

Got Grit? Childhood

by Rev. Garrett Lepper

Gertrude slowly trudged across the tavern, bearing a bottle of wine for the customers. The precocious young girl with freckles and pigtails navigated through the crowd. Such a collection of varied persons might shock the uninitiated but for Gertrude such strange visitors had become commonplace at her father's tavern. Mercenaries, dwarfs, wizards, elves, clerics, and halflings all of them have come and stopped for a drink - and most even left on their own volition rather than being hauled out by the bouncers and tossed in a drunken pile in the street outside. For all their talk of gold, blood, and glory they never seemed to pause to notice her, to thank her for her service, or to spare her as much as a simply copper or schilling as a small gesture of gratitude for her prompt delivery. "Cheap bastards" she thought to herself as she slipped away from their table while the spoke of acts of courage and foolhardiness. They inspired nothing but contempt in the young girl.

It's only appropriate to begin this column with where we most begin: childhood. Childhood, if such a thing can be said to exist in the Old World, is either brief or a luxury. For most living in the Old World childhood passes away quickly and is not necessarily something fondly recalled, because life in the Old World is difficult and everyone in the family is expected to help make ends meet. Those raised on farms are to assume duties inside the household and outside in the fields as early as possible, for the welfare of the family depends upon the hard work of all. Among the pastoralists children are expected to watch the flocks and carry food, water, and messages from the pastures to the homestead. The children of artisans or the urban poor are apprenticed and taught a trade at an early age, often laboring in menial chores long hours for no or little pay. Children of domestic servants are brought along to assist their parents with household chores. Even the poorest families will send their children out to scavenge, beg, or even pickpocket. As would be suggested, most children begin their lives of labor long before they reach the age of ten.

Those families that are well off can afford to give their children a childhood of play and indulgence. Even under such circumstance a happy or prolonged childhood is not guaranteed. The children of nobles are often sent to other families of similar stature to the gentle arts and the ways of war, or like the students of many noble and merchant families they are placed under the guidance of tutors, schools, and collegiums and taught the arts, sciences, and humanities. For the wealthy, childhood may offer little joy for all too often they are cared for by distant and stern nannies or hired help and schooled in the stuffy art of propriety and seemly behavior suitable for little lords and ladies.

"For all his greatness he couldn't transcend his haunted and humble beginnings. Five, that is to say all, of his siblings died before they saw their fifth birthdays. His mother died giving birth to him and thereafter was cared for by his deeply saddened father. And when he turned his back on the farm for a life lived by the sword, his father, it is said, died from grief. And I suppose that it was this sadness from his childhood - that despite his wealth and fame - is why he leapt off that bridge into the waters of Reik below."

Would a happy, well adjusted child who received everything that needed in life ever become an adventurer? Possibly one of the rootless adventurers with no ties anywhere, a thirst for fame and fortune, and a propensity for violence? What drives adventurers, or for that matter villains?

A GM should encourage the players to expand their own childhood to help explain in part the way the character is as an adult. Not all of a person's personality can be directly attributed to a handful of significant events in a childhood, but creating such events can flesh out a character.

Let's look at some of the seedier aspects of adventuring in relation to childhood:

Wanderlust and Rootlessness

Adventurers wander all about the countryside, unable to settle down or engage in meaningful relationships with others. They save a community and move on, forever in search of the next adventure.

Why? Was their own childhood turbulent? Are they running from something in the past? Are they ashamed of their past? Were they lacking significant relationships with others in the community? Were they abused? Have their ties with their own community been severed? Did they commit a crime? Are their parents dead? Did they flee their community in shame? Was their entire community destroyed and they the lone, haunted survivor?

Self Important

Adventurers could be perceived as entirely self absorbed and self important. They believe that they must get involved and if they don't, the world will come to an end. The world revolves around them. Just because a bunch of adventurers show up with lurid tales of cults and foul sacrifices (with little evidence to support such outrageous claims) they demand interviews with the towns' most prominent members, and those that don't give in to their absurd demands are proclaimed as conspirators or accused of the most heinous crimes.

Why are they so self absorbed? So self important? Did they not get enough attention as a child? Were they neglected by their parents? Beaten up by other children or siblings? Shy? Quiet? Ignored by the community? Perhaps they crave attention and get it now by parading about a small town or village in full armor and heavily armed, carrying with them mementoes and trophies of their various victories. Adding silly nicknames to their names. Let's be honest, adventurers are very often self promoting pompous asses with little concern about the peacefulness of the community and overly concerned about the reputations as heroes and paragons of virtue.

Accepting of Violence as a Solution

A man runs down the street. The adventurers immediately assume that this man is running from them, one raises a crossbow and fires at the legs, another prepares a

spell rapidly. Yet these adventurers truly have no idea why this person is running, they're just assuming, being as self important as they are, that it must have something to do with the burglary of their room in the inn.

Adventurers resort to violence routinely. A man in a mask. Strange sounds at night around the campfire. Someone reticent in revealing details. Adventurers are comfortable with inflicting pain and maiming and killing others. What has made these adventurers so borderline psychotic or sociopathic? They investigate a warehouse of a suspected cult member. The elderly guard catches them and is ran through, for no reason other than he was doing his job.

One can assume that many adventurers had violent childhoods. They were bullies, or they were bullied. Their parents fought and bickered. Maybe the player, at a young age had to resort to violence to save their family. Perhaps little Hans returns to his home from wood cutting in the forest to discover that the front door is burst in and an orc is hacking up his mother and siblings, and Hans slams the wood axe into the back of this monster. Whenever Hans, now an adventurer gets angry, something snaps and he intuitively resorts to violence when under any pressure.

The point is, that people who are normally socialized find violence abhorrent. Adventurers, who wallow in this stuff, might be predisposed to violence in a way that many townsfolk and even countryfolk aren't. So was there a series of events in childhood that made the character different in regards to how they view violence in contrast with the rest of the populace?

The Magistrate glared at the accused before him. The orphan stood there frightened, awaiting the verdict. The magistrate hid behind an expressionless mask that betrayed not the tide of bile rising from within. Not even 8 years of age and caught stealing apples from a merchant! Surely it must run in their blood after all! The commoners were like vermin, spreading their contagion of unwanted children, licentiousness, drunkenness, and crime... but this rat had not gotten away - and here it was, cowering beneath the cat's paw. "You are hereby sentenced to three days in the pillory and ten years in prison. Remove the sentenced from my sight." The full weight of the law must be used to crush these snot nosed little brats!

Even the players can be victims of crime. A money purse is stolen, some 15 crowns are taken, and a small child, no more than six years of age is running with it? Are the 15 crowns worth so much to the adventurer? Perhaps the adventurer pursues the child down an alley, into a basement where a group of small, hungry, dirty looking children cower.

People who commit crimes are not necessarily amoral, lazy, or evil, they may simply be needy. And in a world where disease or some other misfortune can result in a child living on the streets, much of the crime may be committed by children who seem to have little future.

Begging: PC's carrying on about in finery, well armed and equipped with a flair for drawing attention to themselves should be surrounded by beggars constantly, seeking

the smallest penny or schilling from such illustrious and generous sorts of themselves. Yet adventurers, walking moneybags that they often are, sneak about towns and villages without ever being accosted by hordes of needy children, thrusting pitiful dirty hands up at the PC's beseechingly!

Placing the characters' heroic deeds in contrast to the desperate acts of survival that occur every day in every town and city may make the characters reflect upon the nature of the society and the inherent inequalities that exist in a system that they champion. Why can't adventurers spend as much time helping children at orphanages as they do rooting out imaginary cults and the like?

The adventurers were pleased with themselves, and chortling with glee. A mere night's work had allowed them to smuggle in goods to their patron for a very generous fee. The ease of their work and the size of their payment filled them with exuberance, and as the first rays of the sun chased away the bitter chill of the retreating night they jostled each other playfully and bragged of the pleasures and luxuries their new found wealth would afford them. Their merriment ended as they were startled out of their revelry. Lying in the street were the still bodies of three small children, cold and blue, still vainly clinging to each other for warmth. The sight of the frail small corpses sobered them up and they continued along their way, each lost in their own melancholy thoughts.

The necessity of crime, and the poverty that drives children to these acts can illustrate the hostility and grim nature of the world. Yet adventurers deal in death and misery to their enemies and foes. Yet death, and suffering, can be employed in a different manner by a GM.

In truth, the players would be more likely to witness funerals of small children, or dead children frozen to death than they would bodies of orcs and goblins, when in truth the reverse is more likely. Players, sadly, should equate childhood not with happiness, but mortality.

Funerals of children, grieving mothers should all reflect a high mortality rate that exists in medieval society, even one with clerics who can heal. Poor children dying or being murdered, with none caring about their demise, since they are viewed by many as vermin, or a problem to be ignored.

Andrea was lost in the Drakwald; her fear turned to gratitude as she saw a faint pillar of smoke ahead through the tops of the trees. She hurriedly entered the clearing, shaking away the cold and exhaustion from her long flight. She stepped forward and was immediately greeted by the barking of a half dozen of the ugliest dogs she ever saw, wild and mangy looking. Moments later, a dozen or so small faces appeared from windows and doorways, children who looked even more feral in appearance than the dogs. Dirty, unkempt, and by the looks of them bruised and beaten as well. Andrea looked at their bare feet, matted hair, and threadbare clothes and pitied their poor little lives. Aghast, she turned away from their fearful, pleading eyes, and entered into the deep forests again.

It is not just children in urban areas that suffer, but children in rural areas as well. They often have little to look forward to then slaving away on land that they'll never own, or squatting on property on the dangerous fringes of civilization. For them, even their childhood is short, dangerous, and harsh.

The children are quite likely ignorant, being illiterate, and their minds full of nonsense and superstition. While they may be full of critical knowledge of their area outside that domain they are ignorant and this ignorance can be dangerous. For them, there is little access to knowledge to improve their lives or become anything other than their parents are.

Marco Tintoretto waited patiently there, suppressing the frustration within. The long trip, on such a delicate yet important matter of diplomacy, and he was kept waiting! Waiting! The gall! A young page walked in, bearing ink, quill and parchment. As he approached, the young lad misstepped, and lurched forward a bit, and a single drop of black ink landed upon Lord Tintoretto's sleeve. He exploded, he rose above the frightened lad, holding his cane high, and brought it down upon the youthful crown! The boy crumpled, but Lord Tintoretto did not stop until the child was a mangled heap and his cane had split in two from the beating.

Power in the Old World affects all, and its distribution is unequal and the source of hardship for the many and luxury for the few. Just as children live in poverty, all too often they are the victims of people seeking power.

Children are vulnerable than most to the abuses of power, and those with great power can use their power against them with little resistance. Wealthy merchants can have child beggars beaten to keep them away from their estates and places of business, while nobles can ride over children with impunity, or incarcerate them for crimes real or imagined.

Those with little power are able to take out their frustrations on those with less power: children. There's no need to go into great detail on child abuse and violence against children, other than to note that the inclusion of such material into a campaign must take into account the sensibilities of the group and what exactly they are comfortable with.

The Ostland Five were bursting with energy! They were alive! They were paid! And they'd done much to help the people of the area! Here, they were relaxing in a local inn, sitting by the warm fire to chill their bones. "The Black Goat", that had hunted down and slain so many and terrorized the people of the land was defeated, its foul, giant beastmen body pierced by a dozen arrows. A hard pursuit and fight, but victory was theirs! Rolf, raised his tankard in celebration, the others grinning followed. Rolf started "Today, we made the lives of the local people better, and for that...", and then paused dramatically before continuing.

Suddenly the sound of a dish crashed from the inn's kitchen. The landlord burst through the door into the kitchen, its door swinging wildly, and a small child stood there amidst broken dishware. As the door swung shut the landlord was seen looming over the child

and his screams could be heard. "You oaf! You clumsy cursed brat! You know how much that cost me!" The door swung open again and a glimpse of the innkeeper could be seen, his hand raised above his head. Violent smacking sounds, strangled sobs. A woman's voice interceding, and soon her yelps were heard as well, and the door swung to and fro, giving the horrified patrons snapshots of the resulting beatings.

The Ostland heroes, defeaters of orcs, beastmen, and even darker evils sat there, unable or unwilling to face the beast that lurked in the human heart.

In conclusion, childhood is a topic that should be explored by GM and player alike, but not our own childhood with myths of innocence and care-free pleasures, but rather a childhood colored by the grim desperation of the Warhammer World. Childhood can be used as a source of character development as well as a means of bringing home to characters a sense of what they are fighting for, and against, in their daily struggles in the Old World.

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