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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Struggle and Survival of the Children in Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum*

Selvamani. B., M. Phil. Scholar



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According to the *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society* “Children’s literature comprises those texts that have been written specifically for children and those texts that children have selected to read on their own” (Susina 2008). Hunt (1999) says, the boundaries between children’s literature and adult literature are fluid.

Literature written specifically for an audience of children began to be published on a wide scale in the 17th century. In 1658, Jan Amos Comenius published the illustrated informational book *Orbis Pictus* in Bohemia. It is considered to be the first picture book published specially for children. Comenius stated that he wanted to attract the reader’s attention, “with pictures that amusingly teach the chief things of this world” (Literature for Children in *Encyclopedia of children and childhood in History and Society* 2008).

Children’s texts with limited circulation have been located from earlier periods of history. In order for a society to produce a substantial body of children’s literature it must recognize the existence of children as an important and distinctive category of readers with separate needs and interests.

As Leonard S. Marcus remarks (www.aaronshep.com), “In every generation, children’s books mirror the society from which they arise; children always get the books their parents deserve”. Contemporary children’s literature continues to be a highly innovative and challenging field.

Jacqueline Wilson and Her Contemporaries

Jacqueline Wilson is well-known for her writing for young readers. She says, “I wrote my first novel when I was nine years old” Wilson once commented (www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk). Contemporary writers during her period were JRR Tolkien, Joanne K. Rowling, Quentin Blake, Irvine Welsh and Rose Tremain.

Jacqueline Wilson’s major works include *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *The Dare Game*, *The Bed and Breakfast Star*, *The Illustrated Mum*, *Bad Girls*, *Double Act*, *The Worry Website*, *Lola Rose*, *The Diamond Girls*, *Clean Break*, *The Suitcase Kid*, *The Lottie Project*, *Best Friends*, and *Dustin Baby*. Her autobiographical works include *My Secret Diary* and *Jacky Daydream*. Though she writes about girls always, she wants to be read by all. “I might write about girls but I want to be read by girls and boys” (www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk).

Wilson visits schools in England regularly and tries to stay with her young readers to have first-hand knowledge about their problems, anxieties, and sense of humour. As she once commented, her inspiration over the years has not really changed her desire to tell a story, to create a pretend life and universe. She received the Guardian Children’s Fiction Award in 2000 for *The Illustrated Mum* and she received other awards and honours too.

The Illustrated Mum

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The story is narrated in the first person by Dolphin, the youngest daughter of a manic depressive woman called Marigold, nicknamed *The Illustrated Mum* because of her many tattoos.

The Illustrated Mum is a story set in London. Dolphin and her sister Star live with their mum Marigold in a small flat. Marigold has many tattoos on her body and sometimes gets drunk or goes “crazy”, otherwise known as “manic depressive”. Dolphin loves her mum while Star is at times ashamed of her. Dolphin has dyslexia and is really unpopular at school and is teased by other girls. Star on the other hand is very popular. Dolphin befriends Oliver, a studious yet unpopular boy, who spends large amount of time in the library to hide from bullies.

Marigold buys tickets to an Emerald city for a reunion concert. She meets Micky, Star’s dad and her true love. She takes Micky back to her place and Micky spends time with Star. Dolphin strongly dislikes Micky while Star adores him. Soon, Micky wants Star to come and live with him and his partner because he fears that Marigold isn’t the best person to live with. Dolphin stays loyal to her mother and continues to live with Marigold whilst Star goes off with Micky. Star’s departure leads to Marigold’s mental breakdown. She, in her frustration, colours herself white using toxic paint. She feels that Star has left her because of her dislike to her mother’s tattoos.

When Marigold is in hospital, Oliver asks Dolphin to contact Micky about whom she knows nothing except that his name is Micky. She manages to contact her dad and then ends up meeting him. He tells her that maybe one day Dolphin could stay with him, his wife and other two girls but until then she has to stay with a foster family. Dolphin stays with a kind old woman and other foster children. On learning Marigold’s hospitalization, Star returns home. She tells Dolphin that Micky’s girlfriend, Sian, didn’t get along with her and she disliked living there. The story ends with the union of the mother and daughter who are content in each other’s company.

Backgrounds of Children

Many children are brought up by single parents whose moral values are different from the earlier generations. They face lots of problems in the society. The kids without the guidance of the elders are not able to tackle the culture conflict and fall a prey to external pressures from their peers. The adults too add problems to the children.

Lack of tolerance leaves the children vulnerable. The misunderstanding between the parents leaves young kids imbalanced. Unable to stand the social pressure the kids become victims of the society. In rare cases the separated families are reunited. When their mother has relationship with other men the children are dejected. It affects them both psychologically and physically. Unable to express their feelings they feel lonely even at home.

There’s no sign of this dad of yours all the time you’ve been living here. Lots of *uncles*, of course, flitting in and out, but the less said about that the better. I suppose your dad is the one that fancies himself with the pretty-boy hair and silly clothes. I saw you all. Is he the one?’(The Illustrated Mum-165).

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Children of Broken Families

When a family breaks down it undoubtedly causes a great deal of pain, anxiety and distress to children. For some children the level of emotional turbulence and hostility between warring parents, prior to their separation, is even more difficult to bear. Separation leaves the kids as well as the grandparents dejected.

‘You can stay with me if the social workers think it’s suitable and I’ll have to discuss it
With my family too, of course.’

The word family hit me like a pile of bricks.

‘Family?’

‘Yes. I’ve got a wife, Meg, and two daughters, Grace and Alice’.

The words struck me on the head. (TIM-188)

Step Mothers and Step Fathers

When a parent remarries, the stepfamilies are formed. The children can’t accept the stepfamilies and they struggle to lead a life with them. In some cases there are few children who wouldn’t know their father from their birth. They are shocked of their father’s second marriage and isn’t ready to accept the child within his family and they land up foster homes where the feelings of the children are least bothered. Thus the children lose their childhood due to negligence. Star’s plight is also the same.

Micky was very sweet about it, ever so understanding, but that Sian started saying Stuff, forever getting at me. I don’t know what Micky sees in her. She just hung around all the time, she’d never leave us on our own. We ended up having this huge row. It was all too much hassle for Micky. (TIM-217)

Standing Up To the Ordeal

But there are a few kids who are able to stand the ordeal. One such character is Dolphin. Her physical and mental strength is evident when she is able to manage both her mother and sister.

‘Yes. Yes, it’s an emergency’, I said. ‘I think I need an ambulance’.

I was connected to someone else who started asking me questions.

‘This person’s covered in paint,’ I said. ‘It won’t come off. No, it’s not my little Brother or sister. It’s my mum. No, she can’t come in herself. (TIM-161)

Sometimes when the children’s father accept them and took them in, the second wife of her father wouldn’t allow them to stay with them. If the children are accepted to live with them they have a lot of trouble with their stepmother and step siblings.

‘I can’t ride a bike,’ I said.

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‘I could teach you. Hey, you could maybe come camping with us sometime.’
‘Meg won’t like that idea’.
Michael looked me straight in the eyes. (TIM-189)

What Do We Learn from Children?

It is Children who teach us the importance of love and affection and they are the ones who make our earth a living place. They are the life giving force for the human beings and they are ones who makes our life meaningful. Let us cherish them and leave them as children in their world.

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<http://www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk>

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