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## **ARTICLE**

### **Article Title**

### **Developing environmental agency and engagement through young people's fiction**

Stephen Bigger<sup>a\*</sup> and Jean Webb<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Education, University of Worcester, Worcester, England;* <sup>b</sup>*Arts & Humanities, University of Worcester, Worcester, England.*

\*Corresponding author. Email: [s.bigger@gmail.com](mailto:s.bigger@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

This article explores the extent to which stories for young people encourage environmental engagement and a sense of agency. Our discussion is informed by the work of Paul Ricoeur (on hermeneutics and narrative), John Dewey (on primacy of experience), and John Macmurray (on personal agency in society). We understand fiction reading about place as hermeneutical, that is, interpreting understanding by combining what is read with what is experienced. We investigate this view through examples of four children's writers, Ernest Thompson Seton, Kenneth Grahame, Michelle Paver and Philip Pullman. We draw attention to notions of critical dialogue and active democratic citizenship. With a focus on the educational potential of this material for environmental discussions that lead to deeper understandings of place and environment, we examine whether the examples consistently encourage the belief that young people can become agents for change. We also consider whether the concept of *heroic resister* might encourage young people to overcome peer pressure and peer cultures that marginalise environmental activism. We conclude by recommending the focused discussion of fiction to promote environmental learning; and for writers to engage ore with themes of environmental responsibility and agency.

**Keywords:** environment, experience of place, young people's fiction, moral development, citizenship, responsibility, agency

## Introduction

There seems to be no reason to do a book unless there is a point to it, particularly reflecting what is happening in the world...I am not doing books for children. I am doing books for the next generation of adults.<sup>1</sup>

Author and illustrator Michael Foreman here exemplifies how fiction writers fuse entertainment with instruction in their works for young people. Peter Hunt's (1994, 3) introduction to children's literature claims:

It is arguably impossible for a children's book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism. All books must teach something, and because the checks and balances available to the mature reader are missing in the child reader, the children's writer often feels obliged to supply them ... . Children's writers are, therefore, in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values, rather than simply 'telling a story'.

In this article we focus on four writers for young people, two from the early twentieth century, and two from the early twenty-first, whose works differently illustrate matters of personal agency and the potential of children's literature to foster environmental learning. The writers are: Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), author of Canadian stories about wildlife and outdoor adventure; Kenneth Grahame (1859 –1932) whose *Wind in the Willows* depicts a romanticised English countryside; Michelle Paver (born 1960), whose stories engage the pre-

scientific beliefs of Stone Age ancestors; and Philip Pullman (born 1946), whose trilogy *His Dark Materials* promotes a humanistic mission to improve our world. The first two were influential in different ways to earlier generations of children despite their opposite ideas about place; the contemporary writers each express distinct approaches to human responsibility for the physical and social world. Because we view stories as potentially empowering for young people, we also consider the extent to which the reading of stories stimulates attitude formation, behaviour change and personal agency in young readers with regard to social and environmental responsibility.

### **Fiction, education and experience of place**

Bernard Crick, reporting on education for citizenship in England, articulates a widely held concern that the majority of young people are not actively involved in community and democracy (Crick 2004; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998). However, reducing serious issues of citizenship and democracy to textbooks and worksheets does not change mindsets. As Illich (1971) and Weston (1996) have argued, education is better viewed as a willing community activity rather than an enforced and disempowering government hegemony. Undeniably, most fiction is read by children outside of school, with teachers having a responsibility to encourage it. Recent environmental education research and scholarship suggest that broader underpinnings and dimensions are needed for our discussion. For example, regarding curriculum integration through place-based learning, McKenzie (2008) argues for the importance of intersubjectivity, and sees a role for literature to stimulate this; while Sharpe and Breunig (2009) advocate fostering ‘pedagogical kinships’, linking diverse areas of study – for example, the sciences and arts. The importance of youth agency to early

adolescence (being able to ‘take a stance’) has been examined by Blanchet-Cohen (2009), whilst Davis (2009) reports agency for the environment as widely neglected in approaches to early childhood environmental education. Moreover, given that young people learn through experience, Barratt Hacking, Barratt and Scott (2007) recommend engaging young people through participating in local environmental research and its representation in relevant forms, while Schusler, Krasny, Peters and Decker (2009) emphasise the importance of youth environmental action to engendering active forms of citizenship both immediately and in young people’s future lives.

We link this integration of effort with the reading of fiction to encourage young people to see themselves as agents for change. This journal has already problematised the notion of ‘critical pedagogy of place’ (see Gruenewald 2008); readers trained to be critical link their encounter with the characters, plots, relationships, dilemmas and places presented and can thereby interrogate their stance on the environment. Fiction juxtaposes different opinions, requiring the reader to deliberate and decide, to take a stance – differently expressed, it is polyvocal and polyphonic, enabling dialogue and dialectic. This aspect of our argument is rooted in Ricoeur’s philosophy, which maintains that one’s understanding of the world is generated through dialogue. On storytelling he comments:

...the post-Enlightenment age has displayed ominous symptoms that point towards a collapse of the very capacity to tell stories and to listen to stories. The destruction of any genuine sense of tradition and authority in conjunction with the abusive prevalence of the will to dominate, exploit and manipulate the natural environment of humankind – and consequently human beings themselves – amounts to an *increase of*

*forgetfulness*, especially that of the past sufferings of humankind, which is the ultimate cause of the impinging death of the capacity for storytelling. (1995, 238, his emphasis)

Pre-scientific societies used stories politically to understand their world and communicate values (Bigger, 2009b); today, stories are recreational but also can establish an inner dialogue between reader and text about ‘worlds’ and values. Dialogue, as a confrontation with ‘other’, introduces different perspectives, and requires readers to reconsider attitudes and concepts enriched by new perspectives. Engagement with story can stimulate inner dialogue between reader and text; a discussion of the story with others offers broader perspectives, interpretations and applications. Rätzl and Uzzell’s (2009) self-reflexive transformative work in environmental education fits well with this agenda.

### **Methodology: our approach to the texts**

This is a part conceptual inquiry, and part autoethnography. Autoethnography is the study by observation and discussion of a field of which the writer/researcher has intimate knowledge, normally as an insider. Hayano (1979/2001, 82) emphasises that autoethnography involves “ethnographic reflexivity”, should include insiders, “voices from within”, and should benefit others. Commonly used currently for reflexivity on one’s own arena of work, it has been called “writing emotionally about our lives” and “evocative autoethnography” (Ellis, 1997, 116-139).

An autoethnographic dimension underpins our argument in three ways. First, both authors are teachers and educators who use stories with young people. Webb studies children’s literature

as an academic subject; Bigger's interests are in values, ethics and empowerment. Bigger (2008) has used oral stories with troubled young people close to expulsion from school: the young listeners enter the narrative as themselves, interact with characters of their own creation, and construct a 'wise character' as an inner discussion partner. Secondly, our views are underpinned by our reading histories. Bigger had rural formative experiences, and research expertise in children's literature between 1930 and 1960, especially that written during 1939-45. Webb had an urban childhood in the post-war slums of London's East End, and has a research interest in Victorian and Edwardian literature. For both, reading vibrant, sensitive stories brought other landscapes and other worlds into being beyond their localities. It has supported our belief in the importance of literature to opening up new worlds for young people, and to contributing to the development of their personal values and enthusiasms. We also study the childhood reading passions of adults, including teachers and parents; and we believe that young readers are developing similar understanding to influence their own world in these and other ways in the future. Thirdly, we are each concerned with story writing - Webb through working with authors, Bigger as a writer of children's stories for school use. How story might be developed to meet twenty-first century challenges is therefore an interest that concerns us.

Drawing on the strategy of *deep reading* within the literary critical tradition, we interrogate passages in stories that illustrate concepts under discussion. Reading a text demands *exegesis*, searching for *original* meaning and significance; and *hermeneutics*, that is, interpreting texts to comment on contemporary issues (Ricoeur 1974, 3). Actually there is an interplay, a continuum. Readers minds are clouded with interpretation(s). So, although people approach

texts exegetically, the ideas engage them as readers and are filtered through their understanding. Ricoeur (1990, 2004) explores how texts speak to contemporary circumstances and to people's lives and memories, partly rooting his work in Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl 1989; Kockelmans 1994), that is, as the study of how we experience everyday life. How people *experience* place is a phenomenological question (Payne 2003); how this experience is put into words, understood and explained is hermeneutical. Husserl's ontology sought to determine what might be considered 'real' about experiences, that is, the ability to see things *as they are* rather than *as we conceptualise them through words*. According to Ricoeur (1995, 3), all descriptions of phenomena draw on conceptual frameworks, so that Husserl's search for pure experiences *not mediated by dialogue* is idealistic. In effect, we slot experiences into broader understandings. Phenomenological 'reduction' (termed *bracketing out*) attempts to separate the 'real' from the 'constructed'. Payne (2003) regards problematisation as helpful 'subversion' in environmental education, transforming the bracketing process into what he terms the 'post-phenomenological' in that ambiguities enrich understanding. He seeks a *philosophy of experience* in and through environmental education (Payne and Wattchow 2009). Reading about something is not experience of it: a *phenomenology of reading* is still to be written.

Followers of John Dewey link learning with experience and democracy, and emphasise experience as a learning mechanism (Dewey 1938/1963; McDermott 1981). For Dewey, philosophy must be true to experience, and tested by experience, so he resisted non-experiential theorising (*Experience and Nature*, in McDermott, 1981, Part IV). Experience of *reading about the world* and experience of *the world* are separate but can interact in both



directions. Keith and Pile (1993), writing on postmodern geography, make a similar point: there is an inner dialogue between the two. Reading fiction can be an interpretative tool to assess past experience, and to structure new experiences. This is the essence of hermeneutics.

We argue, following Ricoeur (1990), that human experience is *storied*. Whatever we experience slots into our life story and our community story, past (retrospective) and future (prospective), and is informed by stories that we have found meaningful. Understanding this web of interpretation (viz. hermeneutics) precedes phenomenological reduction: it analyses what has been bracketed out. Conversely, and proactively, fiction might equally ‘story’ experience. Brett’s notion (2008, 150) of ‘storied space’ in post-colonial contexts (his example is of the land claims of indigenous nations in Australia and America) shows how myth and folk history structure place awareness, emphasising that storying places might be done historically, culturally, spiritually, ethnographically, and/or personally.

### **Early twentieth century writers: Seton and Grahame**

We now present a focused exegesis of two writers from a century ago. Popular and influential in their day, they held diametrically opposed views about place and environment.

#### *Ernest Thompson Seton*

Seton was founder of the American scouts and mentor to Baden-Powell in Britain after writing a series of wilderness stories for boys first published in the *Ladies Home Journal* (Anderson 1986; Smith 2002; Seton-Barber online). Seton’s work encouraged boys into ‘woodcraft’ and championed the First Nations; he also encouraged similar guidance for girls (Beard and Beard

1915). His tales show respect for hunted animals through stories of their courage and bravery, contrasting this with the greed of the hunters. *Wild Animals I have Known* (1898), *Lives of the Hunted* (1901) and *Animal Heroes* (1905) present stories of particular animals in realistic contexts with love, danger and death represented. Detailed observations of animals are enhanced by his line drawings on most pages. *Animal Heroes* is dedicated “To the Preservation of Our Wild Creatures” and emphasises “our kinship with the animals by showing that in them we can find the virtues most admired in Man [sic]” (9) – that is, dignity, love-constancy, sagacity, obedience, fidelity, mother-love, physical force and love of liberty. He concluded:

My chief motive, my most earnest underlying wish, has been to stop the extermination of harmless wild animals; not for their sakes, but for ours, firmly believing that each of our native wild creatures is in itself a precious heritage that we have no right to destroy or put beyond the reach of our children. (12)

*Monarch*, Seton’s (1904) story which explores human cruelty to a grizzly cub, unfolds with a lifetime of the eponymous bear being hunted for no purpose, and finally ending his days angrily, imprisoned in a zoo. A different kind of story, *Two Little Savages* (Seton, 1903) depicts two young white American boys experiencing the wilderness, learning woodcraft and pretending to be native American Indians. His explicit purpose is to show that outdoor adventure develops *character*. The outdoors is depicted as an adventure playground: hunting, tracking, wigwams, campfires and fighting are all a game, but with serious intention. Young people are encouraged to be enterprising and self-supporting with a strong sense of personal agency.

*Kenneth Grahame*

In contrast to Seton, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908/1983) celebrates the security and peace of an idealised English rural landscape and way of life symbolized by the riverbank. It also demonstrates a critical awareness of the threat of urbanization and underlying unrest in Edwardian England. Grahame depicts an idyllic riverbank world; orderly, controlled, satisfactorily divided into social classes from the rabbits up to aristocratic, unruly and uncontrolled Toad. Mole, the worker emerging from his 'dark' and 'lowly little house' which he has been industriously cleaning and decorating, luxuriates in his new found sense of freedom:

It all seemed too good to be true. Hither and thither through the meadows he rambled busily, along the hedgerows. Across the copses, finding everywhere bird building, flowers budding, leaves thrusting – everything happy and progressive and occupied. (2)

Industry is related to the bountiful state of nature in springtime. Grahame creates a safe world for Mole as he explores and discovers the river:

Never in his life had he seen a river before...The mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated. By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spellbound by exciting stories... (ibid.)

This is a wholly new experience of life above ground for Mole, and the river itself becomes a quasi-narrator. Grahame combines the notions of the natural environment as enabling safe exploration, joy, and emotional upliftment with story and narrative as means of experience, expression and education. For Mole this discovery of life as bounteous nature is combined

with emergence from a singular mode of being, for here in the riverbank he meets with the Water Rat. Ratty takes Mole into his care, educates him into the ways of river life, such as travelling by rowing boat, and welcomes him into the community of the riverbank. This is a complete pastoral idyll where environment, landscape and society are in harmony.

However, it is not without threat, as Ratty explains to Mole. Socially each group understands their position and the stratified set of relationships which enable life to continue harmoniously whilst each keeps to a sense of position and place. The riverbank is bounded by The Wild Wood, where weasels, foxes and rabbits live. Ratty admits that ‘they are alright in a way’ (6) and that he is friends with them and passes the time of day when they meet, but they are prone to ‘break out’. There are subtle references here to the sense of unrest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Peter Green (in Grahame. 1983/1908, ix) writes of Grahame as a:

...traditionalist living in an era of increasingly rapid social change, when age-old customs – and worse, a largely stable class pyramid – were in imminent peril from the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. Political violence was in the air.

Representative of a stable yeomanry, Badger is the symbol of safety, conservative wisdom and the values of Englishness. When lost in The Wild Wood, Mole finds sanctuary at Badger’s door. Life can be ordered and controlled within the remit of nature but beyond is the industrial Wide World, typified by smoking chimney stacks. This is the ultimate threat to the ideal community as envisioned by Grahame and beyond the imagination or desire of Ratty and his friends:

‘And beyond the Wild Wood again?’ he [Mole] asked. ‘Where it’s all blue and dim, and one sees what may be hills or perhaps they mayn’t, and something like the smoke of towns, or is it only cloud drift?’

‘Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World,’ said the Rat. ‘And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense at all. Don’t ever refer to it again, please. Now then! Here’s our backwater at last, where we are going to lunch.’

Leaving the main stream, they now passed into what seemed at first like a landlocked lake. (Grahame 1908/1983, 6)

The riverbank community are happy to live their lives actually and metaphorically out of the mainstream and in a landlocked safe paradise. There is always a place of natural harbour and safety there.

In addition to the poetically veiled industrialisation, the gentle life by the river is invaded by Toad and his uncontrolled passion for the motor car. Toad states that the car ‘is the future’, perhaps belying Grahame’s awareness of Futurism and the cult of the machine and speed which arose in Italy in the early twentieth century. Grahame was an eminent banker and widely travelled (Prince 1996, 313). Toad the aristocrat is easily tempted by ‘adventure’. His irresponsibility almost threatens the downfall of his stately home, Toad Hall, but Badger (the yeomanry) and friends (the workers), stand united in the face of threat to the social order. Grahame’s story promotes protectionism for a pastoral idyll, and at its centre is the depiction of landscape. A decade later the social structure was severely disrupted by World War One and

that pastoral idyll would never return. Furthermore, urbanization and the disappearance of the English rural landscape continued to the extent that in 1947 the Government instituted Green Belt legislation to protect the countryside.

*Wind in the Willows* was a best-seller throughout much of the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. For young people reading it today, the class distinctions of rich – professional – ordinary citizen still work to some extent, although routes to richness are more varied. Being becalmed in a safe spot is more psychological than locational; the wide world now is less of a fear than a lure. Young readers might find sanctuary in the story; but intelligent discussion of its implications could engage deeper meanings and messages. It is the ordinary citizens who sort out problems; and it is compulsive rich toad who causes them. There are people like badger who take community responsibility; but it takes cooperation to enable all to work together effectively.

### **Contemporary fiction for young people: Paver and Pullman**

In the two contemporary storywriters considered, the places they depict are not ‘our world’: readers enter imaginatively into fantasy worlds and are explicitly invited to reflect upon social, political and environmental values.

#### *Michelle Paver*

Paver’s contemporary series *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, starting with *Wolf Brother* (2003) features two courageous young people in the stone-age. Paver explains, positively assessing stone-age people, “They were superb survivors. They knew all about the animals,

trees, plants and rocks of the Forest. When they wanted something, they knew where to find it, or how to make it” (Author’s Note, 243-4). Drawing on archaeology, she depicts life in the forest, and carefully constructs a pre-scientific mythic mindset based on her familiarity with anthropology. The characters believe animals to have souls, and that misdirected souls, whether human, animal or elemental, can become death-demanding demons. The young protagonist Torak, a magic-imbued redeemer, is charged with resetting the balance of humankind with nature which had been jeopardized to the point of destruction by human mania for power. Torak learns to understand and respect the natural environment, and those clans which live in harmony with nature. He has a close companion, a wolf, and later a girl, Renn. These three are independent yet interdependent. Power is shared, and each shares an emotional bond with the other. The world of Torak is one where humankind, animals and the environment are locked into holistic co-operation for survival and fruition. Everything the Stone Age people have is made from the natural world around them. They must depend on their understanding of the characteristics of the natural materials from the forest, the rivers, plants, sea and animals in order to create what they need to survive. Nothing can be wasted, nor can they take from this world without giving thanks and acknowledging the spirit world for the gifts of food and tools which they will take and make from nature. A very necessary meal is shared with the spirits and with Wolf; the bones make tools. Humans and animals are locked into the need for co-operation. They each depend upon their environment which is variously threatened by fire, flood and sickness.

Disasters and pestilences emanate, we gradually learn, from human desire for power. In this Stone Age world, natural disasters threaten because there are characters who upset the spiritual

balance by seeking the powers which lie in the moral darkness of the spiritual underworld. In contemporary society we might view our world as environmentally out of balance because of desires for wealth, power, and oil where no account is taken of the irrevocable damage which is being done. The story reveals that choices are as complex as human nature itself:

It wasn't only the evil of the Soul-Eaters which Fin-Kedinn feared. It was that within Torak himself. ... 'Evil exists in us all, Torak' [he said], 'Some fight it. Some feed it. That's how its always been' (Paver, 2006, 135). Paver's universe does not easily translate to our modern scientific world where magic and supernatural power are not taken literally. Yet although individuals no longer 'save' the world, except in fiction, young people can discuss how, in small ways, they can overturn evil and work towards a better world.

### *Philip Pullman*

The fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1997-2000) rejects religious authoritarianism and, through the courage, determination and example of two young people, Lyra and Will, promotes demythologised rational responsibility. Central to this is the notion that one's mission to improve the world is a lifelong process involving hard work and study, finding and learning to rely upon one's authentic self, represented as an animal-shaped 'daemon'. In one of Pullman's worlds (Pullman, 2000) live the Mulefa, strangely constructed intelligent creatures with trunks, no hands and four legs on a triangular skeleton. Their way of life is ecologically friendly, harmonious and cooperative. The health of their world depends on their protection and use of particular seed pods; oil derived from these gives them knowledge, and their use of the seeds as wheels helps the seeds to germinate:



... as more seed pods fell, they showed their children how to use them. And when the children were old enough they began to generate the *sraf* [viz. *conscious knowledge*] as well, and as they were big enough to ride on the wheels, the *sraf* came back with the oil and stayed with them. So they saw that they had to plant more seed-pod trees, for the sake of the oil, but the pods were so hard that they seldom germinated. And the first mulefa saw what they had to do to help the trees, which was to ride on the wheels and break them, so mulefa and seed-pods trees have always lived together. (2000, 237)

The ungainly mulefa ride upon the wheels which prepares the pods for germination, maintains the trees, and receive understanding through the oil. The mulefa represent cooperation with others and synergy with their environment (or '*biophilia*', using Erich Fromm's (1965) terminology for a passion for life). They are set in contrast to the beautiful but destructive tulapi water birds, which destroy the pods and the homes of the mulefa (representing Fromm's *necrophilia*, a passion for death and destruction). The trilogy shows these two opposing motivations at war with each other. Pullman enables his characters to find answers, to find peace and to make decisions as to where their future lies; here also Lyra and Will discover their adult love, which will sustain them in their differing 'biophilic' futures. This is the world of *knowledge* of good and evil, a re-mythologizing of the biblical Garden of Eden myth in a positive direction, with a focus on *including* rather than *excluding*. Embedded in this creation of the imagination, this new public story to replace the old myth, are humanistic moral and ethical values which are directly pertinent to inclusive citizenship and environmental responsibility.

### **Agency and engagement: towards a hermeneutic of place**

The four writers present different models of relationship of the young person with their surroundings – Seton shows the environment as an adventurous place; Grahame as a haven or hell; Paver as a vulnerable place; and Pullman as a place requiring long-term cooperative custodianship. These are each part of the complexity of place, and experience of place, which young people encounter in coming to terms with the significance of place *for them*. Personal experience of places that readers bring to the act of reading are broad, having both individual and relational dimensions and associations, for example, affective responses coming from memories of friendships and pleasant activities. Reading about places offers vicarious experiences and invites readers to reflect and share. Reflection on experiences of different places with others stimulates awareness of other perspectives. An implied dialogue takes place between the writer and the reader, and between the reader and the characters; another between readers discussing the book. Discussion of broader issues can then develop.

Environmental responsibility is encouraged when young people are brought face to face with dilemmas and contested values, and encouraged to make up their own minds. Engaging with fiction is a mechanism for this and can offer young people different perspectives and role models to consider. Bakhtin frames this in terms of dialogicality, polyvocality, and heteroglossa: the engagement with other generates meaning (Bakhtin 1979/2000; Gardiner 2002). A story may stimulate inner debate, which others can enrich. In considering what kinds of people the characters are, and how appropriately they behave, readers can reconsider their own lives and the lives of others.

When writers communicate significant issues, their work has a moral purpose. By championing good over evil in stories, authors intend readers to identify with the good encouraging them to become engaged resisters and activists. Understanding the range of characters in stories may help readers better to understand themselves, others and human nature in general. In the real world, people tend not to be heroes. Yet Zimbardo (2007, 444f; and see Bigger 2009a) praises ‘heroic resisters’ in an analysis of Milgram’s 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment and more recently the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. Only one of the experimental subjects resisted expectations of intimidation of prisoners. Nazi atrocities were made possible by lack of robust resistance by the whole population, so that heroic resistance by a minority could easily be crushed. Holocaust survivor Milgram tested just how far people would go under orders from ‘authority’ (Blass 2004), concluding that around three quarters of participants (within the covert simulation) were prepared to kill if ordered to do so, and felt absolved from responsibility when doing so. The exceptions, a minority, were the *resisters*. The implications of this for responsible action are profound.

Arendt coined the phrase ‘banality of evil’ to highlight when evil is *just a job* (Arendt 1994). Discussion of good and evil, using fiction as a stimulus and in this particular context, focusing on questions of environmental quality, is one way of preparing young people to become champions for good, generating the “banality of heroism” (Zimbardo 2007, 483-7) - affirming that it is normal to stand up for good. Heroes stand up firmly against social pressures, facing personal risk for reasons of principle. Young people’s fiction is full of heroic resisters as role models for readers. There are also anti-heroes, from whom different lessons can come about selfishness, greed and power.

‘Critical readers’ interrogate texts they encounter within a meaningful personal philosophy. This includes ethical and moral reasoning, emotional understanding and a willingness to interact positively with “the other” as part of their developing concept of self. *Critical studies* have the specialised meaning of working towards justice and human emancipation (e.g. Horkheimer 1993). Macmurray (1957a, 1957b; Conford 2006) argued that people are defined by actions (the self as agent) and relationships (self in relation), that individual lives are intertwined with others. Stories illustrate ‘self in relation’ emphasising that success is a group achievement, that people need to work together to solve problems. These paired concepts of *agent* and *in relation* encourages critical discussion about how to become active participants in the locality and community.

Unlike in fiction, the story of one’s life is not fixed. Young people can *restory* their past and their potential futures through the understandings generated by reading. The notion of lives as stories or scripts has been used therapeutically in Transactional Analysis (Steiner 1990) and Narrative Therapy (White and Epston 1990). One’s life story (the interpretation of the past and projection of possible futures) can be revised, so negative expectations can be restoried into positive aspirations. Critical engagements with stories can examine community, environment and place and thus enable young people to identify and readjust their own attitudes and behaviours. Fiction can speak hermeneutically to contemporary circumstances and change lives if insights are internalised. People experience place phenomenologically by being there, alongside others, and their insights from literature can help to make sense of their experiences. Dialogue and discussion interiorises diverse points of view and challenges latent prejudices.

## Reflections

Fiction for young people can provide one mechanism to encourage thought and understanding about the environment, especially when open dialogue and debate are encouraged. However it is not a strategy without problems. We have selected four writers with interesting and different things to say about taking a positive stance about environmental involvement, but apart from farming and nature books for young children, environmental themes do not dominate the market. Readers will not automatically become environmentally educated by the fiction available, which has a mix of motives and messages. Fantasy is popular, but is detached from the real world. If readers are helped to *critique* whatever they read, or view on film or television, they can learn to approach literature in personal, social and ethical ways.

Storywriters start with the plot and characters, but issues are secondary. Nevertheless, the writer's values (positive and negative) are implied behind the story and are perhaps more powerful for not being explicit. The woodcraft values of Seton are explicit, and so in a more sophisticated way are Paver's and Pullman's redeemer agendas. The readers are assumed to be siding with the heroine/hero and not with the enemy, although a degree of ambiguity increases tension. Not all who seem friendly are so. Grahame's values within *The Wind in the Willows* are implicit, so the reader encounters them unexamined, on trust. The big wide world is threatening, progress is to be feared, the hero conserves the rural idyll. For young readers to develop criticality, a young reader may need some help to disagree with a story's omniscient and persuasive narrational voice.

Places gain significance through valued stories. That this significance can follow young people through to adulthood is evidenced by the popularity of societies devoted to the work of children's authors and visits to places associated with these stories and their writers: The E.T. Seton Institute, and the Kenneth Grahame Society are examples, and there are many others, reflecting adults treasuring fiction they once read. This nostalgic comradeship of fellow readers focuses on storied places, environments made familiar through childhood reading.

Current and future writers of fiction for young people could address more explicitly the environmental issues challenging the twenty-first century, in ways which could similarly stay with young readers into adulthood and promote attitudinal and behaviour change. It is not the only way to affect attitudes, but story can be remembered when instruction is forgotten. Robert Owen, the idealist industrialist, for example, is well remembered in Britain and the USA: New Lanark (Scotland) and New Harmony (Indiana) have become 'storied places' attracting visitors, in Scotland in association with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. One dramatised story associated with these places is of a future girl, Harmony, from the year 2200, explaining what environmental action had been necessary in the two centuries between us and her.<sup>3</sup>

For a fiction writer, creating believable characters is like adopting a family who live in the head. Each character has independence and is not a wooden puppet of the writer's ideas. What they do or say can be a blend of what real children have said and done but, coming up from the creative imagination, the results can be unexpected even to the writer. Bigger has written pedagogically for 8-12 year olds in local schools stories about children in their own locality.<sup>4</sup> A dialogue-rich text can encourage the dialogic process we have discussed above, presenting

various points of view. When they become adults, the young readers of today will have the very serious job of running their world and making responsible decisions. Their willingness and ability to be critical and dialogue with others are features of active citizenship, helping them to be strong-minded heroes who are forces for good.

### **Conclusions.**

We have argued that stories for young people can be part of the educative process of encouraging environmental engagement and a sense of agency. From Ricoeur we stress the process of applying texts to real concerns; from Dewey we emphasise how experience underpins understanding, and how experienced is 'storied'; from Macmurray we link personal agency to social responsibility; from Zimbardo we expand the notion of 'heroic resister'. We have argued that fiction texts require hermeneutic application, readers (with teacher support) using fiction texts to reflect upon their lives. Our four examples use story to discuss the environment, bringing out ideas of active involvement in woodcraft (Seton), conservation and heritage (Grahame), respect for life (Pavel), and cooperation within a non-authoritarian commonwealth (Pullman). We argue that fiction's concern for heroic action and the victory of good over evil supports the development of 'heroic resisters' who will fight actively against peer pressure, injustice, irresponsibility and unethical behaviour, and who can become agents for change. This is unlikely to happen without a process of discussion (hermeneutics) with peers and adults, which parents and teachers can provide. We note that fiction texts explicitly about the environment are rare, and hope for writers to engage with themes of environmental responsibility and agency. Our next task is to write and use such stories with children and study the outcomes.

## **Footnotes**

1. From his notebook, displayed in the Truro Museum, 2007.
2. The outdoor theme has been developed in stories by others. Grey Owl (1935, 1937), a hunter-trapper environmentalist in Canada, featured wilderness and its animals. The scouting movement, and the philosophically more cooperative Woodcraft Folk (Paul 1951) linked story to practice. Other writers have used Seton's technique of animal biography to good effect – Church (1941) with squirrels, Adams (1972) with rabbits, and Horwood (1980) with moles.
3. <http://www.newlanark.org/download/upload.46.rtf>, accessed 8.12.2009.
4. Some of these stories can be found at <http://fiction4children.blogspot.com/2009/08/jake.html>.

## **Notes on contributors**

Dr. Stephen Bigger researches educational issues relating to values, race, motivation and achievement including an interest in people's sustainable relationship with the environment. He has a particular interest in twentieth century young people's literature, especially that relating to war and reconstruction, and writes stories for children for use in school.

Professor Jean Webb is the director of the International Centre for Children's Literature, Literacy and Creativity with a research interest in Victorian and Edwardian children's literature.



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