

## **The Image of the Atomic Bomb's Mushroom Cloud in Picture Books for Children**

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In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (1998), Leonard Shlain contends that the dissemination of the mushroom cloud image following the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima saved humankind from collective death by serving as a warning to of a future Armageddon. The image of the mushroom cloud is now over 50 years old and may well have lost its power to serve as a deterrent to the future use of the atomic bomb. Given that the children of today could constitute the future generation that might initiate nuclear warfare, this paper investigates how writers and illustrators of children's picture books have taken up the warning against the threat of atomic warfare, with particular reference to the significance of the iconic image of the mushroom cloud in that genre.

### **Keywords**

Children's picture books, illustrated books, atomic bomb, mushroom cloud

[1] In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, Leonard Shlain contends that:

The first modern image to achieve recognition was the atomic bomb's mushroom explosion ... For the next fifty years, the superpowers bluffed and feinted, but managed somehow not to initiate Armageddon. If a *written* description of the atomic explosion's aftermath were all that had been available, the bomb would surely have been used. But the image of the bomb's destructive power was universally disseminated and that picture (worth many thousands of words) saved the world. The ominous mushroom cloud warned humankind of collective death (409-10).

While Shlain's argument for the impact of the mushroom cloud image is reasonable, it is over fifty years since the world was exposed to that awesome sight. With the twenty first century mind still reeling over the visual horrors of September 11, 2001, one may well wonder if Shlain's iconic image has lost some of its power; evidently it has had little effect on the proliferation of nuclear arms under the auspices of nations inclined towards nuclear terrorism (Langewiesche 19). Mielke (28) goes so far as to refer to the mushroom cloud image utilised in the film *Operation Ivy* (1952) as 'the money shot of technoporn': a backhanded expression of respect if ever there was one. But there remains a greater threat to the avoidance of nuclear holocaust: what if today's children, the future generation that may well lead the world to a future Armageddon, are kept 'too dumb' regarding the possibilities of nuclear threat 'to know any better' (Holt 89-90), or too shielded from the realities of what is perceived by their elders to be the 'evils of life' (Lurie 215) to even know about nuclear holocaust, let alone take any action to prevent it? This is a real possibility, yet a usually innocuous form of literature may well provide the answer to the world's future:

an all consuming arms race ... or a nuclear explosion or post holocaust radiation all have something in common, apart from being matters of current concern. All are the subjects of contemporary picture books, despite the general feeling that the child's picture book is one of the few remaining sanctuaries for "innocent" reading, a genre protected

from the direct expression of the horrors haunting the adult world.  
(Cech 197-98)

[2] In consideration of the above, this paper will examine accounts of nuclear attack in the picture book for children with particular emphasis on the effectiveness of the mushroom cloud image as it appears in such literature as a possible deterrent to future nuclear holocaust.

[3] One of the first picture books for children focusing on the atomic bomb was Toshi Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika (The Flash of Hiroshima)*. Maruki, an established Japanese visual artist, recounts in an epilogue that in 1953, while appearing at one of her exhibitions created in response to the bomb, she was accused by a woman in the crowd of 'making a spectacle of suffering'. But later, this same woman admitted, 'now I have seen your pictures, I want to tell you my story.' (Maruki n.p.). Upon stating this, she took the microphone from Maruki and delivered an impassioned account of how, following the nuclear flash over Hiroshima, she had attempted to carry her husband to safety while leading her child by the hand. Maruki recounts how this woman's story—along with others she has heard—formed the basis of *Hiroshima No Pika*. Although the story is narrated in the adult voice of the child's mother (the child is a girl, named Mii), Maruki has made the book child-centred by the inclusion of specific illustrative reference to the domestic animals (dogs and cats—even the heart rending depiction of flightless swallows) that fell victim to the holocaust. Maruki also features the near naked figure of the seven year old Mii on almost every page. Finally, she makes the particular point that Mii 'never grew after that day. Many years have passed and she is still the same size ...' (Maruki n.p.). Maruki has little hesitation in placing blame for the catastrophe on the United States:

Moments before the Flash, United States Air Force bomber *Enola Gay* had flown over the city and released a top-secret explosive. The explosive was an atomic bomb, which was given the name "Little Boy" by the B29's crew.

"Little Boy" fell on Hiroshima at 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945. (Maruki n.p.)

[4] Throughout much of the book—which covers the four day period following the Flash—Mii is shown clutching the two red chopsticks she was using during breakfast on the fateful day, a circumstance that most readers would assume was an over sight on the illustrator's behalf. This

is not so. It is yet another detail utilised by Maruki to demonstrate the horrific after effects of the explosion:

“Mii-Chan! You're still holding your chopsticks!” her mother exclaimed. “Here, let me have them.” But Mii's hand wouldn't open. Her mother pried her fingers open one by one. Four days after the bomb, Mii let go of her chopsticks. (Maruki n.p.)

[5] And for years to come:

Sometimes Mii complains that her head itches and her mother parts her hair, sees something shiny, and pulls it out of her scalp with a pair of tweezers. It's a sliver of glass, embedded when the bomb went off ... that has worked its way to the surface. (Maruki: n.p.)

[6] Such specific details are supported by Maruki's uncompromising illustrations of the stripped and naked bodies of the dead as well as the horrific physical condition of victims suffering burns in their desperate attempts to immerse themselves in one of Hiroshima's seven rivers. Maruki's images of the dead (and damned) are reminiscent of the photographs and illustrations of the piles of corpses of Nazi concentration camp victims appearing in *The Scourge of the Swastika* and later, Spiegelman's graphically illustrated *Maus*, both works serving as vivid reminders of that other holocaust of the Second World War.

[7] While *The Scourge of the Swastika* and *Maus* were not specifically intended for a child audience, it should be noted that where horrors such as the Jewish Holocaust are presented in picture books for children—as in Christophe Galaz's *Rose Blanche* (1985)—images of the naked bodies of Nazi victims do not appear. In *Rose Blanche*, the illustrator Roberto Innocenti has chosen to show Jewish children in striped uniforms clutching the barked wire of their death camp, yet in a final image revisiting that same scene he does not show these children at all, leaving the reader/viewer to assume that they have been murdered. And rather than show their stripped and naked bodies in piles ready for burial or incineration, Innocenti depicts the ground where they once stood covered in flowers, somewhat reminiscent of Sandburg's poem, *Grass* (1918), which some may claim avoids confronting the full horror of what has taken place.

[8] Illustrations featuring nakedness are highly unusual in children's picture books. The illustration of a naked boy (no genitalia revealed) which appeared in the Australian edition of *Grandad's Gifts* (Jennings and Gouldthorpe 9) was deleted and replaced with the apparently less

threatening illustration of a cupboard in the subsequent United States edition of the same title (1992). Irrespective of their legitimate and non-sexualised context, it would seem that illustrations of naked bodies in children's books are suspected of exposing young readers to those human 'realities' (Lurie 215) usually denied the child audience by their censorial minders, whether parents, teachers or librarians. Nor has the need to be alert for such (perceived) censorship escaped the reviewer of *Hiroshima No Pika*:

Just to make sure that you are prepared for anything, you might want to know that most of the illustrations depict survivors with all their clothes burned off. Most of the book has nude images, so... know your audience! If you plan to share this with particularly immature boys, for example, you might want to be aware of this little fact in advance.

[9] Is this reviewer suggesting that Maruki's warning against any future nuclear horror should not be read either to, or by, 'immature boys' because it shows 'nude images'? This would indeed be ironic, since men (who were *all* once 'immature boys') were the world leaders authorising the Flash that destroyed Hiroshima; a further irony (which possibly escaped this over zealous reviewer) is that the bomb itself was called 'Little Boy'.

[10] As she has no 'children nor grandchildren', Maruki produced her uncompromising book for 'grandchildren everywhere' in order 'to tell young people about something very bad that happened, in the hope that their knowing will help keep it from happening again' (Maruki n.p.). It is pertinent to this paper that despite its vivid imagery, Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika* does not feature Leonard Schlain's infamous mushroom cloud.

[11] Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows* is a satirical post holocaust response to the nursery rhyme *Rock-a-bye-baby* (Anstey & Bull 68). While a reader's association with Briggs' earlier *Father Christmas* (1973) and the title reference to a nursery rhyme may suggest a child audience for *When the Wind Blows*, the cover of the 1983 Penguin edition apparently contradicts this. No empathetic child image appears on the cover to invite the child reader in. Rather, a middle-aged couple about to have a cup of tea is shown against the background of what *might* be a nuclear blast, although the image of the mushroom cloud is not fully developed, having no 'stem'. The middle aged woman wears an apron, her bald and aging male partner sports a pair of braces. Both wear slippers. Behind them, to the left and right, lurk monstrous images of military generals—one distinctly Russian, the other probably American—

both backed by militia. These characters are all adults. Ironically, considering the title, no children (let alone babies) appear anywhere in the book. Evidently Briggs is using nursery rhyme to satirise adult naiveté towards the horror of nuclear holocaust (Hunt 312).

[12] The cover of the 1983 Penguin edition also displays a review quotation from the *Sunday Times*, referring to the book as ‘A visual parable against nuclear war’. Considering that both adult characters in *When the Wind Blows* die from nuclear sickness while muttering prayers to an unknown God (their pleas jumbled lines from the 23rd Psalm, the hymn ‘Oh God Our Help in Ages Past’ and ‘Into the Valley of Death’ from Tennyson’s ‘theirs but to do or die’ tribute to war, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*), one has to wonder: who is the intended audience of this book? Given the seemingly juvenile appeal of the highly accessible comic strip format, yet the apparent contradiction of the book’s adult characters and mature topic, *When the Wind Blows* is, as Anstey and Bull claim (173), a ‘marked departure from the established form of the picture book’, and while it ‘caused a stir’ upon its release, it was nevertheless ‘commended in the House of Commons as a powerful contribution to the growing opposition to nuclear armament’ (Cech 263). Perhaps politicians got it right in realising that the horrors of modern weapons of mass destruction demand that today’s readers of all ages be forced out of their cosseted ‘bomb shelter’ of naiveté and ignorance if they are to better face (and hopefully defeat) the new monsters of this age.

[13] Like Maruki’s earlier *Hiroshima No Pika*, Briggs’ *When the Wind Blows* does not conform to the child friendly criteria usually associated with picture books for juveniles. There are no children featured in Briggs’ work, nor could children be expected to empathise with the principal adult characters. In fact, the woman is rather stupid. Her only response to the radio announcement of pending war is to offer her anxious husband ‘another sausage’ (Briggs n.p.). She is evidently ignorant of world affairs, and only interested in household matters, similar to the housewife obsessed with washing in Postman’s ‘Parable of the Ring’ (Postman 110-111), hardly a character type that a child would relate to. The man, while more likeable in that he does *something* about the threat (he builds a grossly inadequate fallout shelter), is still annoyingly set in his way being determined to ‘pop down to Mr Spong’s tomorrow and get some bone meal and dried blood’ (Briggs n.p.) to fertilise the lawn that has died following the blast. Even in death, these characters randomly cite nonsensical bits of prayers and poems,

which are not part of the literary lexicon of today's child. And given that Schlain's iconic mushroom cloud does not appear anywhere in Briggs' illustrations, would the work succeed in acting as a warning for children to either campaign against—or be fearful of—any future nuclear holocaust?

[14] While Maruki has used illustrative examples of frightful human suffering (both in the long and short term), and deliberately provided provocative images of naked humans suffering radiation burns, Briggs has no doubt featured everything that children actively dislike about ignorant, narrow minded adults hoping, no doubt, that having read about them, no child would aspire to be them. Perhaps, like the cynical Mielke, Briggs believes that the image of the nuclear cloud, once considered threatening, has lost its clout and chosen to employ the more modern psychological aversion that many children have for their 'out of touch' elders in order to drive home his anti nuclear message.

[15] Also a native of Hiroshima (like Maruki before her), Junko Morimoto has both written and illustrated another account of the nuclear blast over that city. In *My Hiroshima* (1987), written in the first person from the point of view of an eye witness, Morimoto provides an epilogue to her narrative of events, stating:

I believe it is the duty and responsibility of adults to teach our children the importance of not repeating these mistakes and to give them the heart to care for and value all life on earth. (Morimoto: End Note).

[16] The bomb was dropped when Morimoto was in 'the Fourth year of school' . (Morimoto n.p.). This may help younger children appreciate the horrors that the author endured, but must, necessarily, restrict the sophistication of the language employed. Following the blast, she writes, 'There was a child, screaming, trying to wake up her dead mother' , and 'Many people died, one after another. Their bodies were taken to the school's playing field and burnt.' (Morimoto n.p.). Understatement has its uses, but in this instance a juvenile reader might not appreciate that there was more than one child who lost its mother, nor that someone had to gather the dead bodies, possibly those of their own family, in order to organise a public cremation in the school yard. Nor is there any mention that those who gathered the bodies would have been suffering the agonies of nuclear burns themselves, nor what was used to ignite the bodies, nor the stench of burning hair and flesh. Like Maruki, Morimoto has shown

the masses of dead and dying, but her illustrations lack the former's power; Maruki's use of colour (especially her reds and vermilions) better conveys the heat than Morimoto's more bland watercolours. However, Morimoto redresses these issues by the cunning positioning of photographs.

[17] Morimoto's use of photography adds a stark reality to *My Hiroshima*, which may well have been titled, *My Hiroshima: Before and After the Bomb*. The opening endpapers show seven photographs of the gracious city before the Flash. The first ten pages reveal Morimoto's peaceful childhood (establishing that, like most children, she was not fond of school), then follows a double page spread showing the transition to war time clothing and preparations for attack; then (again like Maruki), the day the bomb struck is announced: '8:15 AM AUGUST 6 1945' (Morimoto n.p.). Morimoto notes that: 'This day I had a pain in my stomach and was not going to school. My sister and I were in our room talking' (Maruki n.p.). The reader's full awareness of this statement is essential to an appreciation of the author's account. Morimoto proceeds to make specific illustrative and print text reference to the 'sound of a plane' (a direct link the United States' responsibility), which she follows with a double page spread of the mushroom cloud explosion.

[18] According to Schlain's theory this image should create maximum impact, but it does not. There are several reasons for this: the spread featuring the mushroom cloud is sandwiched between broad bands of drab brown watercolour (possibly representing the dust that the explosion swept over the city, though this is unclear), while an apparently distant image of the cloud itself is all but lost in the deep gutter formed by the book's pages at its central opening. This is a design weakness which diminishes the impact of what would otherwise be a significant image. However, Morimoto has evidently not intended to place too much store on this image (she was inside her house and would not have seen it). Rather, she focuses on her earlier statement regarding 'not going to school'—a circumstance that saved her life. At this point the reader needs to be reminded this book is not called *What Happened to Hiroshima*, but *My Hiroshima*, the personal pronoun *my* being highly significant.

[19] Morimoto's statement about not going to school heralds the subtle nicety that ensures the success of her book. Six months after the blast the author returned to her school to see



what remained: 'From the dirt of the burnt earth I took an aluminium lunch box with burnt rice inside. I found the bones of many of my friends' (Morimoto n.p.). The illustration of Morimoto as a child digging is cleverly positioned beneath a panoramic black and white photograph of the devastation of inner city Hiroshima. Immediately over leaf a full colour photograph of the adult Morimoto kneeling in exactly the same spot in the school yard is accompanied by the lines: 'Many, many years have passed since I have returned to my school again. It is still a miracle that I survived' . (Morimoto: np). The subtle impact of Morimoto' s intention now becomes clear. Like Maruki and Briggs, she has not focused on the iconic image of the mushroom cloud, but chosen another option: the empathetic connection between childhood and school.

[20] Every child appreciates the imperative of education and the role that schooling forms in their lives. This is the connection to her juvenile audience that Morimoto has so subtly exploited. The cover of *My Hiroshima* shows the young Morimoto in school uniform being dragged to class by her older brother (an image conscientiously repeated on the inside), while behind her looms the towering image of the mushroom cloud. Morimoto' s intent in *My Hiroshima* is to show that her childhood, her entire life, has been affected by this horror, and for the sensitive child reader anywhere, her warning would be heeded.

[21] This paper now takes a curious, subjective turn. In 2009, I wrote the narrative text of *The Serpent' s Tale* (2010), a picture book for children subsequently illustrated by Matt Ottley. The title drew on the concept of Ouroboros, the ancient myth of the serpent chasing and/or consuming its own tail. I believed that this self-consuming serpent represented both 'betrayal ... and death' (Nissenson and Jonas 19), and 'eternity' (van der Sluijjs and Peratt 18). I wanted to express the theme that violence between humans has been present since time immemorial and would no doubt continue to be. Ottley was briefed as to my thematic intentions.

[22] Perusing Ottley' s original illustrations pending publication, I was delighted. Matt had visually interpreted my narrative exactly as I saw it in my mind' s eye. A boy acquires a charmed bracelet (in the shape of the Ouroboros) and once he has put it on his arm he is subject to frightful dreams of violence. These were represented visually beginning with Ottley' s remarkable illustration of chaos among planetary bodies (*The Big Bang?*, I wondered),

reaching forward to an image of aggression between primal apes (*Was this Darwin's evolutionary survival of the fittest?*), followed by vistas of warfare in the boy's own village until, upon reaching modern times, Ottley represented such violence continuing on the football field—and finally, in what might be called the climactic image, there appeared the epitome of human aggression: a magnificent visual representation of the mushroom cloud.

[23] Upon inquiry, Ottley justified his use of this image:

The thing that I loved about the text of *The Serpent's Tale* was that it allowed me to create imagery about the human story that is not based on any judgement of culture or politics. The story simply says: 'This is the human story, this is the way it is; the way it has always been. This is neither good, nor bad; it just is.' And so, I was able to look at something as dreadful and frightening as an atomic bomb explosion and see it as an object, and to look at it in a purely aesthetic way. In this sense the mushroom cloud becomes something beautiful; a flower of human creativity, in its colour and awesome dimensions. In a dispassionate way, it becomes a thing of wonder. (Matt Ottley. Email to Gary Crew. 29 June, 2011).

[24] While it was difficult for me as the author of *The Serpent's Tale* to fully appreciate Matt's statement, 'it allowed me to create imagery about the human story that is not based on any judgement of culture or politics', in his defence, I was obliged to reconsider a comment made by Peter Schwenger about the postponement of 'an anticipated end':

Arms talks have helped us to feel that words are there to stave off an ultimate action. Like Scheherazade, the writer is continually postponing an anticipated end—has always done so, even before the nuclear age.  
[Schwenger:42]

Considering that the Duck and Cover Campaign concluded in the 1950s and the Cuban Missile Crisis ended in 1962, perhaps young people of today (our children and even their young teachers, if they even know about such things) have come to believe that the threat of Nuclear

Holocaust is long gone. Even Shlain' s book articulating the warning of the mushroom cloud is 18 years old.

[25] This writer is left to wonder if such forgetfulness has always been the way. Is it possible for a child in the 21st Century to truly appreciate the significance of the figure of the Grim Reaper in images portraying the horror of the Black Death or does that image conjure no more than a person dressed in a scary Halloween costume? The artist Salvador Dali claimed that following 'the atomic explosion of August 6, 1945... the atom was my favourite food for thought. Many of the landscapes painted in the period express the great fear inspired in me by the announcement' (Peterson 580). Dali' s claim has the distinct ring of 'past fear' about it. Is it that same distancing from threat that allows the artist to re-imagine 'in a more dispassionate way' a differing vision of what was once considered horrific as a 'thing of wonder' ?

[26] Possibly the interval between 6 August, 1945 and the present obliges all of us to rethink the impact of the iconic image of the mushroom cloud as the ultimate warning of 'humankind' s collective death' (Shlain 410). Both in his reply to my enquiry and in his astonishingly beautiful image of the mushroom cloud, Matt Ottley has obliged me—and possibly persons of all ages who read children' s picture books—to do just that. And yet, how many of us—whether child readers, visual artists, writers or otherwise—dare to imagine the world' s end as 'something beautiful' ?

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