

## WHAT TO READ: PROBLEMATIC TRENDS IN YA PRINT LITERATURE

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### **Abstract**

YA literature with ever-growing effortlessly treads on artifacts as genetic engineering, post-apocalyptic diegesis, cyborg Cinderellas or ‘hyperstylised’ beauty, cloning, xenomorphic aliens, paranoia and paranormal and non-human/ human crossbreeds. Though the pivotal concern lives on: is it safe and salubrious for kids? In this socially networked world little fellows manage even more little time to relocate their gaze off the e-screen. Perturbed parents are striving hard to acquaint them to ‘hardcopy’ or print materials, containing no radiation or any such electronic hazards. But are all books uncontaminated? Is it right to nominate them depending on the yardstick of ‘best-seller’? Are there other books except sci-fi or fantasy? This paper tries to locate some answers. Also it will try to deal with how science fiction materials can be used as a handy educational tool for children for a prospective future.

### **Why YA?**

Children's/YA literature fascinates in its unique way. While addressing a specific audience and readership it often imbues a larger folk, and the reason is it teaches us all by delimiting boundaries. The massive appeal takes in not only variety in storytelling and picturesque word sketches but the indemnity of excluding any plummeting to indecency. Young readers feel comforting to graze in this fabulous realm as well their parents feeling safe that their little ones are reading something wholesome. Even the elders sneak in their kid's shelves to get a taste of such delicacy, perhaps illegally! We can never deny that we are on the precipice of re dreaming ourselves since our young adult books are relentlessly rummaging around the fresh and enlightening so that more and more juvenile folks can locate their avenue to the scrumptious atrium of first-rate appealing reads. The focus of this paper is on the quality and nature of those story books which we serve the young ones in addition to what they procure or study of their own taste. Also under consideration is the much-in-vogue Sci-fi category of YA fictions which looms large like trepidation, very few times screening optimistic tomorrow.

The State of innocence waits to be educated, but if innocence is to be a true ‘mode of insight’ and is not to be effaced by adult know-how. It will keep alive its connections with the

earliest memories and events of childhood. It is hard to imagine any better way of promoting such insight, than by introducing the children to the best of the genre. In offering such choice our own qualities of imaginative depth and range, sense of humour, empathy for childhood and quickness of intuitive judgement, must be fully active, if we wish to reunite with Maggie Tulliver's "triple world of reality, books and waking dreams". David Copperfield's acuteness of touch and smell, as he looks into 'blank of my infancy' and recalls his earliest impressions; the quality of Jane Eyre's resistance against older oppressors; Seriozha's insistent efforts in *Anna Karenina* to make sense of the confusion caused by mother's absence; Paul Morel, Maggie Tulliver, Stephen Daedalus: these and many other examples come to the mind, as classic examples of portrayal of states of childhood. Not all of them are addressed to children, their art is characterized by a respect for child's existence, and for what Dickens termed in *Hard Times* as "the dreams of childhood – its airy fables; its graceful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond." Furthermore, the art of these writers and the quality of their concern for the child has had a powerful influence on the best among the many writers who have written exclusively, or especially for children, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are now, it is agreed, a considerable number of high quality books in this genre.

#### WHAT READERS ARE THEY?

Children represent a special kind of reading public for whom the distance between literature and life is very few yards. A prolific writer and critic of children's literature John Rowe Townsend has sought to enhance the status of the genre in proclaiming the morally educative qualities of good children's fiction. As a writer, and in a spirit of some resistance to the differing viewpoints of psychologists, sociologists and educationists, he has emphasized that YA literature should, like all literature offer enjoyment. But enjoyment of the best is, he claims, no easy pleasure; it ought to involve a stretching, a deepening of experience and heightening of awareness. He opines that the writer's task lies in respectful and affectionate nurturing of the young, and the cultivation in them of a disciplined and informed mind and heart. By contrast Joan Aiken, while acknowledging the educative moral-power of a well told tale, has dwelled on the iconoclastic, liberating, subversive qualities that a good YA book and a healthy child reader should have in common: "They can see through the adult with some moral axe to grind almost before he opens his mouth- the smaller the child, the sharper the instinct." Aiken, who acknowledges Blake, Dickens and Charlotte Bronte among the major influences on her own ample production of fiction writing for children, provides us here with a useful clue to an appropriate critical approach with YA books, which we might link with a view of innocence as being in itself a mode of insight.

The reasons are varied as why people read at all, and it is something perhaps for the familiarity of the unfamiliar that folks come to science fiction and fantasy. Those are indubitably highly liked wings of YA literature and two imperative developments in post war scenario that have attained a vast readership in the physique of 'teenage' novel. One can sense about the vein of these fictions, to depart from Zola-like realism in the novel. The factor, ought to be averted to and abiding, was a colossal trauma of WWII with its uses of occupation, secret police, mass terror, refugees and 'decisive weapons' like the fusion bomb. These became familiar horror legends, but for the British vicariously so. Their reappearance in the forms of fantasy or near-fantasy need cause no surprise. Factually, children's as well as Young Adult literature has 'come of age' in twentieth century, placing itself as a distinct stem in literature with affluently blurring

the genres; and now in this current century it is transforming and transgressing to meet the demands of the tech-savvy age.

### **GRIPPING SCI-FI: THE LEGACY**

Tech pivoted Science Fiction (sci-fi or SF in short), perhaps the most sought-after variety of writing for children and grownups, is the brightest face of propitious YA novel. They are indeed a great scheme for critical thinking lessons. Children and adults have interminably been stimulated by SF fantasies intertwined with the concept of mammoth void named as ‘space’, an enthrallment which has set imaginations alight as early as the 1920's. Legendary supplements in the time of war, like *Amazing Stories* (also popular with the name *Amazing Science Fiction*), in conjunction with men of letters H. G. Wells, George Orwell and Edgar Allen Poe enjoyed a new vogue. This trend of oeuvres later turned out to precipitate endowed figures such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert A. Heinlein and Phillip K. Dick. The mount of these legendary-at-present SF authors had accumulated for ‘golden age’ of science fiction in the '50s and such happenings got oxygen from various space explorations by unmanned robotic probes and human spaceflight. The ramifications that the space programme has had over study of science and inclination toward SF fantasy ought not to be de-emphasized. Having enthused kids across the world to take pleasure in the fantastical world of SF, quite a few of those publications firmly captivated their aims in life. They went to become scientists, with a yearning to revolve science fiction into scientific verity.

By now, souls who are engrossed in the extensive tenure of augmenting science and technology, look upon science fiction writings like a compelling basis of exploratory information and hence as a didactic apparatus. Regrettably, SF fantasy writing earned an awful standing as solely story-bound workings and not having any scientific logic system. In the present climate, books are classified as science fiction the minute a mutated ogre, creature from outer space or alien ship show their visage in the plot. A good deal of that pulp has performed like "the boy who cried wolf." In the bona fide science fiction genre, such a great number of fictions happened to be actuality in one form or another that in olden period, science fiction writers were deemed prophets. A fact like that nonetheless has become quite imperceptible because the freights of shallow fiction, what is docketed ‘posthuman’ or ‘transhuman’ (for conspicuous souk strategy), has been unloaded over it. It is the malediction of the publishing trade to manufacture so trashy things that a large audience will swallow. Albeit the avid reader smells the hitch: those writings are off-track to future, or they have messed up the advantageous note of that 'golden age'!

### **PEDDLING ‘POSTHUMAN’ AND BUSINESS BOOM**

Science fiction once looked to the future as the setting for speculation, though nowadays the focal point seems to be on alternate pasts/futures, artificially created realms, overcrowded earth, guild-ridden races, lack of grub, world in an eternal nuclear stalemate or consciously ‘retro’ upcoming. The overwhelmed scenario that the young reader gets easily now is a dystopic world of crushed values and agency where our posthuman Peter Pan will meet apocalyptic Alice on a waste(d) land with zilch emotions and full-throttled codified langue- no trust and full enmity. Philip K. Dick, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* warned against such situations long ago while writing about a device which will be able to ‘dial’ the perfect emotion (Dick, 7) as per the need of the hour. The writer for the future grownups, in this twenty first century, thinks so less positively about science and future that he takes the concept from the past but pastes on his script without talking about the tune underneath. YA or adult sci-fi is no longer showing the way to

what things might be like and the reasons is perhaps attached to the broad fright of decline and decompose in the Anglophone world. A science fiction and fantasy writer Jo Walton, who has won prestigious Nebula award and got nominated for Hugo, makes it loud and clear about this defective intention: "...there used to be a science fiction consensus future in which we'd expand slowly out from Earth and colonize the moon and Mars and the Belt, which would be full of independent-minded asteroid miners, and outward to the stars, at first slower and then faster than light, meeting aliens and ending with galactic empires. The Cold War, naturally, would still be going on in the twenty-sixth century, and if not there would be some Cold War analogy dividing humanity into big ideological blocs. Lots of the SF written between 1930 and 1989 fit into this rough future outline. It didn't belong to anyone. Everyone could set things within this rough future and make their own specific corner of it shine. Details differed, but this was The Future we were headed for, this was almost destiny....but I can't think of anything else written this century that is."

Quite interestingly, in the publishing industry, one of the most absorbing developments over the last decade had been the flare-up of the young adult (YA) fiction, particularly the science fiction and fantasy genres. To quote L.A. Miller, author of science fiction and fantasy YA books: "Young adult fiction is booming even as the rest of the publishing industry struggles in this economy and wrestles with the advent of e-books, perhaps the biggest game changer since the paperback book." Parallel writings that tender an alternate reality—one analogous to our own but terrifyingly different—are especially popular with readers. Indeed the children's science-fiction/fantasy segment is not only achieving market share but has tripled its escalation tempo. Children's e-books, a category that includes young-adult fiction like the hugely popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, grew 12 percent in 2011, to \$2.78 billion from \$2.48 billion in 2010, reports *The New York Times*. *The Wall Street Journal* informed that Hollywood studios have been grabbing the rights to science-fiction and fantasy YA book series, especially those that offer the potential for movie sequels and profitable licensing opportunities such as toys, clothes, collectibles, and memorabilia.

### FANTASY, ALL THE MORE

If there's an item that SF readers despise, it's a lot of lustrous miraculous gibberish that explains all. But unmistakably a good number of bookworms are cosy enough with that. Peer to sci-fi, the fantasy also has seen a win-win situation in recent decades. Nevertheless the dubiety remains the same for the fantastic. In one of the most successful fantasies of all time, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the many opportunities to enjoy fantasist escape are presented in clear tension with the actual experience and constraints of a child's real world. In short the fantasizing spirit is never given the complete license to evade confrontation with real events. Carroll recognized, as did Coleridge that without such disciplining tension there is a danger that fantasy might feed parasitically on the store of imagination, weakening its capacity to give shape to actual experience. The widely read *Narnia* books (1950-56) by C. S. Lewis and R. Tolkien's three volume *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have successfully made into films (*The Hobbit's* final part of the trilogy is in making) with huge Box Office grosses. They have achieved almost cult status both among children and adults. Yet it is arguable that both of these writers are thorough-going fantasists, in the terms that Coleridge feared: each betrays a need to control, to manipulate their would-be myths and legends to a degree which can make reading of their work a most dissatisfying experience, for an adult reader. Colin Nicholas Manlove has explored the limitations of fantasy in *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* which includes studies on Tolkien and



Lewis. He clearly speaks for a lack of “inner consistency of reality” in such works, which means, even classic writers like Tolkien and others use fantasy to wall off any tangible experience that attests to be inopportune to their vision.

### CAN WE HELP?

Obviously, the mythic, the extraterrestrial and the exploratory are not so much an everyday occurrence: but being a set of writing well-attached to kids, it needs alert and responsive eyeball of the grownups. We cannot agree on what things come over the book industry, but can try to verify what comes over the desks/screens of young folks. Streaming alongside the punks and other pulps, which do not stick on to the "policy" of proper science fiction and fantasy, the genre has really suffered a loss of reputation. Therefore the approach should be to de-stereotype the genre, limited though. People may charge Hollywood, or simply mass media and cultural industries all in all, unfortunately though, bickering itself would not assist at all (even though it is amusing occasionally). On home front, the adults enormously need to hold up the aptitude of little fellows as they own immeasurable prospective to envision and to meddle with actuality and fancy. Besides, it could be proposed to read science fiction written by the kids themselves. *Teen Ink* has a book with some SF stories written by teenagers, though only a few such books are there. Why not have a science fiction short story writing competition? The aim should be straight: explain science fiction, how unlike it is from fantasy and far-fetched narratives, give them some ideas, let them study a handful of short stories of well-known authors and let them write themselves. Sci-fi can arrive at the level of future reality (or close to it), however for a existent tomorrow to take place akin to these ethics is a world that will web very closely with the whole species. If not taken earnestly then colossal heterogeneous war while being separated means far more deaths.

### BOOKS ARE THERE ‘FOR GOOD’

The modern concepts of childhood in the present century were built on the intelligent, largely anti-determinist concern for children that had long been enshrined in folk-lore, and which was highly developed by Blake, Dickens, Bronte and others. Books like *Jane Eyre* have had a very special influence on the development of YA literature, particularly through feminine writers and through girl characters in their books. Jane reveals typical ‘romantic’ virtues of innocence, vulnerability and patience, transparency, honest laughter and grief; above all she has courage and good sense. These qualities and several other virtues of ordinary, inner and outer normality are also to be found in what is virtually earliest classic and still widely read text written for children, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. This recapitulation dares never to overlook such pioneers in YA literature as Maria Edgeworth, the Lambs and Catharine Sinclair, whose *Holiday House* offered tremendous entertainments. A very special mention is required here of Reverend Charles Kingsley also. His *The Water Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* was written as a part satire in shoring up Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. The book was extremely popular in Britain for many decades but gradually had fallen beyond its readership as living text into literary history, just like a few above-mentioned others.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century children’s/ YA books became established as a distinct market for the writers with many sub-genres growing up: boys’ adventures (Marayat, Kingsley, Stevenson), school tales (Hughes, T.R. Reed), animal stories (Anna Sewell, Rudyard Kipling), fairy tales (Charlotte Yonge), fantasies (Carroll) &c. Enthralling pieces like *Wood Magic* and *Bevis* by Richard Jefferies are hard to classify, although his contribution has been

notable in describing landscape and spirit of place. The high time for children's writing was yet to come in Edwardian times, and many of these creators and a lot more were busy writing classics. The new talents to join them were notably Edith Nesbit, Kenneth Grahame and J. M. Barrie. *The Railway Children* has remained a firm masterpiece since it came in 1906 from the pen of Edith Nesbit. We can also and always remember pieces like *The Wind in the Willows* and *Peter Pan and Wendy* by Grahame and Barrie respectively. Later figures like A. A. Milne, John Buchan, Alison Uttley and most prolific perhaps John Masefield as well as Arthur Ransome (whose *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* is one of the outstanding works in YA fiction) brought new varieties in adventures involving both girls and boys. In their pieces we can find layers of interest and metaphoric suggestions which deserve the attention of readers of any age.

### THE PRESENT: SPECULATIVE ABOUT SF

Though sci-fi beginnings can be well back to the days of *Gulliver's Travels* or a fully grown *Frankenstein*, in current days one should pick out cautiously, and for children, more so. A fit exemplar can be Stanislaw Lem's *Cyberiad* and *Fables and Robots*, because there are a lot of amusing short stories about two robots trying to build perfect machines and 'happy worlds'. Besides, why not take a look into the realm of (now somehow less popular) 'speculative' fictions? It applies to work that answers the question "What if...?", and it is also functional to fiction measured more 'literary' in quality that includes essentials of SF or fantasy. Instances include Nicholas Christopher's *Veronica* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Within science fiction, the term speculative fiction refers to novels that focus less on advances in technology and more on issues of social change, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Jack Faust* by Michael Swanwick. Often times people name them 'soft' sci-fi which apparently sounds derogatory, and in the view of Peter Nicholls (ed. *the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*): "...not a very precise item of SF terminology." They explore social sciences and are often much apprehensive about characters and imaginary/ alter societies rather than 'hard' sciences—engineering, astronomy or physics. A book like *Nineteen Eighty Four* that talks about relationships, politics and society getting altered by merciless technology, is the ideal sample. It handles the many tropes of 'hard' sciences and then-future, although inflexibly maintains an ever-present realistic touch. Reading any of these variety of paperbacks can knit something constructive and positive among children, and also prick them about that 'mode of insight', what this paper already have a discussion above.

### MEASURE 'TO MEASURE'

"We think therefore we are". By means of the initiatives like SF education to teach children a future that is fine-looking owing to the indispensable requirements being met and breathing life only to improve one, there is an excellent prospect about future and future citizens. Children will think towards that, desire it, yearn for it, and in due course after a few generations of assessment, it will be readily available in full outcome.

Hope it hits home that upcoming improvements of the hi-tech 'smart' world, along with politico-social affairs be assigned as a requisite element of schooling from the earliest possible age. When children are 13 to 16, whatever they have in their knapsack, they surf with that. Discovery of the 'boy-girl' relations along with amplified mobility and freedoms take up the central arena. So, if aware adults want them to be critical thinkers, it needs to be done from the age of 4 or so, bit by bit reinforcing. In successfully carrying out so, people would grow

flabbergasted by the veracity and speculative orientation the adolescent brood can present. Perhaps it is not too risky to opine such gesture as a sturdy toting up to humankind's innovative lines of thought overall as a genus. In spite of everything, the grown-ups can never complement a youngster's instinctive gift of fabrication, which as an asset might influence some advancement to human.

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