

Learning About Disaster: Children, Emotion and Crisis



Augustus E. Mulready, *Remembering Joys That Have Passed Away*, 1873. Oil on canvas. Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London.

27 June 2025
Victoria University, Melbourne

City Tower, 370 Little Lonsdale St

In 1946, the Finnish author Tove Jansson published her now world-renowned children's story, *Comet in Moominland*. In the tale, the Moomins, a type of troll, learn that a comet is going to hit the earth a few days later, and the tale revolves around the family as they seek out each other and find a cave to try and hide from disaster. Ultimately, the comet misses the earth and so there is a happy ending. But for a time, the child reader is presented with the possibility of extinction, or at least, a world-changing event. The Moomin tale is not unique in presenting crisis, disaster or tragedy for children; indeed, many children's tales seem replete with such imagery. Despite contemporary pretensions towards childhood as a time of innocence, children are often provided access to a rich array of accounts that encourage them to reflect on large existential questions of life and death.

In our current historic conditions, as climate crisis looms, wars uproot families, and new economic conditions require old and young people to imagine the future anew, how we introduce children to large global challenges and the real-world impacts on the people involved seems a pressing question. This event is designed to explore how we have represented crises in art, literature, media, heritage and educational resources designed for children and young people and how they have, in turn, responded to such materials. We are particularly interested in the place of children's emotion in such representations, in how children respond to these resources, and as an analytical tool for reflecting on the crisis or disaster take form in works for children. We encourage papers from any time period, including the present, and from all relevant disciplines. We interpret 'children's literature' widely, including visual representations, film, new media, tv, and radio, as well as more traditional resources aimed at children and young people.

Conference organisers: Katie Barclay, Dianne Hall, Dolly MacKinnon, Una McIlvenna, Charlotte-Rose Millar

This event is part of a series by the organisers that press us to consider the intersections of future, feeling, children, temporality, crisis and our imagined responses. Please look out for further information.



Programme

910-930 Registration

930-945 Welcome

945-1115 Session 1

1115-1145 Tea break

1145-115 Session 2

115-215 Lunch

215-345 Session 2

345-4 Tea break

4-5 Keynote

5-515 Closing Remarks

Programme

910-930 Registration

930-945 Welcome

945-1115 Session 1

Drawings of War

Chair: Katie Barclay

“All of us kids have History”: Awareness and Agency in Children’s Drawings of the Spanish Civil War [Online]

Anita Rescia

“Their own poignant story”: Australian Exhibitions of Drawings by Spanish Civil War Orphans during the 1930s

Anthony White

Suffer the Children: Representations of Suffering in the Soviet Children’s Magazine *Murzilka* 1956 – 1964

Helen Lachal

1115-1145 Tea break

1145-115 Session 2

Worries of Warfare

Chair: Dolly MacKinnon

War and Irish children

Dianne Hall

Interpreting boys' writing sheets during the Napoleonic Wars, their illustrations and their impact [online]

Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen

The War-Torn Ceiling and the Child-Narrator: Angst, Vulnerability and Agency in Christine Nöstlinger's 'Der zerschossene Vater'

Cecilia White

115-215 Lunch

215-345 Session 3

Selling Suffering

Chair: Una McLivenna

'Short was her life, the longer is her rest :.' Navigating childhood disaster using John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'

Grace Howe

History in the making: *In My Blood It Runs*

Melissa Raine

Sexuality as crisis: Australian teenage girls' responses to sexual health information, 1970–2010

Saskia Roberts

345-4 Tea break

4-5 Keynote

Hope in Crisis: Children's Emotions in the First World War

Stephanie Olsen

Chair: Katie Barclay

5-515 Closing Remarks

Abstracts

Hope in Crisis: Children's Emotions in the First World War

Stephanie Olsen

What were the emotional reactions of children to the First World War? How did adults respond to them and in what ways did they try to shape the emotional and moral outlooks of children? And more crucially, how did children themselves shape narratives and responses to war? British and Dominion children and youth in the First World War were not sheltered from the often horrifying realities of this unprecedented conflict. Rather, as co-creators with adults, children learned how to play with their emotions, to harness them for action in the war effort, to shape common experiences and to teach adults. Using a wide variety of child-focused, child-directed and child-produced sources, including popular media, educational materials and even essays of dreams, this talk argues that children's emotions were central to the war, and to the imagined future citizenry of the British Empire. Childhood emotions were calls to action for children in wartime, as well as leverage for feelings of national independence. Just as fear and despair were thought to be agents of continued war, hope was mobilized as an agent of patriotism and of peace.

War and Irish children

Dianne Hall

When Padraig Pearse proclaimed that English were 'fools' because they have 'left us our glorious dead' in his famous graveside oration at the burial of Fenian hero O'Donovan Rossa at Glasnevin in 1915 he was referring to the histories, songs and stories of past Irish heroes who had fought for Irish freedom. Such narratives of past wars were embedded in the literature, stories and songs that were aimed at and consumed by Irish children and young people throughout the 19th and early 20th century. This paper will examine the role of war in in stories, textbooks and songs that were aimed at Irish children, both protestant and Catholic.

Dianne Hall is an historian at Victoria University, Melbourne who researches violence, gender and memory in the history of the Irish and the Irish Diaspora.

'Short was her life, the longer is her rest :' Navigating childhood disaster using John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'

Grace Howe

In June 1723, eight-year-old Betty Keay lay dying of small-pox. Her grandmother, Sarah Savage, recorded in her diary that Betty passed her final moments in 'excellent' prayer, amazing witnesses with her pious death-bed composure. She recited from the Book of Psalms as she navigated fits of fainting, taking comfort that God would strengthen her faith and shepherd her as she journeyed to Heaven. Betty also turned to John Foxe's accounts of the Henrician Protestant martyrs to help soothe her physical and emotional suffering. Her grandmother recalled that as Betty struggled through her painful symptoms she reflected on 'that martyr [James Bainham] in flames, who said he felt no more pain than if on a bed of roses.' These religious contemplations provided Betty with immediate relief, and she found her

distress and 'outward pains' suddenly transformed into serene joy and an eagerness for death. This paper investigates how John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs' provided early modern children, adolescents, and their parents with crucial spiritual comfort and encouragement as they navigated episodes of anguish and disaster.

Grace May Howe is a PhD candidate of The University of Adelaide. Her research examines templates of piety and suffering in John Foxe's martyrology, *The Acts and Monuments*.

Suffer the Children: Representations of Suffering in the Soviet Children's Magazine *Murzilka* 1956 – 1964

Helen Lachal

In the period 1956 – 1964, the Soviet children's magazine *Murzilka*, the longest-running in the world, was predominantly a cheery, colourful celebration of Soviet life and progress aimed at readers aged between six and ten years old. Tasked with the socialisation and education of millions of children into the Soviet way of life and the imminent Communist future, articles, stories, poems and illustrations were included to help shape young minds as well as to entertain. Depictions of children suffering due to the horrors of war, the exploitative nature of colonialism, the injustice of racism and the inequities of capitalism also featured in this period however. This paper explores these pieces in particular and attempts to understand how and why *Murzilka* sought to portray suffering children to its vast readership in the period 1956 – 1964.

Helen Lachal is a final-year PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her research focuses on the Soviet children's magazine *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964 and employs quantitative and qualitative content analysis and archival research to understand how the magazine attempted to influence its target readership.

History in the making: *In My Blood It Runs*

Melissa Raine

In 2019, twelve-year-old indigenous boy Djuwan Hoosan became the youngest person to address the United Nations Human Rights Council. He called on Australian governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility from ten to fourteen in line with international law. Djuwan, aged ten, had been the subject of the documentary *In My Blood It Runs*, which focused on his participation in the Northern Territory education system, his cultural status as a healer, and, at this critical age, the looming threat of criminal liability.

In My Blood it Runs is an internationally awarded creative text that addresses the contemporary crisis into which indigenous children are forced. It constitutes an intervention into debates with deep historical roots, where childhood and criminality, indigenous children, institutionalised education, and Australian history intersect. The filmmakers' stated primary goal is to make schools culturally safe for indigenous students. They have collaborated with partners to create resources to accompany classroom screenings. This paper focuses on the documentary's foregrounding of Djuwan's emotions for producing meaning, especially in footage of him within the classroom.

Melissa Raine is an Honorary Associate of The University of Melbourne's School of Culture and Communication. Melissa has worked on medieval literary childhoods as well as participating in interdisciplinary projects on music and autism. Melissa's monograph on children's voices in contemporary Australia will be published by Springer in 2025.

"Autobiographic pages of unkept diaries:" Agency in Children's Drawings During the Spanish Civil War [Online]

Anita Rescia

Wartime images of children have a unique ability to appeal to viewers' pathos, spurring feelings of indignation towards the conflict that causes innocent children to suffer so greatly. In this paper, I will analyze drawings created by children that were circulated during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

Sixty of these drawings were published in a work titled *They Still Draw Pictures* (1938), edited by J.A. Weissberger, who considers them "autobiographic pages of unkept diaries." These drawings, and hundreds of others, offer us an opportunity to look at the war through the eyes of those children, and to see how they made sense of this crisis. As Aldous Huxley writes in his prologue to this book, "scenes of war... are portrayed again and again with a power of expression that evokes our admiration for the childish artists and our horror at the elaborate bestiality of modern war".

I will argue how these images demonstrate an intent to market the children's political presence to evoke feelings of injustice towards their victimhood. Not in spite of, but, indeed, because the drawings are childish, their impact on viewers is more profound. Moreover, I will analyze the weight of this art, which demonstrates not only children's painful awareness of the war, but also their agency and capacity for justice.

Anita Rescia is a PhD student and language instructor at Stony Brook University in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literature in New York. Her research interests include children's literature, the representations of childhood in literature and film of the 20th and 21st centuries, and (post)memory studies of the Spanish Civil War.

Sexuality as crisis: Australian teenage girls' responses to sexual health information, 1970–2010

Saskia Roberts

Venereal disease, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS: how did Australian girls understand the sexual health issues they faced in the recent past? Analysing unpublished letters to *Dolly* magazine's notorious medical advice columns and approximately forty oral histories I have conducted with a diverse range of interviewees, I trouble two major assumptions of Australian histories of sexuality. First, I argue that girls experienced the widespread availability of contraception as a form of punishment for promiscuity rather than liberation from pregnancy. The history of girls being denied the Pill is well documented; by contrast, my interviewees had contraception forced on them by medical professionals seeking to chastise and control their sexual behaviour. Second, I examine the emergence of AIDS and the consequent flood of safe sex information directed at teenagers. Australia's response

to AIDS has been internationally acclaimed, but girls' new awareness of sexual health led them to interpret pubertal changes as STIs, even if they hadn't engaged in any sexual activity. Overall, girls learned to view their sexual desires and changing bodies as both epicentres and products of crisis. By taking these responses seriously, I re-evaluate not only the impact of sexual health resources but also girls' roles in shaping our sexual norms.

Saskia Roberts is a History PhD candidate at the Australian National University. She has written for *Lilith*, The Conversation and the Northern Territory Treaty Commission.

Interpreting boys' writing sheets during the Napoleonic Wars, their illustrations and their impact

Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen

May 4th 1799, Tipu Sultan was defeated by the British East India Company, drawing the Mysore Wars to a bloody close. Within six months, the news had filtered into English classrooms by way of the writing sheets on which young boys demonstrated their penmanship. Printed and purchased by adults, and completed by children in the classroom, writing sheets represent a convergence of lived realities and operate as sites of ideological exchange between generations. What then, can the illustrations on these writing sheets tell us about how the brutalities of Britain's wars were (or were not) conveyed to young boys? Considering that the children engaging with these images were approaching the age of enlistment, what feelings did these images evoke? And how might have these emotions been embodied through boys' play and eventual martial endeavours?

In this paper, I will survey a selection of understudied writing sheets which exult Britain's victories, c. 1798 - 1815. Examining writing sheets within the social context of the schoolroom, I posit that they may be productively read in conjunction with accounts of children playing at soldiers to understand how young boys were receiving and reading imagery of Britain's ongoing wars, and then interpreting and replicating it in their own spaces. Moreover, I will suggest that writing sheets operated as active sites of enculturation into the citizenry of a nation relentlessly at war.

Caitlin Wareing-Oksanen is an assistant curator with the Royal Air Force Museum, and a researcher whose work examines the material culture of childhood during eighteenth and nineteenth century. She holds an MSc in Global Premodern Art: History, Heritage, and Curation at the University of Edinburgh's College of Art, and BA in Art History from the University of Victoria.

"Their own poignant story": Australian Exhibitions of Drawings by Spanish Civil War Orphans during the 1930s

Anthony White

In 1939, the Australian Art Gallery in Adelaide hosted an exhibition titled 'Child Art from Many Countries.' The display featured artworks produced by children aged between two years old and the late teens from 22 different countries including Austria, Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Mexico, Italy, and the USA. Also included within the exhibition were artworks by orphaned children living in refugee

camps in France who had fled the Spanish Civil War. The exhibition was assembled by the Australian artist Frances Derham (1894 – 1987), a significant figure in children's art education. Although the show was primarily designed to promote Derham's approach to the understanding of child art, the works by the Spanish children she included gave powerful insights into lives which were deeply affected by war. Analysing a range of archival documents, including contemporary writings and statements, reviews of the exhibition, as well as the drawings themselves (now held in the National Gallery of Australia), this paper demonstrates that although the 'Child Art from Many Countries' exhibition instrumentalised the children's drawings for purposes beyond those germane to the young people's experiences, these artworks remain an important record of the material and psychological havoc wrought by military conflict on children.

Anthony White is an Associate Professor of Art History in the School of Culture and Communication at The University of Melbourne. He has published several books including most recently *Variations: A More Diverse Picture of Contemporary Art* (with Tristen Harwood and Grace McQuilten, Monash University Publishing, 2023), and authored peer-reviewed journal articles in *October*, *Grey Room*, *Third Text* and *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*.

The War-Torn Ceiling and the Child-Narrator: Angst, Vulnerability and Agency in Christine Nöstlinger's 'Der zerschossene Vater'

Cecilia White

The deceptively simple commentary of the child-narrator in Christine Nöstlinger's 'Der zerschossene Vater' introduces a World War Two Vienna that is materially, socially and affectively torn apart. When a bomb tears through the ceiling and public space invades the private, the child-narrator's snap-shot view of the exposed home, strewn objects and adult behaviours reveals two critical, emotion-inducing elements: the unknowable present and future, and the adult-reader's challenge to connect with another tear or *Riss*, that between adult and childhood affective expression, needs and comprehension. Nöstlinger radically focuses attention on the power of the traditionally marginalised and neglected child-voice. This paper examines Nöstlinger's interplay of the war-torn child-view with the complex construct of the 'Riss' to demonstrate how fragmentation, vulnerability and Angst may activate tenderness and resilient agency, demonstrated through the interaction of the child with another female character, her grandmother. This paper goes beyond Viorica Patea's lyrical view of the short story to propose how this work's allegorically intertextual foundations inform a powerful socio-political and intergenerational subtext. It argues that Nöstlinger's expression of existential urgency engages perceptibly with the lyrical history of William Blake's poetry *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Here, Nöstlinger's *Riss* is interpreted, in Blake's spiritual terms, as the fall from grace, from goodness in the world. This *Riss* opens a dissonant void, destabilising the public-private/ innocence-experience space of society and of the child. The vulnerable child tries to reorient herself in the rubble and ash but cannot rest, scenes all too familiar today. Lifting the child-voice out of that era's denigration of the arts, Nöstlinger's 'aesthetics of brevity,' illuminates perception, Angst, vulnerability and the agency of intergenerational resilience. It contributes to an emerging body of literary works that provide critical reflection on 'moral, psychological, and spiritual repercussions of warfare,' and confronts the adult reader

with the authentic emotions and lived experience of a child facing the *Riss in der Decke*, the void of a (war)-torn ceiling.