# Papers

## Explorations into Children's Literature

## EDITORIAL

The title of this special issue—*Spaces of Transformation*—encapsulates the exciting possibilities opened up by the kinds of writing for children and young people considered by the contributors. Responding to an invitation to write on topics under the broad rubric of utopian and dystopian fiction, the essays herein explore and engage with a range of writing that has in common a focus on speculative thinking about the implications of current social conditions and social relationships—a hallmark of this generic tradition. Thomas More's elegant pun *eu-topia*—the good place that is no place—produced not just the imagined island society of his 1516 text, *Utopia*, but a resonant conceptual possibility that has provided a matrix for cultural critique and social change ever since. The *topia*, or place, More's narrative opens up is both an imagined geographical locus and a space to think with. The imagined society of Utopia, characterised by the absence of money and its attendant power, is an implicit critique of the materialism and social hierarchy of the England of More's own day, and readers are invited to read actively in order to make the comparison with their own social context. Writers have been creatively embracing this heuristic opportunity ever since, positioning their readers to be actively questioning members of their culture.

It may be surprising that the focus of so much of the current creative work for children and young people deriving from this intertext dwells on the alternative version of the concept—the dystopian 'bad place'. Such texts have in common with utopian texts an attention to the inadequacies of the social structures and power relations of the writer's present. Rather than imagining a new, transformed space in which those inadequacies are corrected, the dystopia imagines an alternative topos in which they are exacerbated. At first glance then, an emergent emphasis on the dystopian seems to be evidence of a kind of cultural bleakness. On the contrary, I would argue that the energy around a dystopian imaginary so evident in this issue of *Papers* signifies an enormously positive phenomenon. If, as Fredric Jameson has argued, the postmodern cultural landscape, based on the 'cultural logic of late capitalism', sees a waning of historicity that renders history flat and depthless, and reads past, present, and future as mere variations in style (Jameson 1991) then the 'dystopian turn' in books for children and young people evident in the pieces in this special issue can be read as a marker of a counter-tendency. There is in this work both a willingness to read the present as part of an historical continuum of change, and an assumption that in order for the future to be different, the present must be seen as a complex of active social and economic processes in constant transition that need to be explored and analysed by active readers.

Certain key words emerge in responses, both utopian and dystopian, to More's imaginary topos, with its attention to the inadequacies of the present. For Ernst Bloch, "the little word *if*" is one such word, and he notes how

often the word, and the kind of speculative thinking it invites, is ridiculed because society undervalues 'unusual anticipating' (Bloch 1986). Anticipatory consciousness, for Bloch and others working in the utopian tradition, is, on the contrary, highly valued as a sign that history is still in process; a sign, therefore, of *hope*, a second keyword. A third keyword central to this critical/creative terrain is *community*, which Raymond Williams sees as central to the exploration of alternative places/spaces of imagining (Williams 1980). An insistence on community signals a refusal to turn attention away from social formations and their implications for individuals within them, and a refusal to focus solely, as did so much social thought of the 1980s and 1990s, on the competitive, alienated individual of capitalist commodity culture.

While the words *if*, *hope*, *community*, are at the heart of the utopian tradition, their meanings equally underpin the project of the critical dystopias Tom Moylan and Rafaella Baccolini have defined as the characteristic turn the tradition has taken since the late 1980s—a turn which helps to account for the dark settings, oppressive regimes, post-apocalyptic societies and endangered communities in the work analysed in this issue. This 'turn' can be explained as a product of emergent socio-political conditions. The socio-economic landscape of the 1960s and 1970s saw the re-emergence of a utopian emphasis in the tradition after a dystopian tendency in texts of the early twentieth century. The re-emergence of the utopian was underpinned by postwar affluence, a burgeoning education system which saw larger numbers of young people undertake university education in the West than at any point in history, and the concomitant emergence of a countercultural critique of capitalist society and its materialist values. This critique took the form of left, feminist, and environmentalist analyses of the implications for the future of the tendencies of the present and utilised the narrative strategies of More's foundational text. Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986) charted this re-emergence, focusing on work by writers such as Marge Piercy, Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, and Samuel Delany, work which utilised the utopian narrative form, often in combination with the strategies of science fiction or fantasy, to open up spaces for a critique of the present and its implications for the future. These *critical utopias*,

while identifying dark possibilities in the present, still focused on imagining the kinds of spaces in which those tendencies might be corrected, at least in part.

As many of the contributors to this issue note, by the late 1980s that utopian tendency had begun to wane. Moylan's own more recent work is itself an index of the culture's changing relationship to the utopian tradition in response to changing socio-economic and political conditions. In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) and in his collaboration with Rafaella Baccolini, *Dark Horizons* (2003*)*, Moylan notes a new generic trend that he identifies as a *critical dystopian* turn in the late 1980s. Moylan's thesis is exemplified by the kinds of texts and issues considered in this volume of *Papers*.

The sociopolitical specificity of the late 1980s and the 1990s was, according to Moylan, an 'era of economic restructuring, political opportunism, and cultural implosion' where 'the contemporary moment…is one in which a critical position is necessarily dystopian…' (2000, p.186). Moylan further argues that this era sees the emergence of the critical dystopia, a specific generic development that, while related to the earlier dystopian tradition, has aspects unique to the current conjuncture, and represents a 'distinctive new intervention' (2000, p.188). In *Dark Horizons*, Moylan and Baccolini suggest that such texts continue to embody the utopian impulse, refunctioning dystopia as 'a critical narrative form that worked against the grain of the grim economic, political, and cultural climate' (2003, p.3).

The reworking of dystopian narrative into this newly critical form, and the form's instantiation in a wide range of books for children and young people, can itself be invoked as a sign that Bloch's 'principle of hope' continues to be available even in the current landscape of grim 'isms': late capitalism, neo-liberalism, corporatism and fundamentalism. The most powerful tool of the critical dystopia might be defined as its capacity to produce the 'cognitive estrangement' that is the key strategy of texts working with the heuristic possibilities of alternative topoi. As Anne Cranny-Francis has noted, 'one of the key conventions of utopian/dystopian texts…is estrangement. Another world…is constructed in the text, and the reader, in the process of constructing this figure,

is positioned to see her/his own society from a different perspective' (1990, p. 110). The worlds constructed by the texts considered in this issue position young readers to 'see' some of the inadequacies of their own culture and to reconsider their own opportunities for choice and agency in relation to them.

All of the pieces here are concerned to come to terms with texts that do this kind of work; positioning children and young people to see their own society and its inadequacies from a fresh, estranged perspective that make clear the limitations imposed by repressions of various kinds and open up spaces for social transformation.

In a broad discussion of a range of fictions, Kerry Mallan, Clare Bradford, and John Stephens, focus on how the texts they discuss offer hope for better futures by engaging readers with contemporary society, while at the same time providing a 'hypothetical unfolding' of possibilities—especially in relation to configurations of the family. Margaret Aitken, Clare Bradford, and Geraldine Massey's discussion of two dystopian texts for children written at the end of the 1990s, shows how each text constructs a world dominated by oppressive social structures and represents journeying characters whose views of their worlds are transformed, thus foregrounding questions of agency in relation to community. Beverley Pennell, too, selects for analysis a text written in the later 1990s, arguing that it deploys many of the strategies of the critical dystopia to deconstruct Australian nationalist mythologies. Patricia Kennon suggests, based on her reading of four dystopian novels, that the genre of dystopian fiction provides ways for young readers to think about their relationship to the power structures of their communities, even though she ultimately concludes that conservative ideological pressures make this difficult. Elizabeth Braithwaite's paper considers three 'post-disaster' fictions written for young readers, arguing that in each case the capacity to remember facilitates the capacity for personal agency in relation to the social. Finally, Debra Dudek's reading of a recent picture book for children reveals that the strategies of the critical dystopia can work powerfully even in texts for quite young readers.

In exploring a range of texts that the uninitiated might find surprisingly dark, given the intended readership, the contributors to this issue identify a common strand, a hope that a new generation will discover through their reading that the world they live in may be transformable. In every case these texts position their readers to see the present as a set of deep possibilities opening onto alternative futures, rather than as a flat endless desert of commodification and disempowerment.

We are grateful to Lyn Barry for allowing us to reproduce her painting 'Utopian Figure' as the cover image for this special issue of Papers.

## REFERENCES

Baccolini, Rafaella, and Moylan, Tom (2003) 'Introduction: Dystopia and Histories', in R. Baccolini and T. Moylan (eds) *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York and London, Routledge, pp.1-12.

Bloch, Ernst (1986) *The Principle of Hope*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Cranny-Francis, Anne (1990) *Feminist Fiction*. Oxford, Polity Press.

Jameson, Fredric (1991) *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York, Verso.

Moylan, Tom (1986) *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York and London, Methuen.

Moylan, Tom (2000) *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder, Colorado, Westview Books.

Williams, Raymond ((1980) Problems in *Materialism and Culture*. London, Verso.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ann McGuire is Director of Undergraduate Programs in the Department of Communication and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Media Society and Culture, at Curtin University.