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## **Introduction**

### **A is for Activism: Children's Engagement with the Political Process**

Blanka Grzegorzcyk with Farah Mendlesohn

Children have always lived in an uncertain international situation that is marked by spasmodic periods of conflict, deadlock, and crisis, but the development of new sets of socio-cultural and technological protocols for the ordering of space and time has opened unprecedented possibilities for them to be aware of and participate in local and global activist movements. Still in the midst of global conflicts and crises, but with a twenty-four-hour news cycle and electronic communication at the speed of light, young people today have more exposure to and awareness of what is happening beyond their local neighbourhoods or contexts. To take the example of the United Kingdom, a 2018 study found that one in three children aged nine to sixteen are primarily anxious about global conflicts, divisions, and environmental degradation (Morris). More recently, a significant subgroup of British children were identified as experiencing high levels of anxiety as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak and its news coverage ('Children'), with further reports warning that the impact of the pandemic would be worse for today's children and young adults given the broader deterioration in living standards compared to their parents' generation (Partington).

At this moment of ever-accelerating change, it seems helpful to consider how children's literature confronts such crises and divisions. Children's literature itself has been caught between the political and cultural logics of the period from which it emerges and the task of striving towards a kind of alternative or antidote to a future that promises the continuance of today's failing paradigms and environments. Progressive children's texts engage with upheavals in the conditions that determine global cultures by, for instance, keeping watch on hegemonic practices and knowledges (see, for example, Reynolds; Mickenberg and Nel) and interrogating, breaking open, and sabotaging them if necessary. They also explore alternative, often youth-inspired, locations and mechanisms of resistance and meaning making. The question that the editors of and contributors to this special issue had in mind was how far are children's texts able to explicate, replicate, and even narrativise these glimmering, changing outlines of children's political consciousnesses, disconsolations, and resistances within the local and global processes that express as structural violence.

In seeking to capture a sense of these literary responses to a range of conflict and crisis situations – gun violence, climate emergency, dictatorship, wars around terror – the approach in this issue is to engage with children's literature not only as a representation of

certain geopolitical conditions and societal dynamics, but also as a form of discourse that can reach into and shape certain areas of social and political experience. By paying heed to children's texts as a mode through which young readers restructure their sense of the world and their place in it, we point to the shifting borderlines that separate the included from the excluded, or the authorised from the counter-cultural. If political children's literature maps how boundary lines spread, its central drive can reveal how the resulting conditions become collectively meaningful. Such an approach to children's texts is bound up with Derek Attridge's idea of reading responsibly, by which he means referring the texts that we read back to the idiocultures, or the local contexts, from which they arrive while, at the same time, as a result of 'inevitable in-betweenness' (119), gaining a better understanding of the global contexts that we inhabit. The recent proliferation of children's texts that dwell on the terrors and legacies of state violence, ultra- and ethno-nationalism, and varieties of neo-fascism indicates that now is a timely moment to pay closer attention to the capacity of children's literature to represent, shape, and enliven its audience's political thinking.

Although there has been a great deal of critical material on the confrontational politics of dystopic children's literature, there is much less on the strategies with which social realist fiction, life-writing, or non-fictional texts capture children's engagement with the organisation of the world around them. Children themselves have always been engaged with both domestic and transnational socio-political issues. They were active, for example, in the American Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and in most military conflicts since then, in pro-imperial organisations such as the Junior Imperial League and the League of Empire Loyalists in Britain, in the Pioneer movement during the Soviet era, the US Civil Rights Movement, China's Tiananmen Square protests, and the Arab Spring, among other conflicts and causes where young people were either actually fighting or contributing in other ways. At the same time, the status of youth activists has been determined to a significant degree by dominant discourses of childhood and adolescence. For instance, young Americans found themselves addressed as 'spoiled brats' by Spiro Agnew and other conservative politicians and thinkers who blamed Benjamin Spock's permissive childrearing philosophy for 1960s youth activism in the United States. More recently, political youth linked to the (mainly Muslim and immigrant) communities that have been targeted in the War on Terror have been deemed the 'enemy other' (see, for instance, Maira, *9/11 Generation and Missing*). By contrast, the rising generation in the West is often referred to as 'generation snowflake'. This pejorative term first appeared in the 2016 edition of the *Collins English Dictionary* and is often used by the Western media to refer to the activism of young adults of the last two

decades as growing out of a lower resilience when confronted with the challenges of the modern age than that of previous generations. These are just a few of the ways CYP (children and young people) activists have been characterised since the middle of the last century.

Until quite recently, children's literary studies tended to sidestep questions of children's rights and political agency, revealing one of the lacunae of literary criticism of children's texts when it comes to praxis and to social and ideological change. However, there is, in the work of literary critics such as Susan Honeyman (2019), Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak ('Using Literary Criticism'; *Yes to Solidarity*), and Lara Saguisag (2018), among others, a strikingly new, much needed attention to the possibilities and pitfalls of rights-based and politically conscious mobilising on the part of youth. This concern with children's rights and agency discourses is interwoven in the articles in this issue with the proliferation of texts for and by children that are preoccupied with the experience of young people growing up in countries that are transformed by conflict and impasse and of youth engaging in community or global politics. Rising out of politically fraught and conflicted situations, these texts strike a chord in young people's consciousness by means of their engagement with the (generally) violent formations that readers know or can recognise. Across four articles that exceed the boundaries of any single cultural domain, the issue advocates a reading of textual interventions in situations where children's voices and actions are often not expected. It also responds to the predicament of today's CYP activists in the northern hemisphere, Chilean girls under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, Filipino young people under Martial Law, and Moroccan children in the post-9/11 world.

In the opening essay, 'Children and Young People as Activist Authors', Niall Nance-Carroll explores the way in which child-authored political narratives act as literary spaces in which children's agency is defined and debated and in which notions of rights, citizenship, and political/politicised subjectivities might be used to sort children into the categories 'child citizen', 'enforcer', and 'messenger from the future'. The next two articles revolve around stories of youth political engagement that unfold over periods of military dictatorship in Chile and the Philippines respectively. Bernardita Munoz-Chereau's 'Girl Protagonists of Chilean Dictatorship Novels for the Young' examines the representation of changing discursive practices and the deployment of the probing, penetrating young female gaze when it is directed at the politics of Pinochet's regime in YA novels. Rita Faire's 'The Political Role of Philippine Children and Young People as Represented in Youth Fiction' applies Diane M. Rodgers's typology of children's participation in social movements to Lualhati Bautista's *Dekada '70* (1983), accounting for the complexity and variety of its young characters'

responses to the violent and oppressive conditions of the Marcos dictatorship. Returning to twenty-first-century childhoods, Sara Austin and Ann Wainscott's 'Children's Literature as a Front in the War on Terror: Ineffective Policy, Ineffective Literature' flags up examples of texts that respond to the transformed political conditions of the post-terror world. Using the example of Ahmed Abbadi and Muhammad Belkadir's picturebook series, *Ma' Naşir wa Basma* (2013–15), they argue that Moroccan Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) literature for children fails because it is too invested in the US-led rhetoric of exceptional state powers for the defence of national sovereignty.

Overall, the articles in this special number reflect on the different kinds of political involvement with which children's texts from around the world variously retrace and expose the regimented lines of some of last century's dictatorship landscapes and deal with key global political divisions of the present moment. Throughout they find that children's literature has and continues to be used to forge new political insights, albeit with certain disabling constraints, including those of privileged models of knowledge and sources of cultural resistance. As such, this special issue belongs to the ongoing critical attempt to resee the political limits and capacities of young generations and to rethink the place of children and young people in our accounts of political activism.

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## **The Authors**

**Blanka Grzegorzczuk** teaches at the University of Cambridge and Manchester Metropolitan University and is a member of the Centre for Research in Children's Literature at Cambridge. She is the author of *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* and *Terror and Counter-Terror in Contemporary British Children's Literature*.

**Farah Mendlesohn** is co-editor of the Hugo Award-winning *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* and author of *The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein* among many other titles. She is the only three-time winner of the British Science Fiction Association award for non-fiction. She is currently working on a short book about Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*.