DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 741 CS 215 046

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TITLE	Sanitizing, Domesticating, Demystifying AIDS: MaryKate Jordan's "Losing Uncle Tim."
PUB DATE	29 Dec 93
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, December 27-30, 1993).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; Child Health; *Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; *Fiction; Social Problems
IDENTIFIERS	Controversial Topics; *Losing Uncle Tim; Trade Books

ABSTRACT

While the AIDS epidemic has wrought radical changes in the consciousness of culture and society over the past decade, it has been relatively slow to make a significant impact on children's literature. Many children's books on the subject have already been published--a recent survey/search yielded about 15 titles. However, many of these books do not venture far into the relatively uncharted territory of the illness. Among the more venturesome books are three works of fiction for younger children, Linda Walvoord Girard's "Alex, the Kid with AIDS," Margaret Merrifield's "Come Sit by Me," and MaryKate Jordan's "Losing Uncle Tim." The first two titles show a world that has to overcome its fear and rejection of AIDS victims, while "Losing Uncle Tim" shows a world in which those victims are loved. In "Alex, the Kid with AIDS," the children in Alex's school are given information on the disease by a doctor and a nurse, including how to react if Alex starts to bleed. Daniel, the child protagonist in "Losing Uncle Tim," finds that people with AIDS are not alien monsters but close relations to be cared for and grieved over; its victims are deserving of the same sympathy and concern extended to victims of any other disease. What this child learns about the world of AIDS and the world at large is presumably a realization that the book hopes to share with its readers. Its shortcoming is its avoidance of the controversies surrounding AIDS. Contains a list of the three works cited and one reference. (TB)

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MLA 1993 Division on Children's Literature Meeting
Session 393: "Evasions and Confrontations: Facing the Unthinkable in Children's Literature"
December 29, 1993

Sanitizing, Domesticating, Demystifying AIDS: MaryKate Jordan's *Losing Uncle Tim*

While the AIDS epidemic has wrought radical changes in the consciousness of culture and society over the past decade, it has been relatively slow to make a significant impact on children's literature. Many children's books on the subject have already been published, a recent survey/search yielding around fifteen titles. However, many of these do not venture very far into the relatively uncharted territory of the illness. Most of these books are for young adults, thus remaining within parameters of safety by honoring the dogma of age-appropriateness. Many of them are non-fiction, telling the stories of well-known victims like Ryan White and Magic Johnson, or, for younger children, giving basic facts about the disease. Thus, the question of how children's fiction can deal with such a highly charged,

overdetermined issue as AIDS remains largely unexplored.

Among the more venturesome books are three works of fiction for younger children, Linda Walvoord Girard's *Alex, the Kid with AIDS*, (1991) Margaret Merrifield's *Come Sit By Me*, (1990) and, the book that some might characterize as the one that takes the most risks in confronting the unspeakable, MaryKate Jordan's *Losing Uncle Tim*, published by Albert Whitman and Co. in 1989. Evidently, all three books have filled a need, as they are now in paperback. Those who have read them will have noted the cheerful, upbeat tone and bright colors of the first two, in their giving basic information about the disease, showing the way that children with AIDS are treated by schools and classmates, and providing explicit facts on prevention and reassurance that children cannot catch AIDS from their playmates. The children with the disease in these two books do not suffer and die, their authors obviously preferring not to look so far into the illness as to show the death of a child. In contrast, *Losing Uncle Tim* is so vaguely circumspect in its treatment of AIDS that, with a few changes, its subject could be any contagious, debilitating, and fatal illness; at the same time it is more somber, taking the risk of showing the stages in the death of a child's favorite adult, and thus entering into the highly charged emotive territory of grief. The implications of *Losing Uncle Tim*'s homogenization of the experience of AIDS, which is unfortunately like no other disease in the way it

is regarded forms an interesting subject for examination. The book evades the subject at the same time that it confronts it, especially in comparison with *Alex, the Kid with AIDS* and *Come Sit By Me*, books that are more direct in dealing with the illness.

In a number of ways, *Losing Uncle Tim* is candidly explicit in its focus on the AIDS. It uses as narrator and controlling consciousness a young child, Daniel, nephew of Tim, the AIDS victim. Daniel knows very little about the disease, apart from the fact that it is fearsome: "I'd heard about AIDS, and it sounded pretty bad." It is not until months of visiting Tim and starting to notice some of his symptoms that Daniel addresses the issue of contagion: "Then I remembered hearing that AIDS was catching. I felt sick to my stomach and sort of prickly all over." But a short conversation with his father, who tells him "It's safe for you to be with Tim," reassures him: "I'm glad . . . I really want to be with Tim." As Daniel observes his uncle's illness, his description of the effects of AIDS is graphic enough to give a clear idea of its debilitating nature. At the same time the illness, while clearly fatal, seems almost unthreatening in its symptoms. Its progress and effects have been sanitized, so that it is uncomplicated in its movement--from Daniel's noticing Tim's falling asleep "almost every time I saw him" to "looking old," being "so tired that when he had to go to the bathroom, one of his friends had to help him get up and walk," having to take

"lots of bottles and pills," falling into a coma--a "special kind of sleep"--and death. At the same time there is not much focus on the fact of AIDS as a special illness requiring a particular form of treatment; it seems to be an illness much like any other.

In contrast, *Alex, the Kid with AIDS* and *Come Sit by Me* show children with AIDS with almost no indications or symptoms of the disease, except for their missing school a few days, or a having bandage on the arm after receiving "medicine through a needle"; they seem shy and quiet at first, like any child new to a school, but later behave like regular children, thus diminishing the idea of AIDS being a threat to a child. At the same time, these books focus on the fact that AIDS is an illness that requires a particular type of treatment and explanation. In *Alex, the Kid with AIDS* the other children in the school are given special information on the disease by a doctor and nurse, including instructions on how to respond if Alex starts to bleed--the only situation in which his classmates could conceivably become infected. The book ends with the children dealing with this situation calmly and effectively. In *Come Sit by Me* the parents of Karen, the child protagonist, become upset when other parents will not allow their children to play with Nicholas, the child with AIDS, or with Karen, who plays with him. They call all the parents and teachers to a meeting where "they all learned a lot about HIV and AIDS." The book ends with all the children wanting to play with

Nicholas. All three books are clearly designed to combat disinformation on AIDS, but use different strategies to do so. The books which talk about special meetings, particular treatments, or precautions for the illness are meeting the issue head-on, exposing the mysterious side of AIDS to the clear light of day. In contrast, *Losing Uncle Tim* practically ignores the idea of disinformation, implying in its straightforwardness that there is, or else there should be, no real mystery to AIDS.

In using the limited perspective of a young child to deal with a disease that has aroused so much fear, suspicion, and misunderstanding among adults, *Losing Uncle Tim* evades many of the issues that surround AIDS. Daniel, the child in this book, seems younger than Michael, the child who narrates *Alex, the Kid with AIDS; Come Sit by Me* is told by in the third person. The concern of transmission and the question of how Tim contracted the disease is simply never mentioned, unlike Alex, who, we are told, received it through a blood transfusion. The question of sexual preference is not raised, and possible clues about it are neutral: Tim is young and presumably single, and the friends who visit him are both male and female. He is a respectable member of the community, in comfortable economic circumstances; he owns an antique store and travels all over in search of treasures. While all three books address the issue of society's marginalization of AIDS victims by showing people with the disease as likeable and ordinary,

Losing Uncle Tim goes a step further in making the victim not just a friend, but a caring, special adult who is at the center of the child Daniel's domestic world: "Uncle Tim was more fun than any grownup I knew."

The child's limited perception is thus used to subvert the demonized mythologies that have grown up around AIDS. Rather than being the marginal other, regarded with suspicion, disgust, and horror, Tim is someone who is familiar, to be cared for and valued. When Daniel is alarmed about catching AIDS, it is not so much because he fears for his own safety but because he wants to continue to see his uncle. Even the issue of contagion is presented by Daniel's father in positive terms of concern and closeness: "I asked Tim's doctor how safe it is for us to be close to him. The doctor said you can't catch AIDS just by taking care of someone." Tim is not rejected by those who know of his disease, as often happens with AIDS victims; during his suffering, he is shown as part of a community of loving family, friends and caregivers: "Everyone wants him to live . . . the doctors, his friends and us. We'll all do our best to take care of him." When he begins to look ill, even his debilitation is cast in terms that are positive and unthreatening: "Uncle Tim started to look old, like the toys in his store," the toys being attractive, valued antiques. Daniel's story is thus an attempt to make sense of the world of AIDS in the light of Tim's value to him as a person.

Thus, in a narrative that depends not only on a child's

limited perceptions, but also on a child's strengths of simplicity, acceptance, and love, Tim's comfortable position in society is not threatened or compromised by AIDS. He is not faced with problems of finances or medical treatment. He seems to carry no psychic burdens and has accepted his condition fully enough to be able to talk encouragingly to his nephew about death. The book explicitly makes the point that Tim is not a "loser," showing him winning a final game of checkers with Daniel, who is usually the winner, and encouraging him never to give up or throw a game. Surrounded with caring, Tim dies with dignity and peace. In the grief of family and friends, the value of his life is emphasized. Even in death he does not become the other, as Daniel hopes to become like him, wanting to grow up to do "something I love. Just like Uncle Tim."

An analysis of the portrayal of AIDS in *Losing Uncle Tim* readily shows that while its picture is graphic and emotionally moving, it actually sidesteps more of the issues and problems faced by AIDS victims than other children's books do. Readers must then wonder why the picture seems so innocuous, and why the reality has been so sanitized. The simple answer, that the book is intended for young children, is clearly a factor, but there are more likely reasons. The avoidance of the controversies surrounding the disease may well be more deliberated than a mere desire to make the book age-appropriate. But whatever the intention of this avoidance may be, it sends the message that the issues that

are not addressed are somehow not as central as the more comforting picture that the book provides. The defanged and domesticated portrayal of the supposedly demonic illness, the omission of some of the horrors that can accompany it, serve to demystify it, and to gain for it a greater measure of acceptance within the community. The evasions in *Losing Uncle Tim* should be read as a form of confrontation. Instead of meeting the fear and hysteria head on, the strategy of indirection shows instead another way of looking at that reality. While some readers may be troubled by the seeming unreality of the book's evasion of controversial issues, others may find that it leaves them with a more positive conclusion. As Peter Medway and Andrew Stibbs say about children's literature, "It helps to see imaginative fiction as hypotheses which can say not only 'The world is like this' but also 'The world could be like this.'" (82) *Alex, the Kid with AIDS* and *Come Sit by Me* show a world that has to overcome its fear and rejection of AIDS victims; *Losing Uncle Tim* shows a world where they are loved. Daniel finds that people with AIDS are not alien monsters but close relations to be cared for and grieved; the victims of AIDS are deserving of the same sympathy and concern that is extended to victims of any other disease. What this child learns about the world of AIDS and the world at large is presumably a realization that the book hopes to share with its readers.

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