

©2001 The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Summer 2001, Volume 22, Number 3
Pages 337-342
ISSN 0271-0137

The Vile Village. Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler). New York: HarperCollins, 2001, 256 pages, \$9.95 hard.

Reviewed by Steven Connelly, Indiana State University

The Vile Village is the seventh volume of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, by Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler). The books are immensely popular with children, and they are growing in popularity with adults as well. Three volumes of the series were on the best seller lists in the summer of 2001, inevitably and justifiably inviting comparison with J.K. Rowling's extraordinarily popular Harry Potter books. In fact, in addition to their best-selling status, Handler and Rowling have a great deal in common, not the least of which is that they are excellent writers. They both treat their readers as equals, never condescending, never lecturing. And they have something a rare few adults retain, a memory or an understanding of childhood, which allows them not only to connect with children and adolescents, but also to be trusted implicitly and soundly by them.

Approached as an archetypal expression of the subjective feelings and emotions of childhood, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is inordinately instructive. The protagonists of Handler's books, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire, are orphans, their parents apparently having perished in a fire in the series' first volume, *A Bad Beginning*. They are largely at the mercy of relatives, legal guardians, and a parade of uninterested and uncaring adults. The exceptions, those adults who appreciate them and would willingly raise or aid them, meet unfortunate ends or are prevented by legal niceties from becoming involved with them. The villain of the series, the evil Count Olaf, actor and fortune seeker, is intensely interested in the Baudelaire children, but only because he must go through them to acquire their inherited wealth. His is the vision, distilled, with which many adults see children: as means rather than as autonomous fellow beings. Children can be leverage: for marriage, for divorce, or for revenge. They are means to immortality, one's continued, if indirect, existence assured. They are means to assure the survival of a religion ("Go forth and multiply"), a nation (generating Aryans), a race (no mongrels!), or a political entity (Henry VIII springs readily to mind). Children can indeed be currency: the stereotypical, though rarer than popularly imagined, welfare mother, or the underage Pakistani shirt-factory worker, for example. And, unfortunately, children can be the means to sexual gratification, as recent investigations into lucrative Internet businesses and Thai sexual tours confirm.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven Connelly, Ph.D., Department of English, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809.

Orphans are common in literature for children. Harry Potter is the most obvious current example, but there are many: from that classic protagonist of adult/adolescent literature, Huckleberry Finn, to those extremely popular dinosaurs, Alodar and Littlefoot. J.K. Rowling pointed out to a young reader who asked her why Harry Potter's parents had to die that there are practical reasons for making the protagonist of a children's book an orphan. Without parents, a young child, such as Harry, is free to engage in a variety of adventures and behaviors that the presence of parents would make difficult. Eliminating parents is good authorial strategy, giving adolescent characters a vastly larger stage than they could otherwise have. Yet orphanhood is obviously much more than a plot device.

The Baudelaire orphans' literal state captures what is a metaphorical condition for all children at times: isolation. Eventually, children realize that quite often they are emotionally alone, dependent for their happiness on their own devices, on chance, or on the mercy of those around them. When one first encounters, outside the umbrella of parental protection, the rough, selfish cousin sharing the wading pool, school bullies with their flattened affect and random nastiness, arbitrary and unfair teachers, sadistic gym teachers, and for some, abusers and molesters, they are interim orphans, as it were, affective orphans. A mythic study of adolescent literature, collating the attributes of Harry Potter, the Baudelaire, Huckleberry Finn, and 997 others waits to be written: *The Orphan with 1000 Faces*, a Joseph Campbellian approach to the genre. Indeed, the focus might well be childhood in general, so often "normative" from an adult perspective, but a hero's journey from the individual child's perspective. These orphan protagonists are a fictional distillation of real, if affective, childhood experiences.

Students of child and adolescent psychology, indeed "authorities" in the field, would do well to approach Handler's and Rowling's books as they might typical textbooks in the field, such as Santrock's *Adolescence* or Hetherington, Locke, and Parke's *Child Psychology*. The symbiotic relationship between the behavioral sciences and literature is, after all, considerable: from Freud's and Jung's use of myth as label and guide to human predilections through Joseph Campbell's mythic investigations, to current behavioral applications of a novel such as *The Well of Loneliness*. Consider how swiftly the Potter books were scrutinized as they related to adolescent behavior, a bit tangentially at first, simply because of their subject matter: some Christian fundamentalists feared the effect of books which portrayed witches and wizards in a positive light. The Handler books, too, have aroused misgivings among some adult readers, usually for the worst of reasons: adult authority figures are often portrayed "negatively." Consequently, the very adults who are out of touch with children and adolescents view the books with a skewed perspective, fearing that they will cause children to behave improperly, to be seduced into a world of witches and magic at the expense of their "faith," or to fail to show respect to adults.

In fact, Handler's books are popular because they share a world view with their readers, not because they are enticing them to a seductive and alien outlook. The fact is that most adults who insist on respect are demanding not respect but the appearance of respect, not content but form. Is there a species of amnesia which strikes adults, robbing them of memories of the ridicule and mockery that was virtually automatic behind the backs of those adults who were most strident in their demands for respect? Handler, and Rowling as well, are unflinchingly honest about this. When approached about writing a children's book, Handler replied that he thought most children's books were "crap." His editor, Susan Rich, persuaded him by arguing that his "writing for adults was fueled by rage at what was going on in

adult fiction, it might actually work the same way with children's books." She suggested that he could write the kind of book "he wanted to read at ten." Consequently, his tone is often mocking, especially when he skirts the shores of the didactic. As he says of his frequent word definitions, for example, "I was mostly just knocking the heavy-handedness that I remembered from kid's books that I didn't like as a child." "That sort of mockery seems to really appeal to kids," says Handler. "I don't make some sort of serious attempt to 'get down to their level.' I'm just sort of a naturally didactic person."

The plot of *The Vile Village*, to give one instance, hinges on the aphorism, "It takes a village to raise a child." "A new guardian program" based on this adage has been established and the Baudelaires are to be "adopted" by an entire village. The Baudelaire children, wise to the ways of adults, especially adults serving in some official capacity, are on guard as soon as Mr. Poe, the executor of their parents' estate, smiles and asks them if they have ever heard the "village" aphorism.

The children looked at one another again, a little less hopefully this time. The quoting of an aphorism, like the angry barking of a dog or the smell of overcooked broccoli, rarely indicates that something helpful is about to happen. An aphorism is merely a small group of words arranged in a certain order because they sound good that way, but oftentimes people tend to say them as if they were saying something very mysterious and wise.

That passage aptly represents both Handler's tone and his ability, in the manner of Kurt Vonnegut or Ernest Hemingway, to make profound observations with deceptively simple prose. Mr. Poe comments, "Normally, I approve of more traditional family structures, but this is really quite convenient." While Mr. Poe may appear pompous and foolish, his seemingly frivolous remark evokes the widespread adult attitude which lets video games and television sets babysit children, and which permits Nannies to mistreat them or to pilfer the matchless pleasures of watching them grow up, while their parents reap the illusory benefits of "convenience."

Mr. Poe is ultimately a decent fellow by most standards. He has simply absorbed typical adult priorities. He worries less about the reality of the poor orphans' lot than the appearance: "I'm worried that your reputation as troublemakers is even ruining the reputation of my bank." Twelve-year-old Klaus protests that he and his siblings are not troublemakers. After all, he points out, they are the victims of Count Olaf's sometimes messy attempts to eliminate them and to acquire their inheritance. But it is clear that the facts aren't as important to Mr. Poe as the impressions others may form. Indeed, Mr. Poe has no time to try and understand or alleviate the orphans' unhappy condition. As he says when they are ushered into his office, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting, but ever since I was promoted to Vice President in Charge of Orphan Affairs I've been very, very busy." The pressing duties of his office keep him from the realities of their miserable existence.

It is a paradox familiar to children, who realize very quickly that those who most need physical education classes are soon conditioned to hate them most, just as those who most need intense academic attention will be least likely to get it. Concerned adults consequently devote time and money to commissions, blue ribbon panels, and distinguished committees to investigate the reasons children fail. They fail because adults fail *them* in order to succeed. The triumph of the bureaucracy over the actuality, the triumph of the vita over the person, the triumph of the law — zero tolerance is a fine example — over the reality of experience and

the complexity of human behavior is certainly as prevalent in the world of adults as in the world of children. Handler's virtue is his appreciation of children's capacity to understand this absurdity and to revel in its just lampooning.

In *The Vile Village*, a Council of Elders of the village which has taken in the orphans creates a mammoth collection of rules to ensure order. The villagers have no reason to take seriously the orphans' warning that Count Olaf is almost certainly around because "Rule #19,833 clearly states that no villains are allowed within the city limits." And they are certain no rules will be violated because "the usual punishment for breaking a rule is burning at the stake." An elder remarks that this is why she warned Violet about "the number of nuts on my hot fudge sundae. It would be a shame to light you on fire." "You mean the punishment is the same, no matter what rule you break?" Klaus asked. "Of course," another Elder replied. "Rule #2 clearly states that anyone who breaks a rule is burned at the stake. If we didn't burn rulebreakers at the stake, we would be rulebreakers ourselves, and someone else would have to burn us at the stake." Young readers gleefully see through the rigid adult approach to life and the absurdities it generates, and they joy in Handler's playful mockery of rules and rulemakers. Zero tolerance, indeed.

A Vile Village is the seventh volume of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and not surprisingly, Handler planned thirteen volumes. That number, with its negative associations for the superstitious, seems inevitable, for bad luck dogs the Baudelaire orphans. The author warns readers at the outset of the first volume, and he repeats the warnings at regular intervals:

If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. This is because not very many happy things happened in the lives of the three Baudelaire youngsters. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were intelligent children, and they were charming and resourceful, and had pleasant facial features, but they were extremely unlucky, and most everything that happened to them was rife with misfortune, misery and despair. I'm sorry to tell you this, but that's how the story goes.

And he observes near the end of *The Vile Village*, "But I can't erase this day, any more than I can write a happy ending to this book, for the simple reason that the story does not go that way. No matter how lovely the morning was, or how confident the Baudelaire felt about what they had discovered over the course of the night, there isn't a happy ending on the horizon of this story . . ." Handler's books are in the tradition of Edward Gorey, Charles Addams, and Roald Dahl, all extremely popular with young readers, and judging from the comments on Amazon.com, young readers love the gloom and melancholy. Of course, no permanent harm comes to the children, though their relatives die at an alarming rate, and they do have the comfort of one another's support and company. For all their dark humor, the books do have a number of positive messages: chief among them is that children can put their talents to good use, that these talents usually spring from activities they love, and that their love for one another and their solidarity in the face of adult folly will help them endure.

Handler has filled the books with allusive names. The Baudelaire and Mr. Poe are in every book, and in *The Vile Village*, a "murder" of crows roosts each night in "The Nevermore Tree." There's Isadora and Duncan Quagmire, Vice Principal Nero (a dreadful violin player), Coach Genghis, Prufrock Preparatory School, Esmé and

Jerome Squalor, Veblen Hall, Dr. Orwell, and Damocles Dock. It is unlikely that many young readers will chuckle to themselves in recognition: "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" by Jerome Salinger! Handler is not engaged in a Nabokovian game of punning literary allusions for elite young readers. In fact, he says "There's plenty of literary names and the like, but there's not so many outright jokes. And the literary names are there mostly because I look forward to kids growing up and finding Baudelaire in the poetry anthology and having that be something else to be excited about."

Vocabulary too, is a recurring theme throughout the series. "Brobdingnagian," "distraught," "phantasmagorical," "dowager": interesting words are perpetually defined and discussed. Klaus Baudelaire is an inveterate reader, and as such he knows the meanings of uncommon words. In fact, correct spelling is an essential clue in *The Wide Window*. This, too, Handler manages deftly. He makes the importance of language a playful, enjoyable aspect of the books, partly through his strategy of having adults consistently underestimate the Baudelaires' abilities to understand sophisticated vocabulary.

Not only are the books well written and entertaining, they are physically attractive. They are beautifully printed, with wide margins and attractive font. Each volume has a color print by Brett Helquist on the front cover, and his delightful illustrations are interspersed throughout the text. Helquist's style is an absolute complement to Handler's prose style. He was undeniably an inspired choice to illustrate this series.

Handler is an excellent "children's author" because he is, above all, an excellent author. He has written two fine adult novels, *The Basic Eight* and *Watch Your Mouth*, both of which attest to his artistic daring. *The Basic Eight* is a comedy about a high school murderer, hardly a safe choice in these times of metal detectors at high school entrances, off duty policemen walking hallways to deter violence, and counselors alert for symptoms of murderous intent. To say that *Watch Your Mouth* is a funny novel about incest, as has been said so often, diminishes its achievement, though to make incest amusing is no small feat. Clearly Handler is a craftsman, whether writing for children or adults. Handler, incidentally, is an excellent critic, often writing about contemporary fiction for *The Village Voice*. He has advocated for the brilliant Japanese novelist, Haruki Murakami, calling him "the greatest living practitioner of fiction." Handler has written that Murakami's novel, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, "will restore faiths you didn't know you had lost or ever needed." The sentiment applies nicely to his own writing, though rather than serving as restoratives, such books as *The Vile Village* may well prevent young readers from losing faiths in the first place.