When War Plays Us: A Different Childhood

Raymond C. Jones

It seemed to me such a revelation, the way Professor Smiley put it in his history course at Wake Forest University: “All wars,” he told us, “are fought over the definition of the future.” In the context of his lecture, we were examining the struggle between competing foes: the one who is victorious must implement his vision of what is to be, and the vanquished must acquiesce to a version of the future that he would rather have died than accept. According to our professor, when the diplomats who write the peace sweep into the space cleared by battle, the foes realize that victory begins, rather than ends, the hard work.

It’s hard work, also, for those who get in the way of the war, and from whom a large price is extracted. Kate Beckwith, in her slim volume Playing War, gives her readers a chance to take note of what is referred to these days as “collateral damage.” She does this through the sweet-voiced character of Sameer, whose entire family was killed by an errant bombing attack in his native land. When we are introduced to Sameer, now living in the United States with his uncle, he and his group of friends are finding it hard one day to come up with a game to play. All too quickly, the decision to play war is made. There is a scramble to gather the tools of battle, and Sameer makes a hasty departure, leaving an unconvincing explanation to hang in the air. The next day, his story comes out, and his friends must wrap their minds around the terrible and true.

By story’s end, the children choose pursuits other than playing Soldiers and Enemies. The illustrations, by Lea Lyon, capture the lightly idyllic cadre of kids and their immediate background, without dominating the story or calling too much attention to themselves. They are grand smudges of color that give the effect of nearly-blurred vision, as for one who’s been crying. We don’t get any sweeping vistas or complex settings in the art, which is generally large on each page; Lyon supports Beckwith’s tendency to focus tightly on her characters, without showing us too much about them.

The author offers us resonating lines and images, beginning just with the title: Playing War. We did it as kids, whether in the woods or with our evenly matched stacks of playing cards, with plastic green army men or tall chiseled GI Joes. The war we know has always been a playful pastime, with rare exception, and the tragedies of it occurred “over there,” somewhere else. Beckwith doesn’t club us with a clumsy fist; she uses little Sameer to tap us lightly and note the suffering where war is all business.

There are quotes within the book that also capture us, simple notions that prove evocative:

“No fair starting the war until we’re ready!”
“What do we get ready for a war?”
“I wish they had a war for kids.”

As adult readers, we know what’s coming, and yet there is an effort to steel ourselves for it, because we know it can’t be pretty. It makes these lines all the more stark and shows Beckwith to be cognizant of where our minds are, while she brings us forward to where she hopes we’ll be. She works hard not to bash us over the head, but she gently—yet honestly—lets her readers in on a terrible secret: war is hell on children. What makes this a story, and a story worth telling, is that the child’s play that is almost inconsequential meets a formidable foe: reality. If we are sad for a moment that the game turns into something seemingly grim, how much more might we grieve for the millions of children who had no game to get tarnished, whose childhood is met on a battlefield stretching out to each unreachable horizon?

For those teachers who want students to begin thinking about the current conflicts on the ground in Afghanistan or Iraq, Sudan, in Israel and Palestine, Playing War lets us meet a survivor of the battlefield who is neither soldier nor enemy. I found the book moving.

What is less certain, though, is how this book works for elementary school children, ostensibly the audience for Playing War. War itself isn’t typically in the K-2 curriculum and, even where it may be, this story probably gets billing as a sidebar, a nudge in the direction of noticing who is hurt besides the soldiers. Students in grades 3-5 can possibly benefit when this book is an aid to meaningful development of content in a larger study of war, but it’s not able to do much of the heavy lifting. The deeper questions implied by the book are not explored but skillful teachers will recognize the jumping-off points for doing so. It is not a stand-alone text (so few content sources really are,
of course) but can be a worthy companion to other readings.

The Ten Thematic Strands that organize the standards of National Council for the Social Studies are a useful means for grounding and shaping the content we teach in social studies. But Playing War is not an obvious correlate for supporting our core goals. One problem is that it is never made explicit where Sameer is from, or what conflict he has escaped, or who is fighting. Strand INDIviduals, gROupS, and inStItutions, would offer a tangential link, in that we might assume that organizations or governments with military capabilities are responsible for the fighting that claimed his family. Strand Power, Authority, and Governance, may also be relevant, especially in considering the impetus for change and the violence that can accompany a group's pursuit of power. Even though I liked the book, I fear that it will be a text in search of an instructional use.

The book does lend itself to teaching sequence and the progression of events. Teachers who are using the idea of story structure to help students understand historical events (see, for instance, the Story Maps or History Frames found at www.readingquest.org) will find Playing War helpful. Beckwith doesn't develop her characters or the setting very much, but the plot progression is clear. I like that there is some ambiguity regarding the real “problem” in the story, from which the events flow. For instance, students might determine that the problem or goal of the characters is a simple one: A group of children needs to find a game to play. A more complex take on the problem, though, could be that kids think war is just a game. The key events will be largely the same in either consideration of the plot:

1. Once they decide to play war, they divide into Soldiers and Enemies.
2. The “enemies” gather weapons/plan attack.
3. Sameer abruptly leaves (the climax of the story).
4. The next day, Sameer describes the loss of his family.
5. Kids find war less enticing.

The resolution for the first goal/problem, that the kids need a game to play, comes when they decide to play basketball. The resolution to the more complex problem, that kids think war is just a game, might be that their opinion of war as a game has changed. Playing War would be a fine choice for letting students attend to story structure and sequence without it becoming too complicated.

We know the quote from Robert E. Lee: “It is well that war is so terrible, lest we should grow too fond of it.” This is the one that kept coming back to me, while reading Playing War. That juxtaposition of the playful attraction of gathering pinecones and sticks after randomly dividing into Soldiers and Enemies, against the carnage Sameer describes of his home and homeland, gives us pause. Playing War offers, at best, an elementary understanding of war. But war, really, has only an elementary understanding of us. It kills those in its way or, as Sameer finds out, those whose misfortune it is to be mistaken for someone else.

When there is discussion and debate about war, it might come down to its status as a “necessary evil,” a point of contention raised by U.S. Congressman John Lewis of Georgia in a Convocation address at Howard University. Those who support going to war believe it to be necessary; those who oppose it believe it to be evil. The temptation to regard war as more necessary than evil, to intellectualize it no more deeply than do kids in a wooded lot, to imagine a reset button, a time-out, and a jolly dash home for dinner with smiles and backslaps all ’round—this cannot be the stance of an educated citizenry. Kate Beckwith’s Playing War brings us a reason and means to think more without a predicated conclusion to draw.

Notes
1. Kate Beckwith, Lea Lyon, illus., Playing War (Gardiner ME: Tilbury House, 2005).

Raymond C. Jones is assistant professor in the Department of Education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is developer of the ReadingQuest website, www.ReadingQuest.org.