# Subversion and Survival: Australian Children's Novels in Postmodernity

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The challenge of survival in a harsh land is part of the mythology of European settlement in Australia. In his study of Australian narrative, Graeme Turner links the response of Australians to their cultural environment to their response to the physical environment: 'survival is all, resistance is futile, and ideals are to be tempered by contingency' (Turner 1993, pp.83-84). He specifically applies this framework to the Australian use of humour in response to adversity, pointing out that it is a tactic of survival, rather than subversion (Turner 1993, p.140). However, some recent Australian children's novels contain strands of subversion consistent with contemporary critical and literary theories and the spirit of postmodernist discourse. Three very different texts will be used to illustrate this trend, each originating in Australia, without being overtly Australian in nature. Victor Kelleher's **To the Dark Tower** is a sombre fantasy, which interweaves the world of dreams with the everyday in an early twentieth century, English setting. Margo Lanagan's **The Best Thing** is young adult realism, bubbling with angst and set in contemporary inner city Sydney. **Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life** is Anna Fienberg's playfully metafictive
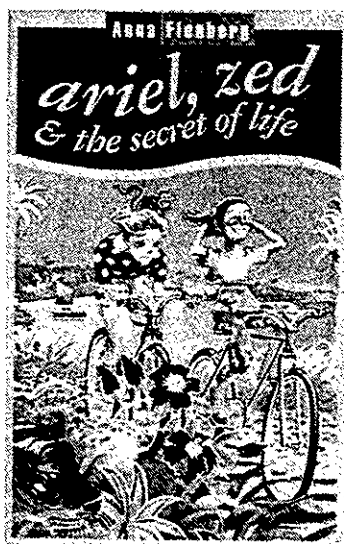
children's novel, set on an island for the rehabilitation of renegade fictional characters. Between them these texts challenge such concepts as transcendent meaning, the self as a unified site, heroism, individuality and the power of language. Yet, despite their subversive tendencies, each novel is still concerned with the negotiation of survival against the complex and unstable landscape of a postmodern world.

The subversion of transcendent meaning in **To the Dark Tower** is consistent with Turner's conclusion that Australians are sceptical of meaning and power, concepts they perceive as being beyond their sphere of influence (Turner 1993, p.143). It is also consistent with

postmodern discourse, which seeks to dismantle the metanarratives that have been used to control and validate human experience in the past (see Lyotard 1992) and the poststructuralist position of Jacques Derrida (1992), who challenges transcendent meaning by arguing that there is no fixed point of reference from which meaning can be determined. **To the Dark Tower** dismantles the notion of ultimate meaning by subverting the familiar quest narrative of the fantasy genre. Many elements of the text position readers to expect that Tom Roland will be successful in his quest for a lost, golden age of perfection. His mission is clarified by the apparently perceptive visionary, Mr Crawford, who anoints Tom as one destined for greatness and one capable of leading a return to a 'golden age of ancient wisdom and enduring beliefs', an age without pain and tragedy (Kelleher 1994, p.69, pp. 27-28). Crawford's continual use of 'believe' and 'trust' imbue Tom's mission with religious significance. The apparently meaningful nature of the quest is also reinforced by Tom's mysterious sense of being called to the task (Kelleher 1994, p.2, p.36), through the confirmation of his identity as the Carrier by his companions (Kelleher 1994, p.3) and by the inner voice through

which the child communicates to him (Kelleher 1994, p.138, p.147). The sense that the quest will climax in revelation is also conveyed in the imagery applied to the Ice Tower, the ultimate destination of the journey through the dream world. This imagery is exemplified in 'a starfall from the starless heavens' (Kelleher 1994, p.141), which portrays the Tower as the light of revelation amidst the dark landscape of the dream. Yet the quest culminates in emptiness and not epiphany, as Tom discovers that the Sleeper is neither benevolent nor evil but 'a mindless hunger, a mindless will to survive' and that 'there had never been a golden age of peace and love' (Kelleher 1994, p.171). Thus the narrative subverts those elements within it which suggest the existence of transcendent meaning. Its contention that there is no state of perfection to which humans can return challenges Christian beliefs, while its dismissal of the past as a source of wisdom subverts the fantasy genre, which often draws upon the mythology and wisdom of the past to imbue the present with meaning.

To the Dark Tower also interrogates the notion of the heroic, an important element of fantasy. This is another aspect of the text which connects with postmodern thought. Mike

Featherstone emphasises that postmodernism is sceptical of the heroic, preferring to privilege the local and the everyday (Featherstone 1992, pp.159-160). Young Tom's desire to approach life heroically can be seen in his attitude to climbing:

For as long as he could remember, the idea of scaling the high cliffs had conveyed a nobility of purpose, a sense of striving that no other occupation offered. To fall from the cliffs was somehow tragic; to survive them was a triumph of the spirit.
(Kelleher 1994, p.10)

There is clearly evident a striving to achieve the extraordinary, a sense of virtuous endeavour and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for a higher purpose, characteristics Featherstone associates with the heroic (Featherstone 1992, p.160, pp.164-165). By way of contrast, Jack Steels stands in opposition to the heroic, dissuading young climbers from pushing themselves beyond their limitations. Ultimately, Jack's approach is revealed to be altruistic, if pragmatic, while the futility of Tom's quest portrays heroism as foolish and meaningless. Jack's view is reinforced, when in later life Tom takes on his mantle, kindly warning young climbers against attempting

Tower Rock (Kelleher 1994, p.183). So the cult of heroism is replaced by an acceptance of human limitations and a fulfilment of responsibilities to others. Yet the text seems unable to disassociate itself completely from the heroic, which is still valorised in Blossom's sacrificial leap to prevent the awakening of the Sleeper. Such gesturing towards heroism is reinforced by Jack's simplistic dichotomy which elevates those 'with hearts as true' as Tom and Blossom's were at the end against the 'misguided fools', such as Crawford (Kelleher 1994, p.178). It is as if there is a paradoxical need for a heroic stance to oppose the foolishness of the heroic. Although **To the Dark Tower** challenges the value of heroism, it is unable to make a complete break from the parameters of a genre which depends upon it, illustrating the problematic nature of attempting to subvert a system working from within it.

The narrative also interrogates the power of language in a manner consistent with poststructuralists like Derrida (1992, p.123, p.127), who argues against the ability of language to achieve fixity of meaning, seeing it as a system of endlessly deferred meanings. In To the Dark Tower there is a sense that language is

struggling with the burden the narrative places upon it. John Stephens has pointed out that the indeterminacy of the descriptive language of the novel's dream strand creates a feeling of unease (Seminar, Macquarie University, Sydney, 14th May, 1996). The narrative struggles to define the world which Tom enters:

A narrow opening lay directly in his path. Or rather he thought of it as an opening, though really it was more like a pale rift in the shadows ... Now there was only silence. Less than silence. Nothing. A strange emptiness, an absence ...
(Kelleher 1994, p.19)

It is as if the signifiers 'opening' and 'silence' are inadequate for the signifieds to which they have been attached, yet the indeterminacy of the redefinitions which follow each emphasises the limitations of the initial terms, without providing greater precision. This challenge to the ability of language to communicate experience is present elsewhere in the narrative of the dream journey, such as the paradoxical 'trees that glinted in non-existent starlight' and the silent scream of Blossom (Kelleher 1994, p.37). Tom shows cognisance of the limitations of language when he chooses not to give voice to the feelings of emotional

connection to Blossom he experiences while sailing to Tower Rock: 'Words could have only betrayed him: either by falling short of what he felt; or, far worse by inviting a possible rebuff' (Kelleher 1994, p.153). He is suspicious of language because it may not be capable of signifying adequately or it may operate counter to his intentions. The potential for betrayal inherent in language is evident in the fact that the apparently transparent words which encourage Tom in his quest, such as Blossom's, 'You are the Carrier' (Kelleher 1994, p.51) and the child's 'Climb. For me.' (Kelleher 1994, p.147) prove to be misleading. Ironically, the unease created by the inability of language to signify experience adequately proves a more reliable guide to the reader in determining the nature of the quest than the apparently straightforward signification of the soundless voices of the dream world. This is consistent with the poststructuralist concept that what a text does not say can be as significant as what it does say. (see Derrida's position, as outlined in Grosz 1992, pp.94-97; Foucault 1977, pp.134-135; Macherey 1992). For Tom, it is experience, rather than language, that unveils reality, when he discovers the true nature of the child through seeing its eyes (Kelleher 1994,

pp.190-194). Similarly, he experiences the presence of Blossom in spring by holding her 'just long enough to express ... all that world of feeling he had never expressed in words' (Kelleher 1994, p.184). In the novel the most significant experiences take place on a different plane to the limiting, sometimes deceptive, world of language. Yet, ironically, the text communicates this through language, raising the philosophical dilemma of the extent to which human experience can be divorced from the power and restrictions of words.

The conflicting discourses of To the Dark Tower focus attention on people's approach to life. There is a tension between those previously discussed discourses which lure the reader into the expectation that the quest will be completed successfully and discourses which undermine the quest. The novel's title and Tom's surname create a clear intertextual link with Robert Browning's anti-quest poem, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', in which a knight consummates his world-wide wanderings by journeying to the Dark Tower, although he has come to realise the futility of this final stage of his quest. The journey culminates in his destruction. This intertextuality sounds a note of

warning that Tom Roland's quest may ultimately be as futile as that of Childe Roland. The presence of a mask motif also questions the expectation that the quest will be a triumph for Tom and Blossom. Tom's initial encounter with the Sleeper is in the form of an old man, whose face is like 'a mask designed to hide or protect the person behind it' (Kelleher 1994, p.4). The sleeping child Tom seeks to unite with the Sleeper has 'a face that somehow hid its true character behind closed eyes' (Kelleher 1994, p.20). The destination of the dream world journey, the Ice Tower, is described as possessing a 'crystal mask' (Kelleher 1994, p.167), while its everyday counterpart, Tower Rock, is attributed with 'a head-shaped eyeless mask' (Kelleher 1994, p.24). This motif suggests the uncertainty of appearances and its association with the object of the quest emphasises that Tom is journeying to an unknown and possibly illusory goal. Other elements of the narrative which subvert the significance of the quest include Tom's moments of disquiet in the dream landscape, such as when he notices that its night sky is devoid of stars (Kelleher 1994, p.74) and his growing questioning of whether the quest is predicated upon deception (Kelleher 1994, p.128, p.137, p.151, p.156). The reader is positioned with Tom, hoping

for a meaningful resolution as the quest continues, despite indications to the contrary. The text can be read as subverting people's tendency to live as if there is a fixed point of reference, in the face of evidence to the contrary. It is interesting to relate this to the conclusion of social researcher Hugh Mackay, that in the 1990s many Australians are turning to beliefs and practices which provide security and allow them to find their bearings in a world in which radical redefinitions of cultural and social values have left them adrift (Mackay 1993, pp.236-239). This suggests many Australians are not content to approach life without a fixed point of reference, whatever postmodernism or contemporary Australian fiction might suggest. It also cautions against too narrow a construction of 'typical Australian behaviour' and indicates that the discussion of Australian attitudes to survival contained in this paper must be limited by its generality.

Nevertheless, in **To the Dark Tower** the process of subversion is followed by the question of survival: how does one live in a world of dismantled metanarratives? In a conversation with Jack after Blossom's death, Tom suggests that life should be a process of negotiating the present, rather

than seeking for a golden past or future. Jack adheres to an essentially evolutionary view of accepting the present, while working for those small advances which will take life further from the blind, primitive will to survive represented by the Sleeper (Kelleher 1994, pp.177-178). In the end, Tom's life becomes one of commitment to community, rather than heroic individualism, as he guides and protects the younger climbers, sustained by his brief moments of communion with Blossom. This way of life can be linked to Turner's observation that the construction of 'the Australian type' in narratives is one of independence and individualism, operating in a context of community and mateship and one of allowing individualism to be subjugated to the needs of the community (Turner 1993, p.143). Thus **To the Dark Tower's** construction of life as a slow progression through negotiation of the present in the context of community can be viewed as characteristically Australian.

Margo Lanagan's **The Best Thing** also explores survival in a world of instability. Its subversion of the humanist concept of the self 'as a unified centre of control from which meaning emanates' is in line with contemporary theorising about subjectivity (see Easthope

& McGowan 1992, p.67 re subjectivity). Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault are among those who see the self as a non-unified construct of social, cultural and linguistic forces (Grosz 1992, p.74, p.78; Foucault 1992). Mel, the central character of **The Best Thing**, does not embark on a humanist voyage to discover her identity but endeavours to negotiate the shifting ground of her own subjectivity. Throughout the narrative her subjectivity is dependent upon the perceptions of others. Early in the novel, Mel tells of being abused by Brenner, the mouthpiece of her peers, and how focussing on Pug makes her feel for a second 'like a good person, a nice person. Then Brenner is just a mistake anyone might make, Lisa a nobody' (Lanagan 1995, p.12). Pug's opinion of her frees her to see herself as worthwhile but the qualification of 'for a second' indicates that, at this stage, she allows herself to be constructed primarily by those from whom she is seeking to distance herself. The instability of her subjectivity continues throughout the novel. During the early stages of their relationship Pug's adoration continues to erode her negative self-image. Whenever Mel walks home after seeing him during this time, she thinks, 'I feel so good about myself - confident and beautiful. He

makes me that way. I go there to be polished and brushed until I shine, and I walk back shining' (Lanagan 1995, p.23). However, the cumulative effect of finding her father physically entwined with Ricky Lewis, her uncertainty about the direction of her relationship with Pug and the ostracism and antagonism she receives from her peers cause her to revert to a negative self-image. She wonders why Pug is 'stupidly not seeing this black me, wimping out on life at every turn ... dragged around by anyone who offers the first scrap of approval' (Lanagan 1995, p.78), as she concludes that her parents and school acquaintances know the real Mel. **The Best Thing** explores the instability of subjectivity, showing that it is not subject to linear development and that it can be partially constructed by circumstances and the views and responses of others.

As well as revealing the nature of Mel's subjectivity, the novel also lays bare the instability of her constructions of others. As Mel is the only focalising character, the other characters are portrayed through her often limited perceptions. However, early in the narrative, the device of presenting multiple meanings of Dino's nickname, Pug, in dictionary format alerts the reader to the danger of adopting a narrow view of his

character. The meanings supplied convey a wide range of connotations, including affection, aggression, strength, illicit love and innocence. In Lacanian terms, the instability of language mirrors the instability of the human subject (Grosz 1992, p.72). However, for a considerable time Mel attempts to apply to Pug the last of the supplied dictionary meanings: 'thrust, poke or pack into a space' (Lanagan 1995, p.14). She attempts to confine him within a restrictive construct, being surprised whenever he bursts through its artificial boundaries. There are times when she sees him as a mere consolation prize, defining him as an 'unemployed bruiser' (Lanagan 1995, p.34). She assumes that her parents' response to Pug would be '*What an oaf ...* Where'd she get *him?*' but also recognises that the real issue is 'something about *me,* and what *I'd* reckon' (Lanagan 1995, p.37). Although Mel's affection for Pug is obvious, she is concerned that he is beneath her station, a perception which is reinforced by his inarticulate nature and non-standard pronunciation. Yet her perception is challenged by such occurrences as his ironic expression after his first competitive fight, as she had assumed that he was incapable of irony (Lanagan 1995, p.66) and his revelation that he

actually reads the magazines in his room, as she had assumed that he only looked at the pictures (Lanagan 1995, p.68). So experience broadens Mel's conception of Pug, until her unreserved acceptance is evident when, observing people in the streets while walking with Pug after finally telling him of her pregnancy, she adopts his dialect in thinking, 'I love youse all' (Lanagan 1995, p.125). She comes to realise that Pug has an inner depth not suggested by his external manner:

Talking with Pug, his words may come out all cockeyed and chewed apart, but he's always saying something - he doesn't just talk to make an impression. He's secure in himself in that way.
(Lanagan 1995, p.179)

Mel's broadened view of Pug indicates the inadequacy of her earlier construction of him and the inadequacy of perceiving others through the narrow filter of prejudice.

The novel mediates against the human tendency to conceptualise others in simplistic terms through the problematising of Mel's perceptions of others. After discovering her father's affair, she is hardly able to see any aspect of him that is not covered by the term 'adulterer' (Lanagan 1955, p.72), making it

easy for her to look down upon him with anger and contempt.· · However, this construction is disrupted by such events as her mother's challenge to view the marriage breakdown from her father's perspective (Lanagan 1995, p.138) and Pug's affirmation that her father is 'all right', after working with him on assembling a bassinet (Lanagan 1995, pp.143-144). Mel even moves towards a more sympathetic view of Lisa and Brenner by the end of her narrative. Mel's focalisation has entrapped the reader in a one-dimensional construction of both characters, whom she understandably portrays as devoid of redeeming features. However, after Bella's birth, Mel reflects that her peers at school were once vulnerable children marvelled at by others, until soured by the circum-stances of life (Lanagan 1995, pp.179-180). Mel begins to recognise that, although it may be convenient to see others in simplistic terms, others are also complex and contradictory constructs, a recognition which is a move towards empathetic understanding and a more mature negotiation of a problematic world.

Mel's changing perceptions of others are part of a continual process of renegotiating her principles and self-perception. This is emphasised by the insertion into Mel's narrative of

prose segments about foetal development and boxing. The . foetal development segments are factual and personal in tone, until the final two: Dr Lovejoy lecturing on the process of birth and comments by Simone de Beauvoir on the horrors of motherhood (Lanagan 1995, p.159, p.169). This movement mirrors Mel's transformation from seeing child birth in a detached manner to recognising it as something intimately connected with her personal experience. Her process of adjustment is evident in her feelings of fear and excitement after seeing ultrasound images of her unborn child: 'I'm terrified, and I'm more excited than I've ever been about anything ... a giant, world-sized excitement, immobilising, awesome' (Lanagan 1995, p.99). The accumulation of adjectives convey her awe and the sharp contrast between her language and the denotative prose segments indicate that life is a process of being shaped by experience, rather than clinical knowledge. The juxtaposition of the prose segments on the development of new life with those on boxing reflects the fact that, for Mel, the two are intertwined through her relationship with Pug. The boxing segments also undergo a stylistic transition from the impersonal to the personal, reflecting that Mel finds herself

unexpectedly involved in a sport with which she has had little experience. In fact, her attitude prior to Pug's first fight suggests that she is opposed to boxing as a matter of principle, as she thinks, 'I'm *appalled* at what's about to happen (Can this be the twentieth century?)' (Lanagan 1995, p.62). Yet she comes to accept boxing as part of her life and in the process comes to see that boxing is more problematic than she first imagined, as exemplified in the gentle and motherly way Pug's ringside team care for him after his loss to Happer (Lanagan 1995, p.160). Life for Mel becomes a process of adapting her principles and perceptions to the ebb and flow of experience. It is the type of localised, pragmatic approach to survival which the work of Turner suggests is typically Australian (Turner 1993, p.84, p.143).

In the final analysis, The Best Thing is a novel about inter-connectedness. At the end of her narrative, she reflects on the importance of families, despite their many shortcomings, realising that individuals receive from their families 'some imprint, some way of seeing, feeling, acting or reacting' (Lanagan 1995, p.180). It is this weaving of new life and continuation of the intricate web of human relationships which is 'the best

thing' of the novel's title and the comments of Justin Silva, Pug's fellow boxer are relevant here (Lanagan 1995, p.135). From her new understanding that her individuality will be intertwined with Bella's, Mel observed, 'They didn't tell us this at school; they told us we were all individuals carving out places for ourselves' (Lanagan 1995, pp.180-181), a recognition that her subjectivity is defined in terms of her connections to others, rather than by her individuality. This view of life as being negotiated in interdependence with others is consistent with the previously mentioned observation of Turner that Australian narrative typically sees individualism as a quality subjugated to the concerns of the community. Although The Best Thing subverts the notions that individuals are unified entities and that individuality is pre-eminent, its emphasis is more strongly on survival; on surviving the complexities of life through negotiation and adaptation.

The subversive potential of **Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life** is highlighted by the fact that it is playfully and unashamedly metafictive, a form of writing which has the potential to undermine authority structures (Stephens 1992, p.156). The novel questions the authority of the

author and the nature of writing, with the majority of its action taking place on an island for the reform of recalcitrant fictional characters, where they are taught to behave according to the wishes of their authors. Early in the novel Ariel, whose very name is suggestive of imagination through connection with her namesake in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, draws attention to the artifice inherent in narrative, through her fascination with the quality of the monster's mask and costume in the movie *The Monster From Out of Town*, while her companions find the film terrifying (Fienberg 1992, p.10). The text even draws attention to the fictionality of Ariel, Zed and Miss Heckle, the 'real' characters on the Island, by referring to Ms Anna Fienberg as one of the authors who visit the Island (Fienberg 1992, p.78). So the novel subverts the power that narrative has to bring readers under its sway by concealing its artifice.

Through its questioning of the authority of the author, **Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life** challenges the perception that writing is an unproblematic form of communication. This is consistent with the approach of theorists such as Barthes and Foucault, who de-emphasise the significance of the author and argue that a text can be

recalcitrant to its author's intentions (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1977). The characters who inhabit the Island are overtly defiant of their authors' wishes. A memorable example is Sleeping Beauty, who in the traditional fairy tale is the ultimate example of the passive romantic heroine. However, the Sleeping Beauty of the Island is an insomniac, who has re-named herself Electra, a name which carries mythological and psycho-analytic connotations which subvert the notion of passivity. She is a modern go-getter, who even takes on the role of artistic creator in making the film *Pessimism in the Modern World*. The lack of authorial control is emphasised by the fact that although the writers send characters to the Island to rectify their incorrigibility, the characters seem content to reside there indefinitely, only occasionally complying with the reform agenda for the sake of appearance. Electra explains the recalcitrance of the characters by proclaiming, 'We're the true parts of our authors - the part they don't even know about themselves' (Fienberg 1992, p.85). This is exemplified in Daniel Goodshot, who emerges from the dark side of his author, Clara Krantzbur, when she attempts to write a fictional character who will reflect her business acumen (Fienberg

1992, pp.103-104, p.178). The novel suggests that the complexity and instability of an author's subjectivity can allow a text to take on a life outside the intentions of the writer, a viewpoint consistent with the work of Foucault (1977). In addition, theorists such as Roland Barthes, Derrida and Foucault suggest that the instability of language can subvert an author's intentions (Barthes 1977; Derrida 1992; Foucault 1977). Such thinking interrogates the concept that writing is a transparent mode of communication, able to fulfil the purposes of the writer unproblematically.

Although Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life draws attention to the artifice of fiction, clearly fiction is part of life and the novel uses it as a metonymic representation of life. The construction of a fictional character becomes a representation of the construction of human subjectivity. As Ariel reflects on the fact that her mother invents characters, she wonders 'How much could anyone really make their own selves up? Was she, Ariel, still herself, as unwritten upon and charged with pure Ariel molecules as the day she was born?' (Fienberg 1992, p.44). These questions can be read as rhetorical, implying that her subjectivity has been written by

external forces. Similarly, Zed's subjectivity is questioned when Electra asks him whether he was born a pessimist 'or is it an effect of the Modern Age?' (Fienberg 1992, p.95). Zed does seem to be constructed by the age in which he lives and events such as his father's death and his mother's perceived rejection of him, allowing himself to be trapped inside the signification of his own name, 'the last letter in the alphabet, an afterthought, the empty useless page you scribble on in your address book! ZED!' (Fienberg 1992, p.86). Yet, just as the characters of the Island have taken control by rewriting themselves, Zed discovers he can take control of his subjectivity. Following Sleeping Beauty's suggestion that he rewrite his character, Zed writes about the courageous, adventurous, self-assured character he would like to be, a New Zed. He actually bring NZ to life though the power of imagination, after Daniel Goodshot leaves him tied up and facing the incoming tide on Opal Beach. The two Zeds merge in the novel's climax, resulting in the emergence of a Zed, who has greater self-esteem and a more optimistic outlook. Ariel also develops through her experiences on the Island, returning to the outside world more comfortable with her idiosyncrasies. Although the

text recognises the constructed nature of subjectivity, it ultimately takes a more positive stance than **The Best Thing** by suggesting that it is possible to take control over that subjectivity.

Yet **Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life** does not allow itself to be read as suggesting that people are able to exercise unqualified control over their lives. The implication of the lack of control authors are shown to have over the products of their imagination is that Zed may not be able to maintain total control over the new self he has fashioned through his imagination. Also Miss Heckle reminds Zed of the uncertainty of life, when she responds to his desire to return to the Island at a later date with 'real life is just like books and you never know where the plot will take you' (Fienberg 1992, p.180). This uncertainty is reinforced by the lack of closure suggested by the question mark in the title of the final chapter, 'Happily Ever After?'. The text ultimately suggests the possibility of negotiating qualified control in an uncertain world of sometimes delightful unpredictability.

So, although the novel subverts the authority of the author and the unity of the self, it is also concerned with the question of

how one should live, a question of survival. Yet, despite the qualifying elements previously discussed and the conflicts experienced by the characters of the novel, the bubbling humour and vitality of the text suggest that life can be celebrated, rather than merely survived. There is also a definite sense that life should be negotiated in connection with others. Although the Islanders display a strong sense of individuality through their recalcitrance, their response to the threat posed by Goodshot indicates a strong sense of community. In fact, Goodshot's self-centred and exploitative capitalism represents the dangerous excesses of individuality unrestrained by a sense of community. Ariel and Zed are assisted in their personal development by the Island community, while their friendship with each other forges a strength with which they can face the challenges of an outside world in which neither had previously felt comfortable. The importance of this connectedness is evident in the final words of the text: 'Zed ... took Ariel's hand firmly in his as they strolled up the steps together.' (Fienberg 1992, p.184). This emphasis on the significance on individuality being worked out in the context of

community gives the novel an affinity with **To the Dark Tower and The Best Thing.**

The three novels examined contain subversive elements in the spirit of postmodern and poststructuralist thought. Although such thought itself needs to be interrogated, rather than taken for granted, its presence can be seen as a sign of an increasing sophistication in Australian children's literature. **To the Dark Tower** subverts the concepts of transcendent reality and the heroic, the authority of language and the fantasy genre. **The Best Thing** challenges the notions of the self as a unified site and the pre-eminence of individualism, while **Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life** questions the authority of the author and the stability of written language. Despite their concern with subversion, these works do not abandon the traditional Australian fictional motif of survival. The fact that they are not concerned with constructing a distinctively Australian setting enables them to go beyond the issues of survival against a challenging physical terrain or a specifically Australian cultural terrain to the question of survival against an uncertain conceptual terrain. Yet, in so doing, they connect with an approach of life which can be seen as distinctly Australian: the subjugation of

individuality to community as survival is negotiated in the face of an unstable and inscrutable landscape.

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