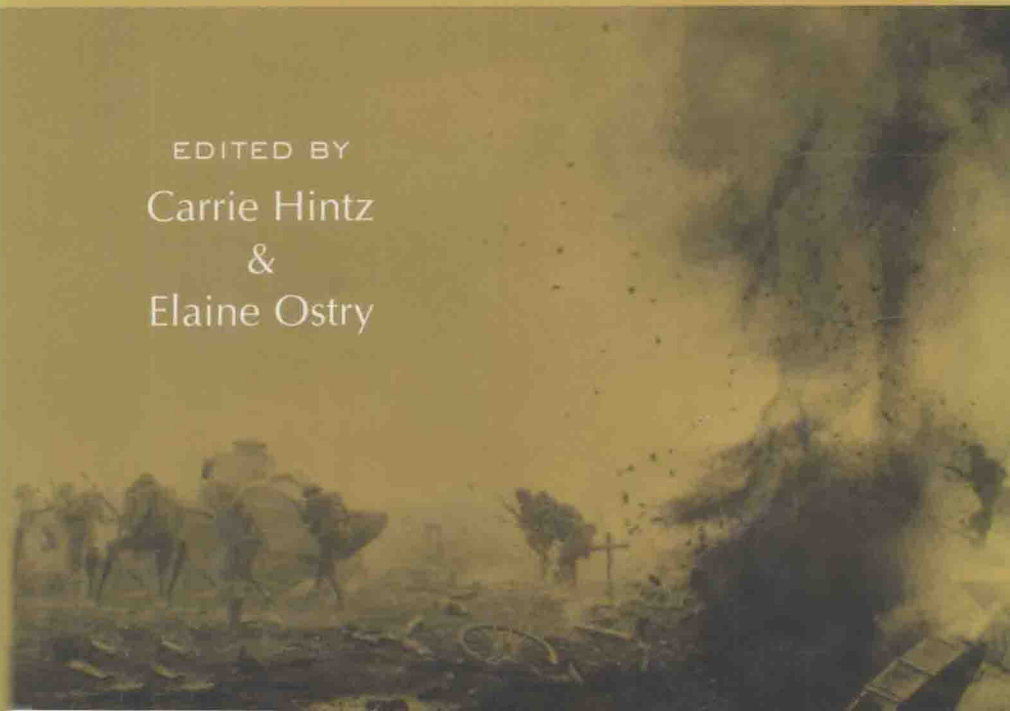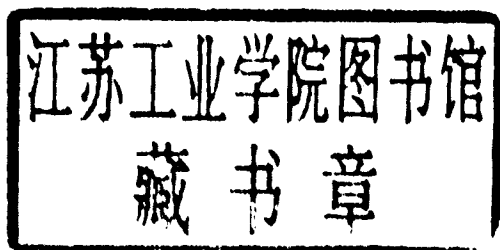# UTOPIAN and DYSTOPIAN
Writing for Children and Young Adults

EDITED BY

Carrie Hintz
&
Elaine Ostry

UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

EDITED BY
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ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Acknowledgments

Foreword
Utopia, Dystopia, and the Quest for Hope

JACK ZIPES

We are living in very troubled times. More than ever before, we need utopian and dystopian literature. I say utopian *and* dystopian because, despite differences, these kinds of literary works emanate from a critique of "postmodern," advanced technological societies gone awry—and from a strong impulse for social change. As much as we are in need of this literature, especially for young readers, to provide hope for a different and more humane world, we can also use more innovative critical studies such as the present book, *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults,* edited with great care and sophistication by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry.

As Hintz and Ostry make clear in their introduction, there was always a utopian element in children's literature from its beginnings in the eighteenth century as it gradually evolved from the oral tradition and became more and more separate from "adult" literary production. It would be misleading to argue that every story written for children is utopian, or to assert that there is an "essential" utopian nature to writing for young people. There is, however, a utopian tendency of telling and writing in general that helps explain why it is we feel so compelled to create and disseminate tales and why we are enthralled by particular stories. The tales, novels, poems, and plays that incorporate this utopian tendency stem from a lack we feel in our lives, a discernible discontentment, and a yearning for a better condition or world. Paradoxically the happiness of the listeners and readers of utopian works depends on the unhappiness of the tellers and writers. Without discontent there is no utopia. Without projections of utopia, our world would be a dismal place, and this is all the more reason why we need utopian and dystopian literature for the young, and not only for the young.

Tomes have been written about utopia, and this is most curious because utopia is allegedly nowhere, a place that has never been seen or experienced. At least this is what Sir Thomas More described in his famous treatise *Utopia,* written first in Latin in 1516 and translated into English in 1551.

Utopia is an imaginary island with a perfect social and political system in which everyone is treated fairly. Yet, since this perfect state of government and existence is imaginary, utopia has also come to mean an impossible idealistic projection. In fact, More's notion of utopia fostered numerous speculative, philosophical and political books from the sixteenth century to the present, and it also promoted all kinds of utopias as well as thousands of stories and novels labeled utopian. But utopia's vague and idealistic premises have led many critics to equate it with idealistic dreaming and unrealistic thinking. To be a utopian is frequently to be somebody out of touch with reality.

Nevertheless, there is a more positive way of looking at utopia that links the conception of utopias to reality and hope, something that the writers in Hintz's and Ostry's collection of essays tend to do with great perspicacity. Although not all of them cite the great German philosopher Ernst Bloch, much of their thinking and views are related to his notion of utopia.

In his monumental three-volume work, *The Principle of Hope,* Bloch proposes that our real life experiences are at the basis of our utopian longings and notions. In our daily lives that are not exactly what we want them to be, we experience glimpses or glimmerings of another world that urge us on and stimulate our creative drives to reach a more ideal state of being. To be more precise, it is our realization of what is missing in our lives that impels us to create works of art that not only reveal insights into our struggles but also that shed light on alternatives and possibilities to restructure our mode of living and social relations. All art, according to Bloch, contains images of hope illuminating ways to create a utopian society. Obviously, not every work that presumes to be art is artful. Nor do all art works necessarily contain a utopian tendency. But inspiring and illuminating images of hope can be detected in low and high art, in a Beethoven symphony or in a rock and roll song, in a grand Shakespeare production or a state fair, or let us say in William Steig's *Shrek,* a picture book for children, and the recent "utopian" film based on it. The utopian tendency of art is what propels us to reshape and reform our personal and social lives. In fact, Bloch points out that there are concrete utopias, short-lived experiments that have given real expression to new social and political relations. These concrete utopias set the building blocks for the future, for once hopes are tested and realized, we cannot betray them for long. We can never fully deny what has been concretized. Among his examples are such major events in the world as the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 as well as the Fourier experiments in France and the Brook Farm "commune" in America, all which have left traces of how we might shape the future. These revolutions and experiments—and there are many more that can be cited—did not entirely succeed because the proper socio-economic conditions to maintain them did not exist. Yet, the very fact that they came into being for a short time reveals a great deal about the validity of our utopian longings that we continue to concretize in different ways.

These longings are recorded in the spoken and written word. These longings are the source of ancient religions and rituals as well as new cults. The belief in a better and just world has always been with us, and this utopian belief assumes a myriad of forms. For instance, the belief in miracles and life after death articulated in religious legends and myths stems from utopian longings. Salvation is predicated on the notion of a just world in which the oppressed will be protected by a powerful divinity. Hundreds of thousands of tales in all religions have been spread with hope that we shall be redeemed after this life. But the more interesting utopian literary works, in my opinion, focus on the present world. The utopian tendency of sacred stories is clear from the beginning. What is not so evident is how our profane and secular stories have a utopian bent to them and are perhaps more appealing and significant because they restore miraculous power to human beings. In other words, they suggest that ordinary people can take power into their own hands and create better worlds for themselves, if they know how to use their gifts.

This is where the dystopian factor plays a role, for the pursuit of perfection, the perfect place and society, can also lead to rigid if not totalitarian societies. Much of what we cite as progress, especially technological progress, has a double edge to it. The cloning of vegetables, animals, and humans that may help overcome hunger and disease may eventually lead to the mechanization of the natural and human world as we know it. The advances in communication may lead to dis-communication and alienation. One could argue that the great drive of human beings to establish fairer, more socialist societies has led to perverted societies, what we might call negative utopias, or what is projected as dystopias in literary works for young and old readers.

As Hintz and Ostry and the authors in their collection demonstrate, there is an intricate link between utopia and dystopia. When asked whether children and young people can handle pure dystopia and what they need to deal with it, Lois Lowry, the author of the provocative novel *The Giver,* responded, "Young people handle dystopia every day: in their lives, their dysfunctional families, their violence-ridden schools. They watch dystopian television and movies about the real world where firearms bring about explosive conclusions to conflict. Yes, I think they need to see some hope for such a world. I can't imagine writing a book that doesn't have a hopeful ending."

Utopian and dystopian literature form a great discourse about hope. The essays in the present volume are part of this discourse, and they make a major contribution toward understanding why such literature has great relevance for young readers. As we all know, there is a real strong "dystopian" tendency in our consumer society to make "better" consumers out of our children. Fortunately, the hope of utopian *and* dystopian literature opposed to this tendency cannot be consumed without deleterious effects—once "struck with hope" for a more humane world, children will want more.

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Introduction

CARRIE HINTZ AND ELAINE OSTRY

Neverland, Narnia, Hogwarts, Middle Earth, Oz. Children and young adults imaginatively travel to many fantasy worlds. From Lewis Carroll's nonsensical Wonderland to the contiguous worlds of Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials series, hundreds of children's and young adult books have presented invented "secondary worlds" that go by their own rules and conventions.[1] In many of these alternative worlds, utopian elements abound. Some books present nonexistent societies that, in the utopian and dystopian tradition, are meant to depict environments that are measurably better or worse than the reader's own. With Sarah Fielding's *The Governess or, Little Female Academy* (1749),[2] children's literature begins with a utopian vision of an all-girls' school that teaches ideal social organization. The history of children's and young adult literature is entwined with that of utopian writing from that moment on.

Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults has been produced for a variety of reasons, and it has had a range of effects, from play and escape to sustained political reflection. In utopian writing, younger readers must grapple with social organization; these utopian works propose to teach the young reader about governance, the possibility of improving society, the role of the individual and the limits of freedom. Utopian writing for children and young adults examines the roots of social behavior and encourages the child to question his or her own society. It often sets up a confrontation between the child and the adult world. In addition, children and young adults are generally in the center of the action or set of concerns, sometimes even bearing the major responsibility for the formation, survival, or reform of the society.

Some utopian writing for children and young adults offers an idealized, pastoral vision that evokes an Edenic image of the ostensibly unspoiled state of childhood itself. Other texts aimed at a young audience raise questions

about political organization and the ideal society, focusing on the built rather than the natural environment.[3] The essays in *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* engage with a variety of texts from the eighteenth century to the present day, encompassing a variety of genres popular in children's and young adult literature: science fiction, fantasy, the school story, and historical fiction. These essays argue for and establish a unique space for children's and young adult utopias and dystopias. They define and explore the category of utopian writing for children, while keeping an eye on the special readership in these books. They link major figures in adult utopian literature to those of children's literature. Ultimately, they provide a context in which we can appreciate the importance of utopia and dystopia in children's and young adult literature, and show how crucial child and adolescent readers are to utopian literature as a whole. In utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults, the stakes are high: these writings may be a young person's first encounter with texts that systematically explore collective social organization.

We have also included four essays by creative writers who have explored utopia or dystopia in their works. We feel it is important to give voice to creators as well as critics of utopia and dystopia for young readers. James Gurney, Monica Hughes, Alberto Manguel, and Katherine Paterson all add perspectives that complement the essays by academics and enlarge on general themes of utopia. Included as well is an interview with Lois Lowry, whose popular novel *The Giver* (1993)[4] has generated much interest in the field, provoking the kind of troubling, exciting discussion about social organization, individuality, and childhood that this collection seeks to continue.

Utopianism

Utopian writing is a notoriously difficult genre to define. A popular use of the term "utopian" is as a means to dismiss an impractical scheme or vision, but this usage fails to do justice to the seriousness of the body of utopian writing and utopian thought, as well as the variety of purposes for which utopian works are written. Lyman Tower Sargent defines "utopianism," or "social dreaming," as "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (Sargent, 1994, 3). It often "includes elements of fantasy" (Sargent, 1994, 4). Texts that possess the element of "utopianism" do not necessarily show an elaborated social system, and they may not be radical, but their aspirations toward ideality or amelioration are fundamentally social.

When Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1516,[5] he inaugurated a tradition that many writers follow today, but one that has become increasingly complex. Critics differ in their definitions of utopia: Does a text's utopian status

lie within the form of the work, the thematic message of the work, the intention of the author to portray an ideal or nightmarish world, the intentions and beliefs held by the characters who live in the fictional society, or the response of the reader? It is impossible to rely on genre, for example, to establish a text's utopian nature, since the form of utopian works varies. Furthermore, even a text like *Utopia* is a hodgepodge of elements: travel narrative, political commentary, theological speculation, and a large portion of humanist intellectual exercise. Lyman Tower Sargent defines "utopia" as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail" and reserves "eutopia" for those societies "that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived," with "dystopia" as considerably worse.[6] Since we are aware of the difficulty of gauging authorial intention, we add to this definition a consideration of the perception and beliefs of the characters about the ideality of their society. We use "utopia," a more familiar term for the reader, to signify a nonexistent society that is posited as significantly better than that of the reader. It strives toward perfection, has a delineated social system, and is described in reasonably specific detail. Dystopias are likewise precise descriptions of societies, ones in which the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok.

In this volume, we include the first annotated bibliography of utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults. In compiling it, our most difficult task was limiting our definition of utopia. Arguments can be made for including almost any book for children and young adults, provided that the definition of utopia is stretched far enough, thus rendering the category less useful. How does one know a utopian work when one sees it? No one model captures the range of visions of the ideal society in the Western world. How does one discern the dystopian as a distinct category from the utopian? As Sargent notes, "fashions change in utopias; most sixteenth-century eutopias horrify today's reader even though the authors' intentions are clear. On the other hand, most twentieth-century eutopias would be considered dystopias by a sixteenth-century reader and many of them would in all likelihood be burnt as works of the devil" (Sargent, 1994, 5). To complicate matters further, several essays in this collection demonstrate how perspectives can change within a single work, as seemingly ideal societies are exposed as dystopian, or characters disagree about the ideality of their society.

Are the nonexistent societies of utopian writing even meant to be attainable? Maureen Moran draws attention to the perennial and productive tension in utopia's oscillation between model and dream: "Some utopian models offer glimpses of perfection which can never be attained; possibility 'seems beside the point' for in this modality, fantasy is primarily a compensation for deprivation and an expression of needs which reality can never meet. The very unrealizability of the fantasy draws the reader

reluctantly back to the existing order of things. On the other hand, utopias may be read as agents of change, 'an imperative to drive us onward,' as Karl Mannheim claims."[7] The essays in this collection show both utopian models—models that are sometimes mutually exclusive—as writers show both the unrealizable dream and visions that are meant to lead more directly to social improvement.

Utopia can be more of a space for self-conscious speculation than a model of unrealizable, perfect space or political engagement. As Fredric Jameson argues: "it is less revealing to consider Utopian discourse as a mode of narrative, comparable, say, with novel or epic, than it is to grasp it as an object of meditation, analogous to the riddles or koan of the various mystical traditions, or the aporias of classical philosophy, whose function is to provide a fruitful bewilderment, and to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualized consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims and structural limits."[8] The "fruitful bewilderment" of which Jameson speaks might well describe a young person's intellectual process while coping, for example, with the mysteriously colorless world and ambiguous ending of Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). Jameson's remarks solicit political awareness through a renewed consideration of social as well as mental limits and possibilities.

An awareness of social organization, we argue, is necessary for a work to be called utopian; not every text written for young readers that shows a positive environment can be classified as such. As we compiled our bibliography, we saw several texts that portrayed wish fulfillment, where the world, like the Land of Cockaigne, is filled with delights pleasurable to the eye and ear, and even edible.[9] Books that show people immersed in a hedonistic fantasy where they get everything they want are to be distinguished from utopias if the texts do not contain a social dimension for the reader, or offer a system of collective organization. Books about happy families, for instance, are not technically utopias.[10] While Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)[11] offers a virtual copia of confectionary abundance, it has a claim to the title of "utopia" because of the enclosed nature of its structure (no one is ever seen coming in or out), the strictness of the workers' discipline and an emphasis on beauty in industrial life reminiscent of William Morris. While wish fulfillment and satisfaction of bodily and spiritual cravings undoubtedly form part of a utopia—unfulfilled desire is certainly one catalyst for utopia— the presence of these elements in a work written for children and young adults does not in itself signify a utopia.

Likewise, many books for young readers offer visions of communities that are highly developed technologically or even morally, but which are not necessarily utopian, since they do not represent a significant enough modification of the society to which the reader belongs. Another problematic genre is the Robinsonnade, which portrays solitary civilization or pure adventure

devoid of utopian content. Poetry for children often has utopian sentiments, but we have not found any elaborated utopias or dystopias in poetry. In general, picture books are also excluded from our bibliography: we prefer to concentrate on works aimed for a slightly older audience, as picture books rarely develop their social settings. However, we have found some notable exceptions. *Babar the King* by Jean de Brunhoff (1933)[12] presents a fairly comprehensive vision of the ideal city of Celesteville through both text and image. In Celesteville, everyone has a job for which he or she is ideally suited. The city itself is well designed and pleasant: "[t]he Bureau of Industry is next door to the Amusement Hall . . . very practical and convenient" (12–13). When Misfortune threatens to visit Celesteville, it is driven away by "graceful winged elephants who chase Misfortune away from Celesteville and bring back Happiness" (44). Paul Fleischman's *Weslandia* (1999)[13] and James Gurney's *Dinotopia: A World Apart from Time* (1992) and *The World Beneath* (1995) depict whole utopian worlds that describe food, shelter, clothing, recreation, and social relations.[14] An unusual picture book dealing with utopia is *Xanadu: The Imaginary Place* (1999).[15] We do not include it in our bibliography, since it is not fiction, but rather a school project from North Carolina that invited children to express their own utopian hopes. It adds the actual voices of children to the study of utopianism.

What are we to make of the many examples of historical fiction that treat a highly developed social organization? One could easily argue that Holocaust literature is dystopian;[16] we have, however, excluded this genre as simply too broad and deserving of its own study.[17] Historical fiction demands an attention to the complexities of history that detract from the abstract formulation of utopia and dystopia. Likewise, there are a number of fictional texts that dramatize the lives of children in a communal setting such as a Shaker colony.[18] For the most part, we have chosen to exclude these books in favor of a concentration on fantasy texts not rooted in specific historical events. We have chosen texts that focus on the roots, abstract dreams, and plans of utopia and dystopia. Even when one limits the investigation to the fantasy genre, utopian and dystopian writing exhibits a variety of political ideologies, formal techniques, and intended audiences.

The Association of Childhood and Utopia

Children's and young adult utopias are in particular need of sustained study for two reasons. First of all, there is a long tradition of thinking of childhood itself as utopian, a space and time apart from the corruption of everyday adult life.[19] The second reason is the unique function that utopianism and utopian writing plays in children's socialization and education.

Childhood is often viewed as a space sheltered from adult corruption and responsibility. This perspective comes from the Romantic conception of

childhood. To the Romantics and their heirs, children were innocent and pure, close to nature and God, possessing greater imaginative powers than adults. They were emblems of hope and the future, capable of converting adults to a better way of life. Usually unconsciously, Romantic children cast a "critical eye" on the adult world of material gain, corruption, and outdated ways of thinking. Childhood was also a time in which individuality could flourish before the conformity of the adult world took hold. The Romantic conception of childhood is one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the Western world. As we teach children's literature, we are astonished at how fervently students cling to the image of the Romantic child. This image is a construction that served the ideological purposes of the Romantics and others since.

In reality, children are more complex and less . . . nice.[20] The Romantic child fits a utopian frame easily, but real children face a variety of social and psychological pressures. No child knows utopia. The Romantic conception of the child empowers the child in one sense and limits him or her in another. The child holds the key to personal and social change, pointing the way to utopia. In Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880),[21] the title character turns the most antisocial and atheistic of Alp-Uncles into a churchgoing pillar of the community. She is the youngest and seemingly most helpless of the characters, but she is the one who makes both Dörfli and Frankfurt better places, drawing people together and giving them mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health. On the other hand, the image of the perpetually innocent child removes it from the complexities of development and the responsibility to understand the world. Utopias for children reflect this duality.

The Romantic vision of the child influenced educational programs such as that of Friedrich Froebel, inventor of the kindergarten, which considered play and imaginative activity crucial for intellectual and emotional growth. This concept is now universally held in the Western world. Utopian writing intervenes explicitly in children's development. As child or adolescent readers enjoy speculative fiction that treats imaginary worlds significantly different than our own, they develop their imaginative powers. Escapism also plays a role; individuals under pressure form imaginative havens where none exist in real life. Some critics stress the compensatory nature of imaginative literature to those who suffer materially, and the way in which fantasy or folklore directly addresses the specific scarcity experienced by audiences or tellers.[22] As one example, the socialist paradise of L. Frank Baum's *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910) is set against the economic hard times of late nineteenth-century America.[23] Fantasy can also mirror and criticize reality, forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it. Fantasy texts, especially those with specifically utopian or dystopian concerns, can be more than escapist: they can offer an improved vision of the future, or address deep and possibly unresolvable fears.

Learning about Society

As we seek to articulate a definition of utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults, it is important to acknowledge the "dual focus" of this literature. Working with children's literature necessarily commits the scholar to some awareness of reader response, because the literature speaks to young readers in different ways. Children's literature specializes in "cross writing," that is, writing on two levels for two different audiences, adult and child, "a dialogic mix of older and younger voices."[24] Most children's literature, no matter how fanciful, contains lessons to be learned. It is an inherently pedagogical genre, and with cross writing, children learn more as they reread at different times in their lives. Likewise, utopian literature is "generally didactic" (Sargent, 1994, 6). Combined with children's and young adult literature, it can be a powerful teaching tool.

Through utopian and dystopian writing, children learn about social organization. Gurney's *Dinotopia* (1992), for example, is characterized by a remarkable unity between human and animal characters, and a repeated affirmation of the need for cooperation. All of the characters in the series learn that they need to work with others to achieve their individual and collective goals. More specifically, they learn that such cooperation can and must take place across difference—bridging gaps as large as those between human beings and dinosaurs. Similarly, Soinbhe Lally's *A Hive for the Honeybee* (1996)[25] shows both the harmony and tensions of bee life, where the good of the hive ultimately overcomes personal doubts about the society. With drones echoing Marx, it is also a good example of cross writing.

Utopian literature encourages young people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action. In the long tradition of utopian literature, an imagined encounter with another culture urges readers to reflect on their home society, a reflection that sometimes takes the form of satire or social criticism. A utopian society likely has solved some of the problems besetting the "real" world, or else its flaws can teach the reader about social improvement. The pedagogical focus of writing for young people invests utopian satire with particular urgency.

The conundrum of many utopian and dystopian books for young readers is as follows: At what point does utopian cooperation become dystopian conformity? At one end of the spectrum, Gurney's *Dinotopia* and its numerous sequels indicate the pleasures and advantages of a strong community, and putting others first. At the other end, however, lies the chilling Camazotz of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962),[26] where all of the children on the street bounce their balls in strictly exact unison. In dystopias for young readers, conformity kills individual creativity, resulting in a dull, oppressive society, as in Louise Lawrence's *Andra* (1971).[27] In Sonia Levitin's *The Cure* (1999),[28] any sign of nonconformity is immediately noted in a citizen's file as

a sign of deviance. The hero, Gemm 16884, realizes that he is different, and is singled out for the "cure": he is thrust into the body of a Jewish boy during the Black Death. His experience with discrimination initially leads him to reject difference, but he soon realizes the need to celebrate it in order to foster love. Young readers, faced with the pressure to conform in their own lives, can learn from these texts not to be ashamed of how they may differ from the norm.

Much of children's literature pits the child against the adult world and, in "showing up" the adults, is subversive. Subversion and social criticism are shared by utopian literature; both genres focus on how society might change for the better. The sharp division between the child and the adult world allows for the social criticism that utopias contain. Through the child, the writer casts a "critical eye" on the world. The Romantic association of the child with hope for the future links the child to utopias even further. Utopias for young readers suggest that children can achieve a state of ideality that adults cannot; at times, the impetus for the fictional child to fix society's problems exerts a powerful pressure on the child itself. This can be seen in O. T. Nelson's *The Girl Who Owned a City* (1975),[29] in which everyone over the age of twelve has been killed by a mysterious disease; hence the children cannot rely on adult figures. Violent gangs roam the streets, creating a dystopian, violent society; it is up to the surviving children and the book's protagonist, Lisa, to rebuild from the devastation.

Utopian fiction reveals the social foundations of our own world—and the cracks that form in them. Class systems come under much scrutiny in utopias and dystopias for young readers. Like Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1975),[30] with its seemingly perfect world, many texts are predicated on the discovery of a society where the sufferings of some allow for the pleasure, comfort, and exaltation of others. We see this pattern, for example, in Zilpha Keatley Snyder's Green-sky Trilogy (1975–1977).[31] In these books, the utopian treetop life of the Kindar is explicitly contrasted to the misery of the bottom-dwelling Erdlings, and, as Carrie Hintz argues in her essay, it is precisely that inequity that the Kindar ultimately must correct. The class system of the real world is exaggerated and criticized in John Christopher's *The Guardians* (1970),[32] H. M. Hoover's *Children of Morrow* (1973),[33] John Tully's *NatFact 7* (1984),[34] Robert Swindells's *Daz 4 Zoe* (1990),[35] among many others. Writers often pull no punches in depicting the brutality of class inequality taken to an extreme. In Tom Browne's *Red Zone* (1980),[36] for instance, twenty-second-century Britain echoes imperial Rome, as the privileged Inner Zone citizens watch the Red Zone denizens fight to the death.

Exposure to these types of texts can lead young readers to see inequality in their own communities and countries, and even lead them into a finer understanding of how the industrialized world exploits developing nations.