

# UC Berkeley

## 2016 SURF Conference Proceedings

### **Title**

The Slippery Slope: How American Children's Literature at the Turn of the Millennium Prepares Children for the Nature of Evil & Adulthood

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06g2m18f>

### **Author**

Wilson, Kristen

### **Publication Date**

2016-10-01

Undergraduate

*The Slippery Slope: How American Children's Literature at the Turn of the Millennium Prepares Children for the Nature of Evil & Adulthood*

"If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book" (*The Bad Beginning* 1), or so Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler) introduces his child readers to the world of the Baudelaire orphans, a bleak and depressing reality populated by horrors as absurd as they are persistent. This is hardly the world of optimism and promise that American children are so often inducted into through children's literature, but *why* does this series of children's books strike such a different tone than the majority of its contemporaries, let alone the long tradition of buoyant didacticism and general idealism of American children's literature that came before it? After all, *The Series of Unfortunate Events*—a thirteen book series Handler published under the penname of Lemony Snicket between 1999 and 2006—hardly exists in a vacuum. No cultural work does. What elements and anxieties of the new millennium allowed and inspired Handler to break with tradition *and* enjoy mainstream success in a market traditionally the domain of the singularly uplifting? Moreover, how does Handler explore these anxieties and how do they function in a societal context? In this paper, I would like to explore Handler's treatment of three central anxieties of the millennium: loss of structure, grief, and morality in a fallen world.

First: loss of structure. The most profound and arguably important tragedy of the series happens even before the first page of the first book when the Baudelaire orphans lose their parents and all of their worldly possessions in a terrible fire that burns their mansion to the ground. This, of course, is the ultimate loss of structure: loss of parental guidance, home, and possessions in one fell swoop. From there, the Baudelaire orphans are immediately plunged into a nightmarish approximation of the foster care system, transferred from guardian to guardian to guardian and so on, all of these guardians of varying degrees of evil and oblivious, but the end result of living with each is the same—they fail to protect the Baudelaire orphans from the horrors of the world and the Baudelaire orphans must protect themselves on the strength of their wits and talents. Each time, the Baudelaire orphans save themselves from death, but this is only for the cycle to continue, handed off to another inept or evil guardian who will fail to protect them just as much as the previous ones have.

The first and worst of these guardians is Count Olaf, chosen because he is their geographically closest relative, not biologically closest—he is a third cousin four times removed or a fourth cousin three times removed, it is never clearly explained to the Baudelaire orphans or to the reader. That said, Olaf offers the only external constant in the lives of the Baudelaire orphans—this external constant being that he will always try to murder or otherwise harm them in the hopes of getting his hands on the enormous fortune the Baudelaire parents left for their children. The Baudelaire orphans, of course, cannot access this fortune until they are adults themselves, yet another frustrating instance of the adult-dominated world denying them an opportunity to escape the cycle of abuse they have fallen into.

If this all seems a bit difficult to believe, a bit too terrible or irrational or distorted a reality, consider that this is a world in which nothing could make sense. This is the world through the eyes of children who have lost their parents, a loss likely previously unimaginable to them. It is no coincidence, after all, that the only other truly sane characters in the series besides the Baudelaire orphans are a set of triplet children they befriend, the Quagmires, who coincidentally have also lost their parents in a terrible fire. They are the only other people in the series who can see the world as the Baudelaire orphans do because they have suffered an equivalent loss of structure.

Now, I would like to think about this loss of structure further, in terms of the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. Starting with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent vacuum of power the United States strove to fill with increasing interventions abroad and in the lives of its citizens, the fear of a new, all-powerful, singular world order became increasingly prominent. In the 1990s and early 2000s, mainstream American culture and psychology was marked by all manner of paranoia and conspiracy theories. This thread can be traced through big government-fearing right-wing paramilitary organizations and terrorists like Timothy McVeigh (the perpetrator of the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995), the irrational fear that technology would suddenly turn against humanity in the first moments of 2000, various conspiracies surrounding 9/11, and all other manner of events engulfed in this fog of paranoia and fear of a singular, secret world order pulling the strings behind it all.

Not for the first time, the American public found a footing for this paranoia in secret societies such as the Illuminati. In his series, Handler has a secret society of his own, the volunteer fire department, or VFD, essentially a spoof of the Illuminati and even represented by an all-seeing eye (no coincidence that surveillance is a prominent anxiety of the millennium and the series). Literally every adult in the series is a member or associate of the VFD, and the task of the Baudelaire orphans for the second half of the series is to piece together the workings of this secret society and thereby regain a world that is structured, at least semi-logical in its operation even if it be malevolent in its operation.

But even this is denied to them. For you see, the VFD is in the midst of a terrible schism, a schism that tears the once noble order in two and pits families and friends against each other. The fear that Handler is exploring here is even deeper than that of the paranoia surrounding a singular world order. The fear Handler is exploring is that the world is actually as arbitrary in its dispensement of suffering as one might fear, not even a malevolent, overarching purpose behind all that the Baudelaire orphans have been made to endure. The only thing more terrifying than the idea that someone is controlling the world is that someone isn't. This is the ultimate loss of structure Handler and the Baudelaire orphans grapple with.

On that high note, I would like to turn to the second anxiety Handler addresses: grief. How do we, as Americans, grieve? How do the Baudelaire orphans, as children, grieve constructively? Death is something Handler tends not to speak to directly. Instead, he models grief in the Baudelaire orphans, in the comfort their shared memories of lost love ones bring them in a particularly dark moment, giving them the strength to go on. It is undoubtedly significant that the Baudelaire orphans never grieve those they have lost by reassuring themselves that they are in a better place or even in any place at all, and that they never think of their parents looking down on them or looking out for them in an active sense. This is clearly an attitude of the secular millennium.

Handler also seeks to model how *now* to grieve, addressing the danger it poses when grief is channeled into a means and motivation for revenge. In her article, "Mourning A Series of Unfortunate Events," Dr. Kim Hong Nguyen posits that Count Olaf, while likely orphaned by the Baudelaire parents (as the reader learns late in the series), likely murdered them and intends to do harm to their children purely so he can gain control of their fortune, as he continually explains at the climax of his evil plans. In this way, Olaf's motivated pursuit of "revenge" is in fact little more than an ill-directed and opportunistic grab for resources, as one may choose to interpret the post-9-11 actions of the American government and public as grief was harnessed as a justification for several interventions in a strategic region with key resources.

Grief and revenge offer tempting opportunities for personal, political, and national gain, or at the very least for catharsis of one kind or another. But the Baudelaire orphans never seek to tarnish their innocence as children or nobility as adults by killing Count Olaf,

and this is because they recognize one fundamentally important truth: nothing they do will bring their parents back. Nothing they do will return any of their loved ones to them.

The third trend: morality in a fallen world. This is alternative morality. Morality that exists in shades of grey rather than in the stark tones of black and white. Morality that justifies burning down a hotel if it saves more lives than it costs, as the Baudelaire orphans do in the penultimate book in the series.

This journey into alternative morality concludes in the final book of the series, when the Baudelaire orphans find themselves in an island Eden, surrounded by islanders who live in perfect ignorance of the world and put everything dangerous or potentially enlightening on a forbidden part of the island. While on this island, the Baudelaires and islanders are exposed to a poison which can only be combated by eating something bitter. The Baudelaires journey to the forbidden part of the island in hopes of finding something to cure them. They find an enormous library inside the only apple tree on the island and begin to read, hoping to find a cure. In their reading, they learn that the apples of the tree have been crossbred with horseradish and are therefore bitter enough to save them. However, at this point they are too weak to retrieve an apple containing the bitter knowledge of the world for themselves.

If the allusion were not clear enough for you, an apple is brought to them by the Incredibly Deadly Viper, a serpent who is, in fact, *not* incredibly deadly but in reality wonderfully playful and kind and a great friend to the Baudelaire orphans throughout the series. The Incredibly Deadly Viper offers the apple to Violet, who takes a bite. She hands it to Klaus. He takes a bite. Klaus passes it to Sunny. She takes a bite. Their journey is complete. They are adults. They have seen too much of the world and now they *know* too much of the world not to be adults.

Almost immediately, the Baudelaires find themselves in the position of many of the adults in the series when they adopt an orphan infant and must begin to ask themselves certain questions. They must ask themselves how they can protect innocence without fostering ignorance. How they can raise a child who will one day be a noble volunteer rather than an evil villain. Most of all, they must ask themselves if they should leave the island Eden to face the real world, such as it is, because it is *real* and they cannot deny their knowledge of it. Handler offers us a final vision of the four Baudelaires pushing their boat from the shores of the island Eden to brave the perilous sea and world beyond, essentially restating his major thesis statement for the series one last time: knowledge is always preferable to ignorance.

Now: why is this a bestselling series if the subject matter it addresses is so dark and depressing? Because it resonates with children and adults alike. It resonates with the era in which it was published (1999-2006), informed by the paranoia and uncertainty of the 1990s and commenting on the millennium as it happens. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* seeks to serve as an inoculation, or as a form of exposure therapy for the children of the millennium—show them how terrible the world can be and how they can survive in it while maintaining their nobility, their goodness, if not their innocence. This is a different sort of didacticism than one commonly finds in children's literature—it is a survival guide for navigating the murky futures and moral quandaries of the millennium with one's ethics and sanity reasonably intact.