SO HERE'S THE BAD NEWS

Reading Minds
Anne Provoost, So here's the bad news – The child as an antagonist
Translation: John Nieuwenhuizen
This book is the first publication in the Reading Minds series.

Design: Compagnie Paul Verrept
Published by Majo de Saedeleer, Stichting Lezen, Frankrijklei 130/4, 2000 Antwerpen & Barry Wiebenga, Stichting Lezen, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 328 G, 1012 RW Amsterdam.

ISBN 9077178244 WD D/2004/9654/2

This text was read at the Annie M.G. Schmidt lecture on 4 June 2003.

Stichting Lezen is supported by the Flemish Community.
The Education, Culture and Science Ministery provides the means which enable Stichting Lezen, together with other organisations, to help improve the reading culture in the Netherlands.

Stichting Lezen

STICHTING LEZEN

Anne Provoost

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Reading Minds
2004

This publication is the first in a series that will appear as a joint initiative of the Flemish and Dutch Stichting Lezen.

Johan Huizinga described the nature of the Dutch people in his essay *Nederland's geestesmerk* (*The Netherlands' character*) in 1934. We can easily state that this description applies for the people of Flanders as well: we are down-to-earth, modest, tolerant, averse to pretention. Seventy years later however, we should at least approach this statement with scepticism.

Fact is that 34 million people speak Dutch, ranking in the world's top ten of most widely spoken languages. Sadly though, it seems the academic dialogue in our field of activity takes place in English. Consequently, ideas developed in Dutch about children's literature, reading promotion, literary socialisation, competence and education of literature and fiction stop at the very own borders of our region.

With a healthy mix of self-importance and due modesty, we have taken the initiative to publish relevant articles both in Dutch and English. We hope it will add to sharing

valuable ideas about reading promotion and the joy books can give us.

Barry Wiebenga
Director Stichting Lezen Nederland

Majo de Saedeleer
Director Stichting Lezen Vlaanderen

SO HERE'S THE BAD NEWS
The child as antagonist

LET'S START RIGHT AWAY. What we need is a lockable room, neither stuffy nor spooky, not a basement that makes you think of a child murderer, and not a scary attic room, but a laboratory with sound proofing, soft floors and cushions against the walls. There are dolls and building blocks, video games and children's books, but also hammers and nails, globes, reference books and cable TV. Everything is there, but nothing can be seen, for we have made sure that no daylight can get into the laboratory. There are lights, but no switches.

Then we put children into the lab. Five-year-olds and ten-year-olds. Twelve- and sixteen-year-olds. One seventeen-year-old, also, to see what difference that makes. And so we start our experiment. We're going to do something that would have to be done anyway. We will sweat blood and tears, but that does not put us off, for we will reap rich rewards: we are going to initiate these children into life, we are going to do what has been done for generations.

The dark room has a glass wall on one side. Behind that wall are we, the adults who have chosen to take part in this experiment because we take a more than average interest in children and their well-being. You know the kind of glass: we can see them, they can't see us. Actually, they can't see anything, they're in the dark.

We control the light switches. We determine how many lights are on. And we are well disposed towards them. We do not intend to leave them in the dark for long, that is not what we are like. As soon as everyone has sat down, the light goes on. Not too bright, for that is bad for their eyes. Just a small glow about the strength of a small candle so that some of their surroundings becomes visible. The children move towards the light as soon as it comes on, that is obvious. And so we get a bit of a look at them, too.

THE PLAN IS that we will look for ways to guide the children, to initiate them into the 'grown-up' life that awaits them. We could do that by putting up a blackboard and standing in front of it chalk in hand, but we want to do it differently. We are searching for an indirect, less school-like, approach; we would rather they learned something from a film or a book than from a dull lesson.

But first, of course, we want to consult. We adults discuss what they are, those living things behind the glass, under the dim light.

"Look how different they are," we say. "They're innocent. They're inexperienced. They're little. They're powerless. They need protecting. And how chaotic they are. How difficult they find it to organize themselves, to give shape to their lives. And they know so little. Were we as helpless as that?" Some amongst us immediately grab a sketchpad and start drawing. Others write words on a sheet of paper. Lovely things result. "Look at how they're enjoying themselves," someone remarks. "They're living completely in the here and now, seizing the day." We all wax lyrical about all those childlike qualities.

"Put some more lights on," someone suggests. "Then we can better observe what happens."

A second globe is switched on and there is more light, perhaps about as bright as two candles. We press our noses against the glass: "Aren't they playful?" we tell each other. "They have such imagination! A very short attention span, though. Of course, they can't grasp much yet, and their knowledge is very limited. It's just as well they don't know everything. They seem happy like this."

AND SO THE EXPERIMENT proceeds for a while. The intention is to work out once and for all how we can best introduce children to the adult world. But now the situation is rapidly getting out of control. Discord breaks out amongst the adults. "They need more light," some are saying. "They can't even see half of what there is to see, so of course they can't develop insight and make connections."

"On the contrary," others cry. "They're not ready for more light. They would see too much and get confused. More light for those little ones should not be allowed. Those switches should be disconnected."

"What do you mean, disconnected?" someone shouts angrily. "Who do we think we are?"

"We are the adults," comes the answer. "We have experience. We are past childhood, so we know what is good. We are here to protect them. If we don't, nobody will."

Those amongst us who consider themselves 'right-minded' argue, "Don't be so meddlesome. Look at what they're doing. They're playing. They're turning the world upside down. Wherever they pass they leave their marks. They have their own logic. They unthinkingly make connections artists could learn something from. They have faith in life. They confront us with what we have forgotten. They have their own truth, so much richer

than ours. We must do whatever we can to prevent them becoming like us." Those same 'right-minded' people put their hands against the glass. They are looking for a way to open the window. "This has to go," they grumble. "We must form a real relationship with them instead of behaving as if they're animals in a cage."

THE BICKERING OF THE ADULTS is not the only reason the experiment is going wrong. The children do their bit, too. It starts harmlessly enough: they tease each other, they squabble, one of them bursts into tears. The 'right-minded' adults already had their hands against the window, so they were the first to knock on the glass and call, "Don't be so childish, you're too old for that."

THE KNOCKING ON THE GLASS startles the children. It had not occurred to them that they were being observed. In no time at all, the laboratory becomes quiet. Under so many eyes, the children rally.

We adults relax; if the children are all right, we are all right. More light or less, we're not going to argue about that: if we make too much noise the children will hear us, and we want to set a good example, don't we? An experiment like this must be concluded properly. Bringing up children is an investment in human capital,

a long-term investment, a guarantee of the future, not only theirs, but also ours.

Now that the children know we are there, they start whispering. Every now and then they say something aloud, but they are very selective about what will be audible. The cushions we have put there for their comfort they stack up in front of the glass wall. After a while, there are only a few chinks for us to look through.

They are rebelling, we realize. And of course that is how it should be. It is becoming very quiet behind the cushions, and we accept that. We must let children be now and then. They need that, as we know from when we were young ourselves.

Suddenly a burning smell comes into our part of the laboratory. They're up to something, we don't quite know what, because they stand in a tight circle, their backs turned towards us.

"Turn off the lights," one of the adults shouts, but it's too late for that. They've made light themselves. One of the girls is a smoker – we hadn't counted on that when we set up the experiment – and she has a lighter. A boy of barely twelve is holding the corner of a cushion in the flame. "We're making a fire," they shout all together. "Then we'll have light and we'll get to see things."

THE EXPERIMENT FIZZLES OUT. Nobody gets hurt. Lots of smoke, and a smell of burning that hangs around for weeks. Not surprising in a space that had been so expertly sealed. In the commotion, the video tapes we were making have been damaged by the children. The only things that were saved were what the adults managed to snatch as they fled: their sketch books and their notes.

AND ON THE BASIS OF THOSE, something can still be learned from the experiment. There were, after all, adults of all sorts involved. Amongst them were pedagogues who had noted in great detail how conditions for development could be improved. Some educators, good at telling stories, had written down a few outlines for children's books with clear messages. But there were also enlightened spirits, artists who had only participated in the experiment to learn something and who had no other plans for the children than to offer them something beautiful in the form of a story. Of all the scribbles and doodles their notes are studied most thoroughly, for artists are interesting, aren't they?

AND WHAT DO WE FIND? When the cry was, "They are so inexperienced," they wrote stories from which children could learn what life is like.

When the cry was, "They are so innocent," they created worlds which resembled the real world, but with the hard edges missing.

When the cry was, "They know so little," they dared tackle new subjects, carefully explaining new ideas, taking care that the reading of the story would not be hampered by lack of foreknowledge. They were realistic stories, with recognizable situations and very definitely containing a problem.

When the cry was, "They need protecting," they went back and removed all references to sex and death from their stories.

When the cry was, "They seem so confused," they created very clear descriptions of their characters' appearance: the protagonists ordinary but enterprising, the other characters rather unusual, the really bad characters provided with a hump or warts.

When the cry was, "They are powerless," they gave the main characters a magic wand, the mark of the chosen on their forehead, or a talking animal by their side.

TOWARDS THE END, the artists' notes become less and less comprehensible; at that stage, the cushions had probably already been stacked high against the window. Someone manages to write a daring story about a self-centered child 'for easy recognition'. Someone else

noted words like 'cool' and 'legendary' and 'massive'. Yet another describes in detail how a student touches up his female teacher – intended for the single seventeen-year-old, a matter of maintaining contact with the other side of the glass wall.

BECAUSE THE EXPERIMENT had been set up on a large scale and cost quite some money, we attach a few conclusions to our observations. This is what we remember. What we do for children, how we approach them, what we tell them… it is all in the vision. Whether our story affirms or denies the child's innocence, protects or exposes the child, informs or deceives the reader, depends on how we see children. We have long since determined what is good for children, what they are in need of (safety, reassurance, adventure, opportunities for experimentation, information, recreation, clarity), and that is the point of view from which we approach them. We do not always distinguish very clearly between what children are in need of and what we judge necessary for them. We are convinced the two things coincide, but all the same there are people who insist that children need order, discipline, a belting every so often.

THE FIRST VERSION OF MY FIRST NOVEL, *My Aunt is a Pilot Whale*, ended at the point where the

main character, Anna, discovers that her cousin Tara was being abused by her father. That was it, the secret had been shared, end of book. When, eighteen months later, and after comments from advisors who had read the manuscript, I revised the story, I decided that I could not leave the reader in the dark like that. I then wrote a second strand into the book, the story of the healing of the traumatized child.

In *Falling*, my second novel, I thought it was important that the reader not just read the story to solve the mystery of why the character Caitlin has her left foot missing, but also because I had become intrigued with the rhetoric of the extreme right, and wanted to let the reader share my findings about the mechanisms underlying it.

Twice my motivation clearly reveals my concept of childhood. In the first book it was: children are vulnerable, you don't hit them in the face without applying a compress afterwards. And in the second: young adolescents are easily influenced, so you supply them with insight into the methods of those who want to exercise power over them.

Neither artists nor writers can escape their underlying concept of childhood. In itself, this is not at all a problem. Without a concept of childhood, children's literature is impossible, and we have developed the

concept 'child' precisely in order to examine the particular character of that group of people we designate as non-adults. A writer need not even be conscious of all the details of his concept of childhood, I think. Leave that to the historians and sociologists, they will expose the scaffolding later on.

But the experiment we were talking about ended badly. We were not able to create a really favourable educational environment in the laboratory. So what went wrong? If it did not depend on the way children are seen, then what caused this upset? In what ways can the researchers who set the whole thing up blame the adults present? Perhaps like this: we thought it was all in the perspective, how you look at children, but we overlooked the fact that children look at us, too. Perhaps that is why we always arrive just too late, when they have already changed the way they look, and what we do is merely the rearguard action of hibernators who have got up too late.

We ourselves have, as young readers, been made familiar with the idea that it is the adults who screw up. Peter Pan runs away the day he is born because he hears his parents next to his cradle talking about what it will be like when he grows up. He does not want to grow up. Jesus states that if we do not become as

children we will not enter God's kingdom. Becoming adult is not something to aspire to, it is better put off, and if you cannot avoid it, than it is best to preserve childlike qualities. The child is the norm, the adult the opponent. And the writer is caught in between, in search of a vanished unity.

That is the romantic view, the socially acceptable view, the *bon mot* of all who are favourably disposed to children's culture. Yet at the same time we are all convinced that children are meant to grow. They have to learn, they have to acquire skills, find their place in our world. The 'childish' has to be put aside. These contradictory forces alternately run through our discourse. That, in itself, is not necessarily a problem either. There is a lot of space under a human skull, even for completely contradictory opinions. The problem here is only that we are slow. Curves shift, ways of thinking change, but our debates are still about the same old things.

Our modern child-rearing principles of involvement and participation are bearing fruit. They've become independent minded, these children of ours, exactly the way we wanted. They look back, they've scratched the reflecting paint off the window between their world and ours. Slowly but surely they're making the adults the needy ones, and they themselves are becoming the

antagonists in the story. Now they hold out a mirror and force us to look into it. A mirror is very useful when it is time to see that you are getting older.

In the mirror, we can see how we really think about children. Children are deviant, and hence threatening. They cause disorder we can't quite define or articulate. They are going to remove us from our throne, replace us and forget us. It is quite possible they will bring a beautiful golden future, but mostly for themselves. They want to become better than we are, less bourgeois, more ecologically responsible, less power-hungry.

The mirror also shows us how we react to this new way of seeing children: we still idealize children, but only with the intention of neutralizing them, to make them harmless to our established order. Because it is still we who lay down the definitions. We still decide the norms, and we think that is our proper right. We run on the spot, we repeat our old saws and, in our panel discussions, we tackle the same old subjects yet again, like some time ago in Brussels with such famous names as Carl Norac, Joke van Leeuwen, Jürg Schubiger, and not long before that at the Salon du Livre in Paris: can you tell children and young people everything, or are there limits? Is it not our responsibility to protect them from the bright light?

When interested parties decide the definitions, the definitions are suspect. Are children actually still powerless? With their new independent-mindedness, do they really still ask for protection, security, reassurance, clarity, information, recreation… or do we just deceive ourselves into thinking this? When we talk about fifteen-year-olds, we're already less definite, but we also see that the age limits shift: independence and control come ever earlier. I can see it in families where I live: children choose the TV channel, they decide what's for dinner – lasagna! – and what to do on the weekend. These are mostly healthy and interesting power relationships, where children are on top for a while, and then they're not for a bit, the same as happens amongst adults. I like observing it, but why do we never discuss it? Why do we never discuss this 'gaze' that is directed at us, much stronger and more compelling and at an earlier age than in the past? Children have always returned our stares, but what is new is that we permit them to do so – to look back, talk back, say that if dad can come home later than expected, so can I; decide what to wear like we do; invest in gadgets the way we do; invoke their right to privacy the way we do. Perhaps we really should talk about this, about the children who look back at us and see us, and about what they see when they do look back.

ALLOW ME TO SKETCH today's child for you, knowing I am looking with the blinkers of my social class: I see children who have everything. They have all the toys they need, somewhere to live, a school, loving grandparents, birthday parties, excursions to an amusement park or the countryside, a trip in the summer and perhaps another one in the winter, a bed full of cuddly toys, later on a desk with a computer, and a shelf full of books.

Obvious disapproval of children has virtually disappeared from the milieu I observe. It has been displaced, not onto adults in general, but onto the parent. I feel it when I go into a toy shop with my children. If they make too much noise, or touch things, *I* get the angry looks, not the children, for they can't help it. If I leave the shop with just a small birthday present for the little boy down the street and nothing for my protesting five-year-old, the staff clearly consider me an unnatural mother, too mean to deserve the role of motherhood, and the girl at the cash desk exercises all her creativity to find something under the counter she can give away for free.

Something has happened, or is happening: a real world has been devised for children. After thousands of years of oppression, they have ended up in a society that is quite child oriented. They have been granted

rights, facilities, representative bodies. Their own culture, their own fashions, their own TV programs, pop groups, shows…

Something like that has consequences. If you go on telling children they have a say, even if this is largely lip service, then they are going to use their power. (Not that they can do much, of course, because their power is primarily a promise, something that seems to be forever stuck in the pipeline, and about which there is mainly a lot of talk, a bit like election promises. In that sense, Guus Kuijer's *Het geminachte kind (The child despised)* has not resulted in any progress. In this collection of essays, many years ago, Guus Kuijer actually *proved*, disconcertingly, that we despise children. And those essays still read as if they were written today. It is only at the level of discourse about the young that anything much has changed.)

One of the consequences is that they talk back. They face us and look at us. We adults have barely registered that change. We should have long since stopped thinking about what young people need and asked ourselves years ago: what is their gaze focused on? What do they see, but also: what are they looking at? Children are curious. They hunger for information, perhaps especially about the two topics we have always judged too upsetting for them: sex and dying.

They look to us when they look for answers. We have made them think that was possible, that we were creating a society in which they have rights, including the right to answers. But when they turned to us, the first thing they saw was a switchboard out of their reach. They saw adults messing about with the light switches. They realized that they weren't living in a house with windows on all sides, and that all they had received up till then was a selection of what goes on in life: hope, comfort, belief in growth and progress, all these had been illuminated for them. Despair, on the other hand, bewilderment, confusion and perplexity, hopelessness and desolation had been expertly left underexposed.

UNDEREXPOSURE OF DOUBT, combined with material excess, leads to the worldview of the magic wand: the belief that you can control factors that are against you with willpower, and that, with strategic insight and perseverance, you can achieve practically anything. Our children have been thoroughly disneyfied. They believe that life can be shaped and they are convinced that failure is weakness. Good intentions are really sufficient, good looks are a bonus, goodness is a quality you have and keep – like badness, for that matter.

This worldview, which actually has not just blown over from America, but has been typical of the European continent for centuries, is what they see when they look at us. They see how we reward success, how we show ourselves, how we acquire status, even how we make up for emptiness. It makes them refuse to have anything to do with 'losers' from an early age. Those who succeed and conquer a place show contempt for those who don't. They have no understanding for anyone who does not get a grip on life. As if that were not enough, they sometimes become so disappointed with their own moments of weakness that they think themselves worthless.

'To spoil' no longer seems to have the negative connotation it used to have. You spoil yourself with a warm bath, and each other with a massage. Perhaps it would be better if we used the word more in the sense our grandmothers did. 'To spoil' is then not only to overload children with material goods, but also to not remind them of the limits to what is achievable. If we don't allow friction, if we stick to what a child thinks lovely and nice, to what results in happiness and does not interfere with sleep, then we behave like child-tempters, incapable of self-analysis. We lead them to what we thought not worth striving for because it was contemptible: bourgeois adulthood, already reviled by

Rousseau in the nineteenth century, now even more small-minded in a period of all-pervading neo-liberal thinking. And we disregard the importance of frustration, that fruitful distress when you run up against your own limits and have to choose between sparing yourself and straining past those same limits.

Protecting children's minds, shielding them, will still lead to rebelliousness and generational conflict (and we have no objections to that, we think that quite normal – look at what we were like ourselves). But the revolt will get stuck at the sterile, ineffective setting-light-to-a-cushion we experienced in the laboratory. The protest will not have enough fuel to become really subversive, to grow large enough to change and/or improve an existing order. It will not get beyond a bourgeois form of rebellion, harmless because it is temporary and does not require real commitment. And we'll only have ourselves to thank for that. Answering children's questions is one thing, but it is something else altogether to give them answers to questions they have not (yet) asked.

"Is that what we are going to do?" I hear you ask. "Are we going to be weighty and important? Are we going to frustrate children? Are we going to taint them with our dazzling adversity and go back to

the problem books of the seventies? But wasn't it happiness we were seeking for our own flesh and blood?" People who understand life say you can't strive for happiness. You can't seek it, because it does not exist on its own. It is a by-product of something else, the side effect of a string of things that happen to people with varying degrees of frequency and intensity, like a look of recognition, a feeling of success, a moment of insight.

There are readers, children amongst them, who value a book more highly if it makes them cry than if it makes them laugh. I should know, I was such a child. I'd choose something weighty any time. Fun gave me a feeling of emptiness. I would gain more insight from a melancholy book than from a visit to a fun park. I did not want fun, it made me feel sad. Reading about adversity provided insight. It gave me a lift.

Even now, as an adult reader, I need something rather different from a cheery message to make me feel happy. "How beautiful," I need to be able to think. "How true! How real! How interesting!"

Interesting is something that is contrary, that tastes different from what I expected, that startles me, or makes me burst out laughing. Interesting is complex, many-layered, which is not the same as difficult or complicated. It is always recalcitrant, although that recalcitrance can be pretty light-footed. It is narrative

that does not exact a consensus of feeling, which does not even think of insisting on feeling A and excluding feeling B, but leaves open various options. It is a text which throws me back on my own resources instead of carrying me along broken-winged; a text which does not elucidate what it says, but rather what it does not say, and which makes the letters and the words visible instead of sweeping them under the story.

What cheers me up then, I think, is the feeling that I've got just a tiny bit closer to a new truth, and that I am not the only one seeking it.

SO IS THAT WHAT WRITERS HAVE IN MIND when they write? Do they slave away to provide insight, do they exhaust themselves searching for truths? I will reveal to you, once and for all, what writers do when they make texts. It is embarrassing, so do not be alarmed, but a song writer recently had the courage to say it on radio, and since then I've been game too. "When I start writing a song," he said, "I don't wonder what truth I can proclaim, I can't afford to. I mostly wonder what rhymes with the last line. And if I find a rhyme in which I can discover some trace of some truth, I am more than satisfied."

And so it goes with us novelists: we create a distinct world, separate from the rest. We don't let ourselves be

limited by what we know, we search for what we don't yet know, and that search drives the writing process. What we have to stick to is the internal logic of the story. Anything and its opposite is possible. (At the end of *De Roos en het Zwijn,* the book before my last one, Rosalena, the main character, has Siamese twins. People come up to me and say, you maintain such strict religious standards, you could be a Jansenist! You let Rosalena sleep with her brothers-in-law, and then she is punished by having a deformed child. I'm scared out of my wits when people say things like that. I wanted to make it hard for Rosalena to take her child with her to her lover, and Siamese twins suited me. I did not think about what my moral conviction was about sleeping with one's brothers-in-law, I was busy with the story.)

It is an admission of weakness, I realize. But that does not make us weaklings. Our strength is at a different level. Because we handle the language, we can take it apart. We bend it until the contradictions are masked. A story that is unlikely, illogical or unrealistic we clothe with words until it becomes quite 'true'. The fable looses its mendacity through the beauty of its telling. Building a story is very closely related to taking it apart bit by bit. We put all the different elements down in front of us and realize that, seeing all the components

laid out, we're not too sure about it all. We begin to want to contradict ourselves. Views that go off in different directions are dressed up gracefully and engage in civil conversation together. After all, there is room under a writer's skull for diverging points of view, even for a few contradictory ones. Our language is a smokescreen, diffuseness our only weapon against the certainties the establishment and the television stations shout at us. Offering a reader a book is also to inconvenience him. What you take away is his certainty that he will ever be able to figure out what you meant when you wrote. Each character has its truth, but it leaves enough space for the reader's own truth. In that way, the act of writing and the act of reading become moments of reflection. They are the symbolic minute's silence on the sideline of the economic rat race.

I AM NOT ADVOCATING a return to problem books full of apparent certainties. I am advocating a careful, tentative certainty that is flexible, even difficult to discover. The writer's limitation becomes his motto. Act like the fox, leave more tracks than necessary, says Wendell Berry, go the wrong way deliberately, feint from time to time."

'As soon as the generals and the politicos
can predict the motions of your mind,

lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go.'

BOOKS THAT DEMAND FLEXIBILITY *train* readers rather than educate them. They coach them in modes of thinking, of critical consideration, of unsettling interpretation and of looking askance. And is that not what we all had in mind: subversive children who question adulthood, and, when they grow up, give it a new and different meaning?

IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK ME what I enjoy most in life, I think I would say: changes in the way light strikes objects. That I find the loveliest thing. How light changes with the seasons, what dimming the lights does to a room, and how evening affects a street or an horizon. How different a space looks suddenly if a light bulb burns out, or after a neighbor trims the hedge that shades the kitchen window.

To my mind, writing cannot ever have anything to do with the amount of light that is allowed in, but with the way it flows in. Writing also has to do with deceptive light, with shading and obscuring. The world would have looked quite different if Bush jr. as a child had read less Disney and more books that left him in despair, without

a clear view of the good and the bad, and without an easily summarized message from the writer. For me, writing happens in the twilight zone between the things I am convinced of and the things I could possibly be convinced of. Intensity is the key word. Light is called intense, but I think twilight is, too.

"YOU MUST GIVE CHILDREN CLARITY, and hope," people say when I tell them which books I approve of.

"In life, perhaps," I reply. "But not in literature." What benefit do readers obtain from writers who simplify their text? They immediately feel that, rather than being offered insight, they get reassurance. Reassurance is necessary from time to time, for without a feeling of security a child cannot fix firm roots – nor can an adult, for that matter. But if all we do is reassure, soothing becomes a habit. Some truths are simply disquieting. (My son was only five or so when he said about his baby brother, "I think Basil doesn't know he's going to die one day. That's why he is happier than us." A few weeks later, he said, "Mum, can we get off the world, or are we trapped here?" And later that same month, "Will people in a million years think we were dumb?")

We are inclined to protect children. We forget that exposing them to chaos is also a form of protection. To give children a little push now and then, to send them away with the words, "go on, you can do it yourself" is just as necessary as reassuring them. A mother duck understands this very well. She launches her ducklings onto the water in good time. Once, in a park in Paris, I saw a duckling tip over while the mother and the rest of her brood diligently swam on. A few of the Parisians around me were all set to get into the water when the duckling, after minutes of struggle, managed to turn right side up. Ever since then I've realised that not all ducklings launched onto the water by their mother are good swimmers.

Literature is not half as dangerous as deep water for ducklings who have not swum before. In a novel we suffer discomfort as a kind of exercise. It is not real, it is only pretend. So we should stop softening literature in order to pass it off as real, and emphasize the fictional which allows us to uphold harder, more complex truths, even to children (and young people; you have, of course, already realised that 'children' in this argument is taken in a broad sense. 'Child' is any age group which we adults think needs 'educating'.)

In the twenty years I have been writing for young people I have become more and more aware of my concept of youth. The more I came to know and understand it, the more I compared it with my concept of people. Taking into account that the 'person' who is the reader 'looks back', means to let him see everything, including the searching, hesitant manner in which my small insights have come into being. In *In the Shadow of the Ark,* my last book, about Noah and the deluge, I wrote this:

…the taciturn, thoughtless Rrattika were beginning to talk. Young and old, they discussed the water and the flood. The children started having anxious dreams. They did not know what drowning was, but their fathers had said, "If you don't watch out, the water will close over your head!" and they woke gasping for breath. Their fear grew, like that of the very old who knew their lives depended on their family's fixed abode: Wandering about the land, they stood no chance and would be left behind in a shady spot with a couple of jugs of water and some bread. And as their fear grew, the inhabitants of the shipyard became convinced that, for the sake of the children, the elderly, the sick and the weak, it would be better not to talk about it. In an almost magical way, all sorts of explanations arose of what the Builder had said, and no-one any longer would draw the only correct conclusion: that many would die. And with the

silence came forgetting. Because there was no new information to confirm the old, the usual happened: Messages of doom are forgotten despite their ominous content. Gaps are found in the predictions, unclear statements which confirmed the suspicion that they were lies. Eventually, the calamity also came to seem so very remote, as if it was not for this time, but for another era altogether, not even that of their children or their children's children. The Builder had already lived such a long time, perhaps he would live to twice his age, and when at last the water came, new-fashioned solutions they could not even think of now would long since have appeared, or new gods, sons of this god, with different opinions and different ways. And what else was there to do but carry out the daily tasks, what else could they have attempted? Plot a rebellion? Stop sleeping and eating? At first, I made an attempt at reminding them of the message of doom. I told people there was very little room on the ship, that only those who made their own vessel would have a chance against the flood, but all I got were bored, almost pitying looks. They peered under my hood and saw that I was not one of them. Only a minority took my advice seriously. They started collecting timber and improvising something. But although they had been working on a ship for years, not one of them knew how to put together a boat. Soon the timber was abandoned and put to other uses. And because time passed without any-

thing happening, the mood became easier. Stacks of fuel from the dung of the cattle and large quantities of wool were available, and eggs galore. Bees willingly gave their honey. The ruminants were tame and let themselves be milked. People laid banquets outside their dwellings. They invited strangers; the women who saw me passing by beckoned to me and it happened more than once that I had eaten before I got home. I met all sorts of folks, they came from faraway cities and wanted to settle here. Small businesses, starting with few resources, flourished; wanderers arrived and never left.

THIS IS A HARSH, complex truth, and it is by no means incontestable, but recent Belgian elections, in which the green party was wiped out, provide at least provisional proof of it. Are the non-believers on the right track when, faced with the inevitable, they continue with their lives as normal? I wouldn't be too sure myself. In any case, I don't for a moment believe that this kind of observation makes children pessimistic, or dejected or confused. By showing the search, you locate the truth in the future. That is the hopefulness writers offer: we tell the story, and even if it sounds pessimistic, making the effort involves the belief that, though there is no truth, you can still search for it. What you in fact say is: the truth does not exist yet, not even for the grown-up

writer, and whether we find it or not, the search itself is worth the trouble. That seems to me a lot more reassuring than the feeling that it already exists, this capital-letter Truth, but that you are too young to know it.

Insisting to children that they 'will understand it all later on' is condemning them to the magic wand. Whoever likes fantasy knows that magic is nearly always employed at points in the story where characters have worked themselves into a corner. Harry Potter risks being expelled from Hogwarts when he breaks the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Under-Age Sorcery. Working magic nearly always happens in situations of extreme powerlessness. (Allow me to quote my son once more. For the last time, I promise. "Mama, Santa Claus is old, isn't he?" Me: "Yes, very old." And he: "What are we going to do when he is dead?" He was four-and-a-half when he asked that question. Already, he felt that the spell was untenable and bound to be broken.)

In the nineteen thirties, a tribe was discovered in New Guinea which had never before had any contact with the outside world. Immediately, the members of this tribe became invaluable objects for study, highly prized for their unspoiled state and

esteemed for their courage.

One day, one of the natives hid near the runway used by the researchers' planes. He carried a liana which he used to tie himself to a plane that was about to take off. Just before, he had explained to his loved ones that he absolutely wanted to see where this flying object came from, no matter what would happen to him. The explorers did not understand how something like this could have happened. They had thoroughly studied the tribe, but not one of them had asked himself what the natives' gaze was focused on.

Acquiring insight can become a matter of life and death, for children as well. When I ask them which news they want to hear first, the good or the bad, they invariably, from the age of six or seven on, want the bad news first. They assume that the good will make up for the bad, not the other way around. Rather than feeling the threat of the danger, they want to know it, the same as we adults do, even if it is a very uncertain sort of knowledge.

So tell us quickly: what is the bad news? That the truth is constantly being formed, that everything that resembles a truth has a use-by date, that there is not one single truth, but a whole lot of truths, often thoroughly contradicting each other, and that, as a

result, introducing children to life is a pretty complicated job. And the good news? That under a child's skull, too, there is a *legendary massive* amount of room, more than we usually think, so much, in fact, that using a magic wand to solve problems is really not necessary.

Translation: John Nieuwenhuizen

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About Anne Provoost

Anne Provoost (1964, Poperinge) already spent a lot of time writing stories in her youth. She studied Germanic Languages and had won two awards for short stories before she debuted in 1990 with the novel, *Mijn tante is een grindewal* (*My Aunt is a Pilot Whale*), in which incest and communication problems are approached from various points of view. She uses a similar construction in her most highly praised book, *Vallen* (*Falling*, 1994), in which the pitfalls and allurements of extreme right-wing rhetoric are dealt with extensively. The importance of knowledge of honest communications is also dealt with in the fairy tale treatment of *De Roos en het Zwijn* (1998). In *De arkvaarders* (*In the Shadow of the Ark*, 2001) Provoost takes her inspiration from the Biblical account of the Flood and creates both a turbulent adventure and a a striking metaphor for the contemporary world. In the course of her writing career, she has received practically every major literary award for works in the Dutch language.

www.anneprovoost.com

In 2001, the Flemish Minister of Culture founded Stichting Lezen to enhance the reading culture in Flanders. Our mission is to bring people and books closer together by seducing more people into reading, passing on reading pleasure to younger people and making sure there is enough room for texts in daily life.

Our wide range of campaigns and publications aims at reaching as many people as possible. Luckily, society offers quite a lot of diverse reading material to work with: challenging, moving, surprising, inspiring, informing, thrilling and reflective texts, words that console or confront, respect or transform tradition. We welcome all genres, all media are equally inspiring to us.

Stichting Lezen Vlaanderen
Frankrijklei 130/4
2000 Antwerp
Belgium
info@stichtinglezen.be
www.stichtinglezen.be

Stichting Lezen (Dutch Reading Foundation) was founded in 1988 by the Dutch Booksellers Federation, The Dutch Publishers Association and the Public Library Association. Since 1994 the organisation administers the reading promotion on budget provided by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The objective of Stichting Lezen is to promote reading, both in Dutch and in Friesian (the Netherlands' second official language). The organisation aligns existing activities and encourages the development of new and original initiatives, methods and tools that are instrumental in reading promotion. This includes the promotion of scientific research in this particular field.

Stichting Lezen Nederland
Oxford House
Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 328 G
1012 RW Amsterdam
The Netherlands
info@lezen.nl
www.lezen.nl