Betsy Byars is a prolific author of children's books, who began writing in the 1960s and has continued until the present. She has written about forty books, the most recent one being Tornado. Byars is popular: her books are sought in school libraries, and The Summer of the Swans won the Newbery Award in 1971. Although all of Byars' writing is fiction for children and young adults, it can arbitrarily be divided into three categories:

(1) the fiction before the mid-1980s, all of which seems at least wistful (The Midnight Fox) if not downright somber (The Cartoonist). A subdivision of this category would be the books that use animals as a major part of the story. These first writings have the widest range of appeal as they are more realistic than the books after this time, and some even have great appeal for adults;

(2) the cheerful recent books (the Bingo series, Coast to Coast, the Blossom series, etc.) for children 10 to 14 years old;

(3) the novels written for beginning readers (the Golly Sisters series).

But even though there are several categories of writing within her works, Byars, like all authors, repeats her methods and ideas. What are her techniques and themes?

Point of View

Byars generally writes in the third-person point of view, not quite omniscient, not quite limited, as she sees into more than one (but not all) of the minds of the characters in each story. Her main teller is usually one child with occasional insights into the minds of the surrounding adults and children. The voice of the main child is usually successful, but the voices of the surrounding people are often too cursory. For example, in Good-Bye, Chicken Little, she has Jimmie tell the story of his mother who makes him feel guilty about an uncle's death and goes only occasionally to the minds of another old uncle, Uncle C. C.; the mother, Mrs. Little; and Conrad, a friend. These additional voices enrich the story but are too incomplete in their insights. Byars lacks only the voice of the sister Cassie to make the novel's point of view omniscient, and the book would have been improved if Cassie's voice had been added and the others deepened. Even The Summer of the Swans, the Newbery winner, could have been improved by letting Sara tell both her story and the story of Charlie, the brain damaged brother, thereby using a voice which only described what Charlie did, not what he thought.

Characters

The children of the first category of novels (except those with animals as the main focus of the story) come in three's, usually a boy and two girls, but the mix varies. The lead character goes back and forth between a boy and a girl, but Byars seems to think young boys are more often introspective, wise, and, as a result, truly sad. Hence the reader has Alfie of The Cartoonist and Jimmie of Good-Bye, Chicken Little, surely two of the saddest young men of juvenile fiction.

Of Byars' usual trio, one is almost completely undeveloped as a character and seems just to provide a voice, perhaps saying something that could not come from the thoughts of the other more developed characters. Wanda of Summer of the Swans would fit this category. If the main protagonist is a boy, he has a sister who, even though she may not say much more than three sentences in the entire book, is painfully truthful. A good example of this plain-spokenness is Alma of The Cartoonist. Even though the boy, Alfie, is far too introspective.
Alma, Alfie's sister in the very sad The Cartoonist. Even though she senses Alfie's grief at losing his attic drawing room to a returning brother Bubba, she does not give useless comforting words but says that "We are never going to be free of Bubba" (p. 58) and "Nothing has ever been yours or mine, Alfie, not since the day we were born, not if Bubba wanted it" (p. 60).

Other no-nonsense sisters are in Good-Bye, Chicken Little (Cassie) and The Summer of the Swans (Wanda). The most no-nonsense girl, though not a sister, is Carlie of The Pinballs who trusts no adults and not many children. Why usually three? The reader can only speculate. Perhaps one character provides the sad hero or heroine, one the foil for this sad hero by being a direct opposite in personality type (this is usually a friend), and one to both drive in life's truths and yet nurture (the sisters).

Animals

Animals play a very large part in Byars' novels. Especially important are dogs whose personalities are often artfully delineated (The Blossoms and the Flight of the Green Phantom). Byars has such a love of dogs that she even has Ace (a little too appropriately named) make the flight from North Carolina to California in Coast to Coast and has a dog Tornado be the thing that holds together the varied stories of the easy-to-read recent book Tornado.

But dogs pale in comparison to animals with wings. Winged animals — chickens, birds, horses — are the animals that really interest Byars. There can be several reasons that Byars likes wings in her stories. First, Byars has a love of flight which she shares with her pilot husband. A fascination with wings follows naturally. The Midnight Fox, although not about a bird, has a section where Byars shows her love of flight by telling of a man who had learned to fly without a plane, “free and easy and silent as a bird” (p. 82). Second, animals with wings are often quite beautiful, and The Midnight Fox showed Byars' love of beautiful animals.

Third, animals with wings (or just wings themselves) can easily be a symbol of other things. For instance, the swans of Summer of the Swans are an appropriate symbol for the brain-damaged Charlie because of their muteness and the fact that they have changed from one thing to another (ugly to beautiful) even as Charlie changes for Sara when she realizes her love for him. They are also beautiful in the water but very ungainly in the air just as Charlie is both beautiful and ugly.

Other winged animals are also symbols of change. The winged colt of The Winged Colt of Casa Mia must learn to fly and adapt to his wings; the injured crane of The House of Wings must accept his blindness even as Sammy must accept his grandfather. Other changes depicted by animals with wings would include the change of Jimmie in Good-Bye, Chicken Little, who gets over his fear of ordinary life and is no longer a chicken but just Jimmie Little.

Fourth, wings may have supported an idea of Byars that she would write a myth similar to a Greek myth, and the winged horse (Pegasus in Greek mythology, Alado in Winged Colt) was a clear and easily recognizable way to let the readers see her story as a myth. Fifth, wings let mortals leave the earth (Junior Blossom of the Blossom series, Birch and her grandfather of Coast to Coast), an earth that is often very sad, if one judges by the first books.

Themes

Byars has several themes that are consistently repeated. One of these themes is that fathers, uncles, grandfathers (with the exception of the grandfather in House of Wings) are totally awful, for example, the father of The Night Swimmers with his too tight, velvet, sequinned suits and indifference to his children; the father of Harvey (Pinballs) who shows little regret for having run over Harvey with the car; and the father of Cracker (Cracker Jackson) who doesn't know when things aren't funny. Adults that are not shown in a bad light are so often undeveloped that they would have been better left out. The Masons of The Pinballs, for example, do not show any of the complexity of a strong adult but seem only to have been thrown in to reduce the somberness of Byars' depicted situations. A second theme is that girls have a more realistic view of life than boys do. And a third is that everybody has problems: even the cheerful Bingo Brown has to work on his problems by listing them. Each novel shows that life demands coping.

Another characteristic of Byars' work is that family is all important. Even the malfunctioning family shown in her
Another characteristic of Byars’ work is that family is all-important, even the malfunctioning family shown in her novels. The novels point to the importance of families both indirectly as each group of children draws comfort from its respective members and directly as Mrs. Little of Good-Bye, Chicken Little thinks that “The family was like a great tasty recipe, and the loss of any member made it less spicy, less enjoyable” (p. 21). And up until the Brown series, all the represented families were just a little eccentric as is noted by Vern Blossom: “He did not want to take Michael home. He did not want Michael to see that he himself lived all wrong and owned nothing. He also did not want Michael to see his family ...” (The Blossoms and the Green Phantom, p. 15).

Another recurring theme is that every person is tremendously selfish. For instance, Bingo Brown “had always known his parents were blind to the depths of his own feelings. They had proved that again and again. But apparently he had been somewhat blind, too” (Bingo Brown and the Language of Love, p. 40). And for a deep degree of selfishness, see the family in The Cartoonist, where the old uncle Pap cannot be deterred from his hoary stories, and the mother is so insensitive that she lives only for an egoistic older son, seeing nothing of the intelligence and beauty of Alfie’s cartoons.

The complexity of life is another message found in Byars’ novels. Jimmie of Pinballs realizes and thinks that “Now, in his own complicated age, good and bad ran together like dye and nothing was simple” (p. 62). Cracker of Cracker Jackson also sees this complexity as he looks at Alma and sees that “the two halves of her face showed exactly what was going on inside her Ñ half of her had been hurt so bad it would never be the same, but the other half still hoped for something good (p. 126). An element of this recurring theme of life's complexity is that the children in Byars' novels often raise themselves, at least emotionally, for the adults around them are completely blind to the things that matter. Even when adults are aware of the things of life that count, they often cannot act appropriately, for example, Mrs. Little of Good-Bye, Chicken Little, who does not realize that she is placing on her son Jimmie too much responsibility for the death of her brother Pete.

Only in the later books, the ones of the second and third categories, are these somber motifs Ñ the importance of the family, the selfishness of all, the complexity of life, and the fact that children must often raise themselves with little physical and no emotional help Ñ lessened. And even with the Brown family, it is only the last theme that is lessened as the Brown family adequately supports Bingo both physically and emotionally.

One of the books in the first category, The Midnight Fox, also shows a complete, functioning family, but this book is not the norm for Byars’ works as it is different in technique (uses first person instead of third point of view) as well as theme. Byars’ depiction of the fox’s beauty and intelligence give an added dimension to the book, and the boy Tommy’s problems do not seem as serious nor the adults as worthless as do the situations in the other stories.

With these four predominate themes, Byars seems surprisingly somber to be considered a children’s writer. Comparing her early stories to those of more cheerful authors such as Cleary and Moffatt shows their true starkness. It is only the happy endings, such as the one for The Night Swimmers, where the father’s girlfriend Brendelle is introduced, that lets some of Byars’ early stories stay in the children's category. A happy ending is needed for children's literature, as is noted in Anthology of Children's Literature, 5th ed. "There is this fundamental difference between fiction for children and adults: A triumphant ending, although it must be believable [is needed] for a continuation of the band of hope and optimism to be found in folklore" (p. 732). The Cartoonist, the most sober of the books, definitely is not in the children's category but has gone into the young adult division and differs little from short stories for adults which are considered naturalistic, i.e., having a philosophy of life that offers no comforting softness, no serendipitous endings.

Literary Merit

If Byars has lots of flat and strange characters, some tacked-on endings, and her books are a little too sober, what overcomes these problems? Her faults are perhaps inherent in the genre of children/young adult fiction. She may be somewhat forgiven the flat characters who don’t say enough because her novels are very short (modern children have short attention spans) and hardly have time to develop even one character, much less several. And the sadness is part of the young adult literature of today which seeks both to sensitize the majority of teenagers who are concerned only
with themselves and to desensitize the minority of teenagers who have too soon been forced to cope in a sad adult world. And as has already been noted, the Bingo Brown books and the Blossom series, Byars’ later novels, somewhat soften the overall picture of Byars’ works as Bingo and the Blossoms are basically happy. Bingo even has a complete family that contains a man strong enough to believably admit he still admires other women besides his wife and yet be faithful (Bingo Brown and the Language of Love, p. 39).

Byars’ plots also help to make her fiction successful. Such antics as the Blossoms’ chase of the green Phantom make the reader wonder what comes next. Will Pap really get out of the dumpster? Will the Phantom’s ingestion of helium make it capable of flight? Will Junior escape the dreaded rooftop of old man Benson’s chicken house? The reader is kept interested in what will happen, not just in whether a character will change an attitude. Less emotionally mature readers (the usual child and adolescent) demand action. Byars also says things well, such as this thought of Bingo’s, which will be cherished by all word lovers who have suffered the indignities of people who use words carelessly:

As a writer, words were naturally important to Bingo. He was affected deeply by what people wrote. He had once fallen out of love with a girl named Mamie Lou because she had written a letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder that said “I know that you are dead, but please write if you can and tell me where you get your ideas” (Bingo, p. 90)

Such instances both provide humor and show Byars’ cleverness, the cleverness that is another reason for the success of the books. Originality and cleverness are apparent all through the books. Two more specific examples would be in the ideas that Alfie has for his cartoons (Cartoonist) and the slightly zany mother and Uncle C.C. of Good-Bye, Chicken Little. Some of the originality almost outdoes itself as in the case of the two old ladies of Pinballs, who are named Thomas and Jefferson and who break their hips at the same time; but in general the cleverness (zaniness) is done very well and is not beyond probability. The fact that she has been able to bring this zaniness to books for beginning readers with the Golly sisters, Rose and May-May, and their traveling feminist road show further demonstrates that Byars is a very talented author, even when forced to use a very limited vocabulary and no dogs, children, or old eccentric men named Pap.

If judged solely on literary merit, Byars’ books have some problems, especially the early ones. But in the school library, her works are a force: her plots move, her sad children are usually brightened by the appearance of a savior, and they all contain (The Cartoonist excepted) some humor. Librarians revere them because kids will read them. It is perhaps all that matters, for in the world of the late 20th century, it is very difficult to make the pen mightier than the basketball, the baseball, the tube, the broken homes, the poverty, etc.

References


______ Coast to Coast. Delacorte, 1992.


The Moon that inspires Betsy Byars's memoir isn't the one in the sky, but a huge, harmless blacksnake she finds in the rafters of her porch. This meeting begins an exploration of the writing process. With energy, wit, and delight, the Newbery medalist shows how "the good scraps" of her life, from a bully named Bubba to a gift-wrapped dime, weave into her work. $5.98. Add to cart. More details. The Summer of the Swans (English, Paperback) Betsy Byars, Ted CoConis. Sara's 14th summer was turning out to be the most confusing of her life. Up until then, things had flowed s

Judith Callaway-Schaefer currently teaches English as an adjunct at Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Oklahoma.

The Moon that inspires Betsy Byars's memoir isn't the one in the sky, but a huge, harmless blacksnake she finds in the rafters of her porch. This meeting begins an exploration of the writing process. With energy, wit, and delight, the Newbery medalist shows how "the good scraps" of her life, from a bully named Bubba to a gift-wrapped dime, weave into her work. $5.98. Add to cart. More details. The Summer of the Swans (English, Paperback) Betsy Byars, Ted CoConis. Sara's 14th summer was turning out to be the most confusing of her life. Up until then, things had flowed s