

Shame, Divine Cannibalism, and the Spectacle of Subaltern Suffering in Ken Barris's *What Kind of Child*

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This essay examines the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Ken Barris's portrayal of the life of a street child in *What Kind of Child*. Responses to literary representations of subaltern suffering are sharply divided. On the one hand, there is the commonsense view that such representations require one to imagine what the situation of other people may be like, and that, in doing so, one opens oneself to their experience of life. To the extent that representations of suffering inspire one to reflect on one's relations to others, they are salutary. On the other hand, though, such depictions, like poverty tourism, may be accused of providing a spectacle of distant suffering that one vicariously experiences from a position of privilege and then discards. So, for instance, Shyamal Sengupta describes *Slumdog Millionaire* as a "poverty tour" (qtd. in Magnier), and Alice Miles even accuses it of being "poverty porn." To aestheticise the suffering of impoverished people is to commodify it for the consumption and prurient pleasure of the bourgeois world. What is partly at stake here is the ethical question, harking back to Aristotle's account of tragedy, of the strange pleasure aroused by spectacles of suffering. While it may be that one's imaginative engagement with subaltern suffering renders one more sensitive to the plight of others, it may equally well be that one is entertained in the process.

My discussion of Barris's negotiation of these ethical and aesthetic problems initially focuses on his novel's juxtaposition of a world of indigence with a relatively prosperous middle-class world. Through its formal separation of these two worlds, the text inscribes distance between them and aligns its readers with the middle-class community, thereby