ON WAR: When Children Die in War; Death in War Literature for Children and Youth • Bringing Books and Children Together: Croatian War Experiences • Peace and Peacemakers in Books for Children • The War Inside Books • What Do We Tell the Children? War in the Work of Roberto Innocenti
What should we teach children about war? Hans Christian Andersen award-winning illustrator Roberto Innocenti firmly believes that children should be afforded access to history and, more importantly, that the child’s place in history should be acknowledged. This article analyzes Innocenti’s illustrations depicting the experiences that children have of war in Rose Blanche, Erika’s Story, and Leda e il mago.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797)

War has always been a central theme in children’s books. Battles between good and evil, whether real or imaginary, are a fundamental part of the human psyche, and books that feature heroic soldiers, powerful weapons, and graphic battle scenes make for exhilarating reading. J. K. Rowling’s highly successful Harry Potter series, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, and Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy all revolve around epic battles, and there is little doubt that a large part of the appeal of these texts stems from the manner in which they enable children to become intellectually involved in issues of warfare ordinarily reserved for adults. But what should we
be teaching children about war? Is it enough for children to experience war metaphorically in fantasy, to learn about right and wrong, justice and persecution, victory and defeat through the struggles of characters such as Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins and Lyra Belacqua, or do children need to read stories about real wars which took place in the past?

Roberto Innocenti, winner of the Hans Christian Andersen Illustrator Medal in 2008, firmly believes that children should be afforded access to history and, more importantly, that the child’s place in history should be acknowledged. Wars have never spared children, and the experiences that children have of war can provide valuable lessons for young and old alike. Among the many children’s books that he has illustrated, three deal specifically with the events of the Second World War: *Rose Blanche* (1985) by Christophe Gallaz, *Erika’s Story* (2003) by Ruth Vander Zee, and *Leda e il mago* [*Erika’s Story* in Italian] (2002) by Ermanno Detti. *Rose Blanche* is the moving tale of a German girl who brings scraps of food to the prisoners in a local concentration camp, only to be shot by mistake when the war draws to a close. *Erika’s Story* is the true story of a Jewish girl who survived the Holocaust because of the selfless actions of two people: her mother who threw her from a train headed for a Nazi death camp and a Gentile woman who found her near the tracks and raised her as one of her own. *Leda e il mago* is the story of a ten-year-old Italian girl’s struggle to cope with the confusing and tragic events of the Italian Civil War. *Rose Blanche* and *Erika’s Story* have been translated into a multitude of languages, and both works have earned the artist international recognition. *Rose Blanche* won the Golden Apple Award in Bratislava in 1985 and was named an American Library Association Notable Book and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book in 1986. *Erika’s Story*, meanwhile, was voted the most successful nonfiction title in the UKLA Children’s Book Awards in 2006.

Born in Bagno a Ripoli, Italy, in 1940, Innocenti grew up during the Second World War. He thus has a very personal understanding of what it is like for a child during, and immediately after, a war. Illustrating subjects such as armed conflict and persecution in a children’s book is, however, no easy task, especially when it comes to approaching material as horrific as the Holocaust. The fact that *Rose Blanche* and *Erika’s Story* have both been the recipients of prestigious international awards and that *Leda e il mago* has been singled out by staff of the International Youth Library for
inclusion in the White Ravens Catalogue, an international list of books that display exceptional artistic and literary style, is a testament to Innocenti’s skill as an artist.

Visual details
How does Innocenti manage to convey the truth about war without alienating his young audience? To begin with, he goes about it in much the same way as he would any children’s book; that is to say he employs techniques that are particularly effective at catching the attention of young readers. Unlike their adult counterparts who are always anxious to turn the page, children love studying the minutiae of a picture, and when it comes to depicting the hustle and bustle of village scenes, Innocenti is an expert. Both *Erika’s Story* and *Leda e il Mago* include full-page illustrations which depict village life in photo-realistic detail, and at least half of the illustrations for *Rose Blanche* are of street scenes bursting with vehicles, people, and animals. Hunting for individuals in a crowd is something at which children are particularly adept, and the protagonist in *Rose Blanche* often appears as an incidental character rather than as a protagonist. By making his child readers identify the principal character(s) in a busy scene, Innocenti is able to convey a wealth of historical detail, safe in the knowledge that none of it can be overlooked. He is also able to ensure that his readers take an active role in the reading process, something which works to great effect in *Rose Blanche* when the protagonist disappears: rather than convey the girl’s disappearance by depicting Rose Blanche’s mother desperately searching, Innocenti offers his readers another busy street scene. This time, however, the protagonist is nowhere to be found.

Providing very few details is often as effective a way of arousing curiosity as is providing many, and Innocenti employs this opposing technique to great effect in *Erika’s Story*. Of the nine illustrations contained in the book, five depict nothing more than the back of a train moving down the tracks into the distance, and two or three show mostly empty train tracks. By keeping the details of the illustrations in *Erika’s Story* as minimal as possible, Innocenti encourages his readers to ask questions of those around them and to flesh out the story for themselves, thereby learning in a more active manner about the past.
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Visual distance
Engaging young readers in war stories is, however, fraught with difficulty because of the disturbing nature of the content. Innocenti thus always employs complementary distancing strategies in his works for children which serve to separate his readers emotionally from the subject matter being portrayed. In *Erika’s Story*, he distances his readers from the full horror of the deportation scene by placing a fence in the foreground of the image. This fence not only closes off the scene, it also cleverly obstructs the faces of the characters, sparing readers the fear and horror of the victims.

Raw emotions such as grief, impotence, and hatred are very difficult for young readers to process, and Innocenti often avoids depicting the faces of both victims and oppressors in his illustrations for children. The Nazi Guards in *Erika’s Story* are portrayed with their backs to the viewer, and all we see of Erika’s mother when she throws her child out of the carriage are her pale hands reaching out of the window. Making the reader imagine what a character’s face might have looked like is often as effective a technique as is portraying the emotions directly; the scene in *Leda e il mago* in which the young girl runs into the woods to escape being caught by a truck full of German soldiers powerfully conveys Leda’s fear even though all we see of her are her legs.

War is all about deprivation, suffering, and death, something which Innocenti’s illustrations for Mario Rigoni Stern’s adult war novel, *Il sergente nella neve* [*The sergent in the snow*] (1993), make abundantly clear; over half of the illustrations in this book feature wounded and dead bodies, and several do so in great numbers. Death and suffering never feature, however, in Innocenti’s illustrations for children. Rather than portray death directly, Innocenti prefers to mark the demise of individual characters by focusing on what they have left behind. In *Leda e il mago*, we only become aware that an Italian soldier has lost his life when Leda is given his blood-stained army jacket to wash, while in *Rose Blanche*, Rose Blanche’s tragic fate is conveyed by the girl’s marked absence from the scene on the final page, a scene in which she had figured prominently two pages previously.

Events that are portrayed in sepia or black and white always seem less immediate than those depicted in color, and Innocenti’s use of a monochromatic palette to depict the deportation of the Jews in *Erika’s Story* is another very effective distancing device. Sandwiched between two full-color illustrations, the traumatic events of the Holocaust appear to
belong to a completely different world than that of the older Erika.

In all of the aforementioned cases, the emotions of the characters are never experienced directly by the reader, but rather are implied through Innocenti’s various distancing techniques. His readers can thus empathize with the anguish of Erika’s mother, the horror of Rose Blanche, or the fear of Leda, on their own terms, to the extent they feel comfortable. Knowing that fear or anguish is present is sufficient; there is no need for child readers to delve into the raw and accurate depth of these emotions as experienced by the characters in history.

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Visual pauses
Innocenti’s ability to bring the events of the Second World War to life for his readers while at the same time providing them with the necessary distance to cope with the emotional content is, of course, only a part of what makes his wartime illustrations so outstanding. There is little doubt that *Rose Blanche, Erika’s Story*, and *Leda e il mago* would not be the eloquent and evocative works they are without Innocenti’s skill as a storyteller. Through his mastery of pace, movement, contrast, and repetition, Innocenti provides his readers with the analytical tools to transcend mere observation of history and to contextualize the events of World War II relative to their contemporary reality.

Getting the right momentum is essential in any good story, and if they are to be effective, illustrations need to convey meaning collectively as well as individually; that is to say, they need to have their own internal rhythm. Knowing how to lead the reader from one frame to the next is something in which Innocenti is particularly skilled; almost all of his frames contain paths, roads, rivers, steps or train tracks which carry the protagonist and the reader along. This page-turning element is what makes these books compulsive reading on the first sitting. It is Innocenti’s ability to freeze the story when necessary, however, that makes his works about war so powerful; for it is only when the reader pauses to reflect on the historical events portrayed that their full significance can be appreciated.

In *Rose Blanche*, Innocenti gets his readers to pause and consider the awful truth of the Holocaust by trapping them in between Rose Blanche’s gaze and the gazes of the prisoners. Both groups are looking at each other in the story, but in the illustrations (one of which depicts Rose Blanche and one of which depicts the prisoners) they are looking directly at the viewers, a device which positions them right in the middle of the exchange. A similar interlocked gaze can be found in *Leda e il mago*; and here, too, it causes the reader to pause in the pace of the story and reflect on the significance of
the scene. The fact that the face-off between Leda and the SS soldier takes place on the top of a cliff further enhances the potential and precipitous nature of the moment.

Visual contrasts
The focus of *Rose Blanche, Erika’s Story*, and *Leda e il mago*, however, is not on the war, but on the decisions made by individuals; and the major dichotomies that the characters face are represented visually by Innocenti through the use of several contrasts. Making a decision necessarily involves choosing a direction, and Innocenti often uses crossroads or junctions to convey the turning points in the lives of the protagonists. In the scene just before Rose Blanche decides to follow the Nazi truck into the forest, the girl is portrayed descending a flight of stone steps in the middle of a double-page spread. On the viewer’s right there is an idyllic village scene and the curve of the steps is directing the young girl down this way towards the village. On the viewer’s left, however, there are soldiers, guns, army vans, and war slogans painted onto the walls.

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We do not know in this scene which way the young girl is going to turn once she reaches the bottom of the steps. It is clear from Innocenti’s skillful page layout, however, that the girl is poised between two different worlds, and that her decision will be of tremendous significance. While the path at the bottom of the steps seem to draw the young girl inexorably towards the village and away from the reality of what is happening to the Jews, there is no physical barrier preventing her from turning left.

One of the best ways to show the brutality of war is to contrast it with the beauty of nature, and Innocenti’s illustrations for *Rose Blanche*, *Erika’s Story*, and *Leda e il mago* all set the machinery and weaponry of war against the peaceful harmony of the natural world. The air-raid scene in *Leda e il mago* takes place in a beautiful verdant valley, and the unruly fighter planes roaring in the sky above appear all the more ugly because of the idyllic setting. Nature is respectful and sustaining, while industry is invasive and destructive, and the railway scene in the frontispiece of *Erika’s Story* makes this contrast abundantly clear. Behind the metal cattle train which is transporting prisoners to the death camps, Innocenti has included several donkeys pulling carts of hay across a wooden bridge, symbolic and subtle reminders of the perversity of warfare and persecution.

Conveying the relative importance of individual and collective actions is not as easy as is conveying the contrast between nature and industry. Innocenti, however, manages to draw the viewers’ attention to the fundamental messages of hope in these books by contrasting color symbolically. *Rose Blanche* is almost always depicted wearing a red ribbon in her hair; and this red material, which is later associated with the poppies growing on the land once used for incarcerating the Jews, serves as a powerful symbol in the book of the life, bravery, and sacrifice of the young girl. The colors that Innocenti uses to depict the baby Erika in *Erika’s Story* also have symbolic significance. When we first meet the baby, she is hidden in a white pram (a color that conveys both
the baby’s innocence and the cold future that awaits her at the camps). When Erika’s mother throws her from the train, however, she appears wrapped in a pink blanket (a color which conveys the new life and hope that the mother’s selfless action has given the child).

Sometimes the contrasts that Innocenti establishes are so subtle that the reader only becomes aware of them on the second or third reading. The star that is featured on the front cover of Erika’s Story, for example, appears on first glance to be the Star of David worn by the Jews during the Second World War. The star, however, has five points instead of six; it is thus not a symbol of the Holocaust, but a bright star that symbolizes Erika’s vitality. The true meaning of the star only becomes apparent when the reader reaches the last page of the book, for here after the very last line Innocenti has replaced the black-and-white Star of David employed throughout the text as a line-divider with a yellow five-pointed star. Suddenly on the last page it all becomes clear; Erika’s mother may have worn a Star of David, but it is not this star that now defines her daughter. Her daughter’s star – the star that is depicted on the cover – is a star of light, something which is reinforced by the book’s last lines: “my star still shines.”

Conclusion
All of these contrasts employed by Innocenti in Rose Blanche, Erika’s Story, and Leda e il mago force child readers to think, to look very closely at what they are reading, and to process the information for themselves. They are
thus extremely effective devices when it comes to teaching children about war. How many books for children can be said to involve child readers to this extent? The answer, I fear, is very few.

Now that almost all the adult participants of the Second World War have passed away and children can no longer hear about the war from parents or relatives, it is more important than ever that they be introduced to these topics through literature, and that the books that address these issues do not oversimplify or sentimentalize the facts. If they are made with the right care and attention, books can be powerful agents of social change. Teaching children about war, however, is not so much about explaining the past as it is about inciting questions, and Innocenti’s illustrations have all been carefully designed to make the young reader curious about the past. By actively involving the young reader in the history-making process, they convey in a very tangible way the importance of love, responsibility, peace, and truth.

Four-year-old Kim's poignant story, based on a true event, tells of a child orphaned by the Vietnam War. Hundreds of thousands of children of that war and others have shared a similar fate. When her village is bombed and Kim is so injured that her vision is hazy, her mother dies, leaving the child with her words: “I will always be with you.” American soldiers take the child to an orphanage in Da Nang, Vietnam, where she is nurtured by kind caregivers. She is a fortunate survivor but, as the text asks, “How do you feel secure when the dreams of your mama disappear into the dawn of the day?” Strangers help and the child is sustained by her mother’s words and the memory of her loving touch. Himler’s realistic drawings in pencil and watercolor detail the horrors of war even as they capture the power of love and hope to heal. This picture book is probably best shared with older children. As with many books dealing with war, children need support in confronting horrifying realities.

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Children’s books cited

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Always With You

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