

Article Title

Growing environmental activists: developing environmental agency and engagement through children's fiction.

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Abstract

We explore how story has the potential to encourage environmental engagement and a sense of agency provided that critical discussion takes place. We illuminate this with reference to the philosophies of John Macmurray on personal agency and social relations; of John Dewey on the primacy of experience for philosophy; and of Paul Ricoeur on hermeneutics, dialogue, dialectics and narrative. We view the use of fiction for environmental understanding as hermeneutic, a form of conceptualising place which interprets experience and perception. The four writers for young people discussed are Ernest Thompson Seton, Kenneth Grahame, Michelle Paver and Philip Pullman. We develop the concept of critical dialogue, and link this to Crick's demand for active democratic citizenship. We illustrate the educational potential for environmental discussions based on literature leading to deeper understanding of place and environment, encouraging the belief in young people that they can be and become agents for change. We develop from Zimbardo the key concept of *heroic resister* to encourage young people to overcome peer pressure. We conclude with a call to develop a greater awareness of the potential of fiction for learning, and for writers to produce more focused stories engaging with environmental responsibility and activism.

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

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Fiction, education and experience of place

The author/illustrator Michael Foreman noted,¹

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.

Writers for young people implicitly or explicitly combine entertainment with pedagogy. Peter Hunt, introducing 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, are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values, rather than simply 'telling a story' (1994, 3).

We have chosen to focus particularly on four writers for young people, two in the early twentieth century, and two in the early twenty-first century, whose works are differently relevant to personal agency and environmental education. These are: Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946), Canadian stories about wildlife and outdoor adventure; Kenneth Grahame (1859 –1932) whose *Wind in the Willows* depicted romanticised countryside; Michelle Paver (born 1960), whose stories set in the stone-age depict pre-scientific beliefs; 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, but have opposite ideas about place. The contemporary writers have different approaches to human responsibility for the physical and social world. By problematising these, we consider the extent to which reading stimulates attitude formation and personal agency in readers with regard to social and environmental responsibility. Story is viewed as a potential empowering agenda for agency. We explore this from a range of philosophical angles, and we consider whether more focused stories that might better further this agenda.

Bernard Crick, reporting on English education for citizenship, was concerned that young people become actively involved in community and democracy (Crick 2004; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998). However, reducing serious issues to textbooks and worksheets does not change mindsets and our vision needs to be broader, viewing education as a community activity rather than a disempowering school/government hegemony – that is, deschooling it (Illich, 1971; Weston, 1996). Indeed, most fiction is read outside school. Environmental themes in recent research underpin our discussion. On curriculum integration, McKenzie (2008) argues for the importance of intersubjectivity, and sees a place for literature to stimulate this; and Sharpe and Breunig (2009) advocate fostering pedagogical kinships, linking areas of study. Since young people learn through experience, Hacking, Barrett and Scott (2007) recommend engaging young people through participation in research, and Schusler, Krasny, Peters, and Decker (2009) emphasise the importance of youth environmental action. The importance of agency ('taking a stance') was examined by Blanchet-Cohen (2009), whilst Davis (2009) reports agency for the environment as neglected.

We examine therefore whether fiction has the potential to encourage young people see themselves as agents for change. This journal has problematised the notion of 'critical pedagogy of place'

(Gruenewald 2008). We explore whether fiction can encourage the formation of a critical stance to the environment through character, plot, relationships and dilemmas presented. Fiction places different opinions side by side requiring the reader to deliberate and decide, that is, to take a stance – differently put, it is polyvocal, or polyphonic, enabling dialogue and dialectic. This aspect of our argument is rooted in the modern philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who emphasises that our understanding of the world comes from 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 impending death of the capacity for storytelling (1995, 238, his emphasis).

Story in pre-scientific societies was how the world was understood, and how values were communicated. Stories still can be more than recreational, and can establish an inner dialogue between reader and text. Dialogue is a confrontation with ‘other’, as different perspectives requires us to reconsider attitudes and concepts. There is some richness in this concept. Engagement with story can begin inner dialogue; discussion of the story with others can help to develop it. Rätzl and Uzzell's (2009) self-reflexive transformative work fits into this agenda.

Methodology

This is a conceptual study. The strategy of *deep reading* within the literary critical tradition illuminates incidents in stories that illustrate points we wish to make. Reading a text demands *exegesis*, a Greek term for 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. As

readers, our minds are clouded with interpretation. So, although we approach texts exegetically, they engage us as readers and are filtered through our ideas. Ricoeur (1990, 2004) explored how texts speak to contemporary circumstances and to our lives and memories, rooting his work partly in Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl, 1989; Kockelmans, 1994), that is to the study of how we experience everyday life (Payne, 2003). How people *experience* place is a phenomenological question; how 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*. Ricoeur argued that all descriptions of phenomena draw on conceptual frameworks, so that Husserl's search for pure experiences *not mediated by dialogue* must be idealistic (Ricoeur, 1995, 3). We slot experiences into broader understandings. Phenomenological 'reduction' (termed *bracketing out*) attempts to separate 'real' from 'constructed'. Payne (2003) regards problematisation as helpful 'subversion', turning the process into what he terms 'post-phenomenology' in which ambiguities enrich understanding. He seeks a *philosophy of experience* (Payne and Wallchow, 2008). Reading about something is not experience of it: a *phenomenology of reading* is still to be written. Dewey linked learning with experience and with democracy and emphasised 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. That is, there is an inner dialogue between them. Fiction can be an interpretative tool to assess past experience, and to structure new experiences. This process we call hermeneutics.

We argue, following Ricoeur (1990) that human experience is *storied*. Whatever we experience slots into our life *story*, past (retrospective) and future (prospective), and is informed by stories we have found meaningful. Understanding this web of interpretation (viz. hermeneutics) precedes phenomenological reduction: it analyses what has been bracketed out. Proactively, fiction can ‘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. Place can be ‘storied’ through historical, cultural, spiritual, fictional and personal stories.

Auto-ethnography underlies our methodology in three ways. First, both authors are teachers and educators who use story with young people. Webb studies children’s literature as an academic subject; Bigger’s interests are in values, ethics and empowerment. He (Bigger, 2008) has used story with troubled young people close to expulsion from school: the young listener enters the narrative as themselves, interacting with characters of their own creation, constructs their ‘wise person’ as an inner discussion partner. Second, our views are underpinned by our reading histories. Bigger had rural formative experiences, Webb urban ones, in the post-war slums of London’s East End. For both, reading vibrant, sensitive stories brought other landscapes and other worlds into being beyond their localities which underpins the belief in the importance of literature to open up new worlds for young people, and to contribute to the development of their personal values and enthusiasms. We study the childhood reading passions of adults; and we believe that young readers are developing similar understanding to influence their own world in the future. Third, we are each involved in story writing, Webb through working with authors, Bigger as a writer of children’s stories. How story might be

developed to meet twenty-first century challenges is therefore an interest we explore in the concluding discussion.

Early twentieth century writers: Seton and Grahame

We present here a focused exegesis of two writers a century ago. Popular and influential in their day, they have 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 a series of wilderness stories for boys published first in the *Ladies Home Journal* (Anderson, 1986; Smith, 2002; Seton-Barber, online). He encouraged boys into ‘woodcraft’ and championed the First Nations, encouraging similar guidance for girls (Beard and Beard, 1915). Seton showed respect for hunted animals through stories of their courage and bravery, contrasting this with greedy hunters. *Wild Animals I have Known* (1898), *Lives of the Hunted* (1901) and *Animal Heroes* (1905) presented stories of particular animals in realistic contexts with love, danger and death represented. The detailed observations of animals are enhanced by his own 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).

His story of Monarch the grizzly bear (Seton, 1904) depicts human cruelty to a grizzly cub, a lifetime of being hunted for no purpose, 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 purpose was to use outdoor adventure to develop *character*. The outdoors is depicted as an adventure playground: hunting, tracking, wigwams, campfires and fighting are all a game with a serious intention. Young people are encouraged to be enterprising and self-supporting, with a strong sense of personal agency.

The outdoor theme was developed in story by others. Grey Owl (1935, 1937), a hunter-trapper environmentalist in Canada, featured wilderness and its animals. Arthur Ransome's characters had both real and pretend adventures (Brogan, 1984; Hardyment, 2007) and he had popular followers²: all encourage personal agency. Carol Forrest's stories about Girl Guides in wartime (1941, 1947) encouraged cooperation and confidence. These writers follow on the tradition of stories involving outdoor adventure started by Seton's writings and practical work. The scouting movement, and the philosophically more cooperative Woodcraft Folk (Paul, 1951) linked practice to story. 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.

Kenneth Grahame *The Wind in the Willows* (1883/1908) celebrated the security and peace of an idealised English rural landscape and way of life symbolized by the riverbank, whilst also demonstrating 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... (2).

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 river bank. 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 river bank 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 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. (Introduction to Grahame, 1983/1908, ix)

Representative of a stable yeomanry, Badger is the symbol of safety, conservative wisdom and 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 the 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, 1983/1908, 6)

The riverbank community are happy to live their lives actually and metaphorically out of the main stream 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’, a reference to 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), stood 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 has been a best selling popular story. 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. The young reader might find sanctuary in the story; but intelligent discussion of its implications could find deeper meanings. 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 stories considered, the places depicted are not 'our world': readers enter imaginatively into fantasy worlds and are explicitly invited to reflect upon social, political and environmental values.

Michelle Paver Her 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 anthropology. The characters believe animals to have souls, and that misdirected souls, whether human, animal or elemental, can become death-demanding demons. Readers today view the natural world with different eyes. 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. Torak 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 homo sapiens, 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 a need for co-operation. They each depend upon their environment which is variously threatened by fire, flood and sickness through the series of adventures. These disasters and pestilences emanate from human action for a desire for power. In this Stone Age world natural disasters ensue and are threatened because there are characters that 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' (*Soul Eater*, 2006, 135).

These ideas do not easily translate to our modern scientific world where magic and supernatural power are not taken literally. Individuals do not save the world, except in fiction. Young people in today's world 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 life-long 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 his depicted worlds (in *Amber Spyglass*, 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 germination.

... 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 generates understanding through the oil. They represent cooperation with each other and synergy with their environment (*biophilia* using Erich Fromm's (1965) terminology or passion for life). They are set in contrast to the beautiful but destructive tulapi water birds, which destroy the pods and the mulefa homes, enacting the struggle between good and evil (representing Fromm's *necrophilia*, the 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, *including* rather than *excluding*. Embedded in this creation of the imagination, this new public story to replace the old, are humanistic moral and ethical values which are directly pertinent to inclusive citizenship and environmental responsibility,

Agency and engagement: towards a hermeneutic of place

These four writers present different models of relationship with a young person's surroundings – Seton, 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 problematic complexity of place which young people encounter in coming to terms with the significance of place *for them*. The personal experiences of place that readers bring to the act of reading is broad, having both individual and relational dimensions and associations – affective responses alongside memories of friendships and pleasant activities. Reading about places is not vicarious experience but it invites readers to reflect and share. Sharing experiences of place with others encourages reflection, and

dialogue stimulates awareness of other perspectives. An implied dialogue takes place between the writer and the reader; another between readers; and further dialogue can develop the issues themselves detached from the story.

Environmental activists are produced when young people are brought face to face with dilemmas and contested values, and encouraged to make up their own minds. Their engagement with story is a mechanism for this which can offer them different perspectives and role models to consider. Bakhtin termed this dialogicality, polyvocality, and heteroglossa, engagement with other which creates the 'genesis of meaning' (Bakhtin 1979/2000; Gardiner 2002). The story itself may stimulate inner debate, which others can enrich. In considering what kind of people the characters are, and how appropriately they behave, readers can reconsider their own lives.

When writers communicate significant issues their work has a moral purpose. By championing good over evil in stories, readers are encouraged to become engaged resisters and activists. Understanding characters in stories may help readers better to understand themselves and others. In the real world, people tend not to be heroes. Philip Zimbardo (2007: 444f; Bigger 2009) praises 'heroic resisters' in an analysis of the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment and more recently of 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 heroic resistance by a minority could 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 were the *resisters*. Arendt used the phrase

'banality of evil' 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 landscape and environment, 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 to provide role models for readers. There are also anti-heroes, from whom different lessons come about greed and power.

'Critical' readers can interrogate the texts they encounter within a meaningful personal philosophy which includes ethical and moral reasoning, understanding of the emotions and willingness to interact positively with, and respond to "the other" as part of their developing concept of self. *Critical studies* has the specialised meaning of working towards justice and human emancipation (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 are dominated by illustrations of 'self in relation' emphasising that success is a group achievement, that a group needs to work together to solve problems. These paired concepts of *agent* and *in relation* could encourage discussion about becoming active participants in their locality.

The story of one's life is not fixed. Therefore, young people can apply new understandings to *restorying* their past and their potential futures. The notion of lives as stories or scripts is 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 engagement with stories

which examine community, environment and place can thus enable young people to readjust their own attitudes and behaviours. Texts therefore speak hermeneutically to contemporary circumstances.

Young people experience place phenomenologically by being there, alongside others, and their insights from literature help to make sense of this experience. Fuller understanding develops through dialogue and discussion, interiorising many points of view and challenging unexamined prejudices.

Concluding 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. It is not however 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, many other books say little about environmental issues. Readers will not become environmentally educated by the fiction available, which has a mix of motives and messages. It is important to emphasise that readers *critique* whatever is the read, or view on film or television, enabling each story to eliciting discussion beyond its own words.

For story writers, the story and characters come first, and issues are secondary to the flow.

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 entirely implicit,

so the reader is expected to accept 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 requires a set of complex understandings: a story's narrational voice can be omniscient and persuasive and a young reader may need some help to disagree with it.

'Storied spaces' are places given 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 adult treasuring of fiction they once read. This is not altogether nostalgia but the comradeship of fellow readers, focussing 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 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 is well remembered in Britain and America: 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 is of a future girl Harmony from the year 2200 explaining what environmental action had been necessary in the two centuries between us and her³. One of us, Bigger, has written for 8-12 year olds in local schools stories about children in their own locality.⁴ These final reflections are on the process of becoming 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 puppets of the writer's ideas. What they do or say are 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. The first step in writing is to generate dialogue – fiction writing is a dialogue which is surrounded by description. This dialogue-rich text can blend into the dialogic process we have discussed. Since the dialogue crosses four generations in two time periods (2009 and 2030), diachronic issues of sustainability can be introduced. Young readers today will as adults have the very serious job of planning for their own maintenance and survival. If fiction elicits critical discussion with others, it may help to build up the depth of understanding which encourages active citizenship, strong-minded heroes for the future prepared to become involved positively with their emerging world and be forces for good.

Footnotes

1. From his notebook, displayed in the Truro Museum, 2007.
2. Such as M.E. Atkinson, Peter Dawlish, David Severn, Malcolm Saville and Geoffrey Trease.
3. <http://www.newlanark.org/download/upload.46.rtf>, accessed 8.12.2009.
4. Three stories can be found on <http://fiction4children.blogspot.com/2009/08/jake.html>.

Authors' Biographies

Dr. Stephen Bigger researches in educational issues relating to values, race, motivation and achievement. This includes 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 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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