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Original Research Article

Food insecurity in books for children: A qualitative content analysis

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Abstract

Issues of class and poverty are largely absent from children's fiction and from elementary school curricula, even though in Canada one in every five children lives in a food insecure household. This paper examines the limited number of middle grade children's books that feature depictions of food insecurity published in North America in English in the past forty years and interrogates their assumptions about children, poverty, food, and hunger. While the primary cause of food insecurity for children is inadequate household income, often due to systemic inequities, most children's fiction suggests that individual choices or life circumstances are to blame and that charity, kind strangers, and simple luck are the solutions, giving children, at best, an incomplete understanding of the social and political issues that produce food insecurity.

Résumé

Les questions de classe sociale et de pauvreté sont généralement absentes de la littérature pour enfants et des programmes scolaires des écoles primaires, même si, au Canada, un enfant sur cinq vit dans un foyer affecté par l'insécurité alimentaire. Cet article examine le nombre limité de livres pour enfants de 8 à 12 ans décrivant l'insécurité alimentaire qui ont été publiés en Amérique du Nord, en anglais, dans les 40 dernières années. Il s'agit d'interroger leurs présupposés sur les enfants, la pauvreté, l'alimentation et la faim. Alors que

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la cause première de l'insécurité alimentaire des enfants est l'insuffisance des revenus du ménage, souvent due à des inégalités systémiques, la plupart des œuvres littéraires pour enfants suggèrent que les choix individuels ou les circonstances de la vie en sont l'origine et que la charité, les gentils étrangers et la simple chance constituent les solutions, ce qui donne aux enfants, au mieux, une compréhension incomplète des facteurs sociaux et politiques qui produisent l'insécurité alimentaire.

Keywords: Children's literature; food insecurity; poverty; shame; social justice; windows and mirrors

Introduction

Children's literature is believed to have the capacity to influence children's understandings of the world, developing belief systems, self-esteem, and even behaviour (Crawford et al., 2019; Darragh & Hill, 2014; Johnson et al., 2018). In 1988, educator Emily Style imagined a curriculum framework that saw classroom materials, including books, as both windows and mirrors, a concept that has been regularly applied and expanded in the intervening three and a half decades (see for example Bishop, 1990; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Enriquez, 2021; Johnson et al., 2018; Myers, 2014; Waller & Sullivan-Walker, 2023). Style (1988) believed that young readers should have the opportunity to look through a variety of "windows" to view the experiences, thoughts, and belief systems of others, and to look into "mirrors" to see themselves and their experiences both reflected and validated. For those children who have historically been marginalized in curricula (and in life), windows and mirrors have the potential to change the way others see them as well as the way they see themselves; equally importantly, windows and mirrors teach those in majority cultures that theirs is not the only valid or authentic experience. Bishop (1990) added the important concept of "sliding glass doors" that allow children to enter into other worlds, while Myers (2014) argued for books that provide a map for children to follow into unfamiliar terrain: children, Myers (2014) says, "are indeed searching for their place in the world, but they are also deciding where they want to go. They create, through the stories they're given, an atlas of their world, of their relationships to others, of their possible destinations" (n.p.). These concepts—windows, mirrors, glass doors, and maps—provide a lens through which to analyse the portrayal of social issues in children's literature.

Books for children "are not ideologically neutral or innocent" (Hartsfield, 2022, p. 80). Currently, there is an increased emphasis on publishing books for children with long-neglected content: ethnicity, race and immigration status, 2SLGTBQIA+ themes, and disability and neurodiversity are all much-needed subjects that some publishers are eager to add to their lists. While attention to classism, poverty, and food insecurity *are* increasing—based on this research, at least—these subjects continue to be underrepresented in children's literature. The purpose of this paper is to examine how poverty and food insecurity are portrayed in children's books, and what solutions to poverty and food insecurity (if any) are offered.

Selection criteria and research process

Book titles were collected via poverty-themed searches in public library holdings, Amazon Books' "Children's Books: Homelessness and Poverty", and Chapters/Indigo subject listings; TeachingBooks poverty-themed books; "food & water justice," "economic class," and "gentrification & housing" booklists on the Social Justice Books website; online poverty-themed children's book lists (these latter two including the terms poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and hunger); other researchers' book lists; and word of mouth. From these many sources, fifty-two books were identified based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Middle grade fiction (aimed at eight- to twelve-year-olds);
- A significant element of the story involves a child or children not always having enough food to eat or interacting with others (children or adults) who do not always have enough food to eat;
- Published in English;
- Contemporary, realistic setting with human characters;
- Set in North America, Europe, or Oceania and concerned with food insecurity in the Global North.

Identifying books that feature food insecurity as a significant plot element was not always easy prior to actually reading the book. Publishers' synopses and independent book reviews were examined,[1] and fourteen books were eliminated that appeared to deal only with other aspects of poverty, such as homelessness, or other social issues, such as abuse. Nine books were found to be out of print (most from the 1980s and early 1990s), and five were unavailable in two out of three Canadian public library systems.[2] The remaining twenty-five books were accessed through the author's public library system in Nova Scotia for reading and review. Due to the considerable effort required to track down many of these books, it is likely that individual children would come across only a small percentage of these titles. The twenty-five included books (see Table 1) were published between 1981 and 2023; a significant proportion (40%) were published in the past five years, and most (72%) were published in the last ten years—an indication that the subject is receiving increasing attention. Twenty of these books were published (and presumably set) in the United States, one was originally published in Australia, while the remaining four were published in Canada.

During my preliminary reading of each book, when I arrived at text that indicated hunger, appetite, lack of food, longing for food, dislike of food, provision of food, refusal of food, or eager food consumption, I tagged the spot with a sticky note to return to. On second reading, once the overall shape of the narrative was apparent, I transcribed food-related portions of the book and wrote a brief synopsis to identify key themes, ideological assumptions, and cultural messages related to poverty and food insecurity. In particular, I noted the events and explanation(s) given for how individual(s) or families came to be food insecure, what interactions with food (or a lack of food) occurred through the book, how the young protagonist and/or

[1] These included Kirkus Reviews (https://www.kirkusreviews.com/), Publishers Weekly (https://www.publishersweekly.com/), the Children's Book Review (https://www.thechildrensbookreview.com/), and Goodreads (https://www.goodreads.com/).
[2] Library jurisdictions searched included Nova Scotia, Ottawa, and Vancouver.

their caregivers dealt with hunger and food insecurity, and how their food insecurity was resolved at the end of the book. I used a constant comparative method, and new themes emerged as I read. In many cases I went back and re-read some texts for a third time where my initial notes were not adequate.

All of the twenty-five middle grade books, except one, feature a protagonist who is food insecure. The one exception is *Dew Drop Dead* by James Howe, a mystery story first published in 1990. Its premise more closely resembles many picture books featuring protagonists who are confronted with the food insecurity of others;[3] the focus is on the alleviation of the simple, immediate, and outward effects of poverty—providing food, clothing, and (usually temporary) shelter—and the moral satisfaction of the middle-class providers.

The twenty-four remaining books featuring protagonists who are themselves food-insecure are written in the first person. Ten protagonists are boys and fourteen are girls, but only three of the twenty-four authors are male.[4] The three male authors' books all have male protagonists, and these fictional boys' stories are among those most focused on both feeling and avoiding shame. Overall, many of these books remain grounded in stereotypically gendered assumptions about appropriate sex roles, assumptions often made by the protagonists themselves. For example, in *The Exact Location of Home,* Zig assumes his girlfriend Gianna will not understand how it feels for him to live in a shelter: "How can you, when you go home to your house with your mom and dad both there, with your *dad actually working and paying bills,* and your *mom home to make sure there's broccoli or something with dinner*..."(Messner, 2017, p. 211, emphasis mine). It is almost always the fictional mothers who are expected to care for and cook for children, and with few exceptions it is women—librarians, school administrative workers, neighbours, and strangers—who notice protagonists are hungry and take steps to feed them.

Two of the books are marketed as "memoirs" by adults who experienced poverty and food insecurity as children, written by authors Rex Ogle (*Free Lunch*, 2019) and Katie Van Heidrich (*The In-Between*, 2023). Another writer, Eric Walters, has stated that his book, *The King of Jam Sandwiches,* published in 2020, is based on his own childhood experiences. These three books do seem to pay more authentic attention to both the physical and emotional *feelings* of habitual hunger, and display a deeper complexity of parental motivation and child-protagonist understanding. For example, Walters' protagonist Robbie is food insecure not because of a straightforward lack of food, but because both he and his father hoard food and for different reasons are reluctant to eat it—the father because he has a mental illness, while Robbie seeks to protect himself in the event of his unstable father's prolonged disappearance. However, these fictionalized "true" stories are not entirely free of the tropes about food insecurity, shame, and self-sufficiency present in the majority of the sample books.

The "memoir" books *Free Lunch* and *The In-Between* make up two of the only three books in this study that feature other-than-White main characters. Ogle and Van Heidrich are mixed race, and the only other BIPOC writer on the list, Kelly Baptist, a young Black writer who won the 2015 We Need Diverse Books contest, features a Black family and many other Black characters in *Isaiah Dunn is My Hero*, published in 2020. The remainder of these books are

[3] Picture books about food insecurity are discussed in a separate research paper (manuscript in preparation).
[4] Writing for children is still a female-dominated industry, although women writers and illustrators do not always receive equal recognition for their work (Magoon, 2014).

overwhelmingly and almost exclusively White. In my notes, I repeatedly wrote "assumed White" where there were no markers for skin colour or other physical attributes, or social or cultural cues, that might make race recognizable. Interestingly—considering our current celebration of the "diversification" of children's texts—in this sample it is the two oldest books whose White authors seem to address race more directly and honestly. Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming*, first published in 1981, and Paula Fox's *Monkey Island*, first published in 1991, each feature at least one significant Black character who provides help to the protagonist(s), but who also must deal with overt racism from other characters, including being called the N-word. In comparison, it seems that contemporary White writers of middle grade fiction about poverty do not, for the most part, write about race or think to include diverse characters in their stories. I expect this would be similar for all children's fiction regardless of subject, although it is particularly noteworthy here given the significantly higher rates of food insecurity among BIPOC individuals and families.

The portrayal of poverty in children's books

The central question motivating this review is what does contemporary North American Children's fiction teach children about food insecurity? Or, put another way, what would children learn about poverty and food insecurity by reading these books? I am concerned not only with the portrayal of those living in poverty, but the portrayal of ways that poverty is alleviated, ameliorated, or escaped.

Regardless of how well or badly they are written, middle grade children's stories dealing with poverty and food insecurity are largely formulaic, and the formula has seemingly changed little over the past forty years. The middle grade protagonist living in poverty and dealing with food insecurity is an oldest or only child who feels single-handedly responsible for holding the family together, both practically and emotionally. They are often academically or artistically gifted or have a special and unique talent, are almost always avid readers, and manage to keep their grades up despite the (usually extreme) challenges at home. There is often one previously-published well-known book (or several books) that serve as guiding stories throughout the novel; these books appear to date from the *writer*'s childhood and are not contemporary favourites.[5] The food-insecure protagonists are responsible for exponentially more work than usual, provided either willingly or resentfully. While there is no doubt that children living within conditions of food insecurity are of necessity canny and resourceful, the level at which these fictional eight-to-twelve-year-olds operate boggles the mind. They do the grocery shopping, prepare meals (and not always simple ones), feed non-functioning parents or younger siblings, clean up family cars, vans, kitchens, apartments, or trailers, pay bills, line up alone at the food bank, and secretly procure food from kind friends and strangers, because their adult "caregiver"

[5] Examples include *Little Women* (first published in two parts in 1868-69), *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *The Secret Garden* (1911), *The Last Battle* (1956), *My Side of the Mountain* (1959), and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). One "newer" book, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), is referenced in at least five of the books I reviewed. This inclusion is all the more curious because its subject matter—racism, sexism, puberty, and sexual abuse, in addition to poverty—would likely place it in young adult fiction (YA) rather than middle grade (MG).

must never find out. In addition, they sometimes go without food so their parent or, especially, their younger sibling can eat. While their heroic deeds go unnoticed or unremarked by those around them, their "otherness" may be signalled by small indications that protagonists and/or their families are unable to navigate the social norms of the middle class; they may not know what fork to use at a formal dinner, or to wait for the bread basket at the restaurant before eating the butter pats.

The physicality of hunger is for the most part only superficially explored. In many books, there is no indication of hunger at all, despite insufficient food or many missed meals. Protagonists may *say* they are hungry, and may spend considerable effort trying to find food, but we are not usually presented with any physical evidence to back up their hunger—except, once or twice in each novel, a hungry stomach rumbles, grumbles, growls, or gurgles. There are a few exceptions: Jackson feels "a little dizzy" (Applegate, 2015, p. 5), Zig gets "shaky" (Messner, 2017, p. 95), Jeanne Ann feels "brittle" (Svetcov, 2020, p. 138), and Rex's little brother "wouldn't stop crying, he was so hungry" (Ogle, 2019, p. 103).

What we do learn about is children's emotional response to hunger. It is taken for granted that poor children—those who are food insecure or underhoused or unable to afford new clothes—feel ashamed. It is taken for granted that they will not want anyone to find out that they are poor; the stomach noises just discussed are usually treated as bodily betrayals. If they have close friends who figure things out, they will swear their friends to secrecy and/or enlist their friends into covering for them so their terrible secret is not revealed. They are often the only child from a low-income family among their classmates or friendship group.

As with many books for middle grade readers, this set of books is full of dead, disappeared, and disappearing parents. There is a long tradition of the "survival story" in children's literature, and it is common across all subjects and genres for young protagonists to be orphaned, abandoned, or to run away, and to have to figure out how to survive on their own for a time. Ultimately, they learn to (re)join and (re)connect with middle-class "civilization"—that place where they are taken care of, as children "should" be. Many of these middle grade books fit into this category. These twenty-four novels feature a total of nine dead parents; the most common causes of death are accidents, heart attacks, and cancer. Eight protagonists are abandoned by a parent or caregiver during the course of their story, only one—who was beaten unconscious and ended up in hospital—unintentionally. There are also at least three incarcerated parents—we do not generally learn what they have done to end up in prison—two fathers and one mother. These plot elements are doubtless repeated in these stories for dramatic effect: a child without a parent, or without a functioning parent, leaves more room (or so it is clearly believed) for fictional character growth and opportunities to demonstrate agency.

There are only two protagonists who belong to two-parent families at the time their story takes place. The remaining twenty-two protagonists live with only one parent or other caregiver (most often a grandmother), and that caregiver generally faces significant life challenges, including depression, mental illness, or addictions, on top of chronic unemployment. Sometimes the caregiver is still able to demonstrate that they mean well and love their child, but their own seemingly insurmountable problems often get in the way—although, occasionally, the protagonist does suffer serious neglect and abuse at the hands of a parent or caregiver. A majority of these parents or caregivers (almost invariably mothers) demonstrate "bad" parenting. This is present to a lesser or (usually) greater

degree in eighteen of the twenty-four titles: parents smoke, drink, get fired or quit jobs for irresponsible (and sometimes frivolous) reasons, spend money impulsively, disappear for days (or longer) without warning, allow their children to suffer (and go hungry) rather than seek help, and regularly demonstrate their carelessness and/or selfishness in many other ways. They are also uninclined toward, or incapable of, regularly providing food or feeding their children. There are almost always direct messages from the parents or caregivers to the child protagonist about not disclosing the family's poverty to any outsiders. Consequently, most of the children try to keep evidence of their family's situation hidden and feel a great deal of shame. There are also direct messages (or dying requests) for the child protagonists to keep the family together at all costs, which is taken to heart and forms a significant plot point. The children never question these admonitions until the end of their story, whereafter their feelings of shame are apparently resolved in one or two sentences about how "it's nobody's fault" or "it could happen to anyone."

However, poor protagonists are presented as having the power to change their situations and, once reminded that they have a choice—whether by circumstance or by others' voices of wisdom—are able to enact that power, reducing the complexity of social and environmental factors to something entirely under individual control. In these books "middle-classness" remains the ideal, complexity is reduced, individual control is assumed, and bootstraps are pulled up once the protagonist (re-)locates their misplaced or undeveloped sense of agency. Poor children's sense of shame *for being poor* is never questioned; at the book's resolution protagonists almost invariably separate themselves from their poverty, or at least take steps in that direction, leaving them free to (eventually) join or re-join the middle class. As they do so, they move from being socially and psychologically "abject" characters (Wedwick & Trites, 2008, p. 130) who, due to their shame, had been ostracized and/or had separated themselves from the social, into a (re-)integration with their community and, usually, one or two special peers. While many books' endings include a sentence—or occasionally a paragraph—that explicitly acknowledges the protagonist's newly-realized recognition of the importance of relationships with friends, kin, and community, and that it is okay to ask for help when you are struggling, along with the reassurance that true friends do not judge us, these brief passages cannot compete with the overwhelming amount of negative material that makes poverty a suspect and shameful condition.

While the reality of foster care is invariably positive when it occurs in these books, the *idea* of foster care is most often presented as a dire warning about what will happen if the "secret" (of the family's poverty) gets out. Protagonists with younger siblings always worry that they will be separated, and this worry almost inevitably inspires the children to make unwise decisions. The books' assumptions that siblings will be separated—something that has long been against Canadian and United States child welfare policies, at least in practice—is never questioned. Despite this negative coverage, if there is an interaction with a social worker, it is generally very positive. However, these rare occurrences are unlikely to counteract the overwhelmingly negative portrayal—suspicion, fear, and threat—contained in these books. Felix is typical when he says, "I didn't want the MCFD [Ministry of Children and Family Development] to take me away from my mom and put me in a home with mean strangers and possibly violent kids" (Nielsen, 2018, pp. 97-98). Most of the children who end up in different homes at the ends of their respective stories do not enter the official foster care system, but are taken in by their

friends' parents, neighbours, and even librarians—despite the lack of home study or any officially-sanctioned process to ensure the home is a good one.

All of the parents *except four* are unemployed during the majority of the books' action. Money is a concern and a source of anxiety for many of these young protagonists, but we often do not know exactly where the family's money—what little there is—comes from. But the fact that parents and caregivers are so often positioned as unemployed emphasises personal responsibility in rectifying the situation, even if, as we are often told is the case, their unemployment is the result of an economic downturn and they try repeatedly to get new jobs. Despite this, a number of young protagonists somehow manage to have part-time jobs drop into their laps, even when their parent(s) cannot find work—they clean up at mom-and-pop corner stores, sweep up at the barbershop, re-shelve books or read to younger children at libraries, or demonstrate an entrepreneurial spirit by busking in the streets or selling lemonade.

The child often hatches an unrealistic plan to get money, escape poverty, and thereby "save" the family—although these plans either never work out or produce unintended results. The plan may involve running away, having to hide, or having to make their way somewhere after they have been abandoned. There are often one or two friends who the child protagonist confides in, or who figure out their friend's unstable situation on their own. Ultimately, near the three-quarter mark of the book, the friend must betray the protagonist's confidence in order to avert catastrophe—although before the book ends there is a positive explanation for the betrayal, understanding on the part of the protagonist, and quick forgiveness.

Once the crisis is averted, the protagonist's poverty is alleviated—it is always alleviated—through a limited number of events. First, the caregiver may get a job, possibly one that also provides a place to live. In the endings of those books where the child continues to live with their original caregiver at the story's conclusion, *and the caregiver is capable of holding a job*,[6] it is precisely the caregiver *getting a job*, usually through luck rather than talent or skill, that leads to changed circumstances for the child protagonist. The caregiver may go back to school, sometimes funded by Social Services,[7] so that the future possibility of a job is implied once this task of self-betterment is completed. A few caregivers enter a rehab program funded by Social Services; once again, this is positioned as a first step on the road to an improvement in individual circumstances. The protagonist comes to understand that their caregiver is trying their best.

If the protagonist does not stay with their original caregiver, they are reunited with a previously-unknown, lost, or injured parent or caregiver, or they are adopted into, or fostered by, a family where there is no food insecurity. Usually this new family is a previously-estranged relative, or is acquired outside of the formal requirements of adoption or foster care. If a second caregiver takes over from the original, they grow slowly into their caretaking role and become a new "family." At the end of the book, preparing or providing food for their child—no matter how basic—is a signal that these original or new-but-reluctant caregivers are being transformed into better, healthier, and more caring parents or parent-substitutes. If the new families are strangers, they feed their new wards an abundance of special foods.

[6] In other words, the caregiver does not have a mental illness or an addiction that requires treatment first.
[7] Demonstrably caring parents go to night school from the start; for others, going to night school is part of their transformation to better parenting.

These fictional children from low-income families are always portrayed as both vulnerable and innocent. Initially, they are dependent on their parents or guardians for food and other necessities, and, although they feel a great sense of responsibility in providing for themselves, their parent(s), and younger siblings, readers know that their poverty is not their fault (see LaFollette & May, 1996, for more on the "paradigmatical innocence" of children). They did not choose to be born into poor families or poor neighbourhoods, and, once there, they can make no social or political changes, nor hold a job that makes enough to support themselves and their families—although on top of all their other too-capable activities they often try hard to contribute financially as well. The children in these stories are remarkable in their demonstration of motivation and diligence. Drawing on the idea of the "Super Negro" discussed by Sims (1982), and the "Super Crip" discussed by Rubin and Watson (2008), I use the term Super Poor Kid to represent fictional or fictionalized children who demonstrate this exceptionalism. The Super Poor Kid is doubly worthy: first, as a child, they cannot be blamed for their economic position, but, second, they are unflagging in their efforts to be model middle-class citizens, even when they are really, really hungry. Many of these children's writers are careful not to directly blame low-income characters for their poverty, but those living in poverty are nonetheless frequently stereotyped—often by the food insecure protagonists themselves. Zig is resistant to seeking help from outside his family; his feelings are dominated by a profound and ongoing shame, as if he had a "POOR KID sticker on [his] forehead" (p. 138). When he learns that his mother intends for them to sleep at the church homeless shelter, he refuses, sharing with readers his impressions of people who use the place: "one lady with a grocery cart full of plastic bags"; "two guys...in clothes so dirty you can't even see what color they're meant to be anymore"; one guy who "is always talking to himself" (Messner, 2017, pp. 138 & 127). And Jeff—whose single mother is an alcoholic—refers to the low-income shoppers at "the cheap food warehouse" as "zombies"; he and his mother have gone there to shop during "off-hours, when no one she possibly knew would see her" (Abbott, 2019, p. 68). Of course, what readers know is that these protagonists are also disparaging themselves when they scorn others living in poverty, and their self-hatred is evident.

Some writers state explicitly—often through auxiliary characters—that the misfortunes of the poor are simply due to "bad luck," or at least the absence of good luck. This presence or absence of luck is a motif frequently employed to suggest that such hardship and adversity could happen to anyone, given the wrong circumstances. While this may be true to some extent, it also downplays the ongoing roles of class and racialized discrimination, systemic lack of resources, and the repercussions of regularly unmet basic human needs such as food and housing. Poverty is not haphazard. While a greater number of middle-class people may be sliding into more precarious situations, poor children—especially racialized children—are more likely to grow up to be poor adults (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009), and many poor adults are unable to escape their structural limitations.

How is children's food insecurity solved?

In the real world, we can conceptualize four main avenues to ensure that children who are hungry get fed:

• The response may be individual—one person feeding one other person or a family;

• There may be organized community-level supports or charities such as food banks or soup kitchens;
• Via existing government programs such as welfare programs or SNAP; or
• By making policy or structural changes that expand the reach of tax-funded programs and increase people's wages and social security payments or provide a guaranteed minimum income.

Individual action

Overwhelmingly, fictional children's immediate hunger is solved through individual action. The protagonists are often responsible for procuring and preparing their own food and feeding their younger sibling, if they have one. So, they scrounge or steal food, eating garbage, or what should be garbage: spoiled, stale, or moldy food. After he is abandoned, Clay raids the trash from the room next door, finding "a few pieces of bread, a chicken wing that had a little meat left on it and which he ate with a slight shudder, and an apple with one bite taken from it" (Fox, 1991, p. 8). Unceremoniously left with her indifferent great-grandmother by her neglectful mother, Angel tries to make gravy—as "Grandma" demanded—with flour that had "little mealworms crawling about in it" (Paterson, 2002, p. 129). Parents and caregivers do feed these children, but they usually do not do it very well. They themselves are reduced to scrounging and occasionally stealing, or they leave their child to go without one day and splurge on fast food the next; the protagonist invariably worries so much about this rash behaviour that they are unable to enjoy the treat.

Every story also involves food being given to the protagonist by others who notice their hunger. Jackson's family, parked in their minivan in a Denny's restaurant parking lot, were given "some pancakes that were too burnt for the customers" by the manager (Applegate, 2015, p. 106). Best friends regularly share food at lunch, always doing so in a way that attempts to minimize the hungry child's shame. An observant classmate regularly gives Lulu extra food because "I don't like milk but they make me take it," and "they gave me an extra dessert" (Fox, 2021, pp. 10 & 53). It does not always work. At school, several classmates notice Jeff is not eating. Hannah buys an extra lunch and tries to pass it off as bought by another student who had to leave, and, after Jeff eats it ("I tried not to eat the grilled cheese too fast"), he realizes the ruse:

> "I know I'm not the sharpest tool, but did you…did you buy me lunch?"….I went away fast. Somewhere. I forget where. My body took me and I wasn't in control. Black knives spun in my eyes. Twice I turned the other way when I saw her in the hall…she had shamed me. I hated her for what she had done. She knew about me (Abbott, 2019, p. 203-205).

This effort to prevent feelings of shame is also made by others, in a tactic I have dubbed "do me a favour and eat this." The worker at the soup kitchen looks out for Mel, and there are several occasions when she suggests that Mel would be doing her a favour by sampling the soup or eating extra cookies (Sand-Eveland, 2012). When Felix steals food from Mr. Ahmadi's shop and

gets caught, Mr. Ahmadi responds by offering Felix "two large plastic-wrapped muffins....my wife says you would be doing us a great favor if you could eat these. The sell-by date is today." On another occasion he meets his deadbeat father for lunch in a restaurant, and afterwards the waiter follows him outside: "Glad I caught you. This jerk just sent back a perfectly good Denver sandwich....sandwich is just going to go to waste. I was hoping you could help me out" (Nielson, 2018, pp. 156-157 & 176). Extended family, small shopkeepers, restaurant staff, librarians, and complete strangers take it upon themselves to feed hungry children. They may do so once, a handful of times, or more regularly, but they never take any action to ensure that the child *always* has enough to eat.

Community supports

In these books, gaining access to free lunch at school is also overwhelmingly about shame. In fact, one entire book, entitled *Free Lunch*, contains repeated cafeteria interactions focused on the humiliation of Rex having to identify himself—loudly, as the "cafeteria lady" is hard of hearing—as a free lunch recipient (Ogle, 2019). Zig has been eligible for the free school lunch program for years, since his "Mom's income put us in the category for free French toast sticks and fake syrup"—first, take note of the writer's middle-class positioning by calling it fake syrup! Despite his eligibility, his mother "always made [his] lunch at home," but, once they are living in a homeless shelter, making lunch becomes impossible, and Zig is finally enrolled in the program. Zig's shame is tangible:

> I make sure I get there really late so [his girlfriend] Gianna's already through the line when the lunch lady punches in my number and the red bar that says "Free Lunch" pops up on her screen. They might as well slap a POOR KID sticker on your forehead before you sit down to eat (Messner, 2017, pp. 120-121 & 138).

There are fewer fictional food banks, food pantries, or soup kitchens than one might expect, given the level of hunger present in these stories—although this is certainly consistent with the fact that most people who are food insecure do not actually access food banks (PROOF, 2019). Not all protagonists visit community organizations that provide meals, but, when they do, shame is once again the main sentiment, and not being seen while eating there is the main concern. This concern generally overrides any description of the relief involved in getting a meal or feeling full. Ari and her brother visit the soup kitchen, but, once there, Ari refuses to go in because her ex-best-friend's new best friend is volunteering that day. Her brother brings her out a plate of food, and she asks for reassurance that she was not seen, because "the last thing I need is for word to get out that I eat at the soup kitchen" (Jacobson, 2015, p. 268). In the majority of stories that include one, the food bank or soup kitchen acts as a plot point to expose the protagonist as "poor." If a visit to a food bank is introduced into the story, the protagonist will *inevitably* run into someone they know there—often the very last person they would want to see, either a new love interest or a sworn enemy, and the experience results in further shame rather than solidarity or understanding. After spending the morning unsuccessfully looking for work, Mel's mother "suggested they get some lunch at the Mission Soup Kitchen," a place that is "not all that different from others they had eaten at." Mel "untied her sweatshirt from around her waist, put it on, and pulled the hood onto her head to avoid being seen" (Sand-Eveland, 2012, pp. 28-29) by a boy she notices looking out the library window. And the worst thing for Isaiah is that

Angel, a girl from school he does not like, comes into the food bank with her family when he and his Mama are there "shopping." Despite understanding that she and her family are also there to get food, he is sure that Angel is "laughing her head off" at him (Baptist, 2020, pp. 51 & 53).

Government programs

From reading most of these books, children would have no idea that there are government support programs that, while inadequate, are relied on by many low-income individuals, who are entitled to them. Only a few books name any particular welfare programs, or even infer them—the most common is SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the United States, usually referred to as "food stamps".) Very few of these out-of-work parents or caregivers are explicitly on social assistance, and only a handful are matter-of-fact about caregivers receiving government assistance. Clay's mother applies for Social Assistance just before she disappears (Fox, 1991), Angel's great-grandmother lives off her monthly Social Security cheques (Paterson, 2002), and Meg's mother gets a disability payment (Weetman, 2021).

However, when a shelter worker suggests that Piper's mother might want to apply for SNAP, she is adamant: "Oh no, we don't need to apply for food stamps. We've just hit a little rough patch, that's all" (Pyron, 2019, p. 39). When a police officer asks Dicey if her mother applied for welfare or unemployment compensation, "Dicey shook her head. 'Momma said she couldn't do that. She wouldn't even go talk to anyone. She said charity was not for the Tillermans.'" Despite the fact that Dicey's mother was so consumed by financial worry that she abandoned her children, the sergeant is approving: "I wish more people felt that way," he tells her (Voigt, 1981, p. 159). There are additional books that feature caregivers proudly refusing to access government aid, but the most usual case is that food programs, welfare or social assistance payments, or subsidized housing programs are not mentioned at all. From reading these books, children would not learn that there are numerous governmental supports that provide supplemental income and/or food aid to low-income families. Since over forty-one million United States households—or about one in three—are currently receiving SNAP vouchers (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023), it seems strange indeed that fictional low-income families do not seem to have access to the program, do not know that the program exists, are unwilling to apply for the benefit, or even, as I am sure happens regularly, have tried to get benefits but were refused. In fact, in these middle grade novels, social assistance and welfare programs are almost invariably presented negatively. Shame is paramount: no one with any self-respect would apply. While it is true that unclaimed benefits and tax credits add up to billions of dollars each year, it is not for the reason that these children's books would have us believe. Low-income individuals and families do not fail to apply because of shame or the stigma of government handouts; rather, they do not apply because the application process is overly (and unnecessarily) complicated, or they simply do not know that they are eligible—a problem that research has proven can be largely rectified by increasing outreach and cutting red tape (Desmond, 2023, p. 123).

This refusal to accept anything that smacks of "charity" is a pervasive theme that runs through all of these novels; if they, as a nuclear family, are unable to manage without help, they clearly consider themselves failures. Livy's mother, like many, is unwilling to accept any help from the government: "Mom...says we don't need other people's money and it's none of anyone's business and we can take care of ourselves..." (Ellis,

2017, p. 212). Jackson's dad says "he didn't want to accept anyone's handouts" and believes that "there's everything wrong with asking for help…it means we've failed….We've been to that food pantry more times than I care to admit. But in the end, this is my—our—problem to solve" (Applegate, 2015, pp. 50 & 52).

Interestingly, the notion of what constitutes "charity" is very broad. As already discussed, there is great distrust of many supports and resources, such as social workers and Children's Aid, school administrators, shelters, food banks, and so on. But characters' resistance to "charity" encompasses everything offered by *anyone* outside the nuclear family unit, not just via government programs. Accepting help from strangers, friends, and even extended family members was equally taboo, if not even more so. Robbie's father tells him, "I don't want you taking things like we're some sort of charity case….friends come and go. You can't count on them. You can't count on anybody but yourself. Don't ever forget that. Counting on people is counting on being disappointed" (Walters, 2020, p. 66). Meg's "Mum is funny about [her sister] Peggy offering us money or trying to help out," but "[Aunt] Peggy is always making us meals. She constantly pretends she's made too much of something like spaghetti sauce or lasagna and then parcels it up in plastic tubs so I can take it home and reheat it" (Weetman, 2021, pp. 40 & 41). After his *Abuela* [grandmother] takes them out for a Thanksgiving meal, Rex's mom loses it: "I don't want her charity! I don't need her help! I don't need anyone's help!" (Ogle, 2019, pp. 128 & 132). When Katie's mother comes back and sees the groceries the children's father has given them, she tells them: "And I'm going to say this one time /and one time only— /you three better make sure /your father and his wife /understand that we don't need /no damned charity…" (Van Heidrich, 2023, p. 149). Unlike the countless real-life parents who go without food so their children can eat, these fictional (or fictionalized) parents stubbornly let their children go hungry.

Structural change

Put simply, there are no messages about the need for structural changes to mitigate food insecurity in any of these books. Several children's picture books about the history of poverty feature strike action as a solution to low wages, but the closest we get to collective action in this set of middle grade novels is the school petition to bring back Crazy Hat Day in *Paper Things* (Jacobson, 2015) and two middle-class supporters lying down in front of a tow truck in *Parked* (Svetcov, 2020) so that Jeanne Ann's mother's van—their home—cannot be towed away. These twenty-four protagonists certainly all demonstrate agency, but their individual actions serve to obscure the systemic barriers that constrain people living in poverty, particularly those who face additional structural discrimination(s).
Sociologist Matthew Desmond (2023) argues that poverty is not benign; rather, it is caused by deliberate social and political structural arrangements that disadvantage the poor and actively advantage the middle and wealthy classes. Low-income individuals deal with low wages and exploitative working conditions, higher rents and food costs, discrimination in housing, lack of access to banks and credit, and limited access to reproductive choices. The questions we should be asking, suggests Desmond, are "Who benefits?" and "Who is feeding off this?" rather than wondering what is wrong with low-income individuals when we see poverty on our streets and in our parks and doorways (Desmond, 2023, p. 79).

It is not only important that children come across low-income characters with positive attributes, but also that they are made aware of the systemic barriers that

poor people have to contend with. Many of the writers appear to be more concerned with creating "caring" middle-class citizens who alleviate the symptoms of poverty piecemeal for "deserving" individuals than with creating the political changes required to eradicate poverty for all human beings, regardless of how their worth is externally assessed. Food insecurity is a policy problem, not an individual one, and, even as we may applaud a caring community, we know that caring about individuals is not enough.

The "bootstraps" messages of these books leave individuals—even children—responsible for both succumbing to, and escaping from, poverty's grip. To be sure, these child protagonists do not manage this without help; in fact, a central theme of these books is that help is needed. At the end of their stories, each over-competent child hands back the reins to an adult, and accepts, either reluctantly or with relief, that they cannot hold everything together single-handedly. But help does not come in ways that demonstrably make a difference for most real-life families, such as a living wage, higher social assistance payments, or a guaranteed minimum income. Rather—in addition to the occasional caregiver entering rehab or getting a job—help largely comes from friends who share lunch at school, kind strangers who, once or twice, press food into hungry hands, or the librarian, teacher, shopkeeper, or other community member who contributes to caring for a particular *exceptional* child. This is not in any way to criticize the importance of the kindness of strangers to real children's lives, or the importance of individual giving, through whatever chosen channels, so that a child, at any given time, may not be hungry. However, as educators Botelho and Rudman (2009) point out, "While…community efforts offer relief, they do not represent structural change" (p. 164). Such actions, when presented as long-term solutions to a child's hunger, do not serve the reality that it is political will and political action that are required to end hunger for all children, all the time.

Conclusion

The tropes in children's books about hunger and food insecurity are remarkably enduring, despite the many important global, national, and regional events that have taken place since any given book's publication, and despite the recognition that structural forces such as poverty, classism, and racism profoundly affect individuals' abilities to make changes in their lives. It is neither helpful nor empowering to suggest to children that they have choices when they do not, or that their individual actions—in a culture that affords children little real power—can lift them, and their families, out of poverty. We have seen that the importance of literature for children has been framed as twofold: it has the ability to perform both as mirrors and as windows or doors. In other words, young readers can see themselves reflected and also observe and learn about the experiences of others from the safe distance of the printed word. As for the first function, it is questionable whether most children living in poverty would be able to see themselves reflected in literature populated by characters who, while living with few resources and supports in extremely precarious situations, manage to stay at the top of their class at school, win awards for their accomplishments, befriend librarians, get interesting part-time jobs, navigate and prop up difficult parents, feed and clothe themselves and their younger sibling(s), stay away from the eye of "the authorities," and, at least in middle grade novels,

avoid violence, drugs, the drug trade, sexual abuse, and the sex trade, and, when they run into strangers on the streets, always manage to find the ones who will not take advantage of them.[8]

Research has shown that children are likely to blame the poor for their poverty (Chafel & Neitzel, 2005); of course, there are many influences on a child's worldview—family, peers, and schools, as well as various media (including books) may contribute to their perceptions (Hakovirta & Kallio, 2015). While children's books are not usually populated with characters who conform to stereotypes about people who live in poverty, there are still books being published that depict "the poor" as ignorant, crude, lazy, dishonest, manipulative, or criminal—or all of the above. In one book, a would-be guardian provides a home for the protagonist solely in order to receive Social Security "worth hundreds of dollars every month" (Tyre, 2018, p. 42). This woman takes advantage of everything she can get for free, regularly steals money, including from children, and is rude, crass, ignorant, judgmental, racist, and abusive. She also chain-smokes, almost always a sure sign of a suspect character in a children's book.

Even in books that portray those in poverty more positively, there are often other characters in the books who voice negative stereotypes. Writers may place them in their works so they can act as a foil to be contradicted or discounted by the reactions of the protagonist or other, more "enlightened," characters. Despite this intention, children may be equally likely to learn about these stereotypes in the first place, and may also learn something about the secrecy and shame of poverty, from reading many of these texts. The shame and isolation that protagonists feel and express reinforces the message that poverty is shame-worthy. What young readers would learn from almost any book in this collection is that, while poverty should not define a human being, it often does, and it is, at best, a terrible and hopefully brief stopover on the road to greater financial security. Despite occasional anti-shame lip service—for example, the social worker who comes to assess Fern's home life tells her, "Don't ever be ashamed of being poor" (Helget, 2017, p. 210)—there are few books in this collection that do an effective job of teaching children that living in poverty is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no surprise that, despite their family's actual financial or class status, children "place themselves in the middle of the economic scale" due to a reluctance to consider themselves poor (Hakovirta & Kallio, 2015, n.p.).

When children's books rehearse limiting tropes and feature unlikely character traits, resources, and life experiences, we should ask what the middle-class establishment wishes children to know about poverty (Broderick, 1973, as cited in Sims, 1982, p. 5). To write and re-write food insecurity as an individual problem points to the continued reification of the American Dream, a "dream" wherein there are both limits to social obligation and unlimited capacity for personal (economic) growth, given the right mindset. This colonialist enterprise separates human suffering into two categories, deserving and undeserving, and allots an unfair advantage of resources to the group able to control, and to dictate the messages about, stories of deservingness. The most insidious work this does is to erase the very structural forces that create inequities in food access in the first place. By making invisible the impulses and ideologies that result in poverty and food insecurity for some, those in society who benefit cannot be confronted or held accountable; the issue remains individualized and apolitical. Tatum (2008), a teacher

[8] This represents a significant difference between middle grade and young adult fiction.

educator, discusses the vital importance of his own and others' childhood reading of stories featuring relatable African-American characters. "Enabling texts," Tatum (2008) suggests, "provide a roadmap for action; connect to personal and community experiences; nurture identity development; and stimulate inner reflection" (p. 141). The vast majority of these "realistic" books about poverty and food insecurity do not and cannot meet these goals. Rather, using this definition, many of these books are "disabling texts" that may teach poor children to feel failure and shame and middle-class children to feel successful and deserving. In other words, they do nothing to trouble the neoliberal status quo. Instead, the responsibility residing in individuals *is* the overarching message of the majority of these books. Even if as children they must learn "to depend on authority for help and advice" (Lurie, 1990, p. ix-x) these fictional protagonists—and their young readers—also learn that to rely on others is taboo, and that charity, rather than rights, is the best that can be expected.

In the end, these are stories of exceptional children doing exceptional deeds in exceptionally unrealistic circumstances. It is difficult to know, in the absence of empirical study, whether the exceptionalism of many of these protagonists, or the contrived "realism" of the plot twists, are a help or a hindrance to children developing their own sense of competence and agency. My suspicion is that children experiencing food insecurity would not see themselves here, and that children who do not know what habitual hunger is would not learn to recognize it or acknowledge its existence among their peers. Certainly, neither group would learn to take effective action against it. There are few sliding glass doors to walk through in this set of middle grade novels, and fewer guiding maps. The vast majority of these books would surely be seen as counterfeit, at best, if read by a child actually living in poverty, or, at worst, as indicative of problems or shortcomings in the individual reader's own life and choices rather than in poverty's portrayal. Finnish researchers Hakovirta and Kallio (2015) suggest that "by familiarizing children with the causes of poverty we may help take inappropriate blame away from poor children and may help them internalize that being poor is not their fault and it is not equivalent of being bad" (n.p.). These fictional children *are* resilient; that is important, and it perhaps teaches children that they are worthy of wielding power, even if they do not find it in their current lives. But in order to teach children that it is not an individual's fault if, in some of the richest countries in the world, they do not have enough money to pay for their basic needs, we must write stories that uncover the structural forces that disadvantage some people while advantaging others. We must write stories that map out for them—and us—what might be done, collectively, to counter that.

Despite the fact that my review of these books has been overwhelmingly negative, not all of them should be summarily dismissed. Many are not great literature, and most portray at least some very problematic assumptions when it comes to poverty and food insecurity. But a small handful are brilliantly written, with clever humour that made me laugh out loud and plot lines that veered enough from the common formula to offer a positive read. One in particular that I would highly recommend is *The In-Between* by Katie Van Heidrich (2023), both for its original writing and its ability to act as a mirror for children living in poverty—perhaps it is effective precisely because it is one of the "memoir" books, so the author has clearly "done her research." It is also the most recent title on the list, published in 2023, and I can only hope that it heralds a sea change in things to come in children's literature about poverty and food insecurity.

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Appendix

Table 1. Books included within the study

Author	Year	Title	Publisher	Country of Publication
Abbott, Tony	2019	The Great Jeff	Little Brown and Company	U.S.
Applegate, Katherine	2015	Crenshaw	Feiwel & Friends	U.S.
Baptist, Kelly J.	2020	Isaiah Dunn is my Hero	Crown Books for Young Readers	U.S.
DiCamillo, Kate	2018	Louisiana's Way Home	Candlewick Press	U.S.
Ellis, Ann Dee	2017	You May Already be a Winner	Dial Books for Young Readers	U.S.
Fox, Janet S.	2021	Carry Me Home	Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers	U.S.
Fox, Paula	1991	Monkey Island	A Yearling Book, Dell Publishing	U.S.
Helget, Nicole	2017	The End of the Wild	Turtleback Books	U.S.
Howe, James	1990	Dew Drop Dead: A Sebastian Barth Mystery	Atheneum	U.S.
Jacobson, Jennifer Richard	2011	Small as an Elephant	Candlewick Press	U.S.
Jacobson, Jennifer Richard	2015	Paper Things	Candlewick Press	U.S.
Messner, Kate	2017	The Exact Location of Home	Bloomsbury Children's Books	U.S.
Nielsen, Susin	2018	No Fixed Address	Tundra, Penguin Random House Canada Young Readers	Canada
Ogle, Rex	2019	Free Lunch	Norton Young Readers, W. W. Norton & Company	U.S.
Paterson, Katherine	2002	The Same Stuff as Stars	Clarion Books	U.S.
Patron, Susan	2006	The Higher Power of Lucky	Simon & Schuster	U.S.
Pyron, Bobbie	2019	Stay	Katherine Tegen Books, Harper Collins	U.S.
Sand-Eveland, Cyndi	2012	A Tinfoil Sky	Tundra Books	Canada
Sherrard, Valerie	2021	Birdspell	Cormorant Books	Canada
Svetcov, Danielle	2020	Parked	Puffin Books	U.S.
Tyre, Lisa Lewis	2018	Hope in the Holler	Nancy Paulsen Books	U.S.
Van Heidrich, Katie	2023	The In-Between	Aladdin	U.S.

Voigt, Cynthia	1981	Homecoming	Books for Young Readers	U.S.
Walters, Eric	2020	The King of Jam Sandwiches	Orca Book Publishers	Canada
Weetman, Nova	2021	It All Begins with Jelly Beans	Margaret K. McElderry Books	U.S. (Australia)