

THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES: LITERATURE AS A BRIDGE TO UNDERSTANDING POST-TRAUMA

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Abstract

Children's literature serves as a crucial medium for helping young readers make sense of complex emotional and social realities. Traditionally, early childhood literature has steered clear of themes related to war trauma, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, recent socio-political events have catalyzed a shift in Israeli children's literature, resulting in the emergence of narratives that engage with the psychological aftermath of war within the family unit. This study examines a selection of contemporary Hebrew picture books that depict fathers returning from combat with PTSD, exploring how these texts introduce young children to the emotional and behavioral transformations experienced by their caregivers. Through literary analysis, the study identifies a shared six-stage narrative structure across these books, mapping the progression from pre-war stability to post-war familial adjustment. Key motifs such as emotional distance, behavioral changes, and the child's perspective on parental trauma are explored, highlighting how these narratives provide a framework for early emotional literacy. The findings suggest that these books function not only as therapeutic tools for young readers but also as educational instruments that foster emotional resilience, empathy, and intergenerational dialogue. By integrating contemporary trauma discourse into early childhood literature, these texts challenge conventional boundaries of children's storytelling while offering educators and parents new pathways for discussing difficult topics with young learners. The study concludes that literature can serve as a safe space for children to process and articulate emotions related to familial trauma, reinforcing its role in social-emotional learning and trauma-informed education.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, children's literature, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed pedagogy, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).*

1. Introduction

Children's literature has long functioned as a space where emotional, social, and cognitive development begins to take shape. While war and conflict have been mainstays in Israeli cultural production, early childhood literature traditionally skirted direct engagement with the psychological consequences of combat. This changed markedly following the Iron Swords War (October 2023), when the traumatic impact of war entered the civilian sphere with unprecedented intensity. In response, a wave of Hebrew picture books emerged, portraying children navigating life with a post-traumatized parent—usually a father, who returned from combat with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. These texts offer a new literary framework for understanding familial trauma, childhood emotional literacy, and the evolving discourse on masculinity and caregiving in Israeli society.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched a surprise assault on Israeli communities near Gaza, resulting in the murder of 1,163 civilians—including 38 children—and the abduction of 255 individuals, among them 42 children†. The war that followed, known as the Iron Swords War, exacted a heavy psychological toll. More than 6,400 applications for psychiatric disability were filed by soldiers

* The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for PTSD: Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence; Presence of one (or more) intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred; Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event(s) occurred; Negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred; Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred; Duration of the disturbance is more than 1 month The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning; The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance or another medical condition. See: American Psychiatric Association 2013, 271-272.

† The Institute for National Security Studies, "Iron Swords – A real-time updated situational assessment."

within the first 14 months, nearly half by reservists[‡]. These figures reflect not only the trauma experienced in combat zones, but also the emotional aftermath reverberating through homes, families, and the youngest members of Israeli society.

To fully appreciate the emergence of post-trauma narratives in contemporary Israeli children's literature, it is essential to understand the cultural backdrop against which these stories are told. For decades, the foundational ethos of Israeli society celebrated the image of the fearless, self-sacrificing soldier. Rooted in early Zionist ideals, this figure was emotionally stoic and physically resilient, embodying the collective imperative to defend the land at all costs. Within this framework, psychological suffering was rarely acknowledged, and trauma—particularly post-trauma—was stigmatized or silenced altogether[§].

This silence began to crack following the Yom Kippur War (1973), when public disillusionment and high casualty rates prompted a cultural shift toward recognizing the individual costs of war. Subsequent conflicts, including the First Lebanon War (1982) and the Second Intifada (2000–2005), further destabilized the myth of the unbreakable fighter. Mental health services for veterans expanded, and PTSD was officially recognized as a legitimate outcome of combat stress. Still, these shifts were slow to permeate early childhood literature, which remained cautious in its portrayal of vulnerability and psychological rupture.

The Iron Swords War (2023–2025) marked a turning point. The war's unprecedented psychological toll on both soldiers and civilians, combined with widespread media coverage and national trauma, catalyzed an urgent need for new emotional tools—especially for children^{**}. Literature stepped into this space, offering not only stories, but symbols, metaphors, and emotional scripts for families grappling with invisible wounds.

The recent wave of PTSD-themed picture books reflects a profound transformation: from a culture that once suppressed emotional pain to one that increasingly values emotional transparency, intergenerational dialogue, and collective healing. These stories do not reject heroism—they redefine it. In their pages, strength is measured not by silence, but by the willingness to speak, to feel, and to stay connected despite the scars of war.

2. Post-Trauma as a narrative framework

This study analyzes the six picture books for early childhood (ages 4–7) published between late 2023 and early 2025: *Papa Tank*; *Posti and Me*; *What Happened to Or's Dad?*; *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?*; *Daddy Postamaty* and *Menahem's Secret Soldier*.

Despite their stylistic differences, these works share a five-stage narrative arc that maps the emotional transformation of the family following a father's return from war with PTSD. This structure serves both literary and pedagogical purposes: it renders trauma comprehensible for young readers and models emotional adaptation for families experiencing similar realities. Each stage contributes to a gradual unfolding of psychological insight and emotional literacy through metaphor, imagery, and dialogue. By drawing on metaphors, symbolic visuals, and empathetic dialogue, these stories translate adult psychological experiences into child-accessible terms. The five-stage narrative structure is as follows:

- (1) *Pre-war stability: The idealized father figure*: Each story begins with a depiction of a harmonious family life, emphasizing the father's emotional availability, competence, and warmth. This phase is crucial in establishing the father as a nurturing and engaged figure—often portrayed as a hero in the child's eyes. For instance, in *Or's Dad*, the father is remembered for telling bedtime stories and laughing during playtime. In *Daddy Postamaty*, the father is described as “superhuman” capable of superhuman feats like removing lice without causing pain, eating spicy food “without steam coming out of his mouth,” and inventing endlessly long stories over a cup of coffee. This idyllic beginning not only sets the emotional tone for the rupture that follows, but also anchors the child's deep longing for the “before” version of the parent.
- (2) *Post-return disruption: Emotional withdrawal and change*: The father's return marks a sudden shift in tone. He is physically present but emotionally inaccessible. The texts illustrate this change through sensory cues—raised voices, blank stares, avoidance of touch, and hypersensitivity to noise. In *Papa Tank*, a playful invitation from the child triggers an outburst of anger. In *Posti and Me*, the child describes the father's emotional absence by referring to an invisible companion named “Posti” who “takes over” her father. The metaphor externalizes the trauma, allowing the

[‡] Peleg-Gabai 2025, pp. 3.

[§] Somer & Bleich, 2005.

^{**} Between October 7, 2023, and May 2005, approximately 143,000 civilians were evacuated from the Gaza Strip, and 68,500 residents were displaced from northern Israel. Over 35,500 rockets, missiles, and UAVs were launched at Israeli territory, triggering more than 36,143 alerts that forced civilians into shelters. In that same period, 8,670 terrorist attacks were recorded. This accumulation of data testifies to the magnitude of national trauma—whether direct, indirect, secondary, or reactivated—experienced by millions of Israeli citizens.

child (and reader) to understand the father's behavior as the result of an inner struggle rather than rejection or indifference.

- (3) *The child's confusion: Emotional disorientation and self-Blame:* Unable to make sense of the father's altered behavior, the child begins to feel confused, anxious, and at times responsible. The invisible nature of PTSD exacerbates this confusion—there is no visible injury to explain the pain. In *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?*, Nir, the child protagonist, questions why his father no longer smiles or celebrates with him. In *Or's Dad*, the child asks, "How can he be hurt if he didn't lose a leg or a finger?" This phase captures the destabilizing effect of trauma on a child's worldview and the challenge of maintaining attachment in the face of incomprehensible change.
- (4) *A search for understanding: Inquiry, imagination, and dialogue:* Driven by confusion and concern, the child embarks on a quest to understand the transformation. This journey may involve asking questions, seeking explanations from other family members, or retreating into imaginative reinterpretations of reality. In *Papa Tank*, Yuval processes his father's anger through a dream in which a threatening tank appears in the family kitchen. The tank eventually transforms into "Papa Tank," a softened version that joins the family on a beach outing. Similarly, in *Menahem's Secret Soldier*, a traumatic encounter between a preschool child and a war-affected neighbor is reframed by the teacher into a story about "Menahem's secret soldier," enabling the child to approach the frightening experience through the lens of narrative and empathy. This stage reflects the child's efforts to build a new framework for understanding the altered familial world his active role in constructing meaning—a developmental task that literature helps scaffold through symbolic language and emotional metaphors.
- (5) *Emotional reconnection: Mutual recognition and integration:* In the final stage, emotional breakthroughs occur. The father articulates his pain, often using metaphors that align with the child's earlier attempts at understanding. The child, in turn, offers empathy and reaffirmation of love. In *Papa Tank*, the father says, "Sometimes I feel like a tank with sharp edges," echoing the child's metaphor and transforming it into a shared emotional language. In *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?*, the father and child find moments of connection despite ongoing challenges. These resolutions are not conclusive "happy endings" but open-ended moments of recognition and growth, where trauma becomes a visible, speakable presence within the family—not a rupture, but a reality to be integrated.

This five-stage model mirrors real psychological processes of trauma adaptation: from shock and disruption to emotional meaning-making and partial healing. By presenting trauma not as an abrupt rupture but as a process, these books offer children not only validation but hope—anchoring pain in relationship, memory in imagination, and suffering in shared narrative.

3. Family at the heart of healing: Navigating trauma together

Across the examined picture books, fathers return from war not as triumphant heroes, but as emotionally distant figures struggling to reconnect with their children. They are often depicted as withdrawn, irritable, and overwhelmed by everyday stimuli—startled by noise, disturbed by light, or unable to participate in family life. This emotional detachment is not portrayed as rejection, but as the visible effect of invisible wounds.

Many of these fathers express an internal conflict: a longing to fulfill their parental role, coupled with a deep sense of inadequacy. In *Daddy Postamaty*, the father likens his emotions to a volcano erupting inside him. In *Papa Tank*, the father acknowledges, "Sometimes I really do feel like a tank—with sharp edges that can hurt." These metaphors help children understand that the father's behavior is not rooted in anger or disinterest, but in pain and self-protection. This tension between the father's past identity and his current fragility shapes a fractured sense of self. Yet, even in moments of withdrawal, the fathers express a desire to return—to themselves and to their families. These admissions become turning points, allowing children to see their parents not as frightening strangers, but as wounded loved ones striving for connection. Through this lens, emotional vulnerability becomes a pathway to relational repair.

The children in these books are not passive observers but active interpreters of their environment. Their perspective drives the emotional narrative, reflecting confusion, guilt, and resilience. In *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?*, Nir's efforts to reawaken his father's joy reveal both emotional loss and persistent love. In *Daddy Postamaty*, Yair embarks on a metaphorical journey to understand his father's "invisible wounds," guided by questions, memories, and conversations with family members. These child protagonists perform a mediating role between silence and dialogue. Their emotional labor—asking, imagining, translating—creates a space for healing and reflection, both within the narrative and for the young readers themselves.

A prominent feature across the books is the role of the mother as emotional anchor and interpreter. She often bridges the gap between the traumatized father and the confused child, offering explanations that protect the child's sense of security while validating the father's struggle. In *Or's Dad*, the mother explains the concept of a "wound in the heart," helping the child reframe fear as empathy. In *Daddy Postamaty*, she gently encourages the father to reflect on his reactions, modeling emotional intelligence and co-regulation.

Through these portrayals, the books construct an interdependent family model, where healing is shared and communication is central. They emphasize the mother's dual role as stabilizer and translator, carrying both the emotional and practical burdens of maintaining familial cohesion in the aftermath of trauma.

4. From silence to dialogue: Pedagogical and therapeutic potential

These picture books reject silence as a viable coping strategy. Instead, they promote gradual, developmentally appropriate dialogue. Emotional expression is scaffolded through metaphors, narrative resolution, and therapeutic language. For instance, in *Menachem's Secret Soldier*, the community's recognition of a war-affected neighbor fosters empathy and reintegration, suggesting that healing is not solely a private endeavor but a collective responsibility. The use of imagination—such as tanks that turn gentle or invisible wounds that speak—provides children with psychological distance to engage emotionally without being overwhelmed. Furthermore, the normalization of therapy in couple of the books destigmatizes mental health care and models help-seeking behavior.

Perhaps most striking is the challenge these texts pose to traditional models of Israeli masculinity. Lidor Leibovitz, the author of *Posti and Me* and a veteran with PTSD, recounts his own experience after the birth of his daughter^{††}: "The first three months after Noga was born brought me to the edge [...] It felt like an out-of-body experience [...] I didn't recognize myself. The container was full." Even routine events—such as a birthday party at kindergarten—become overwhelming, prompting the father's withdrawal from social life.

The archetype of the emotionally silent, heroic fighter is gradually replaced by a figure capable of expressing pain, seeking help, and maintaining relationships. Trauma is not framed as failure, but as part of the emotional cost of war. "This is the story of many families," asserts Leibovitch^{††}, "It is the story of the costs of living in Israel, of serving in the military, of protecting the country—and of being wounded in the process. This is what the price of military service looks like." In *Papa Tank*, for instance, the father's confession of feeling like a "sharp-edged tank" is met with empathy, not rejection. His emotional openness is positioned as a new form of courage.

This reframing allows children to hold multiple truths: to be scared and loving, to feel grief and pride. The books thus function as cultural interventions, expanding the possibilities for emotional expression and masculine identity in a society deeply shaped by military service.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of PTSD-themed picture books in Israel following the Iron Swords War represents a watershed moment in children's literature. These texts do more than narrate trauma—they mediate it. By foregrounding the child's perspective, acknowledging familial rupture, and promoting relational repair, they offer a blueprint for emotional resilience in the face of psychological disruption.

Beyond their literary merit, these books serve vital pedagogical and therapeutic functions. They equip educators, parents, and children with language, imagery, and empathy to address the emotional legacies of conflict. Most importantly, they affirm that healing begins not in silence, but in story.

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