

## UNDERSTANDING CHILD NEGLECT THROUGH SELECTED WORKS BY JACQUELINE WILSON

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### ABSTRACT

*Jacqueline Wilson is a former Children's Laureate (2005-2007) whose contemporary realistic children's novels have been translated into over 30 languages. Recognized as the most borrowed author in the British public libraries, Wilson uses her novels to highlight contemporary realistic issues and challenges which modern children are increasingly threatened with. Despite selling two million books a year, in-depth analyses into her works remain scarce. The paper attempts to fill the gap by reading three of her selected works. They are *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), *Lola Rose* (2003) and *Lily Alone* (2011). The discussion charts the struggles faced by the pre-adolescent girl protagonists who are repeatedly abandoned by their mothers. Consequently, the children live in a state of constant fear and uncertainty. The issue of child neglect discussed within these novels is significant because it corresponds to the worldwide concern pertaining to the increasing statistics of children victimized by parental neglect. Despite the numbers, it is believed that many more incidences occur unnoticed. Efforts to remedy the situation is therefore hampered by the lack of co-operation between victims and the authorities due to the sense of shame and embarrassment involved. Research has shown that children who are subjected to neglect are more likely to experience difficulties in their cognitive, emotional and behavioural development. The study is hence an important attempt to forward Wilson's contemporary realistic children's novels as useful tools to help young readers identify with and address the issue of child neglect prevalent within the nation. Key findings of the study encompass an understanding of how the pre-adolescent girl protagonists manage and overcome negligence. It is thereby hoped that the paper offers a viable alternative to expose and educate children on their right of protection, leading to a sense of empowerment as they learn to seek the necessary help when faced with similar encounters.*

**Keywords:** Jacqueline Wilson, children's literature, child neglect, abandonment, empowerment

### INTRODUCTION

Jacqueline Wilson is a former Children's Laureate (2005-2007) whose contemporary realistic children's novels have been translated into over 30 languages. The first children's author to be conferred the title "Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the female equivalent of a knight" ("Dame Jacqueline", 2008, par. 1), Wilson is recognized as "one of the most influential writers of her generation" (Howarth, 2006, par. 5), a "household name [and] literary phenomenon" (Corbett, 2007, par. 33) in the English reading community, particularly in the United Kingdom. According to the statistics released by the Public Lending Right office, Wilson is also "the most-borrowed author in United Kingdom libraries" (Sutton, 2008, par. 3) with "more than two million loans" (Singh, 2004, par. 2) in 2003. *The Telegraph* reports that "[i]n the 10 years to June 2009, Wilson's books were lent 16 million times by British public libraries" ("Jacqueline Wilson named", 2010, par. 2). The author's continuous effort has also earned her the position as the first Coram Fellow of the Foundling Museum in London (Crichton-Miller, 2007) for having "significantly enhanced children's lives" (Jardine, 2007, par. 4). In recent years, Wilson was given "a ChildLine award in recognition of the way her work gives 'unique insight into challenging subjects'" (Dakin, 2012, par. 8). Following that, the author, together with illustrator John Burningham, were "nominated for the international Hans Christian Andersen Awards 2014" ("Jacqueline Wilson and John", 2013, par. 1) which "are presented every other year to a 'living author and illustrator whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature'" ("Jacqueline Wilson and John", 2013, par. 2).

As one of the prominent authors of contemporary realistic children's novels, Jacqueline Wilson is described as "a serious writer, with some important things to say about children, parents and the nature of contemporary childhood itself" (Tucker & Gamble, 2001, p 84). This is because her books often highlight contemporary realistic issues that her predominantly pre-adolescent and teen-girl readers face. However, many adults feel that the grim topics discussed as well as the novels' lack of resolution are unsuitable for children. Resulting from that, there remains a noticeable gap in the scholarship devoted to serious analyses of her novels (Armitstead, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Duncan, 2009). For Duncan (2009),

[t]he fact that her work has not yet been a subject for serious academic debate in the world of children's literature is a matter of regret. A writer who sells two million books a year is a phenomenon that needs to be understood with greater critical insight than she currently is (p. 172).

In view of this research gap, the paper gives focus to the struggles faced by the pre-adolescent girl protagonists in three of her selected novels. They are 10-year-old Dolphin in *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), 11-year-old Lola Rose or her real name, Jayni, in *Lola Rose* (2003) and 11-year-old Lily in *Lily Alone* (2011). Specifically, the analyses trace how these characters are subjected to child neglect by their family members – especially their respective mothers. Consequently, the characters are forced to care for their own well-being as well as the welfare of their younger siblings. Tucker & Gamble (2001) summarize Wilson's contemporary realistic children's novels as

[w]ritten from the point of view of a young narrator telling the story as if for themselves, the various parents described are often shown as failing to provide their children with a settled, secure and understanding background. The child characters concerned are then frequently unable to explore the world outside in any reasonably confident way, since they constantly feel they have to check that everything is still all right back at their domestic base (pp. 69-70).

In some cases, these pre-adolescent girl protagonists have to care for their mothers too (Bankston, 2011). Tucker & Gamble (2001) therefore allege that “[i]mmaturity is [...] shown to exist on both sides, with numerous moments throughout Wilson's novels where children have to temporarily take on the adult role when parents regress to a childhood state themselves” (p. 71). For Duncan (2009), the pre-adolescent girl protagonists “often find themselves placed in positions of premature maternal responsibility because of their mother's vulnerability, unreliability or immaturity of varying kinds” (p. 169). Rustin & Rustin (as cited in Duncan, 2009) thus label “such children as the ‘parentified child’” (ibid).

Notably, these three novels are selected because of their similarities in plot structures and character types. In addition, the study aims to show that the contemporary realistic struggles which children encounter throughout the years remain similar. The paper is motivated by how Wilson's works give “unique insight into challenging subjects” (Dakin, 2012, par. 8), helping numerous readers manage the contemporary realistic issues that they encounter in their daily lives. This is proven when her novel *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) won the “1999 Children's Book of the Year at the British Book Awards” (Craig, 2009, par. 31) as well as the 2000 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize after competing against numerous children's books which “reflect an understanding that conventional family relationships have been replaced in children's lives by broader and more complex structures” (Eccleshare, 2000, par. 14). Further, Jameson (as cited in Waddilove, 2012) maintains that Wilson's effort to address contemporary realistic issues within the novels enable “her readers to ‘cognitively map’ their social world, even if the circumstances depicted are outside their personal experience” (p. 76). Waddilove (2012) also believes that Wilson's contemporary realistic children's novels give a sense of comfort for her young readers by allowing them to “reflect the situations, anxieties and issues they're facing in an imaginative way” (ibid). In view of that, Duncan (2009) commends the author for illuminating “the complexity of contemporary family life in a direct, simple and accessible manner” (p. 166). For Rampton (2003), the author's novels speak “more to children today than Enid Blyton ever can” (par. 47).

In order to strengthen the research issue of the paper, the following section details the severity of child neglect occurring globally with accompanying statistics involving cases of negligence within the nation. Following that, the discussion extracts instances of child neglect found within the selected novels with further discussion afforded to how the respective pre-adolescent girl protagonists learn to manage and overcome the challenges faced. Lastly, the paper concludes by reinforcing the importance of addressing the serious issue of child neglect through adopting Wilson's contemporary realistic children's novels as viable resources to empower our younger generation in defending their rights of protection and from abuse by their loved ones, including their own parents.

## CHILD NEGLECT

According to Susan Bissell (as cited in Payton, 2014) who serves as the Child Protection Chief with the United Children's Fund (UNICEF), one of the most worrying global concerns involves the “tremendous violence [...] committed against children” (par. 5). For UNICEF, violence against children is defined as

physical [...] and emotional abuse, and may involve neglect or deprivation. Violence occurs in many settings, including the home, school, community [...] Similarly, a wide range of perpetrators commit violence against children, such as family members, intimate partners, teachers [...] and other children (“Children from”, 2016, par. 1).

In addition to that, the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified several factors leading to child neglect. These include parents or caregivers who are “misusing alcohol or drugs [...] being involved in criminal activity [and] experiencing financial difficulties” (“Child maltreatment”, 2016, par. 2). Moreover, “mental health problems of a family member, family breakdown or violence between other family members, being isolated in the community or lacking a support network, a breakdown of support in child rearing from the extended family” (“Child maltreatment”, 2016, par. 13) further lead to potential occurrences of violence against children. This is observed in Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) in which the mother character suffers from manic depression and addiction to alcohol. In the novel *Lola Rose* (2003), the pre-adolescent girl protagonist's father subjects his family to domestic violence while the mother character often abandons her children without adult supervision. Similarly in *Lily Alone* (2011), the mother of the pre-adolescent girl protagonist and her siblings leaves her children for an entire week with no childcare arrangements and limited resources. Not only that, she is involved with credit card fraud. In accordance to the definitions forwarded by UNICEF and WHO respectively, the pre-adolescent girl protagonists within the selected contemporary realistic children's novels are therefore victims of child neglect.

While the issue of child neglect continues to gain attention and awareness worldwide, it remains “complex and difficult to study” (“Child maltreatment”, 2016, par. 3). This is because “the phenomenon remains largely undocumented and underreported” (“Children from”, 2016, par. 3). Throughout its effort to protect the rights of children, UNICEF admits that

[o]ne of the limitations inherent in any attempt to document violence against children is what it leaves out: the presumably large numbers of children unable or unwilling to report their experiences [as many] victims are too young or too vulnerable to disclose their experience or to protect themselves (ibid).

Likewise in Malaysia, the “Welfare Department statistics show that the number of children in need of protection and care following abuse and neglect cases [...] has increased from 3, 257 cases in 2010 to 4, 453 cases” (Lee, 2016, par. 9) in 2015. These involve “more female children than male children in reported cases” (Lee, 2016, par. 10). However, “only extreme child abuse and neglect cases are reported [...] often involving tragic elements of disturbing injuries, sexual abuse or even death” (“Violence against”, n.d., par. 3). According to city chief police officer Datuk Mohamad Salleh, “many cases were not brought to the attention of the authorities also because of the shame and embarrassment which the victims and their families were likely to endure” (“Many child”, n.d, par. 2). This leads UNICEF to assume that “reported cases are likely to represent only 10 per cent of total cases perpetrated” (“Violence against”, n.d., par. 4). As such, although the contemporary realistic children’s texts selected for the study are set in the United Kingdom, the issues which Wilson discussed within her works remain familiar to children across the continents.

UNICEF further states that

[c]hildren who have been severely abused or neglected are often hampered in their development, experience learning difficulties and perform poorly at school. They may have low self-esteem and suffer from depression, which can lead, at worst, to risk behaviour and self-harm. Witnessing violence can cause similar distress (“Children from”, 2016, par. 2).

Likewise, DePanfilis & Dubowitz (2005) caution that “child neglect is more likely to recur than other forms of maltreatment with consequences at least as serious as with other forms of maltreatment” (p. 109). These include impaired “social interactions with both peers and adults” (Dubowitz, Black, Starr & Zuravin, 1993, p. 14) and “short- and long-term negative emotional and behavioral outcomes” (English, Thompson, Graham & Briggs, 2005, p. 193) with “long-lasting impact [...] into adulthood” (English et al, 2005, p. 191). Due to these detrimental consequences, WHO has put out an urgent call for “a multisectoral approach” (“Child maltreatment”, 2016, par. 15) to prevent child neglect. For UNICEF, these efforts should focus not only on “documenting the prevalence of violence but also understanding the underlying factors that fuel it and evaluating interventions aimed at preventing and responding to it” (“Children from”, 2016, par. 4). They include “educational measures to protect the children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation” (“Children from” 2016, par. 5). In addition, UNICEF also “promotes the advancement of research through the development of joint projects and collaboration with academic institutions and other agencies working at the international and national levels in the area of child protection” (“UNICEF seeks”, 2016, par. 9). On the local forefront, “[t]he Child Act (Amendment) 2015 was passed by [the] Dewan Rakyat [which] protects children against abuse and neglect, and guarantees their welfare” (Lee, 2016, par. 1, parenthesis original).

According to Heifer (as cited in Dubowitz et al, 1993), “child neglect occurs when those responsible, at whatever level, for meeting the basic needs of children fail to do so” (p. 11). Dubowitz et al (1993) explain that “[b]asic needs’ include adequate shelter, food, health care, clothing, education, protection and nurturance [...] ‘Adequate’ represents sufficient so as not to incur harm or significant risk of harm” (p. 12). The examples of child neglect given include supervisory neglect, abandonment / desertion, failure to provide a stable home, neglect of personal hygiene, housing hazards, nutritional neglect and educational neglect (Dubowitz et al, 1993). The study thus refers to the list and highlights the cases of abandonment within the selected novels as forms of negligence which Dolphin, Lola Rose and Lily suffer due to their mother’s irresponsibility. According to Panter-Brick & Smith (2000), the term abandonment “refers to desertion not only in a physical but also in a moral sense. Accusations of parental abandonment are often levelled at families who eschew their child-rearing responsibilities” (p. 3). This is mainly due to the respective mother characters’ illness, lack of self-control, self-centeredness and irresponsibility. Pipher (1994) asserts that “[a]dults who are struggling with their own problems such as depression, drug or alcohol addiction or crippling poverty often have no energy to parent” (p. 65).

The shared theme of child neglect is pervasive within the selected contemporary realistic children’s novels written by Wilson. The study thus examines these three titles to identify how the single mothers of the pre-adolescent girl protagonists deliberately abandon their children. Watkins (2002) observes that within such broken families, “women are often the primary culprits in everyday violence against children simply because they are the primary parental caregivers” (p. 73). Through close reading and textual analysis of the selected works, the paper discusses how the main characters manage and overcome the instances of negligence encountered. The study thus aims to forward Wilson’s contemporary realistic children’s novels as viable materials for including into the reading list of local classrooms. Scholars agree that reading such works within the classroom offers a non-threatening avenue to address relevant issues which our younger generations encounter (Stevens & Bean, 2007; Hitt, 2008; Prater et al, 2006; Wopperer, 2011; Guerra, 2012). For Prater, Johnstun, Dyches & Johnstun (2006), children’s literature can serve as a useful tool to help young readers identify with and address potential occurrences of child neglect experienced throughout their lives. Joshua & DiMenna (as cited in Prater et al 2006) further emphasize how fictional works can be utilized “to provide information or insight about problems, stimulate discussion about problems, create awareness that other people have similar problems, and in some cases provide solutions to problems” (p. 6). Moreover, Wilson’s portrayal of child characters who

are empowered despite the difficulties faced plays a role in helping real life children manoeuvre through similar circumstances (Eccleshare, 2000; Brown, 2003; Kellaway, 2003; Armitstead, 2004; Patterson, 2004; Howarth, 2006; Jardine, 2007; Williamson, 2009; Edemariam, 2010; Bankston, 2011). The research therefore hopes to instigate an awareness of the prevalence of child neglect through studying the pre-adolescent girl protagonists in Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* (1999), *Lola Rose* (2003) and *Lily Alone* (2011) which potentially leads to the empowering of children in handling the challenge as well as the implementation of necessary measures to combat the issue.

### **THE ILLUSTRATED MUM (1999)**

*The Illustrated Mum* (1999) is a book that Wilson claims to be closest to her heart because it "portrays an adolescent in a remarkably real and wrenching situation" ("The Illustrated Mum", 2005, par. 1). It is told through the first person narration of Dolphin, the 10-year-old protagonist, who lives with Marigold, her tattoo-covered mother, and Star, her 13-year-old elder sister. Marigold suffers from manic depression (Wilson, 1999, p. 252) which causes her emotional instability. The novel portrays her as a "a binge drinker, subjects the girls to dramatic, sometimes frightening mood swings, which render her by turns delusional, agitated and withdrawn" ("The Illustrated Mum", 2005, par. 1). According to Wilson (as cited in Bankston, 2011), creating *The Illustrated Mum* (1999) was

quite difficult, writing about a much-loved mother who lets her children down and suffers from mental illness and behaves very irresponsibly. I knew it was going to be a book without many laughs because there's just no way you could have a sense of humour about such a searing and worrying subject (p. 101).

The theme of abandonment is one of the main forms of child neglect apparent in the novel. Dolphin, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist, suffers abandonment from both her mother and her elder sister. On several occasions, Marigold leaves her daughters at home without any adult supervision. The first instance occurs on the evening of her 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Believing that she is entitled for a celebration in a pub, Marigold promises her daughters that she will return by 10 o'clock. However, she stays out throughout the night. Dolphin narrates: "We stayed up till midnight. Then we gave up and went to bed" (Wilson, 1999, p. 23). The following morning, Dolphin discovers that her mother remains missing. She is thus thrown into a state of anxiety: "My heart was like a little fist inside my chest, punching and punching" (Wilson, 1999, p. 25). Clearly, Marigold's deliberate abandonment of her daughters constitute negligence when they become worried about her well-being. This is made worse when the mother character returns home the following afternoon and confesses to being engrossed in partying with her friends that she forgets about her children (p. 45).

Not only that, Dolphin also finds herself increasingly marginalized by her elder sister. The pre-adolescent girl protagonist observes that Star begins to go out more often to spend time with her friends, leaving her home alone with Marigold. Due to Star's abandonment, Dolphin is forced to endure her mother's cake-baking frenzy and drunkenness: "Star went out and I stayed in with Marigold and ate raw cake and unrisen cake and burnt cake until I felt sick [...] she'd drunk several small tumblers of vodka. She poured herself another" (Wilson, 1999, pp. 50-2). Nevertheless, Dolphin also learns to take care of her mother in Star's absence, especially when Marigold injures herself (pp. 53-5). The pre-adolescent girl protagonist learns to extend empathy towards her mother when she discovers that Marigold has also been abandoned as a child: "[My mother] just didn't want me. I didn't care though. Know what I really did want? [...] A sister. I was desperate for a sister' [...] 'You're like our big sister,' I said" (Wilson, 1999, p. 71).

The second instance when Marigold leaves her daughters home alone happens on the evening of a concert by a band called Emerald City. The novel portrays Marigold as still being emotionally attached to Micky, Star's father, although he has left her before Star was born. Remembering that Emerald City is Micky's favourite band, Marigold resolves to purchase a ticket and attend the concert, hoping to reunite with him. Powerless to stop Marigold from abandoning them again, both Star and Dolphin resort to caring for themselves in her absence. Star does this by bringing Dolphin with her to MacDonald's. However, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist finds herself sidelined at the restaurant. Star abandons her younger sister "at a table in the corner" (Wilson, 1999, p. 104) while she affords all her attention to her boyfriend at a separate table. Later, Star follows him to the back alley of the shop, leaving Dolphin alone by the side of the road for a substantial amount of time. Resulting from that, Dolphin is exposed to danger and the harsh weather:

I had to hang around staring at shampoos and specs for ages. I was still hungry and my tongue was throbbing. It was so tiring standing still I eventually slid down the glass and sat on the stone pavement though the cold came straight through my jeans. It was like sitting on a vast tub of ice cream. I was shivering when Star came back at last (Wilson, 1999, p. 104).

In the second half of the novel, Marigold manages to locate Micky during the concert and brings him home in hopes of reuniting with him. However, Micky focuses his attention on spending time with his daughter, Star. When Micky invites Star to visit him in Brighton, Dolphin is again abandoned to manage their manic depressive mother alone. In the ensuing outburst of Marigold's temper, Dolphin is caught in an argument with her mother and faces the risk of being physically harmed. Resulting from the commotion, their neighbour threatens to report them to the authorities. In her mentally unstable state, Marigold forces Dolphin to accompany her on a trip to Brighton in order to locate Micky. Without any information pertaining to Micky's address or contact details, however, they wander aimlessly throughout the city. The pre-adolescent girl protagonist is subjected to hunger and thirst as well as physical exhaustion when her repeated pleas for Marigold to return home are brushed off. When Dolphin eventually breaks down from exhaustion, she is scolded and slapped by Marigold instead. This incident is evident of the trauma that the pre-adolescent girl protagonist experiences in the absence of her elder sister's protection.

Tension within the novel arises when Star decides to move in permanently with her father. Although Dolphin makes several attempts to prevent her elder sister from leaving (pp. 158; 180), Star remains adamant. In Star's absence, Dolphin experiences a sense of emptiness (p. 182) and loses her appetite (p. 184). Powerless to persuade for Star's return, Dolphin endures walking to school alone (p. 194). The story climaxes when Marigold covers herself in gloss paint, believing that Star will return if her tattoos are no longer visible. Desperate, Dolphin is forced to seek help by calling the ambulance. As the paramedics prepare to send Marigold to the hospital, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist lies to them and her neighbour in order to prevent them from discovering that she is alone (pp. 214-6). Unable to secure temporary accommodation at her classmate Oliver's, house, Dolphin fears having to manage herself alone in the empty house. The story takes a positive turn, however, when Oliver helps Dolphin to locate her biological father, Michael, who takes over the situation. The novel closes with the pre-adolescent girl protagonist being placed in foster care as Michael begins legal procedures to adopt her (p. 259) while Marigold recovers from her illness. This ensures that Dolphin no longer experiences abandonment as she also reunites with Star in the foster home, where her well-being is taken care of.

### **LOLA ROSE (2003)**

Similar to other contemporary realistic children's novels selected for the study, Wilson's *Lola Rose* (2003) also contains elements of child neglect in the form of abandonment. The novel charts the journey of 11-year-old Jayni who lives with her father, Jay, mother Nikki, and 5-year-old younger brother, Kenny. Jay is portrayed as a physically abusive husband who subjects his wife to domestic violence. Resulting from that, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist is subjected to frequent abandonment by her mother, Vicky. Lola Rose narrates: "[Vicky'd] run off before, several times, sometimes when we were living back with Dad, sometimes since. She was often away for ages but she always came back [...] But I still worried" (Wilson, 2003, pp. 161-2). In their attempt to formulate a definition of child neglect, Dubowitz et al (1993) consider the "frequency [...] as well as the likelihood and severity of harm" (p. 18) imposed upon children. In view of that, Vicky's repeated acts of abandonment become a form of negligence on the pre-adolescent girl protagonist when she is made to worry about her mother's well-being instead of being cared for and nurtured. Emotional abandonment also occurs in the beginning of the novel where Vicky is portrayed as a promiscuous character who is involved in extramarital affairs while her husband is away. This causes her to neglect caring for her children (p. 16). Not only that, Vicky turns to drinking whenever she is scared or unhappy. This is apparent on several occasions within the novel (pp. 26; 164; 179; 258). Due to that, Lola Rose becomes the involuntary guardian of her younger brother whenever their mother is physically and / or emotionally absent.

When the domestic abuse escalates and Jayni is victimized one evening, Nikki runs away from her husband with her two children. Using the £10, 000 that she wins from a scratch card lottery ticket, the mother character leads the family to London to start a new life. She also changes their names to prevent Jay from tracking them. Nikki takes on the pseudonym Victoria (Vicky) Luck while Jayni adopts the glamorous-sounding Lola Rose. Kenny decides to call himself Kendall<sup>1</sup>. Despite their shift to London, Vicky continues to neglect her children. On the first night of their escape, the mother character contemplates leaving her children in the hotel room so that she can head out to buy a new pack of cigarettes. However, Lola Rose manages to stop her mother from abandoning them (p. 45). Notwithstanding that, Vicky leaves her children on the evening of their shift into the new flat when her cigarettes run out again. Although she promises her daughter that she will return promptly, Vicky stays out until midnight. Her prolonged absence throws Lola Rose into a state of panic and anxiety. With Kendall under her care, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist is torn between heading out to look for her mother or remain at home to accompany her younger brother (p. 87). She eventually decides to stay at home, enduring the sense of abandonment by distracting herself through art and making tea (pp. 86-9).

As Lola Rose tries to retaliate against her mother's irresponsibility the following morning, Vicky reveals that she will begin working evening shifts at a nearby pub, thus leaving both her and Kendall home alone more often. Vicky also deliberately abandons her children on their first day of enrolment into a new school (p. 99) and when she begins a relationship with an art student named Jake (p. 110). Due to Vicky's increasing frequency of abandonment, Lola Rose is forced to shoulder the responsibility of caring for both herself and her younger brother: "I hated her being out so much. I put Kendall to bed about eight but stayed up until Mum came home, even though she sometimes didn't make it back till midnight" (Wilson, 2003, p. 107). On occasions when Vicky engages in arguments with Jake, she leaves the house in anger, abandoning the children with her boyfriend: "She didn't come back for tea. Jake didn't seem to care too much [...] He went on moodily sketching until way past tea time. I made baked beans on toast for Kendall and me" (Wilson, 2003, p. 159). When Vicky discovers that she has a lump on her breast, Jake uses the excuse to leave her after realizing that she has run out of money. Lola Rose is thus relegated to her mother's negligence and abandonment.

The situation intensifies when Vicky is admitted into the hospital to surgically remove a lump on her breast. Without any childcare arrangements, Lola Rose is overwhelmed by the abandonment that she "burst[s] into tears" (Wilson, 2003, p. 186). The pre-adolescent girl protagonist is also unable to seek help from their surrounding community for fear that Vicky will be reported to the authorities for her negligence, resulting in the children being sent into care (p. 199). As Vicky's hospital stay is extended for an indefinite period of time (p. 205), the children soon run out of money and food supplies to sustain themselves. Realizing that she is powerless manage her mother's abandonment, Lola Rose reaches out to her mother's long lost elder sister, Auntie Barbara for assistance. Auntie Barbara's appearance within the novel thus provides the assurance which Lola Rose desperate needs. She looks after the children as Vicky recovers in the hospital: "I'm staying to look after you, darling. Until your mum gets better [...] I'm your auntie. You're *family*" (Wilson, 2003, pp. 222-3, italics original). Unlike Vicky who constantly

<sup>1</sup> The discussion will henceforth refer to the characters' newly adopted names.

subjects her children to negligence and abandonment, Auntie Barbara spends quality time with Lola Rose and her younger brother, ensuring that they are well-fed (pp. 226-30). She further accompanies them to and from their school (p. 235). When Vicky begins her chemotherapy and radiation treatment, Auntie Barbara pledges to look after the pre-adolescent girl protagonist and her younger brother: "I'll be here for you, Lola Rose, no matter what." (Wilson, 2003, p. 259). This is solidified when Vicky entrusts her children to her elder sister in the event that her condition worsens (p. 262). The novel closes with Auntie Barbara inviting the family to live with her, ensuring that the children will never again be abandoned.

### LILY ALONE (2011)

Like the other novels analyzed for the study, the theme of abandonment features significantly within *Lily Alone* (2011). The story centers on Lily, an 11-year-old girl who lives with her mother, Kate, and her 3 younger siblings, Baxter, Bliss, and Pixie. Baxter and Bliss are 6-year-old twins fathered by Mikey, who is also Lily's step-father. The youngest child in the family is 3-year-old Pixie, whose father, "druggie Paul" (Wilson, 2011, p. 29) has just died. The novel opens with the pre-adolescent girl protagonist narrating how her mother often abandons them while she runs errands (pp. 4-5) and when she began dating Paul (p. 5). However, while all three pre-adolescent girl protagonists in the selected contemporary realistic children's novels are affected by the abandonment of their respective mothers, Lily in *Lily Alone* (2011) assumes the blame of negligence occurring throughout the novel. She states this in the opening statement of the novel: "It was my fault" (Wilson, 2011, p. 1). Due to that, she constantly tries to reverse the consequences of abandonment affecting her and her younger siblings. Lily learns to manage her younger siblings in Kate's absence. When Kate spirals into depression after the death of her husband, Lily persuades her mother to visit her friends at the pub as a way to cope with her grief. In order to convince her mother, Lily offers to stay at home and babysit the children (p. 4). However, when Kate fails to return by midnight, Lily becomes anxious over her mother's safety (p. 19). Despite that, she tries to calm herself down: "I was the oldest and bravest. What was I doing, weeping into Mum's cushion? I turned it over, wiped my eyes" (Wilson, 2011, p. 21).

When Kate eventually returns at dawn, she appears drunk and exhibits neither guilt nor remorse for abandoning her children. Not only that, she has become romantically involved with Gordon, a 19-year-old student whom she meets at a club (pp. 23-4). In her desire to preserve their budding relationship, Kate conceals the existence of her children from him. This eventually leads her to abandon her children in order to spend time with Gordon: "It's not that I *want* to leave you on your own, but I haven't got any option, have I? And guys like Gordon don't often come along. You have to grab them when you can!" (Wilson, 2011, p. 44, italics original). Due to that, the instances during which Lily is left alone to care for her younger siblings in Kate's absence thereby increases. Tension within the story arises when Kate decides to join Gordon for a week-long trip to Spain without her children. Although aware that her deliberate act of abandoning them constitutes a crime punishable by law (p. 57), the mother character shows no effort to secure childcare arrangements for Lily and her younger siblings. Despite several attempts to prevent her mother from leaving (pp. 54; 61), Lily fails when Kate silences her instead: "'But, Mum-' [...] 'You shut up.' So that's what I did [...] I let her carry on packing" (Wilson, 2011, p. 62). Prior to her departure, Kate further expresses her confidence at Lily's capability to manage the children in her absence: "'You'll be fine. I know you will'" (Wilson, 2011, p. 63).

On numerous occasions when Lily experiences fear and uncertainty in Kate's absence, she learns to strengthen herself:

*I wanted to shout and question and cry. I felt like sinking to my knees and howling like a baby. But I couldn't. I was the eldest. I had to look after them* (Wilson, 2011, p. 65, italics original).

*I had to sit up properly and start reading quick to stop myself crying* (Wilson, 2011, p. 74).

*I was learning that the trick to stop feeling scared was to keep busy busy busy* (Wilson, 2011, p. 81).

*I wanted to crouch down and whimper [...] but I made myself organize the kids instead* (Wilson, 2011, p. 87).

*I started thumping my forehead to try to stop all the worries. I shut my eyes and tried to invent an alternative world* (Wilson, 2011, p. 120)

She also draws examples from the fictional characters in her younger sister's book of fairy tales:

*Bliss' old fairy tales were strangely comforting. Mothers sent their children off into wild woods where there were wolves, they locked them up at the top of towers, they poisoned them with apples. No fairy-tale child would so much raise an eyebrow at a mother going off on holiday for a week. Maybe it was no big deal at all* (Wilson, 2011, p. 74).

In addition to that, Lily strategizes various ways to keep the children occupied in order to distract them from thinking about Kate. She does this by encouraging them to draw (p. 65), feeding them (pp. 67-9), bringing them to the neighbourhood parks (pp. 80; 93-4; 101) and playing games with them (p. 105). By regulating her fears, Lily becomes more efficient in coping with her mother's abandonment: "I'd done it. I'd got them all happy and distracted for the third evening in a row" (Wilson, 2011, p. 66).

Not only that, Lily has to ensure that the authorities do not find out about Kate's negligence and send them to children's homes. In order to prevent her younger siblings from accidentally revealing their predicament to their school teachers, she decides for them to skip school until Kate's return (p. 75). The pre-adolescent girl protagonist also warns them about the consequences of being discovered (p. 86). Throughout their encounters with the surrounding community members, Lily concocts multiple lies to

avoid being interrogated (pp. 84; 98-9; 107-8; 111; 151-3; 174; 198). Her effort also secures the trust, obedience and cooperation of her younger siblings (pp. 86; 101-2). These cumulated examples elevate her sense of confidence to deal with their mother's abandonment. Kate's negligence becomes more apparent when she phones her children from Spain and makes no confirmation of her return: "*I'll be back soon. Maybe the weekend, whenever*" [...] Did that mean she hadn't even booked her flight yet? [...] How could she leave us like this?" (Wilson, 2011, p. 116, italics original). Realizing that they are abandoned for an indefinite period of time, Lily breaks down from the weight of her responsibilities (p. 121). In this scene, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist receives assurance from Bliss and Baxter:

"You're great at looking after us. Better than Mum" (Wilson, 2011, p. 121).

"I'm sick of being the mum." [...] It's OK then, *I'll be mum tomorrow*," [Bliss] said" (Wilson, 2011, pp. 121-2, italics original).

"[Mum] won't be back, not yet," I said. My voice wobbled. Baxter slid his hand into mine, surprising me. "We don't need her back. It's more fun without her," he said (Wilson, 2011, p. 154).

Through these examples, Lily braves herself to continue caring for her younger siblings in their mother's absence (p. 123).

On the other hand, Lily's prolonged absence from school causes concern for her class teacher, Mr Abbott. When he visits their home and volunteers to help them, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist views it as a threat instead (pp. 163-4). The following morning, Lily plans for the children to camp in the neighbourhood park until Kate returns (p. 169). She also ensures that they remain undetected by instructing them not to draw attention to themselves (pp. 183-4). Throughout their hideout in the park, the children learn to keep a lookout for one another. Bliss locates their hiding place in a hollow tree (p. 192) while Lily prepares the spot comfortable for sleeping (p. 194). She further protects her younger siblings from the park's wildlife (pp. 227-8) and keeps them from getting into trouble at the park café (p. 234). Through her resourcefulness, Lily receives praises from Baxter: "You were dead brilliant, Lily," said Baxter" (Wilson, 2011, p. 198). This further builds her sense of agency to endure the negligence experienced:

I felt a little surge of pride. I was coping splendidly. I'd kept all three kids safe and fed and happy (Wilson, 2011, p. 201).

Maybe it really *was* down to me now. I was Lilymum and these were my kids. Baxter had calmed down a bit and Bliss wasn't so timid and Pixie had stopped being a baby and become a real little girl. I was looking after them, finding them food, organizing their games, telling them stories, taking them for lovely long walks, finding the magic garden for them (Wilson, 2011, p. 246, italics original).

By the end of the week, Lily discreetly goes home to check if Kate has returned. However, she is not only greeted by her mother's continued absence but also informed by her neighbour that the authorities have been looking for their family: "[Kate's] done a runner, hasn't she? We've had all sorts round here, knocking at your door – teachers, social workers, even the police." I felt sick" (Wilson, 2011, pp. 251-2). Resulting from that, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist is reduced to a state of fear:

I hid inside that horrible smelly [dustbin] shed and cried. I'd let myself believe Mum really would be back and yet she was obviously still in Spain, not giving a toss about us. And Mr Abbott had clearly got suspicious and told tales, and now everyone was after us. We'd get taken into care and Mum would be put in prison (Wilson, 2011, p. 253).

Maybe we could *never* go back. We'd have to live in the park for ever. When I went to sleep that night I imagined us in five years' time, still living here (Wilson, 2011, p. 258, italics original).

...when I woke in the night I felt small and scared again. I wondered how on earth I was going to manage (Wilson, 2011, pp. 259-60).

These examples show how Kate's abandonment affects Lily. She further narrates: "I didn't want to be the eldest any more, looking after everyone. I seemed to do that even when Mum *was* around. I wanted someone to look after *me*" (Wilson, 2011, p. 261, italics original).

The climax of the story occurs when Bliss falls from a tree in the park and breaks her leg. Powerless to help her sister, Lily stops a passing car to ask for assistance (p. 268). From this scene onwards, the children are accompanied by the lady driver who remains with them until the ambulance arrives (p. 269). Although fearful of revealing their circumstances to the paramedics, Lily eventually gives in and tells them the truth about Kate's abandonment (p. 271). Despite that, she still endeavours to defend her mother's negligence in order to prevent the children from being sent to children's homes (pp. 281; 292). She also stays with her younger siblings in the hospital (pp. 284-5), an example indicating how Lily does not abandon the children like her mother does.

When Kate eventually returns from Spain, she is charged with "child neglect, abandonment" (Wilson, 2011, p. 279). In spite of Lily's attempts to keep the family together (pp. 281; 284-5; 292), the children are placed in different homes and orphanage(s) while Kate awaits the verdict of her charges. Nevertheless, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist's well-being is taken care of as she no longer suffers from her mother's negligence and abandonment. Through her caretaker, Lily is assured of her younger siblings' safety (p. 293) while Mr Abbott arranges for her to visit them (p. 301). Moreover, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist receives

praises from the social worker (p. 285), her class teacher (p. 301) and her mother (p. 306) for her ability to manage the children throughout the ordeal. The novel ends on a hopeful tone as Lily envisions the family reunited. On top of that, Kate pledges that she is “never ever going to leave [the children] again, not even for a night” (Wilson, 2011, p. 307). The discussion thus shows how Lily experiences her mother’s act of abandonment. Although she is powerless to prevent Kate’s negligence, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist eventually learns to manage and overcome the challenge encountered.

## CONCLUSION

In accordance to the objectives of the research, the paper discusses how child neglect is portrayed in the selected contemporary realistic children’s works authored by Wilson. Despite the concerns surrounding the novels as addressed at the outset of the paper, the discussion argues for the importance of analyzing Wilson’s works as it brings to light how each of the pre-adolescent girl protagonist from the selected books encounter abandonment by their respective mothers. According to Dubowitz et al (1993), “omission in care that harms or endangers a child constitutes neglect” (p. 18). Despite that, Musa (2014) notes that “children in [Malaysia] are not being protected as they should due to a lack of awareness and respect for children’s right” (par. 1). This is corroborated by Adnan (2010) who observes that Malaysian parents are generally oblivious to the laws protecting the rights of children. With the statistics of child abuse cases increasing at an alarming rate in both Malaysia and other parts of the world (Miko, 2016; Idris, 2017; Karim, 2017; Kumar, 2017; Nazlina, 2017; Nelson, 2017; Povera, 2017), there is an urgent need to address the mounting challenges which our children face. According to the founder of “PS the Children, Malaysia’s biggest NGO dealing with child abuse [...] ‘There needs to be improvement in the criminal justice system if we want to encourage more people to report [child abuse cases], otherwise we will re-victimize the child’” (as cited in Ananthalakshmi, 2016, par. 14). This is because children victimized by parents through negligence carry long-term consequences from the trauma which last into adulthood. Resulting from that, the society and nation as a whole are affected.

The study of Wilson’s works therefore serves as a “reminder of the destructive effect of family tragedy on the young” (Tucker & Gamble, 2001, p. 79). Exposure to these realities through Wilson’s works helps readers to see

how self-destructive some people’s lives can be. She also reveals how the seeds of such self-destruction are often sown early on in life. This is [...] very important for such young characters later on, and for those who care for them, to work together towards establishing a better way of getting along (Tucker & Gamble, 2001, p. 73).

For this reason, the paper’s second objective is to address how the pre-adolescent girl protagonists in the works cope with the negligence encountered. By analyzing how the fictional characters overcome the abandonment experienced, young readers are able to emulate the sense of empowerment shown when threatened with similar challenges. As Pipher (1994) believes, children learn to recognize how “adversity builds character” (p. 281) through appreciating contemporary realistic texts. This equips them to better manoeuvre the various contemporary realistic issues which threatens their growing up years.

The scarcity of local literary children’s works addressing contemporary realistic issues with equal substance and depth such as Wilson’s makes them viable resources for local classroom reading. However, it is important to note some limitations to these works. Due to the author’s preference for writing within familiar grounds to authenticate the narrative voice of her characters (Boland, 2003), Wilson sets her stories in England with pre-adolescent girl protagonists of Caucasian origin. This may pose some cultural differences to local readers. Furthermore, the contemporary realistic issues discussed within Wilson’s works require a certain level of critical thinking for the readers to fully benefit from discussing the works. Owing to that, the books are more suitable for urban classrooms with readers who have satisfactory command of the English language. Unfortunately, the scarcity of local literary children’s works addressing contemporary realistic issues with equal substance and depth such as Wilson’s makes them feasible resources for local classroom reading. Moreover, the theme of negligence discussed within the paper remains similar globally. As such, the paper advocates for the reading of Wilson’s contemporary realistic children’s novels as a strategy to create public awareness and educate children on how to identify the traits of negligence which they themselves or their friends may experience. Concluding, the research thus strengthens Guerra’s (2012) claim that “[l]iterature is powerful in its capacity to introduce new ideas and contribute to belief formation” (p. 386) while empowering children to overcome the threats of child neglect.

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