

A SECOND LOOK AT “THE ROCKING HORSE”: Is It Really A Children’s Book?

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The *Rocking Horse* written by Becky Bravo and illustrated by Elmer Borlongan was the first winner of The Romeo Forbes Children’s Storywriting Competition, an annual contest organized by Canvas, a non-profit organization that works with artists, writers, artisans, museums and other institutions to create opportunities, and promote broader awareness and appreciation for Philippine art, culture and environment. (www.canvas.ph) The book, the first of many more, is the result of an ekphrastic process that began with a painting by Elmer Borlongan of a grown man sitting on a rocking horse as he plays the violin. The text by Becky Bravo, inspired by this one painting, was further illustrated by Borlongan and eventually published as a children’s book.

The book’s blurb reads as “the poignant story of a boy of frail health who, nurtured by his widowed father’s love, learns to appreciate nature, music and a lovely wooden horse” to give an idea of what the book is about. The language used in this story is lyrical and draws the reader immediately into this poignant world of Chisco and his father. However, upon close examination, one realizes that this is not the story of a boy frail of health but rather of his father sick of heart. Of the elements of fiction, conflict is the essence of fiction and point-of-view is fundamental to creating the main character. According to foremost Filipino writer Jose Dalisay, Jr., “point of view is one of the first and most strategic decisions authors make, conscious or otherwise. Point of view establishes the degree of distance – the level of comfort and credulity between the story and its receiver.” (Dalisay, 23) The make-up of the main character is demonstrated by his action, as well as his attitude, personal vision, and interpretation of the situations in which

their destiny unfolds. "In the majority of stories, everything the reader sees is filtered through someone's point of view. At the heart of all experience coming through our senses there is a regulating and evaluating self. But it is the nature of fiction to tell us about these things through the perspectives of someone who has special reasons for being interested in them – and we understand them more fully when they are passed on this way." (Norton, 1998)

The story begins with a gentleman farmer from the South "who planted fruit trees and raised a small number of horses." He had a beautiful free-spirited wife who loved horses. She suddenly died leaving him with their young son who everyone fondly called Chisco. Like his mother, he also loved horses, in particular, "the large, friendly stallion with the brownish black coat and a mane the color of raw sugar."

Chisco, like most children, rambled around the farm "in search of twigs and bugs and fallen leaves," and when he was tired, he would eat the pick of the day sprawled under the shade of his favourite tree, "a stout kamagong." "When he was finished, the boy would wrap his arms around the trunk of the kamagong and try to guess how long before he could reach all the way around it and touch the ends of his fingers." He dreamt of eventually being able to reach all the way around it. Everyday, Chisco wrapped his arms around the kamagong tree and "talked to it like it was a friend."

But like his mother, Chisco is of frail health and his father "resolved that his son should not set foot outdoors." Everyday Chisco looked out his window and longed for the outdoors. "The farmer did all he could to coax Chisco's mind away from the outdoors" and filled Chisco's room with "toys of every shape and size, shelves full of books, sheaves of paper in the colors of a rainbow, paints and pens with which to draw and write." There were music lessons and tutors but none as wonderful as the outdoors. And as the boy constantly asked his father when he could go out to play, the kamagong tree began to wither until one day it was found uprooted "lying on its side on the dewy grass, its crown pointing towards the house." Chisco watched sadly as the tree was loaded on a truck and driven away.

Just before the end of that summer, Chisco received a package. In it was "a shiny rocking horse, completely black except for a mane the color of raw sugar." Chisco wrapped his arms around the rocking horse's neck and spent many hours "rocking to and fro, pretending..."

Chisco passed away shortly after that summer. The forlorn farmer put the rocking horse by Chisco's grave and "in the place where the old kamagong

used to stand, the farmer found a sapling pushing its way out of the ground. All he could do was scratch his head and marvel at the sight. He smiled. Sometimes it passes beyond our sight, but life goes on. Everywhere.”

The Rocking Horse is more the father’s story rather than Chisco’s. It is the father who experiences the conflict of loss and suffering, and it is the father and not the boy who is accorded the insight at the end of the story that life goes on. Most of the story is told from the father’s point of view and it is his will that prevails in the story as he tries to ease the pain of loss and confinement for his child. As is seen in these series of paragraphs, the child’s life is determined by the father who, under the guise of a deep love and caring, has imprisoned his child – “he would let the child ramble...” “when he thought Chisco had played quite enough...” “...resolved that his son...” “...did all he could to coax...”

A peculiar attribute of children’s literature is that it is written by adults for children “We are dealing with texts that are designed for a non-peer audience, texts that are created in a complex social environment by adults.” (Hunt, 45) The imbalance of power between adult and child in the story and adult writers and child readers complicate the matter. The childhood experience originates from adults who dominate a child’s life physically and emotionally often justified by the belief that it is for the child’s benefit. And while it is the only genre that insists writers must know their audience, this is many times, forgotten as writers get carried away by nostalgia, a natural process that the writer needs to go through as he/she digs deep into his/her childhood.

The story, however, when talking about Chisco, delves into the culture of childhood. In his essay on the definition of childhood, Peter Hunt refers to the essay by Nicholas Tucker to briefly explain the culture of childhood. “Nicholas Tucker draws together features of childhood which are transcultural and diachronic. These include spontaneous play, receptivity to the prevailing culture, physiological constraints (children are generally smaller and weaker), and sexual immaturity (which implies that certain concepts are not immediately relevant to them). They have the tendencies to form emotional attachments to mature figures, to be incapable of abstract thought, to have less of a concentration-span than adults, and to be at the mercy of their immediate perceptions. As a result they tend to be more adaptable than the mature person (whose ‘schemas’ of the world tend to be set). There is considerable evidence that their cognitive skills develop in a common sequence. At different stages, children will have different

attitudes to death, fear, sex, perspectives, egocentricity, causality, and so on." (Hunt, 57)

Chisco, although frail and fragile, is a child of nature and as free spirited as any child should be. He feels love towards a creature of nature. Various studies show that children benefit immensely from playing outdoors. They develop more advanced motor skills and are sick less often. Their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills. Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder with wonder as an important motivator for lifelong learning. Outdoor play improves children's cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills. Nature buffers the impact of life's stresses on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of exposure to nature, the greater the benefits. Nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity and instills a sense of peace and being at one with the world. Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other. Natural environments stimulate social interaction between children. Outdoor environments are important to children's development of independence and autonomy. <<http://www.whitehutchinson.com/children/articles/outdoor.shtml>>

Chisco, despite his confinement, is allowed to play and is given the materials with which to do so. However, he plays alone and in his room, a confined, indoor area. Much of a child's social interaction, in whatever culture, occurs during play. Play is an intrinsic activity that is neither imposed nor directed by adults. It is concerned with the means and not the end, is free from external rules and is non-serious and highly engaging. (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg) The importance of play to a child can never be emphasized enough. Play facilitates a child's cognitive development, it permits children to solve some of their emotional problems, to cope with anxiety and inner conflicts in a non-threatening environment and it advances the social development of a child particularly through fantasy play. By acting out roles, children learn to understand others and to practice roles they will assume as they grow older. (Haight and Miller, 1993) (Hetherington, 466)

Even as the element of play is present, the theme of death pervades the story that the serious and brooding tone of the text impresses. From the first page, where the reader is told that the farmer's wife dies, we get a sense that something unpleasant will happen again which even the arrival of a rocking horse cannot dissipate. The rocking horse's creation is made possible only by the death of the kamagong, Chisco's favourite tree.

The concept of death, according to Jean Piaget, eminent Swiss child psychologist, for children from about 2-6 years of age is that things are physically the way they appear. Death is not seen as final and is more a temporary state. From the ages of 6-11 years children often associate death with a "sleep-like" stage due to the description of death they receive from adults. In the later years of this stage there is more of a cognitive change. These children are able to distinguish reality from fantasy and they begin to understand that death is final, but it still seems far away. They can also understand the consequences of death. Death means finality, change, and dealing with new feelings. This approximates the adult way of viewing death. They become more interested about death and its meaning. (Hetherington) This stage allows children to explore their feelings and ideas about death. They may also gain interest in cultural rituals. Increased cognitive function allow children to think more intellectually about death instead of basing everything on their own personal experiences. The older child can also view death through a literal perception. This means they can understand death at all levels. Children know the difference between literally meanings and metaphors related to death. They also explore the meanings of heaven, hell, and afterlife. Older children can think more abstractly about ideas such as death and afterlife. (<http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/dept/d46/psy/dev/faloo/Death/concept.html>)

Filipino children are exposed to death at a very young age. Our grieving processes are very public and less mournful. In some rural areas, wakes are held in the house of the deceased which is open to mourners well into the night over several days. Young family members are often brought to the casket to view the dead to say their goodbyes and are allowed to move freely around the area. Food and drink is almost always served and in many occasions, gambling sessions and loud music accompany the dead. Among the many rituals that attend our dead and where children participate in is when the tomb is about to be sealed. The children present are gathered and passed over the tomb. It is believed that in this way, none of them will follow the deceased into eternal life and will grow up into adulthood. All Saints' Day and All Souls Day are major occasions in the Filipino calendar where families including children trek to the cemetery for a whole day of feasting and gambling. On these occasions, children are introduced to the rituals for the dead primarily by example. (http://www.livinginthephilippines.com/early_childhood_and_death.html)

It is however the twin theme of renewal that prevents this story from being totally morose. While children's books do not necessarily have to have happy endings those that do not should conclude with a sense of hope which is in a sense, an attempt to keep the child innocent of the world's realities. And while this story ends with hope, it is the farmer who lives this experience and not Chisco the child, even as the last illustration is of children playing under a kamagong tree.

A children's book is more often than not a picture book. It is the first time a child is exposed to the written word and the visual arts and therefore must be of an excellent quality. It is, taken as a whole, a work of art. "Picture books are probably the most innovative, experimental, and exciting area of children's literature – but also one of the most difficult to understand. They are the form of literature that more than any other is designed specifically for children. Pictures must interact with words. They must have a style, take a viewpoint, and reflect decisions about details, all of which have social, cultural, and political implications." (Hunt, 1051) The simplest definition of a picture book is a book wherein every page of text is accompanied by an illustration. However, a picture book is anything but simple. The role of picture books, according to Sonia Landes, is to "enhance the meaning of a story by illustrating the words." Both the text and illustrations have semiotic potential. The relationship between text and illustrations is "contrapuntal, they complement and complete each other. By representing visibly, instead of representing by words (describing), a picture book becomes naturally a dramatic experience: direct, immediate, vivid, moving." (Shulevitz, 240) Illustrations can add information or atmosphere, contradict or provide a comment on the words, explain and clarify – or even confuse. They can follow fashions in artistic style, imitate or echo other artists, or develop new techniques." (Hunt, 1051) "Picture books are multivocal and polyphonic, a place where many voices meet," (Hunt, 1052) and in the same way as texts, "are a significant means by which we integrate children into the ideology of our culture." (Nodelman, 73)

The question that needs to be asked for both text and illustrations in a children's books is, what is the meaning being imparted? "It is for this reason above all that we need to make ourselves aware of the complex significations of the apparently simple and obvious words and pictures of a (children's) book." (Nodelman, 73) "Close attention to picture books automatically turns readers into semioticians. For children as well as adult theorists, realizing that, and learning to become more aware of the distortions in

picture book representations, can have two important results. The first is that it encourages consciousness and appreciation of the cleverness and subtlety of both visual and verbal artists. The second result of an awareness of signs is even more important: the more both adults and children realize the degree to which all representations misrepresent the world, the less likely they will be to confuse any particular representation with reality, or to be unconsciously influenced by ideologies they have not considered. Making ourselves and our children more conscious of the semiotics of the picture books through which we show them their world and themselves will allow us to give them the power to negotiate their own subjectivities - surely a more desirable goal than repressing them into conformity to our own views." (Nodelman, 79-80) Clearly, children's picture books are not as innocent as we think they are.

According to Filipino art critic Alice Guillermo, "understanding art has to do with "reading" the visual work as a re-presentation of the world, an artistic construct and signifying practice conveying a complex of ideas, feelings, values, attitudes, moods, and atmospheres that derive from world views and ideologies. This simple semiotic approach goes beyond the formalist view and advances a broader aesthetics in which the work is situated within the coordinates of society and history in a dynamic relationship of engagement. "(Guillermo, 1)

As mentioned earlier in this essay, *The Rocking Horse* is a product of the ekphrastic process. According to Dr. Marjorie Evasco, poet and scholar, ekphrasis, in its earliest, most restricted sense referred to the verbal description of a visual representation, often of an imagined object such as the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*. As defined by the poet Marne Kilates, it is "one art describing (or imitating, mimicking) another work of art, bringing together everything that is implied, absent, or cannot be depicted, by the medium of the other art. It is that which is inspired, based on, interpreting or re-interpreting, any of the visual or non-visual arts. Some examples in poetry are John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" on an imagined Grecian urn, Elizabeth Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" on the Renaissance artist and his most famous painting "The Annunciation," W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" on Pieter Breughel the Elder's painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," Marjorie Evasco's "Tension Luminosa" from Fernando Zobel's painting of the same title and Sid Hildawa's "Sick Leave" from Juan Luna's "Parisian Life." The text for "The Rocking Horse" was inspired by a painting by Elmer Borlongan and the succeeding illustrations/paintings by Elmer Borlongan were based on the text of Becky Bravo.

For Kilates, it is the “most stimulating, enjoyable manner of writing, especially poetry, from art.” Text and painting “delight” each other with perhaps the smile of recognition, the pleasure (and pain) of knowledge, the light of epiphany.” (www.nameabledays.jimdo.com/ekphrasis.ph)

Elmer Borlongan is a multi-awarded painter whose artistic style is described by art critics as a figurative expressionism that highlights the visually disturbing images of an imperfect world. It is not the content but the way the content is expressed that matters. (www.kulay-diwa.com/elmer_borlongan) “The figurative style, according to Guillermo, “is not mere caprice, passing fashion, or the artist’s personal *écriture*; beyond these, it implies a particular re-presentation or interpretation of the world, a world view, if not ideology.” (Guillermo, 10) Expressionism is a style that developed in Germany at the start of the 20th century that artists used to convey their feelings. Strong emotions were expressed by the use of distorted shapes and heightened colors. It freed art from mimicking reality and allowed artists to explore the potentials of the visual elements. It retained the figure but often departed from the conventional means of portrayal.

The spread on page 10 and 11, my favourite painting in the whole book, shows a happy Chisco sprawled on his back under a tree eating ripe yellow mangoes, most of which are gathered in the folds of his bright orange t-shirt paired with purple shorts that are all in contrast to the bright green grass and Chisco’s brown skin. Borlongan’s figures have long, graceful faces, fingers, torso and feet reminiscent of the Spanish Renaissance painter El Greco. But his style cleaves closer, according to the artist himself, to that of local painters Danny Dalena and Onib Olmedo. According to the artist, most of his figures are purposely bald, as both Chisco and his father are, because he wants the audience to focus on his characters and their expression. This is clearly seen in the illustrations of Chisco and his father. On page six, for example, father and child dominate the page as they mourn the death of wife and mother. Sadness and grief permeate the page and except for a partially seen stained glass window and an elaborately carved rocking chair, there is nothing else in the painting. This is Borlongan’s style. His canvases are without embellishments and reveal some form of isolation. (Casia, mb.com.ph/mode/199077) The viewer has no choice but to focus solely on the figures.

It is this focus that enforces the fact that the story revolves around the father rather than the child. “The iconic plane, includes the choice of subject, which may bear social and political implications.” (Guillermo, 9) In the text on page 33 a package has arrived for Chisco “...and the paper-wrapped package was

carefully set down upon the floor... The farmer came to cut off the twine, and when the wrapping was all drawn aside, there it was – a shiny wooden rocking horse, completely black except for a mane the color of raw sugar.” This is probably the most visual (and my favourite) phrase in the whole book. However, Borlongan has chosen to illustrate the father and not the child admiring the rocking horse.

Lastly, the painting in the book cover is that of a boy riding a rocking horse. Borlongan’s figures have often been described as eerie and this is true for the boy in this painting. As he crouches low on the horse’s back, the boy looks beyond the canvas at something we cannot see but can only guess at. In portraits, the direction of the subject’s gaze is important. “This is important not only in defining the relationship of subject and viewer but also in describing pictorial space.” (Guillermo, 10) Chisco has a serene and knowing smile. What does he see? What does he know? In the context of the story, does he see a happier life outside that of his frail physical body? The horse too has a strange and almost frightening expression. Its glassy eyes bulge, its nostrils flare, its mouth is opened as if in a scream. The sense of isolation, of imprisonment is evident with the boy and his rocking horse boxed in between the low architectural ceiling, the olive walls and the brown floor. Gloom and unhappiness are evident in the artist’s dominant palette of earth colors – dark brown horse, ash brown ceilings, olive walls, terracotta floor and yellowish brown skin. It is also, the outdoors that Chisco so loves replicated in the confines of his room.

In answer to the question posed in the title of this essay, I have to admit that as a judge of this story, I was most impressed by the language and narrative of the story that I failed to see whose story it really was. Becky Bravo is a multi-awarded children’s book writer and may have, as I was, carried away by nostalgia. I have always loved Elmer Borlongan’s painting even if they are a little eerie but he is first and foremost a social realist and an expressionist. He obviously did not modify his style to suit a child audience when he painted the rest of the paintings. It should also be noted that all the paintings in this book were sold on-line and were immediately sold-out to collectors and art lovers who appreciate his style. It may be that with this last sentence I may be questioning the publisher’s intent for continuing to produce more books such as these and labelling them as children’s books. Maybe a further study of the other books published is required. Whatever conclusions we may draw, it is that these books, whether for children or not, are works of art.

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