

Chapter # 19

THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

Literature as a bridge to understanding PTSD

Yaakova Sacerdoti

Levinsky-Wingate Academic College, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article examines a corpus of Israeli picture books for children aged 4–7 that depict fathers coping with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Written and published in direct response to the October 7, 2023 attacks and the ensuing Iron Swords War, these six works constitute the only literary corpus to date that addresses paternal combat-related PTSD in Israeli children's literature. They mark a profound cultural shift, challenging established motifs of heroism and sacrifice alongside the broader national ethos that has long shaped Israeli narratives for the young. The analysis considers these six books: *Papa Tank* (Sosonovsky, 2023), *Posti and Me* (Leibovitz & Cohen-Leibovitz, 2025), *What Happened to Or's Dad?* (Brosh, 2024), *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?* (Tzvi, 2024), *Daddy Postamaty* (Zerach, 2024), and *Menachem's Secret Soldier* (Ramati, 2024). Together, these books trace how trauma reshapes family life - from initial harmony through paternal withdrawal and children's emotional disorientation to tentative understanding and open-ended recognition. By translating complex psychological realities into symbolic and accessible forms, the corpus enables young readers to perceive war and recovery through a child's eyes, foregrounding young children's emotional interpretations and coping strategies. These works reconfigure the canonical figure of the stoic "Israeli fighter," redefining heroism to include vulnerability, empathy, and relational resilience. Beyond the Israeli context, the study contributes to broader academic and pedagogical discourse on trauma, illustrating how children's literature can serve as a cross-cultural and therapeutic medium that equips young readers, especially those growing up amid conflict, with tools for dialogue, emotional literacy, and resilience.

Keywords: picture books, paternal PTSD, children's literature, pedagogy of war, trauma narratives, child perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

When children grow up amidst wars and political conflicts, children's literature is inevitably called upon to mediate experiences of trauma. Israeli children's literature (hereafter: "the literature") is no exception; from its inception in the early twentieth century, it was compelled to grapple with the fears, losses, and devastation generated by the Arab-Israeli conflict, while reflecting the prevailing sociocultural ideologies and norms in which it was produced.

While the literature has long addressed themes of war, bereavement, and national ethos, the aftermath of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Iron Swords War generated a literary development without precedent: the publication of six picture books for early childhood that directly confront paternal combat-related PTSD. These works - *Papa Tank* (Sosonovsky, 2023), *Posti and Me* (Leibovitz & Cohen-Leibovitz, 2025), *What Happened to Or's Dad?* (Brosh, 2024), *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?* (Tzvi, 2024), *Daddy Postamaty* (Zerach, 2024), and *Menachem's Secret Soldier* (Ramati, 2024) - constitute the only existing corpus in Israeli children's literature to explicitly represent paternal combat-related PTSD for

readers aged 4–7. Earlier works occasionally alluded to the psychological toll of war, but none depicted post-trauma directly; the emergence of this corpus thus marks a significant cultural and literary shift.

The publication of these works also signals a broader cultural transformation. By depicting fathers who struggle emotionally, withdraw, seek help, and articulate vulnerability, the books challenge the long-standing ideal of the stoic, emotionally restrained "Israeli fighter." They introduce a reconfigured model of heroism grounded in emotional honesty, relational responsibility, and the courage to confront invisible wounds. In doing so, the corpus expands the representational boundaries of Israeli children's literature and reshapes the cultural imagination surrounding fatherhood in times of war.

This article examines how these six picture books reflect and reshape cultural understandings of paternal trauma in contemporary Israel. It analyzes the narrative, visual, and symbolic strategies through which the texts present PTSD to young children and explores how these representations mediate fear, empathy, and resilience within families. By situating the corpus within historical, psychological, and literary contexts, the study demonstrates how children's literature has become a key site for negotiating the emotional and ethical challenges of life in a war-torn society.

2. BACKGROUND

On Saturday morning, October 7, 2023, at 6:32 a.m., Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched a coordinated surprise attack on Israel, targeting both civilian communities and IDF bases through a combination of artillery fire and ground infiltration. The assault involved widespread atrocities, resulting in the deaths of 1,163 people, including 38 children, and the abduction of 255 individuals, among them 42 children. At 10:26 a.m., the IDF spokesperson announced the launch of Operation Iron Swords, soon followed by a northern front opened by Hezbollah. What began as a military operation rapidly evolved into the prolonged Iron Swords War.

Between October 2023 and November 2025, approximately 143,000 civilians were evacuated from the Gaza envelope and 68,500 from northern Israel. Over this period, more than 37,500 rockets, missiles, and UAVs were launched into Israeli territory, generating over 59,600 alerts that repeatedly sent civilians into shelters (INSS, 2025). Calls to ERAN, Israel's national emotional first-aid hotline, surpassed half a million, with many callers describing their experience as a "pressure cooker", a metaphor for the cumulative strain of prolonged uncertainty and danger (ERAN, 2025).

The psychological toll on soldiers and reservists has been profound. Fourteen months into the war, more than 6,400 applications for psychiatric disability had been submitted to the Ministry of Defense's Rehabilitation Department, nearly half filed by reservists (Israeli Knesset Research Center, 2025). By August 2024, over 10,000 wounded soldiers had been registered, 35% of whom were coping with psychological conditions. Studies by the National Center for Traumatic Stress and Resilience at Tel Aviv University indicate that 12% of reservists who fought in Gaza reported severe post-traumatic symptoms - a 50% increase from prewar levels. Rising numbers of suicides among active and reserve soldiers further underscore the depth of the crisis (Bar-Haim, 2025; Israel Association of Public Health Physicians, 2025). Importantly, these psychological effects rarely remain confined to the soldiers themselves; emerging research demonstrates that parental trauma can have measurable emotional and behavioral consequences for children as young as preschool age (Allbaugh et al., 2024; Watson & Osborne, 2025).

To understand the significance of the recent literary corpus, these present-day realities must be understood within Israel's broader historical trajectory of recognizing and representing trauma. During the War of Independence (1947–49), wartime psychological injuries were poorly conceptualized and frequently stigmatized. Soldiers displaying signs of distress were dismissed as weak or morally lacking. This approach persisted through subsequent conflicts, including the Sinai Campaign (1956) and the Six-Day War (1967), when rapid military victories left little space for acknowledging psychological suffering.

The Kippur War (1973) marked a turning point. The scale of casualties and the disillusionment that followed catalyzed the establishment of mental health centers and formal recognition of combat-related trauma. Yet, many veterans remained untreated, and societal stigma endured throughout later conflicts - the Lebanon Wars, the Intifadas (Palestinian Uprisings), and military operations in Gaza. Over time, trauma gradually shifted from a hidden personal wound to a recognized cultural phenomenon, reshaping public discourse and opening new spaces for literary engagement (Alberstein, Davidovitch., & Zalashik, 2016; Bilu & Witztum, 2000; Keynan, 2012).

Israeli children's literature developed in parallel with these societal transformations. Until the 1970s, shaped by Zionist ideology, it emphasized national ethos, self-sacrifice, agricultural labor and collective belonging. Psychological vulnerability - particularly that of soldiers - was largely absent. The Kippur War destabilized this heroic paradigm and introduced more emotionally complex portrayals of loss and fear. Works such as Tirza Atar's *War Is a Crying Thing* (1975) and Uri Orlev's *The Beast of Darkness* (1976) expanded the boundaries of children's literature by acknowledging the child's emotional world and offering literary spaces for coping with anxiety and grief. Yet these books remained exceptions, and the dominant literary ethos continued to marginalize depictions of psychological struggle. For decades, the literature continued to privilege resilience, patriotism, and heroic masculinity, leaving post-trauma notably unaddressed (Nasie, Bar-Tal, & Diamond, 2017; Dori, 2024).

As the conflict became chronic, a bibliotherapeutic orientation emerged. Recent empirical research demonstrates that parental trauma has measurable emotional and behavioral effects on young children (Allbaugh et al., 2024). Children's literature increasingly functioned as a tool for emotional support, offering symbolic frameworks for coping with parental absence, uncertainty, and fear. This developmental function aligns with foundational insights from Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978), both of whom emphasize that young children rely on symbolic representation, narrative structures, and guided meaning-making to process complex emotional experiences. Recent qualitative research further indicates that when parents - particularly fathers - experience combat-related PTSD, the entire family system becomes destabilized, reshaping parenting practices and increasing children's emotional burden (Sturgeon, 2023). Yet despite these growing insights, one subject remained almost entirely absent from Israeli children's literature: the posttraumatic father.

The new corpus of picture books published after October 7 breaks this silence. By depicting paternal combat-related PTSD for the first time, these works constitute a significant cultural and literary shift. They not only acknowledge the psychological costs of war but also brings them into the intimate sphere of early childhood reading, where children encounter trauma through imagery, metaphor, and guided dialogue.

While the focus of this study is the Israeli corpus, it is important to acknowledge the wider human context. The Iron Swords War has had devastating consequences for Palestinian civilians in Gaza, including loss of life, displacement, and severe psychological and educational disruption. Recognizing this broader frame does not conflate distinct experiences

but underscores that the representation of Israeli paternal trauma is situated within a violent and protracted conflict whose impact extends across borders and communities.

3. PATERNAL COMBAT TRAUMA: FIVE NARRATIVE STAGES

The six picture books published in the aftermath of October 7, 2023, and the Iron Swords War construct a shared narrative arc that traces how paternal PTSD is experienced through the child's eyes. Each work depicts a cyclical rather than linear process: rupture, confusion, attempts at meaning-making, and moments of partial recognition. Taken together, they offer early childhood readers a symbolic vocabulary for understanding the invisible wounds of war.

3.1. First Stage: Idealized Family Life

Each story opens with a warm, harmonious family scene that establishes the father as loving, stable, and emotionally available. These idealized depictions - Or's father telling bedtime stories in *What Happened to Or's Dad?* (Brosh, 2024) or the "superhuman" father in *Daddy Postamaty* (Zerach, 2024) - create a clear emotional baseline against which the later rupture becomes legible to children.

Rather than serving merely as exposition, these scenes function as anchors of memory for the child protagonists. They mark the "before," providing the contrast necessary for children to interpret the dramatic changes that follow. The idealized father is not only a literary figure but also a cognitive and emotional reference point that stabilizes the child's internal world.

3.2. Second Stage: Withdrawal and Crisis of Fatherhood

Upon returning from war, the fathers exhibit emotional withdrawal, irritability, and sensory sensitivity, classic symptoms of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), translated into child-accessible terms. Nir's father "never smiles ... always stares far away" in *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?* (Tzvi, 2024), while Or observes that his father "barely talks, doesn't laugh, and doesn't hug" (Brosh, 2024).

These depictions articulate a crisis of fatherhood: the paternal figure, once a source of safety, becomes unpredictable or frightening. The father's self-perception as inadequate or dangerous is poignantly expressed in Zerach's *Daddy Postamaty* (2024), where the father describes himself as harboring a "volcano inside." Leibovitz's personal testimony in *Hagesher-Podcasts*,⁷⁵ (Leibovitz, 2025) further amplifies this sense of internal fragmentation. Parenthood is perceived as a failure, prompting physical and emotional distancing - understood by the fathers both as self-preservation and as a protective gesture toward the child.

Importantly, this withdrawal affects not only the dyad of father and child but also the entire family system. Several texts subtly foreground the mother's stabilizing role at this early stage, signaling that she will later serve as a bridge between the father's trauma and the child's need for explanation.

3.3. Third Stage: The Child's Struggle for Understanding

Trauma radiates outward, transforming the home from a stable and secure space into one marked by silence and tension. Rather than shifting the narrative focus, this silence intensifies the child's voice. Told through the child's perspective, the impact of paternal PTSD is rendered most vividly, allowing readers to perceive both the father's rupture and the child's

emotional and cognitive responses within the family. Because the father's injury is invisible, children struggle to grasp the source of this disruption. Nir's question - why his father no longer laughs - captures a central cognitive challenge for young children: interpreting a parent's invisible emotional distress, a difficulty well documented in developmental research on children's perception of parental emotions (May et al., 2023).

Children attempt to make sense of the rupture through observation, comparison, and metaphor (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Or's question - "How can he be hurt if he didn't lose a leg, an arm, or even a finger?" (Brosh, 2024) - highlights the developmental difficulty of understanding psychological injury when it lacks external signs.

This stage foregrounds children's emotional ambivalence: fear mingles with longing; confusion with loyalty. The books do not resolve this tension; instead, they present it as an authentic component of the child's inner world when a parent's emotional landscape becomes unpredictable and unstable.

3.4. Fourth Stage: Children as Meaning-Makers

As the narrative focus shifts, children become active interpreters. They ask questions, experiment with metaphors, and engage in imaginative forms of symbolic play, mechanisms that developmental psychology identifies as crucial for processing trauma.

The most striking example appears in *Papa Tank* (Sosonovsky, 2023), where Yuval transforms his father's frightening anger into a dream-image of a tank wandering through the family kitchen. The metaphor evolves visually from a threatening machine to a gentle presence at the beach, mirroring the child's and father's gradual reorientation toward one another. The phallic imagery of the cannon shifting from erect to lowered subtly signals the father's transition from combat mode to vulnerability, but it is presented in a symbol system recognizable to young readers.

Across these texts, metaphor-making functions as a shared semiotic resource through which families articulate emotions that resist direct expression. The child's interpretations are not incidental responses but deliberate meaning-making processes that facilitate communication, relational attunement, and gradual emotional integration.

3.5. Fifth Stage: Open-Ended Recognition

In the final stage, the father's trauma becomes speakable, named, and shared, marking a shift from silent suffering to partial acknowledgment. Conversations, metaphors, temporary withdrawal, therapy, and community support emerge as coping strategies - each depicted as imperfect but meaningful steps toward stability. Across the corpus, these texts normalize psychological treatment, framing therapy as an act of responsibility and courage rather than a source of shame. By integrating therapeutic language into picture books, the works provide young readers with an accessible vocabulary for understanding emotional pain.

The climactic scenes in *Papa Tank* (Sosonovsky, 2023) and *Where Did Dad's Laughter Go?* (Tzvi, 2024) portray relational repair through subtle yet consequential interactions. The exchange: "Even when I'm angry, I always love you" (the father) / "I know" (the son), exemplifies the coexistence of rupture and affection, underscoring that parental love endures despite emotional volatility. Likewise, *Daddy Postamaty* (Zerah, 2024) demonstrates how symbolic metaphors - storms, volcanoes, popcorn kernels - translate the father's internal turmoil into forms accessible to young children, thereby bridging the gap between psychological complexity and early childhood cognition.

The final stage does not present trauma as resolved. Instead, these texts offer open-ended recognition, aligning with contemporary trauma theory that views healing as cyclical, relational, and ongoing. PTSD becomes integrated - not erased - within family life.

The emphasis on shared narratives, mutual reassurance, and community support (neighbors, teachers, extended family) signals that recovery requires collective engagement, not individual stoicism.

4. THE MATERNAL ANCHOR

While therapy and community support provide external frameworks for healing, the primary burden of emotional care within the home often falls on the family and particularly on the mother. Combat-related trauma disrupts not only the bond between father and child but also reconfigures the maternal role. Across the corpus, the mother emerges as a stabilizing presence who mediates between the traumatized father and the rest of the household. She is responsible for maintaining daily continuity, containing distress, and offering developmentally appropriate explanations of the father's condition, tasks that require her to balance acknowledgment of psychological pain with the preservation of emotional security.

In *Papa Tank* (Sosonovsky, 2023), the mother mitigates the child's fear following the father's outburst by explaining, "Sometimes it's very hard for Dad to remember things from the past ... but he loves you very much." By distinguishing between the father's behavior and his enduring affection, she enables the child to sustain attachment despite instability. Similarly, in *Daddy Postamaty* (Zerach, 2024), the mother addresses her partner with a combination of tenderness and clarity: "My love, I feel that things are very difficult for you ... yesterday, when you heard the children playing, you woke up shouting. Maybe you're post-traumatic?" Spoken within a physical embrace, her words communicate recognition, care, and a commitment to shared coping.

The mother-child relationship is likewise central. Mothers serve not only as interpreters of the father's trauma but also as emotional regulators for their children. Through reassurance, physical closeness, and clear explanations, they help children navigate fear and uncertainty, modeling adaptive emotional responses and reinforcing a sense of safety within the home. These interactions underscore the mother's dual role: supporting the traumatized parent while simultaneously safeguarding the child's emotional world.

By mediating communication, sustaining routine, and providing emotional containment, the maternal figure becomes a literary and cultural symbol of resilience. The narratives suggest that the family's capacity to endure trauma rests not on the erasure of suffering but on the shared labor of bearing it together - a labor in which the mother plays a central and often unacknowledged role.

5. FROM HEROIC SILENCE TO VULNERABLE HEROISM

The picture books analyzed in this study foreground the emotional and familial dimensions of PTSD while simultaneously functioning as cultural texts that critique and revise the foundational ethos of Israeli masculinity. Drawing on hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), this section conceptualizes Israeli masculine ideals as culturally constructed hierarchies rooted in emotional restraint, militarized competence, and heroic silence. For decades, Israeli identity has been shaped by the figure of the stoic, self-disciplined "Israeli fighter," whose capacity to endure hardship privately aligns with what Connell (2005) identifies as "hegemonic masculinity." This model has long dominated Israeli literature, collective memory, and public discourse, reinforcing expectations that men absorb suffering without visible vulnerability.

The picture books at the center of this analysis mark a significant narrative departure. Rather than presenting PTSD as a failure of the heroic ideal, they situate trauma as an inherent, perhaps unavoidable, dimension of military service, thereby challenging the myth of invulnerability embedded within Zionist masculinity. In each narrative, the father initially appears strong, loving, and competent; yet the aftereffects of war destabilize this image. His transformation, from engaged parent to withdrawn, irritable, or frightening figure, exposes the tension between external performances of masculinity and the internal reality of psychological injury.

Importantly, these works do not reject the warrior ethos outright. Instead, they reinterpret heroism in ways that resonate with Butler's (2016) theorization of vulnerability as a relational and political condition rather than a private deficiency. Within this framework, heroism is reimagined as the willingness to confront pain, to remain emotionally available to one's children, and to seek therapeutic support when needed. Emotional endurance, relational responsibility, and the articulation of suffering emerge as indicators of strength rather than weakness.

This redefinition produces a broader, more flexible model of masculinity, one that integrates traditional narratives of patriotism and sacrifice with acknowledgment of fragility, dependency, and emotional expressivity. The traumatized father is not depicted as diminished; rather, his efforts to reconnect with his child, articulate his inner turmoil, and strive toward repair exemplify what trauma scholars describe as "everyday heroism" - the small, sustained acts of emotional labor that enable families to function in the aftermath of war (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992).

Significantly, this revised ideal does not obscure the child's emotional reality. Children continue to experience fear, longing, confusion, and ambivalence. These coexisting emotions reflect Winnicott's (1971) insight that early emotional life is shaped by the capacity to hold multiple, sometimes contradictory truths at once. The father can be loved and feared, admired and grieved, present yet psychologically distant. Through symbolic devices such as the living tank, the invisible wound, the imaginary companion, or the "secret soldier" - the books provide children with narrative scaffolding that helps them navigate these complexities without collapsing into denial or despair.

By presenting strength and pain as intertwined, these works offer young readers a new lexicon for understanding masculinity, one that honors the father's struggle while legitimizing the child's emotional world. In doing so, they transform the figure of the traumatized father into an emblem of quiet and relational heroism and contribute to a broader cultural reimagining of what it means to be a soldier, a man, and a parent in contemporary Israel.

6. CONCLUSION

The six picture books published in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks constitute the first sustained literary attempt to represent paternal combat-related PTSD for young children in Israel. As this study has demonstrated, these works collectively reshape the emotional, cultural, and pedagogical landscape of contemporary Israeli children's literature. By centering the child's perspective, they render trauma legible through accessible metaphors, visual symbolism, and narrative gaps that invite young readers to construct meaning from rupture. In doing so, the corpus establishes a literary grammar through which early childhood can begin to comprehend the impact of paternal post-trauma.

Across the texts, paternal combat-related PTSD is represented not as an isolated individual condition but as a relational and family-wide experience. The five-stage narrative pattern identified in this study - harmony, withdrawal, confusion, meaning-making, and open-ended recognition - reveals a shared cultural logic through which trauma is framed for young readers. These stories challenge earlier Zionist paradigms that equated heroism with silence and emotional self-containment. Instead, they promote a revised model of heroism grounded in vulnerability, relational responsibility, and the courage to confront psychological injury. In this reframing, the traumatized father emerges as a complex figure negotiating the intertwined demands of love, fear, and recovery.

Equally significant is the emergence of the mother as mediator and stabilizing anchor. The books portray mothers as the emotional and communicative bridge between the wounded father and the child, sustaining family life, interpreting behavioral shifts, and preventing children from internalizing blame or fear. This maternal role underscores the fundamentally relational nature of trauma recovery and deepens our understanding of family dynamics within wartime narratives for young children.

Notably, none of the works offer full resolution or cure. Instead, they depict PTSD as an ongoing, adaptive process that families navigate together. This mirrors contemporary trauma theory, which conceptualizes recovery not as linear improvement but as cyclical processes of rupture, repair, and reintegration. The open endings of these narratives allow children to hold multiple, often conflicting emotions such as love and fear, pride and sadness—without imposing closure that real life cannot guarantee.

Although grounded in Israeli experience, the corpus resonates with global contexts in which children witness or inherit war-related trauma. As such, it offers a framework for comparative analyses of children's war literature in other conflict zones and invites further interdisciplinary research at the intersections of literature, psychology, and education. Acknowledging the profound suffering experienced by Palestinian children and families situates these texts within a broader humanitarian landscape, reminding readers that literary representations of trauma always unfold within asymmetrical and shared contexts of violence.

Ultimately, this corpus demonstrates the capacity of children's literature to function simultaneously as a cultural mirror and a therapeutic tool. By translating paternal trauma into symbolic forms accessible to early childhood, these books create space for dialogue, empathy, and emotional literacy at a moment of acute national upheaval. In doing so, they contribute not only to Israeli literary history but also to the broader international conversation on how societies narrate war, vulnerability, and resilience to their youngest members.

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Y. Sacerdoti

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Full name: Yaakova Sacerdoti, Prof.

Institutional affiliation: The Levinsky-Wingate Academic College

Institutional address: 15 Shoshana Persits St., Tel Aviv, Israel 6937808

Email address: sacerdoti.yaacova@l-w.ac.il

Short biographical sketch: Prof. Yaakova Sacerdoti is a scholar of children's literature, Holocaust representation, and Hebrew literary culture. She is the Dean of the Faculty of Multidisciplinary Studies at the Levinsky-Wingate Academic College, where she also serves on the institution's research, ethics, and academic promotion committees. Her earlier appointments include teaching and academic supervisory roles at the University of Michigan and the University of Phoenix. Prof. Sacerdoti is the author of three scholarly books in Hebrew on children's literature - two devoted to Holocaust representation and one offering a groundbreaking literary theoretical model, as well as dozens of peer-reviewed articles published in leading international journals. Her research focuses on early-childhood encounters with traumatic history, intergenerational memory, Israeli cultural narratives, and the visual and poetic strategies of picturebooks. Her work has significantly shaped contemporary understandings of how young children engage with complex historical and ethical questions through literature.