

The Expendable Child: Intergenerational Conflicts in Contemporary Climate Fiction

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Abstract

Focusing on intergenerational conflicts in climate fiction for young adults, this article argues that disputes between adult and child perspectives in children's books take a more radical turn in the dystopian young adult (YA) novels *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012), *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and *A Children's Bible* (2020). In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher education aimed at upper secondary school, these novels raise issues of adult failings and intergenerational conflict in relation to apocalyptic scenarios, and exemplify how adults characterized as evil or naïve fail to shoulder even basic responsibilities, thereby leaving children to fend for their own survival. The portrayal of children as exposed, vulnerable or even expendable is shown to undermine common didactic impulses to invest hope in the capacity of future generations to amend the shortcomings of the present. Further, disrupted narrative chronologies undermine the idea of futurity as linear progression; instead, it is left to the child characters to incessantly look backwards to restore fragments of lost culture, stories and language. In drawing an analogy between the novels and Modernist narratives, it is suggested that reading practices that creatively and collaboratively deal with cultural historical perspectives as well as narrativity connect the present to the past and build resilience through an understanding of how stories shape our perception of the future. We argue that a heightened awareness of narrativity and discourse can contribute to perspective changes that may be necessary in response to contemporary challenges in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: *A Children's Bible*; *The Marrow Thieves*; *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*; ecocriticism; EFL education

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Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D. H. Lawrence 1928: 1)

Although Lawrence's contention is almost a century old, many would regard our age, too, as a tragic one, and post-apocalyptic narratives suffuse contemporary culture as well as political discussion. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Anthropocene has been marked by accelerated warming under human-induced greenhouse gas emissions, and there is scientific consensus that the fossil fuel economy, agriculture, industrialization, and deforestation have become drivers of a heated planet, pollution, and mass extinction of biological species. While it is widely recognized that urgent action is needed to mitigate climate change and transition to renewable energy sources, the implementation of stringent environmental policies has met resistance due to concerns over short-term economic stability and forced lifestyle changes.

Notably, however, analyses of attitudes to environmental policies have identified a generational gap; younger generations are more likely than older generations to embrace change and may also be more immediately worried about the impacts of Anthropogenic climate change on their future, including threats to food security, increased frequency of natural disasters, and loss of biodiversity (Hickman et al. 2021; Flynn et al. 2021: 56). From this perspective, intergenerational equity has surfaced as a relevant issue, as young people will inevitably be left to deal with the consequences of global warming despite having contributed relatively little to the problem.

The theme of intergenerational conflict as a consequence of catastrophic climate change stands out strongly in the young adult (YA) novels *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* by Ambelin Kwaymullina (2012), *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline (2017), and *A Children's Bible* by Lydia Millet (2020). In these dystopian novels child characters are portrayed as highly exposed and seemingly expendable to the adult world, as they are orphaned, abandoned, abused, or meet an early death. Whether the setting is the near future or some decades ahead of us, readers are introduced to worlds of antagonism and intergenerational conflict, where adults are portrayed as either pathetically unable to take

responsibility, or as plain evil—using children for their own purposes or survival.

YA climate fiction is a genre that has often received attention for its potential to make future modes of scientifically anticipated existence visible (Andersen 2020; Nikoleris, Stripple and Tenngarten 2017). Less has been said about the didactic implications related to dystopian elements in these works, or to their portrayal of children in greatly vulnerable positions. While aggression or neglect from adults are recognizable elements in children's books or YA fiction in general, the works of contemporary climate fiction we examine here take a new direction as they make the rupture between the adult world and a child perspective more extreme, withdrawing possibilities for conventional rescue or reconciliation with the norms and values of the previous generation.

This expanded generational gap does not only represent a shift in genre conventions, for as Kimberley Reynolds (2011) has suggested, a historical 'comparison of how children's literature has represented the future reveals much about changing attitudes to the young and aspirations for society' (97). These changing attitudes have generally been thought of as progressive, for the lives and thoughts of children in literary futures have often offered contestation or alternative views to adult norms that may inspire new ways of thinking about the world and how it could be shaped in potentially better ways (96). This bettering could be thought of in moral didactic terms, or as an empowering gesture in the face of the narrow constraints and moral shortcomings of the adult world. For example, according to Clémentine Beauvais (2015), some children's literature ascribes power to 'mighty' children who are portrayed as belonging to the realm of imagination, to the symbolic sphere (207), suggesting that childhood represents a powerful source of future possibilities for adults.

Both Reynold's and Beauvais' arguments imply new ways of understanding intergenerational conflict, didacticism, and hope. However, in the dystopian works we examine, such potential or optimism related to childhood is conspicuously withdrawn. Not only do their more negative outlooks convey a pessimistic message about the aspirations of contemporary societies, but they also disconcert pedagogical aspirations for YA climate fiction to warn about the future or to promote empathy and inspire hope in young readers. In an EFL classroom dedicated to creating meaningful futures, such disturbing features as the radical abandonment

of a young generation may be troubling, perhaps discouraging the use of climate fiction as reading material for social change.

We propose to respond to this challenge by turning to recent research in ‘climate change literacy’ by Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr (2023: 5), who suggest a focus on narratology and epistemology rather than what they refer to as ‘the cognitive and sentimental fallacies’ (7). As they imply, neither emotional identification with a young protagonist, nor facts, are in themselves sufficient to inspire hope or action, especially not in stories inciting ‘negative and fearful emotions’ (17). These narratives rather demand teaching focused on language, representation, and rhetoric. Such an approach weakens the case for readings focused on developing empathy or identification, instead pointing to the significance of fostering critical skills that highlight continuities between language, literature, and the world, as well as an understanding of how language creates, resists, or modifies the future. This implies a creative model of reading rather than a replication of standard models of interpretation. As Sofia Ahlberg (2021) usefully contends, literary studies are important ‘to return to stories and to invent ways of reading them, of dialoguing with them and other readers so as to co-create new meaning for each other’ (13). In times of crisis, as Ahlberg argues, it is central to use stories to enable new ways of imagining the future beyond dystopian thinking.

To prepare student teachers for ELT classrooms where they need to guide young people in developing their understanding of social and cultural issues during times of uncertainty and crisis (The Swedish National Agency for Education GY25), we have emphasized a focus on student agency and on practicing cooperative learning, with an emphasis on interdependence and imagination rather than pre-set goals (Johnson and Johnson 2009: 365–370). We are also inspired by Anna Thyberg’s focus on ‘dialogic teaching methods where there is an exchange of ideas instead of questions with right or wrong answers’ (2022: 22). The novels and texts read in the classroom, whether at the teacher training programme or at the upper secondary schools where our students will teach, are then not only finished objects to be interpreted, but contributions to an ongoing discussion as examples of storytelling where the students’ own voices can continue, complement or alter the imagined plots, characters and futures.

Such co-creating dialogues will open to real world concerns, where close readings, seeking meaning within the boundaries of a text, interplay with a more open investigation of how we read the narratives that shape

our world and our futures. Further, as we suggest, this focus on narratological creativity is inscribed within the YA novels themselves, as hope tends to reside in storytelling, myth, religion, in discarding the old authorities and reconstructing a new cultural understanding of the world.

The child characters in *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*, *The Marrow Thieves* and *A Children's Bible* all find themselves among the ruins of a failed world, and faith in the future is placed in the possibilities of creation, through reassembling fragments of the past. The novels have been selected because of the conspicuous theme of intergenerational conflict and radical questioning of adult authority that they share, which is where we will begin our study. We will then discuss the issue of narrativity and how the novels unsettle traditional understandings of time and progress, as the idea of a linear process of maturation from child to adult is challenged also in the narrative form and style. Finally, we argue that it is relevant to connect this destabilization of textual and narrative boundaries, including the persistent reading and 'misreading' of fragments of civilization, with literary Modernism. Advocating the significance of including literary history and intertextuality in literacy skills, our intention is to show how responses to crisis can usefully be inscribed in larger cultural patterns, thus allowing critical distancing and re-readings of contemporary narratives. As the authority and presumed wisdom of both adult and teacher is undermined in many Modernist as well as dystopian texts, we argue that they present ideal opportunities for including creativity and experimentation as teaching methods in the EFL classroom.

Intergenerational conflict

In Vanessa Joosen's (2023) words, many books for children 'begin with intergenerational conflict but end in solidarity' (237). In YA fiction where tension between generations drives conflict, too, the general direction is a resolution that resolves that conflict. This is an important trajectory, as suggested by Joosen regarding children's literature, where she suggests that 'intergenerational alliances' in literature make 'more successful teams'—an important development 'in a time when issues such as global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and war make a strong appeal for cooperation between generations' (237).

Surely the ambition to combat ageism and to deal with crises over generational boundaries is a worthy objective, yet the novels we examine here seem to resist such tendencies as they rather accentuate differences in

how adults and children relate to destructive forces and climate change. The failure of the older generation to take responsibility and care for their young is conspicuous, and the children and adolescents in the narratives we discuss are forced to shoulder survival strategies, duties, and moral decisions that should rightly befall the adult generation. Not only is this adult evasion portrayed as pitifully weak, selfish and appeasing to their own convenience, it also takes a more sinister turn, as the children are exposed to suffering, violence, abandonment, and exposure to the elements with little hope of resolution or homecoming.

The issue is not bound to evil character traits. Indeed, many of the adult characters are themselves victims of systems beyond their immediate control. Rather, we should consider Beauvais' (2015) contention that children's literature may reveal 'adult intentionality at its core, and the hopes and desires it invests in the fantasy of childhood' (7). As Beauvais shows, such intentionality is directed at the possibility of the child to act as an 'agent of a desired' future which is 'located outside predictability' (4). In that way, power and hope for a brighter future is shifted from anguished and frustrated adults to the younger generation. Beauvais makes it clear that she does not discuss YA fiction, but her theoretical standpoints are of relevance in this context too, as she expands the notion of adult agency beyond narrator, author or characters in the books. Instead, she addresses 'the adult volition conveyed within the book; the synthesis ... of a given text's construction of adulthood, with its accompanying intentions, fears, desires, values and attitudes towards childhood' (10; cf. Rose 1984). It is this 'adult volition' that is ultimately at stake, as values in a post-apocalyptic world seem to have undergone a radical repositioning in the three novels we examine here.

Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* well illustrates disempowered grown-up authority, as adults are seemingly paralyzed in response to the world around them. In the novel, a few families have congregated in an extravagant summer house where the world-weary and disillusioned parents, 'so-called figures of authority' who engage in drinking as a 'hobby', pursue a hedonistic lifestyle that keeps them disengaged from their children (Millett 2020: 3). In the evenings, some of them take to dancing, moving to 'their old-time music' (3) with the lyrics 'Beat on the brat, beat on the brat, beat on the brat with a baseball bat, oh yeah' (5). The tune is a 1970s punk classic by The Ramones, which could have indicated a certain rebelliousness and liveliness in the parents. Instead,

they are described as ‘flopping’ and the way they ‘move their lumpen bodies’ is a ‘sad spectacle’ (5). The onlookers are even worse off, as they listlessly sit about in chairs, ‘for practical purposes, deceased’ (5).

At this early stage of the novel, the scene is humorous and light in tone, but it also foreshadows how the song lyrics will in a manner be actualized. For the consequences of the adults’ neglectful lifestyle and lack of responsibility will prove to expand beyond the exposure of children in many other family stories, as Millet’s (2020) novel sets up a generational rift that is violent in character and the parental lack of backbone is figured as a ‘beating’ down of their children, with the adults only contributing to making their situation ‘worse’ (180). Nor is any rescue or intervention in sight, and in this way *A Children’s Bible* is removed from what Reynolds (2011) has identified as an ‘enduring message of the family story’, namely that ‘distance and disturbance do not divide families, but make demands on them that can be strengthening’ (86). For rather than restoring stability and domestic routine, the parents simply withdraw, and while the children ‘waited for them to come back ... they never did’ (Millet 2020: 222). No ‘strengthening’ occurs at the end, as the novel leaves us with the sick child Jack and his sister softly pondering what the world will come to when they are no longer there. A set-up that begins by toying with genres such as children’s adventure stories, featuring an old mansion and an uninhabited island, thus ends on a rather different note. As we shall see, however, the play with genre in the novel itself opens to new versions of hope.

The absence of parental guidance is also conspicuous in *The Marrow Thieves*. At the opening of Dimaline’s novel, the parents of Frenchie and Mitch are both missing, leaving them with no option but to care for themselves. Before disappearing, their father has promised that they are ‘going to make a home’ by asserting that if ‘you make something happen you can count on it being for sure’ (Dimaline 2017: 6). His words are reassuring, and Frenchie feels empowered as he is ‘proud of his family, with our ragged shoes and string hair; we were still kings among men’ (6–7). However, his trust in power, personal agency and the family unit is rapidly shattered as the children find themselves without adult guidance, family, or a path homewards. Importantly, the split family is not merely a trope for abandonment and isolation but a conspicuous result of violence, for the novel draws a parallel between how the Indigenous Anishinaabe people were forced to subjugation and deprived of their language in residential schools and new ‘schools’ in which their bone marrow is drawn

from them. The bone marrow is used to heal the white population, who suffer from loss of dream function, a lasting consequence of the trauma implanted by millions of deaths, natural disasters, war, and water scarcity.

The violence involved in harvesting bone marrow at 'death camps' is brutal and children are not exempt from the ruthlessness of adult perpetrators (Dimaline 2017: 81). The first pages of the novel are explicitly violent in comparison with the opening of *A Children's Bible*, as Mitch sacrifices himself to allow his younger brother to escape. Taken by Canadian Government 'Recruiters', he is never seen again. Later in the novel, 7-year-old Ri-Ri is mercilessly kidnapped and dies a brutal death as she is drawn off a cliff, leaving only a 'single pink boot, all shiny like candy' behind her (Dimaline 2017: 135). It is worth noting that she has been betrayed by two men who are themselves of Indigenous heritage, suggesting that the young generation has been failed by the adult world at large, sacrificed for short-term interests. An on-the-road narrative, this novel is about worlds that may never come to fruition for migrant children, and their fight for survival. Importantly, the intergenerational gap also has current political implications, for as Patricia Zanella (2020) has noted, the novel's denial of a benevolent and progressive ending 'challenges a certain notion of reconciliation' in line with the 'current government rhetoric of reconciliation and apology for Canada's past' (177).

Parental betrayal is an even more pervading theme in Ambelin Kwaymullina's indigenous post-apocalyptic novel *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*. In this Australian dystopia, a totalitarian government controls all aspects of their subjects' lives, and as in many novels in the genre, it is the children who are most closely monitored and subjected to tests and selection procedures since they are regarded both as possible threats and as keys to maintaining the government's dominance and the status quo. For Ashala Wolf, the first-person narrator of the novel, the safety and care of the parental home is shown to be a lie, as it is her parents who themselves call in 'assessors' when they suspect that Ashala and her sister have supernatural abilities and hence are 'Illegals' who must be detained by the state (Kwaymullina 2012: 30–33). The Assessment ends with her sister being killed and Ashala herself fleeing to establish the Tribe, a refuge for children with abilities in the wilderness left uncharted after the 'Reckoning', the biblical sounding name of the climate catastrophes that have destroyed the previous civilization.

In all three novels we thus see how ‘adult’ character traits such as nurturing instincts, guiding knowledge and responsibility have been shifted to children and teenagers. In *A Children’s Bible*, the parents have channeled their parental duties into forbidding their children such relative trivialities as whether their children should be allowed to use ‘Snapchat’ or not (Millet 2020: 41), while disregarding the end of the familiar world: ‘The parents insisted on denial as a tactic. Not science denial exactly—they were liberals. It was more a denial of reality’ (28). Dulling their minds with drugs and sex, and mostly worried about their phones, the parents inspire little sympathy, and their children finally see themselves forced to take over the role of caretakers. In Jessica Murray’s (2023) words, ‘the children are very clear about who is to blame for the destruction of their world’ (35). Expectations on the parents are reduced to the childish position of being ‘helpful’ aided by some encouragement, or rather ‘a bit of the carrot and a bit of the stick’ (Millet 2020: 215). Notably, however, although parent-child roles have been reversed, we see neither reconciliation nor newfound intergenerational alliances. In fact, in all three novels, the generational divide is accentuated rather than erased.

Denying the domain of childhood as a protected zone is also to deny the urgency of present environmental challenges. These novels, however, do not set up a model for change, as it is already too late; the damage is done and there is no going back to innocent Arcadia. Referencing an apocalyptic future in which the possibility of learning from experiences from the past, or from which the adult world is radically and violently withdrawn, means that any hope and investment in the future must take a different form. We will look further at how that process of reorientation is closely tied to genre and narrativity, focusing on how the hope for a meaningful future is primarily produced through what is conceived of as fragmented, random, episodic or broken.

Reckoning with time: Nonlinear narrativity

Lisa Sainsbury (2014) has observed how time is a ‘necessary aspect of lived experience’ and how writers for young adults have ‘increasingly drawn attention to the narrative play of time through metafictional techniques’ (200). As she notes, recent books for children frequently investigate ‘the various ways in which children might come to terms with an unknown past as they attempt to make sense of present experience in preparation for the future’ (200). Contesting ideas that maturation is a

linear journey in time and that historical periods are closed off from the present, such books rather ‘suggest that children must be taught to “reckon with time” ... and to look to their own place in time if the past is to have any relevance to self-knowledge and growth’ (200). This is a significant proposition, for the young characters in the novels we have examined can all be seen as ‘reckoning’ with time, and the undermining of a linear maturation process is accompanied by disruption of linear plot lines, as all the narratives to varying degrees are polyphonic and fragmented, featuring flashbacks and flashforwards. Different versions of what has happened characterise all three novels, adding to their many metafictional and intertextual references.

A Children’s Bible, for example, begins on a fairy-tale note: ‘once we lived in a summer country’ (Millet 2020: 1). The past tense is relevant, for the entire novel is told as a long flashback from a distant point in time in which nothing but uncertainty and a narrative voice remain at the end. The parents are gone and their abandoned children imagine different versions of how this happened: one child envisions them as ‘climbing to the tops of the tall trees that grew along the garden’s edges’ until they are carried off by a ‘breeze’, another sees them as ‘vaporizing’ in the small space ‘between the fence and the wall’ and a third version is that they have got into ‘a stretch limo’ and are driven off to live in ‘a colony all of their own, without the burden of children’ (221–222). The first-person narrator, Eve, sees them going ‘down, down, and down, to the end of infinity’ (222). The actual truth of what happened to the adults is here displaced in favour of storytelling, and the metaphors relating to wind, vapour, and infinity deny closure.

The Biblical reference in the title is of relevance in this context too, as the young Jack comes into possession of a children’s Bible and his religious ignorance sets the ground for an imaginative decoding that strays from the teleological creation myth of a beginning, an end and new beginnings. Jack’s creative creed is rather more worldly, as he holds that ‘God stands for Nature’ and ‘Jesus stands for science’ (Millet 2020: 142). And as he eagerly suggests, there is hope in this down-to-earth perspective, for ‘if we believe science is true, then we can act. And we’ll be saved’ (143). As we have seen, however, the adult world has regressed to a state of apathy and denial in the face of science, and salvation seems increasingly implausible.

Millet's purpose with the Biblical symbols and events that are scattered throughout the novel is not to impose a uniform model of apocalyptic or revelational interpretation on the narrative, but rather to intersperse the wonders and miracles of myth, faith and story in her narrative. This is evident in the last scene, in which Jack asks about the ending to his cherished Bible, lamenting that he has been denied an explanation of the ending as he has been judged too young to partake of the violence of Revelation. His sister Eve comes up with a different ending to the question of what happens '*after* the end', responding with an emphasis on the lingering past, and its undying treasures: 'Ok. Slowness I bet. New kinds of animals evolve. Some other creatures come and live here, like we did. And all the old beautiful things will still be in the air. Invisible but there. ... An expectation that sort of hovers' (Millet 2020: 223). She continues with the novel's final words, evoking the meaning of art as well as hope: 'So maybe art is the Holy Ghost. ... The comets and stars will be our eyes. ... The clouds the moon. The dirt the rocks the water and the wind. We call that hope, you see' (224). Hope is here placed in the possibilities of creation, through reassembling fragments of the past as well as seeing with new eyes. Thus, trust in the future is not placed in correlation to human maturation or teleological understandings of time, but rather in an upheaval of time measures and the boundaries of the human subject. It is possible to gain different perspectives by looking through the eyes of the stars.

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* also allows multiple narratives to emerge. It does so through flashbacks, the characters' 'coming-to' stories, in which they share the chilling events that led to separation from their communities. The novel also abandons a linear narrative when the senior Miigwans shares 'Story', a recurring session in which he educates his young followers about natural disasters, the 'water wars', the loss of dreams, and Indigenous history, including topics such as colonialism, treaties, and the abuses perpetrated in the residential school system (Dimaline 2017: 22–23). The Indigenous language and culture are on the verge of extinction, however, and are only available to the younger generation as fragments. Towards the end of the novel, we find the fugitive group creating a new form of society drawn from pieces of the past: 'The council spent a lot of time piecing together the few words and images each of us carried ... They wrote what they could, drew pictures, and made the camp recite what was known for sure' (214). The young people start a

‘youth council to start passing on the teachings right away’ (Dimaline 2017: 214). Hope is thus associated with the young generation and in a re-imagination of first-nation culture, through fragments, rituals and storytelling. Hope of a better future, however, is not anchored linearly to a restoration of the past, but rather envisioned as a dream—prophetic and emotional: ‘I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want of a dream. And I understood what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger dream that held us all’ (231).

Similarly, in *Ashala Wolf*, Indigenous themes are not only part of the novel’s plot and characters—Ashala being of Aboriginal descent just like the author—but also, and significantly, in its form and narrative style. As Annika Herb (2019) has shown, the novel’s structure offers a ‘depiction of time as a non-linear concept, at once realized narratively, conceptually, and structurally in the text’ (2). By piecing together memories and myths of the past, Ashala comes to understand the world in a way that seems inaccessible to the adults representing the government, and it is through her narration that outlines of a new attitude towards nature and towards time can be discerned. Her story is told as a series of memories and flashbacks as the protagonist is being interrogated with the use of a mind-reading Machine which she eventually overcomes by imagining it to be an animal with its own free will and worth. In according life to the Machine, Ashala also disarms the authorities by refusing their mechanistic view of the world.

The cyclical view of time that stands in contrast to this mechanistic view is represented by the Serpent, a spirit reminiscent of the Aboriginal mythical figure of the Rainbow Serpent, that meets Ashala in her dreams and teaches her about the regeneration of the world after the Reckoning: ‘I journeyed for a long time, gathering all the scraps of life I could find ... Then I sang reminding life of its shapes, strength and its many transformations. Until life remembered its nature, and grew’ (Kwaymullina 2012: 121). While the oppressive Government has a hierarchical view of both power and time as linear progress, seeing both childhood and the pre-Reckoning world as ignorant and irresponsible states that need monitoring, Ashala’s reality is reconstructed through fragments of both the old world and the new, of Aboriginal mythology and ‘scraps’ from the world before the catastrophe. Just as the narrative plot circles back towards the beginning, so Kwaymullina shows that

interdependence rather than hierarchical organization can better explain relations between past and future as well as between child and adult.

If all the novels disrupt linear narratives and deny the standard trope of maturation as a process of reconciliation with adult norms, they simultaneously portray a collapse of sheltered childhood. The relevance of a childish perspective is, in a sense, blocked out or made impossible. As is noted in *The Marrow Thieves*, a bedtime story is hopelessly outdated, and Riri, though ‘desperate for some understanding’ and forever demanding that Frenchie should tell her stories, is denied this ‘for her own good’ (Dimaline 2017: 26–27). What we see is a self-reflexive move, as the novels we have examined seem to question not only the domain of protected childhood, but also the category of children’s or YA literature as the experience of being a child has been radically undermined. In short, one could say that the relevance of a distinctive childhood perspective in literature has diminished (cf. Nikolajeva 1998).

Fragmented futures

The diminished relevance of a distinctive childhood perspective in literature could be described as a democratic levelling of adults and children, serving to equalize power, voice and agency (Nikolajeva 1998: 223), yet this is not the way it comes across in the novels we have examined. For what Millet’s, Dimaline’s and Kwaymullina’s novels convey is rather a lament of the loss of a protected realm of childhood. Or, put differently, they highlight worlds in which that sheltered position has become untenable. As it is expressed in *The Marrow Thieves*, a ‘child needs walls. Not brick and wood walls all the time, but some sort of walls to keep them in and others out. So they can play and they can sleep and they can move’ (Dimaline 2017: 71). This foregrounding of the need for walls could be read as nostalgic longing but should not be seen as the return of the romantic, innocent child, or the Victorian child protagonist, set off in its own pastoral realm and sheltered from the troubles of the adult world. The children encountered in the three novels are hardly innocent with spotless demeanours, nor can they be reduced to adults-in-training. Rather, they are free agents, emotionally complex and capable of doing what they need to survive. They are also thoroughly enmeshed in the material world.

This immersion in the material, whether expressed through searching for food, opportunities to charge iPhones, or fighting destructive, deadly

machines, is significant, and draws readers out of the purely literary or symbolic domain. Nikolajeva (1998) has pointed to the symbolic realm and the employment of postmodernist literary devices in children's fiction as signs of the decreasing relevance of children's literature as a specified fictional category; here, we would like to draw attention to the same stylistic features that she mentions, including genre eclecticism, polyphony, multiple plots, heterotopia, focalization and intersubjectivity (Nikolajeva 1998: 233) in Modernism, a period deeply concerned with the mundane, or worldly, and the new. The child holds a special place in relation to Modernist interest in the new. As Margaret Higonnet (2009) has shown, the 'child metaphor marks Modernism from the outset' (86). Notably, the representation of the 'Modernist's symbolic child' is marked by 'duality' as it is 'not only an image of origins, nature, and archaic expressiveness, but also an image of an increasingly technological and mechanically innovative future' (86). Further, while the Victorian parent generation revered authority, the Modernists aimed to imitate the unruly child and its disrespect for limitations and preordained expectations. The child could thus ambiguously embody resilience against the harsh modern world, while also heralding a new future.

In the twenty-first century YA novels we have examined, the disparaging view of the older generation remains. So does the connection between the child and the future, as the adults in the novels are mainly preoccupied with maintaining a status quo, which is quickly becoming an increasingly unrealistic ambition. Significantly, however, the child is no longer a metaphor but an embodied subject. In contrast, it is the parental role which has become dimly symbolical or irrelevant. In many ways, then, these future-oriented dystopian texts seem to thematize a lost concern for the present living, and the protective walls around childhood we have seen them lamenting not only concern the boundaries of children's or YA fiction, but also those of the vulnerable child.

In contrast to futurist-oriented twentieth-century children's literature that 'promised its readers that the future would be both considerably better and more exciting than the present' (Reynolds 2011: 104), later fiction has exuded 'considerable anxiety about potential disasters associated with precisely the kinds of technological innovations that had previously been credited with improving lifestyles' (107). While such a development may reflect scientific and cultural shifts, it is also one that leaves children and young adults with narrowing outlooks. As Reynolds (2011) contends,

dystopias have didactic implications, as ‘eco-tragedies’ have typically neglected the long human ‘history of solving problems’, creating a ‘paucity of stories that give young people a future to aspire to and to start them thinking about how to bring it into being’ (110–111).

However, what could be read as a critique of technology’s role in shaping our lives is perhaps also, and more convincingly, a repositioning of the very idea of a paved-out future. For although the dark futures portrayed in the novels we have examined act forcefully as warnings of the dire consequences of naïve inaction and passive surrender to new technologies, their plots are hardly presented as logical, realistic outcomes of present predicaments. Rather, these YA novels can be seen as relating to the Modernist potential of a moment to comprise subjective memory, emotion, and lived time, not precluding elements of nostalgia or projections onto future plans and trajectories. In Tammy Clewell’s (2013) words, modernist writers ‘discovered the potential for a productive dialogue where the past is brought into conversation with the present’ (1). In this rendition, Modernists ‘approach nostalgia as an interpretative stance, one that mediates the interplay between the individual and collective, continuity and rupture, memory and desire, escapist fantasy and social critique’ (1). Thus, subjective time itself is potentially both progressive and conservative, liberating or confining.

In the words of Svetlana Boym (2001), a yearning for the past cannot be separated from visions of the future, as nostalgia and ideas of what is to come are ‘doubles and mirrors of each other’ (xv). The juxtaposition of time perspectives is relevant to our analysis. In a modernist gesture, we see in Kwaymullina’s, Dimaline’s and Millet’s novels figurative and symbolic recycling, cut-ups, findings, undoing and re-doings as a way to get from one point to another into a future that is unpredictable and story-like. The detritus of old pieces and fragments of the past, whether in the form of an old Bible or a retrieved bag of Doritos, are simultaneously material scraps from the past, as well as raw material for imaginings of the new. In these literal wastelands, we find the young characters shoring fragments against the ruins left by the negligence of their predecessors/parents.

The aesthetic or nostalgic reclaiming of the past, which is simultaneously a more open-ended glance to the future, is associated with the idea of childhood as a protected time realm. As Boym (2001) suggests,

nostalgia is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. (xv)

Nostalgia for art, language, myths and stories in the novels thus coincides with a nostalgia for childhood as a distinct space. However, we argue, this space should not be reduced to a symbolic realm for adults seeking consolation and refuge from uncomfortable truths, as when the adults in *A Children's Bible* dance to the song popular in their youth, but rather as space that allows children to exist in their own time-dimension, worthy in its own right.

Importantly then, the children in the dystopian novels we have examined demonstrate our contemporary failure to protect that which has value now, but which has become increasingly vulnerable, threatened or even considered dispensable. Although the threat to children's lives stands out in these YA novels, they make it clear that the breakdown of responsibility, integrity or caring impulses in the adult world has also disastrously affected the seasons, endangered species, natural habitats, health, art, cultures, and stories. This means that although all three novels draw upon post-humanist perspectives, they also take a profoundly humanist turn as they highlight how any relevant vision of the future must be concerned with sheltering, protecting, saving, and cherishing what is valuable in the present and what we have inherited from the past.

As we may conclude, the ecocritical stance in Kwaymullina's, Dimaline's and Millet's novels does not primarily serve as a warning of likely bleak futures. Instead, their fragmented narrativity and attention to the exposed role of children point insistently to the negligence of present adult generations to care for the world in all its complexities. This fragmentation and the questioning of adult authority open up, however, for discussions of how literature can be taught as part of an ongoing dialogue where storytelling and imagination become integral elements of EFL education and literary analysis in a world dominated by the complexities of the Anthropocene. In the final section of our paper, we will discuss how pedagogy can do justice to the experience and challenge of living in this complex world.

Didactic implications of intergenerational conflict

In an educational context, a shielded childhood is associated with the preservation of ‘educational realms’, which serve to prepare not-yet-mature children for future participation in society (Wessels et al. 2022: 762). In contrast, the collapse of such a childhood could be regarded as progressive, fitting an egalitarian model in which YA learners and adult teachers have equal opportunities to weigh in on the complex problems associated with life in the Anthropocene. Notably, the novels we have examined could be seen as staging such an anti-ageist model, since the conspicuous loss of an ‘educational realm’ allows the child characters to take on adult decision-making skills and responsibilities. Further, they appear to do so in mature, intelligent, resilient, brave and potentially hope-inspiring ways.

It should be observed, however, that child-adult binaries are not deconstructed in favor of a more egalitarian model in the novels, as the parental generation is portrayed, at best, as naïve or weak, and early maturity is enforced on the children to survive. Such scenarios hardly lead to consolidation and the formation of stable societies. Established social institutions have crumbled in these novels and children are denied safeguarded transmission of language or culture through education. As the persistent search for fragments of lost stories, memories, dreams, and languages makes clear, the loss of an ‘educational realm’ in the novels leaves the children with only contextless remnants and scraps of the old world.

What Kwaymullina’s, Dimaline’s and Millet’s novels indirectly stress is the importance of preserving such references and resonances, communal narratives and a multitude of expressions—including Indigenous cultures and children’s perspectives—for the future. In these novels, schools, culture, and language are eradicated along with landscapes, ecosystems, and social worlds, and losing them is not a matter of lost status-quo. Instead, loss of meaning is an existential issue that ultimately demands asking hard questions about the worth of human life worlds.

It seems essential, therefore, to rethink the association between a sheltered educational realm and a failure to recognize children and teenagers as fully able and mature subjects. The association between the ‘schools’ used as factories for bone marrow extraction in *The Marrow Thieves* and the historical Canadian Residential schools that inspired them, further suggests the importance of *safe* schools that can ensure learners a

protective space for growth, interconnectedness, nurturance, dreams, transmission of values and incentives to preserve ecosystems on the path to the future. To designate such a growth zone as protected and nurturing is not to deny the full, embodied subjectivity and agency of learners, but to ensure an education that sees the significance of facing the crises associated with the Anthropocene in all their complexity.

Such an education, Wessels et al. (2022) argue, demands a future-oriented, dialogic and open-ended pedagogy, but also the integration of past and future perspectives, to gain an understanding of ‘the processes through which our entangledness in the world [have taken] form and of the futures we might collaboratively create’ (769). We share this perspective, and also the idea that the notion of entangled identity should be accompanied by ‘a dynamic and ambitious aim to embrace the fundamental *dependency* that characterises our lives and to recognise the task of fostering communal relationship as part of the flourishing, not only of ourselves, but also those with whom we share our existence on Earth’ (Wessels et al. 2022: 768).

In our readings of the three novels in question, we have drawn parallels between the dystopian narratives we have examined and another period in Western literature, when a dystopian loss of faith in civilization and in past generations led to fragmented narratives and new visions of the future; the three contemporary YA novels share with Modernism an interest in the period of childhood, as well as an anxiety that rapid social change is severing our ties with the past. Asking EFL students to make comparisons between the novels and examples of Modernist literature should ideally alert them to how imaginations or projections of the future, visions about nature and its relation to human flourishing are never only new, highlighting the relevance of historical and cultural perspectives in imagining new futures.

By focusing on how characters in the YA novels in question create worlds and meanings through reinterpreting or reassembling myths and stories, classroom activities can be planned where the students can take the cue from the novels themselves and, in collaborative groups, seek out cultural trajectories and relevant themes and issues that can also form the basis for imagining new stories and new futures. Narration can then be seen not as a set sequence with established meaning, but as a continuously renegotiated way of seeing and engaging with the world. As Ahlberg (2021) argues, teaching methods that involve literature and EFL students

as co-creators of their education can ‘affirm the agency of readers to embody their own unique readings of texts’ and enable teachers to both guide students and fully incorporate student agency and new perspectives on the set texts (16).

Meanwhile, a focus on narrativity, storytelling, and rearrangement of fragments in the three YA novels could offer support for such dialogic and cooperative methods of teaching literature at both university and upper secondary school that, in the words of Ahlberg (2021), ‘foster connections between reading and living [through] collaborative thinking and writing’ (13–15). In EFL teaching at upper secondary school, where there may be significant resistance to reading canonical literature, it is particularly important to focus on ‘motivation building’ and ‘authenticity’ in both text selection and classroom activities in order ‘to genuinely interact in open and contingent dialogues’ (Thyberg 2022: 22).

A word of warning is nevertheless in place here. As we hope to have shown, the novels we have analyzed illustrate how dependency between children and adults is unevenly distributed. In these novels, child characters, arguably dependent on adults, are treated extremely carelessly by a generation who in the face of adversity have given up on an ethics of care, compassion or responsibility. Erasing power dynamics in the child-adult or student-teacher relation, these novels suggest, is problematic. Although future generations need to face the consequences of climate change, and education needs to prepare them to do so, one-sided responsibility assigned to students and young people to ensure dependency and interrelatedness with others and with the natural world, risks concealing the failure of the contemporary adult generation to do the same.

Here, children’s literature once again offers insights that might be worth exploring in the EFL literature classroom. In the words of Beauvais, expectations of children in fiction to rise and take on responsibility for the world is ‘too empowering’, as the child becomes envisioned as a salvational ‘messianic figure’ (2015: 176–177). However, if the child is a ‘mighty other’ to frustrated or collapsed adult authority (Beauvais 2015: 207), there is also didactic potential in this. For as Beauvais contends, not only do children’s books represent adult views on children, but they also convey the ‘child’s look on the adult’ (2015: 207). Indeed, the novels we have studied mercilessly hold a mirror for adults, reflecting our culpability for the present state of the world.

Conclusion

The dystopian novels we have examined in this article all portray worlds in which the characters have lost language, narratives of where they come from, stories, memories, and dreams. In short, the ability to read the world has been brutally withdrawn, a tragedy that leaves the children lost and seeking to restore fragments of meaning. This is no small deal, for in Ahlberg's words, there is a vital connection between 'reading and living, reading and knowing the world, reading and discovering the world, as well as reading and intervening in the world' (2021: 26–27).

Yet these novels do not have to serve the sole purpose of delineating warnings about conceivable futures. They ruthlessly expose the conditions underlying the formation of young heroes, as their courage and agency rise in response to the withdrawal of adult care and responsibility. In this manner, the novels undermine what Hoydis, Bartosch, and Gurr (2023) have usefully called the cognitive and sentimental fallacies, that is, the didactic tendency to read novels as warning illustrations of expected futures or to draw heavily on the affective qualities of a work to inspire action in the reader.

Rather, we have pointed to the novels' metafictional character, how they highlight subjective readings of the world, narrative strategies and fragmented plot structures rather than linear timelines or future solutions to complex problems. As such, we argue, they are highly suitable for teaching environmental literacy, meaning skills related to discursivity and narrative strategies. Notably, literacy is a skill to be learned, thus suggesting the relevance and 'potential of the humanities, literary studies and literature pedagogy in particular ... as research on literacy is part of the disciplinary DNA of these fields' (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2023: 13). The skills to both read and shape your own story in response to a fragmentary past and uncertain future then recall the Lawrence quotation that forms the epigraph to this article, of how shoring up the ruins is 'rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles' (1928: 1). To read the Anthropocene in all its complexity means reclaiming the capacity to read the world, and this can no longer be done intuitively, as the novels, too, demonstrate.

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