



## **Clones and Other Formulas in Science Fiction for Young Readers**

—Elaine Ostry

Choyce, Lesley. *Deconstructing Dylan*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2006. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 1-55002-603-8. Print.

Davidson, Ellen Dee. *Stolen Voices*. Montreal: Lobster, 2005. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 1-897073-16-X. Print.

Henighan, Tom. *Mercury Man*. Toronto: Dundurn, 2004. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 1-55002-508-2. Print.

Hughes, Monica. *The Isis Trilogy*. 1980. 1981. 1982. Toronto: Tundra, 2006. \$24.99 hc. ISBN 0-088776-792-3. Print.

Krossing, Karen. *Pure*. Toronto: Second Story, 2005. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-96-7. Print.

Rose, Simon. *The Clone Conspiracy*. Vancouver: Trade-wind, 2005. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-896580-80-7. Print.

In 1996, a sheep named Dolly changed the world. Headlines about a cloned sheep gave new life to an old science-fiction idea—made it real, in fact. Dolly clearly inspired a generation of writers for children and young adults, and the result has been numerous books in the past decade with genetic-engineering themes. Like most of these books, Simon Rose's *The Clone Conspiracy*, Lesley Choyce's *Deconstructing Dylan*, and Tom Henighan's *Mercury Man* are dystopian (in tone if not in form), cautionary tales, warning us about

the dangers of biotechnology and demonstrating, to varying degrees, the formula established in this subgenre. Monica Hughes's Isis trilogy (reissued in one volume in 2006), Karen Krossing's *Pure*, and Ellen Dee Davidson's *Stolen Voices* are formal dystopias about characters who have been genetically engineered.

Genetic engineering offers young readers an unusually rich metaphor for the self and how it relates to society and family. Both young adult literature and science fiction examine social organization



These authors unquestioningly follow what has already proven to be a successful formula.

They assume that individualism is the value that opposes the evil forces of dystopia, and that art is the principle form of self-expression.



and identity, and the two genres often intersect fruitfully.<sup>1</sup> Genetic engineering allows writers to explore concepts of the self. If the body's DNA is programmed, does the self follow suit? Can the individual self exist in a conformist society that uses genetic technology to control its inhabitants? The dystopias in this group particularly engage in this debate. Protagonists are faced with mysteries of identity concentrated in their own DNA, an interesting take on the typical search for identity in young adult books. Similarly, genetic engineering inspires characters to confront parental control, another theme of young adult literature. Genetic engineering urges the protagonist to question what is human, fight for it, and thus exercise agency. But, having read dozens of books of this nature, and in examining the ones in front of me, I have to wonder: is this subgenre tired? Has it become formulaic and predictable? If so, what directions can authors take to energize it? Questioning underlying assumptions about the self, individualism, society, art, and science would be a start.

As seen in *Pure*, *Stolen Voices*, and the Isis trilogy, dystopian societies are far from ideal, however perfect they may claim to be. They are taken over by forces that honour social conformity over individualism and social hierarchies over equality. These books are post-apocalyptic: global warming, war, genetic experimentation, and overpopulation have made Earth a dangerous place, and these societies view themselves as oases in which order must be maintained to avoid the chaos. These totalitarian societies promise protection and harmony, but at the cost of individual freedom and expression. Art is either forbidden or strictly controlled. These elements are familiar to readers of dystopia from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to *The Giver*—perhaps all too familiar. These authors unquestioningly follow what has already proven to be a successful formula. They assume that individualism is

the value that opposes the evil forces of dystopia, and that art is the principle form of self-expression. It might revitalize the form if authors challenged, or at least qualified, these assumptions.

*Pure* and *Stolen Voices* are instantly recognizable as dystopias. *Pure* features Dawn, a society run by the totalitarian Purity government, and a place where Lenni's parents have come "to escape the chaos of two-headed babies and designer viruses" outside its borders (36). It is, in essence, a gated community that forbids genetic engineering—which has run rampant in the Beyond—and that hoards resources, analogous to the current relationship between the industrialized world and underdeveloped nations. One of its advertisements states that "The Genetic Purity Council protects you and your family from the horrors of this world every day" (37). Those who have undergone genetic engineering are "skidge" and are usually sterilized or sent to work camps in the Beyond. Lenni finds not only that she is good at art, which is considered dangerous, but also that she can heal people through art, which is worse. These talents call her classification into question, and, worst of all, Purity discovers that she was created in a lab by her parents—and this makes her skidge. The government threatens to sterilize her, so Lenni escapes to the Beyond with her new skidge friend, Redge.

*Stolen Voices* features Noveskina, a conformist community that, unlike Purity, treasures special talents.

Miri's future is imperilled when she does not develop one. She is not allowed to be "masked" along with her peers, and, when she is caught spying on the ceremony, the Masker puts her under sentence to be masked as a house servant. As in *Pure*, Noveskina (new skin) features a rigid class system based on bodily traits. Seeing her friends again, Miri realizes that their talents have become muted. The masks they received are "cloned from the cells of living human flesh" (151). The Masker mysteriously steals their "voices," forcing them to meld into "One Voice" (152), thus increasing his own power. Miri escapes to a community on the outside and discovers her talent for synesthesia. She can see colours along with music, and can conduct music so that the sounds blend in harmony. Like Lenni, her artistic ability is healing. She returns to Noveskina armed with her new talent, and deposes the Masker. The city's inhabitants regain their individual power and ability to convey intense emotion, and lose their masks.

Dystopia is the flip side of utopia, and its citizens generally value their society's benefits until the cost of these advantages becomes evident. Authors of dystopias pose the question, "At what point does utopian cooperation become dystopian conformity?" (Hintz and Ostry 7). In my view, dystopias are most successful when they seduce their inhabitants as well as young readers. The revelation that the apparent utopia is ruthless and cruel should follow naturally from the various hints given, yet still be a shock to both



Even a jaded adult reader will be shocked at Lowry's scene in which Jonas sees his father give a weak infant a fatal injection in the head.



the protagonist and the reader. Otherwise, there is no suspense, no epiphany. These novels show the strong influence that Lois Lowry's *The Giver* has had on the genre for young readers, but the standard set by that novel eludes them. Even a jaded adult reader will be shocked at Lowry's scene in which Jonas sees his father give a weak infant a fatal injection in the head. Jonas's community appears to have much going for it: a strong community ethic, pleasant families, and opportunities to develop talents, peace, and calm. The turn to dystopia in the text not only shocks readers, but also encourages them to question social organization that seems perfect. In *Pure*, however, we learn in the first paragraph that this is a dystopia, in a rather heavy-handed manner: "Like the shiver running across my skin, the guards' silver uniforms sent a rippling chill through the crowd. Anyone could be picked up by Purity, pure or not, and even questioning could become painful. . . . Dawn. A promising name for a settlement. Purity loves names with promise, but Dawn only holds promise for some" (11). Dystopian qualities are a little less obvious in *Stolen Voices*, but the novel still lacks subtlety: "I give you this mask so that the voice of your Talent will shape itself to the needs of our community and not be too strong for us to bear"(47). Miri in *Stolen Voices* is more brainwashed by her society than is Lenni in *Pure*. Miri appreciates the calm and is shocked by the first argument she hears on the outside, whereas Lenni sees through her society from the start. But the class system in Noveskina is so harsh from the start—and Miri is enough aware of it—that a young reader is unlikely ever to see her society in a positive way. Although it is refreshing to have the main character miss the dystopia, her homesickness is not entirely convincing, especially given the dangers Noveskina holds for her.

Both novels put a strong value on freedom of expression and the

arts to foster essential human qualities and personal identity. The authors assume that the arts will have a positive effect on the self. But the metaphors of art and music for the self are weighty ones that have been used so often in young adult as well as adult fiction—Lowry's *Gathering Blue*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Karen Hesse's *The Music of the Dolphins*, to name a few—that they are difficult to portray in a fresh way. Davidson's heroine sees colour everywhere, especially with music, without realizing that it is a talent. Even though Davidson's depictions of colour are lavish, they lack the magic of Jonas's ability in *The Giver* to see mere flashes of red. In *Pure*, Crossing's depictions of art seem likewise forced and unconvincing. Lenni's guardian angel of sorts, Mur, who inspires her art, is definitely over the top: "Her voice was the rush of a cool spring breeze, and I followed the playful flow of her" (51). Both Lenni and Miri take on their oppressors using art as a weapon. Lenni heals the bitter heart of Rylant, the government agent, and this battle is more successful than Miri's fight with the Masker. Lenni somehow transforms herself into "a solitary mass of energy" that takes aim at Rylant's psychological defenses, uncovering the frightened little girl inside (226). Seeing the enemy as an unhappy child gives an interesting perspective that will make young readers think about how the self is formed. Miri manages to kill the Masker by conducting music and unravelling and weaving the colours from

the sound he uses as his own destructive weapon. Sound confusing? It is. This is a major weakness of both novels. The descriptions of the fantastical uses of art and music are dramatic but hard to visualize. In particular, the premises in *Stolen Voices* of sound wars, of unconducted sound being both physically and psychically harmful, and of the Masker getting power from sound are too vague. The magic, or technology, should seem to the reader something real despite being fantastical, and this is not the case in either book.

As well, the opposition between art and science is, perhaps, a tired one that needs to be reconsidered. I suggest that it would be more interesting to have protagonists inspired by science and the creativity that it can encourage, especially at a time when children are technologically adept in an overwhelmingly technological world. Science and technology are often portrayed as fearful and victimizing. Perhaps young readers are less inclined than their book-writing elders to see technology as scary; they may recognize its creative potential and see themselves, as users of technology, as active creators rather than passive consumers or victims. If so, depicting the arts as the main outlet for creativity may not always convince young readers.

Dystopia is a difficult genre to write for children and young adults because transposing this adult narrative form to a young audience presents two challenges with regard to didacticism and hope.

Utopian literature is, as Lyman Tower Sargent claims, “generally didactic” (6). Through dystopias, young readers learn about social organization, and are “encourage[d] to view their society with a critical eye” (Hintz and Ostry 7). As is often the case in young adult literature generally, in dystopias, the discovery of the lies protagonists have been taught generates drama as well as a lesson. Dystopias can be “powerful teaching tool[s]” for young readers (Hintz and Ostry 7), particularly if the didacticism is entertaining, as it is in many classics of children’s and young adult literature (*Little Women*, *Heidi*, fairy tales, etc.). Suzanne Elizabeth Reid calls young adult science fiction “an acceptable method of teaching,” remarking that “Science fiction as mere entertainment is evolving into literature with a cautionary burden” (201, 35). I am hard pressed to think of when science fiction was pure entertainment, but I suggest that the didactic impulse has increased since Reid wrote this in 1998, along with the number of young adult dystopias, reflecting growing concerns about terrorism, global inequality, global warming, and other social ills. Dystopias often discuss these real-life problems: global warming figures in recent young adult dystopias, such as M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* and Julie Bertagna’s *Exodus*. The difficulty is how to balance the instruction with the delight necessary to engage readers rather than alienate them through preaching. Statements like “There is no peace without absolute control” (Davidson 180) and

“We do have a right to portray, in art, acts that are not permitted under law in order to provide a comment on society” (Krossing 72) make the lessons of *Stolen Voices* and *Pure* a bit too obvious. Of the dystopias here, Hughes’s achieves this balance best, although it must be said that the didacticism becomes more heavy-handed as the trilogy progresses.


Related to the difficulty in doling out didacticism is the difficulty of including an element of hope in dystopias for young readers. It may seem counterintuitive to include hope in a dystopia—the classic dystopias for adults, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, lack it—but it is generally considered necessary in literature for young readers. As Kay Sambell writes, “[t]he problems of reconciling the aim of presenting the dark truth of the values against which one cautions, whilst simultaneously maintaining a sharp focus on hope (often regarded as essential for the young) forms a significant creative dilemma for children’s authors using the dystopian narrative form” (164). She discusses the compromises, “hesitation,” and “oscillation” present in dystopias for young readers that are not found in ones for adults (164). The convention of the hopeful ending stems from the Romantic child as an emblem of hope: “Since the innovations of Romanticism, children’s narratives have seldom ended unhappily” (Pape 190). It also arises from the protectiveness adults—writers, publishers, teachers, and parents—seem to feel for young readers.

As Monica Hughes writes in a commentary on the subject, “I may lead a child into the darkness, but I must never turn out the light” (160). Adults seem to feel that hope is necessary for encouraging agency in readers—to empower them. I think that the element of hope could well do this, but it has to be hope that feels real, extending logically from the text, and not tacked on. Hughes, likewise, warns against forcing hope into the narrative: “the ‘happy ever after’ utopian world is a trap to be guarded against” (160). All three dystopias here end with the promise, however vague, of utopia. Hughes notes that such promise comes only when the characters are “aware of the causes of the dystopia from which they have escaped” (160), and I suggest that she most effectively delineates the foundations of her dystopia, making the hope at the end feel possible rather than merely part of a formula.


In the Isis trilogy, Hughes, the grandmother of Canadian young adult science fiction, has created the most successful dystopia among these books. She explores the fate of those who are different and who question their society. In *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, orphaned Olwen lives with only her robot companion on the planet Isis, charged with the task of sending information to Earth. Society comes to her in the form of colonizers from Earth. They reject her when they realize that she has been genetically modified by her robot, Guardian, who changed her lungs, skin, and eyes to withstand the intense radiation of

Isis. Here, science is shown in a positive way. To the settlers, however, Olwen is a monster. After their initial response, she rejects them in turn, questioning their superiority. At the conclusion of *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, Olwen removes herself from human society. Until he saw her true form, Mark London had been falling in love with her. In response to the revelation of Olwen’s modifications, he turns into a misogynist technophobe. In *The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar*, he is older and the president of the colony. Ironically, his distrust of technology makes it harder for him to rule, as he does not use the gifts that Guardian periodically leaves to help the colony. In *The Isis Pedlar*, Mike Flynn, a trickster character, travels to Isis with his daughter Moira. Mike proceeds to corrupt the society further by getting people hooked on ambrosia. They work to get the drug by chipping out the precious stones that Mike wants, leaving their crops untended, so their greed threatens their own survival. Mike also encourages them to be cruel, banishing suspicious David N’Kumo to the dangerous heights, where he encounters Olwen and Guardian. David, Moira, and Guardian manage to save the community.

Throughout the trilogy, Mark London’s character foils are three members of the N’Kumo family who are interested in new ideas and technology and who question the social structure—the power of the president and the subjection of women. It is true that this dystopia lacks a seductive quality; one does not



Change is not brought  
about by just one  
person: it takes a  
critical mass.



envy its inhabitants. What makes this dystopia successful, though, is that the technology and the environment are depicted in terms that make them seem real, and the characters are developed well. Simply put, it is well written. Although it is frustrating how long it takes for the N’Kumo ethic to win—Guardian counsels Jody to wait until conditions are right for him to take power—the length of time necessary for social change itself is a valuable lesson to the reader. Change is not brought about by just one person: it takes a critical mass. Even when truth is on one’s side, if people are not ready to hear it, it will not effect change. The dystopia is also convincing because it is based in psychology, particularly that of Mark London, whose romantic disappointment shapes his political and social viewpoints. Thus, Hughes examines the roots of dystopia.

I turn now to the three texts that use dystopian themes but are not technically dystopias. In *The Clone Conspiracy*, *Mercury Man*, and *Deconstructing Dylan*, the action occurs in what resembles our own society rather than in a fantastical one created by the author. Each book features a mystery with genetic engineering at its heart. Corporations, rather than governments, are the antagonists in *Mercury Man* and *The Clone Conspiracy*, whereas *Deconstructing Dylan* does not have a clear antagonist. Their societies are like our own, and the elements of science fiction are limited, threatening but not taking over the world of the protagonist. *Deconstructing Dylan* is set in 2014, just far enough in the future that technology is different but close enough to our own not to be too shocking; the possibilities presented by the book are, therefore, all the more real.

These texts rely heavily on suspense, as do most children’s and young adult texts with an interest in genetic engineering. As I demonstrated in my article, “‘Is He Human? Are You?’: Young



Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age,” in many of these books, such as L. J. Singleton’s Regeneration series, suspense has a way of superseding philosophical questions about biotechnology. This is true in *The Clone Conspiracy* and *Mercury Man*, where chase scenes and unrealistic, even silly, coincidences dominate. Darko Suvin calls this a “gimmicky stance” toward cloning (139).

*The Clone Conspiracy* is meant for younger readers than the other books, and does not delve into the themes beyond their shock value. The LennoxGen research facility clones children to “replace” 75 rich and powerful people, whose memories are downloaded into their clones when they die. Luke and Emma search for Emma’s missing brother, Patrick, and find that he has been kidnapped by LennoxGen and is undergoing the process of having his memory erased, to be replaced by that of the company’s founder, Rupert Lennox. Luke and Emma have to infiltrate the facility and retrieve Patrick without being caught. Their mission is complicated when they find out that they, too, are clones whose “parents” have died, and that they are therefore in danger of the same procedure.

*Mercury Man* follows a similar pattern. Tom notices that Fabricon, a company in town, has been luring in teenagers, who seem to change after their initiation into the company. They have, in fact, been brainwashed, and their bodies used for samples to build a computer out of human brain tissue, a “genetic

super-being” that can be “used to control *our very thought processes themselves*” (203, 204). This seems to be a fair representation of artificial life, which “combines computer science with a concept of life derived from molecular biology” (Kember 256). Like Luke and Emma, Tom must infiltrate the company without being turned into a subject for experimentation himself. The difference between the two books is that *Mercury Man* is meant for older readers, and the teenage protagonist undergoes an identity crisis, including a re-evaluation of his relationships with his mother and estranged father.

Luke, Emma, and Tom become detectives, and this is typical of children and young adults in books of this type. What is valuable in *The Clone Conspiracy* is how Luke and Emma solve the mystery of Patrick’s disappearance. They use a fair bit of deductive reasoning to reach their conclusions, and their use of computer technology to figure things out would be intriguing and educational for many children. *Mercury Man* details the path of Tom’s discovery about Fabricon’s evil ways. Putting myself in the position of a child reader who would not have read widely in the subgenre, I can see that the twists and turns of the discovery of the genetic engineering would be exciting and shocking. The detective work challenges the protagonists, forcing them to take action and thus discover their agency. As Tom muses in *Mercury Man*, “Despite the confusion of things, he was taking



The liberal-humanist self, based on free will and morality, is reaffirmed as essential and fixed despite genetic engineering, even though genetic engineering has the potential—who knows?—to alter one’s mind as well as one’s body.



action—amazing how that warded off the blues!” (166). The capability and courage of the characters promise to inspire young readers.

Of greater interest are the books in which the children turn detective about themselves. It is typical in the subgenre to have the protagonist discover that he or she is a clone, and this is the case in Lesley Choyce’s *Deconstructing Dylan*. Like the children in *The Clone Conspiracy*, Dylan and his friend Robyn use computer technology to find information. Dylan is plagued by a feeling that he is odd and has a kind of twin inside him (14). He finds out that he had a brother who died, and that he was cloned to replace him. The book mostly consists of his thoughts about the implications of cloning.

Genetic engineering in *The Clone Conspiracy* is used chiefly as a plot device that can give readers a frisson of horror. The characters’ discovery that they are clones does not provoke a rethinking of the self, and even though this book is geared toward younger readers, some hint of the feelings one would have at finding out one was a clone would make the book more interesting. When told that he does not “really have genetic parents,” Luke screams, “You’re a liar!” but at no point does he consider the ramifications of this (57). In fact, he never refers to it.

In the other books, however, genetic engineering encourages the protagonists to question their identities as individuals. They assert a sense of self in opposition to their societies and, often, their parents. Their strength of character is generally taken for granted and not analyzed; they naturally assert their will. They question their humanity with imagery of being programmed like a computer, or of being an animal, as cloning is unnatural and seems to put them outside the definition of human. For the most part, though, their questioning is slight and readily resolved through their innate will and sense of

humanity. The liberal-humanist self, based on free will and morality, is reaffirmed as essential and fixed despite genetic engineering, even though genetic engineering has the potential—who knows?—to alter one’s mind as well as one’s body. The challenge that genetic engineering poses for the self is generally dealt with in a conservative fashion (Ostry 236). Perhaps authors could allow for a more flexible, if more disturbing, view of the self and humanity to emerge.

In *Stolen Voices*, at first, Miri has a hard time thinking of herself as an individual outside the rigid class system and rituals of Noveskina. She feels that she is nothing without a talent; when she develops one outside of Noveskina, she fosters a stronger sense of self. This process, however, still holds true to the value system of Noveskina (one must be Talented), and also to the temptation that many authors feel to make their protagonists exceptional. Lenni in *Pure* also suffers from low self-esteem: “Underneath all their programming, their interference, who was I?” (158). She is horrified to find that she is skidge: “What had I become? A beast in a Purity advertisement” (194). By the end of the novel, however, she concludes that only she will determine who she is, and asserts her human freedom of will. Similarly, Olwen must deal with how the settlers consider her a monster after Mark sees her without the “protective” suit Guardian makes her wear. She is hurt by rejection, but her sense of self remains strong. She embraces Guardian’s view that she

is beautiful because her “form and function” are “one” (117), and that her new body has made the planet habitable for her. Olwen’s recovery of self is rather fast, but this is perhaps understandable because she did not grow up with human stereotypes of beauty or social conformity.

In *Deconstructing Dylan*, Choyce enlivens the formula of the young adult clone novel. Like other genetically engineered protagonists, Dylan endures an identity crisis. What is special about Dylan is that, despite his unusual genesis, he is not a particularly talented teenager. Choyce resists the temptation of writers of this subgenre (and, one could argue, of young adult fiction in general) to make his hero exceptional or heroic. Although Dylan eventually asserts his sense of self, this assertion is not automatic. Instead, it is the project of a slow mental journey, inner dialogue, and shared perspectives. As a result, he does not strike the reader as innately exceptional. His characterization is also successful because we get to know Dylan beyond his DNA history; he believes in the Loch Ness monster and is fascinated by bugs, to name just two interests. Dylan ponders the usual questions for a teen clone, wondering if he has a soul, or if he is “some kind of science project,” but he does so in a more thoughtful way than the norm (145). Like Lenni, Dylan examines the idea of being programmed:

What if we were not beings of spirit like the Tibetan

Buddhists and many others suggested? What if we were mere mechanistic physical beings—crude, predictable right down to which toothpaste we would buy? And if that were true of most human beings, then what about me, a boy who did not even come into the world in the usual way but a child who was created from someone else’s DNA? (151)

Dylan has been suffering an identity crisis before finding out that he is his brother’s clone; he has been experiencing some of his dead brother’s memories, and has been haunted by a feeling that “there was someone else inside me looking out at that world with me” (14). With his character sensing his difference before finding out the truth, perhaps Choyce implies that being a clone does, indeed, affect his sense of self, beyond simply overcoming prejudice. This hints at the challenge that biotechnology can make to a fixed, essential view of the self. Choyce honours his readers’ intelligence by providing them with smart and philosophical teenage characters who enjoy reading the *Book of the Dead*. Choyce values nonconformity, as do all writers that I have encountered in this genre, but he is among the best of the lot for showing the difficulties of a nonconformist position. It does not come easily for his characters to embrace their individuality, and the social costs can be high.

Genetic engineering, with its focus on one’s origins,

naturally leads to a re-examination of family. Aside from *The Clone Conspiracy*, where the parents do not know that their children are cloned and Luke and Emma do not reconsider their family bonds, family harmony is disturbed in these books. *Mercury Man* is mostly a story about a boy and his single mother, and their inability to connect. These sections feel true to life, but having Tom’s estranged father come back on behalf of the evil company is a clumsy move. The dialogue between father and son is unnatural: “I know you’ve got some hard feelings, son. It’s been a hell of a long time” (233). Protagonists are particularly estranged from parents who participated in genetically engineering them. Lenni and Miri endure mothers who are caricatures of control: Lenni’s mother controlled her life even before she was born by choosing the DNA for a perfect daughter, and Miri’s mother makes the mask of a servant for her and tried, while pregnant, to imprint Miri with a Command talent. When Miri discovers this, she says, “You experimented on me? Like I was some kind of *rat*?” (179). Both girls have fathers who are well meaning but weak. Lenni’s overwhelming anger toward her parents for genetically engineering her is melodramatic: “How dare they? I’d never forgive my parents. I pushed the pillow aside and glared at the ceiling, wanting to do them damage. Throttle the man who was not my father. Strangle Mother twice” (158). (Wouldn’t once be enough?) She lambastes her father and seems unable to see his

perspective: “He would never understand what he’d done—controlling me, molding me, constructing me” (187). She wants to “wrench all of [her] parents’ alterations out of [her] body” (159). This is an example of how genetic engineering acts as a metaphor for parental control. Lenni’s shock at the revelation that her father is not her biological one is writ quite large but seems unfelt. Her growing understanding of her mother’s illness and the “giving” of her spirit, Mur, to her mother are Krossing’s attempts to flesh out Lenni’s character, but they do not quite succeed.

By contrast, Olwen does not have a family because she was orphaned on Isis, but Guardian has become a kind of father (and later, some kind of intimate companion) to her. In fact, he deliberately models himself after her mother, so much so that he teaches himself how to be human. When Olwen finds out that he has genetically modified her, she is happy, and rational, because the changes have given her freedom. The lack of anger toward Guardian seems a little unnatural considering how hurt she is by her rejection by the settlers.

Lesley Choyce goes further than the other writers, and further than most in the subgenre, in showing the effects of cloning on the family. Parents’ difficulties with cloning and genetically engineering their children are usually either glossed over or become cautionary preaching, but Dylan’s parents display more subtle and ambiguous attitudes toward their actions. It is an

interesting twist that his mother is the scientist who cloned his brother to create him; she does not fit the mad-scientist stereotype. She is not a controlling person like the other characters who create or allow genetic engineering. She is, instead, a grieving mother who suffers from depression and drinks too much. Although Dylan is angry—“I don’t feel like I really know either of you. I don’t know if I can trust you”—he is also sympathetic to his parents’ grief and his mother’s sacrifice of her career (125). Like Lenni, he exercises his freedom of will, despite parental reservations, by deciding to publicize his origins and help other clones.

As much as I am intrigued by these novels, I must admit to having some reservations about them and the subgenre to which they belong. The books all stress individuality, and often include a fight against an oppressive society. Individuality is a great value to teach, but the overriding emphasis on what one person can do is misleading and unrealistic. The marketing blurb on the cover of *Stolen Voices* reads, “In a city ruled by silence, can one girl’s voice make a difference?” Indeed, Miri defeats the evil dictator at the end with her newfound powers. In *Stolen Voices*, *Pure*, and *Mercury Man*, the protagonists are something like superheroes—in *Mercury Man*, Tom is even dressed like one. Although there is some teamwork, success would be impossible without the hero. But this value can be challenged. After all, social change is more often the result of communal action than individual



In rooting for the individual, authors may be shortchanging the possibilities that social co-operation can offer to both the young protagonist and the young reader.



striving, and perhaps a more positive view of societies could offer a more hopeful and realistic perspective on social change. The paradigm that is generally offered—individual good, society bad—does not offer much hope for how societies can actually succeed. It is, in fact, a rather conservative view, even if the idea of a conquering child is radical. In rooting for the individual, authors may be shortchanging the possibilities that social co-operation can offer to both the young protagonist and the young reader.

The opposition between the young protagonist and the adult society is a longstanding trope in young adult books, particularly dystopian ones. Young protagonists call their own society into question, something that is part of the maturing process. The teenagers must fight the adults. The dystopia, then, is a metaphor for the adult world that specializes in crushing conformity and hypocrisy. I wonder how much of this is a construct that may not be true at all, or not to the extent depicted. Do young adults really see adult society in such negative terms? Or are they willing entrants into a world that gives them opportunities for power that childhood cannot? How do young readers see this paradigm? And does this not follow unquestioningly the well-worn image of the Romantic, innocent child?

In portraying societies and situations where science has run amok, these books convey overwhelmingly negative attitudes about science and technology. In the special issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* on young adult science fiction, both Hilary S. Crew and I found (in separate articles) that young adult science fiction is pessimistic about human cloning. I concluded then that young adult science fiction is intent on asserting the liberal-humanist self against the threat that biotechnology poses, and these books follow suit. Purity's stance against biotechnology is shared by the sympathetic characters. The

Beyond is a place of chimeras, and even the genetic engineering allowed on plants runs amok with the invasive lifewort created by Lenni's father. In *Stolen Voices*, technology siphons off people's individual powers. *Mercury Man* shows that there can be positive sides to genetic engineering—"Like most scientific discoveries, it's not evil at all. Whether it's evil or not depends on how responsibly you use it, and what you have to do to create it" (203)—however, the book is dominated by revulsion and fear toward this technology. Much more space is devoted to the ranting of the mad scientist who calls the human body a "meat machine" ("human beings are just animals completely programmed by their genetic inheritance" [107]) and the horrified reaction of the sympathetic characters. Of the books discussed here, only the Isis trilogy seems to have a positive view of genetic engineering and of scientific progress in general. *Deconstructing Dylan* is not entirely anti-science, as the parents' battle against the "[m]istrust of science" is sympathetically described (86). But Dylan's mother nearly suffers a nervous breakdown, and, at the end, Dylan meets cloned children who have been psychologically damaged by the knowledge of their origins. The general viewpoint of the book condemns the procedures that created clones, if not the clones themselves.

Perhaps this negative stance toward science and technology should be challenged or at least complicated. The threat that biotechnology poses for

the self is not deeply explored, and writers could have much more fun with it. Biotechnology will dominate the lives of children today in ways that we are only now beginning to suspect, and science fiction mediates new science for young readers. Indeed, science fiction is an "increasingly relevant genre" (Reid 5); Donna Haraway claims that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (149). If we want children to be critical thinkers and display agency regarding these changes, they should become aware of the complexity of the questions that biotechnology raises. Authors should give young readers more credit for their ability to understand the issues, and feel more free, as science fiction writers for adults do, to experiment with these themes and with the genre.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, children should be aware of the ethical challenges of genetic engineering, and its possible dangers, both physical and psychological. On the other hand, showing only its dangers is not really presenting the debate or showing the complexity of the theme. In general, science is not convincingly depicted as something that, despite its ethical challenges, can be beneficial. For example, gene therapy can now manage Parkinson's disease (Lafferty). The kind of hope that science offers is largely not taken up by authors of children's and young adult books. It is ironic that authors playing to fears when ending on a note of hope is a trope of children's and young adult fiction. The hopeful part in these books is the existence of an



The kind of hope that science offers is largely not taken up by authors of children's and young adult books. It is ironic that authors playing to fears when ending on a note of hope is a trope of children's and young adult fiction.



essential humanity that is unaltered by genetic engineering; however, in these texts, science evokes fear rather than fascination, wonder, or inspiration. This is a pity since, in these days of global warming, science remains our only hope.

One hopeful note that many books on genetic engineering do sound is the value of tolerance (Ostry 237). The theme appears in *Pure*, *Stolen Voices*, the Isis trilogy, and *Deconstructing Dylan*. Because genetic engineering changes one's physical form and gives one an unusual genesis, it may naturally lend itself to promoting tolerance toward those with different bodies and backgrounds. *Stolen Voices* argues for better treatment of the lower classes and the "UnTalented": as one character says, "There's more than one truth, more than one right way of doing things" (146). *Pure* is particularly strong in the theme of tolerance, as its protagonists, Lenni and wheelchair-bound Redge, are considered "skidge," unworthy of reproduction. With these characters, *Krossing* argues that all human life is valuable. Monica Hughes writes the Isis trilogy as a paean to tolerance. The only one not to be repulsed by Olwen is the little African boy, Jody, whose ancestors have endured racism. Olwen questions the human value system when the captain comes to apologize for his settlers having killed her dog. He makes the mistake of referring to her as if she were of a different species. Her reply, "Perhaps you are right in thinking of me as an alien. I know I am different from you. You see—I do not kill," criticizes human intolerance (146).

As in the Isis trilogy, in *Deconstructing Dylan*, the theme of tolerance does not relate only to the issue of genetic engineering. Dylan's friend (and later girlfriend) Robyn is black, and she confronts racism. Her best friend was gay and suffered greatly because of social ostracism after she came out, resulting in her suicide. Thus, the issue



of homophobia is also brought into the mix. Yet Robyn is such a real character—vulnerable, blunt, sweet, and tough—that you do not view her as the carrier for issues. Instead, the melding of various themes of intolerance is natural and seamless. Robyn’s ability to speak out on the topics of racism and homophobia gives Dylan the courage to publicize his origins. Most cloned children are desperate to keep their secret, but, at the end of the book, Dylan prepares to face the press and “out” himself, determined to challenge the intolerance he is certain to encounter.

What sets Choyce’s book apart, not just among these examples, but also in the subgenre as a whole, is the use of metaphor. Choyce uses the images of the Loch Ness monster and of water striders and other insects very effectively to show Dylan’s thoughts about his identity and growth. As Dylan muses (he spends most of the book musing),

I didn’t always mind skating along the surface of things like the water strider. There was a lightness to it—sometimes I was unaffected by everything around me. The good stuff and the bad. Other times, when I felt heavy, it was more like being the Loch Ness monster. I was in the deep murky water, alone. Some believed in my existence, some did not. I was the only one of my kind on the planet, or so I believed. I was a kind of monster. . . (22)

These thoughts are prescient, as he later learns that he is a clone. Although this is not a long book, one gets the sense of the character’s growth as gradual and organic.

Hughes’s writing is also strong, especially in her descriptions of Isis, and although her characters may change quickly, their emotions feel real. The styles of the other books are less effective. *Pure* is written in melodramatic mode, getting downright corny with the romance scenes, which put me off the character altogether: “I knew I belonged to Jonah . . . I couldn’t stand to be separated. We’d started a raging fire” (52). *Mercury Man* is repetitive and clichéd, and *The Clone Conspiracy*, likewise, lacks literary quality. *Stolen Voices* is better than the above examples, but still stilted in its execution, as seen in Miri’s final summation: “My Talent wasn’t recognized. There was no room for it. No room for me or my individuality” (188).

So, are the subgenres of dystopia for young people, and of dystopian books that feature genetic engineering, getting too tired? I don’t think so. Most of the books featured here are not very good examples of the subgenres, and they seem to be offering a formula that we have seen before. But there is much richness in the metaphors of genetic engineering and dystopian societies that can still be mined successfully. The psychological difficulties of being genetically engineered are effectively shown in the Isis trilogy and

*Deconstructing Dylan*. The latter also poignantly shows the family dynamics of genetic engineering without the melodrama of *Pure* and *Stolen Voices*. Other books in the subgenre explore the ideas of experimentation, commodification, vulnerability, the human-machine fusion, the decision to be human, and the importance of peer groups and memory more fully than the examples here. (I particularly recommend Ann Halam's *Dr. Franklin's Island*, Nancy Farmer's *The House of*

*the Scorpion*, and Kate Thompson's *The Missing Link* trilogy.) All of these themes can still be worked upon by authors to come. How the self is created and altered through artificial changes to the body is a huge topic for consideration. Most of all, the genre could profit from fresher and more complex writing. Hughes and Choyce are the best writers of this group, and their styles help unravel the complexity of their topics for a young audience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an argument about how the two genres do *not* mesh, see Mendlesohn.

<sup>2</sup> See Webb and Suvin for surveys on the trope in science fiction for adults.

## Works Cited

Crew, Hilary S. "Not So Brave World: The Representation of Human Cloning in Science Fiction for Young Adults." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28.2 (2004): 203–21. Print.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. *Google Scholar*. Web. 28 Jan.

2009.

Hintz, Carrie, and Elaine Ostry. Introduction. *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. Ed. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry. New York: Routledge, 2003. 1–22. Print.

Hughes, Monica. "The Struggle between Utopia and Dystopia in

- Writing for Children and Young Adults." Hintz and Ostry 156–62.
- Kember, Sarah. "Kin or Clone: Contemporary Biotechnologies of the Self." *Temporalities, Autobiography, and Everyday Life*. Ed. Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. 252–64. Print.
- Lafferty, Mike. "OSU Scientist's Gene Therapy." *The Columbus Dispatch* 22 June 2007: 0A. Print.
- Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1993. Print.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. "Is There Any Such Thing As Children's Science Fiction?" *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28.2 (2004): 284–313. Print.
- Ostry, Elaine. "'Is He Human? Are You?': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28.2 (2004): 222–46. Print.
- Pape, Walter. "Happy Endings in a World of Misery: A Literary Convention between Social Constraints and Utopia in Children's and Adult Literature" *Poetics Today* 13.1 (1992): 179–96. Print.
- Domna Pastourmatzi, ed. *Biotechnological and Medical Themes in Science Fiction*. Thessaloniki: U Studio P, 2002. Print.
- Reid, Suzanne Elizabeth. *Presenting Young Adult Science Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1998. Print.
- Sambell, Kay. "Presenting the Case for Social Change: The Creative Dilemmas of Dystopian Writing for Children." Hintz and Ostry 163–78. Print.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1–37. Print.
- Suvin, Darko. "Science Fiction Parables of Mutation and Cloning As/and Cognition." Pastourmatzi 131–51.
- Webb, Janeen. "Bones of My Bones, Flesh of My Flesh: A Brief History of the Clone in Science Fiction." Pastourmatzi 152–64.

Elaine Ostry is an Associate Professor of English at SUNY College at Plattsburgh. She specializes in Children's and Young Adult Literature. She is the co-editor, with Carrie Hintz, of *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*.