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# Under the Wire: Detainee Activism in Australian Children's Literature

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*[T]he responsibility that owes nothing to my freedom is my responsibility for the freedom of others. There where I could have remained spectator, I am responsible, that is to say again, speaking.*  
(Levinas 2003, p. 55)

One of the emerging sub-genres of multicultural children's literature in Australia is a body of texts that deals with detention centre narratives. Advocating for the rights of people imprisoned in Australian detention centres continues to be one of the foremost sites of political activism in Australia, and representations of such activism are finding their way into literature for children in a variety of ways, including in non-fiction texts and anthologies such as *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australian Detention Centres* (2003), *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11-20 Years* (2004), and *No Place Like Home: Australian Stories by Young Writers Aged 8-21 Years* (2005). Furthermore, novels such as Anna Fienberg's *Number 8* (2006), Isobelle Carmody's *Alyzon Whitestarr* (2005), Alwyn Evans's *Walk in my Shoes* (2004), Rosanne Hawke's *Soraya the Storyteller* (2004), and Morris Gleitzman's *Girl Underground* (2004) and *Boy Overboard* (2002) represent characters who are or have been imprisoned in detention centres and/or are engaged in activism to protest against such imprisonment. In this paper, I shall analyse this figure of the activist protesting on behalf of detainees via the notion of cultural citizenship, looking specifically at Gleitzman's *Girl Underground*. I argue that an ethics of compassion must give way to an ethics of responsibility in representations of this relationship between activist and detainee in order for texts to challenge current detention centre policy and to posit a new version of multiculturalism, which relies on an ethical cultural citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

In his article entitled 'Globalization, National Cultures and Cultural Citizenship', Nick Stevenson argues that cultural citizenship is fulfilled when social life becomes meaningful, when practices of domination are criticised, and when 'the recognition of difference under conditions of tolerance and mutual respect' is allowed (Stevenson 1997, p.42, italics in original). He points to the need to reconcile differences within constituencies against the desire for a homogeneous national identity in order to

achieve 'genuinely multicultural spaces'. For me, the most interesting aspect of his argument about cultural citizenship acknowledges the 'sense of duty and obligation we have for others, which cannot be legislated into existence', and he gestures to Jürgen Habermas's 'ethics of compassion' as a model for this duty and obligation, although he does not elaborate on this stance (Stevenson 1997, p.63). I proceed where Stevenson stops by examining how this ethics of compassion might be put to work when analysing detention centre narratives, and I argue that an ethics of compassion does not go far enough towards creating a multicultural space in which difference is respected under conditions of tolerance. Rather, an ethics of responsibility allows for such a recognition of difference that opens into responsibility for the other.

This idea of cultural citizenship is complicated in detention centre narratives, because the refugees being represented are not Australian citizens, although they are seeking to become permanent residents, if not citizens. Given that detainees have limited or no access to the rights of Australian political and cultural citizenship, it falls upon Australian citizens and permanent residents (which I shall shorten to the term 'Australians' in this paper) to protest against such conditions and to agitate for at least the respect of the human rights of asylum seekers without neglecting the potential agency of detainees. *Girl Underground* represents various manifestations of how Australians might protest on behalf of detainees, and, because the novel is focalised through the figure of an ethically responsible activist, readers are challenged to occupy this position, too.

The activist is in a precarious position because she must speak on behalf of the detainee while still opening a space for the detainee's voice. This detainee's agency is limited, however, due to the very real material restrictions imposed upon asylum seekers arriving in Australia without proper papers. As Peter Mares demonstrates in *Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, these asylum seekers are 'treated as though guilty, until proven innocent'. They are subjected to mandatory detention for an indefinite time period, and no court can secure their release. Furthermore, they have limited access to freedom of speech, given that they cannot leave and journalists cannot enter the detention centres (Mares 2001, p.12). *Girl Underground*



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fictionalises these very real conditions, which the reader has privy to via the child detainee Jamal's letters.

These points are also made by Michael Leach and Fethi Mansouri in *Lives in Limbo: Voices of Refugees Under Temporary Protection*, who claim that 'The effective silencing of refugees and asylum seekers in this country has been one of the more disturbing aspects of the debate as a whole' (Leach and Mansouri 2004, p. 10). Leach and Mansouri's book is fuelled, in part, by their commitment to provide a forum in which refugees and asylum seekers might speak, for they claim that: 'Much of the frustration experienced by refugees and asylum seekers is the feeling that their stories and experiences are misrepresented, distorted, or, perhaps most distressingly, completely ignored' (p.10). Some writers of fiction for children, such as those listed in the introduction of this paper, endeavour to contribute to ensuring that asylum seeker and refugee stories are represented, and therein seek to make young readers aware both of the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees and of the ethical responsibility of Australians. While questions about appropriation of voice are beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to analyse representations of the ethical relationship between detainees and Australians and to suggest that an ethics of responsibility should inform both fictional and non-fictional relationships. In other words, I believe that fiction is both a product of, and a contributor to, the political climate in which the text exists.

Generally speaking, the ethical shift I advocate—from compassion to responsibility—is a shift from an ethics of sameness to an ethics of difference. Habermas develops his ethics of compassion in his chapter on morality and ethical life in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990). Habermas works forward from his definition of moral intuitions, which he claims are 'intuitions that instruct us on how best to behave in situations where it is in our power to counteract the extreme vulnerability of others by being thoughtful and considerate' (Habermas 1990, p.199). He suggests a need for mutual consideration in light of this 'extreme vulnerability' and argues that such consideration must 'emphasize the inviolability of the individual by postulating equal respect for the dignity of each individual', which is the basic principle for justice, and 'must also protect the web of intersubjective relations

of mutual consideration by which these individuals survive as members of a community', which refers to the principle of solidarity (p.200). This ethics is appealing because it moves away from the Kantian solitary reflective individual towards a community in dialogue, a community acting together through discourse that leads to action, such as is represented in *Girl Underground*.

An ethics of compassion does not go far enough towards creating conditions of tolerance, however, because it operates within a framework of sameness, in which members of a community (even when some individuals are not full members of a community, such as is the case with detainees) are equally vulnerable and have equal access to the same discourse. Instead, I suggest that an ethics of responsibility is a more useful practice and way of understanding the relationship between detainee and activist. In 'The Trouble with Tolerance', A.T. Nuyen argues that Levinas's ethics of responsibility provides the tools for understanding how to be tolerant without doing violence to the other. He claims that modernity's idea of tolerance encourages people to understand the other as the same as us (Nuyen 1997, p. 3) while a Levinasian ethics of responsibility:

*teaches us to face the other as radically different, as absolutely other. What is needed is an ethics that teaches us to welcome the other not as 'one of us', one of the same, but as the source of irritation. Tolerance amounts to facing the source of irritation with responsibility, not trying to eliminate it. . . . For it is in such an ethics that we learn to welcome the other by taking responsibility for him or her.*  
(Nuyen 1997, p.9)

*Girl Underground* represents these two versions of tolerance. On the one hand, the government tries to deal with asylum seekers, as a 'source of irritation' by eliminating them, or by at least keeping them out of sight. On the other hand, the two main activists in the novel, Bridget and Menzies, face the other and try to convince the government to welcome the other through accepting responsibility, which does not mean imprisonment.

I shall turn now to an analysis of *Girl Underground* in order to elaborate more fully on these claims. Before I do so, however, some discussion of the novel's preceding

and related text *Boy Underground* will be necessary in order to expose the broader politics at work across both stories. *Boy Overboard*, focalised through the character of eleven-year-old Jamal, tells the story of why and how he and his family flee Afghanistan in order to seek asylum in Australia. The book ends when Jamal and his sister amongst other asylum seekers are ‘rescued’ from their leaky boat and taken, not to Australia, but to a detention centre on ‘a small island, a long way away’ from Australia (Gleitzman 2002, p.166). *Girl Underground*, continues Jamal’s story, but shifts the emphasis and the focalisation from Jamal to Bridget, a girl with petty-criminal parents who befriends Menzies, a so-called ‘refugee sympathiser’ whose father is the federal Minister for National Development.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between these two novels is that Menzies receives letters from Jamal, who in *Girl Underground* is imprisoned in a detention centre in the desert. When Bridget is expelled from school because she and Menzies interrupt a parliamentary session in order to try to convince the Prime Minister to release Jamal and his sister, Bibi, from the detention centre and to allow more refugees to come to Australia, Bridget, Menzies, and Jamal’s father convince Bridget’s father to help them. The four of them drive out of Adelaide and into the desert to the detention centre and initially try to reason with the detention centre officials. When that plan does not work, Bridget and Menzies try to dig under the razor wire in order to break the prisoners out of the detention centre. The novel ends not with the release of Jamal and Bibi but with a fleet of ‘ordinary members of the Australian public’ (Gleitzman 2004, p.180) entering the detention centre through the newly-dug tunnel to meet the refugees. Furthermore, this collective action leads Menzies’s father to resign from government in order to run as an independent in the next election (with Bridget’s dad helping him), a decision he makes once he sees what is possible through ‘The power of a child’s voice and a nation’s conscience’ (p.181).

Setting aside for a moment the novel’s overt (and potentially saccharine) earnestness and the over-the-top utopian ending, I am impressed with the imaginative possibilities expressed and made literal in this novel, especially in terms of how an ethics of compassion is represented, and furthermore, how the novel gestures towards an ethics of

responsibility. Indeed, in a key scene, Bridget says, ‘The Prime Minister reckons they’re doing all this for us . . . Well, if Jamal and Bibi are being kept prisoner for us, I reckon we’ve got a responsibility to do something about it ourselves’ (Gleitzman 2004, p. 177). I shall elaborate on these claims by looking more closely at Bridget and Menzies’s interactions with the Prime Minister and with the consequences of that interaction.

Although Jamal and Menzies do not speak in person, the letters they exchange may arguably be seen as initiating a dialogue, one that exists between moral subjects regardless of whether they are both citizens. While this initial discursive stage is a plea from Jamal for help from Menzies, and therefore can be read within a compassionate framework in which one individual helps a vulnerable other, the letter exchange pulsates outwards reaching a larger and larger community, within which individuals eventually take at least the first steps toward becoming ethically responsible. For instance, the letters from Jamal are what lead Menzies and Bridget to advocate on his behalf to the Prime Minister.

In one of the most hyperbolic scenes in the novel, Bridget and Menzies interrupt a parliamentary session and shout the following:

*‘Jamal and Bibi didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not fair to lock them up. They’re not criminals, they’re just kids.’ . . . [says Bridget]*

*‘I know you’re not really cruel and mean,’ says Menzies . . . ‘You’re just scared cause there’s so many millions of refugees in the world. You’re scared that if you’re kind to the few that are here, all the others will want to come. Well it’s OK, they can come.’ . . .*

*‘Look at America,’ continues Menzies. ‘They’ve got nearly three hundred million people. Australia’s almost as big as America and we’ve only got twenty million people. So we’ve got heaps of room for refugees. They’ll build new cities for us. New industries. Make us successful at soccer. My dad will arrange it. He’s Minister for National Development.’*  
(pp.104-105)

Bridget’s initial plea about fairness can be read as a call for justice—‘It’s not fair . . .’ and her three sentences

place Jamal and Bibi into the subject position three times: 'Jamal and Bibi didn't do anything wrong . . . They're not criminals, they're just kids'. Menzies's speech, however, shifts the subject position away from refugees and towards 'You' – parliamentarians, 'They' – Americans, and 'we' and 'us' – Australians. The only time Menzies places 'they' the refugees into a subject position is to elaborate on what 'they' can do for 'us,' that is, build new cities and new industries and make us successful at soccer. In order to take responsibility for the other, Nuyen claims that for Levinas this means 'substituting oneself for the other, by saying 'I am here for you', (Nuyen 1997, p. 9) and not creating an opposition, which 'is a category within the larger same' (p.6). This distinction is the primary difference between Bridget's ethics of responsibility and Menzies's ethics of compassion. Menzies still operates within an ethics of sameness, saying not 'I am here for you' but 'You are here for us'.

Obviously, Menzies works towards the first two aspects of cultural citizenship—a meaningful social life and a critique of domination – but his sense of justice does not extend to a recognition of difference while Bridget's does. When Bridget and Menzies are taken into the Prime Minister's office and reprimanded for interrupting parliament, Bridget asks him why he locks 'innocent children up' (p.110), to which the Prime Minister responds by saying:

*'Mandatory detention . . . is a crucial element in a sophisticated immigration strategy whose positive outcomes are not always apparent to the unsophisticated. . . . When opponents of my government's policies increase their worldly experience and cognitive ability, they understand that border protection is an initiative wholly in the national interest.'*  
(p.111)<sup>3</sup>

When Bridget asks Menzies to translate the Prime Minister's words for her, he says:

*'The Prime Minister was saying . . . that the government is big and knows what's best, and we're little and we don't. . . . The Prime Minister reckons they're locking those kids up for us . . . The people of Australia.' 'Us?'* [says Bridget] 'You and me?' 'Yes,' says Menzies.  
(p.112)

Bridget's astonished response about the Prime Minister's reasoning, a rationale that is based upon keeping difference out for the sake of a homogeneous 'us,' demonstrates that her moral intuitions refuse this policy of sameness.

These intuitions lead Bridget to act in a way that highlights her commitment to an ethic that allows for a more equitable and respectful relationship between refugee and activist. Immediately following Bridget's father's failed attempt to speak with detention centre officials in order to effect the release of (at least) Jamal and Bibi and their mother, Bridget is asked by members of the television media what she is doing outside the detention centre. She responds:

*'There are kids locked up in there . . . Kids who haven't done anything wrong. . . . This is a letter from one of those kids' . . .*

I pull it out of my pocket and start reading it to the camera.

*When I get to the end, the bit about how Jamal is sad because he thought Australia was a kind place, I see the cameraman glance at the reporter. She signals to him to keep filming.*

*I look right into the camera.*

*'I met the Prime Minister last week . . . He said that these kids are being locked up for us, the people of Australia. We're only four people, but we're here because we don't want any kids to suffer for us. My dad reckons that's how all Australians used to feel. I wish they still did.'*  
(pp.157-58)

In this scene, Bridget displays her commitment to both justice and solidarity via an ethics of responsibility. By reading Jamal's letter, she opens a space for his voice and therein demonstrates a respect for Jamal's dignity and an enactment of justice. Her next speech act, in which she speaks as a member of a community and seeks to protect intersubjective relations within the larger community of Australian citizens, brings to the foreground moral intuitions that include both justice and solidarity in an ethics of responsibility.

In conclusion, Australian children's literature faces a new challenge in its representation of and influence on

detention centre policy. Politicians cannot ignore (and, as evident in the media comments by Australian Defence Minister Amanda Vanstone, are not ignoring) the literary activism that is taking place in Australian children's fiction and non-fiction. Academics, critics, publishers, librarians, teachers, writers, and readers are all under the wire to become activists who advocate for the dismantling of the current federal policy on mandatory detention. In today's so-called multicultural Australia, cultural citizenship means a fulfilling social life, a critique of practices of domination, and a recognition of difference, which can best be realised with a move from an ethics of compassion to an ethics of responsibility in order to understand tolerance not as a way of envisioning people as all the same but as a way of respecting absolute differences.



#### NOTES

1. My interest in cultural citizenship stems from my current research, an ARC-funded project entitled 'Building Cultural Citizenship: Multiculturalism and Children's Literature,' which I am working on with Clare Bradford and Wenche Ommundsen.
2. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to carry out a detailed analysis of Menzies's name, it is interesting to note that his parents have bestowed upon him the name of Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, who maintained a strong defence alliance with the United States, in addition to being 'often characterised as an extreme monarchist and 'British to his bootstraps' (National Archives of Australia).
3. I find this speech to be ironic when looked at beside the current Minister of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Amanda Vanstone's comments that this novel potentially has a 'deleterious impact on children's understanding of the Federal Government's policy of mandatory detention' and that Gleitzman 'was compromising the experience of childhood'. Or perhaps it is Amanda Vanstone's comments that are ironic given the similarity between her rhetoric and that of the novel's fictional Prime Minister. (see Bantick 2005, p. 17).

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#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Debra Dudek works as a Research Fellow at Deakin University, where she is involved in an ARC-funded project which analyses multiculturalism and children's literature. She has published internationally on poetics, postcolonial studies and comparative literature.

