Foster Children in The Junior Novel

Betty L. Kirwan

A nurturing adult is one who helps a child develop a positive self-image. Librarians who recommend books to children, especially foster children, need to understand the role of the nurturing adult and be familiar with books featuring adults who perform this role.

Even children who live with both biological parents frequently need some other adult if they are to develop a positive self-image. Some parents convey to one or more of their children a sense of unworthiness or unimportance. Such parents do this unconsciously when they consistently dismiss what their children say as unimportant, make little or no attempt to see things as their children see them, have little empathy for the child's needs, and display little support or interest in the child's ideas. This lack of communication causes a problem. The child feels defeated and because of this defeat becomes rebellious.

Children can rebel in a number of ways. They can rebel by openly exhibiting behavior which is unacceptable. When reprimanded, they can continue in such behavior clandestinely. They can become quiet and withdrawn.

Such rebellion does not solve these children's problems. Even while they are rebelling, feeling different, they continue to feel that they are not being understood. They continue to feel that they are not being accepted by adult society. Such children need to find someone in adult society who will communicate with them, understand their needs, be sympathetic to their problems. The adult outside of the immediate family who performs this function is a nurturing adult.

Teresa Poston has identified a number of needs which preadolescents have and which the nurturing adults must recognize as he or she fosters a positive relationship with a child. A child:

1. needs to know that he or she is not to blame;
2. needs to give and receive love;
3. needs to be accepted as a member of a family;
4. needs to establish a good self-image.[1]

Adults who help meet these needs do not have to be active participants in a child's rebellion. They may act passively as listeners. The important behavior which these adults exhibit is one of acceptance. The adult fosters, nurtures, or helps the child develop an awareness of himself or herself as an individual.

This acceptance of the child allows the child to say, "I'm OK. There's nothing wrong with me even though I'm not accepted by my parents." The child's ideas and actions are accepted by a member of adult society who encourages and strengthens the child's positive self-image. It is important for the child to see that what he or she values has validity in the adult world. As one fictional child said,

> I saw that Mrs. Woodfin had been special. It didn't matter that she had lied about herself because she was a lonely old woman who needed friends. What mattered was that she had made *me* feel different, and because of that, I had seen myself as a person for the first time in my life.[2]

Finally, nurturing adults through their reactions to children can enable the latter to see that they are responsible for their own actions. The children may then recognize those obstacles of their own making which are causing some of their problems and may correct their own behavior.

Children who live with foster parents, or other surrogate parents, have a crucial need for the kind of nurturing adult described above. Foster children have problems greater than communicating with parents. Such children usually feel exceptional rejection because they have literally been removed from their natural home and whatever kind of security they attached to that home. They need to find acceptability and respectability.

Foster children speaking for themselves have said repeatedly that they wanted to be accepted for what they were by the foster family.[3] At the same time, it is necessary for the foster parent to exhibit a fairly low-keyed acceptance.[4] This role by the parent permits foster children to work out their problems, but at the same time have in the background a caring adult ready to support and accept them for what they are, allowing them to believe that it is all right to be different from the child with two caring parents because they do have someone who cares for them. The librarian recommending books to foster children should be aware that "teenagers who are trying to 'make it' in a broken home need to read books about other kids who face similar situations."[5] Foster children need to be exposed to literature which is not based upon idealized child-parent relationships because they usually will reject such a story's credibility.[6] These children are skeptical of professionals such as guidance counselors and social workers who are *trained to listen* to problems. It should be recognized also that for the foster child, no matter how miserable the living situation was with the biological parents, there is a recurring urge to return, live there, and be accepted.

Books which have as their setting a foster home or foster children provide a context particularly conducive to the role of the nurturing adult. As such, they can be of value to any child who needs the help of such an adult. They can also help those in a conventional home situation to understand and have empathy for the relationships present in a foster home.

The following critical bibliography attempts to evaluate selected books found under the subject heading Foster-Children against the needs of such children as discussed above. *Children's Catalog* and its supplements through 1979 list six books under the subject heading Foster-Children. *Junior High School Catalog* and its supplements through 1978 list only three books under this subject heading. *Senior High School Catalog*, through 1979, does not use the subject heading, Bernstein's bibliography lists thirty-five books, there are a comparable number in *The Bookfinder*, and Wilkin does not use the subject heading. The subject heading is also not used in *Books in Print*. In those bibliographies where the subject heading Foster-Children is used, we find that the books usually deal with other kinds of broken homes, running away, living

with grandparents, aunts, or other family members. Poston made the observation that pre-adolescent literature does not reflect the increase in the number of broken homes.[7] I find from reading books which deal with foster children or broken homes in this age group, that it is more often other children in the home or outside of the home who act as the nurturing individuals. Unfortunately relatively few nurturing adults are found in this literature. Consequently the following bibliography includes books with and without such adults. I have tried to assess the roles played by the adults in the novels in terms of the need for nurturing adults and the need of foster children for support in developing positive self-images.

REFERENCES

1. Gale Teresa Poston, "Preadolescent Needs and Problems as Seen in Family Life Fiction Published Between the Years 1965 and 1975: A Content Analysis," *Top of the News*, 34 no. 4, (Summer 1978): 344.
2. Barbara Wersba, *The Dream Watcher*, (New York: Atheneum, 1979, 1969): p. 170.
3. Elinor Jacobson and Joanne Cockerum, "As Foster Children See It: Former Foster Children Talk About Foster Family Care," *Children Today*, vol. 5 no. 6, (November-December 1976): 32-36.
4. Helen D. Stone, "Introduction to Foster Parenting: A New Curriculum," *Children Today*, vol. 5 no. 6, (November-December 1976): 28.
5. Barbara Haley, "The Fractured Family in Adolescent Literature," *English Journal*, vol. 63 (February 1974): 70.
6. Frances B. Cacha, "Book Therapy for Abused Children," *Language Arts*, vol. 55, no. 2, (February 1978): 201.
7. Poston, "Preadolescent Needs," p. 347.

A Critical Annotated Bibliography

Arthur, Ruth M. *Miss Ghost*. New York: Atheneum, 1979.

Elfie tries diligently to adapt to a number of different foster homes for she fears being sent to the mother in Australia who had deserted her. In each foster home Elfie is a victim of circumstances which cause her to lose her sense of identity and to be placed in a home for mentally disturbed children. It is a "ghost" in this home who allows Elfie to talk through her problem and eventually regain her identity. Foster children can identify with Elfie and her problems, but will find her eventual acceptance into a foster home contrived in order for the story to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Burch, Robert. *Skinny*. New York: Viking, 1964.

Parentless and living with Miss Bessie in an old hotel, Skinny waits with apprehension the day there will be room in the orphanage for him, and he will be taken there. Although the setting is rural Georgia around 1940, the foster child can identify with Skinny's longing to remain with the one person who has provided a stable situation for him.

Byars, Betsy. *After The Goat Man*. New York: Viking, 1974.

Figgy has been left with his only surviving relative, an eccentric grandfather, whose cabin is in the path of highway construction. The grandfather leaves the house where he has been relocated to lock himself in the cabin. The problem with the grandfather is resolved by the two children with whom Figgy plays Monopoly rather than through the aid of any adult supporter. There is little for the foster child to identify with here except Figgy's need to find his grandfather.

Byars, Betsy. *House of Wings*. New York: Viking, 1972.

A child is left at an eccentric grandfather's and abandoned abruptly by his parents. Grandfather communicates his love and concern for the child by involving the child in nursing a crane back to health. The child develops a positive self-image by being treated as an equal in this project which is of great importance to his grandfather.

Byars, Betsy. *The Pinballs*. New York: Harper, 1977.

Foster children are dealt with by concerned adults in a realistic and effective manner. These adults play an understanding but passive role in helping two of the three children

work out their problems and learn to love. These two children in turn aid the third in developing a positive self-image.

Cleaver, Vera and Bill. *I Would Rather Be a Turnip.* Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971.

Even though the story has as one of its main characters an illegitimate boy who is sent to live with his grandfather, the main character, his twelve year old relative Anne, is so strongly drawn that the reader develops an empathy for her as she grows and faces problems when shunned by her friends. Ruth, the black maid, aids in Anne's development in a satisfactory supportive manner while accepting the boy unashamedly.

Corcoran, Barbara. *A Dance to Still Music.* New York: Atheneum, 1974.

A recently deaf girl runs away from an impatient mother, and is accepted by an unconventional but understanding widow living on a house boat. Through the acceptance and patience of the widow, the girl learns to accept herself, and her responsibilities and to relate to others.

Cunningham, Julia. *Drop Dead.* New York: Pantheon, 1965.

This book belongs to the "escape from an ogre" genre. The fact that the protagonist is a foster child is simply an easy way to propel the child into the clutches of a horrible person, thereby permitting the central action of the story to take place. This is a well written story which holds children's interest, but not particularly recommended for foster children. It would probably reinforce their skeptical view of adults. However, there is an aspect which corresponds to a reality in the life of foster children. The foster child must take action and be responsible for creating his future.

Dunlop, Eileen. *Fox Farm.* New York: Holt, 1979.

Adam's father, a widower, remarries and at the insistence of his new wife moves to Australia leaving his son with the Darkes. Conspiring with his foster brother, Richard, Adam helps secretly to care for an orphaned kit. This activity brings Adam out of his self pity and preoccupation with rejoining his father. By caring for the young fox, Adam develops a friendship with his foster brother. He also learns that to be a part of his foster family he must contribute to the relationship. Foster children will identify with Adam's desire to be reunited with his father, but may find his equally excessive desire to care for an orphaned kit to be contrived.

Fox, Paula. *How Many Miles to Babylon.* New York: White, 1967.

A boy, left with three aunts because his mother is in a mental hospital and his father has abandoned them, fantasizes about finding her as a queen of an African tribe and himself as a prince. In his real search for his mother, an abduction by a group of boys allows him to use his cunning to escape and return to his aunts and mother who is the antithesis of his mental image. Foster children will identify with the aunts' and the boy's longing for his mother.

Hunt, Irene. *Up A Road Slowly.* Chicago: Follett, 1966.

Realistic situations, outcomes, and relationships are believable for the foster child who will have empathy for Julie's anguish at being sent to live with her maiden Aunt Cordelia. They will also recognize in lying, alcoholic Uncle Haskel the irresponsible individual who is unable to acknowledge obstacles of his own making.

L'Engle, Madeline. *Meet The Austins.* New York: Vanguard, 1960.

For the foster child, this story will have an air of unreality. The too perfect relationship between the children and parents in the Austin home ruins an otherwise well written book concerning a child's sudden loss of family and need for adjustment.

Paterson, Katherine. *The Great Gilly Hopkins.* New York: Crowell, 1978.

A belligerent foster child is dealt with in a firm but loving manner. The foster parent and the school teacher play an active role in helping Gilly develop a positive self-image and recognize values in others. Foster children will empathize with Gilly's longing to return to her mother, her cunning in trying to cope, and the aloofness of the social worker.

Wier, Ester. *The Loner.* New York. McKay, 1963.

A homeless, nameless child is shown searching for some adult attachment. The adults in the sheep camp who take in the boy develop into a loving, supporting, but not domineering family. Children coping with loss of family will identify with David's search, his attempts to please the adults in his life, his sense of failure, his growing sense of responsibility, and developing sense of self worth.

Wilkinson, Brenda. *Ludell.* New York: Harper, 1975.

A black child, abandoned by her mother into the care of her grandmother, develops into a discriminating ambitious adolescent through the love and support of her extended family. There are no positive male images in this story, and the black dialect will make the reading difficult to some.

Betty L. Kirwan is an instructor, Educational Media, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee.