
Post-disaster fiction for young adults: some trends and variations

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Post-disaster fictions can be used to make a comment on a vast number of topics.

(James 2009, p.154)

Taking as its central question: ‘What narrative functions does the disaster in young adult post-disaster fiction have?’, this paper explores how the genre is utilised to make comment on a range of issues, and argues that there are three connected sub-genres within young adult post-disaster fiction, with the disaster having a different function in each, and the nature of the comments made by each of these sub-genres tending also to be different. Stephens considers that: ‘The main distinguishing feature of the genre is that its texts are set in a fantasy future which exists some time after the world we know has been destroyed by a cataclysmic disaster, usually caused by human actions’ (1992, p.126). This paper broadens this definition to include texts in which the disaster actually happens but in which the focus is on life *after* the disaster. It understands fantasy to include speculative fiction which seeks to portray pre-disaster life as similar to the implied young adult reader’s, as well as works of high fantasy in which the disaster has made Earth into a kind of secondary world (see Sands 1998, p.232), and focuses on novels in which the disaster has clearly been caused by humans in some way.

Although there are earlier examples of texts such as Martel’s *The City Underground* (1964), young adult post-disaster fiction as a genre developed around the same time as young adult fiction (see James, 2009, p.156), which is to use Dubrow’s term, its ‘host genre’ (1982, p.116). This is no coincidence, because the nature of young adult fiction makes the post-disaster scenario ideally suited to be played out in its texts. Trites’ insights into adolescent/young adult literature give a particular clue as to why this is the case:

[A]dolescent literature seems to delegitimize adolescents ... even though the surface of most YA novels is ostensibly to legitimize adolescence. Texts accomplish this delegitimization by conveying frequently to readers the ideological message that they need to grow up, to give up the subject position culturally marked ‘adolescent.’ In order to mature, they need to murder the parent who represses their power, regardless of whether that parent is actual, surrogate, or imaginary, so that they can fully enter into the Symbolic Order.

(2000, p.83)

It seems almost too obvious to be worth stating that a disaster provides a perfect narrative opportunity for the ‘murder [of] the parent who repress[es] [the adolescent’s] power’, even if it is not the adolescent him- or herself who does the actual killing. Young adult post-disaster fiction also plays out the tension that Trites notes above, that the young adult protagonist must both rebel against parents while at the same time acquiescing to the ‘ideological wisdom’ of the adult narrator and/or implied author.

It could also be argued that the huge volume of post-disaster texts for young adults since the late 1960s is at least in part because of adults expecting youth to overthrow them, and at the same time admitting that they expect adolescents to improve the world conditions that adults themselves can not fix. In relation to the nuclear threat, Ratcliff identifies the change in attitudes towards young people from their being ‘passive recipients of cultural messages’ in the 1950s to ‘potential saviors and vocal dissenters’ in the 1980s (1998 p.8). The late 1960s, which saw the birth of young adult fiction as a genre, and post-disaster fiction within it, were a time in which, as Ratcliff writes ‘Many different battles were being fought by teenage activists on many different cultural fronts’ (1998 p. 42). The combination of youth as a powerful force, and the failure of adult promises to make the world safer and better through such means as nuclear energy, made fertile ground for the developing genre of young adult post-disaster fiction.

A further link between the post-disaster scenario and young adult fiction can be seen in Kristeva’s explication of adolescence:

I understand by the term ‘adolescent’ less an age category than an open psychic structure. ... [T]he adolescent structure opens itself to the repressed at the same time that it initiates a psychic reorganization of the individual — thanks to a tremendous loosening of the superego. ... In the aftermath of the oedipal stabilization of subjective identity, the adolescent again questions his [sic] identifications, along with his [sic] capacities for speech and symbolization. The search for a new love object reactivates the depressive position and the manic attempts at its resolution — from perversion to toxicomanias, global religions, and ideological adhesions.
(1990, pp.8–9)

Post-disaster fiction enables, even demands, an ‘open psychic structure’ of its protagonist. With no world against which to measure him- or herself, or with a clearly dystopian social structure that can offer no hope, the young protagonist cannot help but experience a ‘psychic reorganisation’, even if the aftermath of such reorganisation proves to be adherence to a pre-existing set of values except in a different guise. Stephens writes that ‘[c]ontemporary Western social ideologies condition us to value personal freedom, innovation, self-realization and self-expression’ (1996, p.28), and the post-disaster scenario foregrounds the young adult protagonist’s struggle to achieve these goals often through extreme and life-threatening situations in which innovation, for example, or the lack of it can mean the difference between life and death, and the struggle to achieve ‘self-realization and self-expression’ can have far-reaching effects on the society as well as the protagonist.

Stephens speaks of the ‘nexus of personal and public histories’ in post-disaster fiction for young adults (1992, p.128), and the future for the young adult protagonist in the genre is in many instances closely bound up with the future of society or even humanity. Ann Burden’s journey, which began at the end of O’Brien’s *Z for Zachariah*, is not just about Ann herself reaching her goal of finding a new community and teaching children, it is about the hope for the future of the

world. The destruction of the dystopian society in Macdonald's *The Lake at the End of the World* is about more than the liberation of its remaining inhabitants: it is about freedom, moving forward and hope which implicitly apply to more than just the characters directly involved. And protagonists such as Elpseth in Carmody's *Obernewtyn* chronicles, and Val in Forman's *Doomsday Plus Twelve* have missions to stop a second disaster which may be even worse than the first.

Kristeva writes that the adolescent subject 'only seeks because he [*sic*] is convinced that [the object of desire] *must exist*. *The adolescent is not a researcher in a laboratory, he's [*sic*] a believer*' (2007, p.717, emphasis in the original). The passionate, believing nature of the adolescent is ideally suited to the post-disaster scenario because the scenario is predicated on belief that a better future is possible: Within the narrative itself, this is in connection with the future of life after the disaster, but, as will be argued below, a number of post-disaster texts position their young readers to try to work towards preventing the disaster itself from becoming reality and thus to make a better future than that which the text is suggesting.

In order to survive in the post-disaster world, young adults are often forced to grow up very quickly, and hence, as Trites observes above about the YA genre in general, are not permitted to 'maintain the subject position culturally marked "adolescent"'. Simple day-to-day survival in many instances means that the young protagonist has to take on such traditionally adult responsibilities such as finding food and defending against physical threat (for example, in *Z for Zachariah*). In texts set many years after the disaster, controlling dystopian authorities often try to quell the adolescent's quest for self realisation (for example, *The Inheritors*). And for certain protagonists, being entrusted with the mission to prevent a second disaster means that they cannot afford to succumb to the 'depressive position and the manic attempts at its resolution' outlined by Kristeva, even though finding out who they are as people can be, as discussed above, tied up with the solving of a quest with wider significance.

This is further complicated by the fact that adults as a generation are no longer to be trusted: even though individual ones might be, the disaster has been brought about by those in authority either directly or indirectly, and so 'identifications' with adult figures become more difficult. The 'search for a new love object' often manifests itself as the search for a community to which the young person can belong, a mission to which the young person can commit wholeheartedly, the search for a romantic partner, or a combination of all three. As Bradford et al write, post-disaster fictions for young readers often conclude with "boy-and-girl on their way to a new, utopian beginning" (2008, p.14).

This theme of a utopian beginning approached with the beloved highlights the notion of ideality which Kristeva argues is a feature of adolescence. She contends that adolescence is informed by a tendency to idealize the love object as a way to overthrow (in Freudian terms, 'murder') the parent:

*Because he [*sic*] believes that the other, surpassing the parental other, not only exists but that he or she provides him [*sic*] with absolute satisfaction, the adolescent believes that the Great Other exists and is pleasure itself.*

(Kristeva 2007, p 719, emphasis in the original).

The love object in young adult post disaster fiction is not necessarily a romantic partner: it can also be a way of life, a sense of belonging, a quest to be fulfilled. Whatever its form, this notion of ‘absolute satisfaction’ that the ‘Great Other’ can produce is a driving force for many a young adult post disaster protagonist. This is discussed more fully below.

Various critics have noted that the type of disaster featured in post-disaster texts has changed from predominantly nuclear during the Cold War years to environmental concerns, genetic engineering, disease pandemics in more recent years (see Johnson 1999–2000, p.88; Bradford et al 2008, p.13; James 2009, p.155). This paper argues that the disaster has a range of functions across the genre, some of which are connected to perceived social fears contemporaneous with the text’s production, others of which are not.

Sub-genres in young adult post-disaster fiction

The disaster in young adult post-disaster fiction tends to have one of three narrative functions, which points to three connected sub-genres: ‘survivor’, ‘social order’ and ‘quest/adventure’. Most young adult post-disaster texts have aspects of all three sub-genres¹, but because of the way in which the disaster is used in relation to the narrative structure, tend to sit most clearly in one of the sub-genres.

Survivor texts

One of these sub-genres may be termed ‘survivor’ because the function of the disaster is to create a situation in which the young adult protagonist and other survivors of the disaster have to struggle with simply staying alive. Many, although certainly not all², of the young adult narratives produced in the Cold War years about nuclear disaster fit into this category, including O’Brien’s *Z for Zachariah* (1974), Pausewang’s *The Last Children* (1983), Swindells’ *Brother in the Land* (first published 1984), the first section of Lawrence’s *Children of the Dust* (1985), Miklowitz’s *After the Bomb* (1985), Strieber’s *Wolf of Shadows* (1985), Barbara and Scott Siegel’s *The Burning Land* (1987), Godfrey’s *The Last War* (1986), Sanford’s *Nuclear War Diary* (c. 1989), Scott’s *Why Weeps the Brogan?* (1989). Because of the abruptness of nuclear disaster and the resultant capacity for it to be used to contrast before and after life, which is one of the key features of the sub-genre, most of the survivor texts do involve nuclear catastrophe and I will therefore focus on these texts. However, there are survivor texts such as Ure’s *Plague 99* and Christopher’s *When the Tripods Came*, which are centre on the aftermath of different sorts of disasters, and it would be an interesting study to compare and contrast these texts with those that involve nuclear disaster.

Many texts give some kind of general flaw in human behaviour or reasoning as the real cause of the disaster. In nuclear texts, it is often not clear whether the disaster was war or an accident—as Glazer points out ‘Once the devastation has begun, specifics of its origin no longer matter’ (1986, p.87). The guide figure, Branwell, in Swindells’ *Brother in the Land* gives a lessening reverence for life as the reason for the nuclear disaster (2000, p.76). In Godfrey’s *The Last War*, Angel gives pride as the reason for the bombs:

A million people died, bleeding from every hole in their bodies because the ones who built and dropped the bombs thought they were human. Little babies were melted into the sidewalk because of pride.

(1989, p.33–4)

The notion of self-centredness as the reason behind the bombs existing at all is also suggested in *The Last Children* as the real reason for the disaster:

But what would it change if I were to accuse [my father], along with almost everyone else in his generation, of simply looking on while others were preparing the annihilation of mankind? Or of always giving the lame excuse, 'How can we do anything to change it?' and pointing out that such fearful weapons guaranteed peace, precisely because they were so terrible? Or of wanting comfort and prosperity more than anything else?

(1989, p.121, emphasis in the original)

In a passage clearly addressed to the implied teenage reader, *After the Bomb* draws a link between having nuclear weapons at all, tensions within the family, and the danger of focusing only on one's own small existence:

If even brothers couldn't agree, how could countries? ... He guessed that if life ever returned to something like normal, he'd be a bit more tuned in to what was happening in the world. And maybe he'd even try to do something, somehow. He didn't know what, exactly— but something to stop grown-ups from playing 'chicken' with bombs.

(1985, p.155)

Hope for the future often relies on the Kristevan notion of adolescent as believer, who does not doubt the existence of the Great Other. Ann Burden, in O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah*, passionately believes that the children she longs to teach exist, as part of another community who will welcome her (in contrast to the bullying way Mr Loomis has treated her), and thus can set out to find them. Danny's love for Kim in *Brother in the Land* gives him the strength to go on living, even after his brother has died, despite what 'they' have done with the bombs. And Sarah in the first part of *Children of the Dust* has no doubt about the vision for a better future articulated by the old man Johnson, to whom she entrusts her small half-sister knowing that she herself is dying,

This notion of the adolescent as believer in the Great Other, which in post-disaster texts usually involved the better way of being that supplants that provided by the adult generation as a whole, can even pervade texts in which it is clear that the protagonist is going to die. At the end of *The Last Children*, Roland explains that the children trust him because he was not part of the generation that caused the disaster, and he also explains the kind of future that the children must have as the last survivors. The reader is positioned to believe that if his or her generation could follow these tenets, the disaster may not happen at all:

There are so many things more important than reading, writing and arithmetic that I absolutely have to teach them: they must want a life without looting, stealing and killing. They must learn to respect each other again, and to give help where help is needed. They must learn to talk with each other and work together to find solutions to their problems, instead of immediately striking out at one another. They must feel responsible for each other. They must love each other. Their world must be a peaceful one — even though it will not last long. For these are the last children of Schevenborn.

(1988, p. 122)

As Sambell points out, in futuristic fiction, ‘Romantic conceptions of childhood lead the children’s author to represent childhood as an antidote to corrupt adulthood, as well as seeing childhood as being at the mercy of it’ (2004, p.252). Glazer similarly notes that although it is unlikely that the young characters could have prevented the disaster even if they had been more attuned to what was happening in the wider world, ‘they are presented as possibly capable of creating a different and better future’ (1986, p.87).

The notion of adolescents creating a better world than that made by adults is overtly articulated in a number of texts. Phil, in the section from *After the Bomb* quoted above, provides one such example. Struggling to survive after a nuclear holocaust, teenagers Matt and Danielle are offered a can of tuna by an elderly woman who says ‘Maybe you’ll do better with this world than my generation did’ (Siegel & Siegel 1987, p.99). And Robert Swindells, author of *Brother in the Land*, makes it even more clear that he expects adolescents to be the saviours of the world when he writes in the Afterword to the 1986 edition of the novel: ‘The hope — the one hope — is that your generation will prove wiser and more responsible than mine, and that the bombs will not fall’ (1986, p.153).

The idea of young adults as saviours, by virtue of their young adulthood, is perhaps the reason that, with the exception of texts such as Strieber’s *Wolf of Shadows*, which is focalised through a wolf, the main character in survivor texts is usually a young adult who tends to be portrayed as ‘ordinary’ in terms of the text’s ideology. Texts in which the disaster has come about through human action can often be presented as what Tebbutt terms ‘operative literature, since they are attempting to propel the reader towards making moves to help change society’ (1994, p.207). This ‘propelling’ is frequently done through positioning their implied young adult reader to see the world into which the disaster comes as a recognisable version of her or his own world, and to be horrified by the contrast between that world and the havoc wreaked upon it by the disaster. As Mutton writes of Swindells’ *Brother in the Land*:

Identification with Danny, and therefore with the views expressed by the author in the novel, is assured when Danny is revealed to be a very ordinary person within an ordinary family. His situation is probably very much like that of the reader. The author’s message is that what can happen to Danny can happen to anyone. Take heed lest the situation in the novel become reality.

(1987, p.3)

An ‘ordinary’ young person, according to the implicit values of *Brother in the Land* and many other survivor novels, comes from a nuclear family (even if that family is no longer intact), goes to school, has ambitions for the future which usually involve career and marriage, and likes the trappings of Western capitalist lifestyle such as television. The texts thus have the potential to disenfranchise those readers who do not fit into that particular paradigm.

A construction of middle class ordinariness (the language suggests the protagonists are higher up the social tree than Danny’s family in *Brother in the Land*) is a key feature of Hugh Scott’s *Why Weeps the Brogan?*, which creates a variation on the survivor young adult post-disaster novel in several ways. Two children are trapped in a museum after nuclear disaster and have a supply of food, but the real threat to them is loss of sanity. Unlike most survivor novel protagonists, Saxon and Gilbert do not have a clear sense of pre-disaster life, and the reader can only glean it through the language the children use as they make rituals to help them survive.

The children's subliminal memories provide the basis for how they manage to stay alive. This is particularly clear at mealtimes, in which the children's interchanges invoke a conservative family which is polite, requesting food by saying "You may spread me a second roll", and requesting drink by saying "You may pour me a third coffee" (1989, p.9) That the question about the children's other name is raised over such a meal also suggests a default nuclear family in which people care for each other and in which identity comes about through relationships typified by a shared name:

He spread her roll. She poured his coffee.

'What is our other name?' asked Gilbert, startling Saxon.

'I can't remember,' sighed Saxon. 'Keep asking. It will return when my thoughts are loose.'

'We do have another name?'

'I think so. Yes. There are so many unremembered things.'

(Scott 1991, p.9)

The 'unremembered things' in *Why Weeps the Brogan?* are the keys to the children's survival and ultimate freedom from their crumbling world, culminating in the realisation of the Brogan's true identity—their mother. Just after the Brogan falls to her death, and Saxon and Gilbert lie 'weeping for something found then lost in a heartbeat' (Scott1991, p. 102), Saxon 'suddenly kn[ows] many things' (Scott1991, p. 102). What she knows, however, is not simply what has led to their being in the museum (the disaster), but her separation from her mother enables Saxon to articulate in words the answer which she and Gilbert have sought: their last name. It is no coincidence that there is no adult male figure in the dark, womb-like, imaginary of the museum, in which the only language is that appropriated from a time to which there is no return. In order to find the answer to who she is, Saxon, following the model of adolescence articulated by Kristeva above, must 'open [her]self to the repressed' through opening her mind to the past she has shut out.

Social order texts

The disaster can also be used to create a scenario in which a particular kind of society develops. These texts may be considered to constitute a second sub-genre within young adult post-disaster fiction, which I term 'social order' texts. Such texts are usually set many years after the disaster, when a new society has been established, usually a dystopia. Baccolini writes that the function of a dystopia

is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society. Dystopia, therefore, is usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world.

(2003, p.115)

The narrative scenario tends to be that the protagonist is or becomes at odds with that society and must decide whether to succumb to the social order, to leave it, or to stay and try to reform it. Texts in this sub-genre include Kesteven's *The Pale Invaders*, the second section of Lawrence's *Children of the Dust*, Dobson's *The Inheritors*, Ure's *After the Plague* (first published as *Come Lucky April*) and *Watchers at the Shrine*, Lowry's *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*.

As Baccolini's definition suggests, texts set in a dystopia comment on what is presumed to be the reader's world. They do this in a very different way from survivor texts because the function of

the disaster in social order texts is usually to create a particular kind of society which is often critiqued within the text largely through the journey towards agency of the young adult protagonist. The adolescent protagonist in social order texts usually has had no actual experience of pre-disaster life, so must rely on descriptions from adults who have, and the descriptions of pre-disaster life given by the authorities in his or her society. One of the ways in which dystopian authorities maintain their control is by presenting pre-disaster life as essentially negative, and the young adult protagonist in a dystopian society must often deconstruct that image to come to a more balanced view as part of his or her path to redemption. Such texts tend therefore to be critical dystopias, in that they ‘allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work’ (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, p.7). This is not unexpected, given the tendency of young adult fiction to have at least the possibility of a positive outcome (see James 2009, p.156) and it also connects with Kristeva’s link between adolescence and ideality.

Whereas the disaster in survivor texts is almost invariably seen by everyone as negative, some disasters in social order texts were actually attempts at improvement. For example, the decision to go to Sameness in Lowry’s *The Giver* was an attempt to solve the problem of food shortage, but the reader is positioned to see that the cost in terms of choice, freedom, and ‘being human’, has been far greater than the advantages. Similarly, the reader is positioned to see that, even though there has been ecological devastation, the real disaster in Anderson’s *Feed* has been the feed itself, which when first available was seen as a wonderful opportunity for children’s education (2002, p.39), but has made the majority of people controlled, dependent and unable to think for themselves. The feed is indicative of the way the reader’s society is implied to be heading: towards increased consumerism and the reluctance of individuals to think for themselves. This is emphasised in the dedication within the book: ‘*To all those who resist the feed*’ (italics in the original) — followed by the initials of the author.

In social order texts, the post-disaster way of life has usually been established well before the narrative begins (unlike in survivor texts). The texts thus usually conform to the schemata for dystopian texts outlined by Baccolini and Moylan (2003, p.5) in that they ‘begin directly in the terrible new world ... [and the] focus is frequently on a character who questions the dystopian society’. The social order is often highly structured and controlled, and is usually very hierarchical. It frequently defines itself against perceived trends in pre-disaster life, such as in Hoover’s *Children of Morrow* in which the society is built on an anti-technology worldview because it was believed that technology caused the disaster. Whether it is constructed on the principles of opposing what was seen to lead to the disaster, as in the feminist dystopia of *After the Plague*, or is a manifestation of the disaster, as in *The Giver* or *Feed*, the focus of the post-disaster society tends to be on control and on maintaining itself as it is. This can create a natural opposition with the adolescent protagonist, who is on a trajectory of growth. It also creates an opposition between past and present, and present and future: the dystopian authorities want to maintain their post-disaster status quo, whereas the protagonist often comes to realise that he or she must look to the past in order to have direction for the future. As Baccolini writes, ‘in the critical dystopia ... history is central and necessary for the development of resistance and the maintenance of hope, even when it is a dystopian history that is remembered; (2003, p.116). In *The Giver*, access to memories is presented as the way forward to wisdom for the society in which Jonas has grown up (1995, p.154-157), Claudia in *The Inheritors* finds that her ‘vague longings’ come to centre on ‘the chaos and depravity of the Old World’ (1988, p.125), and a

combination of knowledge of the past and a greater understanding to prevent the disaster happening again is seen as the way forward in G. R. Kesteven's *The Pale Invaders* (1979, p.155).

Nonetheless, the dystopian social orders are sometimes described in the narrative in such a way that it is very difficult for the reader simply to dismiss the social order as being completely wrong. As Stephens writes of *After the Plague*:

The utopian claims of the Croydon society are undermined by our own twentieth-century perspectives, since we are forced to recognize that their history is a construction of events and experiences partly falsified and partly exaggerated by the ideology it is designed to serve. At the same time, the real tendency towards violent and sexist behaviour in contemporary society cannot be ignored just because its incidence is being exaggerated.

(1996, p.28)

At first glance, a society which castrates its males at puberty on the grounds that most of the violence throughout history has been caused by men might seem a society that can be easily dismissed by a reader as ridiculous, but as Stephens points out, the violence and sexism of late twentieth century society cannot be ignored. The alternative society offered in the text, that of Daniel, is clearly also repressive and sexist in a different way and thus the text offers no simple binary alternative.

As in Ure's text, most dystopian social orders are founded on the premise of 'freedom from', as opposed to 'freedom to'. Fromm explains that the two types of freedom are very different: a person can be free of constraints, be they obviously negative or the 'sweet bondage of paradise' (1994, p.34), without necessarily being 'free to govern [her- or] himself, to realize [her or] his individuality' (1994, p.34). To be willing to suffer but also to grow is the choice that many social order protagonists finally realise they need to make. To suffer and to grow also enable the protagonist to love, as Jonas finds in *The Giver*, and they give the protagonist the opportunity to make individual choices.

This distinction between freedom from and freedom to is at the heart of the young adult protagonist's fight in dystopian social order novels. Most of the dystopian authorities rely for their power on the notion promoted in their society that because their citizens are free *from* the problems that plagued their forebears (usually their pre-disaster forebears), those citizens therefore ought to be happy. The protagonist in social order novels often has to learn to take the step from secure and restricting childhood to risky but potentially satisfying adulthood, but it is not a construction of adulthood valued by the dystopia (which usually means conforming to society's rules), but rather it is one that values independence, close relationships, and responsibility. The opposition between enquiring adolescent and passive adult is clearly articulated in a comment made by one of the young adult protagonists in Maguire's *I Feel Like the Morning Star*:

'Isn't it strange that four hundred people have stopped dreaming for five years? Except Sorb, weird [young adult] Sorb. Lisopressed Sorb. Maybe kids are lisopressed [given the chemical equivalent of a lobotomy] because they're still brave enough to fear, or antsy enough to dream.'

(1989, p.131)

The tension between rebelling against parents (metaphorically ‘murdering’ them) and complying with the ideological stance of the narrator or implied author is particularly clear in social order texts. For example, Jonas in *The Giver* has to learn to lie to his parents as part of his trajectory towards becoming the saviour (in terms of the text’s ideology) of his society. *The Inheritor*’s Claudia has a mother immersed in self pity, and it takes little to stand up to her, but in order to facilitate her own freedom, and potentially that of other people, from the Dome (physically as well as metaphorically) Claudia must also learn to lie to her mentor Kate. And Dwight Allison in the second part of *Children of the Dust* chooses to cut himself off from his father, and the life he has known, in order to try to build a better future than has been in the bunker in which he was born. Each of these characters is assisted by a guide figure who articulates the ideological stance of the text: for Jonas, it is the Giver, who bestows wisdom on Jonas by giving him access to the memories denied by their society; for Claudia, it is Mrs Winston, who paints a very different picture of pre-disaster life from that portrayed by the officials in the Dome and who thereby enables Claudia to see that it is the ‘Old World’ for which she longs; and for Dwight Allison, it is Bill Harnden (the father of Ophelia, through whom the section is focalised) who teaches him to think and to be true to himself rather than acquiesce to the bullying control of rank.

The danger of control, and of acquiescing to control, is one of the key comments that social order young adult post-disaster texts tend to make. As with survivor texts, the salvation of the young adult is often tied to the future of society but whereas in survivor texts this tends to be related simply to keeping alive, in social order texts the focus is on how society is structured and on the relationship between society and the individual.

Quest/adventure texts

A third function of the disaster is to create a scenario in which a particular quest or adventure can be played out. Texts in this sub-genre I have termed ‘quest/adventure’. There tends to be a wider variety of texts within this sub-genre, including texts such as Reeve’s *Hungry Cities* quartet and Caroline Stevermer’s *River Rats* with their strong comic elements, texts such as Forman’s *Doomsday Plus Twelve* which uses a series of events from the life of Joan of Arc as a pre-text for its young adult protagonist’s quest to stop a second nuclear disaster, and texts such as Odo Hirsch’s *Will Buster and the Gelmet Helmet* in which the disaster itself is comic—the ‘Wizard Wars’ which came about because of the popularity of a fictional character called Iggy Spotter.

The nature of the disaster usually affects the type of quest or adventure in the narrative. This is true of survivor and social order novels as well, of course, but with quest/adventure novels the question is usually less a matter of survival or negotiation with a particular social order than it is with dealing with a task at hand. Stoutenburg’s *Out There* is a clear example of this, in which wars and environmental devastation have created the landscape which leads the children to want to go on a quest, in which they are led by keen conservationist Aunt Zeb, to find animals in the wild (1971, p.13). Likewise, the disaster in Shearer’s *The Hunted* creates a scenario in which it is dangerous to be a child. The disaster is that viruses have developed as a by-product of the cures to illness and aging that have been discovered, and these viruses have caused widespread infertility. Young Tarrin’s quest is to find his real parents, and the text offers comment on contemporary discourses of parenting and childhood, and the nature of being a child. As Deet, the person who has control of Tarrin and who rents him out to infertile couples, explains to a potential client:

'You can take him for a walk, take him for a burger Or you can take him to feed the ducks, take him to the park, play on the swings, skim stones across the pond — you can show him how, like a real dad, you know what I'm saying?'

(2005, p.15)

A very different kind of world is created by the disaster in Laurence James' *Dark Future* quartet. It is the kind of quasi-medieval world described by Stephens and McCallum

which actively rejects social formations and technological artefacts reminiscent of the predestruction (that is, late twentieth-century) world and embraces values of community, loyalty and altruism.

(1998, p.155)

The disaster in the Dark Futures quartet has come about through an earthquake causing the explosion of nuclear reactors built along fault lines (James 1992a, p.39–40), and the character recounting the disaster declares “‘Taught them, dinnit. Used to say that windmills was for hippies and nukes for real people. Stupid” (James 1992a, p.40). In other words, don't assume that nuclear power will always behave as humans think it will, for even just by having it, disaster can come.

Other than this brief sermon on the evils of elements of pre-disaster thought, the main function of the disaster in James' quartet is to provide a setting in which various quests can be played out, and the major young characters brought towards a construction of masculine maturity that values courage and mateship, but at the same time sensitivity. For the young men in this world the 'Great Other' is their friendship group, their sense of belonging. In *The Horned God*, for example, the quest is to rescue Jon's father, but it becomes necessary to rescue (in best chivalrous style) the viperish Gemma. Before the rescue attempt begins, a moment of prayerful mateship is held, when mysticism is valued but specific deities are not: “‘I don't much care whether you pray to the old ones, or the Christ or Mary or an old iron pot. But let's ask for some help in this” (James 1992b, p.106). The experience of closeness, silently moving lips, gripping hands one with another, bows softly rattling and feet which 'shuffled in the icy dirt' brings young Rame to feel 'closer to real manhood than at any time before' (James 1992b, p.106). Physical tenacity in difficult conditions, weapons at the ready but only for when needed, a belief in something bigger than oneself, and an unspoken closeness with one's fellow men (literally) highlight the construction of positive masculinity underpinning all four novels.

However, the exact nature of the disaster in quest/adventure novels is not always clear, and this lack of clarity can contribute to the creation of a particular kind of world in the text. The type of disaster in *Waiting for the End of the World*, for example, is less important than the world which has been created in its wake and the quests carried out within it. Part of this world is the technological dystopia of the City, and the other is that of the bush, which in itself is a world that, as Stephens and McCallum note, draws on a positive discourse of medievalism including the value of 'exercising a craftsman's skill and patience now commonly associated with past ages' (1998, p.156). Manfred Waring's decision to make a longbow' and the healing that comes about through this, thus sit naturally within this world. The very way in which the disaster is recounted — as 'the Darkness, and the wars that preceded it' (1985, p.176), rather than being specifically named — contributes to the mysteriousness and the sense of being beyond rational explanation which underpins Manfred's journey towards recovery, and which will help him and

his friends in their quest to find Killara, whose existence is questioned by some, but whose name, the reader is told, means ‘always there’ (1985, p.177).

The notion of adolescent as believer, articulated by Kristeva, is particularly important in Quest/Adventure novels, especially those involving a clear quest. Whatever setbacks there may be, the adolescent protagonist must have an essential belief that the quest will succeed. This belief contributes to the sense of ‘optimistic outcome’ of which Stephens speaks (1992, p.128)—there may be challenges, but the protagonists essentially believes that ultimately the quest will succeed. Elspeth’s belief in her quest to find the ‘weaponmachines’ (2008, p. 5) in Carmody’s *Obernewtyn* chronicles, Val’s faith in her quest to prevent a second nuclear disaster in *Doomsday Plus Twelve*, Manfred’s belief that Killara exists and will be a place of safety, are all part of the notion of the Great Other. Parents must of course be left (if they have not already died), the security of childhood relinquished, and steps taken into the unknown in order to fulfil the quest which, whatever outside form it takes, is ultimately a quest for Self.

Reeve’s *Hungry Cities* quartet provides an interesting variation on the quest/adventure theme. The primary disaster is the Sixty Minute War, a nuclear conflict which happened many centuries before the events in the first novel, *Mortal Engines*. In terms of the narrative, the function of the disaster is to destabilise the world’s geography bringing about the need for Traction (i.e. cities being put on caterpillar treads to enable them to move on an unstable Earth). The destabilising of the Earth assists the text in its destabilising of consensus reality: as Sambell writes:

Mortal Engines sets out to dismantle socially received ideas and replace them with their opposite, privileging childhood over adulthood, playfulness over sobriety, everyday life over grand aspirations, the here and now over the long-term future.

(2004, p.154)

The function of the disaster in Reeve’s quartet is therefore to begin the process in which ‘socially received’ ideas are challenged and therefore implicitly held up for comment. Conventional notions of beauty and heroism challenged in the final part of *Mortal Engines*, in which Hester of the hideously scarred face says to Tom, ‘You aren’t a hero and I’m not beautiful and we probably won’t live happily ever after ... But we’re alive, and together, and we’re going to be all right’ (Reeve, 2001, p.310). Despite various challenges throughout the four novels, this togetherness continues, and the final image in the quartet of Tom and Hester (now adults, but in some ways perpetually adolescent) is of them lying dead, Hester having taken her own life after Tom’s death.

Conclusion

Developing as it did in the late 1960’s Western climate of the power of youth, and through the years when it was becoming increasingly clear that technology and scientific ‘progress’ were more likely to destroy the world than to save it, it is not surprising that young adult post-disaster fiction, which privileges a Romantic view of youth and its capacity to lead the way to a better future, should have flourished. In the forty years or so since it began to develop as a sub-genre of young adult fiction, post-disaster fiction for young adults has commented on a range of topics, including perceived social fears of the time, the nature of various types of society, and what people need in order to be truly human. Its strong link with both the nature of young adult fiction and with adolescence itself suggests that it will continue to flourish a sub-genre, and it will be

interesting to see in the years to come what kinds of disasters are depicted within its pages, and what kinds of textual use is made of them.

Endnotes

¹ Each section of Louise Lawrence's *Children of the Dust* can be seen to tie in with one of the sub-genres 'Sarah' to the survivor sub-genre, 'Ophelia' to social order, and 'Simon' to quest/adventure.

² For example, the disaster in Phillips' *Turbo Cowboys* series (1988–9) creates a scenario in which the pre-disaster world has been destroyed and a setting created in which a group of boys can have adventures riding motorcycles around the Mojave desert. The texts are far less serious in mode than many of the other texts set after a nuclear disaster published at a similar time. Even though the authorities in Phillips' novels are often not to be trusted, the Turbo Cowboys seem essentially to enjoy life and are not brought into constant conflict with officialdom, and the lack of pre-disaster amenities is usually not a particular problem for the boys.

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