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**The whole world shook: Shifts in ethnic, national and heroic identities in
children's fiction about September 11**

Abstract

Popular discourse tells us that on September 11, 2001 the world changed. This paper examines how cultural identities are constructed within fictional texts for young people written about September 11. Drawing on the theory of children's literature that includes both critical literary analysis and cultural studies, the paper locates three identity categories encoded in 9/11 books for children: ethnic identities, national identities, and heroic identities. It analyses twelve exemplar children's texts about 9/11, including equal numbers of picture books and young adult fiction. The 'story' of September 11 in these texts perform versions of cultural identities that are iterated and reiterated, drawing on old versions of identities as well as contributing to new ones. They represent an ever complex world, one with a strong desire to pronounce certainties in increasingly uncertain times. Being a very new corpus of texts about 9/11, these books provide instruction on the kinds of 'selves' privileged since 2001. The shifting identities which may be evident in texts that are being produced for children about 9/11 contribute to educating young readers about themselves, others and the world in which we now live.

The whole world shook: Shifts in ethnic, national and heroic identities in children's fiction about September 11

Introduction

“But then on September 11, 2001 something so huge and horrible happened that the whole world shook”. (Kalman, 2002, p. 23)

On September 11, 2001, with attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, a new context was set for considerations of identity and culture. The idea that the world will never be the same again has become commonplace and part of a now taken-for-granted discourse. ‘9/11’, as the attacks have come to be known, is often described as the “day that shook the world” (Hawthorne and Winter, 2002, p.xvii), with the popular press post 9/11 repeatedly claiming that the world has changed in profound and lasting ways (Sullivan, 2002; Eccleston, 2002). So great has been the attention given to this notion that, according to Murphet (2003), the target of the attack, Ground Zero, is now one of the great consecrated fetishes of our time. In a similar vein, Jones (2003, p.1) claims that the term ‘September 11’ has become more than a date. ‘Since September 11’, we say, or ‘prior to September 11’, or ‘in the wake of September 11’. 9/11 is thus an historical moment from which the cultural forces and identities that emerged may be examined.

This paper examines how some of the recent children's fiction about September 11 illustrates shifts in the representation of ethnic identities, national identities and heroic identities. The texts listed below represent a selection of the more than 50 books for young people now written about September 11 (*Christian Science Monitor Guide to Books*, 2002; Kennedy, 2006). This sample includes picture books and books for young adults both here encompassed in the term 'children's literature' used by such literary critics as Hunt, 2001; Stephens, 1992; Meek, 2001; Nodelman, 1992; Watson, 2001 and Zipes, 2001. These are the texts analysed in this paper, and as part of the larger study from which this paper is derived.

Picture books

Carlson, Nancy. (2002). *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* New York: Penguin.

Jonell, Lynne. (2002). *Bravemole*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Kalman, Maira. (2002). *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Patel, A. (2001). *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press.

Roth, Susan L. (2001). *It's Still a Dog's New York: A Book of Healing*. Washington DC: National geographic Society.

Young adult fiction

Geha, Joseph. (2002). 'Alone and all together' in M. Jerry Weiss and Helen Weiss (Eds.) *Big City Cool: Short Stories about Urban Youth*. New York: Persea Books.

Rowe, Leanne. (2002). *Girl X Recreated*. Sydney: Random House Australia.

As literature is "often a site where cultural and moral conflicts are invoked and analysed, indeed encoded" (Salaita, 2005, p. 147), an examination of children's books about 9/11 may prove significant in understanding how identities emerge and compete in the stories. Since 9/11, world events continue to change in ways we can only begin to anticipate. So too the shifts we see in children's literature are in constant revision. The shifts, however, are slippery, sometimes subtle. Indeed, things may not superficially appear to have shifted at all. They may be continuations of cultural

attitudes that existed prior to 9/11, or the shifts may be dramatic. Whether we can identify that the world has *really* changed (whatever might be meant by that), 9/11 immediately became, as Baudrillard (2002) claims, the *absolute* event, “the ‘mother’ of all events”(p.4). As such, the representation of both the ‘moment’ of 9/11, and the identities produced from it become presences in children’s fiction produced in the West.

Embarked upon in the months following September 11, this study proposed to examine how its impact continued/ disrupted or reconstituted identities in children’s fiction which used 9/11 as content matter. In its initial stages to even imagine that these books would be written was speculative. It seemed in many ways too soon to consider that the horror and magnitude of the event could be represented in young adult fiction, much less picture books. A knowledge of children’s literature supported the idea, however, that few kinds of books were entirely taboo. Children’s literary theory also supported the understanding that children’s books, like all texts, play a role in the production of identities. This literature already informed us that the texts, if they were to be written at all, would be complex, varied and most likely as ambiguous and contradictory as the responses to the attacks on New York themselves. No one reader or reading would be true or guaranteed.

Accepting that children’s fiction often responds to a crisis climate, and may even contribute to it, provided an interesting point of inquiry. These predictions and beliefs about what the books might (or might not) be or do formed the basis of the conceptual and theoretical ideas that led this study. Though it imagined at the outset that children’s books about 9/11 might bring new identities to the forefront, it did not

imagine that these would be consistent. What was of interest was the ways new identities would be shaped, privileged by the language and discourses within the texts. The discursive analysis employed in this study did not purport to find answers or to prove a point. It was neither intended nor desired that by examining the books we would definitively ‘learn’ about identity in a post 9/11 era. Unlike other kinds of textual analysis, a close examination of the books did not ‘reveal answers’, or clarify meaning. The books only give us clues about who it is possible or impossible to ‘be’ after 9/11. They provide multiple and sometimes contradictory messages about our ethnic and racial identifications, and they tell us, amidst a myriad of other contemporary discourses, how to be good citizens or proper heroes. If meanings made from the texts privilege such views, it is because their discourses are familiar to us, and that they concur (or resist) what readers may already know or believe about these identities. Nonetheless this study illustrates how children’s books about 9/11 have been discursively organised to favour some ideas about identity over others. Together they ‘add up’ to make a case for certain identities over others.

Additionally, rather than search for a true meaning or a definitive conclusion about these new identities, the study proposed to look for both the strength and the cracks in meanings. The central question asked was “What can children’s books about 9/11 tell us about cultural identities”? Using literary discourse analysis, critical cultural theory and a range of poststructuralist textual strategies, analysis of the selected texts demonstrated possible answers for the final research question, ‘What are the meanings that may be made from books about September 11 for young people? What identities are now possible or impossible? How do these identities align or compete within the texts?’

Snapshot: Ethnic identities post 9/11

“There will always be good things in the world. You are one of those good things” (Patel, 2001, p. 12),

The identity categories that became apparent in the texts *about* 9/11 present an idea of what now seems important *since* 9/11. It was through looking for identities common to the texts for young people that the three identity categories first emerged. At the forefront of these texts ethnicity and, more specifically, race politics was a central concern.

One of the most interesting identity shifts is the way in which pre 9/11 beliefs lauding ethnic diversity must sit in these books alongside post 9/11 attempts to create a unified ‘family’. As one example, the picture book *There’s a Big Beautiful World Out There!* (Carlson, 2002) begins with the premise that children were fearful after 9/11. This book intends to address their fears, and persuade their implied readers that they can be brave and confident. It first lists the many things that might make a child fearful, including “people who look different from you” (Carlson, p. 12). But by proposing the idea in the first place, the text suggests that there is something ‘natural’ about the fear we might have about other “people who look different” from ‘us’. The image alongside the print text compels the reader to look upon a group, now gathered on the page as a collection of potentially frightening others. Whilst individually they are not all menacing, the group portrait (Figure 1), with its linguistic suggestion of ‘difference’, make them appear so.

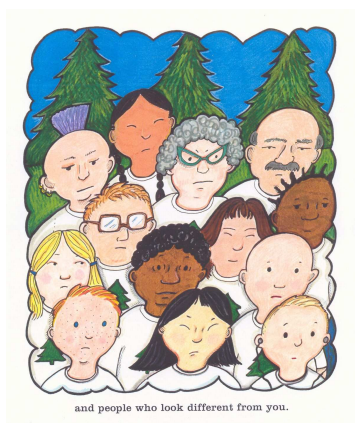


Figure 1 *There's a Big, Beautiful World Out There!*, p.12

In the linguistic choice of the word 'you' the reader is also clearly identified as being *unlike* the sullen, menacing (or at least sad) faces in this illustration. This is a typical example of the competition between the discourses of tolerance and multiculturalism, and a palpable fear of the Other. On the one hand, the illustration offers a representation of cultural diversity. But though multicultural in its diversity, here is the alterity of the Other, a mildly threatening group, with a particular blond girl looking suspiciously to her left, towards a black boy at the centre.

The picture book *On That Day* (Patel, 2001) also demonstrates a difficult relationship with racial tolerance. On the one hand, it too includes discursive nods to a diverse world of global harmony, for instance when the text reads, that "the world is very big, and really round, and pretty peaceful" (p. 2). The illustration on that page shows a collaged globe in green, blue, black and white, a full view of the illustration used on the cover. We are told at various times in the text that, "the world...got badly hurt" and "everyone was sad" when "the world broke" (p. 3). This is a conflation of the United States as the whole world, of course. Again, this picture book struggles with a hugely difficult post 9/11 task: to acknowledge fears about 'race' *whilst* embracing ethnic difference. This competition between diversity and unity is illustrated in *On*

That Day when the reader is told, though these bad people are unnamed, that “sometimes bad things happen because people act in mean ways and hurt each other on purpose” (p. 5). These ‘mean’ people are central to the story but absent in specifically explicit cultural identity. It is this Other that has done evil to America, but it has neither name nor voice in the text. Readers are to ‘know’ which ‘bad’ people are being referred to here but in the ‘unnamed’ invisibility of the enemy in these books, ethnic presence in fact becomes *more* visible, and tolerance less certain.

The picture books, such as *On That Day* (Patel, 2001) and *There’s a Big Beautiful World Out There!* (Carlson, 2002) exemplify many of the contradictory and complex relationships the West now grapple with concerning multiculturalism and diversity. In particular, the increasingly strong desire to re-discover family values and to ally a Western ‘good’ community against a foreign ‘bad’ one seems unable to completely separate itself from ethnic and racial implications, even in the young adult Arab-American written ‘Alone and All Together’ (Geha, 2002).

In this short story, the main protagonist Labibeh appears, prior to 9/11, to have successfully negotiated a hybrid identity. She is ‘half in and half out’ (half Arabic and half American), distinctions made within the story itself, for example when Labibeh says, “I’m half way out the door” (p. 51). She seems to exist in a world where she is comfortable with her double or hyphenated culture. She helps her grandmother cook traditional foods like *loubyeh* and *kusa* and *beitenjan mihsee*, but she also ‘hangs out’ with her friends in a suburb where there are bookstores, coffee shops, delis and “places that sell used vintage clothing” (p. 59) and she goes to a ‘regular’ American school where one of her subjects is Western Civics. Physically, she is neither visibly

Arabic nor is she quite American, being blue-eyed and ‘almost blond’. Labibeh’s Arab-ness is *not* visible on her body, which means she can ‘pass’ as American if she chooses. However, this passing doesn’t reduce the significance of race and ethnicity in her life. Even prior to 9/11 she was subject to name-calling – a black boy in her class, Tyrone, once teased her by calling her a “Camel Jockey”, though she believes there was “no meanness in it”. Still, she acknowledges that some names “cross the line,” like “Sand Nigger and Raghead” (p. 58). Labibeh interprets this teasing as different from the name-calling that occurred after 9/11 after which it takes on a menacing, physically threatening tone.

“I just wish they wouldn’t say it’s us,” I say, “until they’re like, *sure*.”
“Us?” my sister says. “What us?”
“You know what I mean.”
“No, I don’t. We were born here, and so were Mom and Dad, right here in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.”
You’re not here, I want to remind her. I am.
“What I want to know,” Sally goes on, “is when ‘us’ stops meaning *ibn Arab* and starts meaning American!”
(p. 53).

In this story, Labibeh’s ability to shift between cultures (where her identity is not singularly American nor is it wholly Arabic) needs re-negotiation after 9/11. Where she was once comfortable with hybridity, she now must choose to be either ‘us’ or ‘them’ or as the title suggests, ‘Alone or All Together’. The identities that are valued post 9/11 are required to express tolerance for all ethnicities at the same time as they construct a more singular, unified ‘good’ self. They seem largely unable to do this without favouring Whiteness.

Many other 9/11 texts, such as *Lucy and the Liberty Quilt* (London, 2001) and *Girl X Recreated* (Rowe 2002) require their ‘ethnic’ protagonists to prove their loyalty to the West. In the first young adult novel *Lucy*, a Chinese-American girl, must pledge allegiance to her new-found heroes, George Washington and Betsy Ross after 9/11. In the second, a group of Australian teens from the present and the future (a diverse group including Tran) align themselves with America after the World Trade Centre is attacked. They then “all cry as one” (p. 155). The texts provide many good examples of how pre 9/11 beliefs about diversity are continued in post 9/11 texts, but how these discourses of tolerance are now complicated by new race politics.

Snapshot: National identities post 9/11

*“These are hard times for New York, “said Pepper.
“And for all of America,” said Rover. “But we’re strong.”
“We’ll get through this if we work hard together.” (Roth, 2001, p.24)*

Predictably, the very clear desire to define a patriotic, collective national identity is present in almost all of the texts after 9/11, even those not produced in The United States of America. The section above has already demonstrated how America was conflated as the whole world after 9/11. In nearly all the texts the discourses of national loyalty can be detected. Even in the Australian book *Girl X Recreated* (Rowe, 2002) a pro-American stance is privileged. Flag-waving is ubiquitous, as it is in the picture book *Bravemole* (Jonell, 2002). ‘Team-spirit’ and ‘team-building’ in the face of adversity are paramount in the post 9/11 concern with strengthening the national identity. The romanticised, sentimental American past is often evoked to reassure readers about a safe, secure present.

The next example, the picture book *It's Still a Dog's New York: A Book of Healing* (Roth, 2001). This is the story of Pepper and Rover, two dogs who grieve for their city after the Twin Towers are destroyed. The wiser dog Rover gives advice to Pepper, reassuring his friend that

“These are hard times for New York,” said Pepper.
“And for all of America,” said Rover. “But we’re strong.”
“We’ll get through this if we work hard together.” (p.24)

As in many of the children’s texts about 9/11, the idea of working together for a common cause becomes compulsory. The seemingly natural idea that it is this working together that ‘makes us strong’ is surely useful when asking a nation to give unquestioned support for (military) response.

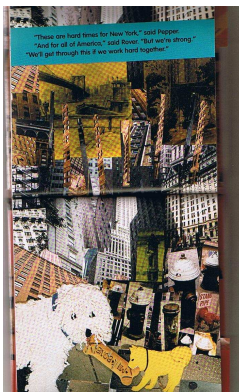


Figure 2, *It's Still a Dog's New York*, p.24

Readers may be persuaded by texts such as this one to recognize that their individual goals should now be subsumed for the good of the nation. Though the illustration on this page (Figure 2) appears to show Pepper and Rover fighting over a bone, they could equally be read as sharing the bone. We, then, should now be primarily interested in working together as an imaginary unified ‘one’. In this book, if we’re not part of the solution, we’re part of the problem, as Rover says in the following passage:

I know why you’re so sad. So am I, and I’m angry, too (p.4).
EVERYBODY feels terrible since those bad people smashed the
planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But Peppa, most

people aren't bad people. There are many, many more good people.
Besides, we're New Yorkers. AM I RIGHT? (p. 4).

Implied in this extract, complete with its capitalised shouting, is a list of national characteristics. It gives us both the right and responsibility to be sad, angry and hurt. It also reminds the reader that Americans (as represented by New Yorkers) are, by nature, good and empathetic (contrasted with the invisible enemies who are unfeeling and bad).

Briefly, it is also interesting to consider an Australian young adult fiction text that refers to 9/11 as well. As one of the earliest published children's texts that include the events of 9/11, it provides another perspective on how 9/11 produced a national discourse, even well outside of America. The main character in the text *Girl X Recreated* is Girl-X herself, who writes after 9/11 that, "the whole world has just changed. It is a turning point for history" (p. 152).

Girl X Recreated is an Australian book, informed by young people in Geelong. And yet, despite the fact that it declares itself as Australian throughout, to a large degree it can be discussed as though it is American. After 9/11 occurs, Girl X and her friends overtly identify themselves with Americans, and regularly declare their allegiance. Their seemingly strong desire to be part of the coalition of the willing is discursively present and becomes a strong element in their identity, one in which the 'nation' becomes blurred. The Americanised (Australian) identity comes to seem both natural and 'right'.

The first example of this hybridised 'Western' identity (part Australian, mostly American) occurs on the diary entry of September 11 itself. Girl X writes:

Tonight I was sitting in my evening American History class. Bored of course. We were discussing general American history and the many wars that have been fought over the years. As usual I felt sadness at the tragedy of those wars and felt great pity for the victims, yet it had no affect on my life. How could I possibly relate something that happened

over 50 years ago to what I know as the world today? Then...2 planes crashed into the World Trade Centre. Shocked. What else could I be? I am glued to the news and I've learnt that the Pentagon has also been hit. It's been nearly an hour since it happened and yet, no-one knows how or why. One of the most famous and important buildings in America is on fire with thousands of people inside, and no-one can tell me what is happening or why this should have happened. Then as news unfolds and more things happen, everything just gets worse and worse. Both of the twin towers of the World Trade centre have collapsed, with who knows how many people inside and another plane crashed outside Pittsburg. There is one thing for certain. The whole world has just changed. It is a turning point in history. (p. 152).

This entry is replete with statements about national identity. What, for instance, is this Australian student doing in an American history class? Why, although she cannot relate to events of 50 years ago, has she no such problems relating to American history in general? Has the world just changed, and is it the whole world, or just the part of the world that identifies with America? This conflation of America as the whole world, as seen previously in texts like *On That Day*, is once again visible.

In the next entry, on September 12th, Girl X's identification with America becomes even stronger. She writes, "I cry when I hear the American national anthem" (p.157). Indeed, she was not alone – many Westerners expressed emotional responses to 9/11 (Heyen, 2002). Yet she displays an absence of emotional response to the Australian national anthem, nor does she mention taking an Australian history class, Girl X's relationship to her own nation seems weak by comparison. It is *America* that evokes her patriotic self, an interesting condition after 9/11. September 11, at least for the moment, 'did' this to Australians. National identity was no longer bound to country, but to ideological allegiance. As evidence of the way the construction of nation is subject to change, Australians could now be American in everything but geography.

The discourses in these books often represent identity in competing ways. Even in binaried constructions, such as the pitting of good against evil, there are places within the texts where slippage occurs. The new preferred identity is to be loyal to country but global in outlook; forceful as an individual whilst always bowing to the common good. Identities in these texts are sometimes slippery. Above all, the texts illustrate a compulsion to find certainty in what are surely uncertain times, which may account both for their black-and-white didacticism and their genuine questioning of the job to be undertaken.

It is useful to recognise the ways identities post 9/11 are both continuations of the familiar and construction of the new, iterating and reiterating a range of post 9/11 versions of identity. This close textual look at the internal contradictions within the texts is potentially instructive. The textual analyses in this paper point both to inclusions and exclusions in the texts, as well as the stress points within the discourses. Identities, especially with respect to ethnicity, are somewhat ambivalent. It is still common for these texts to represent the hybrid identities discussed pre-9/11, such as the Arab-American in Labibeh 'Alone and All Together' and in *Girl X-Recreated*, but there is at the same time a *desire* for a more unified world where this hybridity poses fewer problems. There is less, however, uncertainty about good citizenship. The national identities discussed within the books are, at first glance, aggressive, tied up in visions of national identity that include Whiteness, Christianity, and flag-waving loyalty. They are less geographic than related to attitudes and loyalties. The preferred national identity is the most emotive of the three categories. It is an anxious nation that presents itself. To a large degree it is within the discourses of heroic identity that a picture is formed of the 'new man (woman). It is here in this

third category that instructions are provided on how to 'be' in a post 9/11 world. But still the instruction is not always clear: be strong but soft, be self-reflective but sure, be sensitive but fight back, be super-human but mortal.

Snapshot: Heroic identities post 9/11

*'But what can I do?' Mole wondered. He looked at his own two paws. He looked at his feet, with their claws meant for digging. And then he knew.
'Thank you,' he whispered to Overmole. Because there was a job that had to be done, and now he could do it. (Jonell, 2002, p. 15)*

Finally, though less common or predictable in terms of a cultural identity category, many of the texts draw upon notions of heroism that are intricately bound up with the other identities defining ethnicity and national strength. The heroes in the picture books *Fireboat: The Adventures of the John J. Harvey* (Kalman, 2002) and *Bravemole* (Jonell, 2002) both deliver examples of how the post 9/11 hero must prove themselves both superhuman and immanently mortal; both stronger than the enemy but humble in praise. Even the dogs in *It's Still A Dog's New York* (Roth, 2001) combine heroic qualities of humility with the assertive conviction so crucial to the post 9/11 self.

Fireboat (Kalman, 2002) is discursively organised to position its readers by creating a heroic America which is once more highly dependent on nostalgia and sentimentality. In its story sequence, moving from historical past to present, the text performs in ways that build an image of American heroism. The first third of the book re-creates a nostalgic New York of the past, resplendent with evocative images of familiar American icons. The book begins with 1931, when "The Empire State Building went up up up (p. 2). In its concrete discursive 'up-ness', the reader is positioned to think of

this erection of a monument as a moment when New York reached its ‘top’ potential, when Americans were on ‘top’ of the world. The first part of this book contains little more than lists and images describing the greatness of America. Chouliarki (2004) suggests that this was common after 9/11. In such lists a discourse of the national past is evoked as a lesson for the present. Lists as textual strategies are discursive tools which build (or ‘erect’) a set or taxonomy of ideas for the reader and make necessary connections between the past (New York as the “invincible centre” [Chouliarki, 2004, p. 194]) and the here-and-now. Here, though, is the beginning of a series of nostalgic symbols and images presented to the reader. The Empire State Building sits, in this text, alongside reminders of such familiar historic American figures, icons and events as Babe Ruth (p. 3), The George Washington Bridge (p. 5), the mighty Hudson River (p. 6), the invention of jazz (p. 8), and the “great ocean liner NORMANDIE” (p. 15). Consequently when the little tugboat, the John J. Harvey, is introduced into this list (on p. 9), it sits amongst these ‘great’ reminders of the American past. The fireboat, the John J. Harvey, is identified as having been the “largest, shiniest and fastest fireboat of them all” (p. 10). Although young readers of the text might have no knowledge or memory of these American images and events, this heroic list constructs a romantic American scene, when America ruled, goodness prevailed and life was innocent. Significantly, alongside the many ‘big’ examples of American heroism (like the aforementioned George Washington Bridge) there are small, local examples of American ingenuity and proof of superiority. These ‘small’ less immediately recognisable American symbols include “Snickers chocolate bars” (p. 4), a little dog named “Champion Pendley Calling of Blarney” that won Best In Show at the Westminster Kennel Club (p. 7), and exported “merchandise, such as wood, cotton, bananas and bubble-gum and EVERYTHING” (p. 14). This

‘EVERYTHING’, shouted in capital letters, is a word trying its best to remind the reader of its significance. America is the home of EVERYTHING great, small and large. Lest the reader forget its capacity for large heroism, we are reminded by type choice. And lest we forget the importance of nostalgic memory in building a stronger nation, the ending of the book reminds us that “Now the Twin Towers are gone. Something new will be built” (p. 33).

Bravemole (Jonell, 2002) is representative of the production of another kind of post 9/11 heroic identity; a mortal, working class hero. Bravemole, the protagonist whose mole hill is destroyed by evil dragons with their “wicked talons and its teeth as sharp as knives” (p. 11) must be humble. He makes an individual, heroic choice to dig through the rubble to find missing moles. We are told that after the tragedy, “Mole blinked, and rubbed a weary paw across his eyes, and tried to smile. But he did not feel like a Bravemole” (p. 25). He must, however, also be a leader. When Bravemole reluctantly takes charge, a journalist-mole (a ‘Smartmole’) with a pencil presses closer and gets ready to write: ‘What do you think we should do now?’” (p. 26). This is a difficult paradoxical position for Bravemole to be in in a culture of celebrity; to be both ‘average’ and exceptional. Mole is both a ‘man’ of strong convictions (not wishy-washy) but he is no braggart. He is a new self-effacing hero. Some would claim this is a dual role of humility/strength that George W. Bush has himself taken care to make central to his leadership image. He “connect[s] with ordinary folk as his father never did”, and can thus “shuck off his social class’s perceived indifference to people’s everyday concerns” (Greenberg, 2004, p. 1). In this production of a humble hero, readers are given advice about how to perform themselves in a post 9/11 world.



Figure 3 *Bravemole*, p. 10

Conclusion

In these three identities come an image of a world where producing the right kind of person for the good of the nation is privileged over the more introspective, individualised concerns that might be said to have defined the ‘me’ generation of the 1960s or 1970s. The ethnic, national and heroic identities that formed the basis of this study certainly indicated the post 9/11 binaried good versus evil in a world defined anew as moral or immoral. However, the texts do not define an entirely new or changed world, despite early predictions. In the continuing dialogic relationship that impacts on identities in the West since 9/11, the texts explored are found to draw upon many old identity constructions (for example praising traditional heroic traits), whilst simultaneously constructing new ones. They reinforce some ideas about how to be, such as constructing ideas about the ‘best’ kind of citizen, whilst also revealing internal contradictions about others, finding it hard for instance to reconcile ideas about diversity and the already contested ‘multiculturalism’ with ‘black and white’ ideas about Western values.

The 9/11 texts tell an overall story about competing discourses and uncertainties about the world masquerading as certainties. As a collection, they demonstrate a struggle to reconcile the fears of insecurity with the desire to appear stable, strong and right. Fragility and large-scale assertiveness both make regular appearances. The discourses of multiculturalism have to find a place within the privileged discourses of nationalism. Individual strength has to take second place to good citizenship, with its more powerful desire for group identity. Service still must be paid to global harmony, but within a climate of national security. Fear has to be acknowledged, but must be replaced with confidence. It seems after all that these children's books mirror the tensions and competing discourses in general since 9/11, in ways equally complex ways.

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