

EXPOSED TO NUCLEAR ENERGY: 1950'S CHILDREN'S FICTION LITERATURE AND THE
NUCLEAR FEAR CAMPAIGN

By

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A young boy skips along the sidewalk of downtown Chicago on his way to the first day of school. Against the glare of the sun, a sheet of paper floats down and lands at his feet. The boy, curious, picks it up to see what could have fallen from the sky, seemingly just for him. The paper reads, “THIS COULD HAVE BEEN A BOMB – PLEDGE FOR HOME DEFENSE – REGISTER TODAY.” As the boy moves his lips, sounding out each word, the skies darken as hundreds more of these leaflets shower down all around him.¹ Upon reaching his classroom, the young boy notices the desks and all activities are pulled away from the windows and he is given a dog tag to wear around his neck. It does not occur to him that the police will use the information on his dog tag to identify his mutilated body in the aftermath of a potential nuclear attack.² His lessons even have a new spin on them as educators incorporate civil defense into most of the curriculum.³

All of these occurrences are obvious and well-planned changes determined by the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) in the hopes of creating “Cold War Warriors”

¹ Federal Civil Defense Administration, *Annual Report*, RR No. 14912 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1952), 78. All Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) Reports can be found on <http://training.fema.gov/EMIweb/edu/docs/HistoricalInterest/FCDA%20-%201952%20-%20Annual%Report%20for%201952.pdf>.

² FCDA *Annual Report* (1953), 56.

³ FCDA *Annual Report* (1952), 99.

capable of not only surviving, but also thriving in the aftermath of a nuclear attack.⁴ It is in these changes that we can see the extent to which the Cold War embedded itself into the hearts, minds, and nerves of the American populace. Within this same classroom, this young boy will also come across books specially chosen by his parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, or politicians that capture the views and themes of the Cold War. Specifically, he will encounter books that consider the production, use, and acceptance of nuclear energy.

The United States federal government supported nuclear energy and armament, but they had to develop a strategy to secure the public's support. Guy Oakes, author of *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (1994), explained the federal government's campaign to incite "nuclear fear," but not "nuclear terror."⁵ Federal officials determined that nuclear fear would entice the American populace to be active participants in the fight against communism. By informing Americans about nuclear energy and its uses, both positive and negative, the government could mobilize society to support the government in whatever it felt was necessary to fight communism and win a nuclear war. However, these officials cautioned that too much information about nuclear energy, or too much information about its negative aspects, could incite nuclear terror instead. Nuclear terror would reduce society into such a state of panic and fear that they would feel

⁴ In the *Annual Reports* produced by the Federal Civil Defense Administration (1951-1958), the primary goal was extending civil defense knowledge to the public. First using the term "Cold War Warrior" in 1952, the FCDA began to direct its civil defense campaign more heavily towards children. Through many reports and conferences with educators and administrators at the primary, secondary, and collegiate levels, the FCDA produced several educational articles distributed throughout the nation. Reports detailed changes made in the classroom in order to incorporate civil defense into the daily curriculum. Civil defense was to become a part of many standard studies such as history, science, even physical education.

⁵ Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

completely helpless and either become apathetic about the situation or devolve into a state of mass hysteria.

To combat this, the FCDA launched a campaign that attempted to control exactly what people knew about nuclear weapons, such as who had them, how many they had, and what the U.S. government was doing with their nuclear stockpile.⁶ The dissemination of information about nuclear energy happened through media and educational outlets including, but not limited to, television, radio, federal and local programs, schools, pamphlets, and books. Officials were straddling a fine line between nuclear fear and terror and they had to make careful considerations about the information that they disseminated. United States officials had to be truthful and report the very real and very negative aspects of nuclear energy (which was as much an attempt to remain true to democracy and freedom as it was to incite fear among the populace). At the same time, these officials had to highlight the positive accomplishments of nuclear energy. These officials gave information to the public that took on a survivalist character; that is, the campaign centered on the idea that you could and would survive a nuclear attack because of the federally provided information. Casualties were imminent, that was understood; those within a ten-mile radius of the blast would be instantly killed. However, those outside of the radius would have the chance to survive if they understood and followed the information provided by the government (never mind the long-lasting effects of fallout and radiation). This was part of the two-step strategy outlined in early drafts of the nuclear fear campaign (NSC-68) in which the public would become aware of the horrific consequences of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and, at

⁶ Ibid., 32.

the same time, be persuaded that victory could be achieved through the public's efforts.⁷ As Oakes put it, "The outcome of the contest with the Soviets would depend on the American people themselves: their ability to conquer the new and terrible fears created by the possibility of nuclear war and their determination to make the sacrifices that were the burden of world leadership in the nuclear era."⁸ This article will examine two popular children's fiction books published in the 1950s in order to explain fully the position of children's literature in the campaign to promote nuclear fear and to contribute to the ongoing analysis of Cold War print culture.

There is ample research relating Cold War characteristics to the print culture of the 1950s.⁹ What historians have overlooked, however, is the print culture and literature created specifically for American children, aged three through fifteen. William M. Tuttle prompted the analysis of Americans who were children during the 1940s and 1950s with his monograph "*Daddy's Gone To War*": *The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (1993).¹⁰ Tuttle examined the effects war and familial separation had on children, and how these factors affected them throughout their lives.¹¹ Taking Tuttle's lead, Christopher S.

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jonathan M. Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988).

¹⁰ William M. Tuttle, "*Daddy's Gone to War*": *The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993).

¹¹ Reviewers such as David Elkind (1994), John W. Jeffries (1996), J. Trent Alexander (1997), and James Oliver (1997) have pointed out problems with Tuttle's methodology. Tuttle states in his preface that he wrote to a hundred of the largest American newspapers asking that people send him "stories to tell about their lives on the homefront." From this, he received over 2500 responses, which were then sifted through by the author himself. These responses were extremely varied not allowing quantitative judgments to be made. The author also admits that there were several errant letters that could not possibly be true, but the rest were taken at face value without much verification of the details.

O'Brien used solicited letters from American adults who were children during the Cold War to gain a sense of what events and items had an impact on American children. O'Brien wrote a rather expository dissertation, "“And Everything Would Be Done to Protect Us’: The Cold War, the Bomb, and America’s Children, 1945-1963,” (2002), in which he explores the ways children experienced the Cold War and learned about the atomic bomb.¹² He presents a narrative detailing the events and products children encountered during the Cold War years, such as the atomic bomb, the invasion of North Korea, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the production of comic books, but offers no real conclusive analysis about their effects. This article attempts to produce that analysis.

The FDCA nuclear fear campaign specifically targeted American children as key federal officials such as George Kennan and Chester Bernard realized the important role they played in the Cold War. These officials saw American children of the 1950s as “future Cold War warriors” and thought they needed to be trained as such. The FCDA distributed pamphlets, rewrote textbooks, and held school programs to inform children about nuclear energy and the eventual nuclear war with the Soviet Union. During this time, parents and officials were concerned with children’s literacy rates and the numbers of books available in the classroom and at home began to increase dramatically.¹³ As this happened, the concern turned from “Can our children read?” to “What are our children reading?” Beginning in the early 1950s, many publishing houses sent their work to the FCDA in order to have its stamp

Reviewers have questioned the author’s methodology and the real value that these letters can provide as they are so wide-ranging.

¹² Christopher S. O'Brien, "“And Everything Would Be Done to Protect Us’: The Cold War, the Bomb and America’s Children, 1945-1963” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2002).

¹³ Carol Billman, *The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate: Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, and the Million Dollar Fiction Factory* (The Ungar Publishing Company: New York, 1986), 4.

of approval. It was thought that an FCDA-approved publisher would be more marketable in an anti-communist, pro-American society. Notably, the list of FCDA-approved publishers includes several publishers of children's literature including Random House Incorporated who published the works of Dr. Seuss and Harcourt, Brace, and Company who published individual fiction novels like *Sea Siege* by Andre Norton. These popular children's authors wrote books that included lengthy and serious discussions of the use of atomic weapons. This analysis shows that the nuclear fear versus terror campaign permeated past the world of adults and into the world of children through the literature they encountered that discussed nuclear energy. Literature aimed at very young audiences presented the use of atomic energy in a positive, allegorical sense. As the intended audiences increased in age however, these discussions became complicated as books began to present atomic energy in both a positive and a negative way. Whether a conscious effort or not on the part of the author, the federal campaign to induce nuclear fear had made its way to America's children.

The Cat in the Hat Comes Back, written in 1958, displays fears of communism, war, and a reliance on nuclear weapons to keep society safe. The *Cat in the Hat* series is one of the most popular pieces of children's literature of all time. While it is unclear whether Random House Publishing submitted this particular work to the FCDA for its approval, the themes of the government's campaign are clear within this book. This book is aimed at very young readers; Dr. Seuss' Beginner Books targeted anywhere from ages three to eight. Dr. Seuss had the uncanny ability to realize that children should be treated like adults and could

understand “adult” problems when put into their terms.¹⁴ Therefore, I contend Dr. Seuss felt it was entirely appropriate, even necessary, to write about national concerns, such as the use of atomic weapons, in an abstract and allegorical sense.¹⁵ *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* starts with the same little boy, his sister, their fish, and their absent mother as from the first book. The problems begin when the Cat shows up and leaves a pink residue in the bathtub that only spreads as he and the children try to clean it. The Cat then brings out his “helpers” to combat this quickly spreading residue. The other twenty-five Cat characters take on this residue in a “spot killing” war that uses an entire arsenal of primitive weapons including bats, pop guns, and a lawnmower. Still, nothing stops this residue and it only spreads further. Little Cat Z is then revealed and he takes off his hat to unleash a “Voom” which cleans up the entire yard and all the other cats in one huge mushroom cloud.¹⁶ I argue that the pink stain represents the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and how communism has spread throughout Eastern Europe. The primitive weapons are the United States’ early attempts to contain it such as the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Airlift. The only answer to the spread of communism apparently seems to be the use of the atom bomb as displayed by the mushroom cloud-shaped “Voom.” This story is made for young children and so does not present a very complicated story; problems arise with the spread of communism, which can be easily solved with atomic weapons allowing everything to go back to normal. Atomic

¹⁴ Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (Continuum: New York, 2004), 12.

¹⁵ Other allegorical works by Dr. Seuss include *Horton Hears a Who* (1954), in which Dr. Seuss writes about the Japanese people in a way that would incite sympathy for their plight and represents them as a people who are seeking democracy and freedom. *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose* (1948) pinpoints the problems of collective housing and how it infringes on individual rights. *Yertle the Turtle* (1950) is about tyranny and the problems it poses for individual rights. Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss*, 78-86.

¹⁶ Theodore Geisel, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (New York: Random House, 1958), 15.

weapons are placed in a positive light as a simple answer to a complicated problem. The atomic weapon, or the “Voom,” is used by the smallest cat, Little Cat Z, who is so small that he cannot even be seen, much like an atom. This shows that an atomic weapon is so simply constructed and operated that even the tiniest of individuals is capable of using it. There is even a countdown for Little Cat Z to unleash the Voom, and it gets the job done in an instant by “blowing” everything away. However, the Voom is a last resort leading readers to believe that the weapon it represents must be an extremely powerful device that could have negative consequences. The boy himself admits “Now, don’t ask me what Voom is. I never will know. But, boy! Let me tell you it DOES clean up snow!”¹⁷ This adds to the mysterious power of the device used. It cannot be completely understood by the public so only certain bits of information are useful, in this case, the positive end results of the “Voom.” Much like the nuclear fear campaign, the public should only know certain things about atomic weapons and the less you know the better off you may be. Many questions are left unanswered, as the reader is never really told what the “Voom” is, how it works, or what happened to the pink spots. The Cat leaves with a promise (threat perhaps?) that if the children should ever have “spots” again, he would be more than happy to come back with his Voom to clean them up.¹⁸ *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* adheres with the government campaign concerning nuclear weapons by providing only information that is deemed essential by the Cat and only showing the positive aspects of the use of such weapons.

¹⁷ Ibid., 53.

¹⁸ Ibid., 67.

Sea Siege written by Andre Norton in 1957 reflects Cold War fears of communism and destruction along with mixed feelings on the use of the atomic bomb. This adventure novel is aimed at readers aged eleven to fifteen, an older reading group. Thus, its discussions of atomic energy are much more complicated than the story above. This is reflected in the pamphlets and videos distributed among high schools by the federal government in which atomic energy is explained as a useful tool for the United States, but one that must be handled with the utmost care as it has devastating consequences that cannot be avoided.¹⁹ The first few pages in *Sea Siege* alone exhibit Cold War fears, as it explains that an oceanic disease called “the Red Plague” is spreading throughout the Atlantic and Pacific oceans killing off fish and plant life. The U.S. and Great Britain have joined forces to combat the Red Plague but so far have been unsuccessful. The Red Plague represents the spread of communism from the East to the West and the U.S. and Great Britain’s unsuccessful attempts to contain it. The protagonist, a teenage boy named Griff, is stationed at the small West Indies island San Isadore with his scientist father who has been contracted by the U.S. government to stop the Red Plague. Throughout the novel, we see a suspicion and hatred towards Russians in many conversations between characters. One of the islanders hears of another fishing vessel disappearing and immediately knows who to blame, “Them Reds.”²⁰ This is not the paranoid ramblings of an islander, as the author states,

[b]ecause the tension between the eastern bloc of nations and the West had been building, so that they were on the brink of a holocaust, which both sides knew might put an end not only to the actively warring nations but to perhaps the whole world,

¹⁹ Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

the story of an underseas scout, a lurking, unnamed enemy, had been readily accepted and believed.²¹

Outlandish accusations were being thrown about while fears of atomic war took over the minds of many. These fears represent that fine line between nuclear fear and nuclear terror. When the characters of this book begin to panic and make irrational decisions, this is when the reader understands that nuclear terror has set in. The characters that have crossed that line into nuclear terror usually end up destroyed as they become apathetic about the approaching threat and so do nothing to protect themselves or become hysterical and head straight into the path of danger.²²

Griff and the rest of the population have their lives further complicated when a sea serpent of mythological stature washes up dead on their shore and the scientist, Hughes, proclaims it “hot... Radioactive!”²³ We then find out that the red plague is radioactive, and questions begin to arise over the destructive and creative powers of this mysterious atomic energy; was this creature created or killed by atomic energy? This question of atomic energy as a blessing or a curse runs throughout the entire novel much in the same way that it ran throughout society during the 1950s. Authors argued that the destructive force of a nuclear weapon is capable of obliterating entire cities in an instant and its radioactive aftermath could cause, at the time, unimaginable damage. However, they also argued that the U.S. could harness nuclear power for uses that are more productive. This became the driving

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 86.

²³ Ibid., 17.

force behind the FCDA as it attempted to convince society that nuclear energy was a necessary part of American lives.

Throughout the novel, atomic energy is used both as a force of mayhem and chaos and as a source of help and protection. The arms race between the U.S. and the USSR, along with their increased tensions, eventually culminates in an atomic war that wipes out nearly the entire world. The remaining population has to deal with volcanic eruptions, the catastrophic consequences of the nuclear fallout, and super-powered, radioactive octopi. While these consequences may seem far-fetched now, historian Jonathan Weisgall notes that these were very real concerns to society and voiced in many letters to newspapers nationwide.²⁴ These irrational fears are the ones that the FCDA attempted to combat by educating the populace about atomic energy. Although this work of fiction still employs these far-fetched scenarios, it does so in a way that shows that the use of atomic energy does create problems, but can also be used to stop them, as atomic-powered weapons are used against the radioactive octopi. Atomic energy thus did not just exhibit negative consequences within this novel. Much like its advocates argued, atomic energy could and would be put to good use throughout the book. A Navy Lieutenant argues that ““maybe it was atomic bombs that got us into this mess, but it’s atomic engines that are going to pull us out.””²⁵ The atomic engines power the buildings and machinery that provide shelter, protection, and sustenance to the inhabitants of the island in the aftermath of the bombings. The above quote becomes even more dramatic as atomic energy becomes the only available

²⁴ Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads*, 115.

²⁵ Norton, *Sea Siege*, 112.

resource to power the lone plane that represents the tiny island's last hope at making any sort of contact with the outside world.²⁶ Atomic bombs may have ended the world as they know it, but they now represent their last hope to get any of it back again.

Interestingly, this worldwide disaster also has the ability to bring together the last Russians and Americans left alive. In an expedition to find survivors on neighboring islands, the handful of Americans find a Russian submarine beached on a small island and being bombarded by radioactive sea creatures. The Americans save the Russians and bring them back to their island, though against the will of one American who is sure the Russians are somehow behind everything and this is only an extension of their plan. The Captain counters this American's paranoid statements when he argues:

“It isn't going to help matters to shoot Karkoff and his boys – they didn't give the word to start firing. Though you know,” he added shrewdly, “if they hadn't been found by us – but by survivors of a bombing – they wouldn't have lasted. We got our bad punches not from the Russkis, but from the sea, the quakes, the storm. If we'd had them from a bomb, we wouldn't feel the same way. As it is now, we're closing ranks – man against nature. If you're human, you're on our side.”²⁷

The atomic war that ensued between the two super powers had destroyed their world, but the survivors are able to reason that they all must now band together to fight another enemy; the use of atomic bombs has ended the fight between the Americans and Russians. We are never entirely sure what has happened to the rest of the world and are only given clues that it has to do with atomic energy. While the mysterious uses of atomic energy have caused untold amounts of destruction and caused the creation of many new problems, it is still used to solve these problems and rebuild the characters' former way of life. Atomic energy, in the

²⁶ Ibid., 170.

²⁷ Ibid.

end, even repairs the monumental break in relations between the Russians and Americans, bringing all of mankind (or what appears to be left of it) together to make their society whole again.

The campaign of nuclear fear as instituted by the Federal Civil Defense Administration so effectively permeated every aspect of society that it appeared even in children's literature. The FCDA and other government officials realized they were waging a war with communism that was not going to end any time soon and so needed the support of the entire American population. This war also was going to be unlike any other previous war to date because of the advent of nuclear weapons; these weapons created a new kind of war where total and complete destruction of a society was not only possible, but also fairly easy to achieve. The American public needed to be aware of the ever-growing stockpile of nuclear weapons of the USSR and what sort of damage they could inflict. However, the public needed to know that they could still survive a nuclear attack otherwise mass hysteria or apathy would set in and the US government would be unable to mobilize the public. By creating the FCDA, which chose how and what information about nuclear energy they disseminated and created a civil defense program, the public could feel assured that they could survive a nuclear attack. This would ensure the public's complete support of the U.S. government in whatever it deemed necessary to defeat communism. From the children's literature analyzed we can see that these authors have followed the guidelines of the nuclear fear versus nuclear terror campaign by keeping the information regarding the use of nuclear energy limited, characterizing nuclear energy as a positive addition to society, and explaining the consequences of nuclear energy as ones that can be overcome allowing society to survive

and rebuild itself. This shows that the information disseminated through children's literature would produce a generation that was fearful about nuclear energy, but would understand that it is a necessary part of society that man can harness for the good of all humankind. The FCDA's plan was well on its way to completion.