



Portraits of Children

By Sandi Kahn Shelton
Register Staff

Georgia, age 6, talks openly about her imaginary daughters and her three husbands. Katie and Molly, ages 11 and 12, tell about the world they've developed, a world of fairies, elves and gnomes, for whom they have built houses and created a calendar of events. Jin shows how she can wear a mask to express her Chinese identity.

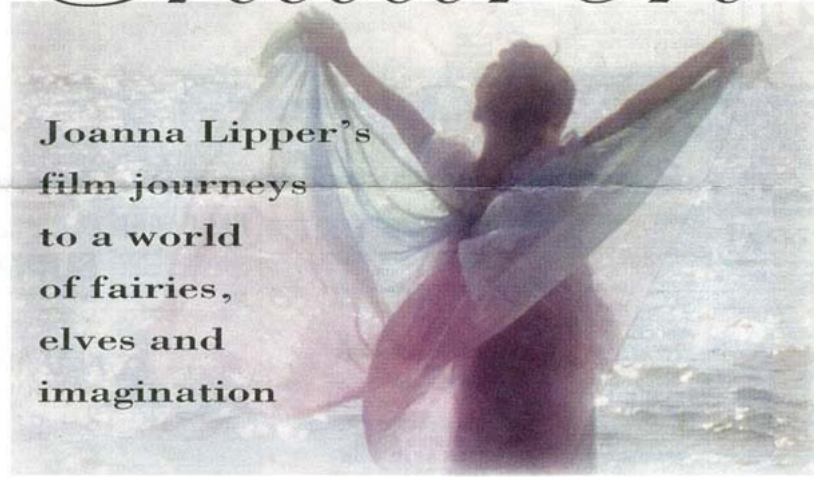
They are just some of the children who tell their own life stories in an award-winning documentary by filmmaker Joanna Lipper: "Inside Out: Portraits of Children." This film will be shown and followed by a panel discussion from 7-9 p.m. Thursday in Linsley Chittenden Hall, presented by the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale.

Lipper, who is a filmmaker and writer, holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard in literature and film, and a master's degree in psychoanalytic developmental psychology from University College in London and The Anna Freud Centre.

The film, she says, came out of her need to explore how children use their games and imaginations to reflect the adult world and make sense of it. Some of the children in the film are dealing with the kinds of issues that make them feel powerless: divorce, adoption, death, homelessness, poverty, fear, relocations. Yet their inner lives are anything but impoverished.

"The film highlights the resilience of children, and that's where the hope lies," says Lipper. "Children in difficult circumstances turn inward more. They express themselves through imagination and fantasies, and by repeating traumatic scenes they've lived through, they somehow revise that experience, and healing takes place through revision. Robert, in the film, hears his grandmother's story of the Holocaust and develops the fantasy that he himself goes and kills Hitler."

Joanna Lipper's
film journeys
to a world
of fairies,
elves and
imagination



Photographs courtesy of Joanna Lipper

TOP: "Inside Out: Portraits of Children" looks at how children, including Georgia with wings, above, use games and imaginations to reflect the adult world and make sense of it. BELOW: Filmmaker Joanna Lipper will be part of a panel discussion after a screening of her "Inside Out" Thursday at Yale.



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IF YOU GO

- **What:** "Inside Out: Portraits of Children," a film by Joanna Lipper, followed by a panel discussion.
- **When:** 7 p.m. Thursday
- **Where:** Linsley Chittenden Hall, Room 101, 63 High St., New Haven
- **Info:** (203) 432-9935, www.ziglercenter.yale.edu.

The title of the film, "Inside Out," comes from the idea of a shirt, worn inside out.

"You can see all the stitches and threads. But when it's right side out, it appears seamless," says Lipper. "It's hard to see how it was constructed. And that's the way it is with children: they are transparent. You can see their unconscious processes, whereas with adults, they

are much more guarded and opaque. Children are less repressed and less censored, and you can see the window into their souls."

Lipper also feels that children are underestimated.

"They are mirrors and sponges, soaking up all the scenarios they observe like sponges, and then reflecting them back like mirrors," she said. "This film shows the depth

of what they are perceiving."

The film, she says, brings a message to parents: if you listen to your children and don't restrict their truth-telling, you will learn a lot about what they feel and need. And you will perhaps learn about yourself in the process.

"It sounds like such an obvious thing — to listen to your children," says Lipper, "but in today's rushed and fragile existence, it can often be overlooked. Empathy is the most important thing, creating openness to a safe space and allowing your child to exist in that space. If children are afraid that the parent is going to criticize them or put them down, they're not going to let the parent into that space."

Lipper: Film looks at how kids think

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In other words, if a parent reacts by explaining to Georgia, above, that she really does not have three husbands, or telling Katie and Molly that fairies can't possibly exist, they are using rational thought to crush what is very vital to children: the emotional truth of what they are feeling.

Children need the time and quiet necessary to develop their imaginations. Lipper says she's concerned about the threats to imagination imposed by modern society. "Time alone is stigmatized for children," she says.

"Kids are over-programmed with a million activities. And the constant exposure to commercial things means that sometimes when I ask kids what they're imagining, they mention brands, like Pokemon. Products are being aggressively marketed to children, and I'm worried that they're not being encouraged to look inside themselves for their own creations."

Studies show, she says, that when children use their imaginations and are encouraged to play, there is an increase in their performance and test scores in school.

"This kind of emotional literacy serves as a bridge between their own thoughts and the world," she says. "It's important to incorporate imagination into the academic curriculum. There has been so much pressure lately on standardized tests and recording performance, that time for imagination has been discouraged. But it's been shown that if you emotionally engage the children in ways that mean something to them, you actually improve their test performances."

After the showing of the film, there will be a panel discussion moderated by Marc Brackett, an associate research scientist at Yale who has created curricula for schools based on emotional intelligence; Jerome Singer, a professor of psychology; Dorothy Singer, senior research scientist at the department of psychology; Daphne Merkin, a contributing writer to the New York Times Magazine, and Lipper.

The film is available on DVD by going to www.joannalipper.com/films.html/. It is also contained as a bonus on her release last month of the feature film, "Little Fugitive," a remake of the 1953 classic, telling the heartbreaking story of two brothers and the practical joke that separated them. Lipper is also the filmmaker of a documentary, "Growing Up Fast," a look at teen mothers, which is also a book.

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