

«Help make the world a better place to live in». Young people as redemptive conscience in Australian books for young adults

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ABSTRACT: The redemptive child has long been a character in literature – both adult's and children's – and is widely used, for example, by the Evangelical movement of the nineteenth century. The representation of the redemptive child is an adult construct and books which used such a representation were very much designed to urge the young reader to emulate that construct. In order to discuss the different ways in which the trope has been depicted (e.g. children as the redemptive force of the world and of the corrupted ideology of adults, as the inheritors of the earth, the guardians of the environment, the keepers of 'true' values etc.), the Author analyses a range of selected Australian novels for young readers, particularly in the last half of the twentieth century.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Environmental Protection; Child; Role Perception; Children's and Youth Literature; Australia; XX Century.

As Margery Hourihan has argued, stories are «the most potent means by which perceptions, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to the next»¹ and Perry Nodelman describes children's literature an effort by adults «to *colonize* children» and to make them believe that they ought to be the way adults would like them to be². An aspect of 'colonising' children which

¹ M. Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 1.

² P. Nodelman, *The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature*, «Children's Literature Association Quarterly», vol. 17, n. 1, 1992, pp. 29-35.

has long appeared in children's literature in many countries, is encouraging children to see themselves as guardians of the environment, something adults would like them to be (for example, as Elwyn Jenkins has pointed out, the very first poem for children set in South Africa was a protest against the hunting of ostriches³ and it has long been a element of Australian children's literature, for example Ethel Pedley's 1899 book *Dot and the kangaroo* which strongly urged children to respect native wildlife and flora. Paradoxically, however, books which valorised the hunting of animals in adventure stories were published alongside the 'environmental books' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries)⁴.

As I have written elsewhere, the redemptive child has long been a character in literature – both adult and children's. Such books were widely used, for example, by the Evangelical movement of the nineteenth century⁵. The representation of the redemptive child is an adult construct and books which used such a representation were very much designed to urge the young reader to emulate that construction. Young people have, in some books, been constructed as inheritors of the earth, and the ones who have most to lose from its destruction, and who must therefore redeem the actions of adult by becoming environmental 'warriors', as is implied in the quotation from Jen McViety's *Dreamcatcher* which is used in the title of this article.

The young protagonists are often also portrayed as being the guardians of the environment, the ones who should both take an active part in developing environmental awareness and in pricking the conscience of adults who are damaging the inheritance of future generations. This concern continues to be displayed in a range of websites which advocate using children's literature to teach about conservation and which have names like 'tree hugger', 'little environmentalists' and 'wildlife encounters', publishers' websites which list books on 'environment and conservation'⁶ and in articles such as that by J. William Hug in which he explores the value of children's literature in educating prospective teachers – and through them eventually their classes – on

³ E. Jenkins, *English South African children's literature and the environment*, «Literator», vol. 25, n. 3, Nov. 2004, pp. 107-123.

⁴ For example, Arthur Ferres's *His first kangaroo: an Australian story for boys* describes in detail a brutal kangaroo hunt, the slaughter of dingoes, snakes and emus and emphasises notions of manliness defined in terms of man pitted against nature – the bush and its creatures. A. Ferres, *His first kangaroo: an Australian story for boys* (1896), London, Blackie, n.d.

⁵ M. Hillel, *A Little Child Shall Lead Them: the Child as Redeemer*, in R. McGillis (ed.), *Children's literature and the fin de siècle*, New York, Greenwood, 2003, pp. 57-70.

⁶ See, for example, the thematic bibliography provided in the website of the Australian publisher Walker Books: <http://www.walkerbooks.com.au/Books/By-Theme/Environment-Conservation?templatePathbookListing=walkeroz/include/bookListing/longWithCovers.wm.html&bok_AbcField=Book.title&bok_AbcFilter=*&orderBybookListing=Book.title&bok_p_PageIndex=3&bok_p_PageSize=10> (accessed: May 15th, 2012).

environmental issues⁷. Michael Bossley has argued that «telling people they must be ‘environmentally good’ in order to protect their own interests, we should be attempting to change their whole emotional relationship with the world. We should be working to get people to love the environment. Protection will then automatically follow»⁸. Loving the environment is frequently a strong element in conservation novels for young people.

To discuss these representations and the political discourse surrounding them in environmental novels for young people, I will consider the way the trope has been depicted in a range of selected Australian novels for young readers, particularly in the last half of the twentieth century. While many examples could be given, I want to examine four books in particular: Nadia Wheatley's *The blooding*, *Dreamcatcher*, by Jen McVeity and *My sister Sif* by Ruth Park and Gillian Barnett's *The inside hedge story*⁹.

Nadia Wheatley's 1987 book *The Blooding*, an openly political text but which nonetheless makes the point «that each side has a substantive case, that most issues of social significance are not simple, nor open to solution by one side ‘winning’ and the other being ‘defeated’»¹⁰.

Early in the book, the protagonist, Col is portrayed as sitting in front of the television, watching a news item which discusses both sides of the logging issue, pointing out that many in the small community in which Col lives depend on the logging industry for jobs. Conservationists, on the other hand, believe that the jobs are replaceable while the old growth forest is not. Col's own father works as a logger and his grandfather has done so in the past, although he is no longer working. Neither of them has any sympathy with the ‘bloody greenies’. The fictional television report lists a number of other conservation battles which were both ideological and literal:

In 1982 we saw the issue mobilise thousands of people over the issue of the Franklin Dam. Public pressure in that case was one of the factors behind the Labor Party's victory in the

⁷ J.W. Hug, *Exploring instructional strategies to develop prospective elementary teachers' children's literature book evaluation skills for science, ecology and environmental education*, «Environmental Education Research», vol. 16, n. 3-4, June-August 2010, pp. 367-382. Hug is an Assistant Professor in the Elementary/Early Childhood Education Department and Director of the Excellence in Elementary Science and Math Education Center at California University of Pennsylvania.

⁸ M. Bossley, *Enhancing the wilderness experience*, in W. Parsons, R. Goodwin (edd.), *Landscape and identity: Perspectives from Australia*, Adelaide, Auslib Press, 1994, p. 165. At the time of writing this statement, Bossley was a lecturer in the School of Human and Environmental Sciences at the University of South Australia.

⁹ N. Wheatley, *The Blooding*, Ringwood, Viking Kestrel, 1987; J. McVeity, *Dreamcatcher*, Melbourne, Thomas Lothian, 1999; R. Park, *My sister Sif*, Ringwood, Viking Kestrel, 1986; G. Barnett, *The Inside hedge story*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1981.

¹⁰ M. Nimmon, J. Foster. *The adolescent novel: Australian perspectives*, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Centre for Information Studies, 1997, p. 223.

federal elections and in return the Hawke Government declared for the conservationists. A couple of years ago, we witnessed the Battle of Farmhouse Creek, where the loggers took matters into their own hands, and police stood by as the environmentalist campers were evicted [...]¹¹.

This passage is designed to link the forthcoming struggle in the book with a number of famous conservation struggles in Australia. It elevates the struggle in Col's small town of Cornwall to a kind of epic status, while signalling to the reader the types of tactics which might be expected. However, for many in the town, unemployment reduces the issue of conservation to a simplistic level, reproduced in a fictive newspaper article in the book:

Scott Robinson, 18, unemployed, was one of those who took the beer. Over the second round, it was he who raised the dangerous subject of greenies.

«They should bloody let us at them», he declared. «I'd split their f--king [*sic*] heads open with a crowbar».

«I'd have a job, wouldn't I, if it wasn't for them?»¹².

The author has been careful here to reproduce the language and style of a newspaper article. The dialogue of the interviewee is left to speak for itself. There is no reflection on wider issues by Robinson, and we are not given any indication as to whether he was invited so to reflect. Readers of the book, who have been given a more nuanced view of the situation, are thus being asked also to reflect on and critique the media, its potential bias, and the tactics sometimes used by journalists. This too is a way of developing political awareness in young readers. Furthermore, the macho tone of Robinson's speech gives an indication of the way manliness is defined in this town, and of the readiness to resort to violence.

The division between the town and others, and the battle mentality, almost a siege mentality, is also illustrated in the newspaper article. Another youth explained: «the people of this area have been here for generations and they don't like all these flash-jack bludgers from the city telling them what to do with their own bit of bush. This is a frontier town. People here take care of whatever happens themselves»¹³.

The use of the word 'frontier' suggests a wild west analogy, one in which the sheriff is a law unto himself and will turn a blind eye to any crime which he feels is justified in support of a particular cause. The analogy is an apt one, as it

¹¹ Wheatley, *The Blooding*, cit., p. 13. The Franklin Dam issue was one of the most important environmental battles ever fought in Australia. The government of the state of Tasmania proposed flooding the Franklin River in a pristine temperate rainforest area in order to build a dam for hydro-electric power. The battle was led by Dr. Bob Brown who later became leader of the Green Party and a member (Senator) in the Upper House of the Australian Government. The battle was eventually won when the federal government had the area declared a World Heritage Area. Farmhouse Creek is also in Tasmania and again the fight was to save pristine forest.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*

is clear from the text that the local policeman has very decided views in support of the people of the town, against conservation and ‘townies’ and regards a real man as one who can win a fight¹⁴. The passage also reduces the issue to a ‘them and us’ one, and there is no subtlety of thought or sophistication of political argument here. It is clear too, that to oppose the people of the town is a dangerous occupation, which Col finds out to his cost. As the newspaper reporter puts it: «“This is a place where mateship is available to anyone who knows the rules. If you argue, then you are in trouble; if you agree, you become one of them”»¹⁵.

Such a passage makes it clear, to both Col and the reader, that Cornwall is not isolated and cannot deal with its own problems. The frontier has been pushed back and the outside world has intruded. The politics of the green movement is explored too. The leader of the Green movement is Michael Marchant. In a by-election, he is standing on a platform of ending logging. The discussion of the way this by-election will work, and how it will affect the balance of power in Parliament, is a political lesson for the reader of *The Bleeding* and the fictionalised reader of the newspaper within the book. Col is being politicised by the events around him, the media reports of these events and his discussions with the conservationists:

Then Mike started talking to Jim and a couple of other blokes about his campaign for that city by-election, and how the troops in the city were getting on with the leaflet-ing and the graffiti-ing. [...] We’ll have this won in a few more days. The way I hear it, the boys in the Labor Party back-room are really putting the pressure on Buckley to stop the logging here. They can’t afford to lose Hadley. [...] Buckley’s the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Tourism¹⁶.

The grab-bag of portfolios of the Minister is also significant as he, like Col himself, has loyalties on both sides. The interests of conservation are directly opposed to those of forests – for example, the forestry side of the portfolio covers, among other things, permits for logging. Tourism is likely to be split both ways, as there is a real interest in eco-tourism while old logging or mining towns can also provide a tourist attraction.

In a somewhat ironic twist to the whole story, the area is eventually saved because the next stand of trees designated for logging also includes an area of land which Colum’s grandfather has urged Colum to protect and which encompasses an area of first white settlement. This area is then used for political purposes with news crews searching for the ‘forgotten place’. Colum feels a real sense of betrayal when he sees on television a local girl displaying the old settlement and misinterpreting some of the things Colum has told her

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

about it. An interview in the same programme with a representative from the Department of Conservation, Forests and Tourism is skilfully done, with the author capturing an authentic political voice:

I reckon this place just has to be at least put in the care of the National Trust. It's clearly part of Australia's heritage, of the world's heritage, if you like. In Australia we don't have Stonehenge or the Parthenon. We do have great Aboriginal sites, going back sixty thousand years or so, but as far as white people are concerned all we have is somewhere like this. It's like a living museum [...] this place must be saved, and the forest around it. And the way to do it is through tourism¹⁷.

There is a cynicism in this speech which will be apparent to any reader familiar with reported political speeches. It is only when the potential for making money, through tourism, becomes apparent, that the area is deemed as being worthy of saving. Aboriginal cultures in Australia are the oldest living cultures in the world, dating back at least 50,000 years and passed on from generation to generation¹⁸. However, in this speech the culture and history of Australia's Indigenous peoples are dismissed and the great icons of history are, speaking broadly, European and white. Indigeneity is thus relocated and elided.

Wheatley is careful, however, to show that manipulation of the media and painting things as black-and-white when they may not be, are not techniques used by only one side in any political argument. Furthermore, as she indicates, politics at any level can divide families, with children and their parents sometimes on opposite sides on a particular issue. When the conservationists' camp is attacked by the loggers with the connivance and probable encouragement of the local policeman, Col is sitting up a tree after an argument with his father which ends in a fight with Col's father declaring that the boy is 'no son of mine'. When Col's father drives the bulldozer through the camp, one of the girls tries to prevent his driving it into Col's tree. The bulldozer slips, bringing the tree down and breaking Col's legs. Much later he tells Col that the brakes were a problem. This may or may not be true, but it is a form of apology and Col accepts it. When the attack is reported in the newspaper, Mike Marchant, the leader of the 'greenies' opposed to the logging, is willing to use it for his own ends, regardless of the absolute truth of the matter: «I'll tell you who the attackers were. Loggers. Men who kill trees. The sort of men like Colin's [*sic*] father, who was willing to kill his own son in order to get into the forest»¹⁹. Killing trees and killing a person seem to be equated here. As Col recognises,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

¹⁸ For a useful introduction to Indigenous cultures in Australia see *Australian Indigenous cultural heritage*, <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-cultural-heritage>>, last update 7th January 2008 (accessed June 20th, 2012).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Marchant does not see, or does not want to see, the other side of the argument, that the loggers are afraid for their jobs and fearful of a future where they may not be able to support their families.

Dreamcatcher, by Jen McVeity (1999), is written in the first person, a technique used by many writers for young people as it is seen as giving more immediacy to the narrative and allows for the thoughts and emotions of the narrator to be given directly without any 'filtering' through a third-person narrator. The focalising through the major protagonist allows the reader to identify with her, and enables a clear recognition of Tess as a politicised person, a politicisation which is valorised in the book and is constructed as being possible for the reader as well.

Tess, the protagonist, resents her father's involvement in politics and what she sees as his consequent neglect of his family. She believes his public persona and protestations are very different from those in his private life:

«Naturally I want to be with my family first». Dad had used that line often in press interviews. I had read it in the local paper many times. «Like you tried for my parent-teacher night?» I asked. [...] Dad had attended some local council meeting on merging boundaries. As usual²⁰.

Despite her disapproval of her father, Tess quite consciously uses political methods herself. She forms a group consisting of like-minded young people called the Green Guerillas to campaign against smoke pollution, animal experimentation, the killing of baby seals and so on. On one occasion the group uses the politician's technique of involving the media in one of their stunts. Outside a showing of fur coats, the group dress up as seal pups being hunted by a sealer who pretends to beat the pups to death. Reporters and news cameras are there, having been previously alerted by the Green Guerillas. Their activities are front page news the next day and Tess reflects, somewhat ironically, that «Dad, the master of the media, would have been proud of me»²¹.

The climax of the group's activities comes when the children climb a smoke stack at a local factory to protest against the pollution caused by the factory. The police interview following their arrest gives Tess a chance to explain her motives for the action: «Comcor is putting all this poison into our air [...] And no one seems to care»²². Her father cannot understand her argument at all, and asks her again why she did it. When Tess explains, «I just wanted to do something to change things. [...] Maybe help make the world a better place to live in», her father is moved by the statement, replying, «I used to say that»²³. Tess thus functions as a political redeemer for her father, reminding him and

²⁰ J. McVeity, *Dreamcatcher*, Melbourne, Thomas Lothian, 1999, pp. 11-12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

the reader of the 'correct' ideological position which argues that true politics is about righting injustice, rather than just staying in power. The politicisation of the child is beginning to change the father, a change we see coming to fruition at the end of the book when the whole family comes together to help save a beached whale.

There is therefore, a further suggestion that the direct methods used by the girl are more effective than the indirect methods of the elected political process. She is thus empowered. She is instrumental in saving the whale, but what is really seen as more important in the context of the book, is that she has changed her father back to the caring person he apparently once was, as well as restoring him to his family and making him recognise the pressure under which he had previously been placing them. She is thus a secular redemptive child. As a child, she is depicted as being closest to nature, and is thus most fitted to 'leading' in the saving of a creature of the natural world. There may be a suggestion here too, of a kind of *realpolitik*, that the girl's practical solution and actions in responding to the immediate problem, may be more effective than protest about things which have long term or long distance effects.

My Sister Sif by award-winning author Ruth Park, published in 1986²⁴, has been described by one literary critic as an «impassioned polemic»²⁵ and it is certainly an overtly political book, calling on young people to act as saviours of the Earth. It perhaps fits what Terry Gifford has termed «post-pastoral» literature, one characteristic of which is that, as Patricia Louw points out, «it conveys an ecocentric attitude of humility or respect towards nature, It also adopts an ecofeminist approach of critically exposing a mindset that dominates and exploits both nature and people»²⁶. Further, as John Stephens points out, there is an «awareness-raising in [some] children's literature» which advocates «direct and positive human engagement with ecosystems»²⁷. In *My Sister Sif* Park does this by bringing a scientist into the island idyll she describes, in order for him to bring the protagonist, Erika, to an understanding of the need to save the environment, and to find her destiny as a marine biologist, rescuing and breeding endangered marine mammals.

²⁴ R. Park, *My sister Sif*, Ringwood, Viking Kestrel, 1986. Park, who wrote for adults and children, won numerous awards including the Miles Franklin Award, the NSW Premier's Literary Award, the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award. Her best-known novel for young adults, *Playing Beatie Bow*, was made into a feature film.

²⁵ H. Scutter, *Displaced fictions: contemporary Australian fiction for teenagers and young adults*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1999, p. 63.

²⁶ P. Louw, *Adolescence, identity and the pastoral: Marguerite Poland's "The Bush Shrike" and Doris Lessing's "Flavours of Exile"*, «Mousaion», vol. 27, n. 2, 2009, p. 140. Louw refers to an article by Terry Gifford entitled *Gary Snyder and the post-pastoral*, in J. Bryson (ed.), *Ecopoetry: a critical introduction*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2002, pp. 77-87.

²⁷ J. Stephens, *From Eden to suburbia: perspectives on the natural world in children's literature*, «Papers», vol. 16, n. 2, 2006, p. 43.

The book, is a kind of eco-fantasy in which Sif and her siblings are the offspring of a mermaid and a human, and where the islanders co-exist happily with the ‘little people’ of the mountains, contrasts the utopian world of the merfolk with the dystopian environment caused by land people (not the nature-loving islanders, however) who, through indiscriminate sea-bed mining, causing huge cracks to appear in the sea floor, from which poisonous gas escaped and the water heated up, killing marine life²⁸.

The sea is emblematic of innocence, offering a kind of baptism and accessible in its purity only to young people and the ‘innocent’ – the merfolk who are not greedy and ambitious as the land people are, and who want to be able to continue to live in harmony with their environment. The whales change their migration routes because of the changes to their habitat; their numbers are smaller each year and the ocean is no longer a life giver²⁹.

Park proves herself prescient too, writing:

A little way into the twenty-first century, as though it was tired of the long battle against mankind, the earth began quietly to die. [...] Rain patterns became wild. That was something to do with the damage to the upper atmosphere. After that came drought and its grey brother famine. [...] During those years many kinds of familiar creatures vanished forever³⁰.

She also predicts torrential rains and subsequent flood damage; tornadoes; increased volcanic activity; rivers in Australia silting up; deserts expanding; the disappearance of bees and the subsequent damage to crops³¹.

«There is a strong sense throughout the book that the adult world is beyond reformation and salvation and hope is located in future generations of children educated in an ecologically revolutionary way»³², a point of view espoused by some environmentalists such as Andrew Revkin, a former journalist and now Senior Fellow for environmental understanding at Pace University, New York, who states in an article with the telling title of «How to save the world. Kids are the Earth’s best hope – and librarians can play a special role», that he left journalism to take up the fellowship «to start engaging students through a course I’ll be creating on comprehending global environmental change. One goal is to develop a tool box, much of it online, aimed not so much at teaching young people a set of facts about the relationship between the human species and its home planet, but helping them develop ways to think and learn – and communicate – on their own. I’m convinced it’s an exciting story, full of drama and adventure and surprise. And the ending, of course, is for young people to write»³³.

²⁸ Park, *My sister Sif*, cit., p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

³² Scutter, *Displaced fictions*, cit., p. 60.

³³ A. Revkin, *How to save the world. Kids are the Earth’s best hope – and librarians can play*

Furthermore, «there is a furious anger and grief [in Park's book] at the way in which the waters of the ocean are being made to carry the consequences of human technology and waste, in the form of air pollution, toxic wastes and industrial and technological sewage, all befouling the pure blue waters [of the Pacific]»³⁴.

When Erika discusses with one of the adults in her life the pollution of the ocean and the effect that is having on the dolphins, he despairs, asking what someone like him can do beyond writing letters of protest to governments? To which Erika responds: «But you're an adult! [...] What I meant was that he was one of those who ruled the world, who arranged things for the children, pushed them here and carried them there [...]»³⁵. So it is left to young people to clean up the mess left by their parents' generation, a mess they are able to deal with because of their special affinity with – and resemblance to – the natural world. As Erika, as an adult, says:

As we all know nowadays, little children and babies are really like young dolphins. They're good and loving and happy. That's if they're left to grow their own way. They don't want to own a lot of things; they truly like other beings' company and affection more than possessions. They're born knowing that the planet loves them as they love it. [...] in the past people stuffed their heads with greedy ideas, so that they forgot their own good sense and grew up seeing life the wrong way. [And, in a direct address to the reader, she finishes:] But you know all this, because [...] you belong to the generation that woke up³⁶.

«Children's books have always been powerful ideological instruments – Virginie Douglas has argued – largely because of the status of the child as a learning being. A children's book cannot escape a certain amount of didacticism, although the content of the lesson which is taught varies greatly, ranging from conformism to religious, political and social norms – sometimes to the point of indoctrination [...]»³⁷. The previous quote from Park suggests her book is perilously close to indoctrination, with the notion of new generations acting as a kind of collective *tabula rasa* and being 'imprinted anew' with the right ideas this time³⁸.

Finally, I want to look at Gillian Barnett's 1981 book, *The Inside Hedge Story* which fits within the sub-theme of the preservation of the urban landscape in the discourse about conservation³⁹. Barnett's book thus extends the trope of the environmentally aware, politicised child discussed so far in this article. In

a special role, «School Library Journal», April 2010, pp. 25-27.

³⁴ Scutter, *Displaced fictions*, cit., p. 60.

³⁵ Park, *My sister Sif*, cit., p. 91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁷ V. Douglas, *Desperately seeking the child in children's books*, in R. Findlay, S. Salbayre (edd.), *Stories for children: histories of childhood*, Tours, Presses Universitaires Francois Rabelais, 2007, p. 72.

³⁸ Scutter, *Displaced fictions*, cit., p. 64.

³⁹ G. Barnett, *The inside hedge story*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1981.

Barnett's book, a group of children use a variety of political methods to try to preserve an old house set within the parklands of an old estate in suburban Melbourne, in southern Australia. They try lobbying, in the first instance approaching the buyer direct, despite misgivings that «Businessmen don't listen to kids»⁴⁰. Their interview confirms this apprehension, demonstrating that the man is interested in development for development's sake. The reactions of the adults to the young people's concerns and plans betray different attitudes to children and to childhood itself. One of the girls, Abby is incensed when her parents seem to favour the development of the estate, although they then tell her that: «We were only trying to make you see the other side. However, we realize that this is an ideal opportunity for you to learn about community affairs, and democracy at the local level. We think the whole thing could be very educational»⁴¹.

Although this is certainly expressing support for the politicisation of the children, it is also patronising and didactic, with an adult narrative voice intruding, as though Abby's parents don't really expect them to succeed, and implying that the effort of trying to save the estate will keep them 'gainfully employed' while providing a lesson. On the other hand, Jane's parents approach the children more as equals, although they are the ones to provide ideas:

Mr Hugenot continued, «I can think of several things we can do: approach members of the Council; collect signatures for a petition; and let the National Trust know about the Estate. What do you think?».

Abby had hardly ever been asked that question by an adult in her life. It made her feel marvellous, as though she was capable of understanding all sorts of things which had always been hopelessly beyond her until now⁴².

When Colum, in *The Bleeding*, was in hospital, the man in the next bed was an elderly Greek who tells Colum that it is up to Colum's generation to fight for a better world. A similar sentiment is expressed by the mother of one of the characters, saying she believes there is more chance that the people of the neighbourhood will work to preserve the Estate when they see «that you young ones care about the district and that you are prepared to work to improve it»⁴³. A little child (or children) is expected to lead once again.

The children devise a petition and begin a round of doorknocking, a job they find more difficult than they anticipated. Like any politician wanting to 'sell' a policy, they need to convince all those they visit of the merits of their cause. With the help of the petitions and discussions with a number of councillors, the council agrees to debate the issue and probably vote against allowing the development of the Estate. The children are soon to learn that the political

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

process sometimes moves too slowly, however. One Saturday morning, they wake to find a demolition team in the Estate, already knocking down the old house. More direct action seems called for, and the group stands, holding hands, in front of one of the bulldozers. Mrs Hugenot obtains word that the demolition was illegal without council permission, but the damage has been done as the buildings are unsafe and have to be pulled down anyway. All that remains of the garden is turned into a public park, so that the children's efforts have not been entirely in vain, and they have, as Abby's mother predicted, learnt a great deal about the political process. This process which makes the elite private world of the estate into an egalitarian public one, is, in itself a kind of politicisation, a move to a kind of 'socialism'.

As Peter Hunt has argued,

Children's literature is, by definition, a mode rooted in an imbalance of power... and this leads to the inevitable manipulation of the text by, and/or within ideology. Thus children's literature portrays (that is, creates) in-text childhoods, for religious, commercial, social or personal purposes. For example, it portrays utopian or dystopian childhoods for social and political reasons – for what is, in effect, social engineering, to encourage emulation by children or action by adults. It portrays society as it wishes to be seen, in its positive aspects, and as it wishes its readers to perceive it, in its negative aspects⁴⁴.

Furthermore, what Maureen Whitebrook has claimed for adult novels is also applicable to children's literature: «many modern novels pose basic questions about human existence, including its political aspects, and depict the dilemmas which make moral *and* political demands on human beings»⁴⁵. This didactic purpose is evident in all the texts discussed in this article. In some books as I have argued, the authors go further, and there is also a clear purpose of the child characters taking the lead over the adult characters in developing this awareness. Such children therefore act as redeemers, not necessarily for their immediate family, but for a wider world.

In the textual worlds created by the authors discussed here, the politics, the environment and the child as redeemer are allied, and this conflation forms a trope which calls on young people to become politicised and lead the way in righting perceived wrongs and function as a role model for young readers, urging them also to become politically aware and active.

⁴⁴ P. Hunt, *On the unreliability of fiction as a portrayer of childhood*, in Findlay, Salbayre (edd.), *Stories for children: histories of childhood*, cit., p. 15.

⁴⁵ M. Whitebrook, *Taking the narrative turn: What the novel has to offer political theory*, in J. Horton, Andrea Baumeister (edd.), *Literature and the political imagination*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 47 (emphasis in the original).

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