

“Unmitigated Hell” in Wonderland

“Unmitigated Hell” in Wonderland:
Depictions of Childhood in Timothy Findley’s Early Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Timothy Findley and Findley scholars and critics have by and large promoted the idea that the Findleyan world is one littered with innocent children forced into a dark, adult reality. In his effort to assign significance to the loss of childhood innocence, Findley attempts to construct epiphanal, or “atomic” moments that cause a sudden shift from innocence to post-innocence - a sudden awareness in the child of life’s inherent suffering and mortality. However, a close examination of Findley’s early novels reveals that, in fact, Findley often contradicts the supposed sequential paradigm of innocence, loss of innocence, and adulthood, even raising the question as to whether innocence exists at all. Findleyan childhoods are highly complex and conflicted phenomena, collapsing traditional “storybook” ideals of childhood. This “collapse” is perhaps better understood when studied with an eye on Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, which place a very adult little girl (fixated on mortality, reason, and power) in the supposedly child-like world of Wonderland. Though Alice possesses the ability to dream Wonderland, her cynicism prevents her from really enjoying its wonder. Such is the case for Findley’s fictional children, who may be young, but are hardly unaware of life’s more cutting realities...are hardly innocent.

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Surely a student of Findley's work could find no better guide in the world than Lorraine York. No. After five courses with Dr. York in my last three undergrad years, and after working with her on this thesis, I can safely say that a student could find no better guide, period. If I have thrived in my studies, it is due in no small part to her criticism, support and encouragement.

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Introduction

“Paying Attention Anew: Finally Getting Around to Findley’s ‘Childish’ Fixations”

i

There is no shortage of articles on Timothy Findley. His third novel, *The Wars*, was his first to be published in Canada, and subsequently won the Governor’s General Award in 1977 -- a double whammy of Canadian approval that opened perhaps not a floodgate, but certainly a *streamgate* of interviews with the man and criticism of his work that continues to this day. In 1981, *Canadian Literature*¹ published a special Findley issue; as recently as one year ago *Essays on Canadian Writing*² produced its own, as did the *Journal of Canadian Studies*³ but months ago. In the typically progressivist mode of current literary criticism, work on Findley has followed an eerily unanimous trajectory which Lorraine York charts in the twelfth volume of *Canadian Writers and their Works* (82-85). After a smattering of general essays in the early 1980’s dealing with *The Wars* (an obvious product of Findley’s literary “newness”), Findley criticism found focus in his “appeals to sight, sound, and smell in both *The Wars* and the earlier fiction” (York *CWTW* 83), then moved on to “reader-based theoretical frameworks,” followed by “historiographic theory” (York *CWTW* 83),

and next by studies of the postmodern, historical, and metafictional elements in Findley's work (York *CWTW* 84). Most recently, critics have devoted attention to the morality of his fiction (his anti-fascist stance is a clear favourite) and, as York points out, "The critical approach to Findley's fiction that will continue to govern its criticism in the 1990's is feminism and/or gender studies" (York *CWTW* 85). (One might also mention that some critics have taken note of the elements of myth/fable/parable/fantasy in Findley's writing.) York suggests a few much needed diversions from the above -- a look at Findley's short fiction, plays, work in television, and the importance of humour and performance in his work (York *CWTW* 86) -- and a few have taken her up on the challenge since. Thus, the two most recent journal issues devoted to Findley study issues of narrative, myth, performance, gender and sexuality, politicized morality, intertextuality, and postmodernism. Interviews with the author (of which there are many!) are similarly engaged. The trajectory has, to be sure, been accumulative, and reached a fairly broad stage, keeping pace with popular critical approaches (note that queer and feminist approaches have come last of all!). But I wonder if such momentum has overrun a less popular critical focus (indeed, I wonder if it is considered a critical focus at all) which nonetheless finds abundant applications in Findley's work, interviews, and lectures.

As is the danger of critical progressivism, there seems to be tacit agreement amongst Findley scholars that one subject will be mentioned, but never *discussed*, as if things have progressed to the degree that to go back and

study the obvious (or, perhaps in this case, regress to the *childish*) would somehow hobble the formidable critical trajectory, now well into “isms” and “alities.” That subject is Findley’s pervasive emphasis on children and the loss of childhood innocence. But before I deal with the oddly fleeting-yet-recurring mention critics make of Findley’s depiction of childhood innocence, I will highlight a few of the (many) times Findley has -- outside of his fiction -- demanded we “pay attention” to his “children.”

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In “Bashing the Fascists: The Moral Dimensions of Findley’s Fiction,” David Ingham justifies his use not only of Findley’s fiction, but also his interviews, conversations, letters, and public lectures by arguing that to “deliberately ignore what an author has to say about his work and his views of the world as they appear in his work seems more than a little perverse” (35). Indeed. In addition to Ingham’s sensible statement, I find a similar sort of resonant practicality in Mark Cohen’s record of the many times Findley has used the phrase “pay attention.”⁴ Cohen notes that Findley talks about paying attention in *Inside Memory* (31), in interviews (Aitken 82; Benson 111, 115; Mellor 98; Meyer 11; Summers 107, 110), and three times in *Headhunter* (23, 387, 474)⁵ (Cohen 95). In “The Countries of Invention,” Findley writes, “Paying attention pays off” (106). In an interview with himself and Bill Whitehead, Findley mentions yet again the importance of paying attention -- this time to what

his characters want to say (Findley, "Alice" 16). And so my thesis begins by taking Findley at his non-fictional word...or words...and paying attention to the number of times he highlights the importance of childhood and youth. In point of fact, the phrase "pay attention" comes out of Findley's childhood. He attaches the phrase to his "childhood" experience of listening to his grandmother's stories (Aitken 82).

Findley has revealed that both his careers (first as actor, then writer) have been founded, in one way or another, in aspects of childhood. As to the former career, Findley defines his desire to act as an attraction that "goes right back to [his] childhood -- the element of living in another world" (Benson 107). As to the latter (and ongoing!) career, in one interview Findley has said that he writes in an effort to preserve "the world before the bomb" for those children who "have always lived with it" (Aitken 88).⁶ He reiterates this sentiment in other interviews: the importance of preserving pre-nuclear "purity" for "our children" (Summers 109); and his writing as product of his desire to pass stories on to subsequent generations (Mellor 90). His perception of insanity (a common thread in his work) is also grounded in his childhood, garnered from an early relationship at age six or seven that was "the first truly profound experience of [his] consciousness" (Findley, *Alice* 17). One gets the sense that Findley perceives childhood as defined by innocence until some epiphanal, consciousness-altering moment of experience (like a bomb dropping, or a consciousness suddenly awakening into profundity) shifts that childhood abruptly into a dark adulthood.

Findley's focus on the atomic bomb is apt. Its use is generally regarded as the modern world's sudden, total loss of innocence -- the modern world's ephiphanal moment between innocence and experience (to borrow from Blake) writ large. However, for Findley, it seems that there was more than one "truly profound experience" that shifted his young self from innocence into adulthood. In *Timothy Findley: Anatomy of a Writer* (an NFB documentary), Findley describes one "vital memory" from his childhood, when he stood outside his boarding school and watched his brother being taken away to die⁷: "I remember so very vividly the sense of being abandoned...utterly abandoned in this dark place." The shift occurs as Findley is between worlds -- watching his mother and brother drive away, about to re-enter the detested school now an individual wounded by adulthood: "The child who turned and walked back into that school was the incipient writer...watching in wonder the subtleties of the adult world come in and alter his life forever." It is interesting that Findley was twelve years old when this happened - on the cusp of his teens and a more definite step towards adulthood. But there are greater discrepancies to be unpacked than the existence of more than one "atomic" moment in Findley's vivid, vital and various alterations.

Findley has made no secret of the fact that for him, "Childhood was unmitigated *hell* from beginning to end" (Roberts 19). This total "hell" is at odds with his oft discussed formative years spent with pet rabbits, a garden (Roberts 13) and of course, *Peter Rabbit*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Wind in the*

Willows (Findley, "Significant" 152): "I can literally remember a feeling of suddenly waking up in this garden. I looked around at the trees. Everything smelled nice. Something was singing. There were people around. It was comforting. I thought 'This is the world'" (Summers 108). What about "unmitigated hell from beginning to end"? Findley's remembrances strike a tension between the assumption that our lives begin with innocence and wonder and the reality that we might never know that kind of pure wonder. [His feeling of being born into the world of the garden was more likely a way of escaping the chronic illnesses that kept him isolated at home or in hospital beginning at age three, when doctors gave him up for dead (Roberts 13, 15)]. To gain greater understanding of this tension, let us "pay attention" to another of Findley's memories (so important that Findley attempts to recreate it for the final scene of the NFB documentary) -- that of his father reading poetry to Findley and his brother from their bedroom doorway. In order to evoke those bedtime readings, Findley recites one of his father's chosen pieces, the last lines of which read, "the rose-lipped girls are sleeping / in fields where roses fade." Exactly. The "signs" of innocence in these lines -- the rose lips and the peaceful slumber -- seem doomed to vanish even as they appear (if, in fact, they ever existed in pure, "unfaded" terms). Wonder and hell are not simply two separate worlds bridged by one epiphanal moment.

Accordingly, truly happy, or innocent, children are a rare find in Findley's

work. Instead, he writes a landscape filled not only with abused (emotionally, physically, and/or sexually) children, but with dead babies and even aborted fetuses -- signs that many of us are doomed to know death and darkness even before birth. And yet at the same time, Findley often seems to take childhood innocence for granted; to assume over and over that it exists by describing relatively unguarded actions or characteristics as "child like," and to create those epiphanal atomic moments wherein the (few) previously innocent are inaugurated into the bleakness of the adult world.

This contradiction has been briefly visited by Lorraine York, who devotes the last two pages of her *Canadian Writers and their Works* chapter to the simultaneous occurrence of "wanted" and "rejected" children (115) in Findley's early fiction (114). She notes that two affirmations (two instances where characters say "yes") conclude *Headhunter* -- that a child will be born, not aborted, and another will be sexually abused: "One 'Yes' does not cancel out the other, any more than the arrival of one child can compensate for the violent death of another. The two affirmations coexist, tormentingly..." (116). In these two pages York comes closer to charting this coexistence than any other critic has done, despite the fact that a few other Findley critics have taken ever so slight stabs at the subject.⁸ In *Timothy Findley*, Diana Brydon sees Findley's concentration on childhood innocence (and its loss) in socio-historic terms, wherein "innocent witnesses...record social hypocrisies..." (19). Brydon's study deals very much with innocence as a vehicle for complicity in large scale social

ills (colonization, violence, fascism...), and finds that “in Findley’s fictional world, even the innocent are complicit, and the capacity for violence lies within everyone from birth” (45). Put simply, Brydon finds that in Findley’s work there is no real innocence, whereas York finds that in that same body of work, innocence and evil coexist. In an earlier, separate essay, Brydon notes that *The Wars* suggests that experience (or violence) allows us to know innocence (Brydon “Devotion” 75, 83), and that its hero has “lost” his “innocence” (80). Again, we are left wondering, does Findley believe in innocence or not? Other critics, like Dennis Duffy, seem to think so, occasionally paying lip service to Findley’s damaged child characters as “vision[s] of lost innocence” (Duffy 202), which carries the assumption that they had it in the first place. In another socio-historic Findley paper, Tom Hastings argues that *The Wars* is an examination of “the process by which the military turns boys into men/soldiers, thereby destroying their childhood innocence...” (Hastings 98).⁹

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Obviously, these are complex questions that we, scholars and critics, have barely begun asking. But in a recently republished interview with Jeffrey Canton, Findley directs our attention to a productive approach to the issue of innocence -- whether we ever have it, whether we lose it in a definitive moment and move abruptly into a corrupting adult world, or whether innocence is merely the first stage in an inevitable process of growing into adult corruption, or

complicity. In the interview, Findley hints at this basic nature/nurture tension first by stating that he's "always worshiped" Jung's idea that the human mind can contain anything and go anywhere (Canton 61), and second by wondering whether a person makes a moment by seeing it or thinking it (Canton 66). The former statement indicates a belief in the mind as germ, or kernel, already possessing the ability to pursue all its future applications. This ties in with the childhood development argument that adults (largely in terms of behaviour and intelligence) are the "natural" outcomes of their DNA. Findley's latter thought indicates a belief in the importance of construction and impression in the creation of an adult; it reveals Findley's frequent creative re-visitation of the epiphanal moment when one is confronted with an outer reality that alters perception forever as a matter of experience rather than genetics. This ties in with the theory that children are "nurtured" (although Findley might call it "abused") into their adult patterns of behaviour and levels of intelligence.

In this thesis, I will explore Findley's first three novels: *The Last of the Crazy People* (1967); *The Butterfly Plague* (1969, rev. ed. 1986); and *The Wars* (1977). In a kind of anti-progressivist move, I am devoting my attention to those three novels written before Findley became a prominent CanLit figure.

Furthermore, it is my belief that the first two novels chart a course of childhood pain that spreads from one family in one place at one time to many people in different places and different times. The third novel then combines the dynamics of the first two by investigating in depth one child's pain in the arena of global

conflict -- war. Given the relative newness of this subject area and the fact that my primary sources mark Findley's earliest "triad" of fiction, my efforts here will be necessarily primary. That is to say, my goal is to lay the groundwork for further exploration of the nature of childhood innocence in Findley's work. In order to do this, I will first establish how often "lost" children shape these novels, in part because it seems that in his fictional world, truly happy, unfettered childhoods seem non-existent, and adulthood is often just an extension of this lack of innocence. Second, I will investigate Findley's seemingly parallel belief that children are doomed from inception *and* that they have a sense of wonder and innocence before being thrust into the adult world. Consideration of these beliefs may necessitate consideration of the epiphanal, or "atomic," moments that mark the supposed loss of innocence; are they singular, socially constructed "markers" or are they more part of an inevitable, natural progression towards adulthood?

Put simply, it is my desire to establish that readers may find much complexity and depth in Findley's child characters despite the fact that innocence is so often fodder for cliché (not that Findley is immune from such clichés!). Feminist criticism has long demanded that the term "female" be stripped of debilitating, static associations that corner women as nurturing and home-oriented, sexual, or virginal, etc. By the same token, I think it reasonable to question what, exactly, is meant to be understood by terms like "childlike" and "childish."¹⁰ Do these terms indicate a simple innocence and wonder,

untouched by the customs or pain of adulthood? Findley seems to assume as much, given that he often uses “child similes” to attach a sense of guilelessness to an action or character. But at the same time, in Findley’s fictional world, children can know pain and cynicism even before they leave the womb. There is a very obvious contradiction going on.

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It is important that I define “innocence” for the purposes of my study, for there are certainly varying degrees and types of innocence, childhood and otherwise. In simple terms, I will depend on the traditional dictionary definition -- innocence reflects a state untouched by the painful awareness of loss, loneliness, trauma, mortality, and so on. This simple definition will no doubt be complicated. For instance, if a child *feels* an *intuitive* urge towards violence, but does not comprehend or fully recognize it, one could argue that that child was either innocent or not.¹¹ The urge for violence suggests a “touched” state, but not understanding that urge, nor being able to name it (“rage,” “instinct,” and so on), suggests an “untouched” state. Certainly, as I have mentioned, there will be many examples of times when Findley tells us without a doubt that a child is changing irrevocably from child to adult -- those “atomic” moments. But, as I have mentioned, Findley also writes moments wherein children seem never to have possessed innocence. To try to elucidate this contradiction, I will often return to a chapter of Terry Otten’s *After Innocence: Visions of the Fall in Modern*

Literature, which deals with Lewis Carroll's Alice stories. Otten effectively argues that "rather than moving *from* absolute innocence to experience, Alice returns *to* the garden an already corrupted character" (149). In a dual "looking glass" world, Alice is a "child of darkness as well as light" (154), paradoxically in a land of wonder and yet constantly trying to enforce reason in that land. Otten claims that Alice never really possesses innocence, but is rather in a constant process of adding to her already considerable catalogue of "adult" qualities: "Though utterly naive, she portrays a proclivity for violence, moral tyranny and unswerving absolutism" (153). Thus, the seemingly atomic moments of falling down a rabbit hole, or stepping through a mirror, do not actually mark Alice's progression from one "side" of innocence to the other (the opposite of innocence, presumably *uninnocence*) -- the line between child and adult is not so clear. Though Alice may not fully understand or exploit her instinct for control and reductive reason, and her fixation on mortality, they are in opposition to the world of wonder and imagination -- the garden¹² -- and therefore must be considered uninnocent, despite the fact that Alice herself may still be venturing down the rabbit hole. Findley's childhood affection for the Alice stories and his occasional mention of them in his fiction add to their relevance here.¹³ I am intrigued and bemused by Findley's "interview" with William Whitehead -- "Alice Drops Her Cigarette on the Floor..." -- which constantly brings to my mind the Disney Alice (blond hair, blue dress, white apron) leaning on a counter, taking a decidedly uninnocent drag on her ciggie, flicking it inelegantly onto the kitchen

floor, and then using one of her little black Mary Janes to smush it out. Though not obviously Findley's intended image -- he claims not to know who Alice is (14) -- it suits my discussion of the convergence of innocence and experience quite well! Though this Alice is clearly as much a product of my own imagination as Findley's, the following thesis will highlight several more such paradoxes that are purely Findley's own; not fanciful little girls smoking in their Mary Janes, but a boy whose hobbies are croquet and burying dead animals, and children who assassinate Mickey Mouse balloons, and storybook animals caught in trench warfare. None of these, obviously, is meant to be funny.

Notes

1. *Canadian Literature* 91 (winter 1981).

2. *ECW* 64 (summer 1998).

3. *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.4 (winter 1998-1999).

4. John F. Hulcoop has written in much greater depth on Findley's demands on a reader's "attention" (in a fictional/stylistic sense) in his essay "Look! Listen! Mark My Words! Paying Attention to Timothy Findley's Fiction" [*Canadian Literature* 91 (winter 1981): 22 - 47].

5. These are Cohen's page references.

6. Many have found Findley's anti-fascist stance to be the most salient aspect of his fiction, but for Findley this theme is child-centric; he states that fascism is "about gaining and dominating the minds of the young" (Aitken 91).

7. In a 1979 article for *Chatelaine*, Findley wrote that the family was sure his brother Michael would die -- "there wasn't any doubt of that" (as quoted in Roberts 17). As he watched his brother being driven away, "[he] knew [he] would never see him again" (Roberts 18). Michael did, however, recover.

8. At times it seems critics wish to deliberately pass over the subject entirely. Brydon has written that in *Headhunter*, the main protagonist's (Lilah) "talisman" (Peter Rabbit's shoes) are indicative of settler colony guilt (?!) (*Intertextuality* 60). Brydon makes no room for the more obvious possibility that the shoes represent Lilah's ongoing struggle with childhood trauma and the loss of her baby (the woman drives around an empty baby carriage, for goodness' sake). In a recent essay, Herb Wylie mentions that *Headhunter's* "Club of Men" is "a sexually predatory group" (71) but does not mention that children are its prey. Perhaps this is academic nit-picking, but both the above examples come from one journal issue, and in that same issue Terry Goldie calls the Club of Men "the most consistently malevolent group" in the novel (which is chock-a-block with malevolent characters). Goldie also notes that sexual relations in the novel act on an axis of age and youth, rather than male and female or heterosexual and homosexual (134). With all these "glancing blows" at the subject of lost (i.e. abused, dead, etc.) children in only one of Findley's novels, condensed in one journal issue, one gets a greater sense that critics feel the subject unworthy of any greater attention. It must be connected to studies

dealing with post-colonial intertextuality (Brydon), post-modernism (Wylie), or queer theory (Goldie).

9. In order to be relatively complete in my (albeit brief) survey of Findley criticism that has touched on his depiction of childhood innocence, I should mention two additional sources: *The Child Hero in the Canadian Novel* (1991) by Theresia Quigley, and a McMaster PhD thesis entitled *The Romantic Child in Selected Canadian Fiction* (1987) by Margaret Steffler. The former devotes a chapter to the child protagonist, Hooker Winslow, in *The Last of the Crazy People*, and the latter includes that same character, Hooker, in a chapter entitled "The Death of Innocence." Quigley finds that Hooker is one of many bewildered children thrust prematurely into the adult world with disastrous outcome, and therefore that innocence has lived, and then died, in the child (and not that innocence in and of itself is dead). Steffler discusses Hooker as a child in the Romantic, pastoral tradition, again with the tangential assumption of Hooker's innocence. I will deal to further extent with these two sources in my chapter on *The Last of the Crazy People*.

10. Though the word "childish" is most often used to indicate a certain amount of bad temper, it stops well short of connoting adult malevolence or anger.

11. A further complication is Findley's own admission that he may confuse "innocence" with "naivete" (*Inside* 108). "Naïveté" suggests a reduced sense of protocol -- how to handle adult situations as an adult -- and not necessarily the more thorough "untouched" state more usually associated with "innocence."

12. I admit this is a loaded term to throw willy nilly into a paragraph, but it is in fact directly related to Findley's own romanticization of the garden as the wondrous place of his childhood awakening (see page 5) and Otten's reference to the garden as a marker of innocence (Otten 149). And of course, there are also the obvious theological implications of the garden as utopia before the fall of mankind -- before being tainted by sexuality and ambition (not necessarily in that order!).

13. In point of fact, Findley has named "*Alice Through the Looking Glass*" (sic -- by combining the titles of Carroll's two Alice stories I assume he refers to both as halves of a whole!) as one of the two (the other being *Animal Farm*) best illustrations of how to write well by writing "simply" (*Inside* 223).

Chapter One

The Last of the Crazy People

The Last of the Crazy People, Findley's first novel, might be construed as the dissection of one particularly painful "atomic" moment. In the prologue, a boy is waiting in a barn, in stifling heat. In the epilogue, we learn that he has been waiting for his family; he shoots them from his hiding place in the barn. It makes sense to assume that the rest of the novel is an explanation of this moment when a boy graphically and horribly loses his innocence. Lorraine York interprets the moment as such, writing that this "final decisive act" is the guileless boy's first foray into a sort of civilian system of warfare (*Civilian* 341). However, I will argue that the bulk of the novel actually calls into question the assumption that the "end" of the book -- the epilogue -- is the climactic "end" of the boy's innocence.¹

Of all the mentions critics and scholars have made of childhood innocence and loss of innocence in Findley's fiction, only two attempt to deal with the subject in its own right (although only in sections of chapters within larger studies), and both deal exclusively with *The Last of the Crazy People*. Of course, I will argue that we should dig deeper for post-innocent children than the

very obvious example of Hooker Winslow, the sensitive child protagonist who kills his family.

In *The Child Hero in the Canadian Novel*, Theresia Quigley highlights the social significance of Hooker's family; often described by Findley as the walking dead, they "represent values that are dead, a way of life that has lost all meaning" (Quigley 49). It falls to Hooker, lone sensitive, "living" soul, to somehow free his family, but of course without the support of adults, disaster ensues because he is "forced to come to terms with problems which are far beyond his comprehension" (Quigley 51). Hence "the problem of the powerless child" (Quigley 53), which, put simply, is that as a result of society's general decline, adults heap abuse and neglect on children who are incapable of dealing with such situations. There are no saviours, young or old. Granted, Quigley devotes scant pages to Hooker, but I find her argument simplistic. Directly after she notes that Hooker's father, Nicholas, is "a tired man, devoid of hope, lacking courage, afraid of life," she quotes the following: "He felt like a child. His first thought was: 'If Rosetta catches me in here, she'll kill me...'" (Quigley 49). Not so much as a mention concerning how, if Nicholas is so very old and worn down, can he also be "like a child?" Her argument presupposes that children are innocent first, and traumatized by adults second, but Findley's simile suggests that children can be inherently fearful -- even tired, lifeless, and devoid of hope.

Margaret Steffler also believes in Hooker's original innocence, but succeeds in recognizing some of the ways in which Findley problematizes such

innocence. In her study of *The Romantic Child in Selected Canadian Fiction*, Steffler finds that while Findley seems to espouse "the traditional Wordsworthian communion between child and nature" (213), he eventually "presents what seems to be a perversion of the conventional communion" (214).² Hooker's "garden" (a field which is his habitual escape) is the burial place of dead animals, and Hooker, the gravedigger. Not surprisingly, then, Hooker is often "ill at ease with the natural world" (Steffler 216), feeling oppressed and subdued by his natural surroundings (Steffler 217). Rather than inheriting transcendence and integration from the natural world, Hooker inherits a sense of constant struggle from the human race -- a struggle against nature (Steffler 218). Again, we find the suggestion that children are never really innocent to begin with -- they inherit very adult struggles as a natural matter of course. Steffler alludes to this again when she (in her effort to demonstrate Findley's perversion of the Romantic/pastoral depiction of the child) highlights the connection between sexuality and death in the novel (217, 225). But the examples she gives (225) seem to suggest more of a connection between *birth* and death. First, she notes that Clementine, Hooker's cat, dies along with her unborn kittens, but we know nothing of their conception. Second, she cites the rumours linking Hooker's brother, Gilbert, and a society girl, but the entire affair is centered upon the girl's suspected pregnancy (*Last* 140). Gilbert commits suicide after being publicly accused of fathering the unborn child (*Last* 219, 223). It's true that there is a certain suggestion of sexual transgression -- that Gilbert has "gotten her into

trouble" -- but there is a fateful correspondence between Gilbert's death and the news of another life being born. Third, Steffler finds that Hooker's ignorance about the mating actions of dragonflies connects sex to death because he is equally ignorant about how to kill a squirrel (Steffler 216-217). Using Steffler's "equation," we could surely argue that death is connected to pregnancy because Hooker is also ignorant about how babies are made (*Last* 49). In which case, once again, we return to the obvious question: are children born under the spectre of death as a natural matter of course, far from gardens of innocence and wonder?

One would be hard pressed to find a happy child -- even a happy *baby* -- in *The Last of the Crazy People*. The focus of the Winslow family's unhappiness seems to be the complete breakdown suffered by Hooker's mother, Jessie; she isolates herself in her bedroom, and lashes out at those who intrude upon her private desolation (which is of course not private, but felt acutely by all members of the household...her bedroom hangs over the house like a ghost). The novel suggests that her breakdown is the result of two things. First, as a child she suffered her parents' divorce, her mother's mental decline and subsequent death, and her father's departure (*Last* 36).³ Writing that her "torn home" has "eaten into her sense of security" (36), Findley immediately describes Jessie's first breakdown, well after her marriage and the birth of her two sons (36). Second, Jessie's childhood-borne trauma inspires her and her husband to create another child as some sort of remedy to Jessie's problem, but instead it

brings on her "condition" permanently (37). Unhappy children beget even more doomed children -- the baby is born dead (9).

Nor is Nicholas' childhood of the storybook variety. Though he remembers his father fondly (143), he is oddly incapable of remembering his "youth" (142) -- as if it were lost, or perhaps never existed in the first place. Through Nicholas, we may recognize that once again, childhood seems endemic of pain and death: "Like his children, those past parts of his own life were dead or buried, one way or another, forever" (142-143). It is interesting that he sits in Gilbert's car as he fails to remember his youth, because Gilbert's youth seems equally enigmatic. Gilbert notes a "kid's bike" and reflects that he's never had such a bike (119). He also remembers that his childhood sense of "wonder" merely resulted in "all those little, tiny worries that whole days and days of wasted time are made of" (192). Gilbert's "wonderment" caused him a great deal of childhood pain, as he struggled to catch up to his classmates (192). Nicholas' sister Rosetta's unhappy childhood is revealed through old photographs, in which her young face is permanently locked in a "worried stare," betraying her "sad aloofness" (248).

Lest we think that the Winslows are unfortunate worst case scenarios, unhappy childhoods extend beyond their family tree. Janice Parker -- the girl suspected of conceiving a child with Gilbert -- seems an echo of Jessie; motherless (113), she finds herself pregnant and in even more trouble than before [she is shipped off to Jamaica (112)]. Iris -- the Winslows' maid -- lost

both parents early on, and "There had also been five other brothers and sisters who had not reached more than their first year. There was a joke, at home, that when you were born, a disease was reserved for you and consequently a death" (14-15). Some joke. The pain of loss and the finality of mortality extend to most of the characters in the novel well before they reach adulthood -- some even before their first birthday and in the case of Jessie's last baby, even before leaving the womb.

But Quigley and Steffler concentrate on Hooker for a reason; in him, Findley has created the most striking illustration of a lack of childhood innocence because Hooker's "young" consciousness is so often preoccupied with death. First and foremost, as Steffler points out, Hooker's daily haunt is a field wherein he has "created a cemetery" (*Last* 69). Findley's diction reinforces the connection between birth (creation) and death -- the child *creates* a place of death. Though Hooker "plays dead" at one point (groaning, pretending to be Lee Harvey Oswald) (63), this brief appearance of youthful exuberance only serves to highlight, by contrast, just how serious Hooker's death-fixation is. Iris tries to divert his attention from death by inspiring a more properly "childish" attraction: "Well, Mr. Oswald, unless you get up you can't have no ice cream" (64). Although Hooker accepts the ice cream, his fixation isn't easily rerouted; upon receiving the ice cream he asks, "What's assassinate really mean?" (64). Iris and Gilbert move the discussion towards issues of racial discrimination and communism, but again, Hooker isn't biting: "I wonder if [being dead] made

[Oswald] happy” (65). Iris realizes that death is far from a game to Hooker: “Iris almost smiled, until she took a quick look at Hooker and saw the expression on his face” (65-66). And once again, the ice cream is brought in as diversion: “‘Hon,’ she said very quickly, ‘you’re spilling all your strawberry ice cream’” (66). One imagines what’s left of the pretense of Hooker’s innocence⁴ spilling down across his lap to the floor, and sure enough, Findley reveals that Hooker is consumed by mortality not out of curiosity, but out of some deeper connection: “There had to be death” (66) Hooker thinks to himself. Whether or not he knows the word “assassinate,” he has already started becoming an assassin -- he eventually kills his family with all the stealth of a sniper, ostensibly as a form of mercy killing.

Does this “benign” purpose -- mercy -- render Hooker’s act innocent? Earlier in the novel, Hooker’s seemingly innocent plea that he doesn’t know how to kill is betrayed by his instinct to kill. After one of his cats badly maims a squirrel, Hooker is told that he should kill the squirrel and end its suffering. Despite wailing that he doesn’t know how, Hooker does, in fact, know how to kill it quite handily: “the squirrel’s eyes looked up at him with a terrible calm, and he thought ‘It’s dead,’ before he saw that it moved, and then, because it startled him, he struck at it, all at once. Right down. With the hatchet” (73). If Hooker’s instinct was based in fear and fear alone, he would simply have run. But there is a violent instinct in the boy, and instincts are generally shared.⁵ Gilbert -- another “boy” -- recognizes that instinct in Hooker. When Iris watches Hooker

walk off to kill and bury the squirrel, she says “Poor lamb” (72); Gilbert replies sarcastically, “Sure....Poor little Hooker” (72). When Hooker kills for the first time, it is not an epiphanal moment when Hooker loses his innocence -- it is one step closer to recognizing that he’s never had it.⁶ (It is not my intention to suggest that only boys have the instinct to kill. The fact that Gilbert and Hooker share a similar genetic make-up in terms of DNA and sex, though, is relevant to any mention here of natural instinct as a shared characteristic.)

Just as Gilbert never had a “kid’s bike,” Hooker has “never” asked for children’s nursery rhymes or songs (39). Just as Gilbert looks “old” (186), Hooker feels “old” (259). Perhaps most tellingly, Iris cannot remember ever seeing Hooker happy, though she has known him all his life (87) -- an echo of Nicholas not being able to remember his youth. Almost like Nicholas trying to get back some sense of youthful innocence, Hooker asks Iris “again” how he was born (48), almost as though he is trying to find that same inscrutable sense of innocence. It is telling that Nicholas can’t relate to being Gilbert’s age, and Gilbert finds no fond memories of when he was Hooker’s age, and Hooker tries to cast his net even further back -- to the womb -- in search of happy memories. He, like his father and brother, finds none.⁷ Instead, all he knows for certain is that his father “hurt” his mother “into being pregnant” (49). We mustn’t mistake a lack of knowledge or guile for innocence; what is most salient here is that Hooker is very conscious of the basic pain his mother has endured, and the pain he has endured as a result. He knows nothing of happy love or subsequent

innocent babies.

A few particularly striking points in the novel emerge as further proof that we cannot easily assume that innocence is part and parcel of youth. When Hooker first sees the gun that he will eventually use against his family, he seems to assume that it is *natural* for him to use it, as if youth were the only prerequisite to be connected to the gun. Hooker is not alone with the gun -- by its side is a picture of a young man shot in World War I. These two "innocent" youths share space with the gun, more entitled than its owner, Mr. Harris, because, Hooker thinks, "Mr. Harris [is] too old to fire the gun" (124). By alluding to World War I, Findley suggests that Hooker's plight is part of a much larger "disease" (to use Iris' term) -- a catastrophic loss of innocence for the youth of the modern world.⁸ But when we read that Hooker plans to use the gun for "Armageddon" (124), we may be reminded that the world has always been (supposedly) on the path to destruction, and must wonder how on earth even the concept of innocence came to be. We may also think back to Nicholas, Gilbert and Hooker casting their nets back further and further in search of childhood innocence, but finding none even as far back as the womb. What we are seeing, in effect, is an ongoing heritage of trauma that seems to worsen with every birth, moving from chronic neglect and withdrawal (Nicholas), to apathy and suicide (Gilbert), and next to familial massacre (Hooker).

Findley seems to ponder whether or not this "snowball" effect is natural or constructed at various points in the novel. Nicholas and Rosetta debate whether

Gilbert's despair is the result of a "sickness" or "habit" (60) -- whether his behaviour is connected to Jessie's "disease" or whether he has simply been corrupted by easy access to Nicholas' money (61). While (as we have seen) Findley seems to explain Jessie's trauma as the result of her mother's death and her father's departure, Iris explains to Hooker that Jessie's behaviour is the result of a "sickness" (169). Findley often compares Iris to Jessie, further emphasizing the "nature/nurture" question. Tellingly, Iris and Jessie watch Hooker "from different windows" (155). It is clear that Iris, not Jessie, has "nurtured" Hooker -- has "brung" him "up" (164) -- but Hooker thinks of himself as being at the end of "a whole list of crazy people" (199), his own name located not far from his "crazy mother"'s (199). I wonder if Findley somehow calls a rather disappointing draw on this question, which might explain the rather disappointing end of the novel. Under the prophecy of Armageddon and against the backdrop of the Great War (which must inevitably be followed by World War II, Vietnam...), "craziness" that multiplies with every birth is somehow confounded by the final scene of the novel, wherein the "nurture" champion -- Iris -- walks Hooker's field alone: "The field and its welcome would always be there" (274). This comes directly after we have learned that Hooker has been incarcerated at a mental hospital (272), and Iris thinks to herself, "Oh, Lord....This is such a dreadful feeling, thinking that things have got to have an end" (273). Armageddon looms large, and I find little comfort in the "field and its welcome." Iris' nurturing has done little to help Hooker avoid his destiny

(birthright?!) as a “crazy person.”

To take another look at this “doomsday issue,” Gilbert ironically thinks that Hooker “would believe anything. He’d believe it if you told him that the world was going to end” (41). Findley dangles this observation tantalizingly at the end of a paragraph which marks the end of a section that has been written according to Gilbert’s point of view. In terms of both structure and content, we must stop and reflect that, in fact, the world *is* going to end for Gilbert, and for his family. And, as the deliverer of this end, perhaps Hooker would believe in the end of the world not out of innocence or naïveté, but because of awareness and foresight of menace. Iris’ friend Alberta lectures Hooker about “Arm’geddon” and “perdition” (92-95), and mistakes his silence for misunderstanding. Hooker lets her, but thinks to himself that he “underst[ands] it all” (95).⁹

Hooker seems to consciously reject the innocence assumed of “youth;” when a woman cheerfully tells him to “Have a good time.... You’re only young once!” (177), Hooker replies “feebly,” “I’m nearly twelve....” (177) -- as if to remind the woman that he is quickly aging, already pushing at the next year. If youth means a good time, he doesn’t feel young. Perception and reality are at odds in determining how innocent the young are, and age is a useless, shifting benchmark. I am reminded of the “angels and cherubs” plaster cast in the molding on the ceiling of the Winslows’ living room. The figures remind Rosetta of Hooker and Gilbert as babies: “fat and bumpy...ridiculously fat behinds...” (27). The cherubs and angels, although they are supposed to be dancing, are

(like Hooker and Gilbert) not quite the pictures of innocence they *should* (stylistically? romantically?) be.

This apparent slippage between the traditional ideal of childhood innocence and a more “bumpy” reality emerges in an intriguing fashion several times throughout the novel. I have mentioned (page 15) that Findley describes Nicholas’s tired, cynical, aged demeanor as being akin to that of a child’s -- certainly a simile at odds with the traditional perception of what it is to be “like a child.” Nicholas’s “mischievous” act of going into a bedroom where he isn’t allowed to go, and then his fear of being caught, might easily be perceived as childish, but if this is the case they certainly create a very dark association with childhood. It’s not exactly a cookie jar he’s breaking into; Nicholas is trying to enter his wife’s forbidden space -- physically, mentally, and emotionally. Later, Nicholas sits with “his legs, in front of him, look[ing] childish and helpless. They [lie], knees together and feet apart, like the legs of a paraplegic patient waiting for help” (58). There is, no doubt, a reasonable connection to be made between being childish and helpless -- and not necessarily an altogether negative one. But Findley quickly dispels any romantic innocence ascribed to young helplessness, for Nicholas’ “childish” quality is likened to a crippling physical condition. Later still, Nicholas looks at his sister “like an angry child” (61) -- again, Findley ascribes a very dark tone to the quality of “childishness.” It is significant that each of Nicholas’ “childish” comparisons is made in reaction to his sister, Rosetta. He is afraid of being caught in his wife’s room by Rosetta.

His physical presence collapses when she confronts him with the disappointing fact of Gilbert's general lassitude, which eventually leads to his childish rise in temper. These confrontations highlight the pain of childhood through "child similes" by showing the gap between the ideal of childhood and the reality. Furthermore, as siblings, Nicholas and Rosetta highlight the absence of their parents, and a subsequent heightened sense of abandonment and isolation directly related to the condition of being children -- of knowing each other from childhood. After the coroner's inquest, Nicholas observes that Rosetta is "dressed as if she were still a little girl" (236), but the simile is depressing and falls flat -- he suddenly aborts it: "The words stopped composing themselves suddenly....He was tired of prose. Tired of thoughts. His son was dead" (236). Perhaps the simile fails because the image of tiny white-gloved Rosetta as a child (and "childish" adult) is an empty musing distinctly at odds with the reality of Rosetta's "worried" and "aloof" childhood (see page 20) and the reality of his own child's gruesome suicide.

Jessie's moment of "childish misdemeanor" is distinctly *uninnocent* -- sexual and even cruel. Given a gift of lipstick, she raises and lowers the red column as a subtle taunt to her husband: "'It reminds me...of something. [...] Isn't it funny,' she said, and smiled directly at Nicholas" (102).¹⁰ In her last moments, Findley once more compares her to a child, again suggesting that childhood is far more traumatic than it is innocent: "Her face bore the expression of a child who has been lied to in a moment of crisis" (271). Despite the fact that this

“child” might have had innocence before this “moment of crisis,” what is being summoned here is another creative capitalization on a perception of childhood which hinges on *un*innocence (particularly since it prefaces Jessie’s murder, after she has watched her husband and sister-in-law be shot).

In describing some of Gilbert’s actions, Findley once again suggests that the “childish” is connected to very dark sentiments and experiences. In a confrontation with his father, he cries “with rage, like a child” (140). In a confrontation with Rosetta, he is “childishly vague and viciously self-protective” (153). There is very little question that when Gilbert, drunk in a bathtub, says (“inside himself”) ““Oh Youth...and the days that were!”” (117) he is being sarcastic as well as sad.

As I have mentioned in my introduction, discrepancies exist in Findley’s creative perception of childhood innocence lost. Thus far, I have dealt with certain details in the novel which suggest Hooker’s lack of innocence, and even the general lack of innocence ascribed to the quality of childishness, but other details suggest that Findley is not altogether comfortable with this bleak picture of childhood. At the very beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that the structure of the novel itself could be considered the dissection of an epiphanal moment -- the moment when Hooker loses his innocence and kills his family. Another such moment occurs within the body of the novel (at once confirming and denying the epiphanal moment) when Hooker, as he leaves a drugstore, is fleetingly groped by an unknown man in what is called “the crazy, final

happening" (178). At *this* point, Hooker's reflex is to run -- an innocent reaction that counters the more uninnocent striking reflex we have seen Hooker exhibit twice before (73, 175). Findley adds weight to this invasion -- this unpleasant experience -- by suggesting that it has dismantled Hooker's perception of the world up until this point:

He became confused. He could not manage it.
 What happened? What was happening? What was
 happening? What was happening?
 What was happening?
 What was happening?
 What was going to happen...? (178)

The final question and its ellipsis suggest a view forward, as if from now on everything will be different. To emphasize this "atomic" moment, a later scene places Hooker in a men's change room, and explicitly describes the effects of the precise moment when Hooker "loses" his "innocence:"

Hooker had never before been aware that there was anything sinister about nakedness. [...] But now it was different, and the difference had something to do with his experience in the drugstore yesterday. [...] For the first time in his life, Hooker began to have an awareness of the difference between each man and the other. (208-209)

There is another point in which we are led to believe that Hooker has undergone a sudden loss of innocence (which brings the total to three epiphanal moments!). In remembering his mother, he thinks: "There were two bracelets she always wore, made of silver. One bore Gilbert's tooth marks and the other his own, and the story was that they had teathed on silver and would grow up to speak like kings. It was only a fairy tale, of course, but Hooker had once, quite recently,

believed it" (128). Hooker knows that the time when he stopped believing in the fairy tale is recent, which suggests that another distinct change -- a distinct loss of innocence -- has occurred.

How to decipher this contradiction? Did Hooker ever really have innocence? If so, how could he lose it so decisively three separate times? Fittingly enough, perhaps fairy tales (of sorts) can help sort out these questions. In my Introduction, I briefly described Terry Otten's argument that Lewis Carroll's Alice stories illustrate a dual nature in childhood -- the co-existence of innocence and experience. I also mentioned Findley's affection for the Alice stories, and I feel that their influence surfaces more than a few times in *The Last of the Crazy People*. In isolation, features similar to both Alice and Hooker's stories seem merely coincidental,¹¹ but when they are taken together, one gains greater insight into a larger theme. In both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice's journey begins with her desire to "enter" a garden. In the former:

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat hole; she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall,¹² and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains. (6)

In the latter: "'But oh!' thought Alice, suddenly jumping up, 'if I don't make haste I shall have to go back through the Looking Glass before I've seen what the rest of the house is like! Let's have a look at the garden first!'" (160). This "garden" turns out to be have a chessboard floor, the squares of which Alice must travel

for the rest of her Looking Glass journey so that she may be "Queen." In the figure of Alice, Carroll contradicts the traditional perception of the child -- as an innocent -- by placing a child *outside* a garden, trying to get back in. Otten writes that Alice's entries into Wonderland and the Looking Glass world and the gardens therein represent a "fall in reverse." When Alice succeeds in gaining access to a garden, "it is but a tenuous moment in her evolving consciousness of mortality and domineering adulthood" (150), given that she brings her "reductive reason" (Otten 157) and "unredemptive selfhood" (158) *into* the garden with her - already largely adult, she cannot fully respond to the wonder of the "garden" consciousness. Her placement in and around the gardens, and the fact that these places come from her own dreams, serve to highlight the fallacy of selecting one epiphanal moment which severs children from their supposed innocence. There is no clear line to be drawn between innocence and experience, and despite the fact that Findley seems to assign such a line in narrating moments both fictional and autobiographical, it is more usually superceded by the rather nebulous duality of Alice "consciousness."

Like Alice, Hooker spends most of his time in and around the "green" of the Winslow garden or field. If not in these two places, Hooker is often standing in the "green" of the green drapes (77, 150, 240) hung at the entrance to the green wallpapered (254) living room. Hooker, like Alice, brings a distinct awareness of mortality into his various "green spaces;" he goes to his field to bury dead animals and it is there that he first kills the squirrel (73), and it is in

the garden behind the house where he finally kills his family (269). At the same time, Hooker's immediate explanation as to why he goes to the field seems born of an innocent "garden consciousness" -- he simply says that "It's a pretty walk" (21). But what he brings to the garden is, in fact, an adult sense of responsibility regarding the matter of death ["someone has to do it" (14)]. The "green space" of the library suggests an innocent Eden: it can seem "cool and inviting" and "shady and green" (77). But this green space is most often the site of conflict and trauma -- a place for battered Nicholas and brittle Rosetta to argue over what to do about their disintegrating family. I believe that Hooker's habitual hiding place among the drapes that hang at the living room entrance reveals the futility of trying to define children as innocent or uninnocent. He is "on the verge of either place" (217), not yet past the age of twelve, not yet able to give the definition of "assassinate," but still carrying experience like dead bodies with him into gardens. Hooker recognizes this "childish" duality in the "looking glass" of a framed picture:

in photoed gardens, again toward the dark side of the evening, some children lingered under their favorite trees or sat on quiet swings, singing wordless children's songs. Or they lay in dreams along the cool white railings of the porches and verandahs of their houses....These picture children were dressed in shady, off-white costumes, and they looked like dusty moths, hovering, yet stilled forever, at the edge of the dark. (248)

These children reveal their mobility (their ability to "swing") between innocence and experience by inhabiting "fringe spaces" -- the spaces that are defined by

their *inbetween-ness*...railings, verandahs, porches. They are even dressed in fringe colours -- "shady" and "off-white." They do not land completely in innocence or experience -- they hover at the edge of the dark, bathed in the awareness of that bleak place.

Notes

1. Findley claims that Hooker is meant to reflect an "icon of innocence" (*Inside* 68), but he also identifies that innocence as quite darkly experienced -- "troubled, inarticulate innocence" (69) that is "battered by too much reality" (70). The novel charts Hooker's "ultimate arrival at adult life" (74), which seems to contradict the idea that Hooker has already become aware of life's more adult, "battering," realities. Do we only truly, "ultimately" arrive at adult life by killing our families?

2. This is only part of Steffler's larger argument, that Findley "discard[s] the established union of the Romantic child with nature and society as a possible resolution. The conflict and opposition result in destruction and decay rather than harmony, as the gap between the Romantic child and society is far too great to be bridged by imagination and vision" (234).

3. Jessie returns, in a manner of sorts, to her childhood to die; she insists that her missing son (Hooker) might be under the porch, since that's where she always was as a child (265)...this location seems symptomatic of an unhappy childhood. Hooker shoots her minutes after she looks for him under the porch.

4. Previous to the ice cream "episode," Iris insists on seeing Hooker as "innocent," but in the same instant tells him: "you're all bugged up, an' you're not even twelve years old" (19).

5. Later in the novel, Hooker strikes a cruel, taunting boy, and strikes him "without thinking" (175). Again, despite the fact that Hooker is under a certain amount of pressure, his reflex is to lash out, and not to escape.

6. On this point, I am in slight disagreement with Lorraine York, who has found that Hooker "is without artifice or guile," incapable of "hatching" a "plot" (*Civilian* 341), but she does make room for a somewhat more menacing instinct in Hooker when she writes that when Hooker kills, it "is shocking proof of the immense power for destructiveness hidden and unacknowledged in our civilian wars" (*Civilian* 341).

7. Rosetta, too, tries to put her finger on the time when Gilbert and Hooker were babies, but is similarly bewildered: "'When?' she thought. 'When -- when was that?'" (27).

8. Tom Hastings has dealt with this issue in his essay on *The Wars*,

wherein he discusses how Findley perceives of the Great War as a distinct loss for the *youths* -- the sons -- involved in combat, and not for society as a whole.

9. In addition to the many mentions of "Armageddon" (92, 124, 147, 226) or "Doomsday" (125), Hooker is literally "damned" -- thrice by his mother (78,79) and once by Gilbert (118). Early on, Iris (casually, but still prophetically) says "Everyone be damned" (107).

10. On this point I am indebted to Lorraine York, who has interpreted the sexual nature of Jessie's treatment of the lipstick (*Civilian* 341).

11. On a rather simple level, Hooker and Alice are both associated with cats and croquet. The Cheshire Cat figures prominently in Wonderland, as does Alice's cat Dinah in the Looking Glass world. In the prologue to *The Last of the Crazy People*, Hooker moves "exactly like a cat" (4), and his eyes are said to be "just like" those of his cat (7). The connection between Hooker and his cats is strengthened throughout the novel. Alice's devotion to croquet is such that she has boxed her own ears "for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself" (9). When the Queen of Hearts asks her if she plays, Alice is keen to play (84), but when she finds that the balls are hedgehogs and the mallets are upside down flamingos (85), and actually tries to play, she soon decides it is not for her (86). In a similar pattern, early in the novel, Hooker wants to play croquet (54), but later he rejects Iris' suggestion that he play (167). Later still, the croquet hoops are simply stumbling blocks on the lawn -- completely abandoned (197). I am also intrigued by Hooker's feeling (in the Epilogue) that he is "small for his eleven years," his feet seem "to be far away", and "other parts of him" seem to be "asleep" (2). This echoes Alice's very first "trial" in Wonderland -- the famous "eat me" "drink me" episode when Alice's body is no longer her own. Like Hooker, she loses sight of her feet when (after being shrunk down to 10 inches) she suddenly grows to such a height that "when she look[s] down at her feet, they see[m] to be almost out of sight" (11).

12. Alice's location in a dark hall, surveying a row of closed doors, reminds me of a point in Hooker's Prologue; in a "gray and silent" "hall," Hooker "survey[s] the row of doors" leading to his various sleeping family members before he leaves for the stable. In the Epilogue, his family emerge from their rooms and enter the Winslow garden, where Hooker shoots them.

Chapter Two

The Butterfly Plague

Like *The Last of the Crazy People*, *The Butterfly Plague* may be perceived as the dissection of an epiphanal moment that marks a distinct change from innocence to post-innocence. The novel takes place largely in 1938 Hollywood - - a time and place on the verge of total change: "America is not the Nightmare. It will be" (*Plague* 67). It often moves from scenes -- always labeled by date, place and time, sometimes to the second -- that reveal the nightmare Europe has become (and how it got that way), to scenes that reveal how America is about to fall into that same nightmare. To do this, Findley employs a larger, more diverse cast of characters than he does in *The Last of the Crazy People*, as if to track the movement of childhood pain from the singular family (the Winslows) to entire nations.¹ What I find interesting is that Findley goes to great lengths to describe the various ways in which America has already lost its innocence, so the idea that it is *about* to fall into a nightmare seems contradictory. Of course, this is representative of the tension Findley exhibits between the ideal of childhood innocence and the fictional "evidence" that no such thing exists.

It is an odd paradox. Findley seems to want to describe this epiphanal moment -- this falling into the nightmare of fascism -- and yet to do so he creates several points at which innocence is lost for different people, which creates in turn a broader scope of epiphanal moments. This range of "points" defeats the idea of one epiphanal moment, forming a series of blips on a wide screen of unhappiness -- a pattern rather than a clear line of division. A woman -- Ruth -- edging further into a Nazi regime realizes that her shaved head is "some kind of beginning" (84). Later, she realizes that closing her eyes to misery "would never do any good again" because she has been given the star of David by a Jewish man (135), and somehow instantly understands his plight and her role in it. A man -- Dolly -- recognizes that his starlet has become fat and depressed and sees that "Something [is] suddenly over" (216). Later, he realizes that his heart has suddenly broken (219). A soldier turns from "pure and young" to "troubled and mature" (237). Findley writes these losses of innocence but in the very same novel writes that life is "Moments and minutes -- one by one" (294), and that the novel takes place in the "sudden season of change -- constant in nature and history" (373). And, of course, we should wonder if any character (let alone a country) can really change from innocence to experience when Findley seems to write a world where innocence doesn't exist in the very place we most expect to find it -- childhood.

The novel begins with a ferocious little being -- a parody of childhood innocence. "A little boy, aged four, st[ands] screaming" at his "Mickey Balloon,"

which has gotten away (2). (A likelier word might be “escaped.”) The boy “stamp[s] his pretty feet, encased in patent-leather shoes” (2); the word “encased” tinges the description with a foreboding along mafia lines (encased feet more often referring to *cement* shoes). Sure enough, the boy is one of an organization of young offenders; Mickey Balloon is “assassinated” by “a child with a BB gun” (4). Findley takes care to reveal that, like “quick, deft, and quiet” Hooker (*Last* 4), the child sniper seems born to the violent task: “Standing in the window across the way, the child took perfect aim and fired” (4).² A few pages later, one child wails because it wants to see a decapitated body, while another “roar[s] disapproval and rage” at the loss of his/her balloon (20). At the outset of the novel, then, one might read of these children and uneasily wonder who the fascists really are....

In his second novel, Findley has created a second cast of characters hobbled by unhappy childhoods and a distinct lack of innocence. And yet he intended the leading role to be an “innocent” *adult* version of his usually junior “innocent watchers” (*Inside* 107-108). Even so, Ruth is quite similar to Hooker, with a highly questionable sense of “innocence.” As a child, she bullied her younger brother (*Plague* 9), but as an adult, she holds onto her “innocence” “like a renegade child” (10). Does this “renegade” quality assume that in order to have innocence, a child must rebel against the norm, which is experience? At another point, Ruth is described as having always -- “all her life” -- had “angry” “cries” and “fear” within (153). What of her childhood wish to shoot herself

(133)? And what of her statement that she has “never known anyone” and knows no one “who loves” (353)? Surely the one thing innocents must have experienced is *love*, whether they can name it or not. Ruth can name it and have the experience (and cynicism) to recognize its utter absence. The most disturbing aspect of Ruth’s “innocence” is that, having barely survived life as both wife to, and experimental subject of, a Nazi, now back home in Hollywood she desires a child that epitomizes the horrible “master race” (343). Ruth’s intercourse with a tall, blonde, blue-eyed Nazi soldier is described in violent, disturbing terms: “she thrust him into the wound prepared for him, impelling her body onto his blade so suddenly their union was completed in a single spasm of alarm” (238-239). Despite this, Ruth insists on seeing the soldier as an innocent, for he is “chosen -- not choosing” (238) to be a Nazi messenger. She pities him and commands him to begin intercourse “as a mother asking her infant to feed” (238). He co-operates “as obedient[ly] as a hungry child” (238). I’m not sure how a reader might believe that any part of Ruth is innocent -- that is to say, untouched by trauma or even the awareness of trauma. As with “Mickey Balloon,” Findley’s association of the “childish” -- the suckling child -- with the grotesque or violent -- the Nazi soldier -- only serves to highlight the complete *absence* of innocence.

Ruth’s desire for a “Race” child is complex, and this complexity lies to a large extent in the nature/nurture tension I have discussed before. As a carrier of hemophilia, if Ruth bears a son, it will be a hemophiliac son. If she bears a

daughter, it will be another carrier of the hemophiliac gene. Either way, the natural process of creating babies carries with it a distinct sense of doom for Ruth, in that even before conception, her children are inextricably linked to the ever-present threat of bloody death. Ruth's "flawed" genetic make-up seems a kind of saving grace in Europe, because she cannot bring herself to become a "breeder of winners" (154) -- of "perfect" physical specimens -- for her Nazi husband. However, when she returns to America, she wants to breed that winner *of her own accord*: "This was her child. Not his. Not Germany's. Hers" (343). Either way, genetics -- in reality and theory -- hold a sort of tyrannical power over Ruth's consciousness. Her desire to overthrow that tyranny by "will[ing]" (343) the baby to exist (after only one go with the soldier) -- by nurturing it into existence -- is unsuccessful. This leads me to wonder whether Findley pokes holes not only in the "myth of perfection" which is "the cause of all human pain" (156), but also in the myth of childhood innocence. Even if Ruth's "perfect" child -- "a blue-eyed baby, with blond hair and fine, long limbs, a straight mind and a health-infested system" (343) -- were born, it would be a false, destructive perception of perfection. All this meaning and conflict is wrapped up in the concept of the child, and as a result we must consider that concept to be highly conflicted and ultimately negative.

Ruth's is not the only unhappy, "diseased" childhood. Her younger brother Adolphus was the unhappy recipient of her bullying, and as a boy, was born and raised in constant fear of a bloody death (a fear which persists into his

adulthood). Adolphus is nearly exclusively called "Dolly" -- another parodic combination of the grotesque (Adolph Hitler) and the childish (a doll) that plays havoc with the ideal of childhood innocence. Dolly identifies himself as one isolated since birth -- "Single, I came into this world, to borrow a phrase" (309) -- who has "suffer[ed]" "eternal[ly]" (277). Ironically, in the novel Dolly is engaged in directing a film called "*Hell's Babies*." The only part of the film we are made aware of is a sort of Eden scene -- "a jungle pool in the South Pacific" inhabited only by a naked man and woman (164). But Eden is really a sound stage, and Adam and Eve are actors wearing garishly heavy make-up. Is this where Dolly lays the blame for his "eternal suffering?" Is the ideal of innocence so thoroughly false that Eden is full of "rubber rocks" and "blued" water (162)? Dolly's "hellish" Eden mocks man's supposedly innocent origins, and as a doomed child, who better to do the mocking?³

Ruth and Dolly are brother and sister to an unthinkable number of siblings who never even made it to birth; their mother, Naomi, has had "so many abortions, [she] do[esn't] remember" (151); however, in trying to stave off the trauma of death by hemophilia, she has merely substituted death-by-abortion for death-by-disease. Frighteningly, death seems to have taken up permanent residence in Naomi's womb -- cancer develops there and she dies from it.

But Findley does not allow us to conclude that nature is responsible for such misery. (Recall that in *The Last of the Crazy People*, Findley seems to debate whether childhood unhappiness, and later adult happiness, are inherited

"sicknesses" or manipulated states.) To add to these "genetically tainted" children, Findley pads his novel with several more children who suffer from the "disease" of painful circumstance. Naomi's "birth was ignored" and her "distant parents" were killed when she was ten (252). She regards, understandably, childhood as "a misery" (31). Like Nicholas in *The Last of the Crazy People*, she tries to remember her youth, but cannot (30) -- as if it never happened. Ruth's ex-husband, Bruno, also lost his parents early on: "He had wanted an education but there was no one to provide him with clothes and food, let alone schooling. So he taught himself. He read a lot" (79). This "reading" is mostly scientific - biochemical theories which Bruno tries to rigidly enforce in his work in breeding a master race, as if trying to make a family from those cold books that provided him his only source of childhood guidance. Lisa (Ruth's childhood friend) began a life "patterned on revenge" (88) -- a life born of the bitter social rivalries that surrounded her parent's union, even after her father's death. Lisa's fate parallels Ruth's -- she also marries and is held captive by an unforgiving (although I'm not sure there's any other kind) Nazi. Findley tells these stories of individual childhood misery against a panorama of traumatized children. They are carried in "bundles" by German refugees (70), for instance, and suffocated in giant butterfly attacks (282).⁴ This panorama -- so vast as to cross international borders, create "World Wars," and whip even lowly butterflies into violent proportions -- brings us back to the suggestion of the natural path to destruction followed by the human race. As critically unsatisfying as it may be, Findley

covers both nature and nurture “bases,” but certainly it is fair to conclude that no matter what the cause, Findley’s fiction suggests that if innocence ever did exist, it is lost to us now.⁵

We may recognize this loss, as we did in *The Last of the Crazy People*, in Findley’s recurrent use of the “child simile.” In describing a sleeping man’s expression, Findley seems to draw upon some stock, accepted expectation of what the term “child” means: “Noah Trelford...slept beside her right now with a child’s smile on his face and an everlasting erection battering for release against the buttons of his jeans” (42). What is a “child’s smile?” Given the extraordinary range of childhood *uninnocence* Findley has included in this novel, under what pretext does he associate the childlike with a sort of charming peacefulness? The conflict between the childlike and the powerfully, “batteringly” sexual is perhaps testament (like Ruth’s state as “renegade child”)⁶ to Findley’s struggle between the ideal of childhood innocence and the experienced reality that so often intrudes upon that ideal. The man’s wife’s reaction to his erection further complicates the uneasy comparison: “B.J. awoke fully, glancing around for the time, and smiled. Noah. Noah. She gave the erection a motherly pat and slipped off the bed, knowing that soon the children would start their afternoon interruptions” (42).⁷ Are children tied up in sexuality or do they “interrupt” it?

Later in the novel, Findley tries to recuperate the ideal “childlike” element of the “child simile” in describing a Charlie Chaplin-esque character, Bully Moxon: “He gave such pleasure and like a child was capable of so much

adoration and wonder that you could not revile him" (259). But the simile quickly veers into adult experience: "He exudes peppermint and bourbon, a delightful aroma of mixed sweetness and acid, the aroma of a comically wicked child" (259). Like Noah and his "battering erection," Bully's "child-like" sense of wonder, adoration and pleasure -- his sweet peppermint-ness -- are intruded upon by bourbon and acid. It is no doubt appropriate to point out at this time that Bully dies in the novel's "First Chronicle" -- he is decapitated by a train as he unwittingly dances ("smiling" and "waving") across its tracks (19). This scene must be one of the blacker examples of Findley's black humour, creating a bleak foreboding that the childlike...get their heads cut off?⁸

Several more "child similes" conflict with the "adoration and wonder" ideal of childhood innocence. Ruth's father, George, argues with a former lover, Letitia Virden, and *directly after* their bickering, small-minded behaviour is likened to that of "Children" (54), she threatens to shoot him and he calls her a "Bitch" (54). When a frightened, disoriented and presumably starving Jewish refugee leans against Ruth for support (he is about to die), he stands against her "like a child" (109). Caught in a park that is on fire, an actress takes Dolly's hand "like a child" *and then* cries "We're going to die! We're going to die!" (140). Desperate not to lose Letitia to another suitor, and in a drunken stupor/rage, George "blubber[s] like a little boy into his handkerchief" (203). And, perhaps most succinctly telling, after the death of her brother, mother and father and what she believes to be a miscarriage of the child she believed she conceived with

the soldier, Ruth hangs about a beach "childlike and bereaved" (351), as if the two words were naturally connected.

At this beach, during her "childlike bereavement," Ruth meets Octavius -- the son conceived by Bully and Letitia. Like Ruth, Octavius is a character Findley seems to peg specifically as an innocent, but such an ideal is again disrupted. For instance, Octavius is described as having a face "so young it's unborn," but which is also "slandered by a monstrous nose, inept of nature, which was more a gesture of strident nobility than it was of flesh" (306). Octavius does seem to be without guile, but he is defined by his loneliness and isolation. He has never met his parents; he can only send notes to his unknown mother through her messenger -- one note reads "TELL ME WHO YOU ARE" (36). For comfort, he dresses up as he believes his mother might, and tries to mother himself (190). Letitia will not meet her son because his existence threatens her screen persona, the "Little Virgin" [reinforced by her new film role as "Virginia Mary" (332)]. Virgins don't produce sons! Letitia is another parody of the innocent. Nicknamed "Titty" by George, she is connected to the cheaply sexual -- a connection George himself makes clear when he observes that another actress "sure beats Titty for tits" (202). Letitia is getting older and tries desperately to hold onto "innocence" with a barrage of beauty aids, including

loads of facial cream, bottles and syringes, loads of cotton; combs, curlers, brushes, and hair ribbons; hair tonics, hair nets, rats, falls, pins, buns; loads of jellies, jars, and Jergens; trays of pencils,

rouge, lipstick, kohl, and mascara; toilet water, ice water, hot water, drinking water; mirrors, mirrors, mirrors; files, scissors, and emery boards; patience and paper bags. (49)

One gets the sense that Findley delights in naming all these "little helpers" -- that he delights in cracking the veneer of the ingenue and the society that worships her. In fact, Findley's criticism goes much deeper -- or perhaps much further back. As George says, Letitia's "secret" began "In the garden" (56) -- where she and Bully conceived Octavius. This fake virgin and her abandoned son begin in the garden - sending up the ideal of man's original innocence as clearly as Dolly's Eden scene in *"Hell's Babies."*⁹ Accordingly, Octavius is often pictured in his own garden which is "somber and green, peaceful but forever shattered" (35). As in the green spaces of *The Last of the Crazy People*, gardens in *The Butterfly Plague* may have the look of green shady peacefulness, but they are, in fact, the sites of much trauma and conflict. It is in a garden that Ruth meets Lisa again, who has been re-named Lissl and is now married to a Nazi. In this garden, Ruth must reconcile her childhood friend with a cold, frightened, strictly monitored woman. It is a point when the adult world crashes into the ideal of young innocence with brutal clarity, and the crash site is the garden. Such a moment recurs when Dolly realizes that bubbly and dimpled Myra is now fat, old and depressed; on his way into her bedroom, he passes by "Myra's garden" (213) -- an ominous sign of the realization and trauma to come when Myra is revealed without her "innocent" facade.

Falconridge -- the home that George and Naomi shared before their divorce -- is described largely in terms of its gardens. They are used to secure George's adulterous affairs; they are "cunningly laid out in circles (a circle mesmerizes, lulls)," where "George would walk his ladies with passionate steps" (252). These gardens include the garden where Bully seduces Letitia at Ruth's fifteenth birthday party (257). The "innocence" of a child's birthday garden party is disrupted not only by seduction and betrayal, but by murder. When George sees Bully and Letitia together, he kills his gardener, who has eight sons (341). For George, children are evidence of virility and upper class standing -- prizes to show off (257). The ultimate prize would be a son by the Little Virgin, and when Bully gets the opportunity first, George (who has just found out, at this same birthday party, that his own son is a hemophiliac), lashes out at the virile gardener. On this birthday -- this "exemplary day for nature" (258) -- the garden shimmers and considerable trauma simmers beneath the green surface. In this garden, on this day, a child is conceived who will never know his parents; a father learns that his children carry "tainted" blood, and rejects them both; and eight sons are left without a father for his "crime" of procreation. At the end of the novel, Ruth returns to Falconridge to spread the ashes of her mother, brother, and father¹⁰ in the gardens which are at once "bone-branched and ghostly...dry and brittle" (370-371) and suddenly "wanly alive with the pleasant voices of insects and birds" (373). I am reminded of the rather unsatisfying ending to *The Last of the Crazy People*, when Findley tries to recuperate some

optimism and innocence in green space after it has been the site of such pain and destruction. His efforts do not cancel out this child-centric pain, but they do require that a reader consider that while a child may not be born under the assumption of innocence, a child may return to a place normally associated with innocence, even carrying distinctly *uninnocent* baggage. Again, we may return to Alice in Wonderland's duality to explore this point.¹¹

Recall that Alice's duality is represented not only by her tendency to bring adult, "experienced" qualities into the "innocent" garden, but by her location on both sides of a looking glass. It is significant that at one point Octavius moves from his garden to his "mirrored dressing room" (44) -- as if to connect the two. In front of his dressing room mirror, he makes himself into a mother with tweezers and make-up and jewelry (194), and is simultaneously adult and child...a child perpetually searching for his mother. It is in this mirror that Octavius finds his mother -- his resemblance, once "made-up," to the star Letitia Virden is too striking to deny (195). One might argue that Octavius has traveled into a mirror to find adulthood, but I believe it's far more plausible that the effects of his childhood pain are still so strong that they force him into the looking glass to find a parent, but that parent's existence only brings him closer to the origins of his pain. Octavius' duality is also evident in the mirrors on his bedroom ceiling -- a distinctly sexual tone he ascribes to his "mother," but of course he is the one performing his "mother," so he is implied in this sexuality. When Octavius finally meets his mother, he does so in his motherly drag --

simultaneously adult and child. Letitia, caught by surprise and in public, sees “as though through a mirror, her own person standing [eight paces away], smiling at her, holding out its hand” (361). But this mirror does not solidify the identities of mother or son. Letitia is shocked to see another, younger, “Little Virgin,” and screams ““What do you want of me?”” (362). Octavius, childlike (i.e. utterly abandoned and lost) in his beseeching, replies ““But Mother, don’t you recognize me? Mother?”” (362), and then screams ““Mother! Mother! Mother! Please! You wanted to see me and here, Mother, I am!”” (362). Again, in his “mirror,” Octavius is simultaneously child and adult, and both are distinctly unhappy. Furthermore, when Letitia looks into the mirror of her son, it only serves to reinforce her ersatz youth and innocent virginity -- to send up her own veiled (literally) pretense. Put simply, there is never innocence on one side of the mirror and experience on the other, there are simply degrees of it on both sides, always tinged heavily with experience.

Octavius and Ruth and Dolly are connected by their uncaring parents; in one confrontation, Letitia asks George where his children are, and he shoots back ““Hah! What about *your* children?”” (56). These “lost children” all engage with mirrors in search of a sense of safety -- of innocence -- but are instead confronted with their adult reflections. Dolly catches sight of the “delicate glow of his nakedness,” swimming in “elusiveness” (220). Elusive indeed -- like the shadowy off-white children in the photo Hooker looks at in *The Last of the Crazy People*. Later, Dolly seeks “a mirrored existence somewhere safe” and realizes

that such a place does not exist (300). His desire for innocence is quickly outweighed by his familiarity with the threat of death, a familiarity he has had since early childhood, and so there is no clear line between having innocence and then losing it. Dolly can only grasp elusive, swimming moments of it before a tide of darker experience comes in again.

In fact, perhaps Findley communicates Dolly's duality through photographs, as he does Hooker's. After Dolly's death, Ruth visits his apartment and, browsing through his shelves, picks up a book of fairy tales. Within the book Dolly has hidden homosexual pornographic pictures -- "glossy and loose" (325). Dolly has a collection of children's books, and Ruth finds in each one more pornographic photographs. And at the top of the list: "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" (326). The "innocent" section of Dolly's life -- his childhood affection for bedtime stories (326) -- intermingles with the "experienced."

When Ruth leaves Bruno, Findley seems to suggest that Ruth has suddenly become uninnocent because when she looks into her "own mirror" she sees that her hair (shaved off by Bruno) is growing back in completely white. But Ruth has already looked into a mirror to find that any sense of childhood she may have had is now lost. Upon re-meeting her childhood friend Lisa (now Lissl), she and Ruth face a mirror together: "[Lisa] took my hand, which rested on her shoulder, and held it. She looked longingly at our reflections in the mirror. We were not as we had been. We closed our eyes, hoping together to

open them on other images and other days, but we faltered in that dream and the world remained real" (95). *Remained real*. In other words, the mirror does not represent a sudden realization that innocence is lost. Rather, it represents a moment of wishing for innocence and then being reminded that it is gone. If it ever existed in the first place. This point seems to surface in Findley's description of Falconridge -- an "unreal" "fairy-tale castle" that is a monument to "tenuous happiness" (263 italics mine). Even in (or perhaps *especially* in) fairy tales, innocence is a fleeting, nebulous concept that exists within a greater scheme of *unhappiness*; and since innocence is by its very nature untouched by the awareness of such a scheme, one could argue that it cannot exist. Children's lives are not happy and then abruptly made unhappy as adulthood is ushered in. This is perhaps best said by Dolly, who tells Ruth that she has "the mind of a child," which is defined by an innocence/experience duality: "Up and down. Up and down. Here today and gone tomorrow. Pessimist. Optimist. Stoic and pleurist. The shy gregarian" (294).

I should address a point Lorraine York, quite rightly, raises in her chapter on Findley's writing in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*. She notes that in *The Butterfly Plague*, the Trelford (Noah and B.J.'s) children are counter to the other unhappy childhoods Findley writes. The Trelfords are "gentle and imaginative" (CWTW 115), and perhaps this opposition to the norm of uninnocence in the novel is the precise reason York feels that they "are not really interwoven in a truly satisfying way with the other characters in the novel, though they do

interact with them” (115). This is quite true -- it is difficult to know what to make of the Trelfords as they cavort on the beach, “all of them...laughing” (301). Dolly watches them from his mother’s house: “How beautiful they were, Dolly dreamed: Noah with his coltish gaiety, the little boys with their ragged flags of uncut hair, the wild Boadicea-child with her [butterfly] net, and the barking, joyous yellow dog who circled and fell and circled and rolled and circled and jumped among them” (302). But why does Dolly “dream” of their beauty? Isn’t it real? Findley plants a few clues which suggest that even in the seemingly ideal childhood Noah and B.J. foster, it is impossible for children to be completely untouched by an awareness of darker elements at work. The first might be Mary Baker Telford (aged thirteen), who has an “infuriating tone of *practiced* innocence” (182 italics mine). In other words, she knows what innocence is and (cynically) how to fake it -- it is a tool to be manipulated, but not an honest state of being.

Charity Trelford, one of the youngest (247) of the eight children, has an invisible friend who is “a grown-up” and an “orchestra conductor” (247) for “The Salinas Mickey-Minnie Orchestra” which plays “in the middle of the night...nine o’clock” (248). This is all very funny and certainly redolent of what we normally associate with childhood -- imaginary friends, Mickey and Minnie, and the belief that truly fantastic things happen long after bedtime. But Charity’s friend soon takes a decidedly dark turn into the real world. She reveals that he is “hairy” (248), faceless, and a murderer (249). And he wears a green dress.

One night, wearing this dress, he takes off his hair. A hairy man wearing a green dress and a wig, walking on the beach.... Charity has blended the imaginary with the real -- she has seen Octavius walking on the beach, dressed as his "mother" in a green dress (194). And somehow, she has injected murder into the whole equation. Though death has not invaded her family (yet), she is aware of its presence, and it blends into her perception of the world. [In fact, the hairy conductor is her second imaginary friend -- she drowned the first (184).]

The story briefly projects forward to reveal that the eldest Trelford child, Mary Baker, will die in 1943 (350). I would argue that her death is not meant to be interpreted as an isolated, arbitrary event. Findley takes care to establish Mary Baker's status as the first to experience things and then pass them on to her younger siblings; she passes on her role as leader to the second oldest (180), and she is the first in the hand-me-down cycle -- she gets new clothes that are passed down to the others (350). Will Mary Baker pass early death onto her siblings as she has passed on her new clothes and the leadership role? This is perhaps an echo of the sense of inherited doom about Nicholas, Gilbert and Hooker -- the sense that their pain grows as it is passed from one to the next. The air of doom about the Trelford children is helped along by their father's current work of art in progress, for which they are models, called "The Children's Crusade:" "Each child had his own pose -- some drowning, some bent over with 'the agonies,' as they call them, some dead (the very worst pose of all), and some dragging reluctant others to the edge of the 'sea'" (182). Their

predicament as unwilling models for their father's artistic enthusiasm and the blackly comedic sound of them being enlisted in "The Children's Crusade" as punishment are indeed quite humorous, but we cannot avoid the fact that for all their supposed innocence, the Trelford children are very much aware of, and connected to, death under their "pretense of innocence."

All the same, York's feeling that the Trelford's have been parachuted into the novel without a fully developed connection to the rest of the characters is symptomatic of the novel's construction. Despite Findley's efforts to broaden the Winslows' painful story by recounting other sad childhoods and by suggesting that their pain is in some ways a matter of human nature, *The Last of the Crazy People* remains a fairly intimate portrait, confined to one time, one place, one family -- one boy, even. But in *The Butterfly Plague*, Findley tries to examine how that pain spreads -- from one person to another, from one family to another, and even from one country to another. Given the scope of this exercise, it is no wonder that what may have been intended as examples of how innocence is lost end up becoming part of an overall flow of unhappiness. This flow, endemic to the human condition, defies -- seeps over -- the boundaries of child and adult.

Notes

1. Though much of the novel takes place in Hollywood, Findley makes quite clear that Hollywood is meant to stand for the whole of the United States in terms of its empty ideals and bankrupt value system. I am thinking in particular of the aging starlet who attempts to revive her career by starring in a war story of American triumph over “dirty little Mexicans” and Indians (323). Calling the film their “personal declaration of freedom...the money and power to be free” (336), the film makers decide that the music for the final scene, with the “rotting Mexicans in the field” (333), will be “America the Beautiful” (336).

2. In reading of the two children connected to Mickey Balloon, I am reminded of three separate recollections in *Inside Memory* that isolate the instincts for destruction and/or cynicism in children. First, Findley recalls going to a zoo and witnessing “a scene [he] will never forget as long as [he] live[s]” (129). “Rows and rows of little boys...and little girls...pointed and screamed and yelled” at a gorilla in her cage. Findley asked one of the teachers why the children weren’t stopped and was told that they were only children, and meant no harm. Findley knows better, and connects them to a very adult incident of violence: “Like fucking hell they don’t [mean harm]. Their grown-up counterparts just killed Robert Kennedy” (129). Second, a very melancholy passage recounts Findley listening to loons sing their “silver chain of song.” The song is abruptly and crudely shut down by “a child’s voice” yelling at the birds to “Shad-dup! Shad-up!” (166). Findley and his partner (Bill Whitehead) liken the child’s action to a critic’s -- snuffer-out of creativity (166-167). Third, Findley remembers a busload of “children, got up like clowns” that are garish sights indeed: “They were drinking Coke out of tins and their make-up was running all over their faces and hands and some of them were eating...and there was lipstick all over the food...and they didn’t smile or laugh the way real clowns should do. They stared at us -- ate their food -- and were gone” (217). In each of these three vignettes, children are portrayed as forces which destroy representations of innocence or beauty.

3. Findley lets us know early on that Dolly finds little comfort in the “eternal comfort” of innocence Christianity promises: “God doesn’t know anything. He’s just a wretched, sadistic old tyrant sitting up there inflicting diseases on innocent people!” (7). Findley has Dolly use the word “innocent,” but again, is it an ideal or a reality? By placing it in a religious context, is Findley revealing that it is the former rather than the latter?

4. This point needs a little explaining. The novel is set in a “Butterfly

Plague" (hence the title), when vast numbers of butterflies move in and settle on Hollywood roofs and trees and people. To be caught in a storm of their little flying bodies is not magical -- it is disgusting. Findley takes great care to detail the sweeping up of dead butterfly bodies, the inhalation of their wings and "powdery scales" (282), and so on. How very typical that Findley takes (yet again) a "childish" image, or element -- like Mickey Mouse or a doll -- and rips the innocence from that image. While children are not the only butterfly victims, Findley does seem to feel their victimization is specially significant: "Later, twenty-two [butterfly storm] victims were operated on. Parts of butterfly wings and masses of powdery scales were removed from their lungs. Three died, all children" (282).

5. Late in the novel, Ruth compares the Jews to Dolly -- part of "The condemned" who are "born that way" because death is "in their blood" (352). Interestingly, at this point Ruth also says that Naomi is not one of the condemned, but I find that Naomi's linkage to abortion, disease, and a cancerous (womb-oriented) death creates a very strong bond between birth and premature death, which suggests a certain genetic condemnation. It is also intriguing that in the first version of this novel, the final "Chronicle" of the plague tells of Ruth's daughter, who is the lone survivor when Ruth and her husband die in a train crash. This is how Naomi's parents were killed (252). Even if a reader were to disregard the fact that Naomi and her children would have to either be hemophiliacs or carriers of the gene (a condemnation, of sorts, of the blood), it would be hard to disregard that Ruth's daughter inherits Naomi's experience of death. (Ironically, Findley abandoned this ending because it was too hopeful.)

6. Recall also Ruth's sexual intercourse with the Nazi soldier, wherein he is described as a "hungry child" and she, "a mother asking her infant to feed" (238).

7. Findley returns to Noah a page later to further associate the sexual with the "childish;" Noah, still sleeping, now holds onto his erection, "but still babysleeping, kidsmiling" (44).

8. Through Bully, the "child-like" is connected not only to alcohol, acid, and violent death, but also to the sexual (like Nicholas), given that he is the man virile enough to produce a son with "The Little Virgin" -- screen legend Letitia Virden. (I will soon return to Letitia and her son, as their relationship and her status as "virginal innocent" go a long way in revealing the absence of innocence.)

9. Most of the central characters of the novel come together in "The Chronicle of Alvarez Canyon" -- another fake paradise. Alvarez is a park named

“Paradise” by the “visiting public” (112), but this Paradise is a “sanctuary” where visits must be booked in advance, and accompanied by a warden (112). Furthermore, it is made in part of rubber and fabric plants (113). At the end of the chronicle, Paradise is set on fire by a Nazi soldier and is destroyed.

10. Ruth’s position as a lonely, abandoned child is established here, since she is the only surviving member of her family -- those who have known her since childhood, and helped shape her childhood, and are therefore representative of that time.

11. Besides the mirror and garden, it is interesting to note other “Alice threads” running through *The Butterfly Plague*. When the characters are lost in Alvarez Canyon, Findley writes that “To wander in Paradise is all very well if you know your way” (127). This sounds remarkably similar to Alice’s endless attempts to impose a sense of reason upon the twists and turns and nonsense of Wonderland. At the Mad Hatter’s tea party, she is frustrated in her attempts to decipher the Hatter’s watch [for it doesn’t tell the time of day, only the day of the month (71)] and figure out reasonable answers to riddles that apparently have no answers (72). When Octavius watches a film newsreel, he is particularly interested in a clip of Norma Shearer, whom he remembers most fondly for her role as Marie Antoinette, when she says “Oh, Mama! Oh, Mama! I’m going to be Queen of France!” (192). This is perhaps an echo of Alice’s ongoing desire to become a Queen, which she does at the end of her trials and travels. However, both Marie and Alice (and Octavius, for that matter) find that once they become queens, their fantasies quickly dissolve.

Chapter Three

The Wars

Having written one novel that takes place after the two World Wars (*The Last of the Crazy People*)¹, and another that takes place on the cusp of the second World War (*The Butterfly Plague*), with his third novel Findley finally settled down and wrote a “proper” war story called, appropriately enough, *The Wars*. Hold on. *The Wars*, plural? Evelyn Cobley writes that “most criticism has situated the novel in the context of Canadian literature or postmodern metafiction” (Cobley 98),² but in deciphering the plural title I am more interested in Lorraine York’s suggestion that *The Wars* is “a war novel which is largely concerned with domestic strife” (*Front* 30). In another study, York seems to find that this strife originates (for the novel’s protagonist, Robert) in childhood; the guilt and grief over his mentally retarded sister’s death is what drives Robert to enlist (*Other* 83). But York immediately reaches even further back into Robert’s childhood to find “other subtle pressures which act upon Robert’s mind” (83).³ She refers to a photograph in the novel; a scene from Robert’s childhood indicating a lack of innocence which precedes the sister’s death⁴ and suggesting a broader context of corruption:

The photograph of the Ross's pony, entitled *Meg -- a Patriotic Pony*, because she is covered in bright bunting, reveals the vicious underside of patriotism. Meg is 'either angry or frightened' (9), [...] and in the background, Robert's younger brother Stuart, wearing Indian headdress, wields a baseball bat. (83)

In Findley's "picture" of childhood, violence and unease exist without the shock of death or the horror of war -- they are simply there, part and parcel of ponies and baseball and "innocent" (i.e. pre-World War) national pride. It is important to pay attention to this picture and others like it in the novel, because Findley often locates epiphanal moments (losses of innocence) within the war context. It is common to perceive the Great War as the modern world's loss of innocence -- its first taste of mass death and destruction with a rapidly declining sense of purpose.⁵ Findley attempts to make the most of this perception in the novel; a prime example is the rather grandiose pronouncement "After the Great War for Civilization -- sleep was different everywhere..." (47). However, as we have seen in *The Last of the Crazy People* and *The Butterfly Plague*, another bleaker perception creeps in which questions whether innocence (presumably a peaceful sleep) exists at all (perhaps it is just a dream during a peaceful sleep!).

For instance, the ideal of innocence and its loss at war is portrayed somewhat cynically through the novel's description of a picture of Robert in his brand new uniform. The picture seems to say "I lived -- was young -- and died," (49) which (in and of itself) correlates with the romantic notion of a young soldier's death, the bloom barely gone from his cheeks, snuffed out too early by the horror of war. But the novel itself identifies the fallacy in presuming that

innocence and experience exist in separate spheres. Robert, speaking through the picture, mocks this notion and its reductive quality: "*I'll faint away in glory hearing music and my name. [...] Medals...will sit beside this frame in little boxes made of leather lined with satin. I will have the Military Cross. He died for King and Country -- fighting the war to end all wars. 5 x 9 and framed in silver*" (49). To separate living, being young, and dying is as ridiculous as stashing the war experience into elegant little boxes and frames. The reality is much messier.

On two occasions, Findley tries to convince us that the war presents Robert with scenes and experiences that explicitly *alter* his mind. First, when Robert sees two men engaged in sado-masochistic intercourse, "his mind be[gins] to stammer the way it always did whenever it was challenged by something it could not accept. [...] He threw [his] boot across the room and shattered the mirror" (45). The shattered mirror and the stammering mind suggest a cataclysmic alteration of Robert's consciousness, but because the stammering is familiar -- because his mind has reacted similarly to such "unacceptable" realities before, in his childhood (13) -- it is difficult to interpret this moment as singularly "shattering." Second, when Robert is forced to shoot a horse because it has broken its leg, upon firing the first shot, "A chair f[alls] over in his mind" (65). Tellingly, the horse does not die; the first shot is only one of the series (so many that he loses track) it takes to finally kill the horse. It is much the same for Robert: one "shot" simply cannot alter his mind -- it is already muddied with trauma and more mud is simply more mud. Robert is badly

bruised after this episode, for he tries to kill the horse in the lower hold of a tossing ship. But bad bruises are not new to him -- he has always been prone to them, and has suffered them before in his childhood (26-27). Furthermore, this is the second time a chair falls over for Robert -- the first time occurs when Robert overhears his mother saying that Robert must kill his sister's rabbits after her death "BECAUSE HE LOVED HER" (24). The next thing Robert hears is a chair falling over (24).

Nevertheless, Findley insists on creating "atomic" moments for Robert. When Robert sets sail for war, Findley writes in a terribly portentous tone that three days prior Robert has celebrated his birthday with wine and "Robert even smoked a cigarette. He was nineteen years old" (47). In another scene, Robert shoots a German soldier he thinks is reaching for his gun. But the German is only reaching for his binoculars to better see a bird (131). Robert realizes his mistake when he hears the bird sing: "It sang and sang, till Robert rose and walked away. The sound of it would haunt him to the day he died" (131). Is this "haunting" somehow more "atomic" than the stammering or the chair falling over in his mind?

It is important to note that before Robert shoots him, the German soldier has deliberately allowed Robert's battalion to pass unharmed. But this "live and let live" moment cannot supercede Robert's instinct to kill. War or not, I do not believe that Robert's killing the German is any more gruesome, violent, or pathetic than when Hooker kills the squirrel with his hatchet (Findley takes care

to emphasize the squirrel's watchful terror and then calm -- the squirrel's humanity, essentially). This instinct also surfaces when Robert shoots the horse: "He began to squeeze the trigger and he squeezed it again and again and again -- so many times that when the Sergeant-Major pulled him away the gun went right on clicking in his hands" (66). One could easily argue that it is the war which has driven Robert to such a state, but I wonder why, then, Findley would write that the proper method of killing a horse is the stuff of Robert's childhood memories: "he remembered that somewhere in *Chums* -- as a boy -- he'd seen a picture of a cowboy shooting his horse behind the ear. The image rose in his mind -- black and white and clumsily drawn -- a child's world picture of exactly what to do" (65). But this picture, as with most other false assumptions of the innocence and "picture book" quality of childhood, is of no real use to Robert (the horse continues to live after he is shot). The chummy, boy's own "child's world picture" is merely another "5 x 9 and framed in silver" lie.

Even if this picture were to be taken at face value, it would indicate that a child's perspective must include some knowledge of pain and death and responsibility -- the originating kernel of truth which is part and parcel of Robert's childhood.⁶ This important point should no doubt be connected to the violence implicit in the picture of Robert's younger brother, Stuart, wielding a baseball bat while a pony stands "angry or frightened" in the background -- angry or frightened like the horse Robert must kill in the hold. It is interesting that when

Robert joins the army he seeks "Someone who [can] teach him, by example, how to kill" (28). But he has grown up with this knowledge, and on the very same page Robert's mother tells him why: "We're all cut off at birth with a knife and left at the mercy of strangers" (28). This rather brutal reality (we are, after all, cut off at birth and left to people we don't know) suggests that children, as early as birth, must develop a keen instinct for self-preservation in a hostile environment. This sentiment is reiterated by a soldier -- Bates -- much later in the novel: "This -- to Bates -- was the greatest terror of war: what you didn't know of the men who told you what to do -- where to go and when. What if they were mad -- or stupid? [...] He thought of being born -- and of trusting your parents. Maybe that was the same. Your parents could be crazy too" (119). Assigning this observation to Bates creates the sense that uneasy, defensive childhood is not endemic to Robert and his family. It is representative of a reality so totalizing that it corresponds to "the greatest terror of war." Not only that, the "natural" aspect of birth and survival are likened, through Bates' observation, to the defining dynamic of war, thereby suggesting that war is a natural outcome of procreation.

Or, more specifically, that war is the natural outcome of our unhappy childhoods; Mrs. Ross, Robert's mother, has "a way" of using "everyone's childhood as a weapon" (26), and this observation has a rather broad application. It is not borne of her bitterness over Robert's impending military life, it is her "way," and it applies to "everyone's childhood." It is not surprising to

find that Robert has an instinct to kill under his habitual blushing (29). And it is not surprising that wars happen, either. If weaponry begins in childhood, what else can it do but grow into such large scale conflict?

In one passage in particular, Findley implies that war might be a childhood, or more specifically, a boyhood phenomenon. In training camp, Robert and a childhood schoolmate, and now fellow soldier, go out to find two AWOL mustangs. Their childhood is what connects them, what defines them, in this moment: "As they rode, Robert and Clifford sang old hymns they'd learned at school. They sang at the tops of their lungs because they were the only songs they mutually knew" (33). They come upon Taffler, a former Varsity football champion who habitually looks like a "*Boy's Own Annual* hero" (96) who is keeping his arm in form by throwing stones at bottles. Two important observations come out of Taffler's exercise. First, Clifford remarks that it's a "pity...that [they] aren't all playing football" (34), and second, Taffler laments the fact that "All you get in this war...is one little David against another....Just a bunch of stone throwers" (35). Findley evokes schoolboys singing hymns raucously, wishing they were playing football,⁷ surrounded by more and more boys -- more Davids, more stone throwers.... Taffler has already served in the war and been wounded, so it is certainly not a lack of experience which leads him to say that the landscape of war is one without Goliaths. Instead, war is a place for boys. And if there are no Goliaths to force the boys into their stone throwing, is it all a matter of natural instinct? What begins at birth grows

throughout childhood and leads to war. In a later passage (often quoted by critics discussing the “lost innocence” in the novel), Findley asserts that there are, in fact, many Goliaths; Mrs. Ross wonders at all the smiling parents of doomed youth (proud parents of future soldiers) and asks “What does it mean -- *to kill your children?*” (54). But this rather tired question (rendered so much more effectively by the Great War poets) pales in comparison to Findley’s earlier, far more evocative, image of a landscape filled with Davids slinging stones at each other and nothing in particular. While it is no doubt Findley’s overt desire to promote the idea of innocence lost, the more chilling truth achieves much greater resonance.

Robert’s relationship with horses is another indication of how pain seems to originate in childhood and develop throughout adulthood. As we have seen, a frightened or angry pony makes an appearance in Robert’s childhood garden. In the war, Robert encounters several more frightened or angry horses; these are versions of ponies in a larger forum of trauma than Robert’s childhood, but outgrowths of these earlier kernels all the same. He dies trying to save some horses, but fails. He cannot divert events from their fated order -- man and animal are as connected in the ordeal of suffering and death as they are in the process of procreation (a doomed connection which is perhaps alluded to with the bleak but primal sexual intercourse of the “horse and rider” in the whorehouse).

In dealing with this matter of “nature” and instinct, I should mention

Robert's episode with the coyote. A runner with a "long, instinctive stride that [is] his natural gait" (29), Robert runs with a coyote one night. They run and rest together -- aware of one another -- for over forty minutes (29-32). Robert's synergy with the coyote and the prairie landscape is retold in romantic terms, according a definite sense of wonder to the scene. There is a flip side to it, though. Coyotes are hunters -- carnivores. Robert doesn't follow a rabbit or a squirrel. His "natural gait" reflects the characteristic movement of an animal quite high up in the food chain, which complicates considerably the romantic ideal of the "boy" and his animal companion.

This is not to say that Findley avoids associating Robert with rabbits, or that rabbits are only associated with innocence! Rabbits are, in fact, quite important to our understanding of Robert's "natural" lack of innocence, particularly as a child. The rabbits of his childhood are actually his sister Rowena's, who feeds and plays with them, occasionally with Robert's participation (22). When she dies and his parents tell him that it is his job to kill her rabbits, Findley puts the command down to "obeying some kind of fate" and "revenge." Because a girl had died -- and her rabbits had survived her" (25). It is bad enough that death, revenge, and slaughter exist in Robert's childhood, but Findley also suggests that this sort of pain is *natural* -- due to "some kind of fate." Without treading too far into political incorrectness, I wonder if Rowena's mental retardation is connected to Findley's other "diseases" of doom, like Jessie's breakdowns and Dolly's hemophilia.⁸ But in Rowena's case, Findley

seems to create a specific physical illustration of the tragedy of childhood: "Her head is large and adult but her body is that of a ten-year-old child" (14). Is this not a perfect expression of children's lack of innocence? Despite being small physically, their heads are large and adult⁹ -- full of the awareness of darker realities.¹⁰ Rowena's parents keep her physicality "off the record" -- "She is never in photographs that are apt to be seen by the public. In fact, she is not much admitted into the presence of a camera" (13). Perhaps this desire to hide away the child's body with the adult head is akin to the idealization of childhood as innocent -- an effort to efface the reality of childhood.

Rabbits, then, become signs not of childhood innocence, but rather of an empty storybook ideal. At the front, Robert meets a children's book illustrator whose "line" is in *realistic* drawings (91) of birds, rabbits, hedgehogs, toads and the like (88). Robert is pictured with these animals at the front (109, 173) and in the illustrator's sketchbook (138). Robert, Rowena, the rabbits...they all exist in childhood and in war, on both sides of the looking glass. *Realistically*, there is no magical childhood innocence on the "side" of childhood and therefore there cannot be an epiphanal loss of innocence that shifts that child into the adult "side." By bringing the "storybook" ideal of childhood (epitomized by the *Wind in the Willows*-esque animals) into conflict with the reality of Robert's life prior to and during the war, Findley collapses the supposed "atomic" boundaries of innocence and post-innocence.

One cannot discuss innocence, or its loss/absence, in *The Wars* without

discussing Robert's rape. Findley ascribes much meaning to it; in *Inside Memory* he describes why he kept this "intrinsic" (*Inside* 151) scene despite suggestions that it be cut: "It has to be there because it is my belief that Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made the war. Basically, their fathers did it to them" (*Inside* 151). Tom Hastings has written that these "fathers" are more a "sociocultural construction and not a biological construction bound by gender" (86), given that Robert's actual father is a "good man" (86) and Mrs. Ross "drives her son away from home" (86). Nature/nurture questions aside, Findley's and Hastings's reasoning relies heavily on the World War One legend (and to a fair degree, reality) that the young were innocent victims of older political and military fat cats. Robert's rape, then, marks this victimization -- the epiphanal moment wherein the military turns "boys into men/soldiers, thereby destroying their childhood innocence" (Hastings 98). But the rape is bookended by two highly intriguing scenes which complicate the assumption of man's original innocence and its destruction by "nurtured" (i.e. socially constructed) forces. Immediately prior to the rape scene, while on leave in a French town Robert sees "a child of about eight" amid "bright yellow cowslips and paddling ducks" (165). The child is sitting with a duck, so Robert "raise[s] his hat to show that he ha[s] no designs on the ducks -- but the child [does] not wave back" (165). In direct opposition to Robert's gesture of good will, the child scowls until Robert passes, and then spits on its own shoe (165). Despite the rather idyllic storybook nature of the scene -- the child among bright

yellow cowslips and paddling ducks -- it is punctuated with outright bad will. And it is not coming from the soldier. Findley sets up the scene with Robert's wonder that some ducks have been spared the appetites of "hungry soldiers foraging for extra rations" (165), thereby suggesting that the child (if a duck-lover) might have been privy to some nasty shocks that would prejudice him against anyone in a uniform. Even so, the child remains a stark figure of cynicism and even hatred -- qualities thrown into relief by his idyllic surroundings. This image suggests that children cannot be forced into the "natural" aura of innocence that ostensibly precedes the sociocultural rape of Robert's generation of soldiers. After all, the child is much younger than Robert, and has not been turned into a soldier (not yet), so it is difficult to see it in the terms Findley has set up with the rape scene. This child is without innocence for some other reason...a reason perhaps not far removed from Robert's (the aforementioned overly "serious child") or his brother's (threateningly wielding a baseball bat in the garden photograph).

After the rape Robert unexpectedly meets one of his former soldiers (now with another battalion), and notes that the soldier's voice has changed since last they'd met (171). Is this intended to reinforce Robert's "sudden" change from boy to man? But when the soldier, Poole, is introduced earlier in the novel, his most salient feature is that though he may *look* under age, he is actually nineteen. This is in stark contrast to those other soldiers who are defined as boys; for instance, Harris twice over connected to his status as a lonely only

child, and a poor kid named Regis (from Regina) who is hardly sixteen, weeps (63), and won't drink because he promised his mother he wouldn't (66). It is highly unlikely that Poole, at nineteen or older, would lose his voice at such a late date. I am unsure as to why Findley selected Poole as the soldier to undergo puberty at the other side of his teens (and *after* about three months of combat duty), but this much is absolutely clear: yet again, Findley has complicated the supposed boundaries of young and old. Therefore, we must also question whether the rape -- located between the sour, cynical child and the oddly pubescent Poole -- indicates a straightforward (though horrific) progression from innocence to experience. Rather, it seems a lateral move further into dark realm Robert has begun to travel already. This is especially plausible given that after hearing the voice of one of his rapists, Robert recognizes that he has been assaulted by "his *fellow* soldiers" or his "*brother* officers" (169 italics mine), and not by a higher up -- a sociocultural "father" figure.

To further explore this point of collapsed boundaries of innocence and experience, or youth and age, I will return once again to *Alice in Wonderland* -- or more specifically, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.¹¹ One of the most salient features of the Looking Glass, besides the fact that it transports Alice into another world, is that it becomes hazy, like the swimming reflection Dolly sees of himself in *The Butterfly Plague*. In effect, when Alice tries to cross the "boundary" of the mirror, it *dissolves*: "Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like

gauze, so that we can get through. Why it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through --' [...] And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist" (Carroll 151). This "misting" corresponds with Carroll's belief that there is no clear line between childhood and adulthood (Otten 159-160). Accordingly, when Robert looks down at his reflection in a puddle, it is "beaten in submission by the rain" (20) -- in other words, it dissolves or appears to melt. Robert's next thought is that the surrounding melting snow has begun to turn to mist, and that this mist is "filled with rabbits and Rowena and his father and his mother and the whole past of his life -- birth and death and childhood. He [can] breathe them in and breathe them out" (20). Now, given that Robert does this "reflecting" and "breathing" just prior to his departure for an army training camp, one might assume that he is watching life -- youth -- as he knows it evaporate. Findley helps this assumption along by writing that the evaporation contains "the whole past of his life." However, if this was entirely the case, why does Robert continue to breathe this "past life" in and out? This does not suggest that his childhood has suddenly left him -- evaporated into nothing -- but it does suggest that trauma has always been part of Robert's existence...it is in the very air that he breathes. And always has been, as we learn in the very last sentences of the novel which describe another photograph: "*Robert and Rowena with Meg*: Rowena seated astride the pony -- Robert holding her in place. On the back is written: 'Look! you can see our breath!' And you can" (191).

Given the tenuous status of Robert's watery and misty "reflections," it is not surprising to find that mirrors and glass occur frequently in the novel as a place where "innocence" and experience mesh, rather than as a bridge from one state to the next. Put simply, it is not so easy to see ourselves clearly at all, let alone to define exactly when and where we move from being children to being adult. In a moment often looked upon as the classic loss of male innocence, Robert visits a whorehouse. In the entrance hallway covered in paintings of Odalisques, Robert is faced with a mirror, and therefore "the first thing [he sees is himself], intermingled with a lot of pink arms and pale breasts" (38). The word "intermingled" is key, here. Robert has not yet lost his virginity (nor does he at this particular location), but his reflection reveals that he has already been touched by -- has intermingled with -- an awareness of the sexual.¹² Later, as I have mentioned already, upon catching sight of two men engaged in a sexual horse and rider position, Robert shatters a mirror. On one hand, Findley likely intended for this to represent the shattering of Robert's sexual innocence. But on the other, we are faced once again with the "dissolving" nature of the mirror. It is not a steady, clear boundary that reveals exactly how this experience has changed his character, or moved Robert into an adult identity.¹³ In fact, Findley suggests that the mirror represents a lack of defined identity for Robert; when he loses his kit bag he feels as though he's "left his face behind in a mirror" (159). The mirror represents the transient nature of our sense of self, and the ephemeral quality of our stages of development.

But again, Findley insists on describing people or actions as “childlike” as if the concept were stable. The prostitute “assigned” to Robert in the whorehouse sees a couple engaged in sado-masochistic acts and *giggles* because she is “like a child” (44). This simile destroys the concept of guileless, innocent childhood, and instead intermingles the simply mischievous with the darkly adult. It is fascinating that Findley’s next (and last) four “child similes” appear immediately prior to, during, and immediately after, a gas attack. The gas becomes a mist much like the mist which obscures the line between adult and child worlds. The child similes achieve the same end. First, one of Robert’s gunners is “throwing clods of earth into [a] pool below -- like a child in High Park on a Sunday afternoon” (122). Second, the men obey Robert’s command that they tear the tails off their shirts (to urinate on and use as gas masks) “like chastised children” (124). Third, one man sits “like a child in the sand and [digs] in his underwear for his penis” (125). Fourth, when Robert rolls his body over, having spent the gas attack face down in the mud, he “look[s] like a child about to make ‘an angel’ in the snow” (127). In this deadly mist, the idealized child (in the park, on the beach, in the snow...) and horror are inextricably combined.

Also fascinating is that Robert’s solution to the gas attack -- makeshift urine-soaked masks -- comes from knowledge he acquired as a twelve-year-old; a science lesson on the neutralizing effects of ammonia on chlorine. For a brief moment, at least, Robert returns to age twelve. At another point, on a ship bound for the war, a soldier recognizes a captain’s reading material as books he

hasn't seen "since [he] was twelve" (58). The captain replies that since he's "going to do a boy's work he must read 'the stuff of which boys are made'" (58). It is as if twelve is the last year of childhood, the last year in which one reads boy's books, and the war marks a return to that age. In a similar vein, listening to rallying war songs reminds Robert of Saturday football crowds cheering their players, and he reflects that he hasn't "dreamt of glory since he was ten or twelve. Now, it refreshed him" (165). Because age twelve is the last year prior to the teenage years, it is perhaps an easy cutting-off point for childhood.¹⁴ (Recall, as described in my introduction, Findley's own experience of watching the adult world come into his life at age twelve.) But when a twelve-year-old's perception resurfaces in distinctly adult, traumatic moments, such divisions (childhood, adolescence, adulthood) seem extremely simplistic. Therefore, the ideal pictures of childhood Findley uses -- children at the beach, children making snow angels -- must be questioned.

This splicing of a child's perspective with traumatic wartime experiences creates an interesting revisiting of Findley's first two novels. In the first, Findley concentrates on "the war at home" -- at one boy's home.¹⁵ In the second, he studies this childhood pain in its early and adult stages in various people and even various families, all against a backdrop of impending war. In the third, he brings childhood pain, its adult manifestations, and war into direct contact with one another. It is as if the ends of a string have been knotted together to make a circle. In any event, it is certainly *not* as if that string has been laid out flat to

divide childhood innocence from adult experience.

Notes

1. Lorraine York has written that *The Last of the Crazy People* is also heavily informed by the American Civil War (*Civilian* 336).

2. Cobley makes this statement because the essay in which it appears is intended to counter such classifications with an analysis of the novel's formal narrative reconstructions of the First World War. Nevertheless, her point -- that many critics have readily accepted the plural title's easy fit into postmodern metafictional theory -- is well taken.

3. Allan Weiss connects these two references (York *Front* 30, *Other* 83) in his essay "Private and Public in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*," in order to establish the "private and personal imperative" behind Robert's desire "to participate in a public act of violence" (Weiss 93).

4. Diana Brydon has also written that the loss of Robert's "childhood innocence" occurs with his sister's death (*Devotion* 75). I must mention here that Robert's mother defines him as having been "such a *serious* child" who did "Everything...with such great *concentration*" (27). Clearly, Robert's consciousness was not all sweetness and light and wonder prior to Rowena's death. In fact, his serious frame of mind might suggest a certain fated preparation, even awareness, of the traumas to come.

5. While Brydon's focus is fairly national, her emphasis on lost innocence as key to an understanding of Robert and the war exemplifies this common perception of the Great War and its victims/heroes: "The lost innocence of Robert as an individual becomes the lost innocence of the political order destroyed by World War I and particularly the lost innocence of a Canada compelled to participate" (*Devotion* 83).

6. Another such instance occurs in the novel when Robert realizes that his childhood vision of the sea -- informed by Joseph Conrad and the *Boy's Own Manual* -- have "given him a false impression" (56). The suggestion that Robert has led a sheltered childhood because now he is confronted with a storm that is "real" and that "rage[s]" (56) is deflated somewhat by Findley's allusion to the instinctually dark worlds of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. These worlds are as much a part of Robert's childhood as the *Boy's Own Annual*.

7. Findley adds to this "football" vision of the "boys" at war when he writes that Robert and Harris are "just like football fans" (67) when they watch

the horses swim from the boat to shore; later, a singing convoy of troops reminds Robert of “a Saturday crowd at a football game” (165).

8. As we have seen in Findley’s first two novels, a certain nature/nurture debate emerges in tandem with childhood “diseases” of unhappiness. Essentially, Findley writes children who are doubly doomed -- if nature won’t get them, nurture (or experience) will. Though Rowena has a physical illness, there are many characters in the novel who suffer unhappy childhoods because of the disease of experience. There is the young soldier Harris, “an only child” whose “mother died when he was three and he’d lived estranged from his father” (59). Findley obviously feels that Harris’ childhood loneliness is important, for he returns to it later in the novel, reiterating that he is an “only child” (105), that “his mother died when he was three” (106), and that he was “alone with his father” (106). And then there is Mrs. Ross herself, whose “only brother” was killed as a boy (68). Again, Findley feels he must revisit this point later in the novel, when he repeats that Mrs. Ross’ brother was killed and adds that her father died of a broken heart as a result (137).

9. Elsewhere in the novel, Findley creates characters who are younger than they look (74), or older than they look (86), as if to reiterate that a certain type of consciousness cannot be ascribed to a person based simply on their *perceived* age. To assume that a child is innocent simply because he or she is small or young-looking would be a highly fallible assumption.

10. Much of the last section of the novel depends on a child with an “adult head” - it is written as a transcript of a twelve year old girl’s diary, and despite being read by a much older woman, “the wisdom remains a child’s” (139).

11. Rather than revisiting the similarities between the garden as portrayed in the Alice stories and the green spaces in Findley’s writing again, I will briefly mention that as with his two previous novels, Findley once again locates very “adult” trauma and foreboding in garden settings, which contradicts the (originally!) intended association of the garden with innocence. Early in the novel, Robert and Rowena are in a park, but it is crowded with extensive military fanfare. Robert perceives quite clearly that the “martialling of men” (13) is cause for apprehension, not celebration. We have already seen -- in the picture of “*Meg -- a Patriotic Pony*” -- that a definite anxiety inhabits the Ross family garden, what with the “bunted” pony (a reflection of the military parades in the park) that is either frightened or angry, and the boy wielding a baseball bat (14).

12. This relates directly to Terry Goldie’s comment that though the “core” of *The Wars* (and of *Headhunter*) “is innocence,” Findley’s depiction of “the

innocence of children seems expansive to the point that it can include a quite non-innocent knowledge" (137). Goldie fails to pursue this contradiction any further, but he does describes it with economy and clarity!

13. Again, I return to Goldie, who finds in his essay "The Canadian Homosexual," that Robert's sexuality is a rather grey area -- homosexual "clues" often intermingling with heterosexual "clues," if you will.

14. A portion of the actual novel is presented as twelve-year-old Juliet's diary writings. Juliet knows Robert because he (briefly) sees her older sister. Findley emphasizes Juliet's location on the edge of adulthood -- her breasts are "sprouting" despite the fact that her mother insists that "she can't have breasts...She's only twelve!" (147). Tellingly, Juliet "waver[s] on the verge of the nursery" (145).

15. Lorraine York deals with the war elements embedded in *The Last of the Crazy People* and Findley's fiction as a whole in an essay ("Civilian Conflict: Systems of Warfare in Timothy Findley's Early Fiction") and a book (*Front Lines: The Fiction of Timothy Findley*).

Conclusion

"Now Really Pay Attention:

From Fiction to Fictional Activism, Childhood Pain Moves Into the 'Real' World"

What next? Having looked at Findley's first three novels, let us stand at this midpoint of sorts and cast our eyes towards three of the novels which followed. In doing so, we may discern how Findley's "childish fixations" grow in complexity and urgency. The childhood pain that has moved through and between the two World Wars, that has spread from one character to international casts, gains a new dimension of totality by finding its origins in theological characters in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* -- Findley's spin on the story of Noah's Ark. And yet another dimension of totality is gained when childhood pain finds a governing position in the lives and actions of actual historical figures in *Famous Last Words* -- Findley's spin on the Duke of Windsor's abdication scandal and its aftermath. In *Headhunter*, this blend of the "real" and the fictive culminates in Joseph Conrad's fictional characters Kurtz and Marlow being brought to Toronto, where they persecute and save (respectively) a slew of traumatized children. By referring to other fictional works *as fiction*, *Headhunter* is one step removed from the realm of the make-believe.

Therefore, this metafictional novel achieves a degree of reality and immediacy by hinging on the acts of writing and reading fiction -- acts he and his readers engage in (respectively) as part of their daily lives. Furthermore, Findley reaches past fiction in his near activist assertion of the need to "SAVE THE CHILDREN" (*Headhunter* 282). I believe this "reach" indicates Findley's more ready willingness to take a crack at broader, more readily known and accepted "storybook" ideals.

Famous Last Words begins with the protagonist, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, at *twelve years old*, watching his father commit suicide by jumping off a roof. Before he leaps to his death, Mauberley senior gives his son a silver pencil, which Hugh uses to record those memories which make up the bulk of the novel. He dies with the pencil in his hand. Hugh tries to find a "surrogate father" (67) in Ezra Pound; he is drawn to Wallis Simpson because she says something ("*I want my life*") which fills a void he has felt since his father died (75-76); and he avoids intimate companionship because his parents' marriage was so unhappy (142, 145). Clearly, Hugh continues to react to, and suffer, the effects of an unhappy childhood. It is no doubt important to note that Hugh's mother is mad (142) -- of the same mold as Jessie in *The Last of the Crazy People*. It might be argued that Hugh tries to find another father figure in the Duke of Windsor -- a sorely ill-equipped fellow to fit such a bill. The Duke is another grown-up child in pain, often compared to a child, and acutely patronized by his mother's presence (101). The Duke tries to replace his own

mother with Wallis, who also suffers the effects of a painful childhood (372). In fact, all of the major characters in the novel are often compared to children. Add to this the myriad references to glass, mirrors, and gardens, and we have a historically piquant war-time Wonderland. Needless to say, there is such a wealth of unhappy children in the novel (a few tertiary characters are casualties of war, slaughtered or simply left behind) that the points at which innocence might be had or lost are impossible to find -- a reflection of all those lost and roaming (Hugh especially) over shifting war-time territories.

In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Findley goes to great lengths to create particularly gruesome and graphic losses of innocence. Of the more incredible examples, one boy leaves to find his manhood and comes back stained blue from being marinated by nomadic ruffians (he escapes before being cooked), and a *twelve year old* girl is savagely (but ceremoniously) raped with a unicorn's horn. But these and other scenes are set against a backdrop of destruction which questions whether innocence -- safety -- actually exists. After all, the earth can be totally destroyed by flood, and it is God that wreaks this unforgiving brutality on his own "children." Findley suggests as much when Noah's wife decides that "There is no God worthy of" a developmentally delayed child, a bred-in-the-bone innocent, without cynicism or comprehension of the dangers in her midst: "There is no God worthy of this child. And so I will give her back to the world where she belongs" (170). That world is death. However Findley often contradicts the idea that innocence doesn't belong on earth by defining it

as a characteristic of those newly arrived on earth: one of Noah's sons has the "innocent curiosity of the young" (76) while another is "innocent as the proverbial babe" (77). As in his previous novels, Findley makes his strongest case when he argues against innocence's existence, because when he tries to apply it to children through the ever-present "child simile," innocence becomes a rather empty and unconvincing ideal...or cliché.

Though *Headhunter* is populated by a cast that seems as large as Toronto itself, critics generally agree that Lilah Kemp is its protagonist. She is a schizophrenic but also a "spiritualist" who can bring fictional characters into the "real world" (an adventurous concept worthy of Lewis Carroll, surely!). Her first experience as conduit for the fictional occurs at age five, while she reads *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* in the garden, as escape from one of her abusive father's more brutal tirades (25 - 26). Peter hops away, but leaves his shoes behind, and as an adult Lilah often carries them with her -- her talisman. Such is one of the many childhood traumas experienced and relived by characters in the novel. *Headhunter* marks Findley's most complete examination of children trapped in the looking glass world. Located in gardens, under tables, and through mirrors, they should be picture perfect reflections of storybook innocence. But the only "perfectly formed" (18) children in this novel are those aborted fetuses behind glass - "jar babies" (18). The most horrific example of children examined through glass must be those recruited for a sex club and then, rendered nearly catatonic from the trauma, institutionalized. Behind windows or two-way mirrors

they rip out their hair, and one even tries to rip the genitals from his body (34 - 35). These children have been abused as a direct result of Kurtz's actions. Kurtz (brought into the "real" world as a psychiatrist) is stopped by Marlow (also a psychiatrist), who must "*SAVE THE CHILDREN.*" By restructuring these canonical fictional characters (as he has historical and biblical "characters"), Findley makes an aggressive case for moving his stories beyond the boundary of the page (be it fictional, historical or biblical). The last line of *Headhunter* prods those who might not recognize the importance and urgency of Findley's "childish fixations:" "*It's only a book, they would say. That's all it is. A story. Just a story*" (440).

Critics have accommodated this "fictional activism" by embracing Findley's anti-fascist themes, but I find that his depictions of the state of childhood constitute a "cause" just as complex and important to the author. Not only are Findley's childish fixations readily, consistently apparent in the six novels discussed (at length and in brief!) in this thesis, one by one they mark a distinct growth in importance. From individual families to global actions to metafictional applications, Findley goes to great lengths to explore the concept of childhood and its relevance to the human condition. He illustrates the conflict between the supposedly "innocent" child and his/her victimization by adults who are but older children -- whose lives are lived in reaction to painful childhoods. Thus, the line between child and adult, between victim and victimizer, is not so easily located or investigated. But oh, what awaits those who might try!

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