From Blackouts to Lockdowns: Depictions of Crisis Childhoods in Post-Pandemic and Historical Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates how childhood is portrayed in crisis situations By contrasting historical works set during earlier crises, such as wartime evacuation, disease outbreaks, and economic hardship, with post-pandemic children's literature. The study examines thematic similarities and differences in representations of isolation, community resilience, and adaptation by drawing on texts like *Outside, Inside* (LeUyen Pham, 2021), *While We Can't Hug* (Eoin McLaughlin and Polly Dunbar, 2020), and *Windows (*Patrick Guest and Jonathan Bentley, 2020) in addition to *Goodnight Mister Tom* (Michelle Magorian, 1981), *A Parcel of Patterns* (Jill Paton Walsh, 1983), and *Blue Willow* (Doris Gates, 1940). Using approaches from comparative literature, trauma theory, and childhood studies, this study shows that although resilience and hope are recurring themes, post-pandemic works have changed in terms of technological mediation, global interconnectedness, and visual strategies.

Keywords: children's literature, COVID-19, historical fiction, trauma, resilience, comparative study, wartime evacuation, pandemic narratives

Introduction:

Children's literature has long served as a cultural record of how societies imagine childhood in times of disruption. From wartime evacuation stories to narratives about illness, displacement, and economic hardship, books for young readers have mediated historical crises in ways that both reflect and shape generational understanding. These narratives operate on multiple levels: they offer comfort to child readers, transmit cultural values, and preserve collective memory of past hardships. In doing so, they reveal as much about adult perceptions of children's needs as they do about the lived experiences of young people.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) brought a unique set of challenges to children worldwide: extended lockdowns, the closure of schools, loss of social interaction, and the omnipresent backdrop of illness and mortality. Unlike previous crises, COVID-19 occurred in an era of global digital interconnectedness, where many children's primary social and educational activities shifted online almost overnight. Literature emerging from this period reflects these realities but often refracts them through allegory, visual symbolism, and narratives of resilience tailored to the emotional comprehension levels of young readers.

Post-pandemic children's books such as LeUyen Pham's *Outside, Inside* (2021), Eoin McLaughlin and Polly Dunbar's *While We Can't Hug* (2020), and Patrick Guest and Jonathan Bentley's *Windows* (2020) are among the earliest cultural artefacts to address the pandemic directly for children.

These works depict lockdown life, social distancing, and adaptation in forms that emphasize hope, togetherness, and creativity rather than fear or loss.

By contrast, earlier crisis narrative such as Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom* (1981), set during the Second World War; Jill Paton Walsh's *A Parcel of Patterns* (1983), centered on the seventeenth-century plague in Eyam; and Doris Gates's *Blue Willow* (1940), set during the Great Depression reflect historical moments where children's lives were reshaped by war, disease, and economic instability. These texts often emphasize personal moral growth, the importance of communal responsibility, and the endurance of cultural traditions.

Comparing these two bodies of work provides an opportunity to explore continuities and divergences in how children's literature frames crisis. This study examines the thematic parallels such as resilience, isolation, and community and also the significant differences in narrative tone, representation of danger, the role of technology, and visual storytelling. Such a comparative approach not only situates post-pandemic children's literature within a long tradition of crisis narratives but also reveals evolving assumptions about how to speak to children about hardship in different cultural and technological contexts.

Literature Review

Scholarly work on children's literature in times of crisis has often centered on wartime narratives, especially those depicting the experiences of child evacuees during the Second World War. Victor Watson (2000) identifies the evacuation novel as a subgenre of British children's literature that blends adventure with moral education, often showing the child protagonist developing independence and resilience through rural life away from urban danger. Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom* is frequently cited in this context for its sensitive depiction of trauma, abuse, and healing (Watkins 116). Lydia Kokkola (2013) further notes that such narratives frequently balance the horrors of war with pastoral imagery, creating a contrast that reassures child readers while acknowledging loss.

Historical epidemic narratives in children's literature have received comparatively less attention, though certain works have become case studies in collective memory. Jill Paton Walsh's *A Parcel of Patterns* has been discussed in relation to historical accuracy and moral instruction (Watson 142). The novel's portrayal of Eyam's voluntary quarantine during the plague invites discussion of communal sacrifice and personal costkey themes that resonate with later pandemic narratives. Similarly, Depression-era fiction such as Doris Gates's *Blue Willow* has been analyzed for its treatment of poverty and mobility, with Elizabeth Bullen (2003) arguing that such works address the tension between children's need for stability and the economic realities of migratory labour.

Recent scholarship has begun to consider the emerging field of COVID-19 children's literature. Caroline Bland (2022) identifies a wave of picture books produced in the first two years of the pandemic, many self-published or distributed digitally, that attempt to explain the crisis to young readers in age-appropriate ways. These books often avoid direct depictions of illness or death, instead using metaphor, anthropomorphism, or abstract imagery to convey the disruption of normal life. LeUyen Pham's *Outside, Inside*, for example, compresses the global lockdown into a sequence of visually rich double-page spreads, using the motif of a door as a boundary between safety and danger.

Similarly, *While We Can't Hug* employs anthropomorphic animal characters to normalize social distancing through humor and practical suggestions for showing affection without contact. This aligns with what trauma-informed publishing guidelines recommend: focusing on actionable coping strategies rather than dwelling on distress (Bland 18). Patrick Guest's *Windows* takes a more allegorical approach, using the nightly act of looking out from one's home as a metaphor for shared endurance and hope.

What is striking is that while both historical and COVID-19 narratives seek to help children process crisis, the strategies they employ differ substantially. Historical works aimed at middle-grade readers often include explicit depictions of dangerair raids, plague symptoms, povertytrusting the

reader's ability to handle realism in service of moral and emotional growth. In contrast, early pandemic books, particularly for younger children, rely heavily on abstraction, metaphor, and visual reassurance.

There is also a marked difference in the portrayal of community. Historical works frequently depict physical gatherings as central to resilience shared meals, communal work, or collective decision-making whereas post-pandemic works emphasize symbolic gestures, physically distanced acts of care, and implied digital connection. The role of technology is largely absent in earlier works, while in COVID-19 literature it is omnipresent, even if only indirectly referenced.

Despite these emerging observations, there remains a scarcity of comparative scholarship linking pandemic-era children's literature to its historical predecessors. Most existing analyses treat COVID-19 books in isolation, either as artefacts of a unique historical moment or as extensions of the therapeutic tradition in picture books. This study addresses this gap by placing the new pandemic narratives in direct dialogue with earlier works of crisis literature, thereby enriching our understanding of how changing historical, cultural, and technological contexts shape the way we tell children stories about hardship and survival

Research Gap

While both historical and contemporary crisis narratives share the goal of helping children process fear and disruption, no significant research to date has compared COVID-19 children's literature with earlier works to identify thematic shifts and continuities. Existing studies often treat pandemic-era books in isolation, neglecting the broader literary tradition of depicting children in crisis. This paper fills that gap by conducting a cross-temporal comparison to highlight narrative, thematic, and visual differences.

Comparative Analysis

Children's literature, whether produced during wartime, epidemic, or pandemic, often fulfill dual purpose: providing comfort and offering frameworks for understanding disruption. The post-pandemic texts studied here *Outside, Inside* (Pham), *While We Can't Hug* (McLaughlin and Dunbar), and *Windows* (Guest and Bentley) are part of an emerging corpus responding directly to COVID-19 realities. In contrast, *Goodnight Mister Tom* (Magorian), *A Parcel of Patterns* (Walsh), and *Blue Willow* (Gates) belong to established historical fiction traditions that frame earlier crises. This section examines six key points of comparison: **isolation, community, technology, representation of danger, resilience, and visual strategies**.

1. Isolation as Physical and Emotional Space

In *Outside, Inside*, Pham compresses the global pandemic into a single image of simultaneous withdrawal: people around the world stepping indoors. This representation is static and collective very household is portrayed as "inside," their shared stillness an act of protection (Pham). The narrative avoids individual psychological detail, favoring a communal mood of quiet solidarity.

Historical works, however, often foreground the emotional turbulence of isolation. In *Goodnight Mister Tom*, Willie's evacuation from London is deeply personalizes isolation is not simply physical but psychological, as he is removed from his abusive mother and placed in an unfamiliar environment. The journey from London to Little Weirwold is active, involving travel, adjustment, and gradual emotional openness (Magorian). Here, isolation catalyses character growth in a way more individualized than in the COVID narratives.

A Parcel of Patterns presents isolation as imposed by a higher moral duty: the quarantine of Eyam village during the plague is collective, but the narrative dwells on the human funerals, empty streets, and the quiet devastation of households (Walsh). In this way, the historical works present

isolation as a dramatic rupture from daily life, whereas post-pandemic works treat it as a global, simultaneous shift

2. Community and Connection

Post-pandemic books strive to depict connection without physical contact. In *While We Can't Hug*, Hedgehog and Tortoise discover creative alternative blowing kisses, making funny faces, painting pictures emphasizing ingenuity in maintaining relationships (McLaughlin and Dunba). The tone is light-hearted and reassuring, underscoring that emotional closeness persists despite physical distance.

By contrast, in *Blue Willow*, set during the Great Depression, connection is grounded in physical presencesharing meals, playing together, visiting neighbors. Economic hardship tests these bonds, but physical gatherings remain central to survival (Gates). The absence of such gatherings in post-pandemic narratives shifts the depiction of community toward symbolic acts and technological mediation.

In *A Parcel of Patterns*, connection is moral rather than physical: the villagers' collective decision to self-isolate is an act of solidarity. This mirrors *Outside, Inside*'s portrayal of mutual care through shared stillness but differs in tonethe plague narrative conveys grim sacrifice, while the COVID books present withdrawal as a temporary, hopeful measure.

3. Technology as a Narrative Tool

Perhaps the most marked difference is the role of technology in sustaining relationships. While none of the post-pandemic books depict laptops or video calls directly likely to avoid dating the text they imply digital presence through metaphor. In *Windows*, the glow of houses at night suggests unseen families sharing the same experience; the view through a window becomes a stand-in for both physical sight and digital contact (Guest and Bentley).

In historical works, connection is mediated only through letters or physical travel. In *Goodnight Mister Tom*, Willie's rare communication with his mother comes in the form of letters that must be physically delivered, and the delay in correspondence heightens tension. In *Blue Willow*, the protagonist's family's mobility limits consistent connection to others entirely, with friendships forming and dissolving as they move.

The absence of instantaneous communication in historical works raises the emotional stakes of separation, whereas the post-pandemic texts implicitly normalize the possibility of contact albeit mediated during isolation.

4. Representation of Danger

COVID-19 picture books tend to soften or abstract the concept of danger. In *Outside, Inside*, the cause of isolation is described only as "something bad" that made people stay home. The virus is never depicted directly, avoiding imagery that could cause fear or confusion in very young readers. Similarly, *While We Can't Hug* avoids any mention of illness entirely, framing social distancing as a friendly challenge.

By contrast, *A Parcel of Patterns* offers detailed accounts of plague symptoms, deaths, and burial practices. The illness is named, described, and contextualized in the village's moral landscape. In *Goodnight Mister Tom*, danger is tangibleair raid sirens, bombed buildings, and injured soldiers bring war into immediate view.

This reflects a shift in children's publishing norms: contemporary works, particularly picture books for early readers, are often produced with trauma-informed principles that minimize explicit depictions of threat, focusing instead on coping mechanisms. Historical works for older children, however, embrace realism and use danger as a narrative driver for moral and personal development.

5. Resilience and Growth

In post-pandemic works, resilience is collective. *Outside, Inside* ends with communities emerging together to greet a transformed, blossoming world. The emphasis is on shared recovery rather than individual transformation. In *While We Can't Hug*, resilience is playful, framed through problem-solving that maintains affection despite rules.

In historical works, resilience often manifests in individual moral or emotional growth. In *Goodnight Mister Tom*, Willie's journey from fear to self-assurance is deeply personal. Tom's nurturing and the rural environment provide the stability that allows Willie to flourish. In *Blue Willow*, Janey's resilience is tied to her capacity to adapt to poverty and hold onto a sense of identity through her treasured blue willow plate.

This difference may reflect the scope of each crisis: wartime and economic hardship were experienced unevenly, allowing for narratives of individual triumph. COVID-19's near-universal disruption lends itself more naturally to depictions of collective endurance.

6. Visual Strategies and Symbolism

The visual language of post-pandemic picture books plays a central role in communicating emotion. In *Outside, Inside*, Pham uses muted palettes during lockdown scenes, shifting to vibrant colors as restrictions lift. The recurring motif of open windows and blossoming flowers visually enacts the idea of renewal. In *Windows*, Bentley uses darkened streets and warm interior glows to emphasize safety and solidarity, turning an ordinary architectural feature into a shared symbol.

Historical illustrated works, when they exist, are generally more representational. The few illustrations in older crisis narratives (such as early editions of *Blue Willow*) depict characters and settings in realistic detail, without the heavy use of visual metaphor found in contemporary picture books. This suggests a broader shift toward abstract and symbolic illustration in children's publishing, particularly when addressing sensitive topics.

7. Tone and Emotional Register

Post-pandemic works maintain a reassuring tone, even when acknowledging disruption. *While We Can't Hug* uses humor to offset the sadness of physical distance, while *Outside, Inside* emphasizes gratitude for essential workers and the hope of reconnection. The tone encourages optimism without denying the seriousness of the situation.

Historical crisis narratives are often more somber and morally instructive. *A Parcel of Patterns* does not shy away from loss; the ending is bittersweet, acknowledging both the courage and the suffering of the villagers. *Goodnight Mister Tom* blends hope with deep grief, including the death of a childa scene rarely found in books for younger audiences today.

8. Moral Frameworks

In historical works, crises are often framed within moral narratives of courage, sacrifice, and duty. The characters' actions are judged in light of communal valuesWillie's mother in *Goodnight Mister Tom* is condemned for neglect, the villagers in *A Parcel of Patterns* are revered for their self-sacrifice.

Post-pandemic works largely avoid moral judgment, focusing instead on empathy and mutual care. In *Outside, Inside*, no individual is portrayed as failing to follow rules or endangering others; the story presents society as uniformly cooperative. This may reflect the divisive public discourse surrounding COVID-19, which authors may have chosen to avoid in order to preserve accessibility and unity for child readers.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the comparison reveals a consistent thematic throughline: children's literature, across time periods, seeks to help young readers process crisis through stories of adaptation, community, and hope. The primary differences lie in **scope** (individual vs. collective resilience), **medium** (reliance on visual metaphor vs. direct realism), and **contextual tools** (presence or absence of technology). The historical works emphasize tangible dangers, physical journeys, and moral growth, while the post-pandemic texts focus on shared emotional landscapes, symbolic imagery, and gentle reassurance.

Conclusion

Comparing post-pandemic and historical crisis children's literature reveals that while core themes such as resilience, community, adaptation remain consistent, the narrative strategies have evolved significantly. Post-pandemic works tend toward abstraction, allegory, and symbolic visual language, likely influenced by trauma-sensitive publishing norms and the ubiquity of technology in children's lives. Historical works, grounded in direct realism, emphasize individual moral growth and tangible community structures. By situating COVID-era stories within the broader tradition of crisis narratives, we see both continuity in the emotional arcs offered to young readers and innovation in how those arcs are mediated through image, technology, and collective identity.

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