

Abstract

There are many things that go into a successful children's book. Each story is unique from the other, with their own plotlines and morals. One of the most important aspects of children's literature is the coming of age story that a character goes through. The transition may be subtle or it may be the purpose of the story, but regardless of the magnitude, it is important because it helps the child readers with their own transitions. Children go through a plethora of changes in the change from innocence to adulthood, and at times it becomes overwhelming. It is at this time that these struggling children turn to the brave fictional characters they closely identify with in books to help guide them through their anxieties. Through any coming of age experience, whether it's at age four or age eleven, the child evolves into a matured version of themselves. These types of experiences are the ones that shape children to who they will become when they grow up, as well as help them find their own identity.

Coming of age stories can be found in any type of children's book, and, depending on the type of literature, the conflicts encountered by the characters are typically similar to something that the average child in that audience would be going through. Research and observation shows that children look to their favorite books to help them go through struggles they may be having, and help them find who they are. This coming of age experience is detrimental to the development of the child to become a fully functioning member of society at some point in their matured age. By exchanging adult experience with the naivety of children, the growing child is urged to become independent and more emotionally and intellectually developed, with the ultimate goal of finding their personal identity and the wisdom inside themselves.

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Coming of Age in This Age

Coming of age is an important transitional period in young children's lives. It includes various obstacles which test the maturity and growth of the individual, and eventually come to shape who they grow up to be. The events that take place throughout this transformation can sometimes be difficult to understand and bear with, and one of the tools which children are beginning to lean on are the books on their bookshelves. One of the reasons children look to their books is due to the identification they may feel towards the characters, and indulge in the books as a way to "meet characters worth observing and to witness how they manage with the conflict, peril, and adventure," in order to get a better understanding of what they might be going through (Tatar, 18). The coming of age of a character in a children's book is an important aspect to include for children who are in a transitional point in their lives, and help with their maturation intellectually and as a person overall. It allows them to witness and observe how other characters they might identify with deal with the sort of problems they may face at some point, and prepare themselves in some way to take on problems of their own.

In a coming of age story, a character takes on various conflicts which end up shaping them to become a more developed person through interactions between child and adult, as well as carry on conversations and interactions that help the transitioning child discover the "elder within" (McGuire, 2). The transition from adolescence to experience can account for an entire

book, or it can be more of a subtle conversion. Regardless of how or when the changes take place, it's an important part of character development for both the character and the reader.

When a child identifies with a fictional character, it means that they “grow to love” and care about them and their actions throughout their journey in the novel (Tatar, 19). Fictional characters from the books children read are often seen as more interesting partners-in-crime in their own daily conflicts and adventures. When children are going through tough situations in their lives, it is these partners they confide in and travel with in order to explore certain situations while staying in a safe place.

Martin Johansen focuses on how the task of becoming oneself is an important part of growing up as well as coming of age stories. Each person is a work in progress, growing and evolving from their experiences in life. These experiences help to shape who you become, especially those early on in life. In order to find yourself, according to Johansen, you must endure tough situations and types of despair, usually involving some type of darkness or deception. Despair can come in many forms, but despair in itself is a universal feeling that everyone encounters at some point. Overcoming your despair, whether it is the separation of child and mother, or a challenge of who you are from an outside source, is the key component to getting to know yourself and feeling concrete as a person. This “transition from despair to becoming a self,” is not one that happens in a matter of a single day (Johansen). It is a continual and ongoing movement that is woven throughout everyone's life. There will always be new challenges in life, and each conquered obstacle is another step towards determining your identity.

Various types of stories are geared towards helping children at crossroads in their lives. Picture books with younger audiences, like *Goodnight Moon*, as well as other children's books with more content like *The Phantom Tollbooth*, are designed to help these young readers at

various phases in their lives to develop and create tactics for managing with hardships they will come to face.

The widely-known children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, is a commonly used example for a simple coming of age story. Although it is closer to a picture book than a children's novel, and is geared towards a much younger audience, it still contains the story of a young boy who goes on an adventure to the unknown and comes back subtly transformed and matured in a unique way. In the book, Max, the main character, is an imaginative young boy who dislikes the authority put on him by his mother. In the beginning of the book, Max demonstrates behaviors "highly representative of the dramatic behaviors young children demonstrate," allowing for an identification factor between the reader and character automatically (Gross, 83).

Throughout the book, it is easy to see how Max changes his behaviors. Once he internalizes the behaviors he has learned from his mother, he begins to subject the imaginary "wild things" to these same behaviors, where he is acting as the authoritative figure. Although Max does eventually return to his room and mother, this change in behavior is an example of how small interactions between adult and child, as well as exchanges between child and fictional characters, can be a large contribution to a child's development and maturity. Through these interactions, Max has learned about authority and dictation over other subjects, adding to the evolution into who he may become.

In comparison to the coming of age experience in *Where the Wild Things Are*, there are also more developed types of experiences in children's novels that are more pertinent to children, because they are focused more on solid and realistic problems. Although the stories themselves might contain elements of magic and fantasy, the journeys and adventures that the fictional

characters endure are what matters most, because they symbolize a type of growth and maturation, both of which are key aspects in a coming of age novel. Children's books like *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Coraline* exemplify some of the multiple ways a character and, in turn, the reader, can come of age.

In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Milo undergoes an arguably drastic transformation in multiple ways. His coming of age experience involves his emotional change, as well as his intellectual maturity. Introduced as a "dejected" boy who believes that "almost everything is a waste of time," he embarks on a journey that ultimately changes his outlook on knowledge and learnings, as well as his overall emotional and mental state (Juster, 9). Through all the interactions with the Humbug, the Lethargarians, King Azaz, and the many other characters, Milo learns the importance of words, as well as to remain open-minded about the world around him. When he emerges from the tollbooth, his emotional state has changed from one of sadness to one of excitement for the world around him. Instead of thinking that everything around him is a waste, he instead admits his intellectual maturity, thankful for his enlightening learning experience in the tollbooth. Through Milo's transformation, children readers, too, travel with him through Expectations and are taught the same things as Milo, ultimately broadening their intellect and even possibly transforming their emotional state.

Coraline, too, captures a coming of age story that relates to many children around the world. In addition to her subpar relationship with her parents, the curious adventurer is faced with an unstimulating environment. Turned away by her busy parents, Coraline seeks entertainment from alternative sources, like the black cat and her crazy neighbors. Coraline's situation of seemingly eternal boredom is relatable for young readers, making Coraline's transformation much more meaningful and important to the reader. By conquering the other

mother and rescuing her real parents without any help from an adult, she learns how to be independent from not only her parents, but other authoritative figure as well. Coraline matures through direct experience with adults, and comes to learn when she needs to listen to authority and when to listen to herself and be dependent on herself. Whereas in the beginning of the story her parents didn't pay too much attention to her, a different type of independence is established when her parents return. Their relationship became closer in the sense that they are more understanding and respectful of Coraline, while still remaining a closer bonded family.

Children's books serve as a therapeutic way to address and embrace the magical and mystical worlds they're reading about as a way to work "through the complex primal emotions of childhood" (Tatar, 118). Children look to their books to help them deal with any overwhelming emotions or situations, because they allow them to retreat into the fantastical world where they are the ones in charge and can subside any anxieties. The books that children read in adolescence serve as a type of transport for things like self identification, behavioral guidance, and moral instruction. The stories they read about help them realize how certain situations can play out and exemplify the exchange between child innocence and adult guidance, acting as a catalyst for the character and even the reader to come to certain realizations about themselves. These realizations are a necessity for their discovery of who they are supposed to become and how they change with age. Books are a way for kids to encounter hardships and events in life indirectly and test out various paths on their way to maturation and discovery of their identity; who they are meant to be.

Certain aspects of maturation are universal. The journey from adolescent innocence to adult experiences is an intimidating transition that is made more comforting through literature. The coming of age stories in children's literature that the fictional characters go through serve as

models for children in an attempt to make their own situations less confusing. Often, children readers select the coming of age books because the content closely mirrors developmental experiences and desires they may be intrigued in resolving. It shows children that they are not alone in their experiences, and the characters they identify with can lead them safely through journeys they may be afraid to take on their own. Stories that exemplify a coming of age story are necessary to have in the bookshelves of kids because they help children understand not only situations they may be in, but who they are as well.

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