

## Science fiction and dystopias

'O brave new world,/ That has such people in it' (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* Vi183)

The ironic use by Aldous Huxley in 1932 of this quotation from Shakespeare for the title of his dystopian novel perhaps foreshadows the ambivalence characteristic of so much writing about imagined futures, for both children and adults. At least from the twentieth century onwards, it seems that Utopias are far fewer in number than dystopias. Scenarios abound, in which worlds, either created in accordance with political or philosophical theorising, or resulting from scientific progress or disaster, are shown to be flawed. In some of them, bands of intrepid young people find their way to a more hopeful future, perhaps achieving a deliverance that the adults had not even realised that they needed.

In this issue of *IBBYLink* we have a range of articles by writers who vary in their interpretations of the terms 'science fiction' and 'dystopia' and, as a result, present a number of perspectives on the current situation of this genre (or genres!) in children's literature. But I suspect that all those who create science fiction or write about it would agree with a statement in a recent article by Guy

Consolmagno, curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory: 'Ultimately, SF is not about spaceships or bug-eyed monsters; it is about human beings' (*Tablet*, 30/7/05). He suggests that a writer who uses story to explore the interaction of the human with the 'almost-human,' or 'deliberately changes one or two key truths' about our world, is using a very effective technique. Such stories at their best can work towards 'a deeper understanding of technology, society, and the fears and dreams of being human.' Perhaps the reason that children's books that look towards an imagined future seem to be proliferating is that such issues have become still more crucial in today's world. Authors and publishers alike realise, perhaps implicitly, how key is the involvement of young people in shaping the future and establishing human values within it.

### Pat Pinsent

The next issue of *IBBYLink*, Spring 2006, will largely be devoted to summaries of papers at the November 12<sup>th</sup> IBBY conference on Children's Literature in Translation. We would, however, welcome reviews, comments, articles on other topics for inclusion either in that issue or in subsequent ones.

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## Science Fiction – what is it?

Luke Slater

The term *science fiction* describes a broad church, or perhaps more accurately, is used as a blanket term to describe a wide array of disparate, squabbling and schismatic faiths. Science fiction is in some ways the poor relation of the literature family, looked down on by ‘proper’ writers as the domain of hacks and tech-geeks and permitted a sense of superiority only in the company of that even more disreputable fictional cousin, horror. To mercilessly stretch the allegory, it is also notable that, despite this external condemnation, the internal disputes of the science fiction community are more savage by far; no-one hates a stranger with the fury they reserve for their next-of-kin.

All genre headings are vague and nebulous of course, but science fiction is especially so, despite the superficially obvious dictionary definition:

Science fiction: fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

In fact, even the *name* of this particular genre is contentious. Many people – including almost anyone without a particular axe to grind in the debate – abbreviate science fiction to the punchier ‘sci-fi’. There is, however, a corps of particularly devoted fans of ‘serious’ science fiction who prefer the acronym SF, usually using sci-fi as a derogatory term for low-quality, inferior science fiction, pronouncing it ‘skiffy’. These purists may also insist that SF stands for *speculative* fiction, in order to distinguish their kind of literature from mere ‘science fantasy’.

### Common themes in science fiction

In science fiction, the setting is king. While all of the features of good narrative will be well-represented in any worthwhile work of SF, most science fiction – especially that of the sort preferred by the purists – is ultimately about the effect of a novel element on society and humanity. Science fiction frequently commences in media res, or at least in

the midst of the fictional time and place at hand. Consequently, protagonists in science fiction are often outsiders – travellers, even time travellers, rebels or innocent fools – because this allows the author to use the character as the senses of the reader in exploring a new world and thus assign basic expository duties to dialogue rather than the voice-of-god.

If everyone in the fictional world knows what a spoodgeflanger does and what its role in modern society is, then any explanation for the audience must come in the form of either a pedantic narrative passage which has nothing to do with the story, or a meaningless discussion between two characters who essentially agree on everything they are saying but apparently feel the need to say it at great length anyway; the ‘as I am sure you know...’ method. If the protagonist is a foreigner of some kind, however, then it makes sense for their guide to describe the role of this most basic of things, as it would for a potential rebel to receive a diatribe on the subject of how the spoodgeflanger is not the boon that she believed it to be.

Science fiction may encompass a range of sub-genres and styles, but there are a few themes which recur repeatedly, from the most pedantic speculative fiction to the fluffiest of space operas, and perhaps provide a better definition of science fiction than content. In his *Pictorial History of Science Fiction* (Hamlyn, 1976), David Kyle defines four key themes: remarkable inventions, imaginary voyages, future predictions and social satire. This is a useful, broad definition; almost all science fiction involves one of these four features.

Remarkable inventions could include discoveries of biology as well as marvellous machines. It is notable that in tales of such inventions, their effect on the world around them is as important – if not more important – than the specifics of their operation. Once more we see that the it is the fictional world that dominates. Imaginary voyages, be they through time or space, serve as a vehicle for commentary on the world of the story, and so indirectly on the world of the author. This ties in very closely with

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science fiction as social satire, wherein the absurdities of a future or alternate world point at less obvious faults in our own. The final theme – future prediction – involves the use of fiction to explore possible realities, whether utopian, nihilistic or somewhere in between.

Less specifically, science fiction deals with a number of key issues. These include, but are not limited to: musings on alienation and the human condition, in particular the effect of scientific progress on human identity and interpersonal relationships; the conflict between technocratic civilisation and nature, either human nature or the wider environment; and human reactions to the ‘other’, an unknown element in a rational worldview, which could be an alien, other humans with unusual abilities or beliefs, a new technology or simply an outsider to a closed community.

Journeys of discovery are a common theme in all branches of science fiction. Whether the journey is epic or personal it will usually take the characters on a tour of the key points of the setting. The journey may be literal, but especially in satirical stories it will often be allegorical.

### Hard and soft SF

A common critical distinction is drawn between ‘hard’ SF – serious fiction, dealing in realistic science and the impact of progress on society – and ‘soft’ SF – fantasy, quite literally, with knobs on. ‘Soft’ is often used in a derogatory fashion, but a fanciful setting can still be the backdrop for serious writing, while well-researched science is a poor substitute for good writing.

The division is deep, and begins with the great-grandfathers of science fiction. Jules Verne remarks: ‘It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on a very scientific basis...I make use of physics. [Wells] fabricates’ (1903), while the same year H.G. Wells ripostes: ‘There’s a quality in the worst of my so-called “pseudo-scientific” (imbecile adjective) stuff which differentiates it from Jules Verne...Something one might regard as a new system of ideas –“thought.”’

At its best, hard SF uses plausible scientific conceits to explore contemporary and universal social and humanistic themes through stories about involving characters; at its worst, it consists of a

morass of pedantic concepts illustrated through techno-fetishist vignettes. Soft SF, meanwhile, runs the gamut between cheesy space opera and involving science fantasy in which the technological aspects are a vehicle for the story.

Indeed, this last is often identified as the key distinction between hard and soft SF. In hard science fiction, technology and progress provide the focus and driving force of the narrative. In soft science fiction, on the other hand, all the technology in the world is purely an enabling factor. Hard SF stories would not take place without the science; soft SF uses it only as a tool.

### Sub-genres

As noted, science fiction covers a broad territory. It is therefore in order to conclude with a brief survey of some of the more common sub-genres of SF, and some of the better examples of each.

- *The Unknown Frontier*. Exploration of the unknown can combine elements of all four key themes and is a commonplace in SF writing. The frontier may be in space or under the sea, or it may lie between dimensions, but the journey is often more important than the destination and the reactions of the travellers to their voyage matters above such trivialities as their personal lives. Classic explorations of the unknown frontier include Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001* and Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea*; more recent examples include *The Wormholers*, by Jamila Gavin.
- *Dystopia*. A future world exists in a state of socially engineered bliss, but apparent utopia covers a multitude of sins which the characters in the story must uncover. Frequently the protagonists of a dystopian tale are powerless to change anything, even once they know the truth. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984* are classics of the sub-genre, while M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* is a modern, IT literate take.
- *Post-apocalypse*. Fiction set in the aftermath of a world-shattering disaster, either natural or more frequently of humanity’s own creation. *Z for Zachariah*, by Robert C. O’Brien, written for older children, is a stand-out in the field.

- *Alternate history.* There is a world very like ours, but where some key event occurred differently. Either random chance – as in Stephen Baxter’s *Voyage*, in which the US space program is accelerated when JFK is merely crippled by Oswald’s bullet – or deliberate intervention from the future or from other worlds sends history off at a tangent, usually providing an arena for satirical comment on orthodox history.
- *Secret history.* A sub-genre which has gained massive popularity in recent years, the secret history posits a modern day setting in which the legacy of either a lost race of pyramid builders or an ancient Masonic conspiracy overturns accepted notions of history, usually paving the way for a desperate race to prevent Armageddon.
- *Time travel.* Time travel fiction comes in two flavours – ‘they come to us’, or ‘we go to them’. In either case, the story is usually a social satire and reflects upon the mores and morals of the contemporary protagonists. *The classic example is of course H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine.* A key idea in these stories is predestination, or lack thereof, and the consequences of meddling in history (c.f. alternate history), the latter explored by Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.
- *Alien contact.* Humans meet aliens; as with time travel, we could go to them or they could come to us. What follows ranges from paranoid diplomacy to all-out war, precipitated by either side, but happiness, hugs and puppies are rarely the outcome. Key themes here are conflict with the other and the cosmic insignificance of the human race. Again, Wells gives us the classic with *The War of the Worlds*, but Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* series and John Christopher’s *The Tripods* are modern examples for more advanced readers. Alien contact is also a popular focus for contemporary SF series for children and young adults, such as K.A.Applegate’s *Animorphs*.
- *Technology gone mad.* Not unlike dystopian fiction, a technology gone mad story revolves around a remarkable invention which turns on its creators, either by functioning too well, or by rebelling against its destiny. Popular choices for the technology that will go mad include robots, genetic engineering and computers (particularly artificial intelligence), and this sub-genre often combines with dystopia. This genre goes all the way back to the Greek myths, but the first truly science fictional example would probably be Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; more recent technology gone mad stories include various versions and updatings of this seminal story, such as Ann Halam Taylor’s *Five*.
- *The other within.* Similar to first contact, but here the other arises from within the human race as a result of mutation. Such stories may either concern themselves with how these mutations are received or with how they cope with their own abilities. Aside from the popular *X-Men* comics, good examples of the other within include *The Chrysalids*, *The Midwich Cuckoos* and other works by John Wyndham, or Peter Dickinson’s *The Weathermonger*, in which the ‘Changes’ transform modern-minded humans into the other within.
- *Space opera.* Epic adventure set against the sweeping grandeur of infinity. This much-maligned genre is the public face of SF and contains many elements of the fantastic – robots and spaceships; heroes and villains; angels and monsters, be they ever so technological; bold adventurers, wise-cracking mercenaries with hearts of gold and evil empires. Not all space opera is soft SF, however; Larry Niven and Gerry Pournelle’s *The Mote in God’s Eye* and Ben Jeapes’ *The Xenocide Mission* are examples for older readers which transcend simple science fantasy.
- *Cyberpunk.* A fairly modern genre, cyberpunk explores the blurring of borders between man and machine. AI, VR and mind/machine interfaces are staples of cyberpunk, as are dystopian, corporate-led, technologically-dependent societies. The genre was essentially founded as an identifiable entity by William Gibson in the seminal *Neuromancer*, which also coined the term ‘cyberspace’ for all the world to use.

[This article can be downloaded from the Booktrust website <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/> where it is available as part of a collection of teachers’ support material for teaching Science Fiction.]

# Children's Science Fiction: the Transgender Factor

Farah Mendlesohn

My current research project is on science fiction written for children between (approximately) 1950 and the present day. The project is a book length extension of the article 'Is There Any Such Thing as Children's SF?: A Position Piece', published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Vol. 28, no 2, April 2004). It involves reading somewhere in the region of three hundred books published over this period, considering why we can date these books within distinct decades in accordance with the models of childhood they offer, and how this correlation affects the attempts to construct SF specifically for the younger reader. The age at which children commonly start reading adult fiction is between eleven and fifteen, and, while fantasy written for children tends to be very popular and well remembered, very few writers of SF for children are remembered fondly by their grown readership.

One of the things that is beginning to intrigue me about the research is the degree to which research into children's literature and children's reading development seems to be shaped by truisms: 'Science fiction is for boys', 'A third of young readers are girls', 'Boys don't read'. What I want to add is Jacqueline Rose's argument about 'The Impossibility of Children's Fiction', the subtitle of her influential book, *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984). She develops this argument out of the claim that children are neither the producers nor the market for such texts, which may be too simplistic an interpretation. All the evidence I'm collecting from SF readers about their reading patterns as children suggests that the pre-teen child who chooses to read rather than being forced to do so, the 'Reading Child' as distinct from the passive Child Reader, is just as independent a market entity as any adult. The child's choices, like those of adults, are constrained by the people who select books for stock, whether they are booksellers or librarians.

Rose's point that children don't write children's literature is more valid; children's literature *is* clearly written to reflect the period's culturally specific ideas about the child. Even though something similar could be claimed in regard to popular literature for adults, this aspect is

relevant to some of my arguments. These outline arguments are as follows:

- 1) Most science fiction written for children does not use/reflect/build on what we know of the cognitive capabilities of children.
- 2) Science fiction written for children rarely seems to encompass the diversity of forms and cognitive demands demonstrated in the adult genre.
- 3) Science fiction written for children seems to be driven, above and beyond everything, by the cultural arguments around issues such as education/pedagogy, citizenship and socialisation.

I propose to explore these arguments in the light of what I am tentatively calling the transgender reading protocols of science fiction. I want to emphasise that I am at a very early stage in my research and that much of it is not yet supported by hard evidence.

## Science fiction and the cognitive capabilities of children

Small children tend to attempt to make sense of strangeness by linking it to things that aren't strange, to use context to decipher the unfamiliar. When I discuss cognitive development and SF, I tend to focus on Piaget's comments about children's development of abstract reasoning around the age of 12. Not coincidentally, this is the entry age for most SF readers. As very little SF written for children demands abstract reasoning, this may explain why most children who decide they like SF skip this material and go straight to the adult genre. I am not altogether happy with this simple explanation, however, because the development of emotional processing, where a form of abstract thought occurs, seems to happen earlier. At the age of 18 months a child will look thoughtfully at the cable on a lamp, tug it, and watch the lamp tumble. At the age of two, the child will look thoughtfully at the cable on a lamp, tug it, and watch you to see how you will react. The child is turning outwards from self as universe to a larger universe which links self to others. But it is also a piece of abstract experi-

mentalism. While the earlier situation demonstrates Piaget's notion of concrete operation, the second strikes me as much more to do with abstraction.

The problem with tests like these is that they mostly took place at a time when cultural pressures made it problematic to separate boys and girls. In the past ten years, as brain imaging has made it possible to forget crude measurements of size, enough differences between boys and girls have started showing up to make me wonder about how these experiments have affected our idea of childhood. Such test results help to explain how, from about 1980 onwards, books for children have been driven by an interest in developing social maturity. They imply that you can work on abstract emotional reasoning many years before you can work on abstract factual reasoning.

The snag is that there has always been evidence that there are gender differences: anecdotally, educators have been moaning about boys' emotional immaturity since the eighteenth century at least; their inability to reason abstractly at the level of emotional consequences for their actions. Recent studies of mathematical ability suggest that boys are better at maths than girls, but only temporarily, especially if there are cultural incentives for them to do well. Girls acquire the same abilities later on, but often after people have given up trying to teach them. The same may well be true for boys' linguistic and empathic abilities—it isn't that they can't acquire them, but we expect them to acquire them at the same time as girls do, and then assume they can't be added later.

### Children's Science Fiction and Cultural Pedagogy

The SF written specifically for children before 1980 tends to concentrate on reasoning related to information and objects rather than emotions. Most of the fiction is written by men, apparently with an implied audience of boys (even the apparently exceptional André Norton had male protagonists in her most successful books). This SF is not necessarily good, having a relatively small number of plots: travel to a new planet/world and prevent sabotage; travel to a new world and help it; or repel alien invaders.

SF for children seems to appear in clusters. An obvious example comes from the '40s and 50s, where the universal

theme of growing up was viewed as a process of socialising children (boys) into the work environment. Examples include Robert A. Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy* and Norton's *Catseye*, both of which treat emotions as luxuries to be dealt with later. From 1960 to 1980 the commonest new plot, rejection of myth and parental beliefs, is quite clearly a product of the counter-culture. In Sylvia Engdahl's *Heritage of the Stars*, Ben Bova's *The Exiles*, Suzanne Martel's *The City Underground*, or pretty much any book by John Christopher, the trajectory of the plot is identical: in a ruined society the children discover that what their parents have told them is a myth, and it is the children who will reject the old and build the Truth anew. Running through the books published in this twenty year period is a fascination with pedagogy, how to teach independence, how to teach children to think.

From 1980 onwards the emphasis shifts away from parental rejectionism towards a redemption of parental input. In Bev Spencer's *Guardian of the Dark* (1993), although the protagonists reject the myth that there is nothing outside the cavern in which they live, and go forth to find a better world, we discover in the penultimate chapter that the young people's rebellion has been coached and coaxed by the Patriarch. Two recent examples of this rejection of the parental line, William Nicholson's *The Windsinger* and Jeanne du Prau's *City of Ember*, seem to be aimed at the early-teen age group, and suggest the extent to which this idea has by now fallen out of favour with society.

In the 1980s, much of the SF published for children concentrates on the inner landscape, and seems to see as its mission the socialisation of children less for the factual world than for the emotional world. Even the political issues, such as environmentalism, reflect this. Significantly, much of the SF written for children from the 1980s to 2000 is written by women, and also by people who don't write in the adult genre. Part of what I've been arguing is that SF written for children tends not to share the social ideals of SF written for adults, partly because the writers are ignorant of the genre, but also arising from literary protocols imported from 'feminine' ideas of child development. Incidentally, I am using the term 'feminine' for a mode of thought, not to claim that 'women think like...'. For instance, a feminine mode of thought empha-

sises people skills and protectiveness. A masculine mode of thought emphasises information skills and risky behaviour. Indices of maturity have shifted from the early nineteenth century to the present day to emphasise feminine qualities over masculine qualities.

One of the big issues in persuading children to read is the truism 'boys don't read'. We know, however, that there are many boys who read science fiction and its precursors such as myths, legends, history, science, and anthropology. Responses to my questionnaires (<http://sfquestions.blogspot.com>) suggest that neither males nor females saw 'emotional development', 'social issues' or 'relevance' as being of interest to them in their reading as children. All of this is problematic in a climate in which one of the reasons we encourage children to read *fiction* is to develop their emotional maturity. So we select as 'good' books those which emphasise emotional interests rather than practi-

cal problems, and judge that the best books are 'relevant', talking to children about the world they are in. Books about history or science either get labelled as work or as inferior literature. Why then would boys admit to reading this material? Rather than gaining credit, they are told it diminishes them. Similarly, any girl who likes it will be labelled both boyish *and* immature. However, having said this, Holly V. Blackford's new book *Out of this World: Why Literature Matters to Girls* (2004) is a valuable corrective to many assumptions that have been deployed as working hypotheses (mine included).

By contrast, the reading protocols of SF look first for a wider consequence, the sense of wonder, the marvelling at the world. I would claim that children's SF between 1960 and 1980 suffered from, among other problems, a 'femininisation' of the metaphoric drive, and that this alienates SF readers of both sexes who are far less oriented to interiority.

## New dystopias and children's literature

*Kim Reynolds*

Dystopian fiction holds up the mirror to culture to reveal what we most fear: it takes our present dreams and aspirations and subjects them to scrutiny to reveal their faults, their petty, egocentric dimensions, and their consequences for aspects of life overlooked by those in power who propose to implement their grand designs. In other words, dystopian fiction explores humans' inability to conceive and manage the world we live in for the good of all. It usually does this by focusing on contemporary trends and preoccupations and exploring their possible long-term effects. Children's literature, as a vehicle for shaping future generations, has a long tradition of exploring frighteningly bleak scenarios with a view to finding ways to avoid the mistakes that writers believe will lead to the kinds of dystopian worlds they imagine.

While the mechanics of dystopian fiction are broadly similar over time, the things that frighten and preoccupy us change with increasing rapidity. The world from which Bunyan's Pilgrim flees (to the utopia of the Celestial City, the real focus of that text) is beset by sin, trickery, obfuscation, doubt and despair – still problems

today of course – but it was left to future generations to imagine the many ways in which human invention can set us on the path to new kinds of dystopias.

In my time as a teacher of children's literature I have seen a succession of dystopian sub-genres, based on a variety of developments and behaviours, which demonstrate the topical and sometimes culture-specific nature of dystopian writing. Some of the themes have been reworked at different times for new generations of readers, but an indication of the range and role of dystopian fiction for children over the last 30 years can be seen in the following personal, anecdotal recollection of notable themes and texts I have encountered over this period. Perhaps not surprisingly, the number of dystopian scenarios seems to have increased decade by decade.

### 1970s – 80s

The combination of Cold War mentality and the related nuclear arms race dominated dystopian writing at this time, with books like Robert Swindell's *Brother in the Land* and Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for*

*Zachariah*, both of which explored the idea of nuclear holocaust brought about by wars between the 'super powers'. The resulting dystopias tended to be stories of survival in a ravaged and toxic world.

### 1980s – 90s

Armageddon scenarios changed their basic premise during this period, as tensions between the old 'super powers' reduced and power bases shifted. Nuclear disasters were still a possibility, but more likely to be the consequence of accidents at power stations than war [Gudrun Pausewang's *Fall Out*], while the possibility of human error arising from biological experiments [Victor Kelleher's *Parkland*; Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide*], and secret scientific/technological projects dominated dystopian thinking about how humans might destroy themselves. Related to technologically/scientifically generated disasters, this period saw an increasing number of writers exploring the possibilities of environmental meltdown in response to pollution and human failure to respect the needs of the planet. Perhaps the most time-specific dystopian themes of this period related to the rise of Reaganism and Thatcherism in the US and UK; by the end of the 1990s many writers were exploring the consequences of the social divisions the policies of this period were bringing about between rich and poor [Louise Lawrence's *The Disinherited*], and the privileging of the individual above society (the concept of which Margaret Thatcher famously denied). Fears about diminishing resources, and an increasingly totalitarian and youth centred culture spurred writers to consider worlds in which those who were deemed not to be able to contribute adequately to the material and economic needs of society – the elderly, the infirm, the differently-abled – or who refused to participate as instructed [Malcolm Rose's *The Obtuse Experiment*], were regarded as dispensable or danger-

ous, leading to some powerful dystopian visions [Louise Lawrence's *The Giver*; William Nicholson's *The Wind Singer*].

### 1990s to the present

By the turn of the millennium, all the previous strands can still be detected in dystopian fiction for children, but with new variations. Rowling's Harry Potter series increasingly depicts a world suffering from various kinds of terrorist scenarios; Meg Rossoff's award-winning first novel, *How I Live Now* reflects fears of war and invasion, while numerous books assume the worst about the Internet, computers, and scientific ethics [Alan Gibbons's *Shadow of the Minotaur*]. Books about abuses of cloning [Nancy Farmer's *House of the Scorpion*], the ravaging of rain forests [Elizabeth Kay's *The Divide*], the ruination of species [Ann Hallam's *Siberia*] and even the furthest reaches of the environment [Geraldine McCaughrean's *White Darkness*], and the triumph of violent individuals and heedless groups – sometimes disguised as fantasy – continue to sound warning bells for new generations of readers.

In combination with the daily news from around the world, it is important to ask whether the right balance between concern and optimism is being struck. Bruno Bettelheim has argued that an important use of fairy tales is to provide young readers/listeners with stories that show them triumphing over adversity. It would be foolish indeed to suggest that all books should be optimistic – that would be to deny the genuine problems – but by creating fear around so many aspects of culture and the future, there is also the danger of making change seem impossible, of demonising the technologies that will be needed to bring about solutions, and denying the contributions that can be made by individuals.

# The Evils of Technology

Contemporary Dystopian Science Fiction for Young People

*Noga Applebaum*

In their critical introduction to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), Hintz and Ostry define dystopian texts as 'precise descriptions of societies... in which the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok' (p. 3). They claim that dystopias in novels for young adults can be seen as metaphors for adolescence and the transformation from a state of innocence to that of experience (ibid. 9-10). A browse through their extensive annotated bibliography reveals that a significant percentage of dystopian writing for young people belongs to the popular genre of science fiction. The dystopian worlds described in these books are very often technological or post-technological. Hintz and Ostry believe that in these science fiction novels, children are 'exposed to anxieties about technology while being shown the wonders that it can perform' (ibid. 11). However, an examination of science fiction written for children from 1980 onwards suggests a prevalent anti-technological bias amongst many of the authors.

As the western world is still in thrall to nineteenth century ideas of childhood, and adults perceive children as naturally innocent (see Warner 1994; Jenks 1996; Higonnet 1998; James, Jenks et al. 1998), man-made technology is often constructed as being in opposition to nature, and by extension, as the embodiment of corrupting experience. Glimpses of this attitude are already found in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) in which pre-Victorian industrialism is depicted as already corrupting and evil.

In many contemporary children's science fiction novels, technology is depicted as the destroyer of nature, democracy, art, and language. In Peter Dickinson's *Eva* (1988) humanity has overwhelmed the planet, and the natural world, with its jungles and animals, is almost completely gone, and can only be experienced virtually on the 'Shaper'. The scant patches left 'were always being nibbled away as somebody found a new method of exploiting them' (1988:20). Similarly, in Robert Westall's *Futuretrack 5* (1983) and Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002), techno-

logical society is equated with oppression and the dystopian cities are sterile and devoid of nature.

For many children's science fiction authors, the humanities and the arts, especially literature and music, represent the essence of being human, while technology is usually not perceived as a creative or ethical endeavour, but rather as a threat to human values. The dystopian technological worlds they create have no regard for reading books or composing music, which are either banned activities or simply of no interest to a society saturated with images and virtual realities. In Rodman Philbrick's *The Last Book in the Universe* (2000), society has fallen into chaos as a result of addiction to surfing virtual fantasy worlds, and the only writer left is cruelly lynched. Sonia Levitin's *The Cure* (Levitin 1999) depicts a seemingly harmonious world in which, with the aid of technology, artistic talent is actively discouraged for fear of it creating diversity which might lead to conflict. A young musician defies the rules, thus conveying the message that artists are the keepers of the soul of humanity. As a result of the exposure to technology and the disregard for literature, language is seen as being in danger of impoverishment, in novels such as *Feed* (Anderson 2003), *Daz 4 Zoe* (Swindells 1990) and *Sleepwalking* (Morgan 2004).

As we live in a rapidly advancing technological era, it is easy to understand why many children's science fiction authors visualise the future as being full of new gadgets and gizmos. However, a fear that the past would be trampled in the process of technological progress prevails in novels such as *The Giver* (Lowry 1993) and *Useful Idiots* (Mark 2004).

Human values and cultures are not all that is seen as being threatened by technology. The flood of dystopian writing surrounding the issue of cloning not only reflects general public anxiety in a post-human era but more specifically adult fear of the disintegration of the family structure and with it the power relations between child and parent. As clones have no parents in the biological sense we are

### STOP PRESS!

The winner of the CLPE Poetry Award 2005, announced on June 6th, is *Sensational!* edited by Roger McGough

accustomed to, they pose serious questions as to the future of adult control over children's lives. This speculation may well explain the emphasis in many of these novels on a cloned child protagonist finding or creating alternative familial relationships. In Patrick Cave's *Sharp North* (2004), three generations of cloned women form a sisterly bond, while in Halam's *Taylor Five* (2002) a cloned girl forms an alternative mother-daughter relationship with her gene-mother.

Of course there are exceptions. Steven Bowkett's *Ice* (2001) and its sequels, which form The *Wintering* trilogy, also depict a technological dystopia; however the author suggests that the foundation for a better future lies in forming a partnership between technology and nature. A similar message is found in McNaughton's *The Secret under My Skin* (2000). In Cooper's *Earthchange* (1985), C.P. Snow's myth of 'the two cultures' is dispelled, as the scientist is also a gifted poet, and in Fox's *Eager* (2003), an endearing tale of a humanoid robot, the message conveyed is that technology is part of nature.

Unfortunately, these examples are sparse; science fiction authors writing for children and teens continue to display a significant distrust of technology in the form of diverse dystopian technologised worlds which they create for

their young readers. As these young people are likely to grow up in a technological environment, the negative messages about technology embedded in literature written for them may perpetuate the ambivalent attitudes of previous generations. Moreover, the increased ability of children to adapt to new technology, in comparison to their elders, may offer an insight into the subconscious motivation of adults in creating these dystopian worlds, since this ability threatens the power hierarchy existing between the knowledgeable, experienced adult and the innocent, helpless child, outdated though such a concept may be today.

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## Children's Dystopias

Kevin McCarron

I am sure I would find broad agreement if I were to suggest that there are at least six or so children's dystopias which can safely be regarded as 'classics': Robert O'Brien's *Z For Zachariah*, Robert Swindells' *Brother in the Land*, Louise Lawrence's *Children of the Dust*, Gudrun Pausewang's *The Last Children and Fall-Out*, John Rowe Townsend's *Noah's Castle*, John Christopher's *Empty World*, and Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*. To this list could be added numerous other authors who have made strong contributions to this very popular genre – this list would include, among others, Robert Westall, Diana Wynne Jones, Nicholas Fisk, Paula

Danziger, Melvin Burgess, and Jean Ure. Over the years I have published a considerable amount on Adolescent Horror, and my first area of interest was that of reader response: essentially, why were these horror narratives so popular? I want, very briefly, to ask the same question of these children's dystopias. Why are they so popular?

The most common cause of the nightmarish future depicted within the genre is nuclear war, the second is environmental collapse. Children's dystopias are extremely graphic in their depictions of a post-apocalyp-

tic landscape, far more so than their adult counterparts. Indeed, Louise Lawrence's *Children of the Dust* and Gudrun Pausewang's *Fall-Out* and *The Last Children*, in particular, were severely criticised for their bleakness. Pausewang defended herself robustly: 'The young readers of my "nuclear novels" are not being confronted with the dangers of the nuclear war for the first time... if adults want to protect children from fears about the future they should *change reality*, not condemn my books.' My suggestion here is that adolescents read these grimly pessimistic accounts of millions dying, radiation sickness, a slow and painful death, as factual; the books are, at least on one level, received as factual, neutral *information*. They satisfy a pragmatic agenda.

Pausewang's persuasive defence of her writing is later undermined, for me, by her simplistic and sentimental evaluation of young people, of whom she writes: 'The young are more imaginative than we are. They're bursting with ideas.' No, they are not! They are bursting with emotions, often inchoate and unarticulated, which they confuse with ideas. These dystopias are also often powerfully emotional, although I keep in mind here Peter Hunt's useful admonition to remember when reading children's books that I am a guest; they were not written for me. Nevertheless, a scene such as this one, from the last page of *Brother in the Land*, strikes me as almost unbearably moving:

He had a creeping dose. There was nothing we could do... We kept him wrapped up and sat watching the life go out of him. He didn't make a fuss or anything, and then one night he slipped away.

We buried him in the garden. It was raining. We'd wrapped him in sacking and there wasn't quite enough, and we could see a bit of his bald head glistening in the rain. I know you're supposed to say something over a grave but I didn't know what, so I said what Branwell said once. I said 'He who places his brother in the land is everywhere'. Just that. It's hard to talk when you're crying.

Overall, the genre echoes the sentiments of the ironic soviet observation 'One million deaths is a statistic. One death is a tragedy.' So, children's dystopias are, ostensibly anyway, factual and they are undeniably emotionally powerful.

They are also, and I think here lies the real appeal of the genre, relentlessly critical of us, adults: the greedy, selfish, violent, macho lunatic criminals who have brought about the end of the world. The official advice given by the Government to the stricken populace in these texts is at the very least useless, and more often than not, dangerously wrong. Parents are particularly useless in such texts, almost always dying in the opening pages, incapable of providing protection to their children, themselves little better than the warmongering morons who have wreaked such devastation. It has been suggested by a number of literary theorists, including Todorov, Bakhtin and Rosemary Jackson, that the genre of fantasy itself offers a subtle temptation to transgression, dispensing as it does with the materialist rationalism of Western culture. Certainly, the children's dystopia could be seen as a site for the most violent displaced Oedipal urges. Additionally, these texts offer unlimited scope for simplistic self-righteous criticisms of the prevailing order. Only slightly tongue in cheek, I suggest that a primary appeal to the adolescent lies in the genre's ability to point out that things could hardly be worse and IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT! No post-apocalyptic world has ever been brought about because a teenager left his Nintendo DS charging for an entire weekend.

Finally, I note that while these texts are relentlessly, overpoweringly pessimistic regarding the fate of most human beings, they are reasonably optimistic about the chances for survival of the principal characters. Here, though, a paradox emerges, or perhaps less charitably, a contradiction. There's no getting around the fact that the worldview that emerges after the apocalypse is Hobbesian: *in extremis*, nearly everybody is cruel, violent and greedy. The values that these texts celebrate, most notably self-sufficiency and courage, are placed within a larger context within which gender-specificity is inscribed in the natural order of things, and the importance of the family is never queried, although the family is often reconfigured as a 'tribe'. Nevertheless this alternative family is hermetic, and places its own needs and desires ahead of all other competing claims. The most powerful background text in children's dystopias is Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, not Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*.

## Historical If ...

Joan Aiken, the Worlds of Willoughby Chase and beyond

### *Bridget Carrington*

Why do we want to have alternate worlds? It's a way of making progress. You have to imagine something before you do it. Therefore, if you write about something, hopefully you write about something that's better or more interesting than circumstances as they now are, and that way you hope to make a step towards it.

Joan Aiken: 'Wolves and Alternate Worlds' in *Locus Magazine*, May 1998  
<http://www.locusmag.com/1998/Issues/05/Aiken.html>

Joan Aiken always took pains to explain to her readers how she set her books within their historical/ahistorical and literary context. As a result, her novels, particularly the *Willoughby Chase* sequence, are well supported by notes, prefaces and afterwords, in which she explains the circumstances giving rise to particular episodes in the reign of King James III, his heirs and successors. It was in 1952 that Aiken first created her imaginary nineteenth century in which the House of Stuart had retained the English throne though under a constant threat from Hanoverian pretenders, but it wasn't until ten years later that the first of the sequence, *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, was finished and published. Each of the eleven *Willoughby Chase* books stands alone, but also relates to the people and events of the others. The degree of dystopia present in each varies, as Aiken stated in her 1998 article 'Wolves and Alternate Worlds' when discussing the original book: 'At that point, the alternate world wasn't so important. I just knew vaguely that it wanted to be in the reign of James the Third and the Channel Tunnel with the world coming through from Europe, so I could give myself scope if I wanted to, to change things, alter the course of history.'

Although Simon Battersea was introduced in the first novel, it was the second, *Black Hearts in Battersea* (1965), which saw the arrival of the heroine of many of the remaining books, Dido Twite. It could be argued that Dido, as an enterprising, energetic, thoroughly independent and somewhat anarchic young Cockney, herself adds a dystopian dimension, being so very unlike what readers might expect of a working class nineteenth-century adolescent. Aiken peppers her behaviour with irreverent and unladylike action, brave

and impulsive reactions being accompanied by expletives such as 'croopus' and 'odds cuss it!' as though they were authentic corruptions of ancient oaths. Aiken intended to kill Dido off in this book, but relented, sparing one of the most engaging young women in children's literature. *Night Birds on Nantucket* (1966) sees Dido foiling an assassination plot which would employ a massive cannon to fire from New England to England itself, but whose recoil threatens to damage the American mainland. This fantasy of monumental and truly awesome imagination is only rivalled by the plan in *The Cuckoo Tree* (1971) to disrupt a coronation by rolling St. Paul's Cathedral into the Thames! Dido remains determined throughout the books that, while she will fight to preserve the Stuart monarchy, and ensure that Simon gains his apparent birthright, she will never live in luxury, even when that decision will deny her the opportunity to remain with him. Only the surprising events of the final episode of Aiken's Jacobite history, *The Witch of Clatteringshaws* (2005), offer the possibility of an alternative for the two young lovers.

The later novels in the sequence present a far more dystopian world. *The Stolen Lake* (1981) and *Limbo Lodge* (1999), although fitting between *Night Birds on Nantucket* and *The Cuckoo Tree* in the chronology of Aiken's Willoughby related world, were written after some of those describing subsequent events. Aiken acknowledges her debt in *Limbo Lodge* to the young Brontës' imaginary world Angria: 'I'm using bits and pieces of these ideas, inventing a Pacific Ocean which has been colonized by the Angrians' (*Locus*, 1998). Aiken also affirmed that she was a firm believer in the use of 'exaggeration and nonsense' to enliven her writing, engage her audience and strengthen the dystopia. The distorted mapping of her *Willoughby* world, in which familiar place names and natural features are transported to unfamiliar locations in a landscape altered as much geographically as its society is historically, serves both as points of contact and jarring reminders of the dislocation of this created world with our own.

In two of the last works in the sequence, *Is* (1992) and *Cold Shoulder*

*Road* (1995), her alternative worlds move truly from historical fantasy to dystopia. Throughout the *Willoughby Chase* books, characters' names are chosen, in a manner common in both Shakespeare and Dickens, to reflect their personalities and positions, and Aiken, like Dickens, extends this to places; in *Is* she envisages trainloads of children tempted away to Playland by the promise of an everlasting supply of fun and sweets, only to find that they will instead spend the rest of their short lives as slaves in horrifying conditions mining coal in Blastburn, the underground kingdom of Gold Kingy. Where Dickens describes the actual circumstances in which the children of poor families lived and worked in Victorian cities, Aiken creates a horrifying alternative-nineteenth-century dystopian underworld, which elaborates on reality, deepens the anguish and emphasises the horror of what we know to have been a genuine historical situation.

As well as bizarrely altered aspects of authentic Victorian society, set within a distorted but recognisable historical framework, Aiken uses literary references, both from the traditional oral repertoire and from well known authors, which she alters to suit her plot. This provides an intertext with the plot, and thereby a commentary on the created world, a curiously distorted half memory from the reader's previous experience. Throughout the sequence, there are twisted echoes of real historical rhymes and ballads (often Dido's father's compositions), and constant references to people and events from literature, while the journeying elements of *Is* and *Cold Shoulder Road* have undertones of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Aiken's frequent incorporation of characters, names and identities from other sources brings readers a wider set of references, as well as the twisted characterisation or timescale attached to the recreated character or situation.

Aiken classed the Willoughby books as 'short' fantasy, which she found easier to write than creating a complex and sustained fantasy world. In *The Cockatrice Boys* (1996), however, she attempted a science fiction story which is wonderfully humorous as a result of situations arising when humans try to act by ordinary rules in extreme circumstances. So adults still scold their children for triv-

ial misbehaviour while terrifying creatures eat the neighbours, and sports fans lament the state of soccer while the cockatrices raven through the streets. The monsters invade Britain, driving most of the population underground, while the Cockatrice Corps travel from London to Manchester on an armoured train to do battle with Shovel-tuskers, Basilisks, Flying Hammerheads, Telepods, Cocodrills, Kelpies, the dread Mirkindole, and worse, for Trolls lurk dangerously beneath every bridge. Dakin Prestwick and his orphaned cousin Sauna Flow travel with them to escape their homes; Sauna's precognitive abilities greatly aid the Corps, but they also make her a target for the evil behind the cockatrices. A missing book of occult lore written by one of Sauna's ancestors may hold the key to dispelling the monsters, but Sauna is kidnapped, and the Cockatrice Corps must save her and recover the book before the enemy does. This novel, expanded from a short story, replaces the vicious humanity which populates the *Willoughby* worlds with monsters, a more visual representation of evil. In so doing, Aiken increases the fantasy elements, but decreases the subtle and far more horrifying reality that it is humankind, not otherworldly creatures, which harbours all the malevolence necessary to intimidate and subjugate the world and its inhabitants. The dystopian world of *Willoughby Chase*, altered from the world we know, but not beyond our comprehension, is perhaps a more salutary experience for readers than the science fictional world of Cockatrices.

Aiken believed passionately in the power of imagination to inspire and direct us to better things. In her 1998 interview she asserts that

People need stories...to remind them that reality is not only what we can see or smell or touch. Reality is in as many layers as the globe we live on itself, going inwards to a central core of red-hot mystery, and outwards to unguessable space. People's minds need detaching, every now and then, from the plain necessities of daily life. People need to be reminded of these other dimensions above us and below us. Stories do that.

Thankfully, the recent republication of the *Willoughby Chase* sequence will ensure that Aiken's stories continue to do this for many future generations of readers.

## Dystopian Societies Represented in Fiction for Young People

*Pam Robson, with Nikki Gamble and Pat Pinsent*

Few authors of fiction for older children represent the future very positively, and it is hard to find a futuristic novel that portrays any kind of utopia. A number of distinguished authors, such as Peter Dickinson, have created whole series around a fictitious dystopian society. Dystopian sources include state-sponsored totalitarianism and violence; abuse of the environment and the resultant devastating effects; and rapid advancement of technology which leads to unethical use or annihilation. The following selection includes both series and single titles in which disturbing dystopian societies are portrayed. Some proffer a hopeful closure for the reader, while in others closure is ambiguous or even pessimistic.

### Series Fiction

■ **Malorie Blackman** • *Noughts and Crosses*, 2001, ISBN: 0552546321; *Knife Edge*, 2004, ISBN: 0385605277; *Checkmate*, 2005, ISBN: 0385607733. London: Doubleday

This controversial series represents black people, the eponymous Crosses, as the ruling class; the despised Noughts are all white people. Callum, a Nought, is the childhood friend of Sephy, a Cross. Their future is doomed. Callum becomes a Liberation extremist and the first story ends with his execution. Chapters are organised alternately to represent the viewpoints of both main characters. There is much violence here, and sexually explicit scenes. In the second volume, Sephy has given birth to Callum's child, a girl. Sephy, who now lives with Jude's mother, Meggie, provides an alibi for Callum's evil brother, Jude, the murderer of a young black woman. Sephy tries to earn a living as a singer but is reviled for her actions and tries to kill Callum's baby. As the story closes Meggie is trying to save the baby's life, creating an open-ended situation for a sequel. In the third volume, Sephy's daughter, Rose, is growing up in a prejudiced and dangerous world.

■ **Stephen Bowkett** • *The Wintering Trilogy* (Ice, Storm, Thaw) London: Orion

The epic tale of humanity's fight to recover from the next ice age and

escape the control of a malevolent global Artificial Intelligence – seen through the eyes of two children, Kell and Shamra. The author says:

I'm not worried particularly about the Armageddon which will inevitably result from the development of technology, or the cloning of humans, or the creation of an artificial cell. But I do think that if these ideas are not challenged or debated, then vested interests will have their way. Technological development will prevail not necessarily for evil purposes but for commercial purposes, which might have evil outcomes. Imagination can lead you to project possible outcomes and consequences of technological development.

([www.writeaway.org.uk](http://www.writeaway.org.uk))

A gripping quest.

■ **Peter Dickinson** • *The Changes Trilogy* (*The Weathermonger* (1968), *Heartsease* (1969), and *The Devil's Children* (1970), Harmondsworth: Puffin (reissued in 2003 by Collins Voyager to accompany a television adaptation)

Each of these three stories is set in a Britain of the future during the eponymous Changes. *The Weathermonger* portrays the British as having been overcome by a spell cast by the wizard, Merlin, who has been disturbed in his underground sleep and, through the machinations of a do-gooder, has become addicted to morphine. As a consequence, machines and motor cars are now regarded as the source of all evil and superstition reigns once more. Anyone found tinkering with technology is branded as a witch and put to death; society has become brutal and primitive. Geoffrey and his young sister Sally, who are immune to the spell, set out to find its source and succeed in persuading Merlin to reject morphine. Life returns to normal but Dickinson, who has admitted to a tendency to undercut his own premise, offers an ambiguous closure, hinting at the doubtful advantages of the internal combustion engine in his final sentence: 'And the English air would soon be reeking with petrol.' Pre-quals *Heartsease* and *The Devil's Children* inform readers of events at the beginning of the Changes.

■ **Jeanne DuPrau** • *City of Ember* [sequels to follow]. London:Random House ISBN: 0552552380

Hundreds of years ago, the city of Ember was created by the Builders to contain everything needed for human survival. It worked – but now the storerooms are almost out of food, crops are blighted, corruption is spreading and worst of all – the lights are failing. Soon Ember could be engulfed by darkness. But when two children, Lina and Doon, discover fragments of an ancient parchment, they begin to wonder if there could be a way out of Ember. Can they decipher the words from long ago and find a new future for everyone? Will the people of Ember listen? Not overly complex and the prose is accessible and very readable.

■ **John Marsden** • *Tomorrow, When the War began* (1993) (ISBN 0330363891); *The Dead of Night* (1994); *A Killing Frost; Darkness, Be My Friend*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.

Gripping futuristic series set in an Australia invaded by an unspecified force, possibly from Asia. Ellie and her friends are thrust into a nightmare world in which their families have been interned. Events, including romantic and sexual relationships within the group, are revealed through Ellie's 'writing' as they wage guerrilla warfare against the invaders but their heroism ends in near tragedy. Marsden raises real moral issues about land. The ending is inconclusive.

■ **Philip Reeve** • *The Hungry City Chronicles (Mortal Engines, Predator's Gold and Infernal Devices)* London: Scholastic.

Set on Earth thousands of years in the future. A shield wall divides the Tractionists in mobile cities from the static Anti-Tractionists. Protagonists Tom and Hester are caught up in a struggle which leads them to the arctic wastes.

■ **Jean Ure** • *Plague99* (1989); *After the Plague [Come Lucky April]* (1992); *Watchers at the Shrine* (1994) London: Methuen.

Three teenagers attempt to survive alone when plague sweeps London. Later descendants of two plague survivors from the isolated communities now existing without technology are seeking knowledge about this event and about other communities. By considering the extreme values held by such groups,

involving serious gender issues and religious fundamentalism, Ure encourages much philosophical discussion, with no happy endings or easy solutions.

### Single Novels

■ **Alison Allen-Gray** • *Unique*, Oxford: University Press. ISBN: 0192753355

Fifteen year old Dominic discovers that he has been cloned from the body of his dead brother. There is a happy, though violent, ending.

■ **M. T Anderson** • *Feed*, London:Walker, ISBN: 074459085X

In one sense, *Feed* is an affecting, but unremarkable teenage romance, and this is its triumph. Within a subtly-realised dystopia, Anderson weaves a story that is almost brilliant in its banality and staggering in its emotional truth, with no real conclusion – a shockingly powerful novel, which reads like a digital-age, teenage version of 1984. (Review: Luke Slater ([www.writeaway.org.uk](http://www.writeaway.org.uk)). *A set of teachers' notes for this book is available on the Book Trust website.* <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/>)

■ **Neil Arksey** • *Playing on the Edge*, Harmondsworth: Puffin. ISBN: 0141307501

This gripping futuristic novel is set in the U.K in the year 2064. Football teams are controlled by big business and players are drugged to enhance performance, until a coach and members of a team become leaders of a wave of public opinion that ousts the unscrupulous organisers.

■ **Julie Bertagna** • *Exodus*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, ISBN: 033039908X

This futuristic fantasy uses the threat of Global Warming for its theme; the year is 2099 and oceans cover the land, only mountain tops remain. Mara's island home is finally submerging and the islanders flee to the legendary New World, where they find a regime that enslaves refugees. The story is open-ended.

■ **Henrietta Branford** • *Chance of Safety*, London: Hodder, ISBN: 0340699639 (1999)

A society of 'haves' and 'have-nots' has been created because the country is governed by unscrupulous people. An optimistic ending.

■ **John Christopher** • *The Guardians*, Harmondsworth: Puffin, ISBN: 0140305793 (1970)

There is a chilling plausibility to this story about a future world of 'haves' and 'have-nots', each confined to live in separate zones. Life has degenerated into a holding situation in which the population has been conditioned into acceptance of their position in society; no-one attempts to cross borders.

■ **John Christopher** • *A Dusk of Demons*, Harmondsworth: Puffin ISBN: 014036420X (1993)

The reader must wait until the last chapter before discovering the reason why people have adopted a strange new life style governed by Demons. Civilisation has been destroyed by over-population and violence. The new order of isolated tribes is designed to prevent a recurrence.

■ **Ann Halam** • *Siberia*, London: Orion, ISBN: 1842551299

Both Ann Halam's thought provoking previous books for young readers, *Dr. Franklin's Island* and *Taylor Five*, considered the dangers of the misuse of scientific knowledge. In *Siberia*, she creates a world so damaged by human mismanagement that in its permafrost only scavenging creatures survive amid a brutalised human population. Sloe's journey as she fulfils her mother's wishes and preserves the seeds of the genome bank is a true Bildungsroman. A powerful message prompting discussion of the fragility of life and of relationships between all living creatures. (Review: Bridget Carrington ([www.writeaway.org.uk](http://www.writeaway.org.uk)))

■ **Libby Hathorn** • *The Climb*, London: Hodder, ISBN: 0340687444

Set in an unnamed fascist state, this is a powerful romance which raises some tough moral issues. Peter, once a weakling, bullied by stronger boys, has developed into a top athlete; climbing is his forte, which enables him to rescue Maya who is hiding from the state.

■ **Carol Hedges** • *Bright Angel*, Oxford: University Press, ISBN: 0192752820

A cyber crash in the year 2049 has destroyed all computer information. The world has been destroyed by natural dis-

asters and HIV. Now there is only one artificial world, led by an insane old man kept alive by life-giving drugs. Issues also involve cloning.

■ **Lesley Howarth** • *Ultraviolet*, Harmondsworth: Puffin, ISBN: 0141310782

Global warming provides a powerful premise here; deadly sun's rays confine the population indoors for most of the year, playing Quest computer games. Violet's father, Nick, spends his time developing a plastic protective covering kept from general public use by commercial greed. The story swings between reality and virtual reality so that the reader is never quite sure what is happening.

■ **Eric Johns** • *After the End of the World*, London: Walker, ISBN: 0744577705

This futuristic story with strong language and sexual innuendoes portrays a group of young teenagers, suspended in a hibernation programme, waking fifty years into the future to discover that the world has rejected machines and reverted to a medieval society. Much here to provoke discussion.

■ **Diana Wynne Jones** • *The Homeward Bounders*, London: Collins, ISBN: 0006755259, 1981; *A Tale of Time City*, 1987 ISBN 0 7497 0440 3, London: Methuen; *Hexwood*, London: Collins, ISBN: 0006755267, 1993.

These and other relevant novels by Jones were considered in *IBBYLink*, Spring 2005.

■ **Louise Lawrence** • *Children of the Dust*, London: Red Fox, ISBN: 0099433427

Set in Britain after a nuclear holocaust, this book is divided into three sections with the voices of three generations, in the shaping of a better world. One of the few dystopian novels to end on an optimistic note.

■ **Louise Lawrence** • *The Disinherited*, London: Red Fox, ISBN: 0099301873

This powerful novel portrays a Britain in which natural resources are exhausted and unemployment is the norm. Sharp divisions between the minority rich and the majority poor have re-emerged. There is a chillingly realistic storyline with an unnerving plausibility.

■ **Lois Lowry** • *Gathering Blue*, London: Bloomsbury, ISBN: 0747555923

Civilisation has been destroyed in this future world and replaced by a medieval society in which the disabled are rejected and sent to the 'Field' to die. Kira is crippled, but saved in order to weave the story of the past and the future; she comes to understand that she must be instrumental in changing society.

■ **Lois Lowry** • *The Giver*, London: Collins, ISBN: 0007141424

Jonas lives in a future world where there are no colours, no music, no pain and no real families. Old people, unwanted babies and others are 'released'. Jonas comes to realise that this means being killed by injection, so escapes to a different type of community.

■ **Jan Mark** • *Useful Idiots*, Oxford: David Fickling, 2004, ISBN 0385 60413 0.

Set in 2255 on the 'Rhine Delta Islands' (formerly the United Kingdom), this book presents a confrontation between the values of the scientists (who refuse consideration of the past) and the aboriginal inhabitants. A demanding read.

■ **R.C. O'Brien** • *Z For Zachariah*, Harmondsworth: Puffin, ISBN: 0141300310

A nuclear holocaust has devastated the land. Ann Burden is alone on the farm when she sees a man approaching wearing a plastic suit. A cat and mouse game follows and Ann finally leaves her small world. O'Brien leaves the reader with an element of hope.

■ **Kate Reid** • *Operation Timewarp*, London: Orion. ISBN: 1842552031

A time machine carries three children into the year 2099, to bring about the collapse of a vicious dictator in a society in which children have been genetically selected to be non-violent and compliant. A gripping, plausible read with a probable target audience of 9-12 years.

■ **Robert Swindells** • *Daz 4 Zoe*, Harmondsworth: Puffin, ISBN: 0140372644

This tale of the future imagines Britain divided into a police state of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Alternating chapters present

the viewpoints of Daz and Zoe who live on opposite sides of the division line.

■ **Robert Swindells** • *Brother in the Land* (1984/2000)

When this bleak but well-written and moving vision of a nuclear disaster was first published, its ending lacked the element of hope; the more recent reissue provides a very slightly more positive slant.

■ **Nick Warburton** • *To Trust a Soldier*, London: Walker. ISBN: 0744536928

A thoughtful novel set in Britain of the future where machines have been discarded, and war is in progress as the result of an invasion. A teenager, Mary is involved in guiding a group of soldiers and witnessing the violence of war.

■ **Robert Westall** • *Future Tract 5*, London: Kestrel 1983

The country is divided into three classes: the middleclass Ests, the underclass Unnems, and the controlling Techs, and violence between them is the inevitable result. Surprisingly prescient for its period.

■ **Chris Wooding** • *Endgame*, London: Scholastic, ISBN: 0439978882

A powerful ideological novel: the world is about to face not only world war three, but also a new ice age. Then a riot breaks out. The central teenage characters have many problems but all is in vain when the siren sounds because nuclear bombs have been detonated. This is a bleak, violent read, a true dystopia.

## *You're Thinking About Tomatoes*

Michael Rosen, illustrated by Quentin Blake. Barn Owl Books 2005 paperback £4.99. ISBN: 1 9030154 4 8

Frank isn't much looking forward to the school visit to a stately home – it will be so boring that 'you want to sit down and sleep for a year'. He certainly doesn't imagine that the objects on display will come alive, nor tell him their story, nor have some very 21st century ambitions and generally make his day anything but boring. Michael Rosen is already well known for some of the funniest, most irreverent, and most child-centred poetry currently available. This is his second book about Frank, who starred in *You're Thinking About Doughnuts*. *You're Thinking About Tomatoes* continues Frank's bizarre adventures amongst the treasures of British museums and stately homes, for which it is clear the young hero has a healthy disrespect. Frank's despairing route through Chiltern House, trying to complete his worksheet, takes him past a painting of the 18th century children of the house, where he is upbraided by a shadowy figure behind the children, who then steps out of the picture and enlightens him about the plight of young black servants at that time – treated as a family pet, yet beaten and locked up when they disobey. Frank then encounters an Egyptian mummy who wants to star in a horror film, an ambition brought on by the thoughtless and unfeeling attention he has had since he was robbed from his tomb, and became an object of popular and scientific interest. As Frank collects more reanimated followers, he hears their stories, all of which introduce readers to the idea that history is more than dates and facts – it's also the story of people's lives, and very unjust lives those often were.

A funny, lively, but often worryingly confused story, full of humour and horror, and with an undeniably serious intention. The observation both of disengaged schoolchildren and exasperated teachers is dreadfully accurate, but unfortunately the pervasive supernatural chaos may obscure the underlying messages. The Alice-like animation of inanimate objects, filled with malevolence and able to threaten and deliver injury to human visitors, exacerbates an already nightmarish situation, and may well encourage in readers a concern more in the titillating possibility of evil *objets d'art* than in the evils of the past.

**Bridget Carrington**

## Books Received

**Charmian Hussey** • *The Valley of Secrets*, London: Hodder, 2005. £5.99. ISBN0 340 89377X

First published by a small Cornish press in 2003, this book is ecologically driven by the author's commitment to preserving the flora and fauna of the Amazonian rain forests. The focal (and almost single) character, Stephen, inherits his great-uncle's Cornwall estate, to which a variety of real and imaginary plants and animals, plus one threatened Indian, Murra-yari, had been brought early in the twentieth century from Brazil. Stephen gradually discovers these, notably a 'tigerwomp' whom he names Tig, and also reads his uncle's journal. Very well intentioned, but for me the credibility of what is in most respects a 'realist' text is impaired by the invention of the 'bugwumps' – I'd have preferred Hussey to have used only the real species on the lists in the text, compiled by Christopher Crump (who also illustrated the book). There is also an extensive bibliography and a list of relevant organisations.

**Gerard Benson** • *Omba Bolomba*, illus. Cathy Benson, Huddersfield: Smith Doorstop Books, 2005, £6. ISBN1-902382-70-6

A very varied collection of 60 short poems. The rhythmical title poem with nonsense words is complemented by the visual emblem of 'The lighthouse', several unrhymed poems about animals, and the autobiographical, post-Lear 'How delightful to know Mr Benson.' Humour is to the forefront in 'School for wizards and witches' (*Macbeth* via 'Harry Potter?'), which begins: 'So today, children, we will learn to make/ Fillet of a fenny snake,' and ends with praise of the pupils for all being 'really evil today'. 'Dan Malone and his mobile phone' reveals Benson's command of the language of 'txt', while 'The Earwig football song' is short enough to quote in its entirety: 'Earwig Oh,/ Earwig Oh,/ Earwig Oh!' The illustrations add an additional witty element.

## Hans Christian Andersen Awards 2006 – the nominees

Country	Author	Illustrator
<i>Argentina</i>	Ema Wolf	Isol Misenta
<i>Austria</i>	Adelheid Dahiméne	Heide Stöllinger
<i>Belgium</i>	Pierre Coran	Klaas Verplancke
<i>Brazil</i>	Joel Rufino dos Santos	Rui de Oliveira
<i>Canada</i>	Jean Little	Michèle Lemieux
<i>China</i>	Zhang Zhilu	Tao Wenjie
<i>Croatia</i>	Joza Horvat	
<i>Denmark</i>	Josefine Ottesen	Lilian Brøgger
<i>Finland</i>	Hannele Huovi	Virpi Talvitie
<i>France</i>	Pierre-Marie Beaude	Grégoire Solotareff
<i>Germany</i>	Peter Härtling	Wolf Erlbruch
<i>Greece</i>	Eugene Trivizas	Vasso Psaraki
<i>Iran</i>	Mohammad Hadi Mohammadi	
<i>Ireland</i>	P.J. Lynch	
<i>Italy</i>	Angela Nanetti	Emanuele Luzzati
<i>Japan</i>	Toshiko Kanzawa	Daihachi Ohta
<i>Netherlands</i>	Toon Tellegen	Annemarie van Haeringen
<i>New Zealand</i>	Margaret Mahy	
<i>Norway</i>	Jon Ewo	Svein Nyhus
<i>Portugal</i>	Matilde Rosa Araújo	Alain Corbel
<i>Russia</i>	Sergey Kozlov	G.A.V. Traugot
<i>Slovak Republic</i>	Ludomir Feldek	Martin Kellenberger
<i>Slovenia</i>	Lila Prap	
<i>Spain</i>	Jordi Sierra i Fabra	Javier Serrano
<i>Sweden</i>	Barbro Lindgren	Eva Eriksson
<i>Switzerland</i>	Hanna Johansen	Etienne Delessert
<i>United Kingdom</i>	Philip Pullman	David McKee
<i>USA</i>	E. L. Konigsburg	Ashley Bryan

The authors and illustrators listed on the previous page have been nominated for the 2006 Hans Christian Andersen Awards. The jury will meet before the Bologna Book Fair in March 2006, and the winners will be announced at the fair. They will be presented with their medals at the IBBY Congress in Beijing, China in September 2006.

As always, it is interesting and somewhat depressing to note how few of these names will be familiar to British readers. Margaret Mahy is no stranger, of course, having won the Carnegie Medal twice with *The Haunting* (1982) and *The Changeover* (1984), and also being the author of many picture books such as *A Lion in the Meadow* and *The Man Whose Mother Was a Pirate*. However, only a fairly small portion of her oeuvre is currently in print in the UK.

Thanks to Walker Books, E L Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs Basil E Frankweiler* became available to British readers in 2003 (it won the Newbery Medal in 1968) and they have now published her more recent novel *The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place*. Her other (1997) Newbery winner *The View from Saturday* has not been published here. Books illustrated by African American illustrator Ashley Bryan are only available in the UK as imports. The Irish nomination for the illustration award, P J Lynch, is well known and has twice won the Kate Greenaway Medal, for *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* (1997) and *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* (1995). Canadian author Jean Little's novel about bereavement *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird* was available in the UK some years ago but no longer.

Once we move away from the nominations from countries where the dominant language is English, the picture worsens. Apart from these, of the writers listed above, Eugene Trivizas is best known here as the author of a picture book illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Egmont) and recently his novel *The Last Black Cat* (Egmont) has been translated. The only book illustrated by Wolf Erlbruch generally known to British audiences is the humorous *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business* (Chrysalis). As anyone who attended the talk given by him and Sara Fanelli at the Goethe Institut in London a couple of years ago will know, he has produced many other interesting books. If only they were available here, along with the work of some of the other illustrators on this list such as Gregoire Solotareff and Javier Serrano who have both been nominated previously. Books by the Swedish nominees Barbro Lindgren and Eva Eriksson, such as *The Wild Baby*, have been available here but do not seem to be now. Some of the work of the Swiss illustrator Etienne Delessert, published by the Creative Company, is distributed in the UK by Portfolio Children's Books. This includes *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Seven Dwarfs*.

Happily, we will be able to find out more about all the nominees when the Hans Andersen Awards issue of *Bookbird* is published around the time the awards are presented, in Summer/Autumn 2006.

**Ann Lazim**

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## **Book Launch**

Frances Lincoln launched their new Dual Language series, which currently involves texts in English, Gujarati, Panjabi, Bengali and Urdu of *Amazing Grace*, *Rama and the Demon King*, and *The Leopard's Drum*, at the Newham Bookshop, Barking, on 13<sup>th</sup> July. Authors and translators of these books were present, as well as Prodecepta Das whose *Prita goes to India* shared the launch. A goodly number of people, who had not been deterred from travelling by the prevailing tension, enjoyed the refreshments and good company as well as the chance to look at the books. A worthy project!

## Bookbird

The attractive latest issue of IBBY's international journal (Vol.43, no.3) includes a number of interesting items, such as an article on Anthony Browne's latest book, *Into the Forest*, a critical evaluation of two African picture books, and an analysis of the effect of translation into French of some animal books. The international note is maintained by a look at the Simke Kloosterman award for children's literature in Friesland, a wide range of book reviews, and an interleaving feature of 'Postcards from around the World,' which highlight a number of books and other topics. To submit articles, email [bookbirdsp@oldtown.ie](mailto:bookbirdsp@oldtown.ie) or [bookbirdvc@oldtown.ie](mailto:bookbirdvc@oldtown.ie); for details re subscribing (individuals \$40, most easily done by credit card) contact the University of Toronto Press, 5201 Dufferin St., North York, ON, Canada M3H 5T8 ([utpress@utoronto.ca](mailto:utpress@utoronto.ca))

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## CONFERENCES and OTHER EVENTS

**No Child is an Island: The Case for Children's Literature in Translation** • Annual IBBY Conference at Froebel College, Roehampton University. Saturday 12th November 2005. Plenary Speakers include Emer O'Sullivan, Anthea Bell, Sarah Adams, plus other translators and authors; workshop topics covering a large range of countries and languages. IBBY members should have received Registration Forms or will receive them with this issue of *IBBYLink*. Contact Laura Atkins at NCRCL, Froebel College, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, SW15 5PJ, 020 8392 3008, [L.Atkins@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:L.Atkins@roehampton.ac.uk)

**October 19 - 24 Frankfurt Book Fair** • With IBBY participation at the stand of the German Section of IBBY (Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur)

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## The Children's Bookshow – Outside In

This begins in Children's Book Week, October 3rd to October 10<sup>th</sup>, at the British Library and ends in November at L'Institut Français in London. This year's theme focuses on Children's Writers in Translation Events with writers from abroad will be held throughout England and there will be a series of schools workshops.

Events venues and writers proposed:

**Oxford Tuesday Oct 4th** • 1pm Museum of Natural History, George St, Oxford OX1 2AG Stefan Casta (Sweden) and Nicolette Jones (Children's editor *Sunday Times*).  
Booking: Borders 01865 203 901, or 11 Magdalen St Oxford

**Manchester Thursday October 6th** • 10am and 1.30pm Central Library, St Peter's Sq, Manchester M2 5PD [www.manchesterpoetryfestival.co.uk](http://www.manchesterpoetryfestival.co.uk), [www.librarytheatre.com](http://www.librarytheatre.com)  
0161 236 711 Matthew Sweeney and Owen Sheers (also doing translation workshops in schools from Romanian and Welsh)

October 6th is **National Poetry Day**

**London Friday October 7th** • The British Library, 96 Euston Rd, London NW1 2DB  
Christine Nostlinger (Austria) Nicolette Jones booking: 020 7412 7222 [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk)

**Cheltenham Saturday October 8th**

**Ilkley Literature Festival, October 7th – 16th**

**Sheffield Tuesday October 18th** • 1pm The Crucible Theatre, 55 Norfolk St, Sheffield  
S1 1DA Michael Rosen, Hervé Tullet. Booking: 0114 249 6000 [www.offtheshelf.org.uk](http://www.offtheshelf.org.uk)  
0114 273 4400

**Newcastle Northern Children's Book Festival November 7th – 14th • Daniel Morden** (Grimm's Tales) Oliver Wilson-Dickson, venue to be confirmed

**Leicester Tuesday November 22nd • 10.30am** The Phoenix Arts Centre, 21 Upper Brown St, Leicester LE1 5TE Andrew Fusek-Peters (Eastern European poetry for children) [www.phoenix.org.uk](http://www.phoenix.org.uk) booking: 0116 255 4854

**London November 23rd • 6.30pm** L'Institut Français 17 Queensberry Place, London SW7 2DT Erik L'Homme, François Place, Michael Morpurgo [www.institutfrancais.org.uk](http://www.institutfrancais.org.uk) Booking: 020 7073 1345 or 020 7073 1307 or [bdl@ambafrance.org.uk](mailto:bdl@ambafrance.org.uk)

For further information: contact Sian Williams: [sianwilliams2000@hotmail.com](mailto:sianwilliams2000@hotmail.com); 020 8960 0602

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### Other conferences

**Stories for Children, Histories of Childhood • 18th-19th November, 2005, Tours, France.** Contact [rosemary.findlay@univ-tours.fr](mailto:rosemary.findlay@univ-tours.fr) or [sebastien.salbayre@univ-tours.fr](mailto:sebastien.salbayre@univ-tours.fr)

**Cartooning Life? Graphic Novels and YA Literature • MLA Conference, Washington DC, December 27-30th 2005.** Contact [t.mielke@worc.ac.uk](mailto:t.mielke@worc.ac.uk)

**Your World, My World: exploring global issues through children's literature • Friday 3rd February 2006 at the University of London, Institute of Education**

In the 21st century concerns that affect the lives of children in Britain are shared by others across the globe: human impacts on the environment are becoming more apparent and widespread making sustainable development that both protects the environment and safeguards human rights, a contemporary imperative. Many children grow up in a world where war and conflict rage around them. There are 30 'high-intensity' wars raging around the world, virtually all between factions within states, and there dozens of more localized conflicts. Human rights issues including racism, children's rights and justice systems are of concern to people across all continents. Although on the surface these may seem to be separate concerns, many of the issues are in fact inter-related.

This conference seeks to examine the ways in which children's literature embraces global issues. Workshops will provide guidance on book selection as well as providing practical support for placing children's literature at the heart of the curriculum for addressing global issues. The conference will be of interest to teachers working with pupils in key stages 1 – 3, school librarians, literacy consultants and advisors as well as those who have a particular interest in citizenship, science and geography education. Key note speakers: Beverley Naidoo, Nikki Gamble Workshop presentations: Paul Gardener, Centre for anti-racist literature, DeMontfort University; Ann Lazim: CLPE & IBBY; Prue Goodwin: University of Reading; Janet Evans: Liverpool University; Alison Kennedy, Egmont Press; John Cook, University of London Institute of Education.

For further information, contact Nikki Gamble ([NHGamble@aol.com](mailto:NHGamble@aol.com) or see [www.writeaway.org.uk](http://www.writeaway.org.uk))