

## The Forbidden Word: Reading in dystopia

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### Introduction: reader identity

I suppose it is inevitable that writers of books like readers. They have a vested interest in them. Without readers, we can say positively that the author is dead – or at least in reduced circumstances – for who else will buy their books?

And readers like readers in books. It is in them that they see their bookishness reflected and their values about reading upheld. Think of poor little Jane Eyre wrapped up in the curtain on the window seat with Bewick's *History of British Birds* on her knee. Who, reading the novel, does not recognise her comfort in text and seclusion? And think of John Reed, when he discovers her. The reader's outrage at his bullying is not just because of his treatment of Jane, but because of his boorish disregard of books and readerliness in general. We side with Jane as readers and as victims in a philistine world. We are horrified that he could *throw a book!*

This writerly ploy to engage the real reader with the fictional reader is not rare. We see it again in *Matilda*, (1988) where our bookish heroine unites readers against her stupid parents and the tyrannical Miss Trunchball, and again in Margaret Mahy's wonderful *The Librarian and the Robbers* (1978). Miss Laburnum is the salvation of Salvation. She cures his friends of measles, brings him to stories and rescues him from the unimaginative arm of the law by filing him on her shelves in strict alphabetical order. (She is a librarian, after all). Readers in

the real world stand cheering at her side. How could we do otherwise? There is another example in Eva Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea* (2001). Here, the reader knows that Mia is going to be the right sort of protagonist when she spends the evening on sitting on the ladder in the school library, furnishing her imagination with the wonder and excitement of the Amazon jungle. The reader knows too, that the governess, Miss Minton is sound. This is established early on by the anecdote about the umbrella, the boy and the puppy; it is confirmed when we discover that her heavy trunk is full of books. Mia's cousins, on the other hand, Beatrice and Gwendolyn, are unimaginative and spiteful. They would not save puppies and they hardly read at all. The message of all this is quite clear: readers (such as you and me) are good, kind, generous, resourceful, upstanding members of society. We fight for right. Indeed, we are right. Readers, quite clearly, are on the side of the angels.

It is flattery of course, but perhaps it is necessary flattery. Readers – especially young readers – need strong and positive images of readers and reading to confirm them in their understanding that reading is worthy behavior, at times when peer pressure might suggest otherwise. It is partly from these images of reading that readers build reading identities, those constructs of self- image that sustain and fuel reading and reading choices. It is one's reading identity that determines if one reads, how much one reads, what one reads and what one does with that reading. Much has been written about how reading identity is formed in homes and classrooms and by society in general (Heath 1983; Chambers 2011; Gambrell 1996; Cremin *et al.* 2010) but there seems to have been very little written about the role of texts in this process. I want to suggest here that texts matter very much; that they are perhaps the most persuasive places for readers to learn about reading, about how other people read, and by extension, about what reading might come to mean to them. Further, I want to suggest that for pre-teens and teenagers, some of the best texts that enable that exploration of readers and

reading are dystopian novels: those places where readers in the story have to read against the odds and against society, often in order to survive. Here more starkly than ever, are readers-in-the-story positioned as warriors of right. When this happens, the differences between Jane Eyre and John Reed transcend the domestic and interpersonal and become political. Reading becomes resistance: an act of integrity and defiance in the face of oppression.

The connection or rather the disconnection between reading and dystopia is well established in both literature and life. Political and religious leaders realised in the sixteenth century that the printing press made ideas available to the masses, and that rebellion against state and Church could be a consequence. In the twentieth century, as literacy became the norm, more than ever, oppressive regimes of all political persuasions proscribed texts, imprisoned writers, muffled the press and even burned books. This has long been reflected in literature, along with the idea that together with freedom of thought through reading comes individuality and the possibility of creative personhood. *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), for example, is as much about the discovery and maintaining of self as it is about oppression and book burning.

The novels I will discuss here are various. Some are set against real historical contexts. Others are placed in an imaginary time, often, but not always the future. What they have in common is a child protagonist who despite being deprived of text by a deliberate act of politics, maintains or develops a relationship with reading. What I want to explore here is how this 'reading against the odds' might be interpreted by the real reader, and what, by extrapolation, might be learned about reading as a result.

## **Felix and Tomas: children in war**

War provides a particular type of dystopia. As well as the inevitable disruption and danger, there is a sense that war is an abnegation of what childhood should be. The Wordsworthian ideal of the free and innocent child in the countryside cannot be maintained in light of invasion, landmines and shootings. Two texts which explore war in terms of how it disrupts the innocence of childhood are Michael Morpurgo's *I Believe in Unicorns* (2005) and Morris Gleitzman's *Once* (2006) (and subsequent titles). *I Believe in Unicorns* tells the story of eight year old Tomas. He lives, untroubled by anything, including literacy, in a small town in what seems to be one of the Balkan States. He is reluctant to read, so his parents send him every week to the town library to hear stories. An enchantress of a librarian, her wooden unicorn and the stories she tells win him for literacy. He thrives and becomes a reader. Then the town is bombarded and enemy tanks roll in. The library is hit and all is feared lost, but the townspeople rally. They save the books and the unicorn and store them in their own homes until the war is over and the library rebuilt. Peace finally comes, but it is only when the unicorn is restored to the new library that the reader feels that the world has been righted. The primacy of the word and of the imagination has been restored and all is safe.

What we have here are books, story and reading as value, as things that are worth saving per se, that persist and can be returned to. Through the hardship, uncertainty and sheer pragmatism of war, the imaginary world is cached safe: a promise of luxury in the better times to come when innocence is restored and imagination can be entertained. It survives in memory and as an act of faith. Like the image of the blackbird in RS Thomas's poem, *A Day in Autumn*, it is 'something to wear against the heart in the long cold'. Reading, the young reader learns, really is worthwhile.

For Felix Salinger too, in Gleitzman's *Once* quartet, story provides comfort. Felix, the child of Jewish booksellers in Nazi occupied Poland, has been hidden by his parents in a Catholic orphanage. When Nazi soldiers arrive to burn the convent library, Felix decides to run away and warn his parents. He takes with him just two things: the notebook in which he writes his own stories and his memories of Richmal Crompton's *William*. On the run and in hiding, Felix holds William and Richmal Crompton close to his heart. William is there in the stories he retells to amuse his friend Zelda and in the names the two of them take on as they assume new identities. Crompton is there – the one constant feature – in the naïve litany of saints that Felix recites to calm himself in times of crisis. Eventually, when Felix is forced into still deeper hiding, a copy of *William's Happy Days* is his sole reading matter.

What is it, then, that William *does* for Felix the reader? What is it in these very English, middle class pre-war texts that speak to the little Jewish runaway? Most immediately, and most convincingly, I think, is the emotional security they provide. For Felix knew William Brown before war disrupted his life: he had met him in the bedtime stories his parents read aloud to him. The William in Felix's memory secures a thread of continuity with the past and strengthens his link with his missing parents. In this way, Felix's sense of identity is maintained. The stories attach him to the Felix he was and the Felix he wants to be again.

But any favourite text might have delivered this sort of emotional security. What is significant about William Brown is that he connects with Felix in other ways as well. For William's carefree life in the English Home Counties proceeds in curious counterpoint to

Felix's fight for existence. Both boys, for example, spend much time in the woods: William and the Outlaws in perpetual and imaginative adventure with brigands and highway men; Felix, a real outlaw in terms of the Nazis, has to avoid sniper bullets. Both are fascinated by food: William's days are punctuated by birthday teas, cream buns and visits to the sweetshop; Felix, genuinely hungry for much of the time, fantasies about a whole carrot. Both spend time in barns: William and the Outlaws play, plot and argue in their old barn; Felix hides, cramped in a pit in Gabriek's barn for two long years. Besting figures of authority is a preoccupation for both. For William, authority means the irascible Farmer Jenks, Mr. Marks, his headmaster, and his sometimes stern father. He risks the loss of pocket money, the confiscation of various catapults, bows and arrows, trumpets and mouth organs and the occasional beating. For Felix, authority means German soldiers. He risks being shot dead or being sent to a death camp.

What William has, and what Felix lacks is safety from harm, the security of a predictable home life and the freedom to play. Felix's only access to these is through his reading, and that is what William provides for him: a vicarious childhood.

So what might the child reader of Gleitzman's books make of all this? Most clear, I think is the life enhancing effect that reading is shown to have. Reading (and remembering story) preserves Felix's sense of self-hood and maintains a playful core to this thinking that juxtaposes the political straightjacket of Nazism, and which celebrates naughtiness and forgiveness. What Felix knows, and what the real reader learns from him is that books are where better lives can be had.

But this is not all. Felix has one more use for Richmal Crompton. He uses her as a shibboleth, a test for liberal values. Felix knows he can trust Amon, the Hitler Youth boy, when he discovers they are both fans of William and indeed, the bond the two boys develop through the books enables Amon to save Felix's life. Are we to believe that stories imbue the reader with liberal values and inoculate against fascism? I find this less convincing.

### **Demetria and Todd: children in future worlds**

In some ways, Thomas and Felix were relatively fortunate in that they both grew up in environments where familiarity with books and stories was an expectation and a joy. They knew what books might be good for, and they could hold on to and use this knowledge, even when there were no books to read. Fictional children in science-fiction and dystopian novels do not always have this advantage. The two I want to explore here are Todd from Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008), the first of the *Chaos Walking* trilogy; and Demetria from Jan Mark's *Riding Tycho* (2005) and its sequel *Voyager* (2007).

First Todd: his inability to read is both a consequence of his upbringing and an engine of the plot of the trilogy. Todd is nearly thirteen; a boy on the verge of manhood. His home is Prentisstown, an isolated settlement on New World, founded some twenty years earlier by Christian settlers, looking for a purer, more simple life. They did not find it, and they live now in an all-male community. There are no girls and no women, but there is the Noise: the ability to hear each other's thinking, or rather, the inability to stop others from hearing one's own thoughts. Mayor Prentiss, who governs Prentisstown, has caused all books to be burned

and has discontinued school since the suicide of the teacher. Todd, therefore, has no books to learn to read with and there has been no-one to teach him to do more than simple (and still for Todd, inefficient) decoding. The consequence of this is not just illiteracy, but also ignorance. Todd and the other boys who are his contemporaries have only propaganda videos and the accepted narratives of the adults to help them make sense of the history of their settlement, and nothing to to expand their ideas in any way beyond the that. With no alternative discourses available, questioning the truth of Mayor Prentiss's authorized version of events is unimaginable. Todd and the others take on the lies of their society: the knowledge that the women died out through illness, that Prentisstown is the only settlement on the planet, and that anyone who leaves it dies. In this world, where thinking is transparent, there is no concept of deceit, and so Todd is confined physically as well as cognitively by his illiteracy. One who cannot imagine the possibility of life beyond the prison does not try to escape.

But despite the Noise, there is deception, and the boundaries of Todd's life are not as fixed as he supposes. When circumstances force his guardians, Ben and Cillian, to insist that he leaves Prentisstown, they give him a survival kit in a rucksack. There is food and first aid equipment. There is a hunting knife, and there are texts: a map to help him reach the next settlement and his mother's diary.

This is astonishing, and the significance of these texts is immediately obvious to both Todd and to the reader, for neither text ought to exist in Prentisstown. The diary should have been burned long ago: the fact that it has been saved reveals a deliberate and long term act of civil disobedience on Ben and Cillian's part. The map should not even be possible, because, as far as Todd knows, there is nowhere else to map. Its presence suggests something even more

shocking to him: that there must be other settlements on New World. Together the map and the diary light a fuse of realization in Todd's mind. Its spark exposes for the first time the layers of deception that have swathed his young life: the carapace of lies that Mayor Prentiss has built up around Prentisstown concerning its history and isolation and the secrets that Ben and Cillian have kept hidden, even from Todd himself. The fuse explodes the world he has taken for granted since childhood and blows away his confidence and his trust.

This confidence would have been fairly easily reconstructed if Todd had been able to read. The diary would have helped him reimagine his past, and the map would have enabled him to see a purposeful immediate future. But Todd, like the children discussed in Arizpe's chapter in this volume, cannot read. As so, for Todd the secrecy he has only just realized continues, and now the texts take on a duality: they become both holders of truth *for* him and withholders of it *from* him. They symbolize the knowledge which he knows he desperately needs, and his inability to access it. They are silent, yet full of the noise he needs to hear. They are of enormous worth and enormous frustration. They are an outward reminder of his ignorance, his helplessness and his pride. For what thirteen year old boy can admit to a girl that he has been wrong about everything, or that he can't read?

Only when Todd trusts Viola enough to admit his difficulty in reading is he able to discover what the texts have to say. By then, the urgent message that Ben wrote on the map is no longer relevant, but the diary has a lot to teach. It tells Todd his mother's story, and through it he learns the true history of Prentisstown. But he learns more than facts, he learns about love and openness. The hope and the tenderness his mother communicates stands in sharp contrast to the hatred and violence of Mayor Prentiss and his advancing army. These qualities provide

the solace and emotional security that Todd needs: they allow him to rebuild his understanding of the past, rediscover selfhood and understand the present more clearly. The added factor is Viola. Because the text is mediated for Todd through her, those lessons in love and trust transfer. Sharing the text draws them closer together, strengthens their relationship and fortifies their resolve.

In the end, text in *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is an agent of companionship and healing. But it can only become so once it had been read, and this is why Viola is so important. She shows the reader in the real world that text, important though it is, is nothing without a reader to read it. The reader, far from being nerdy and isolated, is in fact, a figure of power and unity.

Like Todd, Demetria in Jan Mark's *Riding Tycho*, lives on a planet which has been settled from Earth, though she has not been told this, and like him, lack of text is one of the factors that locks her into a dystopian community. Her home is High Island, one of just two outcrops, remote and bleak, and far from the mainland. Low Island, the other, is a prison. Demetria lives with her mother and older brother, Bevis. They, and the other inhabitants of High Island – especially the women – live a life of utility and hardship. There is no luxury, no festivity, no music and no laughter. They have one annual celebration on Old Year's Day, and they celebrate with a funeral.

Demetria and Bevis go to school. There, Bevis and the boys learn woodworking and seamanship. These are the skills they will need as adults. Demetria and the girls knit. They

learn to knit the garments that their mothers and grandmothers have knitted for generations to supplement family incomes. For some this means elaborately patterned jumpers. For others it means stockings. Demetria's family knits stockings. She has learned to read, and is better at reading than teacher, but this is not an accomplishment that is valued. It is knitting that matters here, and she is mediocre at that.

In this community texts are few, and those few are functional and authoritative. The mail boat has long since stopped bringing anything other than official letters – such as the one Demetria's mother receives to say that a political prisoner is to be billeted in their shed. There are no newspapers or magazines, and the only books are the collections of disjointed sentences that teach children to read:

*The great orne is a big fish.*

*The sheep is a useful animal.*

*A good girl learns to knit.*

*What will happen to the bad girl? ( Voyager 129)*

Texts such as these admit no room for argument or questioning, and less still for imagination. This is reading to control.

Even story has been diminished and brutalized. Demetria knows that the function of story is to teach morality to small children, and it is a comfortless morality indeed. Of course she knows about the Little Mermaid, she who fell in love with a fisherman, and married him. And Demetria knows what happened next: the mermaid turned out to be a useless wife (she

couldn't knit!), and so the fisherman bashed her brains out on a rock and gave her to the women, who made her into soup. Optimism, love and mercy are not features of Demetria's life.

And yet, this world of misogyny and brutality is a palimpsest. Beneath it, shadows of a richer, more imaginative consciousness can be glimpsed. The currents that carry logs and fish past High Island are called Tycho and Kepler, named after astronomers who looked into the night sky and wondered. The siren that wails when a prisoner escapes from Low Island is called the Banshee. How did this unimaginative community happen upon these names? As the story progresses, Demetria learns that she has been named after her own planet: Demeter. It takes a romantic imagination to call planet after the goddess of natural bounty: it takes hope, love and generosity to wish that bounty on a child. What has happened to this hope and imagination? Even Bevis, Demetria's bullying brother has a name reminiscent of childhood play and adventure (see Hunt, this volume), though that play is tainted with misogyny. In her interaction with Ianto Morgan, Demetria begins to glimpse this richer alternative to life as she experiences it on High Island. Her story, therefore, is the story of hope rediscovered. While Todd learns of an alternative way of understanding the past, Demetria glimpses the possibility of a better future.

*Riding Tycho* is a text that is allusive and subtle. The reader who appreciates it will have necessarily developed reading habits that are imaginative, tentative and enquiring, qualities all of which have been quashed in Demetria and her contemporaries. Much of the power in the book is in the unstated contrast that is made in the reader's mind between her own, necessarily rich way with text and the deliberate misuse of it that is accepted as normal on

High Island. The readers in the real world who see this are both delighted and appalled: delighted at the imaginative and enriching possibility of text and story in their own lives, and appalled at the possibility of its abuse. They learn not to take text for granted.

### **Mosca Mye: child in an imagined past**

If dreariness is the key word for imaginative life on High Island, then exuberant superstition seems to characterize the Fractured Realm of Frances Hardinge's *Fly by Night* (2005). Here every day and some hours are named for one of the Beloved, the domestic saints who regulate daily life. There is Goodlady Cramflick, She Who Keeps the Vegetables of the Garden Crisp, Goodman Postrophe, He Who Defends Villages from the Wandering Dead, Goodman Palpitattle, He Who Keeps Flies out of Jams and Butterchurns, and hundreds more. Shrines are built for them, prayers and berries are offered to them, and babies, born on the days and hours of their festivals are named for them. So our heroine, born on the day of Goodman Paplitattle, is named Mosca, after a bluebottle.

Mosca is daughter to exiled scholar, Quillam Mye. They live, isolated from the rest of the village of Chough in bookish harmony, until Quillam dies. Then his books and papers are burned and Mosca is farmed out to the miller to keep accounts and read letters. She is useful, but not trusted, for, as everyone knows reading is dangerous. If you read the wrong books, the words crawl around you brain and send you mad. Mosca is the only person in the village, except the magistrate, who can read.

She is not happy. The village is awful. It is wet and dripping. Chalky deposits from the hills engulf everything, and she is bored. Starved of words and ideas and in danger of calcification of mind as well as body, she escapes with a delinquent goose called Saracen and Eponymous Clent, storyteller, poet, conman and spy. Their adventures in the troubled city of Mandelion are the substance of the novel.

Text, and who controls it, is at the heart of Mandelion's trouble. The villagers in Chough were right. Text is dangerous in this realm, though not in the way they imagine it. The Guild of Stationers has power of press and must sanction everything that is read. Only texts that bear the Guild's stamp are permitted. Thus there are chapbooks and ballads, and news bulletins. The public may be entertained and thrilled by text, but not encouraged to think. Reading texts, writing texts, printing texts that have not been passed by the Stationers is an act of treason. They seek to thwart opposition. Opposition comes in two forms: Radicals and Birdcatchers. The Radicals want fairer conditions for the poor and strive to achieve it through education. They run illegal ragged schools for poor children, and print revolutionary literature on their hidden press. They want to overthrow the Stationers. The Birdcatchers are priests and their followers from the old regime, whose reading of ancient sacred texts has prompted them to wish to free the people from the superstition of the Beloved, to a purer, higher ideal. They will stop at nothing, not even murder to achieve their aims. They strive to restore the monarchy and regain intellectual control of the city. For all three groups, text is seminal and secrets essential: their own are to be guarded and the others' uncovered. Intrigue, suspicion and betrayal, therefore, are inevitable.

Into the fray, come Mosca and Clent, partisan to none of it, but literate enough to cause trouble to all. They weave their way through this web of politics and power, pushed and pulled by opposing forces. Is Clent spying for the right paymaster? Should Mosca pledge her allegiance to Pertellis the radical and join his floating school? Should she be persuaded by the eloquence of the Birdcatcher, Linden Kohlrabi, and his professed admiration of her father's words?

In this novel text leads and misleads, changes, challenges and manipulates. Clent wields words very often to his advantage, but sometimes he comes close to being destroyed by them. Blythe the highwayman is metamorphosed from thuggish robber to champion of the people, merely by the suggestive power of a poem. Mosca is enticed by words out of one life and cast into another more dangerous. She is swayed almost out of reason by rhetoric. Cakes learns to read and is released temporarily from her skivvying mind set; Partridge accidentally encounters an illegal press and is murdered. Text empowers and text destroys.

In this novel words, both spoken and written, are powerful and unpredictable, riotous and unreliable. There are no safe messages here for the reader in the real world about texts as sources of comfort. Nor is there any suggestion that text will help the reader sort out the past or the future: it is too capricious for that. But words, and story, are rich and life enhancing. Mosca knows this. This is why, in the end, she chooses to live a life of adventure with Clent rather than accept the predictability and security of the ragged school. She chooses to live on her wits and her intelligence as her literacy has equipped her to do. The words Mosca imagines her father speaks towards the end of the novel as she drifts disconsolately on the river on a raft of rags might just as well have been addressed to the read in the real world:

“ ‘If you want someone to tell you what to think,’ the phantom answered briskly, without looking up, you will never be short of people who will do so.’ ... ‘Come now,’ he said at last, ‘you can hardly claim that I have left you ignorant. I taught you to read, did I not?’ ” (415).

## **Conclusion**

Teaching children to read, as Quillam Mye did for Mosca is one thing. Teaching them how to be readers is quite another. I suggest that teaching anybody to see text as an instrument of power is something different again. The books discussed here, separately and together, show text in two ways. They show how text can be controlled by authority, and how, when this happens, individual and collective freedom is curtailed. This is both freedom to act and speak and, most important, freedom of the imagination. For, without stories, how can anyone see beyond the confines of their everyday world, and build the narratives that make challenge possible? Todd and Demetria make this point clearly. Both grow up impoverished as readers and as a result struggle to learn to read their worlds differently. Both find, eventually, through story, the courage to oppose. This does not make either of their lives safer or easier, but it gives them agency.

Mosca too finds reading dangerous. But she knows what words are good for, and so illustrates the other way that texts are used here. They sustain. For Mosca, words provide interest and excitement and possibility. They enable her to live life on the edge. For Tomas and Felix, it is a little different, but the basic function is the same: story, or at least the promise of story enables them to hang on to the people they know they should be and want to be again. Reading for all three of them, is about identity.

And so it is for young readers in the real world. They, just like Tomas and Mosca and Todd are continually in the process of constructing their own reading identities from texts as they read. Few of them, thankfully, have war and tyranny to contend with, but there are social pressures, some of which, for some young people make being a reader difficult. These texts, with their internally persuasive arguments about the power and importance of text, I suggest, give these young readers the courage to keep reading ‘against the odds’ in their own lives.

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