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Allie Faden

### Abandoned Children and Surrogate Parental Figures

Abandonment, a common fear of children, has roots in literature due to a lengthy history of child abandonment in situations where parents feel the child would be better served away from its home. In our own culture, we see the literary roots of this motif as early as in Biblical writings, such as the story of Moses, continuing into the literature of today. In many instances children are abandoned not because they are unwanted, but out of parental hope that a life away from the natural parents will provide a "better" life for the child(ren). Societies have dealt with this concern in a multitude of ways over time, spanning from Church approval for poor parents to "donate" their child(ren) to the Church up to our modern system of criminalizing such actions (Burnstein 213-221, "Child Abandonment Law & Legal Definition"). During Puritan days, children were fostered out to other homes when a woman remarried after the death of her husband, and were often removed from the home if the parents failed to ensure access to education for the children (Mintz and Kellogg 4-17). Likewise, Scandinavian youths were frequently fostered to other families, either due to a lack of living children within a family, or to cement social bonds between people of varying social status (Short). In the British Isles, surrogate parentage was routine, involving child hostages, fostering to other families to cement social bonds, to deal with illegitimate births, or to encourage increased opportunities for children born to poor families (Slitt, Rossini, Nicholls and Mackey). Correspondingly, as surrogate parentage is a common feature of life in a given society, the topic is treated routinely in literature, most notably in works of children's fiction as a mode of addressing the fears of children regarding varying modes of abandonment.

Abandonment is a frequently used trope in children's literature, taking many forms including death of natural parents, running away, sublimation of the natural parent's authority to a step-parent, literal abandonment, sale or barter of child and negligent parenting<sup>1</sup>. One sees overt demonstrations of the dangers of being parentless to children in both classics of children's literature and in modern works. However, in many cases in which the child has been abandoned, authors present at least one surrogate parental figure to guide the child toward good decision making, safety, and in some instances, reunion with the child(ren)'s natural parent(s). Three interpretations of this popular theme will here be examined in *Rumpelstiltskin*, by the Brothers Grimm; *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black; and *The Ugly Duckling*, by H.C. Andersen.

H.C. Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* presents another form of abandonment, utilizing a signet in place of a human child. In Andersen's work, the signet is routinely made fun of for his ugly appearance and his inability to fit in with the ducklings. Although he has, for reasons unknown to the reader, been abandoned by his natural parents (while still in the egg, he was put into the mother duck's egg nest), the mother of the ducklings takes him on and raises him. He is abandoned, and yet not. Despite the meanness of the ducklings and the neighborhood ducks, the signet is initially defended by his "mother" and given guidance. As the signet grows into a cygnet, even his mother is embarrassed by his ugliness and she too turns on him, resulting in the cygnet running away from home. He is tolerated by wild

<sup>1</sup>Negligent parenting may take several forms or involve varying degrees of negligence, from serious negligence where children are not fed, clothed, et cetera, to occasional or the situational parental absenteeism due to the multi-tiered demands of single parenting that produces "latch key kids".

ducks and ganders, and ultimately is taken in by an old woman who lived alone in a hut. This is his next surrogate parent, and she gives him a full three weeks in her home. Ultimately he runs away again, due to ill treatment from the woman's hen and cat and spends part of a cold winter alone. A farmer finds him and brings him home to his wife, giving the cygnet yet another opportunity to find his place within the world. After running away one more time, the cygnet, now a swan, meets other swans and is able to find a place of acceptance in the world.

Throughout this story, the ugly duckling is routinely abandoned, both due to actual abandonment, and by successfully running away. Each step of his journey, however, is tempered with kindness from a stranger who acts as a surrogate parent for a time. Interestingly, although the ugly duckling *does* encounter someone who acts as a surrogate parent to him, helping to guide him along for a short while, the poor treatment he receives from those surrounding the surrogate cause him to feel that he does *not* have a place outside solitude. The mother duck, his first point of contact with a surrogate whose other charges are unkind, does turn against him in response to the conflict between him and her own offspring. This likely initiated a pattern of belief that he is unworthy of love the moment any other surrogate's charges began to harass him, ultimately leading to him running away. This type of self-perpetuating abandonment is demonstrated in contemporary America, with an estimated 380,000 children per year living in homelessness (United States). A study conducted by the Family and Youth Services Bureau indicates that "nearly half [of study participants] had been kicked out or abandoned by their parents or guardians..." and that "60 percent had been raped, beaten up, or robbed..." (*ibid*). Of American youth who do run away from one or more homes, "46 percent of runaway and homeless youth reported being physically abused, 38 percent reported being emotionally abused, and 17 percent reported being forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member" ("Homeless and Runaway Youth"). These statistics demonstrate that although *The Ugly Duckling* was not written to demonstrate the horrors children undergo in the United States, it certainly is representative of the trials many youth undergo, and accurately depicts the response of youths to familial (or surrogate familiar) abuse. Approximately one percent of foster care children run away from placement homes three or more times, citing a desire to reunite with biological family as one of the top three reasons for repetitive self-abandonment (United States). Although the ugly duckling himself has no concept of biological family, his inability to fit in or feel as though he is part of a family unit in which his place has a solid foundation is reflected in these contemporary statistics. Ultimately, the ugly duckling *does* find a place with those who are biologically "the same" as him - swans, corresponding to the statistic that sixty percent of foster care children are permanently placed with a biological relative, which typically does result in better long-term outcomes for the child ("Foster Care Children Statistics").

The story *Rumpelstiltskin* begins with a miller who abandons his daughter to the king. In this story, the miller's daughter is told on three successive nights to spin a room's worth of straw into gold. On each night, the amount of straw to be converted increases, and the daughter is threatened with death should she not complete the task. Unable to spin straw into gold, the daughter accepts the help (for a price) from Rumpelstiltskin (here the parental figure, in that he performs tasks for her that ensure her continued life). As payment for his help<sup>2</sup>, the miller's daughter promises to abandon her own first child to Rumpelstiltskin once she becomes Queen. Although this fairy tale involves the possibility of generational abandonment, ultimately the daughter is successful in solving the riddle of Rumpelstiltskin's name, which prevents her from being required to abandon her own child in the same manner in which she herself was abandoned. In effect, in this story the abandoned child protects another child from a similar fate. According to Susan Anderson, a psychotherapist specializing in abandonment topics, abandonment can cause severe depression in a subject, causing them to hold on even closer to those they hold dear (Anderson). Evidence in children's literature, cross-culturally, demonstrates this type of clinging to what (or who) is known, and is exemplified in stories such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Secret*

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<sup>2</sup>It should be noted here that although one typically views parenthood as an event without any economic benefit, it is a commonly accepted social contract that in payment for the care one receives in one's youth, repayment in the form of elderly care must be remitted later in life. Despite elements of love and selflessness in the parent-child relationship, this transactional aspect of this type of relationship does still exist.

*Garden, Linnets and Valerians, The Secret of NIMH, Little Women, Artemis Fowl, The Black Stallion, The Golden Compass, the Cirque du Freak series, Mary Poppins, The Wizard of Oz, Toby Tyler,* and innumerable other examples of children's literature. It is reasonable, therefore, to extrapolate that the Grimm brothers, in their telling of Rumpelstiltskin, acknowledge the effects on the psyche of childhood abandonment and allow the miller's daughter to effectively right the wrong done to her vicariously through her own child. Through this protection, the miller's daughter simultaneously protects her own child from a fate similar to her own, while also demonstrating some evidence of healing regarding her own abandonment.

*The Spiderwick Chronicles*<sup>3</sup> (2003) is a modernized take on abandoned children, using a scenario children of today are likely to be familiar with in addition to being able to relate to: latchkey kids (Venter and Rambau 345-356). Mallory, Jared and Simon Grace are the children of a broken home. Their father leaves the family and divorces their mother, who then moves the children from New York City to a dilapidated house loaned to them by the institutionalized Aunt Lucinda. The mother of the children, Helen Grace, is an absentee parent due to her obligations as a single parent. The children then undergo five books worth of adventures with the fae folk. In this series, although there is no physical, interactive surrogate parent, the children are routinely "advised" by a field guide written by one of their ancestors, Arthur Spiderwick<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, they occasionally experience moments of kindness from various fairies and humans, who advise the children as well.

In Book One, the children move into their new home and discover a sealed off room in which they find their field guide. They also unwittingly destroy the home of a brownie<sup>5</sup>, who, angered, becomes a boggart<sup>6</sup> and plagues the family with disruptions to their home life, the cleanliness of the home, and beats the children in their sleep. The children discover why the brownie has turned into a boggart (with the help of the field guide), and build him a new home, returning most of his things. The boggart returns to its original form and finds the children to give them advice after thanking them for his new home. He informs the children that everyone who has possessed or used this field guide has come to harm. The brownie, Thimbletack, then advises them to throw away, burn or otherwise rid themselves of the field guide and to ignore the presence of the fae so nothing unfortunate will happen to them.

In books two through five, Thimbletack tells Jared that because his advice had been ignored, consequences would follow. The children become embroiled in a series of (mis)adventures, battling different species of fairies. Ultimately, the most dangerous foe the Grace children encounter, Mulgarath, kidnaps the children's mother and holds her hostage. The children are forced to fight and defeat Mulgarath in order to save their mother and other individuals the children have become close to. Through these (mis)adventures, the children are advised and in some instances, aided, by a variety of surrogates, including elves, a hobgoblin named Hogsqueal, their Aunt Lucinda, Arthur Spiderwick, a griffin, and their original helper, Thimbletack. Each of these characters develop bonds with the Spiderwick children and guide them, in a parental role, toward more sensible choices and a safer life.

This series expertly combines elements of surrogate parentage with the delight children may feel

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<sup>3</sup>There are five books in this series, plus supplemental field guides. In the first book of the series, the reader is introduced to the characters and given background story on the family as well as explaining how the children end up experiencing a series of adventures with fairies.

<sup>4</sup>The character Arthur Spiderwick is named after Arthur Rackham, to whom the books are also dedicated.

<sup>5</sup>"Brownie is a personage of small stature, wrinkled visage, covered with short curly brown hair, and wearing a brown mantle and hood. His residence is the hollow of the old tree, a ruined castle, or the abode of man. He is attached to particular families, with whom he has been known to reside, even for centuries, threshing the corn, cleaning the house, and doing everything done by his northern and English brethren" ("The Fairy Mythology: Great Britain: The Brownie").

<sup>6</sup>Boggarts are "Household spirits from the north of England, and similar to [brownies](#) and [bogies](#), although their nature is much more malicious and less helpful. The dark and hairy boggarts are dressed in tattered clothes, with meddling hands and clumsy feet. The presence of a boggart is betrayed by the unusual number of small accidents and strange noises after dark. They tip over milk bottles, frighten cats, pinch little children, blow out candles, and cause many other mishaps." ("Boggart").

in the adventures they can have without parental supervision. The authors detail the various coping strategies of the children as they come to accept their new lives without their father. The authors also empower the children by allowing them to be the sole determiners of their mother's fate, giving them power over their own destinies in a way that reconnects the members of the family and affords them to heal from their feelings of abandonment.

Stories such as *The Ugly Duckling*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *The Spiderwick Chronicles* allow children myriad ways of reconciling the ever-present childhood fear of abandonment with hope that should they find themselves on their own, a surrogate (or several) will step in to help them find their way. Each of these three works exemplifies a different type of abandonment, along with resulting variation in the effects of abandonment on the protagonist(s). As a result, the characters in these works experience surrogacy in different forms, but unilaterally are helped by their surrogate parent(s) in a manner that allows for a more fulfilling and rewarding future than they likely could have experienced in a situation where navigating the world was a solitary affair that exposed these children to the harsher elements of life.

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