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# The Power Imbalance in Children's Literature: Locating the Power of the Child

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## **Abstract**

Children's literature is for and to children, but it is written, edited, published, reviewed, purchased and often selected, by adults. The adult thus dominates the genre, and the overshadowing power the adult holds is frequently in focus in literary criticism in the field of children's literature. However, by changing this focus and moving it over to the child, it is possible to explore the ways in which the child can be powerful, rather than the adult. The conventional features in children's literature exist and have become prevalent due to the general adult power surrounding the genre. However, Kevin Brooks' *The Bunker Diary* lacks the conventional features of the genre that the adult has established, and the novel then allows the power of the child to come forward instead. *The Bunker Diary* is throughout this thesis used to illustrate where the power of the child is located. The power of the child unfolds in specific kinds of power that can have multiple meanings. These are all explored, and the child reader can arguably be empowered by reading contemporary, controversial literature for children.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The child as other

“[I]n the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it” (Nodelman, “The Other” 30).

As Nodelman states, “all children’s literature is written across what must inevitably be perceived to be a gap, written for and often about a group to which the writer does not belong” (“Pleasure and Genre” 11). What allows children’s literature to exist in the first place is thus binary and oppositional, as child and adult stand against each other. The centre of attention in criticism and theoretical discourses on children’s literature is frequently the adult, and his domination and power in the genre. Nodelman compares Said’s writing on Orientalism, describing the European mindset towards Arabs and Asians to that of children’s literature, suggesting that the thinking of the East is a European invention in the same way that the thinking of children and childhood is an adult invention (“The Other” 29). The description of how Arabs and Asians are inherently seen as inferior to Europeans can be applied to children and their inferiority to adults: “Orientalism is [...] inherently and inevitably a study of what theorists often call *the other* [...] Said’s words force us to face the uncomfortable conclusion that our attempting to speak for and about children in these ways will always confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as thinkers and speakers” (Nodelman, “The Other” 29). Children’s literature is for the child, but is written, published, reviewed, purchased and often selected by adults. It is then an imperialist activity where those in power speak for and to the powerless (Nodelman, “The Other” 33). How childhood is portrayed in children’s literature is, according to Nodelman, “permeated with assumptions developed over a number of centuries by a history of adult observation and discussion” (“The Other” 30). The view on children and childhood is thus something that has been formed over time, and this explains why the adult interpretation of children and childhood has become something that is established and prevalent in our society today. How the adult believes the child and childhood should be is transferred to children’s books, and how both children and childhood are portrayed in children’s literature is an adult reading and construction. The adult dominates in what children’s literature is, why it is so, and how it is communicated: literature for children truly is “adult-centered” (Nodelman, “The Other” 30).

The adults' attempts to speak both for and to children underline a difference between adult and child and establish the child as inferior to the adult, as the child cannot speak for itself (Nodelman, "The Other" 29). The child is different and other to the adult, and the fundamental demarcation between them is age. The adult writes the literature that is for the child, and interpretations, assumptions and constructions must then necessarily be made by the adult in order to write children's literature, as he himself is not a child and is situated remotely and isolated from childhood. When the adult speaks for the child giving it a voice, the child is silenced (Nodelman, "The Other" 30): The voice in children's literature is that of the adult, and the voice of the *actual* child is never heard. The child character internal to a text is constructed by the adult, and thus speaks through this adult voice. The child reader external to a text is simply the receiver of the adult voice speaking, and children's fiction thus "sets up the child as an outsider in its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*" (Rose 1). The author attempts to bring the child into a world that he, the adult, has constructed. There is no doubt that the adult truly dominates children's literature, he is "author, giver, maker" (Rose 2), whereas the child "comes after [as] reader, product, receiver" (Rose 2). One can thus see the adult as powerful and the child as not. Nikolajeva claims that "nowhere else are the power structures as visible as in children's literature", and that literature for children is "deliberately created by those in power for the powerless" ("Theory" 13). The attempt of the adult to both see and speak for the child is certainly what creates children's literature in the first place (Nodelman, "The Other" 34), and the adult is the one deciding what children's literature really should be. The adult thus holds an inevitable power over the child – the child to whom children's literature is written for and to.

## 1.2 Children's literature

There is no set definition of what children's literature really is in discourses surrounding the genre. Nonetheless, as the child frequently is seen as other to the adult, marking the relationship between the child and adult by power, Beauvais' definition of children's literature is appropriate to adopt. She states in the same manner like Nodelman that adult intentionality is at the core of children's literature (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 7). Her definition of children's literature then is intentionalist, that is a synthesis made up of adult intentionalities (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 7). Authors, publishers, reviewers and critics partake in deciding what children's literature should be, but the genre is also shaped by the "immense contingent of adults who have no direct connection to children's literature, but indirectly influence it through the propagation and perpetuation of social, cultural and



political ideas linked to childhood” (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 8). What adults both inside and outside the genre have in common is that the child is conformed as other: “[t]he layers of adult mediation that surround the delivery of fiction to children place the child reader in a role of ‘subjection’ to the controlling discourses of adulthood and society” (Thacker 10). The adult assumptions and beliefs about children and childhood in society have developed over centuries, and are now implicit and taken for granted (Nodelman, “The Other” 30). As Nodelman claims, “whatever children actually are, there can be no question that it is adult *ideas* about childhood that shape [children’s] literature and provide it with its characteristic features” (*The Hidden Adult* 148).

The content of children’s books reflects adult beliefs and assumptions about children and childhoods, which is apparent in the conventional features in children’s literature that characterize the genre (Nodelman and Reimer 191). Among these characteristics, Nodelman states that children’s books are “hopeful and optimistic in tone” (*The Hidden Adult* 216), “didactic” (*The Hidden Adult* 81), and have “innocence [as a] central subject” (*The Hidden Adult* 77). There should be a happy and hopeful mood in children’s books, there should be something that the child can learn from, and there should be an innocent attitude to children’s books because children are perceived as innocent. These features are prevalent in children’s literature, and can establish children’s literature as a genre on its own. Just like there are different genres within literature for children as with literature for adults, there are certain recurrent features in *all* texts for children (Weinreich qtd. in Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 142). Whether dystopian, realistic or fantastic: certain features are commonplace and can thus be seen as universal when it comes to the genre of children’s literature as a whole. These conventional features are expected to be part of every children’s book, and that is despite and regardless of different age groups of intended readers as marked by the publishers on children’s books. The features thus really compose children’s literature as a whole since they have come to be ingrained in the genre over the years. Again, it is the adult who dominates, forms and defines the genre.

### 1.3 The child reader

The adult talks both about and for the child reader. To define children’s literature also means defining *children*, and there is a “constant assumption of the existence of the (reading) child (that is: the assumption that there is such a thing as a unified, consistent, ‘objective’ ‘child reader’)” (Lesnik-Oberstein 21). The child reader represents children as a group, as

adults frequently group children together and see them as an entity (Nodelman, “The Other” 32). The child reader then is an adult construction, made up of adult beliefs and values about what it really means to be a child in Western society (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 8). Because children need to be defined in order to define the genre of children’s literature, the children “remain the passion of – and therefore the source of conflict for – children’s authors and critics” (Lesnik-Oberstein 27). Adult critics and theorists discuss this child reader whom children’s literature is written for and to, but the child reader is nevertheless an adult construct, because “children as readers are frequently dismissed” (Thacker 2). Children are seen as other to the adult and less than what the adult is, and the voice of the child is regarded as insignificant and is then silenced. Real children’s responses and reactions to children’s literature are rarely examined or presented in critical discourses on the genre and its readers. The adult critic or theorist constructs a child reader then, through which he can present who he believes the child reader is and how this reader will respond. The real child reader is left out of the equation, and how both children and childhood are presented in children’s books by authors as well is done “‘without’ having to make reference to a single existing child” (Cook qtd. in Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 7). Both the child reader, as well as children and childhoods as depicted in children’s literature, are all adult makings.

Every author too constructs and creates a reader through his writing; that is an implied reader. This reader is created consciously or unconsciously, but each children’s book implies a specific kind of reader created by the author (Wall 6). The author communicates with the implied reader and establishes a relationship with him through his writing, presenting the reality he has written for this reader (Chambers 35). Despite having deliberately created him or not, the author knows this reader well – as it is for and to the implied reader the author really writes. Each author’s text inescapably calls an implied reader into being, but the real author knows only this implied reader (Wall 7). The *real* reader is outside the book, and the author will never know the child reader who holds his text and reads the words (Wall 4). However, by removing the focus from the reader whom the adult author has created, the centre of attention can rather be the child outside the book. Children’s literature criticism is indeed “condemned to remain absolutely childless [but] the children’s book is read by *real* children [emphasis added]” (Beauvais, “The Problem of ‘Power’” 77).

The thesis takes a point of departure in a real child reader, but not by making any assumptions regarding this child, neither ethnicity nor background. What is essential is merely

the “vertical” differentiation (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 10) between adult and child, where age is what separates them. The aim is to focus on the child and his<sup>1</sup> power, and this is a power that the child reader has regardless of “horizontal” demarcations (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 10) such as social differences. All readers are different from one another and can and will get different things out of reading a text, and claiming to know how child readers react can be seen as the adult exerting power over the child. By presenting child readers’ responses and reactions, the adult provides the child with a voice and hence silences it: neither authors of children’s books nor critics or theorists can know how the real reader will react to a children’s book, but attempts are frequently made in order to do this. However, no one can know a real reaction but the child himself. The aim of the thesis is not to present readers’ reactions and speak *for* the child, but rather to demonstrate how a children’s book can speak *to* the child. Beauvais states that the real child cannot arm himself with a voice in literary criticism, but it is possible to “speak on behalf of [...] voiceless ‘victims’” (“The Problem of ‘Power’” 77). Children as readers are frequently devalued and silenced (Thacker 5), and the child tends to drown in the adult domination in and out of the genre. Nevertheless, in exploring how a specific children’s book can speak to the child, the voice of the child can be lifted to the surface, and his power can then be examined.

#### 1.4 The Bunker Diary

Kevin Brooks’ award-winning, yet controversial *The Bunker Diary* was published in 2013, and will be used as an example throughout the thesis in order to explore the power of the child. On the cover of the novel, the main character Linus’ thoughts summarize what *The Bunker Diary* is about:

“I can’t believe I fell for it. It was still dark when I woke up this morning. As soon as my eyes opened I knew where I was. A low-ceiling rectangular building made entirely of whitewashed concrete. There are six little rooms along the main corridor. There are no windows. No doors. The elevator is the only way in or out. What’s he going to do with me? What am I going to do?” (Brooks cover).

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<sup>1</sup> The child reader will be referred to as “he” rather than “she” throughout the thesis. Nodelman claims that “whether male or female, adults often describe their dealings with children in language which manages to suggest something traditionally feminine about childhood, something traditionally masculine about adulthood [...]” (Nodelman, “The Other” 30). The intention of the thesis is to move away from the prevailing adult power in children’s literature, and it can thus be more expedient to refer to the child as male, not conforming to the prevailing norm in gendering the child as female.

The remaining rooms in the bunker are soon filled, and both children and adults are kidnapped by the same man and held captive in the bunker. They are deprived of their freedom and of the basic needs a human has. The “man upstairs” plays a sick game with his captives, monitoring them and forcing them to act desperately against each other. The novel has been disesteemed by critics, reviewers and consumers – consumers that frequently are adults selecting and purchasing literature for children. Bradbury asks in her review of *The Bunker Diary* why anyone would wish the book upon a child, and calls it a “uniquely sickening read” (1). Bradbury states that the novel is “extremely close to real life, for one thing – or to what it might hold at one troubling extreme. And there’s no distancing alternative-world scenario at work” (1). The troubling extreme she refers to is part of explaining why *The Bunker Diary* might be an uncomfortable read, because the harsh reality it portrays actually can happen in real life. The world the novel presents is allegedly real, rather than fantastic or dystopian, and there is no escape to be had for the child reading it.

There is undoubtedly more controversial and radical children’s literature being published than ever before, but the content and features established and ingrained in children’s literature due to adult assumptions about children and childhood prevail. Even though increasingly more children’s books challenge the conventional traits of the genre, there are hardly any children’s books that break with all three features Nodelman refers to in his characterization of children’s literature. Nonetheless, *The Bunker Diary* does break with them all; the novel lacks a hopeful tone, as well as didacticism and innocence. The adult decides what is appropriate for children to read, and *The Bunker Diary* is frequently discredited because of its content and then regarded as inappropriate. The adult sees children as an entity, and there is no difference in age or level of maturity in this entity. *The Bunker Diary* and similar novels then will be discredited by adults regardless of which age groups of intended readers it is listed for. It comes down to the prevailing conviction of what the adult wants the child to read, regardless of age or maturity. Authors, publishers, critics and consumers all hold power in which to decide what is suitable for the child reader, and *The Bunker Diary* is not suitable. The novel breaks with what the adult has established and made prevalent in the genre, and precisely because *The Bunker Diary* challenges the norm of children’s literature, it can be used as an example to challenge another norm in the genre, that is the power the adult has.

## 1.5 Thesis overview

Beauvais' interpretation of children's literature as intentionalist, in addition to Nodelman's characteristics of the genre can together comprise a definition of children's literature that forms an interesting point of departure. Children's literature does "articulate an adult-child relationship marked by power dynamics" (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 3), and power can be seen as the main component in the relationship between the adult and the child. Because the adult power is overshadowing in children's literature, the child is apparently left powerless. However, when adult intentionality is established as pivotal in the genre, the power of the adult is exposed and then makes it possible to challenge this power. The purpose of the thesis is to remove focus from the power the adult holds in children's literature and rather look at how and where the child reader has his power. The adult power will not be examined, but will be referred to as a general power as the adult *dominates* the genre. The power of the child then will be in focus, and the adult power will be forced to the background, which allows the child to come forward.

The conventional features Nodelman mentions are established by the adult and underline adult power, so when the features are absent in a children's book it can make place for the power of the child instead. *The Bunker Diary* will be used as an example to explore both where and how the power of the child exists, and what *kinds* of power these are. Beauvais claims that "power" really is an umbrella term, and that it needs to be redefined, and most importantly, redistributed ("The Problem of 'Power'" 74). If power is redefined and then redistributed, it becomes clear that there are different types of power, and despite the adult dominating children's literature, the child has power too. Each chapter will explore a conventional feature of children's literature and its connection to adult domination and general power, before looking at how the lack of the feature in *The Bunker Diary* arguably can empower the child reader. Hope, didacticism and innocence are examined, and various theories will be used in order to explore and examine the power of the child reader. The power of the child consists of several kinds of power that all contribute making and establishing the child reader as powerful. The child then can be seen as being empowered by reading contemporary, controversial children's literature.



## Chapter 2: Hope

### 2.1 Hope in children's literature in conjunction with adult power

Hope is closely connected to children and childhood by nature, and the child is different and other from the adult and “will be hope” (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 46). Hope is an image of childhood as children have their entire future ahead of them. Since hope represents children and childhood, it is also ingrained in children's books. As Beauvais states, hope is not something that is merely “added” to children's books, it is rather “a notion so tightly entwined with the very construct of childhood, with symbolic childhood, that it is not pruned away from it so easily” (*The Mighty Child* 46). The world as presented in children's literature is an optimistic and hopeful one, and hope “makes texts for children's literature into utopian fantasy, a description of what the writer knows or thinks is a better world than the actual less ideal one of which the writer is conscious” (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 217). An ideal world is what is continually presented to the child, and in an ideal world hope is always present. Like Carpenter claims, all literature for children is about ideals: “[a]dult fiction sets out to portray and explain the world as it really is; books for children present it as it should be” (qtd. in Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 217). Hope is a defining characteristic of children's literature, and certainly plays a great role within the genre (Smedman 91). Whether the characters in children's books face challenging obstacles to overcome, such as disease, are abandoned by family or friends, or must fight against evil, there is as a rule an underlying assumption that things eventually will get better. Hope is portrayed as a better future, that things will work out, and that good will overcome evil. It is an established norm and a conventional feature that “adults are reluctant to see diminished in any way” (Nodelman and Reimer 133). The ideal childhood is a happy and hopeful one, and the adult writer will continually construct a world for the child reader where there is hope. There is indeed a reluctance to see hope diminished in the genre of children's literature, as children and childhood naturally stand for hope.

Assertions like that of Inglis, claiming that hope is a completely necessary virtue (297), or Nodelman, stating that the centre of attention should continually be on hope, *especially* in naturally pessimistic novels depicting the dark aspects of the world (*The Hidden Adult* 217), emphasize the dominance of hope in children's books. However, according to Nodelman, there is a dishonesty about the hope and hopefulness such assertions commend

(*The Hidden Adult* 217). The dishonesty derives from a wish to shield the child, since the adult knows that hope can be illusory or even absent, and wants to keep the child from knowing this. Children's books offer the child a utopian fantasy, and for "child readers, it is usually assumed, the fantasy will or should appear to *be* the reality, not fantastic at all" (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 221). "[A]dult writers lie to child readers" (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 217), and to shelter the child from the real world outside of the book does involve lying. Children's texts "[reflect] the adult writers' view, often highly idealized, sometimes nostalgic" (Nikolajeva, "Theory" 18) as well as they "represent a holding back, a reticence about saying too much in too much detail" (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 142). The adult must then continually balance between what to tell the child and not. What the adult does not tell is rooted in prevailing assumptions and beliefs in society regarding children and childhood, and because the adult sees the child as hope, the literature for the child must be hopeful as well. A defective and flawed world where hopelessness exists will then be kept from the child. Nonetheless, the adult does not keep hopelessness from the child merely with the child's best interest at heart, there is also a selfishness from the adult's side about the preservation of hope in children's books. For adults, children's literature can be seen as representing a utopian escape, as "childhood is something irretrievably lost for adults" (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 217). Childhood can, however, be restored in fiction, and constructions of childhoods symbolize for the adult a time where things were simpler and better (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 217). The adult is, according to Nikolajeva, bitter "about the impossibility of returning to the childhood idyll" ("Theory" 18). In both keeping hopelessness away from the child, as well as wanting an idealized, hopeful image of childhood for himself, the adult then exerts power over the child.

According to Nodelman and Reimer, the hope and optimism of children's texts "[raise] a question about their accuracy and honesty" (209), and might be seen as evidence of the lack of realism in children's literature (209). Realistic children's books constitute a clear minority in the genre, and are perhaps the only books for children where hope is not necessarily latent, but rather questioned or challenged as a trait. The child reader is not offered an ideal, hopeful world, but rather a world as it can be at its worst. Realism intends to be honest and to present life and the world in an authentic way. Nonetheless, the often harsh reality and honesty realism aims to depict can be prohibitive for consumers, who frequently are adults purchasing literature for children, deciding for the child what to read. The frequently discredited content and issues treated in realistic books for children can also be a



problematic notion for authors to deal with, like Hunt claims: realism is frequently seen as “raising more problems than it can solve” (124). He refers to Le Guin, who characterises what she sees as an insoluble dilemma for naturalistic writers in that presenting the world’s malice conjointly with a solution is lying to the child, and presenting it as insoluble is unethical, crushing the child reader with a burden that is too heavy for him yet to bear (Hunt 124). Le Guin seems to prefer the former, and lying to the child is shielding him from the unethical, constructing a world where there is a solution, and where there is hope.

A presence of hope suggests optimism, that there are solutions to issues, and that there will be a happy ending. A happy ending “turns a story ultimately towards hope rather than resignation” (Babbitt qtd. in Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 216). The aim of children’s books then is to present a solution to the issues they present, but the tone needs not be happy or hopeful throughout the book. According to Nodelman, a story for children will not be satisfying unless there are obstacles to overcome for the child characters; “a difficult situation to be solved or transcended” (*Hidden Adult* 222). However, literature for children is “a literature in which an idyllic utopia is eventually achieved” (Nodelman, *Hidden Adult* 222), and a solution must necessarily be presented for the child reader; if not in the course of the book, at least in the end of it. There is then a latent indication of hope for a happy ending in all children’s books. Literature that presents the world as if there are no solutions or hope is seen as unethical, and since the purchaser of children’s literature frequently is an adult and not the real audience of children themselves, such literature will indeed generally not be a first choice. Children’s books *ought* to have solutions and conform to the established norm of hope and a happy ending, and the adult ensures that this continually is the case.

## 2.2 *The Bunker Diary* and the empowering of the child reader from the lack of hope

“Jenny dies in my arms. Goes to sleep, doesn’t wake up. My tears taste of blood” (Brooks 253).

After receiving the Carnegie Medal for *The Bunker Diary* in 2014, Brooks admitted in his acceptance speech that he had to fight for a decade to get his novel published, due to its lack of hope (Flood 1). This demonstrates how ingrained hope as a trait is in children’s literature, but at the same time says something about an increased candour regarding controversial issues to be treated in contemporary literature for children. Nevertheless, *The Bunker Diary* faced rather massive criticism for its content, and perhaps especially for its

complete dissociation from hope. In the first part of *The Bunker Diary*, the narrator and protagonist states in his diary that “if you exist, if you’re reading this, then I’m probably dead” (Brooks 56). The child reader thus knows what will happen in the time to come in the novel, and there is no hope or future for the protagonist. This hope for the main character’s future is divested from the child reader in the very beginning of the novel, and throughout the story and towards the end it becomes clear that none of the other characters will survive either. According to Nodelman and Reimer, hope is something that arises out of the assurance that things eventually will get better (133). This is related to the aspect of time, and as Smedman states, “all hope seems to be directed toward that time we call future” (92). It is natural to have hope for the future and the time to come, because with it comes an encouraging unpredictability, expectations, and prospects. However, hopelessness is present from the very beginning in *The Bunker Diary*, and is not only latent throughout the story, but actually evolves as the narrative merely becomes darker and bleaker page by page. Trites states that novels implying that there are issues that cannot be solved or overcome, can be called novels of despair (“Hope, Despair, and Reform” 11). *The Bunker Diary* does more than simply imply that some of its issues cannot be overcome, and rather portrays clearly how none of them are. The characters’ attempts to escape the bunker are futile, and their desperate situation insoluble. The novel then certainly is a novel of despair.

As all the characters in *The Bunker Diary* die in the end, the novel can be said to be an extremeness within its genre. Featuring death in contemporary literature for children has been and is not uncommon, but novels portraying the death of not only the protagonist but of all characters involved remain extremely rare (Reynolds and Yates 63). This is precisely because “to die young is associated with lack of fulfilment and even waste” (Reynolds and Yates 157): it is so rare and disheartening, and will always be something unnatural, as the child not only represents the future, but *is* the future, according to Beauvais (*The Mighty Child* 44). Death in *The Bunker Diary* thus represents the uttermost despair and is the antithesis of hope: the characters are all deprived of their lives in a senseless and incomprehensible way; there is no underlying illness or accident, but rather someone who intentionally makes them die for a reason that is never explained. Death is not used as a narrative technique in order to address life after death, or encourage and enhance hope for other characters in one way or another; it rather represents utter meaninglessness. The novel can be said to represent life at its darkest and there is a complete lack of hope and sense of helplessness in the narrative.

The adult is undoubtedly hesitant to give children's books like *The Bunker Diary* to the child. Natov's statement that children's books should never leave the child reader in despair, but rather be "a rendering of hope and honesty" (qtd. in Tucker 200) highlights this adult reluctance. Nonetheless, the *and* in Natov's statement can be seen as presenting hope and honesty as being connected and linked to one another, but this is not the case in *The Bunker Diary*. The novel clearly breaks with hope, and rather gives prominence to honesty rather than hope, portraying life as it actually can be at its worst. Tucker recognises a need for such honest or depressive novels, depicting despair and hopelessness for the child reader for "certain moods and needs" (210) and claims that the justification of the existence of such novels within children's literature "seems fairly strong" (210). However, in the very end of his essay on depressive stories for children, having validated and justified such literature, he ends with stating that "most would surely agree that novels with an overtly depressing message should still only constitute a small minority in current children's literature" (Tucker 211). By recognising the need for depressive children's books, Tucker challenges the established norm of what children's literature should be about, but then in the end still conforms to what is prevailing in stating that the number of such children's books anyhow ought to be low. Tucker's statements demonstrate yet again the resolute and persistent role conventional traits, such as hope, hold in children's literature. It is also part of explaining why *The Bunker Diary* frequently is discredited by adults, exactly due to the fact that it breaks with the established norm and what is prevailing in literature for children. Nonetheless, the child arguably needs children's books like *The Bunker Diary*, because he can be empowered by reading them.

In writing on power dynamics in children's literature, Beauvais attempts to redefine *power* and states that the adult has his power, that is "authority", due to time passed having lived longer than the child (*The Mighty Child* 43). The child however has his power in the exact opposite; in that he has time to come. Beauvais calls this power "might" (*The Mighty Child* 43), and the child is *mighty* because he has the future ahead of him (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 43). The future is principally attributed to children, "on whose shoulders time itself sits" (James and Prout qtd. in Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 20), and children are "world-makers [who] stretch out into the future" (Beauvais, "The Problem of 'Power'"). The child's *might* can be seen as superior to the adult's *authority* considering the aspect of time (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 18). A life lived is indeed gone and spent, which can be said to hold negative connotations. A life ahead, on the other hand, is unused and untouched,

undeniably associated with something positive. Having a life ahead implies having possibilities, and as Beauvais rightly claims, “there is a large degree of overlap between the terms ‘possibility’, ‘hope’, [and] ‘future’” (*The Mighty Child* 47). All terms involve a time to come, and the child is ascribed his power precisely because of this, and “is mighty because [he] ‘owns’ the only thing that the adult does not: the future, and the indeterminacy that goes with it” (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 57). Beauvais states that the child’s *might* appears alongside the adult’s *authority* both internal and external to the narrative (*The Mighty Child* 18): the child character internal to a novel is *mighty*, and so is the child reader external to a novel. However, as to be *mighty* is to have a future left in which to act, and the child protagonist in *The Bunker Diary* does not, he is thus deprived of his power, because he has no future or hope. Nonetheless, the child reader external the novel still has his *might* and is then powerful.

Despite the fact that there is no future for the characters internal to *The Bunker Diary*, the actual future for the child reader is undoubtedly beyond the children’s book itself (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 54). The child internal to the narrative does not need to have hope then, because the child reader external to it will have. The hopeless protagonist in the novel might boost and encourage the hope latent in the child reading it: as a children’s book always implies a child reader who inevitably is “future-bound” (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 48), the child reader has time to act, and has the opportunity to do something with the possibilities and future he has. Being made aware of hopelessness in a novel might make the child reader truly aware of his unique position with a future ahead of him, where he can achieve things the child internal to the narrative never can. Tucker states that young readers might embrace literature depicting the darkest aspects of life, remote from what they already know of, as ever since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, it “has been received knowledge that tragedy suffered by fictional others can always have a potentially tonic effect upon audiences happy that they are spared the miseries that they are witnessing on the stage or page” (203). Reading of characters with no hope can arguably make the child reader more aware of the hope and future he has himself, and *The Bunker Diary* can thus reach out to the hope of the child. The indeterminacy and possibilities of a future is something that is valuable and profitable in that it involves a blissful ignorance and holds the promise of infinite opportunities. As Reynolds states, children have most of their choices before them: “they represent potential” (qtd. in Beauvais, “The Problem of ‘Power’” 81). The power of the child is then of great value, perhaps more than that of the adult: the adult has spent and used many of his possibilities, but

the child's opportunities are yet to come. The child has indeed a "potent, latent future to be filled with superior action" (Beauvais, "The Problem of 'Power'" 82), and the opportunity to achieve and accomplish more than the adult.

Beauvais claims that "an entirely hopeless children's book might indeed probably have to be categorized as 'adult' literature" (*The Mighty Child* 47). However, Beauvais in a way contradicts herself when questioning whether children's books lacking hope in fact are part of the genre. She then deprives the child of some of the power she herself has ascribed to him. When children's books without hope are questioned whether belonging to the genre of children's literature, it shows how inherent and deep-rooted the notion of hope is in children's books. Nonetheless, there does not need to be hope in a children's book as the child reader inevitably will have hope himself. Children's books without hope *are* children's literature, and can arguably generate hope for the child reading them. As Beauvais has stated, "there is hope because there is time to come" (*The Mighty Child* 47), and the future does belong to the child reader, which establishes him as powerful.



## Chapter 3: Didacticism

### 3.1 Didacticism in children's literature in conjunction with adult power

According to Rudd, "didacticism" is a collective term of religious, moral and pedagogical literature (167), that all have in common instructing the child reader in one way or another. However, as the word didacticism means instructional, it carries what Rudd states is a "far stronger, negative connotation – something like 'preachy'" (167). This connotation can be seen as a relic from the past, where leading an ethically correct life played a great role in the religious society, and was transferred to texts for children where the value of leading such an ethically correct life could be conveyed. Didacticism is the backbone of the genre of children's literature and has "always formed part of children's literature" (Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* 108). The reason for it is historical due to the strictly religious and instructive texts that were to teach children how to behave and ensure a "building of moral character" (Sainsbury 33). A genre for children thus emerged through the importance and purpose of such instruction and lessons as established by the adult, and children's books were chosen for their appropriateness as moral influences by the library service from the very beginning (MacLeod 30).

Children's literature went through its perhaps most decisive change regarding didacticism as the literature developed from concerning instruction to delight (Hunt 14). The use of humour made children's books supposedly more enjoyable and entertaining for their audience, rather than the religious and strict texts that dominated in the past. As early texts for children were tainted by their didacticism and had overt instruction and lessons for the child, "good children's literature [...] is seen to have freed itself from this didactic past" (Darton qtd. in Rudd 167). There is according to Nodelman an "often proclaimed distance for the didactic" in today's children's literature, and if "a book seems too obviously contrived to teach a lesson, children (and critics) will not tolerate it" (Temple qtd. in Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 158). The didacticism has thus changed its form and character from being rather overshadowing and overt, but is nonetheless still part of children's literature. Nodelman states that "the best children's literature is sneaky about its didactic agenda. It manipulates its readers into being educated by not being obviously educational, by giving children what they need by appearing to give them what they like" (*The Hidden Adult* 158). There has certainly been a shift from instruction to delight, but there is still instruction *in* the delight, only hidden.

Children's literature cannot be freed from didacticism according to Darton, because it is so latent and ingrained in the genre, and according to Rudd, "it would be a mistake to think that any work could escape a moral dimension" (167). Didacticism in contemporary children's literature is often sneaky and covert, and aims to influence and educate the child without the child knowing. It can then be seen as oppressive.

Didacticism is, according to Sainsbury, "enslaving" (7), as it is not an intercommunication between adult and child, but merely something that the adult transfers to the child. Latent in didacticism is the authority to teach the recipient something by what is conveyed, and hence to influence and impact. "Moralizing often seeks to tell children what to think" (Sainsbury 6), underlining the power of the dispatcher of moral and instructive lessons. This dispatcher is the adult and he seeks not only to instruct the child, but to shape and form it by such instructions, as he inevitably always will know more and have experienced more than the child. This is the reason why instructions and lessons are conveyed in children's literature in the first place. "Adults have something of value to teach children" (MacLeod 29), precisely because childhood has been and is "closely associated with that of the nurture, training and conscious education of the child by responsible adults" (MacLeod 29). This conscious education underlines the instructional role of children's literature in general, as well as the adult authority shaping both the child and its literature, that is an authority that naturally can be seen as oppressive. According to Nodelman, "[t]he didactic stance implies that children are weak or fallible or somehow mistaken – in need of instruction in how to be better people, that is, more like adults" ("Pleasure and Genre" 2). There is a clear purpose of the didacticism in children's literature: the child is yet to grow up, and the adult still has the opportunity to shape and impact the child by instructions and lessons, and the adult needs to make use of this opportunity to influence before the child grows up and it is too late.

McLeod states that "adult attitudes toward children's books, as towards childhood are, in any period, an amalgam of personal, social and sometimes political convictions" (30). Thus, adult attitudes towards children and childhood can and will change as society does. Nevertheless, since education of the child is so closely connected to childhood, the status of the education itself might not change. Didacticism concerns the role of the adult as an authority and how the adult will always possess more knowledge and wisdom than the child, and wants to pass this on. The value of holding such wisdom can arguably be seen as worthless if it is not imparted to someone else. It concerns the upbringing of the child and really is a preparation for the child to become an adult. Didacticism thus involves the position



and function of being an adult opposed to the child, which can be part of explaining why didacticism still is a latent and ingrained part of children's literature.

Despite more controversial and radical children's books than ever being published, hardly any such children's books lack didacticism; there is still didacticism of some sort, latent and somewhere in the background, and then something that the child can learn from. In discourses on children's literature today, the term moral "values" has frequently been applied rather than moral "lessons", which dominated in the past (MacLeod 31). Nevertheless, the moral is still present, even though disguised by what can be seen as a less repressing word than "lesson". Rose claims that children's literature is all about "what the adult desires – desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech" (2). This speech can be interpreted as mere didacticism, since the object of it is the child. Rose affirms that didacticism is based on adult desires and is in the heart of writing in children's literature (139), and its omnipresence still dominates contemporary children's books. Regardless of which terms are used then, there is inevitably something the adult wants the child to learn. Moral instruction is intended both for younger and older children, as the adult will always have something to impart and convey to the child. What is for the adult an obligation and duty to educate will not be completed until the child has become an adult himself.

It will inevitably always be the adult in charge of what will be published or not within the genre, and adult beliefs and ideas on children and childhood *will* dominate: didacticism is about the value of children's books, and if there is nothing to convey or teach the child, it follows that the children's book is deficient. An absence of didacticism is implausible or even illogical. Children's books lacking what the adult has decided they should enclose are generally absent within the genre of children's literature. However, there are exceptions to the rule and *The Bunker Diary* is one such example, arguably having no moral lessons for the child reader to learn. There is no didacticism for the child reader in the novel, and it has been frequently criticized and called meaningless. The novel rejects didacticism, but exactly because it breaks with what the adult desires the focus can be relocated onto the child, and *The Bunker Diary* can ascribe power to the child reader precisely because of what it lacks.

### 3.2 *The Bunker Diary* and the empowering of the child reader from the lack of didacticism

“He’s just gone. Got fed up with the whole thing. Got bored with it, got in his car and drove off to create another hell-hole somewhere else [...] We’ve been trying to get out for hours, days, and we haven’t got anywhere at all” (Brooks 244).

Didacticism is latent in all genres and categories that comprise children’s literature, but it has frequently been seen as going hand in hand with realism (Grenby 1). Sainsbury underlines the importance of didacticism in children’s literature when claiming that the pessimism frequently ruling in realistic novels only has a value if it has a “moral purpose” (40). Her statement demonstrates the fact that she herself is part of the adult dominance in children’s literature, deciding that a children’s book necessarily must have a meaning and a purpose, and that is to convey something the child can learn from. In this lies the supposition that if a children’s book has no moral purpose, it is pointless and of no value. There is an adult framing surrounding the genre, built by convictions of what should be conveyed to the child, and *The Bunker Diary* perforates this frame in that it has no moral purpose or lessons, as all the characters undeservedly die in the end of the novel when the man who has captured them disappears. Evil thus overcomes good, and this fight between the two apexes is “fundamental to ethics and which have a particular relationship to children’s literature and notions of childhood” (Sainsbury 9): there is no lesson to be learned that is bigger or more important than the distinction between good and evil, which is frequently conveyed and can be seen as the main theme in children’s literature.

The child reader is accustomed to reading novels where good overcomes evil, and ingrained in this is the moral lesson that good will *always* overcome evil, which ensures a reward for the child in knowing that if one is good, one will eventually succeed. A novel where evil overcomes good, on the other hand, consequently leaves a gap: if there is no moral lesson for the child reader, it follows that there is nothing left for the child reader to learn. The whole genre of children’s literature is built upon what the adult wants to convey to the child, and that is apparent in the didacticism shaping the genre, and thus is meant to shape the child itself. Instructions and lessons are entirely on the adult’s premises and because it can be seen as the backbone of the genre of children’s literature, something is *missing* when such didacticism is not present in a children’s book. However, this gap can be filled, and that on the child’s premises rather than the adult’s. Instruction is what makes children’s literature

meaningful (to the adult), and is transferred to the child. But if there is no such instruction present the child is left to fill this empty space and create a meaning on his own.

Both what is in *The Bunker Diary*, that is its dark and rather horrid content, as well as what is *not* in it in form of conventional features, can somehow impact the child reader. However, what is not in the text is arguably what affects the child reader the most: the emptiness created by a lack of didacticism makes the reader more actively interpret and contemplate the text and this emptiness. According to Iser, “by reading we uncover the unformulated part of the text, and this very indeterminacy is the force that drives us to work out a configurative meaning while at the same time giving us the necessary degree of freedom to do so” (25). What is not in the text thus gives the reader freedom and power to construe meaning and contemplate, and the text does activate something within the reader (Iser 21). Nonetheless, it is not merely the text that provides the reader with this freedom, it is rather the relationship between reader and text, “the coming together of text and imagination” (Iser 21). It is about what the text and reader “can ‘do’ together” (Iser 21). The adult is left out of this equation, and it is rather about what the child and the text can achieve together. Both the reader and the text are essential components in this relationship.

As didacticism can be seen as oppressive, the lack of it then removes some of the oppressiveness from the adult, and the child reader can be ascribed power because of what the text lacks. The act of reading works as a link between the text and the reader, and it is in this relationship between the reader and the text that the power of the child can arise. When the child reader fills the gaps that the lack of didacticism leaves in *The Bunker Diary*, the novel becomes meaningful to the child – even though the adult sees it as meaningless. The unformulated parts of *The Bunker Diary* then both allow and challenge the reader in creating meaning (Chambers 47). No explanations are offered for the gruesome incidents taking place in the novel, and the reader never gets to know who the man holding the other characters imprisoned is, why he does it, why he suddenly leaves them all in the bunker, and why all of the characters must die. One can claim that the novel in fact leaves most of its questions unanswered, and accordingly it is up to the reader to interpret and then answer the questions for himself. The unexplained and unanswered circumstances are part of what *The Bunker Diary* has been criticised for, but it is precisely this that allows the reader to really make the text his own, actively using his imagination and interpretation. The adult author is inevitably the one who creates these gaps in the first place, but it is up to the reader to fill them, and the

author can never know exactly what the reader will make of the text. By filling the gaps in the novel the child reader creates his own truth. He must interpret and answer the questions so the novel makes meaning to him, and the child reader then creates the entire novel for himself and is through that ascribed power.

In addition to creating gaps for the reader to fill, the author “exert[s] plenty of influence on the reader’s imagination” (Iser 23). The author does have power in his rhetoric, and he can and will influence the child reader. Booth calls the presence of the author manipulating (19), and he does have an unlimited range of narrative techniques in order to impact the reader (Iser 23), but nonetheless, as Iser claims, “no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole* picture before the reader’s eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader’s imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of the text” (23). The author will never disappear (Booth 20), but because he is so dependent on the reader in order to realize the text and for it to become alive, and as the reader and his imagination is crucial in this, the power of the child comes forward and that of the adult is moved to the background. The unwritten part of a text is what gives “the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination” (Iser 23). Merely transferring knowledge can be seen as a way of exercising power by the adult, but the unwritten part is not something for the adult to transfer to the child; it is rather entirely up to the child how to use his imagination and in a way write what is unwritten. Having a lively imagination is something that is frequently connected to children, and because the author is dependent on the child to use this imagination in order to realize the intentions of a text, the child can be seen as having more power than the adult in this context.

The fact that different readers can be differently affected by a text establishes how reading is “a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written” (Iser 21). Meaning is not latent in *The Bunker Diary*, but is rather something the reader creates on his own in the act of reading. Each individual reader makes meaning of what he reads, and regardless of what interpretations a child reader makes of the novel, he is ascribed power because his reading is his *own* and the adult holds no power in that. Because *The Bunker Diary* lacks what the adult wants, it then leaves the adult out of the picture. As Nikolajeva claims, we all read fiction because “it has the power to shape our identities” (“Memory of the Present” 89). A moral lesson can influence or shape the child, but it is when the child can interpret and find meaning on his own that his power truly arises.

## Chapter 4: Innocence

### 4.1 Innocence in children's literature in conjunction with adult power

The Romantic ideas about children and childhood associated the child with “primal innocence” (Gubar, “Innocence” 122), and the view of the child as innocent is prevalent in today's society as well; innocence has become an established norm ingrained in the view of what both children and childhood are. There is a common belief that children have not yet lived long enough to be tainted by life and the world around them in a way that can influence them negatively, and they are thus seen as innocent. As Nodelman and Reimer state, “the main reason our culture isolates children as a group is an awareness of their relative lack of experience” (100). Innocence is not merely a feature that the child possesses or holds; it is rather what it *means* to be a child, inexperienced with living (Nodelman and Reimer 100). The child lacks what the adult has, and that is experience with life as the adult has had time to live. The child, on the other hand, has not lived his life yet, and is then innocent because of this. Since children and childhood are seen as innocent, it follows then that the content of children's books somehow must reflect that. Just as innocence is a “key characteristic of childhood” (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 77), so it is a key characteristic of children's literature, and it is a decisive demarcation between literature for children and literature for adults. Innocence permeates children's literature (Gubar, “Innocence” 125), and “by a combination of textual devices, characterization and assumptions of value position, children's books construct children, both as characters and as readers as [...] innocent” (Sarland 48). Innocence is then an adult belief of what a child and a childhood should be, both internal and external to children's books. Innocence is frequently perceived as something natural and innate for the child, but it really is an adult construction.

The child is established as innocent by the adult and the “conscious or unconscious wish to keep children innocent clearly suggests how central adult needs are. Children need to be innocent less than adults need to believe that children are innocent” (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 167). Children are seen as innocent in childhood as it is an ideal state where the child is protected. To keep children innocent is keeping them from knowing what the actual world can be like, and by growing up, children necessarily will be tainted and influenced by the world surrounding them, being deprived of this innocence. The adult can see an “obligation to protect [children] from experiences they may not yet understand well enough to

cope with” (Nodelman and Reimer 100). The adult wants to keep the child innocent because he does not want the child to have knowledge of the darkest aspect of the world, a world which can be harsh and brutal. Due to the child’s inexperience, the adult is afraid that the child is not able to deal with such information. The adult thus decides that the literature for the child should be innocent, in order to protect him from experience, and this experience really is knowledge.

Children’s literature is, according to Nodelman, “predicated on distinguishing children from adults primarily on the basis of their innocence – what they don’t yet know” (“Pleasure and Genre” 9). It indicates adult power that the adult knows and the child does not, and the adult is thus “more” than the child because he has experience. The child is seen as “less” than what the adult is or has, and “children are less knowledgeable, less resilient, less resistant to influence than adults are” (Nodelman and Reimer 88). Childhood can be defined “almost exclusively by its limitations” (Nodelman and Reimer 88), and so can innocence: it is characterized by what one lacks (Gubar, “Innocence” 121). Gubar affirms that it is “extremely difficult to define this quality (innocence) without invoking its antonyms” (“Innocence” 121), and innocence can most easily be understood from its opposite: what it is not. Innocence calls upon experience, and the feature of the child stands against the feature of the adult. Since the adult is experienced and knowledgeable, it follows that the child is innocent and unknowing. The adult constructing the child as innocent can create “a barrier between child and adult, reifying the child as a race apart” (Gubar, “Innocence” 123), and innocence can thus be seen as something oppressive. The child is other to the adult, and what the adult has and the child has not is linked to power; both experience and knowledge are synonyms to power and then establishes the adult as powerful. The child is innocent and then left seemingly powerless.

Because innocence is so ingrained in children’s literature, it will create controversy if it is not part of a children’s book. Criticism about children’s books, whether coming from a parent, a librarian or a reviewer is about protecting “children and their perceived innocence” (Bittner 164-165). “[T]he wish not to have children know emerges from a genuine concern for their welfare. Adults want to protect children from what the adults see as harmful” (Nodelman and Reimer 102). *The Bunker Diary*, however, offers no such protection. Even though a concern for welfare and protection is something that naturally can be seen as positive, it can in the context of children’s literature be seen as oppressive. According to Nodelman and Reimer, “[i]n trying to protect children [...] these adults may well be doing more harm than good” (102). Protecting children from certain books naturally causes some books to be excluded

from the market. Adult protection thus conforms to the established norm of what children's literature should be, and by conforming to the norm, authors writing controversial children's books will continue to face obstacles and have a hard time getting published. As Nodelman and Reimer rightly state:

“The most significant effect that common assumptions about childhood have on children's reading is to deprive children of access to books. Many adults are far more interested in determining what children should *not* read than what and how they should read [...] a good book tends merely to be one that does *not* contain oversubtle ideas, potentially bad messages, descriptions of unacceptable behavior, or scenes fearful enough to cause nightmares” (101).

Narrow and limited adult beliefs about what children and childhood should be leads to censorship. Children are thus deprived access to children's books other than the literature conforming to the established norm.

Innocence is inevitably linked to censorship because it is a way to keep children from knowing what the adult knows, and preserve the innocence of the child by keeping them from reading books that are *not* innocent. Children's literature really exists “in order to offer children this protection, to exclude things they ought not to know” (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* 158), and the genre has been described as “a literature that leaves things out – i.e., censors them” (Nodelman, “Censors” 126). Assumptions about children and childhood are “inherently censorious” (Nodelman, “Censors” 126) because they are about protecting the child. The protection the adults offer is really about the adults themselves, in protecting their *own* “idealized image of childhood as primarily a time of innocence and enjoyment” (Tucker 205). Censorship is a way of protecting the child, and can be seen as the adult exerting power over the child. Innocence is ingrained in children's literature and in the adult beliefs about the child, and these assumptions that “underlie that censoriousness continue to have great power. Most of us still think of children as being innocent” (Nodelman, “Censors” 126). Children's books not portraying innocence or suggesting it as an attitude for the child reader then will be discredited, if they are ever published in the first place.

#### 4.2 *The Bunker Diary* and the empowering of the child reader from the lack of innocence

“Fred’s dead. Went to the bathroom and drank the bleach. Howled for an hour then coughed up blood and died” (Brooks 249).

*The Bunker Diary* breaks completely with an established norm in children’s literature. The only aspect of innocence present in the novel is the fact that none of the characters depicted are guilty of any crime, but are captured and imprisoned for no obvious reason. The notion of innocence, however, ceases right there, and *The Bunker Diary* portrays rape, violence and death. All the characters involved die one by one, and there is no happy ending. Childhoods in literature for children are usually depicted as states of innocence, but for the child characters in this novel, the bunker represents and becomes the exact opposite. The whole novel really rejects innocence, and the child reader is confronted with what life can be at its worst. Evil triumphs over good, the characters are deprived of their freedom and imprisoned, and danger rather than safety dictates the characters’ lives.

*The Bunker Diary* is clearly not innocent, but arguably neither is the child reader. Nodelman claims that the perceived innocence of childhood really is deceitful, and when referring to actual knowledge of the lives of children rather than ideals, beliefs and myths about childhood, “we must quickly realize that surprisingly few children are ever innocent at all” (“Censors” 126). Most of the world’s children do live in poverty or starvation, and they are not innocent in terms of their challenging situations of life. Nonetheless, children who are not situated in such challenging situations are not innocent either. Both children and adults in the global world we live in are surrounded by news and a global flow of information every day. It is impossible for a child to not be influenced or affected by news in some way or another, and the child is not innocent in that he is pure and untouched like the Romantic ideas connected to innocence suggest. The child is rather very much exposed to news and then information and knowledge about the world surrounding him. The innocent child the adult pictures is an ideal child, and not a real one. An ideal child is innocent to the adult in that he is happily unknowing and ignorant, but the real child, however, *knows*. He knows that the world can be a gruesome place, and that people can be cruel. That the child is innocent is indeed merely an adult construction and illusion, and “deploying the ideology of innocence does not protect children; instead, it mystifies the actual conditions in which they live” (Gubar, “Innocence” 127).



Of course children should ideally be innocent “of the actual experience of hunger, of emotional chaos, of exploitation” (Nodelman, “Censors” 129), but they should arguably not be innocent of knowledge. That is, knowledge that the world actually is gruesome for many, both children and adults. Knowing that what happens in *The Bunker Diary* actually can happen in the real life and knowing about rape, violence and death might indeed benefit the child reader: the novel does not protect him from such knowledge, but rather challenges him and does not underestimate him. The child will know about such issues as described in *The Bunker Diary* already, because he is not innocent in that he lacks knowledge. The child does have information and knowledge on beforehand, and reading books like *The Bunker Diary* describing difficult issues allows the child to further develop this knowledge. As the author of *The Bunker Diary* himself has stated:

“National newspapers are freely available to children of any age – with no censorship, no ‘adult content’ warnings and no age restrictions [...] The straightforward news content of all newspapers is necessarily hard-hitting, violent, awful, sickening and shocking... which it has to be. The world’s a scary place, full of terrible things. Newspapers wouldn’t be doing their job if they didn’t report on the sometimes awful reality of life. The way I see it, if it’s OK for children to read about “difficult” subjects in newspapers [...] then it’s OK for authors to write with thought and insight, about the same subjects. In fact, they wouldn’t be doing their job if they didn’t” (Screech 2).

Reading about the issues that *The Bunker Diary* portrays can be seen as a safe place to encounter such arduous situations for the child. The novel opens up for an opportunity for the child to find what he feels he needs to know (Nodelman, “Censors” 128), and the child reader can read about the issues the novel presents at his own pace and in a secure environment. Nodelman states that, “[i]f you know about something, you can think about it even if you’ve never actually experienced it” (“Censors” 102). Reading *The Bunker Diary* gives the child an opportunity to contemplate difficult issues, and awareness of the darkest aspects of the world is something that can be valuable. The content of *The Bunker Diary* then can be seen as part of establishing the child as able to understand and deal with controversial issues, and takes the child reader seriously.

The adult uses his knowledge to impede the child from reading controversial children’s books like *The Bunker Diary*, but the knowledge the child gains from reading the novel is arguably of great value for the child, and he is powerful despite what the adult

believes. Nodelman claims that “[w]e adults [...] use our knowledge of ‘childhood’ to dominate children” (“The Other” 32). This domination is oppressive, which can be explained by Marilyn French’s descriptions of what she sees as two different types of power: “there is power-to, which refers to ability, capacity, and connotes a kind of freedom, and there is power-over, which refers to domination” (qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 6). Adults dominate and have power over children with their knowledge about childhood, believing that the child is innocent. The child however is not innocent in that he is ignorant or unknowledgeable. He does not have the experience the adult has, and experience does mean knowledge. But, that is not to say that the child cannot have knowledge without having experience. The child has not lived his life and been able to gain the experience the adult has, but he has information and knowledge about the world around him. Knowledge is, according to Nodelman, “quite literally power” (“The Other” 31), but as the adult has “power-over” (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 6), using his knowledge to dominate and repress the child, the child has “power-to” (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 6). The power of knowledge the child has differs from that the adults has, in that the child’s power is a power to *do*. The child can engage this power “to enable [himself]” (French qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 7), and the child is enabled and empowered through reading. He gains knowledge which allows him to build on, and further develop, his already existing knowledge. “Power is a force that operates within the subject” (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 7), and the power of knowledge for the child then is about self-development and improvement. Beauvais affirms that “there is no finished knowledge in the world” (*The Mighty Child* 94), and knowledge and the child have one valuable trait in common, that is that they both are in constant development. The knowledge the adult has is more finished and complete than that of the child, but the child’s knowledge is continually evolving. The child can “develop greater understanding through experience - including the experience of reading literature” (Nodelman and Reimer 100), and *The Bunker Diary* then offers the child a way to gain a valuable experience which leads to more and enhanced knowledge.

The child should arguably not be protected from knowing about the real world, and this calls for more controversial children’s books like *The Bunker Diary*. The adult wants to keep such knowledge as presented in *The Bunker Diary* from the child, but this is prejudicial and can be disadvantageous for the child. The adult assumptions and beliefs about children and their needs is what makes children’s literature what it is, and the needs of children are “almost always defined in terms of their relative vulnerability and the consequent obligation

of adults to protect them from complete and dangerous knowledge of the world” (Nodelman, “Censors” 126). Depriving children of access from controversial children’s literature is allegedly about protecting the child, but this might be “more self-interested than [adults] sometimes like to imagine. Lack of knowledge leads to lack of power – and some adults do prefer children to lack power” (Nodelman and Reimer 103). By strict censorship and keeping knowledge from the child, the adult can continue his domination over the child. Children will then continue being conformed as other. Nevertheless, the adult’s attempt to shelter the child indefinitely is “bound to fail with time” (Tucker 205), since the child will grow up and become an adult himself. Despite this, the adult has a “deep need to ensure that childhood does continue” (Nodelman, “Censors” 126) as he wants to protect the child from knowing about a world which can be relentless and cruel. But children and their childhoods are not innocent, and childhood can continue without the adult protecting the child. The adult fears the child knowing, but “ignorance is always likely to do more harm than knowledge can” (Nodelman and Reimer 102). Since protection from knowledge is about what the adult wants, a move away from it can then be beneficial for the child. Less censorship and allowing children to read controversial children’s books like *The Bunker Diary* is arguably of great value for the child, and it is on his terms rather than the adult’s. By reading the novel, the child can gain insight and come to a greater understanding, and all of this truly means empowerment for the child reader. The child is not innocent, but rather aware and informed, and this is important to embrace. *The Bunker Diary* can be characterised as depressive literature and according to Rudd, “depressive literature reflects a move towards a characterization of child readers which privileges their need for truth about the world over their need for protection” (70). The child needs more knowledge in order to develop and improve the knowledge he already possesses, and reading *The Bunker Diary* can contribute to this. The child’s power emerges when he is established as not being innocent or ignorant, but rather knowledgeable and then powerful.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Adult assumptions about what children and childhood should be control the content of children's books, and the conventional features in children's literature exist and have become prevalent due to the general adult power that surrounds the genre. However, the absence of such conventional features removes some of the adult power and allows the power of the child to come forward instead. Specific kinds of power belong to the child reader, and contribute to make him powerful in various ways. The lack of hope in *The Bunker Diary* demonstrates how the child has a future ahead of him and time to live and act, which the adult has not. The novel with its lack of didacticism, unanswered questions and open ending lets the child reader find meaning on his own, rather than having the adult instructing him. Lastly, the lack of innocence in *The Bunker Diary* establishes the child reader as non-innocent opposed to adult beliefs, and demonstrates how the child reader already is knowledgeable, and can add to this knowledge by reading the novel. The child reader then can be empowered by reading contemporary, controversial literature for children, lacking the conventional features of the genre that the adult has established. This perspective can then function as a counterbalance to the frequent focus on the adult and the adult's power in children's literature.

The attention aimed at the adult in critical and theoretical discourses surrounding children's literature is not reflected in the term "children's literature" itself. Rose claims that the term is "striking for the way in which it leaves the adult completely out of the picture" (12). She sees the term as misleading because there is no mentioning of the adult, even though children's literature is all about "what adults, through literature, want or demand from the child", rather than "what children want, or need from literature" (Rose 137). The adult then is wrongfully left out of the equation as Rose sees it. The term "children's literature" does not reflect that adults decide the content of all children's books, neither that adults appraise the merit of these books "on behalf of children, based on their own adult responses" (Jones 305). Jones does as well see the term as abstruse and misleading, and proposes that we in fact need to get rid of the term altogether (305). She suggests a new term instead, that is "child literature" (305). According to Jones, such a term will clarify "that this is a literature written almost entirely by adults that assume various conceptions of the child, childhood, and the childlike, with child readers usually being the target of the book" (305). Attention should be aimed at child readers and their experiences of literature, as well as focusing on how the adult constructs the child for his own purpose (Jones 305). Jones' suggestions for an altered focus is

fruitful and expedient in order to bring the child forward. Nonetheless, the problematic aspects of the term “children’s literature” that Rose points out, in addition to the altered aim of attention that Jones proposes, cannot be solved or completed simply by changing the term itself. It all comes down to what the adult thinks, and it is the ideas and beliefs that dominate in society that need to change, as these construct and compose children’s literature. Jones makes an interesting point when proposing the need to “(re)locate children and adults in the discipline, in the sense of both finding and rediscovering them” (306). However, it is arguably straightforward to locate the adult, since his domination and power is omnipresent and overshadows the child reader. The child then is who needs to be found and rediscovered, and locating the power of the child is important in order to move away from the focus on the adult power in children’s literature.

By focusing on the child it is possible to challenge the binary thinking ingrained in the genre. What allows children’s literature to exist at all “is in itself binary and oppositional” (Nodelman, “Pleasure and Genre” 11), as the adult who writes the literature does not belong to the audience to which he writes. Nodelman claims that “all the other binary oppositions of children’s fiction represent replications of this basic one” (“Pleasure and Genre” 11), and as the adult is the norm, the child is continually established and conformed as other. How the adult sees and describes the child is a contrast to how the adult sees and describes himself. As the adult is capable, the child is incapable, and as the adult is strong, the child is weak. The binary thinking can be seen as representing power in that the adult has it and the child apparently has not. Those in power speak for and to the allegedly powerless, and the power imbalance in children’s literature then exists due to binary thinking.

A move away from the binary thinking that “sets children up as blank, alien others” (Gubar, “On Not Defining” 127) can be of great value for the child. That the child is powerless is merely an adult idea and construction, which is part of society’s ideology (Nodelman and Reimer 82). Foucault states that “[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (131). As the idea of the child as having no power is an ideological belief ingrained in society, it becomes the “whole truth” about the child (Nodelman and Reimer 79). However, by establishing that it is not true that the child is powerless it becomes clear that the alleged truth and ideology need not be accepted. Believing that the child is powerless is oppressive from the adult’s side, and to be aware of this constrained belief about the child and the oppressiveness of it can be significant. Awareness can only be established by recognizing the

“oppressiveness inherent in [...] use of concepts” regarding children and childhood (Nodelman, “The Other” 34), but an awareness in itself will not make the oppressiveness disappear. However, an increased consciousness of the oppressive adult thinking allows for questioning and challenging this thinking, as well as for moving the attention and focus over to the child instead. Perhaps might such alterations contribute to a change, since it certainly is possible to move away from the binary thinking about the child. As Nodelman and Reimer state, “[t]here is the choice of thinking about children in other, more positive ways, and creating a different and [...] better truth” (Nodelman and Reimer 98). It all comes down to thinking about the child reader in more positive terms, taking him seriously and not underestimating him. The idealistic thinking about the child needs to be replaced by a more practical thinking, and there can be a change in how adults think about children if the already established and ruling ideas about children are questioned and challenged. If a norm is challenged, it “can be revealed as constructed; it can therefore be deconstructed, or even ultimately destroyed” (Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity* 130). The established norm of thinking about the child as powerless does not have to prevail then.

The thinking about the child will directly influence the content of children’s books, since ideas and beliefs about children is what makes children’s literature what it is. Conventional children’s books reflect adult ideas and beliefs, and establishes both the child and its childhood as something they might not be. It is so that “assumptions about childhood have the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies, making children what adults believe they already are” (Nodelman and Reimer 94). The adult will not expose the child to books that break with what the adult assumes and believes about the child. If the adult thinks that the child will not understand a complex language, he will not expose the child to books with such language. If the adult thinks that the child will not be able to understand or deal with certain themes, the adult will not expose the child to a book describing such themes (Nodelman and Reimer 94). So the story goes, but it demonstrates the fact that a change in how adults think about children can have a great impact on the literature that is for and to the child. If assumptions about the child can make children what adults think they are, then a more positive way of thinking about children can be inestimable. Such a change in the thinking about children can then lead to more controversial and radical issues in children’s literature to be acknowledged, which again can lead to a decrease in censorship. More children’s books like *The Bunker Diary* will then be published. The novel empowers the child reader, but also challenges the norm and what is established by the adult. Hence, *The Bunker Diary* might

contribute to develop and expand the genre of children's literature, and can also function as an approach to question and confront the way adults think about children.

Nonetheless, the adult generation dominating children's literature will inevitably be replaced. All children who survive childhood must necessarily grow up and become adults themselves. Nodelman claims that "[w]hat distinguishes our thinking about childhood from other discourses about otherness is that in this case, the other does quite literally turn into ourselves" ("The Other" 31). Every child then becomes an adult, that is an adult who thinks of children as other. This process is "doomed to continue replicating itself forever – or at least until it stops assuming its subject is indeed other" (Nodelman, "The Other" 31). To validate the power of the child and embrace the child as powerful is then of great importance in order to change the thinking about children, and then thwart the replicating process that Nodelman refers to. According to Foucault, "truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it" (133). Adult beliefs and ideas about the child are confirmed as the truth, and if it is merely the adult in the adult-child relationship that is established as powerful, then the idea of the child as powerless and other to the adult will be sustained. However, if the child is established as powerful, the "truth" the adult knows about the child as being powerless will no longer be valid. Affirming the child as powerful instead might prevent future adults establishing children as other in terms of power, and the circle of replicating thinking can then be broken.

It really is a paradox that the adult so frequently is centre of attention in discourses surrounding the genre that is written for and to the child. Bringing the child forward then is only just and proper. By specifically showing how and where the child can have his power, it becomes clear that simply establishing the child as other to the adult is mistaken and improper. The general power the adult holds in children's literature is frequently seen as something oppressive, but the different powers of the child, however, are arguably about the opposite. These different powers make for an integral power that is positive. Foucault claims that power can hold good, and that it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network" (119). The power of the child is such a power. It consists of what the child has or can do, and these are all positive things. A future ahead in which to act, to make and produce meaning, as well as to develop knowledge represents power - and it is all about the opportunities and possibilities the child has. Foucault claims that power "only exists in action" (qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 4), and the power of the child is indeed about performing. It is



inevitable that the child will be seen as other to the adult in terms of age and maturity - but the child is not a powerless other. Despite the adult domination in the genre of children's literature, the child has a voice and has power – it just needs to be located. “Power is everywhere [and] comes from everywhere” (Foucault qtd. in Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 4) and the power of the child needs to be identified. By exploring and bringing the power of the child to light then, the power imbalance in children's literature is adjusted. It is rather made more equal and stabilized, as the child can be established as truly powerful.



## Appendix

### The thesis' relevance for the teacher profession

“Stories evoke response, recognition, identification, stimulation; they educate the imagination by stretching it to other dimensions. Reading introduces wider knowledge, offering children the opportunity to think, to reflect, to ask questions, and to develop comprehension, stimulating curiosity, liberating the imagination, aiding natural learning and the educational process” (Elkin 159).

There is no question that reading can contribute considerably when it comes to the child's development. The problem, however, is the fact that fewer and fewer children actually *do* read. Other media is constantly gaining ground on the book, and it is simply not natural for most children today to choose a book as a source of entertainment above anything else. When reading is essential to a child's development and increase of understanding, it is certainly a shame that reading has lost some of its status as a source of entertainment. Nonetheless, if a child learns to enjoy reading, he or she will simply read more. The child needs to be exposed to a wealth of books, as well as having the freedom to choose for him/herself which books to read. The bottom line then is to get children to read, and it is of great importance to focus on literature in the classroom. Such a focus may inspire children to pick up books outside the classroom as well, and teachers then actually have an opportunity to make reading an integral part of children's lives. Every teacher has a responsibility towards his or her pupils, since the “effectiveness of any teacher in the encouragement of the reading habit varies in proportion to the teacher's depth of knowledge of children's books and literature generally [...] the teacher who reads avidly himself, the teacher who knows and reads children's books, inevitably fosters a similar interest in a high percentage of his pupils” (Chambers qtd. in Elkin 162). By actively reading and engaging in children's literature and then using it in the classroom, the teacher truly lays a groundwork for the pupils.

It can arguably be valuable to introduce controversial children's literature in the classroom. Children's books like *The Bunker Diary* might appeal to pupils precisely because it is norm-breaking and different than more conventional children's literature, and can then perhaps fascinate and attract readers in a way that other children's books cannot. Due to its difficult and challenging issues, *The Bunker Diary* can also facilitate discussions in the classroom. As there is an open ending in the novel and several unanswered questions, the

students can freely interpret the text and come up with their own explanations and opinions. Children's literature then is not only of great importance for pupils' development, but it is also a valuable tool for the teacher in the classroom and can ensure a various and rich teaching.

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