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# Battling Against Environmental Crisis: Children in Action

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## Abstract

With its historical privilege of the relationship between children and nature, children's literature has long attended to ecological problems, often in concert with its attendant social problems. In a century of stories, from *The Secret Garden* (1911) to *The Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Iron Man* (1968), *The Iron Woman* (1993), and *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), children's authors have been demonstrating how children, prefiguring actual child activists such as Greta Thunberg, can lead the way towards solutions. Whether in literature or real life, it seems that it is the children who understand the urgency of environmental crises and can bring about responses. Children activists, such as Lucy, Hogarth, Frenchie and his companions, take decisive action in saving nature and the human world.

**Keywords:** Environmental Crises, Environmental Activism, Children's Literature, Children Activists.

## Introduction: The Awareness of Ecological Problems in Children's Literature

Books for children has a long history in raising ecological awareness and reflecting contemporary environmental issues.

"Concern for the nonhuman environment and a questioning of humanity's place within that environment can be traced back to the literary and cultural transformations that accompany the development of children's literature in the eighteenth century" (Sigler, 1994, p.148).

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocates children should grow up in nature in his *Emile*. He also uses Robinson Crusoe as an example to show the importance of learning how to survive in nature. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, many writers depict the issues about nature and animal, such as Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* (1863), Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971), and Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves* (1972) and so on. Those novels attempt to awaken young readers' awareness of the relationship between man and non-human in nature. In the twenty-first century, children's novels address the political problem in environment, showing a kind of radical description, and examples such as Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) and *The Carbon Diaries 2017* (2009) not only highlight the serious ecological crisis, but also the political conflict and environmental activism.

“Any effort on behalf of the environment, to protect it, to enhance it, to restore it, whether done by an individual or by a group, can be considered activism” (Embree, 1995 p. 52).

The roots of environmental activism begin from the establishment of environmental organizations in the nineteenth century. Environmental activism gradually becomes a rule that guides people’s daily life. Many environmental philosophers explain the relationship between nature and human beings, and attempt to discover a new way to treat nature, such as Henry David Thoreau who advocates the importance of nature and the rejection of civilization in his *Walden*. Then Aldo Leopold puts forward his philosophy: “an ecological comprehension of land” (1949, p. 224) rather than keeping a technological, anthropocentric, and economic attitude towards nature. In mid-twentieth century, people turn their attention into local environment. Windle Berry, another philosopher, changes this concept into “nature as measure” (1990, p. 204), and he shows his concerns about the local farm and land. Besides that, other issues they discuss include nuclear power, pesticide, shortage of resources, and urbanization. In the late twentieth century, environmental activism has influenced many new environmental protection organizations and promote the government to formulate relevant environmental policies.

The publication of Rachel Carson’s *The Silent Spring* in 1962 is typically regarded as a starting point for raising public awareness of environmental crises in modern times. Ever since then, the dangers of global warming, the destruction of the rainforest and air pollution have reached a certain consensus. The creation of child protagonists leading awareness of environmental crises has a long history in children’s literature, as Liam Heneghan argues in his 2018 *Beasts at Bedtime: Revealing the Environmental Wisdom in Children’s Literature*,

“Not simply because some of these stories inform us about the nature of environmental decline, but just as important is the fact that children’s literature can provide a secure foundation in environmental sensibilities” (p. 190).

This paper will explicate how authors as different from each other as the late British poet laureate Ted Hughes and Métis Canadian young adult author Cherie Dimaline speak to environmental activism. They express direct and explicit ideas about the role of children, the power of children or the need for children to stand up for the environment because adults are not doing this successfully.

This paper will address how children battle against environmental crisis, bringing change and hope to all of us. In all the stories to be discussed, children as the agency and activists, with their love and connections to the natural world, are charged to find a solution to save humankind from danger and the destruction of the ecosphere. The term agency

“underscores children and young people’s capacities to make choices about the things they do and to express their own ideas” (James and James, 2008, p. 9).

The most important point is how children can be “active in determining their own lives and the lives of those around them” (Heywood, 2001, p. 4). That children are viewed as hope and redemption in face of ecological crisis has close connections with the Romantic view on children, who are deemed to have natural connection with nature, and are immune to the pollution of commercialized culture. Children in the stories under discussion shoulder the responsibility to lead

man out of the endangered world, helping rebuild the harmonious relationship between humankind and the natural world.

### **Environmental Crisis and Social Problems**

After the industrial revolution, the relationship between humankind and the natural world changed profoundly. Nature became something that was just in the way of progress, something that had to be tamed or civilized. Increasingly, natural resources were exploited in the drive towards industrialization whether water or forests—it was the exploitation of the natural resources that led to their collapse—and the subsequent exploitation of minorities such as indigenous people who had traditionally respected the natural world that sustained them.

Ted Hughes, one of the early writers influenced by Carson, sensed sharply the destructiveness of industrialization towards the natural environment and dealt with the issues often in his work, with his *The Iron Woman* (1993) standing as his most explicit warning of an ecological crisis. Michael Morpurgo articulates in the Foreword that Ted Hughes

“used his art and his craft to raise our awareness of the urgency of the situation, how in the flagrant and willful destruction of our environment, of our fellow creatures, of sea and river, of field and tree and flora, we are bringing that same destruction upon ourselves, that we are creating a maelstrom of toxicity that will overwhelm us, that will ultimately destroy all life on this Earth” (Hughes, 1993, p. xii).

Devastating environmental pollution such as chemical wastes, depicted in both *The Iron Woman* (1993) and Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), exerts a powerful influence on their own lives and the communities, all of which depend on the physical environment and its bounty. The governmental placement of toxic facilities in communities of color and low-income communities means that these communities are often the hardest hit by environmental problems, such as the North American Indigenous people in *The Marrow Thieves*, whose homeland and lives are totally degraded and destroyed.

When water quality and public health are in risk, Lucy, the young girl in *The Iron Woman* takes action and helps rebuild the relationship between man and nature, thus saving man from total extinction. In the opening pages of *The Iron Woman*, the young girl, Lucy, senses that “something was wrong with the eels” (Hughes, 1993, p. 3), but the birdwatcher does not care the worsened and polluted environment. When Lucy realizes the crisis, to save the other creatures, she decides to work with the Iron Woman to change the ways of mankind and calls upon the help of Hogarth and the Iron Man, the hero of Hughes’s less-explicitly environmental story for children, published in 1968. Lucy determines to shut down the factory that is pouring out poisons. Together with Hogarth, she goes to the factory and asks the managers to stop. She charges the manager of the waste factory with polluting, blaming the manager for poisoning the river and killing all the fish. She demands immediate stop of the polluting. “It’s poisoning all the creatures. [...] Now. You are poisoning all the creatures and you are poisoning me” (Hughes, 1993, p. 64). Lucy is in such a fury, and she demands that the manager “stop the factory. Let the river run clean. Or all these creatures will die” (Hughes, 1993, p. 103). When their warnings are ignored, the Iron Woman decides to

teach the men at the factory a lesson by turning them into fish and forcing them to taste the bitterness of their own destruction.

The destruction caused by humankind results in the rise of sea levels, the transformation of the coastlines, as well as the oil pipelines poisoning the fresh water sources. What's more, the ecosphere is fundamentally changed with warmer temperatures and frequent earthquakes. In *The Marrow Thieves*, by Métis Canadian, Cherie Dimaline, the protagonist Frenchie shares with his indigenous group his concerns about the changes of his hometown "[l]ike all the industry-plundered Great Lakes, was poison" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 11). "But now with most of the rivers cut into pieces," he says, "lakes [are] left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 21). The pollution of water means the collapse of the ecological system. "The Great Lakes were polluted to muck" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 24). Even though humans do take some action, California is almost swallowed by the ocean. "They were fenced off, too poisonous for use" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 24). The whole world has been changed due to the pollution of water system; wars occurred just for water. "The Water Wars," he explains,

"lasted ten years before a new set of treaties and agreements were shook on between world leaders in echoing assembly halls. The Anishnaabe were scattered, lonely, and scared" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 25).

With temperature rises, the earth is falling apart. The North Pole is melting. The sea level is rising. The weather has changed. In some cases, "it changed to violence, building tsunamis, spinning tornadoes, crumbling earthquakes" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 87). The coastlines of countries are changed forever, breaking off like crust. It rains the whole year due to climate change. Deluges occur with great frequency which allows no time for the earth to absorb the rainwater. "The hurricanes and earthquakes made us fear for a solid ground to stand on" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 46). Environmental crises affected North American indigenous people directly, in fact and in fiction, forcing them to move north and run for life.

Children in these stories are the activists and the environmental saviors, as remarked in the preface that evil prevails all over the earth and

"it is up to the children to confront that evil, and to restore and protect all that is confront that evil, and to restore and protect all that is good in the world, that our best hope for the survival of the planet, of humanity, lies in children (Hughes, 1993, p. xi)".

In fact, without those children, neither the Iron Man nor the Iron Woman could save the world. It is the children "who were loving enough to look after them and wise enough to recognize and understand that the world needed them (Hughes, 1993, p. xi)" that prevent them from perishing and "save [them] from [themselves]" (Hughes, 1993, p. xi).

### **Environmental Injustice and Environmental Exploitation**

Environmental problems are closely connected with environmental injustice. Poor whites, women, colored people and the Third world are always the most affected when living closer to the resources of pollution. Environmental problems are increasingly recognized as the root or symbol of social problems, for instance, the gap of wealth and the persecution of the minorities will

inevitably accelerate social injustice of all kinds. Many stories have addressed candidly episodes of genocide, displacement and the like of these social injustices. Environmental problems will also lead to psychological problems of humankind, who suffer the loss of homeland, disconnection with nature, and their loss of a sense of belonging. Children in *The Marrow Thieves* are treated as commodities and medicine to cure those who cannot dream, and the predators are also the victims of climate change. No one is spared of the consequences of environmental destruction. Thus, children are left to confront the environmental problems and social problems at these historical moments.

Likewise, children in *The Marrow Thieves* are the activists in face of the injustice, madness, and cruelty of the world. They must stay forever on alert in order not to be captured by the government Recruiters or by other Indians who act as their agents. The survivors, mainly children, are trying to figure out what to do for survival. Frenchie, the adolescent survivor, is a typical case. He is hunted, runs away to seek shelter, and finally is saved by his community. Frenchie grows into the leader of the group in exile. Frenchie's job "was to hunt, and scout, and build camp, and break camp, to protect the others" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 180), battling against the prosecutors of all kinds.

Frenchie and his companions work together to adapt themselves to the changed landscape and life. They must take action to prevent their family, their community, and the natural world, from the ravages of conquest and various forms of toxicity. They must take action to fight back and find the way to heal the land. The elder Minerva is the one who keeps the tradition and educates the children during their journey to the north. After her capture, Frenchie refuses to go further north, "I'm going after Minerva" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 153). Joining the other group of indigenous people, they have the plan to secure Minerva and "shut down the schools" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 183). With the tragic death of Minerva, they are all broken with "grief and a shared history of survival" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 213). They "start a youth council to learn the tradition and the keys to survive" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 214) by following the last words of Minerva. Frenchie and his companions come out of grief, regain hope and strength, for "as long as there are dreams left, there will never be want for a dream" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 231). And Frenchie knows quite well what are the right things for them to do:

"what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger dream that held us all. Anything. Everything" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 231).

At the end of the story, they are determined to return to their ancestors' homeland in the far North. These children have experienced discrimination and persecution of all kinds due to environmental crisis and climate change.

Environmental exploitation often means human exploitation. In *The Marrow Thieves*, the economically impoverished North American indigenous people lost their homes to climate change. In the actual world too, indigenous communities globally are facing some of the worst environmental devastation. They are fighting for land and water rights. Without social justice there will be no environmental justice and vice versa. Social injustice threatens the well-being of Indigenous children and their families, as articulated in *The Marrow Thieves*.

"Everything made to ache and splinter and seek and throb by the loss of our parents, our homes, our words, our Elder and our RiRi, our safety" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 158).

Environmental problems also give rise to psychological problems of the Indigenous people. All of them are suffering from the loss of their loved ones. All the children in *The Marrow Thieves* are abused. Wab's coming-to-story symbolizes the degradation of the whole community. Poverty, drugs and crimes emerge with environmental deterioration. Wab, neglected by a hopeless drunken mother, is cheated, raped and deserted by her community. She ran away from the corrupted world, seeking healing and belonging. Wab was alone for two whole years before she came to Frenchie's group, "unable to trust that we wouldn't hurt her too" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 98). "Wab was harder to figure out [...] Wab's was less defined, messier somehow and therefore more dangerous" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 77) and therefore regarded as a more dangerous problematic person by the community. The other children are also abused and traumatic. According to the narration of Miig, both RiRi and Slopper are single-parented and "[both] of them lost them to the schools later on" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 98); Tree and Zheegwon are deprived of their dreams by "a colony of townspeople" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 98) who figure that "they'd found some kinda personal reservoir with the Indian twins" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 98). Miig describes the suffering of the twins who were

"[...] tied up in a barn, dangling like scarecrows from a rope thrown over a beam. They were full of holes that's been stitched up with rough thread, all up and down their sides. And with a pinky missing on each hand. They were seven then" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 99).

The physical pains might be easy to cure, but the psychological traumas are hard to heal.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, Non-Indigenous people are also becoming the victims of the environmental degradation. Disaster and disease cause catastrophic death among human beings, killing half of the population. "Families, loved ones, were torn apart in this new world" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 26). They are faced with extinction and "they stopped reproducing without the doctors, and worst of all, they stopped dreaming" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 26).

When people stopped dreaming, they got sick and depressed, tasting the bitterness of their destruction of nature: "And a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 88). Everyone suffers from the overwhelming consequences of environmental degradation and the collapse of ecological system.

As T.V. Reed says in an essay on environmental justice:

"Any serious environmentalist must now realize that for decades the worst forms of environmental degradation have been enabled by governmental and corporate policies of dumping problems on communities of color, poor whites, and the Third World" (Reed, 2002, p. 146).

In all the stories discussed in this paper, governments are held accountable for all these environmental problems and social problem. With the help of industrial capitalists, governments seek economic gains at all means, without thinking of the vulnerable environment, welfare of future generations or the unsustainability of the enterprise.

The government in *The Marrow Thieves* first polluted the water system, then sold the interests of later generations while driving the Indigenous people in exile. The Water Wars, that lasted for ten years reached a new set of treaties and agreements, are also based on the profits of the government and the rich White people. "American reached up and starting sipping on our lakes

with a great metal straw" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 25). In a nod to the way economic interests outweigh environmental interests, Dimaline directly implicates corporate complicity:

"Too bad the country was busy worrying about how we didn't pay an extra tax on Levis' jeans and Kit Kat bars to listen to what we were shouting" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 25).

This has violated the health and life of other species, thus causing new virus and climate change.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, the government is held accountable for these solemn social problems and injustice. They isolated the indigenous people, foment split and distrust between Native Indians, thus taking advantage of one group to steal the other group, making their lives even unbearable and miserable. The government makes use of the opportunity to steal the marrows of the indigenous people since they "got sick with new germs, [...] And that's when they opened the first schools" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 23). The government wants to sacrifice and exploit shamelessly of the North American indigenous people who they believe possess the secret of dream and healing, even after the indigenous people was being commoditized and after their lands were filled with water companies and wealthy corporate investors. They want "Indigenous bloodlines and good general health" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 89). Without the slightest guilt, the corrupt government poisons the drinking water and changes the air condition to such a great extent that the earth starts to shake, melt and even crumble, "harvesting a race for medicine" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 47).

In a reflection of actual historical government policies, the corrupt government in the novel does not treat North American indigenous as human beings, instead "just commodities" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 203), hunting them, capturing their DNA, taking their marrow and making it into medicine, but "no one should be sacrificed for anyone else" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 58). Within a short span of time, North American indigenous communities were not only reduced to extreme poverty, but also suffer from numerous losses of their loved ones and their own health. Thus, children are left to confront the environmental problems and social problems at these historical moments.

### **Children Activists Promoting the Process of Healing**

That children are viewed as hope and redemption in face of ecological crisis has close connections with the Romantic view on children, who are deemed to have natural connection with nature, and are immune to the pollution of commercialized culture. Children in the stories under discussion shoulder the responsibility to lead man out of the endangered world, helping rebuild the harmonious relationship between humankind and the natural world. Just as the misappropriated Biblical quotation "A little child will lead them," the adolescents in these stories recognize the absurdity and failures of their society, and take action, transforming the traditional child savior into an environmental savior.

After the breakdown of ecological system as depicted in *The Marrow Thieves*, the non-indigenous characters cannot dream, so they decide to steal the marrows of the indigenous people who can dream. The commodification and exploitation of the indigenous people symbolize a corrupted society and self-destructive humankind. To seek healing and to be healed, man will have to go back to indigenous communities. Then they can start "the process of healing [and] healing the land" (Dimaline, 2019, p. 193). They are fully aware of the inseparable relationship between the land and themselves. "We have the knowledge [...] When we heal our land, we are healed also"



(Dimaline, 2019, p. 193). Empowered with the knowledge of healing the land, children are shouldering the responsibility for finding the solution to the environmental destruction in order to make the world whole again. Frenchie and his fellows know that only by respecting nature, embracing nature, and treating nature as their family members, can they be saved.

As Christensen puts

“a focus on agency provides an alternative to viewing the child as vulnerable and dependent on adult power and protection” (2021, p. 13).

In these stories, human beings’ hope for survival, the future of the world, and the restoration of harmony in nature lies in children. They are sparing no effort in warning, transforming, and helping the adults to make significant changes. In both *The Iron Woman* and *The Iron Man*, alienation from nature is viewed as the root of the ecological problem, as well as the separation of nature and culture, thus initiating humankind’s quest for healing. As Kerslake explains:

“in line with Hughes own healing quest, culture (in the form of the Iron Man representing technology) and nature are brought together again in harmony at the end of the story” (2018, p. 160).

The redemption scene at the end of *The Iron Man* confirms positive resolution. An unexpected effect is achieved through the space-bat-angel’s singing. “Suddenly the world became wonderfully peaceful” (Hughes, 1968, p. 62). Everyone is enchanted by the singing, for the music seems to get inside them and make them “as peaceful as starry space, and blissfully above all their earlier little squabbles” (Hughes, 1968, p. 62). The music, strange but soft, starts altering all the people around the world. People stop making weapons. The countries, stopping scheming how to get rid of each other, “begins to think how they could live pleasantly alongside each other” (Hughes, 1968, p. 62). They don’t pay attention on the conflicts and wars.

“All they wanted to do was to have peace to enjoy this strange, wild, blissful music from the giant singer in space” (Hughes, 1968, p. 62).

Children in these stories endeavor to bring order and harmony to the world, healing the abused natural world. They, as the role model and the agents, advocate that only by reconnecting with the natural world and following the order of nature, will the natural world be saved, as well as the ever-increasingly barren inner world of humankind.

## Conclusion

It is only with the efforts and leadership of children like Lucy, Hogarth and Frenchie that humankind is given one last chance. We can save ourselves only if we save the natural world and all its creatures. Covid-19 warns us again of the good days for mankind are running out. The enormous responsibility of saving humankind is placed on the shoulders of children in these stories. The children understand that the Earth and all its creatures are part of our own family, and only by loving our family members will we be loved. As William Wordsworth puts, “the child is the father of the man” (1984, p. 246), children in these stories may be our best hope of reforming and adjusting human behavior to mitigate our destruction of the planet.

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