

Carnivalizing the future: A new approach to theorizing childhood and adulthood in science fiction for young readers.

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Carnivalizing the Future: A New Approach to Theorizing Childhood and Adulthood in Science Fiction for Young Readers

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Abstract

The comic narrative strategies that Reeve uses in *Mortal Engines* set it apart from the bulk of deeply serious, starkly pessimistic science fiction for young readers. Sambell illustrates how Reeve eschews the oppressive admonitory tone of the dystopian genre, by playfully and humorously carnivalising the future instead. She argues that this innovative approach allows him to critique and subvert the polluted adult world in a manner that is not at odds with the desire to offer young readers optimistic possibilities within the post-catastrophe novel. A new style of didacticism is achieved, based upon an emancipatory model of child-adult relations.



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Dominant Trends in Recent Science Fiction for the Young

Since the 1960s futuristic science fiction for young readers has been dominated by authorial fears about the violent, inhumane social and political worlds young people seem likely to inherit.¹ Postapocalyptic, admonitory scenarios are rife, depicting horrifying visions of hostile societies that are shockingly indifferent to injustice, oppression, persecution and the suffering of the masses. Whether these fantasy scenarios extrapolate from current trends to take the imaginative form of neoprimitive or hyper-technological societies, or whether they predict the apocalyptic aftermath of nuclear aggression, the future is typically represented as a terrifying nightmare that child readers must strive to avoid at all costs. Often these stories²—which include John Christopher's *The Guardians*, Jan Mark's *The Ennead*, Victor Kelleher's *Parkland*, Robert Swindell's *Brother in the Land* and Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide*, among many others—expose and critique totalitarianism. The authors pull no punches in depicting brutally enforced inequality, horrifying violence and the systematic dismantling of individual rights in their future worlds.

This substantial body of writing is based on the dominant genre model of the classic dystopias, *1984* and *Brave New World*. As in these didactic adult novels, the dystopian form for children is used to make serious and daunting comment on where we are really going as a society and, worse, what we will be like when we get there. Its primary purpose is to puncture old myths and dreams, by proving, in the form of a literary experiment, what human aspirations and ideals are *really* likely to mean for the future of mankind. Above all, children's dystopias seek to



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