

New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature

Utopian Transformations

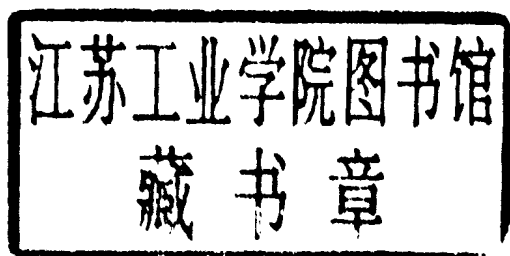
Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum



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1

A New World Order or a New Dark Age?

This is the dawn of the ending
It's the time of a new world order
This is a new beginning.

Gamma Ray, *No World Order*, 2001

The phrase 'a new world order' has been used by politicians from the early years of the twentieth century to describe the new political dawning, the end of the old warring world, and a new beginning. Woodrow Wilson is credited with being the first US president to proclaim the optimism of a 'new world order' at the end of the First World War, 'the war to end all wars'. Again at the end of the Cold War, other leaders (Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, President Mikhail Gorbachev, and President George H. W. Bush) spoke of a new world order, and outlined their various visions for a world shaped by tolerance, human rights, superpower cooperation, north-south alliance, and an end of military conflicts. By the time of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, 'new world order' rhetoric had been replaced by other concepts: 'globalisation', 'end of history', 'clash of civilisations', and 'the war on terrorism'.

As we write this introduction in July 2006, we watch daily news reports of the escalation of conflict in the Middle East, where bombings of Lebanon and Israel have left many children, families, and citizens dead, injured, homeless, and traumatised. The era of the new dawn brings fear, insecurity, and pain. While a new dark age might well be upon us, our intention throughout this book is to examine how texts written and produced for children and young people imagine future world orders, how they respond to current and past world crises, and the kinds of utopian dreamings they offer their audiences. These are dangerous

times, but they are also times of possibility. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it:

To measure the life 'as it is' by a life as it should be (that is, a life imagined to be different from the life known, and particularly a life that is better and would be preferable to the life known) is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity.

(Bauman, 2002b, p. 222)

Within popular and political discourses, the term 'utopian' is often taken to refer to unrealistic imaginings of improved world orders which when tested against the realpolitik of pragmatism collapse into ineffectuality. We argue, on the contrary, that utopian thinking both draws upon and generates ideas capable of influencing cultural, economic, and political practices. For utopianism incorporates what Lyman Tower Sargent refers to as 'social dreaming', the complex of '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' (1994, p. 3). Utopian thought thus informs social, political and cultural practices: it enables processes whereby intentional communities determine material practices; it shapes visions for improved world orders; and it pervades cultural production (including film, artwork, fiction, and drama) which engages with utopian and dystopian ideas.

Our aim in this book is to focus on contemporary children's texts, a field of cultural production highly responsive to social change and to global politics, and crucially implicated in shaping the values of children and young people. We locate our examination of these texts in relation to utopian studies and critical theory, calling on the concept of 'transformative utopianism' to suggest that utopian and dystopian tropes carry out important social, cultural, and political work by challenging and reformulating ideas about power and identity, community, the body, spatio-temporal change, and ecology. Children's literature is marked by a pervasive commitment to social practice, and particularly to representing or interrogating those social practices deemed worthy of preservation, cultivation, or augmentation, and those deemed to be in need of reconceiving or discarding (see Stephens, 1992a). An outcome of this commitment, in both the literature itself and the critical discourses which serve the literature, is a pervasive impulse towards what can be termed 'transformative utopianism'. This concept is realised as fictional imaginings of transformed world orders and employs utopian/dystopian

themes and motifs which propose new social and political arrangements (Parrinder, 2001). In Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* (2000), from which we borrow an image for the cover of this book, a small boy discovers a 'lost thing', a large red object, a hybrid figure with mechanoid, animal and human features, which is 'out of place' in the boy's world, where order and uniformity find expression in linear directions and monolithic forms. The utopian world shown in our cover image is a space of freedom, in which posthuman figures engage in purposeful play. Debra Dudek describes this space as one in which 'the beings are animal and machine and human and organic and musical instrument. They are grounded yet they fly. They are caged but have wings' (2005, p. 63). When the boy protagonist leaves the once lost (but now found) thing in this space and returns to his neat, orderly world, he nevertheless retains a consciousness of utopian possibilities where things '[don't] quite fit' (Tan, 2000). It is through its advocacy of difference and its refusal of closure that *The Lost Thing* proposes a transformed world order, one which reaches beyond a fear of the unknown to embrace new ways of being.

In a way similar to fiction, film produced for children and youth audiences serves both a socialising and a political function by representing and communicating the subjectivity of children and young people. By privileging the point of view of a young person, film offers visual and narrative pleasures, but, like literature, film is not an innocent medium devoid of ideology. Thus, by extending our focus texts to include film — animated and live action — we consider how a transformative utopianism operates through both the narrative and the body of the child who is the subject of the narrative. By paying attention to the child-subject, we attempt to understand how adults produce projections of children as citizens in the making. Our attention to the different layers of story and their significances offers ways of reading the social critiques they imply and the alternative futures they construct.

Within the interdisciplinary field of utopian studies, formulations and discussions of utopia draw upon the practices and theories of philosophy, sociology, history, political science, and cultural and literary studies to consider ideas, social movements, and cultural production. Our work, too, is interdisciplinary in scope, incorporating utopian studies, cultural geography, literary theory, and environmental and socio-political studies in its approach to literary and filmic texts.

Transformative utopianism

The notion of transformative utopianism forms the conceptual framework of this book because of its pertinence for analysis of the ways utopian themes are deployed in children's texts. Transformative utopianism is a construct we have selected as an alternative to other theorisations of utopian literature, which tend to be grounded in a particular theory or political philosophy (e.g. socialism, liberalism, feminism). For our purposes, transformative utopianism offers a number of narrative and theoretical possibilities.

Utopia must be transformative if it is to imagine a better world than the one that readers/audiences currently know. However, as Lucy Sargisson notes, 'utopian transformation doesn't have to be located in the future, in a far-distant hope for a better place. Rather, it can be part of transformation in the now' (Levitas and Sargisson, 2003, p. 17). Hence, our selection of texts includes those that do not necessarily conform to the traditional utopian genre. Many nevertheless contain what Moylan (2003, p. 2) sees as crucial to critical utopias, 'an emancipatory utopian imagination' which breaks away from the restrictions of the traditional utopia while preserving these texts' ability to challenge and resist dominant ideologies and social practices. In our critique of the transformative utopian potential in children's texts, we consider to what extent the narratives resist 'stasis and uniformity' (Beauchamp, 1998, p. 223) and authoritarian systems of control, which characterised earlier utopian models and interpretations, prevalent in both child and adult utopian writing.

David Harvey's Marxist framework displaces these traditional models with the notion of 'dialectical utopia'. His formulation of a 'dialectical utopia' and a 'spatio-temporal utopia' introduces the notion of spatio-temporal change and provides a space for the interplay between individuals and the environment and an understanding that social change is attainable. Harvey's work provides a useful resource for our conceptualising of transformation, rather than stasis, as a textual element of literary and filmic utopias and an ever-present condition of today's world. As Harvey observes, free-market utopianism, expressed in the spread of globalised capital, has resulted in 'geopolitical struggles' (2000, p. 178) which reinforce and exacerbate distinctions between populations more or less advantaged by the supposedly free play of market forces. To counter these illusory utopian orders, which depend upon institutional and political control for their maintenance, Harvey postulates more transformative visions of utopias. The novel, he says, has

now become 'the primary site for the exploration of utopian sentiments and sensibilities' (2000, p. 189), its representations of spatiality taking multiple forms which include feminist, anarchist, religious, and ecologically informed varieties of the 'good place' of utopia. In many of the texts we consider, spatiality is a site of struggle over competing visions of social and political orders. Nor do these texts generally adduce narrative resolutions where utopian visions are enshrined in spatiality, achieved once and for all; rather, as in the closure of Lois Lowry's *Messenger* (2004), where a community returns to the utopian ideals of its original foundation, this apparently utopian resolution is contingent upon a continuous struggle against the reassertion of dystopian tendencies on the part of its inhabitants.

Further theoretical direction to our analysis is found in Richard Rorty's pragmatic liberalism (1989), which argues, firstly that social change is implied and advocated by processes of redescription — that is, the evolution of new vocabularies which impart new significances to things, or at times shift the meaning of key words, and secondly, that social formations, language and identity are contingent. Redescription enables the reformulation of social institutions and practices, of how they develop, of the effects they produce, and of the issues to which they give form. It thereby invites a critical discourse analysis of the extensive dystopian elements in children's literature. In positing the virtues of a critical pedagogy (with its utopian visions), Henry Giroux too puts language at the centre of those imaginings of a different and more just world which are crucial to transformative utopianism. Giroux's proposal of a 'language of critique and possibility' (2000, p. 694), like Rorty's utopian project, suggests a way in which our analysis will move from theoretical and conceptual concerns to consider their pragmatic and pedagogical implications and possibilities.

In summary, our formulation of transformative utopianism provides for a focus on the variety of forms and ideological positions which characterise children's texts, rather than driving our analysis towards definitions which fall back on static notions of utopian and dystopian forms and elements. In examining these texts, we consider the extent to which they promote and advocate transformative possibilities, either through constructions of fantastic or realistic worlds (both utopias and anti-utopias) or implied through negative example (as in the many dystopian narratives produced since 1988). Far from assuming that utopian texts are progressive and liberatory in regard to the ideological systems which inform them, we are interested in tracking the extent to which contemporary texts reinscribe conservative views and values embedded within

narrative and discursal features and naturalised because accepted as given. Our use of the term 'transformative utopianism' is based on the assumption that works of fiction employ utopian and dystopian themes and motifs in a way that has a transformative purpose: that is, they propose or imply new social and political arrangements by imagining transformed world orders.

The better worlds envisaged in utopian thinking project both liberation and constraint. Frances Bartowski succinctly labels such narratives 'tales of disabling and enabling conditions of desire' (1989, p. 4), and this concept is especially pertinent to children's texts, since to grasp what children's texts propose about values, politics, and social practices is to see what they envisage as desirable possibilities for the world. There exist clear contrasts between texts informed by alarm and pessimism about political conflict, war and environmental degradation (see Mallan, 2001), and utopian rhetoric which reinvokes Romantic formulations of an innocent child. The concept of transformative utopianism identifies the intellectual ground implicitly underlying most political and social inflections in children's fiction. Further, it transcends the interpretation of works written specifically within the genre of literary utopias because it has a wider application in the examination of the utopian impulse in children's literature and its associated critical discourses.

Utopianism and contemporary contexts

As Bartowski has pointed out, utopian writing and thought 'would seem to chart certain moments or ruptures in Western social history — those times when utopian desires/projective longings are driven by both hope and fear, those times particularly marked by anticipation and anxiety' (1989, p. 7). The texts we consider, produced between 1988 and 2006, derive from just such a time and play out many of the concerns of adults as they give shape to children's imagined anxieties and desires. In particular, the events of September 11 and their aftermath in world politics have sharpened cultural unease about children's perceptions of the worlds in which they live, and the futures which they imagine.

The engagement of children's literature with social practices was arguably pushed in a new direction by the various upheavals set in train at the end of the 1980s and which continued beyond the end of the millennium. Children's texts have reflected and responded to historical moments such as: the end of the Cold War in 1986–1987; the

disintegration of the Soviet Empire in 1989, with related consequences such as the outbreak of civil war in Bosnia in 1992; the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991; and the formal end to apartheid in South Africa in 1990. These events have prompted shifts in the social and political discourses of the fiction; for example, disaster literature, originating as a cold-war phenomenon in children's literature, has changed its focus over the past decades from nuclear holocaust (1960s–1980s), to pollution, greenhouse gases, and global warming (1980s–1990s), to (post-)apocalyptic scenarios (1990s–2000s) (see Stephens, 1992b; Bradford, 2003b; Braithwaite, 2005; Free, 2006). The timeline of this book (1988–2006) is framed by the contrast between the 'openness' of Glasnost and the more closed system of surveillance, power, and control which invokes utopian visions in the rhetorics of 'the new world order' and 'the war against terror'. In films targeted at child and youth audiences, a similar trajectory of disaster is reflected as filmmakers respond to shifting global political, environmental, and social agendas, and predict future scenarios. To grasp what these films propose in terms of the contexts of our times is to see what adults regard as desirable possibilities or cautionary tales in the face of an uncertain and complex future.

A noticeable feature in contemporary political and popular discourses is a distrust of history and a rejection of the idea that knowledge of the past can be a regenerative and productive force. For instance, the lessons of European imperialism — such as the enduring and mainly negative effects of colonisation upon Indigenous peoples — do not serve as warnings as to the long-term consequences of the hegemonic and expansionist directions of neocolonial politics. Samuel P. Huntington's view that the future of global politics inevitably involves a 'clash of civilisations' between the West and the East arises from his tendency to reduce both West and East to a single scale of values, much as Orientalism depends on a monolithic view of the East in order to construct the West as the standard by which cultures are judged. Since September 11, 2001, Huntington's thesis has been taken up in discourses of the 'war on terrorism' and in Bush's formulation of the 'axis of evil'. It is often the case in the field of children's literature that texts for children lead in new directions while the existing critical paradigms lag considerably (see Stephens, 2000). This is particularly the case in contemporary texts which address the politics of globalisation and neocolonialism. Our approach, then, is to locate children's texts as an object of theoretical and critical analysis within the broader domains of democracy, social justice, politics, and struggle.

Transforming the present

Our project of identifying and analysing utopian elements in contemporary texts has proceeded from a wide sampling of narratives for children and youth and across a range of text types including contemporary realism, historical fiction, speculative fiction, film, and picture books. From this body of texts we have chosen symptomatic works, treating these in relation to the key concerns we have identified. Rather than engaging in an encyclopaedic account of utopian tropes in children's texts, our approach is to model theorised readings which may then inform further explorations of utopian and dystopian tropes as they relate to the cultural and political contexts of texts.

Over the course of this project we have come to understand that utopian narratives are, more than anything else, concerned with the present, and with the values, politics and social practices conveyed in these texts as desirable possibilities for a transformed world order. Viewed in the broadest terms, their subject is that of society itself: the political systems, the networks of power and resistance, and the discursive regimes, which constrain and enable identity-formation.

Focusing on English language fictions drawn from Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, and a small selection of films from the United States, Japan, and Iran, the following chapters address in various ways the transformative potential of these texts for realising utopian possibilities. This broad canvassing of children's texts and the transdisciplinary approach we take in our discussions highlight the largely untapped resource of children's literature and film to utopian studies. While we engage with the general topic of utopia, we also consider dystopian and anti-utopian genres and tropes as necessary elements to non-traditional utopian models and critiques. In an aim to unsettle any complacency about the innocence and benignity of children's texts, we actively challenge assumptions (our own and others) and scrutinise the explicit and implicit discourses that invariably shape the politicising and socialising agendas and subtexts of the narratives.

In the next chapter, 'New Dialogues: Children's Texts, New World Orders and Transformative Possibilities', we offer an overview of the range of genres, forms, and narrative strategies by which children's texts engage with contemporary political and social discourses. Drawing on a selection of texts discussed throughout the book, we explore the question: 'What forms does the dialogue between children's texts and new world orders take?'

From this overarching narrative framework, the focus then shifts to a number of textual readings, beginning with 'Masters, Slaves, and Entrepreneurs: Globalised Utopias and New World Order(ing)s'. This chapter considers the impact of globalisation on the lives of young protagonists as they inhabit global/local spaces that characterise the shifting social and technological landscapes of new global world orders. By examining a diverse range of films and fictional texts, we consider how these new global 'utopias/dystopias' reinscribe social hierarchies requiring young people to be creative, resilient, and flexible in order to survive times marked by consumerism, globalisation, new technologies, and international conflict.

In 'The Lure of the Lost Paradise: Postcolonial Utopias' we contend that formulations of nationhood in contemporary societies whose histories are marked by experiences of colonisation (e.g. Canada, America, and Australia) are inevitably shaped by collective memory and imagination. In this chapter we focus on treatments of utopian spaces in the narratives and consider how these texts attempt to position readers using strategies such as the powerful trope of 'a lost paradise' which induces a strategic forgetfulness of past atrocities, or, by contrast, utilising processes of remembering by envisioning new modes of collaboration and engagement that address the dysfunctional relations of colonialism.

In 'Nature Versus Culture: Reading Ecocritically' we examine a number of environmental utopian fictions to argue children's texts remain 'environmentally informed' rather than 'ecocritical' in that the fictions are constrained by a pervasive commitment to maturation narratives (exemplified by the *bildungsroman* genre). This environmental approach ensures that any environmental literature remains anthropocentric in emphasis, rather than engaging with biocentrism or 'deep ecology', a way of thinking which rejects the anthropocentric assumption that human beings are special within the world-order, and which replaces it with a biocentric or 'life-centred' attitude.

Chapter 6, focusing on imagined communities in children's texts, argues that in contrast to the general tendency in literature to locate utopian communities out of time and space, providing models of peaceful and productive societies, a noticeable trend in children's literature since 1990 is that the utopian imaginings of ideal communities have been largely supplanted by dystopian visions of dysfunctional, regressive, and often violent societies whose deficiencies nevertheless open up a space for utopia, in that by negative example they gesture towards transformed world orders. This chapter considers the narrative

strategies through which dystopian texts advocate and critique models of community and of human behaviour, focusing on children as catalysts for social change and/or reform, and as being subjected to social engineering and manipulation as members of cults or fundamentalist communities.

In 'Ties that Bind: Reconceptualising Home and Family' we shift focus from community to family and home, and consider how late modernity has seen many children growing up in post-traditional and risk societies. Characteristic of this development is that traditional notions of family and home are changing in ways that see many families fragmented or its members function independently of familial structures and support, often relying on other associations or networks for economic, emotional, and functional security. In our selected texts, we examine the ties that bind families and the reimagined configurations imagined across a range of dystopian children's fiction and film.

The final chapter, 'The Struggle to be Human in a Posthuman world' takes us back to the lyrics of our opening epigraph: 'It's the time of a new world order/This is a new beginning' in that we turn from the human subject to the posthuman. In examining how children's literature responds to the idea of the posthuman, we argue that children's texts access four areas most commonly linked to the posthuman: robotics and artificial intelligence; biological interventions into the human — cloning, genetic manipulation, 'test-tube' creations of human life; cybernetic interventions that either modify the human body or fashion artificial life in its evolutionary image; and information technology. These scientific and technological developments have impacted on how we think about the world, how we make sense of our experience, and, most significantly perhaps, how we think about ourselves as human beings, in other words, what it means to be human in a world in which traditional conceptualisations of being 'human' have been increasingly problematised and rendered inadequate.

2

Children's Texts, New World Orders and Transformative Possibilities

The failure, if failure it was, is only in how your father's dream of a happy, useful community was carried out. The failure was not in your father's dream.

Whelan, *Fruitlands*, 2002, p. 116

America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves — safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the hope for a better life.

George W. Bush, at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York 1 June 2002

The changing global politics we pointed to in Chapter 1 call for a thorough examination of the rhetoric of utopian imaginings and speculations in children's texts, and of the ways in which these texts participate in what Ruth Levitas has termed 'the education of desire' (1990, pp. 7–8), especially in so far as they mediate ways of regarding the world and offer shape to children's anxieties and aspirations. In this chapter, therefore, we will consider the variety of themes and narrative forms in which the concept of 'new world orders' and 'transformative utopianism' are brought into conjuncture. Representations of utopian societies are virtually non-existent in children's literature, where such representations swiftly disclose themselves as critical utopias (rejecting utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream — see Moylan, 1986, p. 10). Gloria Whelan's *Fruitlands* (2002) or William Nicholson's *The Wind Singer* (2000) are notable examples of narratives in which communities ordered and orchestrated ostensibly for the good of all members are revealed, through the perceptions of young enquiring minds, to be repressive patriarchies organised to serve the self-interests of those in control.

What makes the depiction of utopia problematic in fiction for younger readers is its need to engage with the concerns that both authors and critics concur are the dominant problems and concerns of adolescence. The common node is the production of subjectivities: adolescent fiction is pivotally preoccupied with the formation of subjectivity — that is, the development of notions of selfhood. Fictions are typically concerned with existential questions like: who am I, why am I here, where am I going, and what does it all mean? They construct narratives of personal growth or maturation, stories about relationships between the self and others and between individuals and society. And in their preoccupation with personal growth, maturation, and the development of concepts of selfhood, adolescent novels frequently reflect complex ideas about subjectivity — or selfhood — in terms of personal concerns, intrafamily concerns, and interpersonal concerns (see McCallum, 2006, p. 217). A child protagonist is bound to rebel against the high level of conformity demanded by a utopian society. The imbrication of unfolding story events with narratives of growth thus shapes any quasi-utopian closures such narratives may aspire to, and subjectivity may be narrowly conceived as a point of destination rather than a constant process of self-production. Where some narratives may exploit the subject's alienation from society by exploring the competing desires between the child/adolescent protagonist and the utopian project, others might appear to offer transformed subjectivities but in effect redescribe desire so that it conforms to existing socio-cultural codes and modes of expression.

Further, while it is plausible to distinguish between utopia and dystopia as distinct adult genres, the dialogue between children's texts and new world orders is conducted by means of the genres which prevail in childhood texts and cultures, within which, as we argued in Chapter 1, utopia or dystopia appear rather as tropes, modes, themes, or settings than as genres. During the Cold War era, the interest of authors of children's literature in the capacity of human beings to transform the world was dominated by dystopian 'disaster' narratives, but by the end of the twentieth century the field had expanded to include narratives reflecting the different assumptions about the world following the enormous geo-political shifts set in train at the end of the 1980s. Children's literature now often functions with a sharpened awareness that literature and society are interpreted, if not shaped, by major concepts in cultural theory, some of which deeply challenge the liberal humanist assumptions which underpinned children's literature during the Cold War. An attempt to find narrative modes with which to address these