collect and collate these images, the texts indicate modes of interpretation of these symbols.

The Red Tree's symbolism indicates that a lack of transformative power—signalled by the brown leaves—is equivalent to despair. Metamorphosis (the red leaf), however, speaks to childhood as a time of transformation. This is the same logic that underpins the peach-coloured dawn as the time of transformation between night and day in *An Ordinary Day*. *The Red Tree* is chromatically linked to its red-haired protagonist and, in the cover illustration, in place of her reflection in the water the child gazes down at the leaf. The leaf/hope is the "other" that is ordering and

facing the child protagonist as her own reflection, but ordering not in fixative ways, offering instead a way for her to see herself in flux, that is, sharing the metamorphic state of the red leaf. "Becoming" is a word that Deleuze and Guattari redefine at many points of their deliberations in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, but in this reading it indicates the play between flux and proximity: "[b]ecoming is to emit particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter a particular zone of proximity" (Deleuze and Guattari 273). "Becoming," then, as underpinned by a molecular flux, potentially answers why the child is unable to understand herself at various points in the illustrations—for example, when she looks at a self-identical puppet to help her ponder what she should do, and when she paints her exact silhouette in grey in order to consider who she should be (see Figure 2). These are images of depression precisely because of their static nature as reflections of the external self. Imaginative power is again about the transformative solution to sadness, a solution that is, in effect, art.

And this solution, it seems, centres on teaching children to, as Stockhausen would have it, "turn their brains around" so as to read symbolically. Child readers of these texts are asked to find a community of consensus in positive readings of the symbolic landscapes presented to them, not simply in these books, but in the worlds (both real and imagined) that they inhabit. This vision of Australia is then profoundly art-centred, suggesting creative and emotional intelligences as modes of resilience to the adverse circumstances devised by the contemporary world that Ulrich Beck categorizes as a Risk Society in his book of the same name.

These picture books are invitations to children to think themselves both within and outside cultural conformities. This is, Lingis contends, because human evolution calls for:

> the reliance on systems of significant symbols—language, ritual, and art—for orientation, communication, and self-control. These systems of significant symbols delineate the distinctness of the multitude who use them. . . . The rational elaboration of significant symbols transforms our biological specificity, making our species one composed of individuals representative of a universal community. (*Community* 9)

Although Lingis separates the rational from the irrational (the mystic), in these texts the two poles meet. This is perhaps because children are typically exempt from the necessities of rationality in ways uncircumscribed by the dominant authority. Concepts of childhood in fact often demand imaginative play as integral to child-ness. As Michel Foucault argued, challenges to the dominant order in adults are the province of the certifiably insane, and call into being the institutions that contain them. Schools institutionalize children in similar ways, but

cultural acceptance of childhood as a period ruled by imaginative strategies (as an appropriate phase in development) sanctions art in childhood in ways that, for many people, for those of who are not artists, come adrift from commonplace humanity in the adult world.

For these reasons, such messages are safe in texts for children, while Stockhausen attracts many critics. These two picture books, then, predominantly teach children to territorialise the symbols of their unhappy world through the transformative power of reconceptualisation. The Australia that can be imagined out of this process is one that encodes possibilities for thought and for art. Perhaps the hope encoded here for adult readers with intellectual pretensions is that these texts for children may be tentative steps away from the anti-intellectualism that has for so long held the Australian self-conception in its sway.

WORKS CITED

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. 1986. Trans. Mark Ritter. London: Sage, 1992.
Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
Foucault, Michel. 1961. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. 1965. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage, 1973.
Gleeson, Libby. *An Ordinary Day*. Illust. Armin Greder. Sydney: Scolastic, 2001. [Text © Libby Gleeson. Illustrations © Armin Greder.]
Lingis, Alphonse. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994.
—. "The Dreadful Mystic Banquet." *Janus Head* 2.3 (Fall 2000). Amherst, NY: Trivium. October 2004 <http://www.janushead.org/3–2/lingis.cfm>.
Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. London: Longman, 1992.
Stockhausen, Karlheinz. Comment. October 2004 http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=14377.
Tan, Shaun. *The Red Tree*. Melbourne: Lothian, 2001.