Article

From Eco-Pessimism to Eco-Activism: Trends in Selected South African Teen Literature

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Abstract

This article explores the response in selected South African teen fiction to a sense of impending ecological disaster in the face of global warming, environmental exploitation, and political, social, and economic manipulation with an ecological impact. A broadly ecocritical literary approach is followed to examine relevant aspects of Helen Brain's *Elevation* trilogy (2016–2019), Jayne Bauling's *New Keepers* (2017), and the *Eco-Warriors* trilogy by Joanne Macgregor (2011–2016). These novels go beyond the interpersonal to address ecological concerns in a southern African space. Two genres are used—Brain's *Elevation* trilogy and Bauling's *New Keepers* are dystopian fantasy novels set in a post-apocalyptic future, while Macgregor's *Eco-Warriors* trilogy is a school story set in contemporary South Africa. All seven novels draw on the local landscape in their world building. They position the protagonists as potential rescuers of their world, or as activists for better management of that world. The dystopian fantasy allows for awareness-building around social and environmental (in)justice, while the realist school story is an ideal vehicle to convey ecological information, laying a groundwork for change.

Keywords: South African teen fiction; eco-activism; dystopia; South African landscape; ecology; school story

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Introduction

The human footprint includes changes in soil, water and air, erosion, pollution, species extinction, and global warming, from causes such as the unsustainable use of fossil fuels, and the destruction of natural resources, through overgrazing, irresponsible forms of fishing, and other activities that destroy habitats, posing a risk to many species, including humans. Mikota (2012) has noted a strong strand of children's and youth literature that reflects a sense of impending ecological disaster in the face of global warming, environmental exploitation in an age of globalisation, and political, social, and economic manipulation with an ecological impact. However, many of these novels go beyond eco-pessimism to provide a more positive approach to that ecological threat (Mikota 2012). South African authors of children's and young adult literature are not immune to this awareness of the Anthropocene, or to anxiety about the planet and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman. Several locally published books aimed at children and teenagers address these issues in a range of genres.

In this article, I adopt a broadly ecocritical approach to explore relevant aspects of seven post-apocalyptic dystopian novels, namely Helen Brain's *Elevation* trilogy (2016–2019) and Jayne Bauling's *New Keepers* (2017), and the realist school novel *Eco-Warriors* trilogy by Joanne Macgregor (2011–2016). These texts have an implicit or overt eco-political didactic agenda, socialising young readers first to *think* about the environment, and then to *act* on its behalf.

Ecocriticism as an Approach

In their introduction to the seminal anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the editors, Glodfelty and Fromm (1996, xviii), give a broad definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"—it is the lens of an interdisciplinary "earth-centred approach to literary studies." The approach asks questions about how nature is depicted as a physical setting, its role in the text, and the values expressed through the overall trajectory of a text and the language used in it.

Its "fundamental premise [is] that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. … As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (Glodfelty and Fromm 1996, xix). The phrase "human and the nonhuman" (which I also used in the introduction) is itself open to critique, as it adopts a dualist stance, distinguishing between the human and an Other, potentially sustaining a questionable anthropocentric focus which is not in line with Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's construct of "Deep Ecology," "which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features, and presents a symbiotic and holistic world-view rather than a purely anthropocentric one" (Mambrol 2016, n.p.). Accepting a deep ecology stance calls for a less human-centred perspective, a shift from "ego-consciousness" to "eco-consciousness" (Love [1990] 1996, 230). Admittedly, some anthropocentrism is inevitable in literature: while human authors may imagine what animals and other entities think and feel, they cannot truly speak *as* those entities—they can only speak *for* them (Buell 2005, 7–8), restricting authors to depicting their *Umwelt*, a term "denoting the individual organism's perceptual world" (Buell 2005, 140), or an imagined environment within which ethical engagement with nature needs to be espoused.

My particular interest in examining the selected seven novels is the way in which they adopt and adapt the two genres chosen by the respective authors (post-apocalyptic dystopian fantasy, and the realist school story) to convey specific messages on the human-nature interface. The novels speak to the emergence of eco-literature in the domain of fictional works directed to young South African readers, revealing a nuanced awareness not only of the focus on the preservation of nature prevalent in Global North children's and young adult novels noted by Mikota (2012), but also of the need to address the human aspect of the equation, since ecological justice is unlikely without social justice, which frequently remains absent in the Global South in the aftermath of colonisation and the continued effects of colonialism.

I focused on seven novels published in the second decade of the twenty-first century. *New Keepers* was awarded a silver in the 2017 Sanlam Prize for Youth Literature, *Fault Lines* won the Percy Fitzpatrick Award for children's literature in 2017, and *Elevation: A Thousand Steps* was shortlisted for the same award. These novels address some issues that have emerged in ecological writing, for which Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) provides a *terminus a quo*, in that ecocritics regard it as a key text in its rhetoric, which issues its warning of impending ecological apocalypse by demonstrating the loss of a pastorally idealised world (Buell 2005, vii; Garrard 2012, 1–8).

Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy: Helen Brain's *Elevation* Trilogy

The *Elevation* trilogy is set in the Western Cape after the seas rise in the "Calamity" or the "Purification," as the priests of Prospiroh, who are the rulers and the custodians of the official state religion, call it. The disaster is probably a result of global warming, exacerbated by human actions. It drowns many, and leaves higher ground as a series of islands, inhabited by an elite (initially governed by the Prosperite religious sect, but after a coup, by the military). In the wake of the disaster, pestilence decimates those outside the walls enclosing the areas reserved for the rich and powerful (perhaps not unlike today's gated communities). Moreover, food security is threatened by severe ecological degradation, and those on the periphery, such as the poor of "Boat Bay," no longer have any fish to catch. Two thousand children are taken into the Colony, a bunker 1000 steps under Table Mountain. The children's parents are told that these children are gifted "seed" for a new world, but actually, they are used in work groups as sabenzis (de facto, as slaves), producing clothing and artificial food. The Colony is subject to regular selective culling, called "the Sacrifice," to retain only the strongest for the workforce. The protagonist Ebba is left as a baby at the entrance to the bunker just before the

Calamity, and is taken in as the last child in the Colony. Later, because of her red hair and birthmark, 16-year-old Ebba is designated a "witch," and is chosen for the Sacrifice. She only escapes this fate when she is recognised at the last moment by an amulet (the only thing left with her when she was abandoned) as the heir of the Den Eeden estate, Greenhaven. After being "elevated" from the Colony, she discovers that she is descended in the female line from the goddess Theia, who created the Earth, and that her parents were involved in an attempt to rebel against the Prosperites. Ebba's sacred task is restoring the displaced goddess by finding the three remaining lost amulets, preventing a second and final Calamity. She has to overcome betrayal by her childhood friend Micah, with whom she is in love, and her own youthful impulses to anger, a desire for revenge, and unwillingness to take on the responsibility of leadership. Finally, she, as the descendant of the goddess, and Lucas, the descendant of Theia's brother Prospiroh, find love and a way to restore the balance of the Earth.

The recognisable local setting, including references to places such as Mitchell's Plain (destroyed in the first Calamity), is offset by a mythology based on a more Eurocentric model. The battle in Celestia between rival gods spills over to the earth: Theia is threatened by the vengeful Prospiroh, who is venerated in the official state religion at the start of the first novel. These rival deities combine characteristics of several Graeco-Roman gods. The depiction of Prospiroh, whose adherents aspire to material capitalist prosperity and power, draws on the figures of Hades/Dis/Pluto and possibly Poseidon and Hephaestos/Vulcan. By contrast, Theia, whose name is reminiscent of Gaia, the Earth, is derived from Demeter/Ceres and her daughter Persephone/Proserpina (Bulfinch 1981; Graves 1959).[1]

Introducing an environmental justice slant, which is related to social justice (see below), the trilogy draws on the pastoral tradition to posit a more utopian scenario in opposition to the dystopian world of the novels. The novels evoke the archetypal pastoral imagery of the Garden of Eden, which offers a kind of "stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (Garrard 2012, 63), through the naming and descriptions of Greenhaven, and the protagonist, Ebba den Eeden (whose name is clearly derived from Eve of Eden). The inclusion of the goddess Theia combines the invoking of the Judaeo-Christian Eden with what eco-critic James McKusick (2010, 20) refers to as "the feminine principle of fertility and abundance, represented … in the ancient cult of Gaia, the pre-patriarchal Earth-goddess," drawing particularly on the gentler traits attributed in Graeco-Roman mythology to Demeter/Ceres. Thus the novel also draws on ecofeminist trends, which tend to associate (sometimes too uncritically) the feminine with nurturing, including nurturing of the earth. The novels give a generally positive spin to the overarching theme of stewardship of the earth, which has been critiqued in its Christian formulation for its “patriarchal and logocentric tendencies” (McKusick 2010, 21)—in particular, a feminine stewardship of the Earth is juxtaposed with the exploitative, corrupt capitalist practices of the stereotypically patriarchal Prosperites and subsequent military and other revolutionary regimes.

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[1] While the name is also suggestive of Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest*, no clear parallels emerge with the play, since Brain's trilogy sidesteps the racial and colonial associations discerned by some critics in Shakespeare's play, such as Barker and Hulme (1985), but which have been problematised to some extent by nuanced readings such as those by Brotton (1998). The novel does not clearly address north-south dynamics, and shows a racially diverse corrupt ruling elite instead. While this may raise interesting questions about South Africa after 1994, this is not the focus of the current article.

The trilogy also combines the environmental issues arising from the Calamity and misgovernance with a strong social justice slant. It demonstrates the effect of apocalyptic propaganda by an elite—as Garrard (2012, 94) points out, apocalypticism “both responds to and produces ‘crisis’.” In this case, a rhetoric of “purification” of the allegedly “evil” and the “unfit” has enabled the enslavement of 2000 children, and has been used to rationalise the disenfranchisement of the majority of the population, both before and after what the Prosperite elite insists on calling the “Purification” (everyone else refers to it as the “Calamity”). The novels accept the deep ecology premise of the intrinsic value of nature, but paradoxically, they vigorously reject, in principle, the biocentric premise of the necessity of a reduction of the population (by the elite), while simultaneously acknowledging the problems caused by unsustainable population–resources ratios (for example, in the challenges Ebba faces when Greenhaven has to pay taxes and feed her workforce). The reader is conscientised regarding social injustice through Ebba’s becoming aware of the disparities between herself and those she meets outside of the elite, and the resentment of her former co-workers in the Table Mountain Colony of her privileged colonial inheritance. (The novel tends to elide race as a factor in social injustice, making wealth and power the criteria for the class hierarchy which distinguishes between “citizens” and the disenfranchised poor.)

Utopian/dystopian writing responds to current and future local/global crises, offering insight into perceptions of the present and alternative scenarios of a positive or negative world order. Bradford et al. (2007, 2) acknowledge that utopian writing is often opposed to the disastrous effects of *Realpolitik*, but argue that “utopian thinking both draws upon and generates ideas capable of influencing cultural, economic, and political practices.” I have so far typified the *Elevation* trilogy as dystopian writing, but in its pastoral overtones and conclusion, it also has elements of the “utopian dreamings” (Bradford et al. 2007, 1) that offer young readers an alternative, by endorsing values such as self-control and a willingness to take responsibility for the healing of society and the earth.

The environmental theme plays out in the struggle to retain Greenhaven, a last bastion of unscarred nature, which is crucial to food security. The theme also plays out in the struggle to restore Theia as earth mother. The environmental narrative linked to food security reflects aspects of current poverty and social disparities in South Africa to call for both environmental and social justice. This trajectory is energetically presented in Ebba’s hero’s quest. Nevertheless, as Bradford et al. (2007, 9) point out, texts for children are “constrained by a pervasive commitment to maturation narratives (exemplified by the *bildungsroman* genre)” implying an anthropocentric, rather than biocentric, emphasis. Overall, then, the trilogy highlights the importance of the nature/human nexus, and positions the teen protagonist as potential rescuer and restorer of a cosmic balance.

Post-Apocalyptic Dystopia: Jayne Bauling's *New Keepers*

Another striking and complex evocation of a post-apocalyptic dystopian world is Jayne Bauling's novel *New Keepers*, which makes a strong attempt to engage with a South African, rather than Eurocentric, heritage, but leaves the outcome in the future uncertain.

The novel is set in a landscape running from the Highveld to the Escarpment and into the Lowveld, after an ecological disaster called "the Drowning"—the sea covers much of the land, and the receding water leaves the land "salted." This natural disaster is followed by "the Contagion," which is in fact, as readers discover, a human-designed "Purge" to reduce population numbers, ensuring complete control and a new age called "the Prosperity" for an elite, the Minders. The Minders cull the old, the weak, and the sick, controlling all history, all information, and even procreation, as well as labour (using some of those that are ostensibly "Parked" as an imprisoned labour force). This world is both familiar and unfamiliar, set around the city of Gauzi, or Joto, called the Sprawll by those outside it, and suburbs such as Kya, Ransalex, Benoni, and Tshworia. Gauzi is an entire city of covered malls, with FacLabs (factories) on the outskirts. It also has its impoverished Margins, filled with the makeshift dwellings of the poor and outcast in the ruins of the old city (reminiscent of the informal settlements in the townships today). The Margins are in turn surrounded by the vast and unknown Wilderness, inhabited only by runaways and "Wilders." The society is strongly hierarchical, with the Minders as the elite, and subcultural Minder-groupings such as the Skins (with an implanted piece of genetically reproduced animal skin on their arms), Feathers (with feather implants on their arms), and Prayers (an undefined priestly caste), as well as outcast groups such as the Stains (whom the Minders have marked with a genetic and indelible mark as a punishment for the first resistance).

We follow the journey of the protagonist, Jabz (a Stain from the Margins, and instinctive grower and user of healing herbs), to a mysterious mountain, after he is called by a voice heard whenever he inhales smoke from what we later learn is *imphepho*. He takes with him as companions against the dangers of the journey seven other teenagers—Silver (a Skin), Lidzwi and her autistic brother Meyi (Feathers), Halo (a Prayer), Ril (a runaway "Pet" to a childless couple), her brother Boa, and Orpa (an aggressive Margins girl). Their journey, which roughly follows today's N4 eastwards, ends with Jabz's recognition of his call by the ancestors to become an *inyanga*, learning about the qualities of plants to heal, and to control bees, and with the "calling" of Meyi as "the One" who is to lead the revolution against the Minders.

In the closed dystopian space of the novel, characterised by power, control and surveillance, environmental concerns are not the overt central focus, but they remain inescapably present in the descriptions of the landscape beyond the city margins. In the city, nature is conspicuously absent; even access to the sky is controlled—the novel opens with Jabz stating: "I hate the Sprawll's perpetual half-light. The whole place is just a series of linked malls. Even the residential areas are entirely sheltered from the sky" (Bauling 2017, 7). The very absence of nature in the contrast between natural and artificial foods, and the legacy of pollution in places such as Emala, the ruins of a coal mining city (now called Emalahleni, formerly Witbank) pushes the reader's attention to nature.

Bees, which Jabz reports as returning to the Margins and enabling the cultivation of fresh foods, are central to the novel. Their survival promises a new beginning, and they are connected to the ancient Mother, the *inyanga* who will initiate Jabz into his calling. There are also frogs, which none of the group have ever seen, and which terrify them. More noticeable are the birds (as distinct from the products of technology—the drones used for surveillance by the Minders and their hovercraft). Jabz knows a few of the birds, but many are as unknown to him as to his companions (although some, for example, the red bird, probably a red bishop, may be recognised by some of the readers).

Here there is no pastoral idyll, however:

> I open my eyes to white, gold and blue. I've never seen anything like it.
> I stumble out of the bus, and stand there, almost forgetting my need to pee. It's unbelievable. This shining place is alive, loud with birds completely unlike those in the Margins. These must be waterbirds. They fill the air with their blaring honking and plaintive quacking. (Bauling 2017, 153)

Despite the beauty of this scene, the mode remains determinedly dystopian, resisting the allure of an idyllic pastoral. The insistent "blaring honking and plaintive quacking" of these birds is far from the gentle birdsong evoked as so catastrophically lost in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), with its allusion to the pastoral. The "shining place," despite initially almost spiritual overtones, is not without threat, as the companions discover. The reeds soon lose their dawn brilliance as the sun rises further: they "revert to blinding paleness" (Bauling 2017, 157). The glory of the dawn colours is further undercut by Jabz's need to urinate after a long, uncomfortable night in the old minibus he has patched together as a mode of transport.

Nevertheless, Jabz's calling as a future *inyanga* also aligns him with finding ancestrally grounded ways to live in harmony with and harnessing the power of nature, making him one of the New Keepers for a future better world. Like the *Elevation* and *Eco-Warriors* trilogies, this novel positions the teen protagonists as those who must bring change and restoration, but in this comparatively pessimistic novel, the desired outcome is still far off, and hope remains tenuous. Any potential resolution—something that may never be achieved—is likely to be temporary and posits the need for constant vigilance against the recurrence of the same or new dystopian conditions (Bradford et al. 2007, 5).

The Realist Mode: Joanne Macgregor's *Eco Warriors* Trilogy

In contrast to the dystopian fantasy genre stands the realist mode, with novels set in present-day South Africa, with more specific local challenges. Mikota (2012, 2) writes about this trend:

> Die Kinderliteratur greift Umweltschutz vor der eigenen Haustür auf und zeigt den Lesern konkrete Handlungsmuster. … In allen Texten werden Kinder und Jugendliche als engagierte Personen entworfen, die die Welt retten möchten, ohne dass jedoch der Feind immer explizit genannt wird. [Solche] Texte appellieren an das ökologische Bewusstsein und möchten [Leser] für die ökologischen Fragen sensibilisieren. (Children's literature picks up environmentalism on our own doorsteps, and presents readers with concrete models for action. … In all these texts, children and the youth are depicted as engaged human beings who want to save the world, although the enemy is not always explicitly identified. [Such] texts make an appeal to and for an ecological awareness and seek to sensitise [readers] to ecological issues.)

Joanne Macgregor's trilogy—*Turtle Walk* (2011), *Rock Steady* (2013), and *Fault Lines* (2016)—falls into this category. The series is explicitly aligned with eco-activism by naming it the "Eco-warrior" trilogy. The genre is the boarding school story, set in the elite (fictional) private Clifford House girls' high school in the Drakensberg. The trio of protagonists cover diversity in terms of race, familial, and financial disparity—nerdy Samantha (Sam) Steadman (white) holds a scholarship and has two brothers in the neighbouring boys' high school, and a loving and supportive, hard-working father, but has lost her mother to cancer; the athlete Nomusa Gule's parents (black) are wealthy politicians with a Struggle background in the post-apartheid government, and artist Jessie Delaney's parents (of Irish descent) are wealthy, but they divorce by the second book, leaving Jessie and her younger sister Cassie in the middle.

The school setting is particularly well suited as a vehicle for environmental information, repeatedly using a school research project or event as a way to present the reader with relevant data, including statistics. This approach allows for some blurring of the fiction/fact boundaries, and incorporates a light version of natural history prose, which McKusick (2010, 21) identifies as one of the genres underpinning ecological writing. As the girls research a topic or share the information, the readers acquire the same salient information, for example, on leatherback turtles and their breeding habits in a shrinking habitat at St Lucia on the KwaZulu-Natal north coast, where the turtles are threatened by rogue long-line fishing in *Turtle Walk*, or on the heated debate around fracking in the Karoo in *Fault Lines.* The girls take action and speak out on the issues involved. In this, they stand against adults who cause the problem, prefer to ignore or remain ignorant about it, dismiss it, or hold back, believing that nothing can be done. One such adult is Clifford House's image-conscious headmistress, who objects to Jessie's graphic poster of a fatally injured leatherback turtle (which the headmistress refers to as a tortoise) as "dreadful." She would prefer a "less shocking" and more "appropriate" illustration of "happy" "tortoises" (Macgregor 2011, 193–194).

The third novel, *Fault Lines*, is the strongest and most complex novel in the trilogy, in terms of its stylistic experiments, incorporating emails and newspaper clippings in the narrative. Moreover, in this novel Macgregor splits up her protagonists—Sam(antha) is strongly anti-fracking, and energetically works for her cause, but Nomusa disagrees, believing that fracking will bring much-needed jobs. Jessie is largely apathetic, distracted by her personal situation (here Macgregor tackles the teenage problem of severe body-image issues for Jessie, triggered and fostered in this case by a newcomer to the school, the exotic Anastasia Oberzhitzky). The "fault lines" of the title imply not only those created by fracking, but also the fissures in the friendship between the three girls, overlapping the environmental concern with the personal issues that remain in the forefront of the novel.

Sam has to engage with opposing views on fracking, which became a topic of hot debate from around 2011 onwards, as exemplified by Devon Maylie's (2012) article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Fracking Debate Racks South Africa." Sam encounters and supports a group of Karoo "fractivists" who are raising funds to buy out a farm to save the town of Nieu-Bethesda from fracking, which could endanger and pollute scarce water resources and the land. But she also meets a representative of the company hoping to gain fracking rights who "launched into an obviously rehearsed speech about job creation, economic growth, foreign investment and profitable business opportunities" (Macgregor 2016, 120). Phrasing such as "obviously rehearsed" undermine the man's argument, biasing the reader towards Sam's preference of the anti-fracking lobby, but the argument for job creation is also raised more persuasively earlier, by Nomusa, who argues:

> If that "precious little town" is like any of the others in the great middle of nowhere of South Africa, then it's full of poverty, unemployment, hunger, alcoholism, under-funded education, non-existent medical services, and is slowly dying from a lack of official attention. (Macgregor 2016, 84)

Nomusa herself chooses a project to raise funds for a small local clinic in the same town, run from a container, by a single nursing sister, with very limited funds. The bigger arguments, relevant to both environmental and social justice, around the exploitation by foreign companies versus job-preservation in agriculture and tourism are also set out just before the climactic reveal of whether the town will have enough money to buy the farm, and "even Nomusa looked impressed" (Macgregor 2016, 252).

The novel offers a mature recognition of the interrelationships between socio-economic disparities and ecological conservation that must be addressed if successful conservation strategies are to be achieved, especially around the fraught issue of different views on fracking in the Karoo. The message remains that it is worth trying to find solutions that protect the natural environment *and* serve local populations at the same time, and that every action makes a difference, even if, realistically, it only does so for a short while.

An interesting local twist in *Rock Steady* is the inclusion of the socio-cultural heritage, notably of the San people, in the environmental or ecological domain. The novel deals with the preservation and protection of rock art from theft. Here, the boundaries of the ecological become permeable, to include the local indigenous heritage in the environment, reflecting indirectly the premise (also implied in *New Keepers*) of a closer, more respectful and less exploitative relation between early indigenous populations and their habitat, shared with the local fauna and flora. Such depictions may be regarded as partially undoing what McKusick (2010, 3) and Bradford et al. (2007, 9) describe as the colonialist "forgetting" of past atrocities against local populations associated with some earlier North American literary constructions of the "Wilderness." They also align with the assumption "of indigenous environmental virtue [as] a foundational belief for deep ecologists and many ecocritics" (Garrard 2012, 129), an assumption which should, however, itself perhaps be interrogated as emanating from a romanticised belief that indigenous knowledges are more biocentric.

The symbiosis between humans, their creations, and the "habitat" of both animals and human creations is emphasised by the protagonists' plea to rock-art thieves to preserve a specific environment intact—Sam says: "Once the paintings are out of their setting … Once you've ripped them from their environment … We'll never know what they meant" (McGregor 2013, 258). The respectful, if idealised, vision is one of unity and connection between the human and other inhabitants of the landscape, offering a model for a different way of interacting with nature from the one that most of the spoiled girls at Clifford House practise. This is encapsulated by the final lines of the novel: "Out there, beyond the noise and light and motion, just a walk away through the grass and starlit darkness, was another gathering. A still and silent dance of hunters and shamans, of spirits and elands, sprang across the hushed sandstone cliffs, ceaseless and timeless. Rock steady" (Macgregor 2013, 284).

Conclusion

As McKusick (2010, 231), points out, "literature deals at the most fundamental level with the analysis and critique of human values." He comments: "Maybe what's needed is not a clever technological fix, but a fundamental change in human consciousness" (McKusick 2010, x). He adds, quoting Jonathan Bate (2000, 23), that it is "the business of literature … to work upon consciousness" (McKusick 2010, x). One task of literature on ecological issues is thus to advocate making "humankind right for nature," instead of only adapting nature to human needs (Love [1990] 1996, 234). Thus literature has to "formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth" (Glodfelty and Fromm 1996, xxi).

In the case of children's and young adult literature, adults as writers project "children as citizens in the making" (Bradford et al. 2007, 3) in a world that has to marry social and environmental justice. Overall, pragmatically, these seven novels would attract a largely suburban, South African middle class readership, appearing in limited editions (although all the titles are internationally available as Kindle e-books, and the *Eco-Warrior* series has been adapted with a glossary for international readers). This is an audience which may indeed be the part of the future citizenry who will need to take the lead in making a difference, so there is a need to increase the publication, distribution, and readership of such texts, but there is also an urgent need to create and distribute works for an even wider readership.

These recent South African teen novels hold a measure of eco-pessimism—the world is at risk, and human exploitation of each other and nature increases that danger. But the novels also point towards the possibility of moving beyond apathetic pessimism regarding the apparently inevitable loss of the natural environment and the difficulties of human/environment interactions. There is some hope in the form of a call to the youth to see, to feel, and to act, to make some difference. As Julia Martin (2017, 180) points out, "Introducing young people to imaginative texts as a complex mode of knowledge … as a vehicle for eco-social advocacy" offers a "teaching environment [that] may well be our best opportunity" for achieving change. Doing so responds to Cajetan Iheka's (2018, 161) plea to

> retain the spirit of Fanon's and Butler's call for a new human but extend their organizing logic to capture a planetary network of human and nonhuman beings. If Fanon and Butler insist that opening up to fellow humans, who may not necessarily look like us, is pertinent for creating a better world, … opening up to both human and nonhuman Others is an ethical obligation.

By pointing out some of the ills of the current world order, these texts, with their uniquely South African aspects, advocate for imagining transformation for the better, which remains, for better or worse, an anthropocentric task. Their readers need to undertake this task in the interests of local and global environmental sustainability, also taking into account the local social implications of proposed solutions.

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