

Chapter 12

Future: Nan's Future Expectation and Her Views on Children's Literature

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Fred Inglis defines children's novels as "imaginative forms of life which they work with and turn into their future lives" (qtd. in Gannon and Gay 1983, p. 26). However, this imaginative life is usually modelled by adults with various political orientations. Mary V. Jackson holds that English children's literature, "especially in its early stages, was rooted in complex social, religious, and political conflict. It was yoked to the service of this or that party, faction, class, dogma, or philosophy and was constantly buffeted in controversies over who should control the child's world and mind" (1989, p. 245). Ruth Bottigheimer suggests that the patterns that Jackson identifies in English children's literature are also reflected in France and Germany (1993, p. 165). Jonathan Ball (2011) notes that scholars such as Farah Mendlesohn (2009) and Noga Applebaum (2010) are critical of young adult science fiction saying that the genre adopts socially conservative attitudes toward discussing the future. While Ball disputes this view, one point is certain—children's literature comprises "imaginative forms of life" which offer a window into possible future worlds: the expectations and fears about the future and a vision of Utopia or Dystopia on the part of a social group. In the past 20 years or more, these elements have been addressed in children's literature and its criticism¹.

In looking to the future, children's literature speaks to the concerns and anxieties of the present. As Abby Ventura notes in her discussion of three young adult speculative fictions², the futures of the twenty-first century depicted in these texts share similar concerns about "global capitalism through the expansion of the marketplace, excess of commodities, the waste product (or the obsolete commodity), the commodification of the body, destruction of natural resources, and a media-saturated culture" (2011, pp. 89, 90). This concern about the current state of society and its future has been part of futuristic science fiction for young readers since the 1960s. According to Kay Sambell, since that time the genre "has been dominated

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by authorial fears about the violent, inhumane social and political worlds young people seem likely to inherit” (2004, p. 247). It is interesting to note, however, that there are few articles discussing the relationship between the future and children’s expectations. So how do children see the future? Are there any connections between children’s literature and their future worlds? Will their futuristic observations benefit our new imagination of their future worlds and thus adjust our designs of futuristic worlds in children’s novels? I believe these are valuable questions to explore and they are the reason that we need to seek help from children to answer them.

To gain a sense of how a young person might think about the future, I interviewed a 10-year-old Beijing girl, Nan. A female Masters degree candidate Chen (C) also participated in the interview which was conducted in my office by me at Beijing Normal University. Nan’s parents work at an NGO and at a university respectively. She has a typical middle-class background, and loves children’s literature having read lots of works. Her personality is optimistic and open-minded. The interview took place from 4:00 p.m. to 5:25 p.m. on October 11th, 2012. Nan’s mother brought her to my office after school and left after we were acquainted. Her permission was sought and received to make an audio recording. The interview was informal but contained questions relating to children’s literature and the future³. After processing the data of recording, the contents not correlative with the topic were deleted. Excerpts from the interview are reproduced below. These are clustered under key emerging themes and provide insights into Nan’s expectations of the future and her views of children’s literature.

12.1 A Child’s Expectations About the Future Change Repeatedly

Wu Yan (W below): What do you want to be when you grow up?

Nan (N below): When I was young I admired the people who worked at McDonald’s and made ice-cream cones for me, and that’s what I wanted to be back then. After that I wanted to be a doctor, then a teacher, and now I don’t really know! (*laughs*)

W: So it’s still changing.

N: Yeah. And just recently I wanted to be a writer. (*laughs*)

12.2 Expectations About the Future are Influenced by Current Reading

W: Why do you want to be a writer? Is it because you’ve read something interesting and impressive?

N: Right!

W: What was it?

N: The Rain Demon's *Beast King*⁴. It's really great!

W: Who is the author?

N: Zhang Kai.

W: Zhang Kai. Have you read anything about him?

C: No.

W: The Rain Demon's *Beast King*?

N: The Rain Demon is...

W: Is a demon?

N: Yes, it's the name of the book...no, sorry, not the book's name! Rain Demon is the author's pen name.

W: Rain Demon is the author!

N: Right!

W: *Beast King* is the book name.

N: Right!

W: Could you tell me a little of the story of the *Beast King*?

N: It is hard to tell...

W: Just say anything you'd like.

N: Ok, so there's a boy, uh... a long time ago, one person in a hundred thousand had hidden energy, and... well, we'll just call it "hidden energy." Later, there were two people, one female and one male, who carried out missions in a village. Because of a plague, only that boy survived, due to his hidden energy. Then the woman took him to her (*laughs*) to her old school. The boy's name is Lanhu, and she took Lanhu to her old school, and in the end he got a beast king, his own... what's it called? (*talks to herself*).

W: Is the beast king a wild animal?

N: Yeah, lots of bad guys appeared, and then there was fighting (*claps excitedly*). Anyway, that's up to the last volume of what now Rain Demon has written. The next volume will be *Peerless Wolf*, which brings the number of books to... more than ten! (*talks to herself*). Anyway, what I am reading now is the last volume, *The Dark Beast King*. There will be more after *Peerless Wolf*. And then the sequels: there's a sequel, you know, *The House of the Beast Master*. I've only read the first volume...

W: You think the author's books aren't bad?

N: Right! He had written—Because I was a fan of *Beast King* (*laughs*), I did a PowerPoint—tons of books. Just the *Beast King* series is this thick (*measures with her hands*)! Unfortunately, I lost one book; it might have been stolen by a classmate because I took it to school, and I can't find it any more.

W: Can you replace it? It should be replaced.

N: I can.

W: Tell me and I'll give you a hand. Kongfz.com will carry it.

N: No, thanks. I don't think that volume is very interesting. Then (*returns to Beast King*), the book is really, really thick, every page covered in text. It's about this thick (*gestures*).

W: Does the story take place in the present-day, or...?

C: A long time ago.

W: Oh. A long time ago.

N: Right, and the story and reality...

W: Are unrelated.

N: Not totally unrelated. It's just, uh, the story's pretty bizarre, but other things like spaceships and all that, they're imaginative but haven't been realized yet.

W: Are there spaceships and things like that in the story?

N: Yes, the spaceship even flies to other stars.

W: So it's got that in there! And that's related to things to come, isn't it?

N: Absolutely!

W: It's the stuff of the future.

N: It tells about the things in the year 10,000, wait, the year 11,000, so everything's really advanced.

W: It is about the future?

N: Yeah.

12.3 A Child's Definition of and Attitude About the Future

W: Do you like reading the stories about the future?

N: They're OK.

W: Just OK. Not as good as others stories, about the present?

N: I really don't care. Anyway, I just read.

W: Your focus is the plot, isn't it?

N: Yes. I'm fine as long as it's readable.

W: You brought up the future, so can you tell me what you think about the future?

N: It comes later on.

W: The future is later?

N: Oh, tomorrow is the future.

W: Tomorrow is the future.

N: Right, or the next hour is also the future.

W: OK. Do you think the future is good or bad? Or, would you say you like the future or dislike it? Or perhaps it doesn't matter?

N: Hmm... (*pause*) It doesn't matter.

W: It doesn't matter to you, does it?

12.4 Fear and Coping Strategies for the Macro-Future

N: But I think the future will be very horrible.

W: Horrible?

N: Yeah.

W: Why?

N: The weather's so bad now. Every day is so dreadful and gloomy, so what will it be like in the future? When the odor layer (*means "ozone layer"*) totally disappears, we will change into "toasted cheese people"!

W: (*Laughs*) "Toasted cheese people". You mean you worry about the future?

N: Yes, when we were young they told us, don't waste water, but then we found out that lots of people use it—for example, watering plants at school—and just let it run all over, and it's a waste of water. A little water is OK for your fish, but when it's a big jar of water, it's really wasteful.

W: They say to conserve water, but they actually do the opposite, right?

N: Right. Advertisements talk about environmental protection and conservation, but what's the result? Those people! (*adopts an exaggerated, angry expression*).

12.5 Fear and Coping Strategies for the Micro-Future

W: (*Laughs*) So it's mainly the problem of environmental protection that makes you worry about future?

N: There's another reason: I'm afraid I'll end up forgetting the telephone numbers and addresses of my current friends.

W: Are you afraid you'll lose your friends in the future?

N: Yes.

W: They sound like very good friends. They must be quite happy.

N: Of course.

W: You can stay in touch with them. How would you lose them?

N: Yeah, that's what I think too.

W: Exactly!

N: But they might change their telephone number, and I don't even have a mobile phone right now.

W: Oh, so you don't have a mobile phone.

N: Yeah. Students in Grade Two have their own mobile phones, but my mom said they have radiation and won't let me have one.

W: That's a reasonable explanation.

N: Yeah. (*meaningfully*)

W: OK, so apart from environmental protection and losing friends (don't lose their numbers, of course), is there anything else you're worried about? Isn't there anything at all that's good about the future?

N: There are good things.

W: For example?

N: Uh...(*talks to herself*) Meeting good colleagues, um...A good job, earning lots of money, a nice place to live, being safe and not in danger at all.

W: But you aren't sure if all these things are good.

N: Yeah. I am not a fortune-teller. But my predictive abilities are powerful... (*laughs*)

W: (*Laughs*) How do you know your predictive abilities are powerful?

N: Because to deduce whether we'll have physical activity or exercise at school today, all I have to do is look at any teacher.

W: Physical activity means sports?

N: Yeah.

W: And exercise means that you just do a set of exercises?

N: Yeah.

W: Which one do you like better?

N: Both are OK.

W: So deduction is useless, given your lack of preference.

N: But, but I can tell my classmates. My friends only like physical activity.

W: What do you do for physical activity? Things like basketball?

N: Skipping rope, Tug of War.

W: Physical activity is a little more interesting!

N: Right.

12.6 Good Writers and Works

W: What other books for kids have you read?

N: I've read some Jimmy Liao.

[...]

W: What's interesting about Jimmy's books?

N: There is *Pourquoi*, *The Private Me*, *Mr. Wing*, and lots and lots of others. And *A Chance of Sunshine*.

W: What impressed you most in the books?

N: When I was young I didn't have *A Chance of Sunshine*, because my mom didn't buy it for me, so I just read *Mr. Wing* for a long time.

W: You remember *Mr. Wing* most clearly.

N: Yeah, I can retell the story now.

W: Can you tell me an interesting part? Something impressive from *Mr. Wing*?

N: I think it's the part after his wings grow out, but before the operation, the part in the middle. After the wings grow out, people from the whole city come to take his picture. He becomes unhappy and begins to eat and drink a lot, and turns fat. After that his wings fly everywhere, and he has to follow along. He can't take a bath, or go to toilet, or stand in line, and then he can't even have meetings. This part is pretty amusing.

W: It's interesting to you.

N: Right. But I've got this confusion, which is, although the wings might not be obedient, how wonderful would it be to one day have wings and fly! But the first half is told so miserably, and the wings are broken in a fall, so I feel... (*mutters*) swallowing.

W: So you mean that if you were the writer, you wouldn't write it like that.

N: Yeah. I would write about the positive.

W: Oh, I agree. Wouldn't it be great if we had wings and could fly!

N: In *Beast King Lanhu* has a falcon, so he can grow wings and fly.

[...]

W: It feels a little like science fiction.

N: Science fiction, pretty much.

W: Do you like science fiction?

N: Yes, I do.

W: What kind of science fiction do you like?

N: As long as it's not too scary.

W: So you don't like horror, do you? What kind do you like?

N: Horror keeps me awake at night.

W: You like happy stories—

N: Sunny ones. *Beast King* isn't too scary, and although some parts are kind of scary, I can skip those. The book is the sort that reveals its meaning after repeated reading. This book, for example, *Garden of Pet Beasts*, is one I like very much. I bought the first one when I was in Grade One, but I didn't read until Grade Two, when one day I thought, just read it. It took me a year to finish reading this book. So that's why I read it so slowly, but it's so interesting. Then I ordered a whole bunch. (*Imitates flipping pages*) I can read two of the new ones a day.

[...]

W: That's fast!

N: Thirty seconds for two chapters.

[...]

N: Oh, I've read *The Neverending Story*, three-fourths of it. Thanks. (*Takes the book*). The ending is a little scary, so I put it aside. Leave it alone. These aren't so flashy.

W: Yes, *The Neverending Story* is deeper.

N: I also gave it to my friend. Oh, here's another one I've read! *Sophie's World*.

W: Was it good?

N: It's okay.

W: It's pretty abstract, isn't it?

N: "Who are you?"

W: That's right. The first chapter is "Who are you"!

N: And then it's "Where does the world comes from?" isn't it?

W: Right.

N: But it's still scary.

W: Still scary. I see you dislike scary things most!

N: Yes. I don't read anything scary.

12.7 Parents and Friends are the Focus of Future Concerns

W: What else about the future (*talks to himself*)? Ah, about the future, you just mentioned environmental pollution. Is there anything else that concerns you, about the world's future?

N: No.

W: Nothing?

N: (*Laughs*) I'm a carefree sort.

W: So that's what you think. And your classmates? What are they concerned with about the future?

N: (*Thinks in silence*)

W: Not much, either?

N: Yeah, not too much.

W: What about your own future? What are you concerned about? Are you worried about anything?

N: I haven't thought about that before.

W: You haven't thought about it. So you think everything's great.

N: Yeah.

W: You only worry about losing your friends, like you just said.

N: Yeah.

W: How many good friends do you have, best friends?

N: Best friends?

W: Right.

N: (*Thinks in silence for a long time*) At any rate true friends are all good friends.

W: What's your personality, in your classroom?

N: Uh... lots.

W: Are you a happy sort of person?

N: I'm pretty pessimistic.

W: Pessimistic in certain areas?

N: Yeah.

W: Is there anything in your life now that makes you anxious and afraid?

N: (*Silent for a long time*)

W: Or does anything make you particularly happy?

N: That I have lots of books. (*Laughs*) And then the thing I fear most is that my mom and dad might leave me.

W: But now it looks like they won't leave you.

N: Yeah. They're quite healthy right now.

12.8 To Play is the Most Joyful Thing!

W: What do you dislike most at school?

N: See if you can guess.

W: I'd say, exams.

N: No. The whole teaching building, and every aspect related to studying. All of it. (*Laughs*) Leaving just a little garden, the pavilion—we have a vine-covered pavilion—and then the playground, the workout equipment, the ones you play on, and the horizontal bar. That's enough. Oh, and the flagpole!

W: You'd keep the flagpole?

N: Absolutely. There's a flag-raising every Monday. Then we wouldn't need to take our bags, and the only classes we'd go to would be PE and morality and society, and after that we'd play. We've got a thing called a "Game Book", and we draw the game ourselves, including whatever money we need, and then whoever wants to play, they write down their own name and money, and there are pets and a map. And then we play.

W: I don't really understand. Is it some sort of game?

N: Yeah. We draw it by ourselves.

C: I've played it. The girl asked me to write down my name, and then she issued me "money".

N: Right.

W: It is a set of game rules, right?

N: Yeah. Also, everyone will get five hundred notebooks. And they'd be thick and white.

W: What for?

N: For drawing the game. (*Laughs*).

W: That's a good design for a future. Just now you mentioned how, if you were principal, you would vaporize the buildings and anything study-related.

N: Wipe out from the world.

W: Leaving behind things to play with, and the flagpole, and then you'd hand out lots of notebooks!

N: (*Laughs*)

W: Then everyone could play games every day.

[...]

Perry Nodelman (1981, p. 23) remarks that many children's novels "describe a developing future rather than events in the past", which differs from discussions about the past in adult works. My interview shows that the future in this child's mind changes frequently and is easily influenced by current reading, daily life, family and school education. Therefore, a positive direction would be to encourage children's writers and publishers to experiment, offering a variety of alternatives and their results, and to provide more influential and decisive materials and worthwhile actions.

Childhood is a period of exploring one's own abilities. Children also feel astonished about their relationship with the future (for example, Nan believing that she has "predictive abilities"). These explorations of the subconscious will be an important part for individual development of the imagination, creativity, and even daydreaming: necessary capacities for the future. These same capacities in children's publications are not to be underestimated. That is why Janice Alberghene points out that the "fall" of childhood may be a function of contemporary adults' inability to imagine any future at all (1985, p. 189). The development of children's imagination of the future should be encouraged if we want to retain their childhood and optimism.

Children, such as Nan, may have no definitions of the future, but they have strong expectations about happiness, affection and entertainment. This might serve to guide the construction of Utopias in children's novels and science fiction. However, as Nan

notes, children also have fears about possible futures, such as losing friends and parents, as well as environmental pollution. I entirely agree with Kimberley Reynolds' view (2007) that children's literature "provides a curious and paradoxical cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive" (2007, p. 3). Writers of children's literature need to continue to embrace *serious play*—writing about the seriousness that impacts children's lives while providing them with, as Inglis notes at the beginning of this chapter, "imaginative forms of life which they work with and turn into their future lives".

Notes

1. See for example Claudia Mills' review of *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*. *Lion and the Unicorn* 33(1):121–126.
2. M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), and Pete Hautman's *Rash* (2006).
3. Interview outline:

A. Introductory questions

What do you want to be when you grow up? Why?

B. Direct narrative questions

What do you think the future would be like?

Do you think the future would be better than present or worse?

What is the future in your eyes?

If you were to have only one wish about the future, what would it be?

C. Questions related to children's literature

Have you read/watched lots of children's novels/films? What are they?

Are there any inspirations about the future in children's literature?

What would you write if you were asked to compose a futuristic novel?

4. This refers to a series of network online novels that were published later. Nan read the paper edition.

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