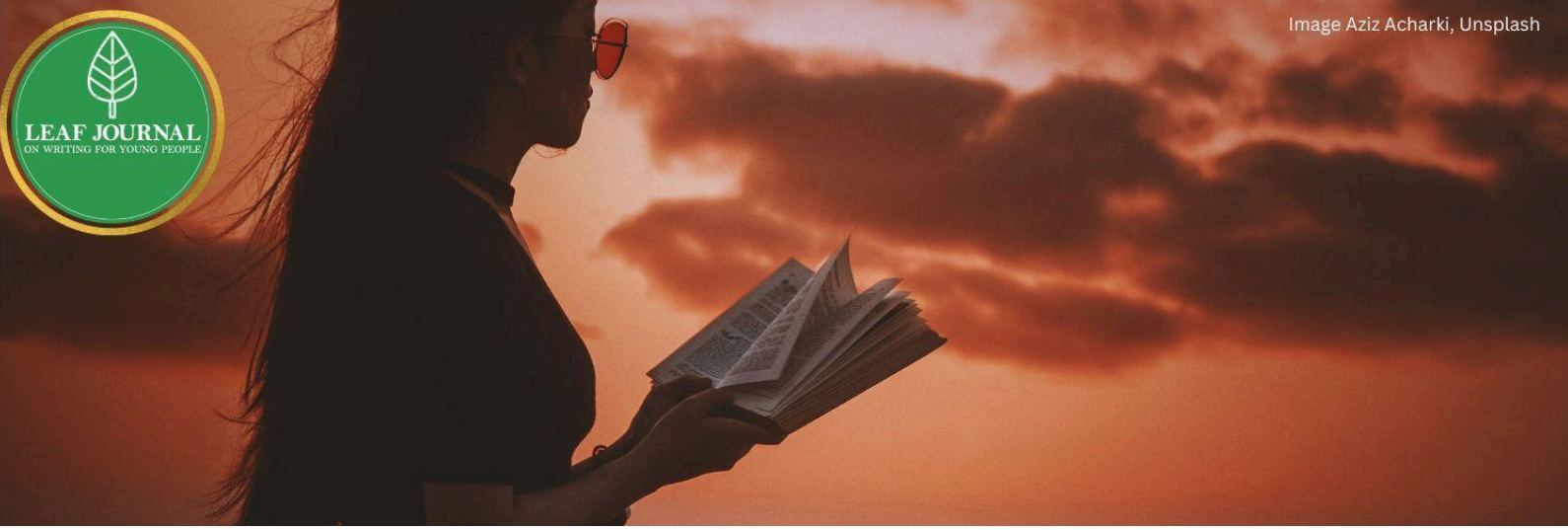

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The Post-Apocalyptic Space, Character, and Morality in Middle-Grade Children's Literature

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Abstract
Stories for young readers overwhelmingly aim to educate on what is good and how a person must behave as a moral member of society. The question of how characters may further solidify moral right and wrong in the post-apocalyptic setting of my story *The Neverending Sea* became a focus for my research. Through this paper, I present: the discoveries made on the importance of children's spaces in the post-apocalyptic; how characters can present a reader with moral dilemmas from the safety of the page, and perhaps, how they can be used to socialise young readers' sense of right and wrong.

Keywords: *Morality, children's literature, post-apocalypse*

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In this paper, I will focus on the notions of Space and Character, to determine how a Middle Grade (MG) novel can instil a strong moral sense of right and wrong while being set in a post-apocalyptic world.

Stories for young readers overwhelmingly aim to educate on what is good and how a person must behave as a moral member of society. The question of how characters may further solidify *moral*[1] right and wrong in the post-apocalyptic setting of my story *The Neverending Sea* became a focus for my research. In the following sections of this paper, I will reflect on: the discoveries made on the importance of children's spaces in the post-apocalyptic; how characters can present a reader with moral dilemmas from the safety of the page, and perhaps, how they can be used to socialise young readers' sense of right and wrong.

Space in the Post-Apocalyptic World

I considered the spaces occupied by children and how they could influence moral sense. 'Home. School. Nature. The spaces identified with childhood'[2] are 'never neutral. It carries social, cultural, and political histories; it imposes – or attempts to – behavioural expectations.'[3] The post-apocalyptic setting is an 'extreme deterioration of quality of life and society as a whole' [4]. It morphs places occupied by children, both physically and imaginatively, as much as it alters adult ones. In a *mimetic*[5] post-apocalyptic world, we would traditionally expect to be exposed to the worst forms of human nature. However, there was one example which immediately came to mind which contradicted this. It was a Noah's flood story written for children which has adventure-like qualities and focuses on the animals who are given anthropomorphic characteristics. This retelling presents the events through a lens more suitable for a young reader, yet it occurs in a post-apocalyptic world. It is an approach Peter Bramwell upholds when writing about world view through magic, 'Magical Thinking need not be outgrown, because magic can be used in fiction as a vehicle for an outlook

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[1]Morality = connected with principles of right and wrong behaviour; based on your own sense of what is right and fair, not on legal rights or duties; following the standards of behaviour considered acceptable and right by most people; able to understand the difference between right and wrong. (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, *moral*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/moral, [accessed 18 August 2023])

[2] Russel, Danielle, *Containing Childhood: Space and Identity in Children's Literature*, edited by Danielle Russel, (U.S: University Press of Mississippi 2022) pp. 3.

[3] Russel, Danielle, pp. 4.

[4] Pagan, Amanda, *End of the World as We Know It: Apocalyptic, Post-Apocalyptic, and Dystopian Worlds*, New York Public Library, (U.S, 2019) (https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/12/19/apocalyptic-post-apocalyptic-dystopian-worlds, [Accessed 19 August 2023])

[5] Mimetic = imitative; relating to, characterized by, or exhibiting mimicry (Merriam Webster, *mimetic*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mimetic [accessed 24 August 2023])

on the world, including politics and spirituality.'[6] The post-apocalyptic space can be a vehicle for learning and attaining moral sense if viewed through this lens of magical thinking. Through the use of fantasy and magic, the focused elements of the setting can shift towards spaces more familiar to a young audience, and unfamiliar ones can morph to serve the story's purpose.

The novel which inspired my use of space in *The Neverending Sea* is *Kemosha of the Caribbean*[7] by Alex Wheatle, set in the time of slavery. It is quickly established that Kemosha does not view her surroundings as home when she remembers her mother's dying words, 'Fly away home, Kemosha, fly away home.'[8] Her space in the world of the novel is restricted to her body and mind. While her mind-space is hopeful of attaining home and signposts the character's drive throughout the story, her body is in constant danger from the very beginning. This harsh reality of her character is shown in a raw and powerful moment when a colonial slaver 'grinned and stared at me as if I was still naked.'[9]

While this novel is heavily inspired by a historical setting, it offers a realistic situation which resembles the post-apocalyptic place. Particularly, the danger in otherwise safe spaces, the presence of the survival instinct in *character*, and the search for the shelter of home and family, whatever form it may take. Survival is a commonality I have observed between novels written for middle-graders such as *The Accidental Stowaway*[10] or *The Mapmakers*[11], and novels for young adults, or – as it appears more commonly in Middle Grade literature – a journey towards safety of home. Upon further reading into theories regarding children's literature, this became more evident: 'This is what drives humans, as we strive to overcome the sense of lack we experience, desiring to re-attain the Eden we think we once inhabited.'[12]

By using space as a focus for the post-apocalyptic setting, the dangers that my character, Hayn, encounters become crafted as vehicles for educational purposes. Contrary to adult readers, 'young readers seldom have problems identifying with anthropomorphic animal or toy characters as long as these hold the disempowered subject positions similar to their own'[13], and from the examples of novels given earlier I would infer that the same is true for spaces not traditionally occupied by children. As long as there are familiar childhood aspects or curiosities to these spaces, a young reader would have no issue identifying with them. 'Cognitive criticism, supported by

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[6] Bramwell, Peter, *Magic and Maturation: Uses of Magic in Fantasy Fiction*, found in *Modern Children's Literature: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, ed. by Katherine Butler & Kimberley Reynolds, (London: Palgrave 2014) pp. 221
[7] Wheatle, Alex, *Kemosha of the Caribbean*, (London: Andersen Press 2022)
[8] Wheatle, Alex, pp. 11
[9] Wheatle, Alex pp. 11
[10] Eagle, Judith, The Accidental Stowaway, (London: Faber & Faber Limited 2022)
[11] Merchant, Tamzin, *The Mapmakers*, (London: Puffin Books 2022)
[12] Rudd, David, Psychoanalytic Approaches to Children's Literature, found in *Modern Children's Literature: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, ed. by Katherine Butler & Kimberley Reynolds, (London: Palgrave 2014) pp. 47
[13] Nikolajeva, Maria, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, (U.S: Scarecrow Press Inc. 2002)

neuroscience, has shown that the brain … reacts to fictional worlds … as if they were real.'[14]

In the initial drafts of *The Neverending Sea*, the ship Hayn lived on lacked such familiarity. Inspired by how Kemosha clung to an internal home, and thinking more deeply about how children affect space, I created Hayn's internal way of dealing with the post-apocalyptic landscape through drawing, and with that, the effect on adult spaces came naturally:

> 'He still remembered the last spanking from when he forgot a bunch of charcoal sticks in Crawley's hammock. He woke up half striped in black the following morning and chased Hayn around the Banshee [the ship] twice over before catching him …'[15]

As a result of my research into childhood space, I found that through young people's interaction with the world close to themselves, spaces both physical and mental can become educational. The post-apocalyptic space lends itself to both external conflicts on Hayn's journey towards the safety of home and internal ones as he discovers how to navigate the morally complex adults of this landscape. Additionally, I was brought to think of how closely-related character was to space when discovering that in children's literature "home and family… are almost inseparable: the term 'family home' barely needs to be voiced, for home is essentially family"[16] If that is the case, then the safety of home can also be the safety of family. Throughout the story, Hayn's internal journey is to understand the surrounding adults, realise his own mistakes and those of the adults, and discern right from wrong in a landscape which encourages self-correction when the people he considers family are morally complex.

Character in the Post-Apocalyptic Space

Characters in children's fiction 'must be comprehensible for young readers. More commonly… they serve as ideological (or rather educational) vehicles.'[17] The characters in *The Neverending Sea*, even within spaces that might seem alien to modern young readers, still need to be familiar, and their purpose, educational. A function of character for children is to 'sort out basic moral problems'[18].

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[14] Nikolajeva, Maria, *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co. 2014) pp. 8

[15] Marinescu, Vlad, *The Neverending Sea*, unpublished, practice-based research portfolio CREW415, (Lancaster: Lancaster University 2023) pp. 4

[16] Alston, Ann, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, (U.S: Routledge, 2008), cited in Russel, Danielle, *There's No Place Like Home*, found in *Containing Childhood: Space and Identity in Children's Literature*, ed. by Danielle Russel, (U.S: University Press of Mississippi, 2022), pp. 69-70

[17] Nikolajeva, Maria, *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*, pp. x.

[18] Vermeule, Blakey, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?*, (U.S: Johns Hopkins University 2010) pp. 12

To grasp how a moral dilemma could be brought to the text, I considered how:

> 'During childhood, individuals learn how to manage their feelings and how to express emotion. Children are taught what they should feel and when, where, and for whom particular feelings are appropriate … these are also concerns of popular and literary fiction for children …' [19]

However, the teaching of societal rules by an authoritative figure was in opposition to the aim of my writing. Maria Nikolajeva provides a contrasting position on this: 'We [people] want to understand (or are, for survival, compelled to understand) our own and other people's ways of feeling and thinking … ' [20] I was drawn to this statement by the word 'survival', and how it spoke to my previous insight on the journey towards safety of home or family being a form of survival for children. What these developments translate to is empathy. 'The understanding of other people's minds is an essential skill, and if fiction can help novice readers to develop this skill, it would be a major tool for socialisation.'[21] This brought me to think about the commonality between Young Adult fiction and the upper end of the middle-grade reader spectrum. The intrusion into adult spaces, the taking up of adult responsibility and understanding others, observed in nearly every coming-of-age story, is also a young individual's attempt to develop empathy.

In order to develop moral sense, Hayn had to develop his empathetic skills towards other characters. *The Blue Book of Nebo* does this in a more complex fashion, through meaning from subtext. In one of the story's pivotal moments, Rowenna is cruel towards Dylan's religious beliefs after her daughter, Dylan's sister, dies:

> 'For a second, and for the first time in my life, I hated her … It only lasted for a moment, that feeling, but I've never hated anyone before. It's almost as strong as love, but nowhere near as strong as faith.'[22]

To me, this signalled Dylan's regret and understanding that Rowenna's cruelty came from the pain of losing her daughter. This is reinforced a few sentences later when he deliberately mentions in his journal that he hears her crying in her bedroom. However, this is an unpacking of text which a developing middle-grade reader's empathy might find too difficult.

Wheatle has a different approach to morality with Kemosha. Her character seems to have a developed moral sense, even resembling modern activistic traits. A major moral revelation comes when she discovers that the privateers she sails with

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[19] Bullen, Elizabeth, Moruzi Kristine, Smith, Michelle J., 'Children's Literature and the Affective Turn', found in *Affect, Emotion, and Children's Literature: Representation and Socialisation in Texts for Children and Young Adults*, ed. by Kristine Moruzi, Michelle J. Smith, Elizabeth Bullen, (London: Routledge 2018) pp.5
[20] Nikolajeva, Maria, *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*, pp. 77
[21] Nikolajeva, Maria, *Reading for Learning: Cognitive approaches to Children's Literature*, pp. 77
[22] Ros, Manon Steffan, *The Blue Book of Nebo*, (Wales: Firefly Press 2022) pp.113

have massacred a village: 'Guilt overwhelmed me. I considered tossing my sword into the great blue too. I wanted to wade into the waters until the Caribbean swallowed me.'[23] It is an interesting approach, to have the young protagonist already possess a developed sense of morality through which they view others and it would be interesting to see what effect that has on young readers.

My approach to Hayn's character as a result became quite different from both examples. I considered how a reader might solidify their level of understanding through the development of empathy. They might not have Kemosha's moralistic stance or Dylan's level of understanding. Considering the boundaries of these examples and the lack of role models to show good moral character, Hayn had to lean on his survival instinct, and learn right from wrong through his own mistakes. This translated to an unpacking of Hayn's process of making sense of things on the page through dialogue, actions and his interiority. By employing this approach, the reader and main character could attempt to understand the adults and world of *The Neverending Sea* together.

The Application of this Wider Reading in *The Neverending Sea*.

Research in children's psychology shows that 'reading fiction makes the brain simulate cognitive and affective responses to the actual world … and … can improve our understanding of the actual world.' [24] By bringing aspects of childhood spaces to the post-apocalyptic setting, it facilitated the focus on journeying towards the safety of family, shining a light on Hayn's understanding of those around him, and his working through moral problems he's faced with as he wrestles with the non-traditional meanings of friendship and family.

In *The Neverending Sea*, Hayn's expression of childhood is overwhelmingly found in Carver's cabin; this spoke to familiar children's intrusion on adult spaces: 'The sketch he made of himself and Carver with their names written underneath was also there, in the corner [of the map] that hung off the table. It was faded now.'[25] Similarly, it aims to function as a primer. Carver takes the role of both home and family as the story progresses and Hayn loses the ship as a physical representation of home when he and Carver are thrown overboard. Part of Hayn's understanding of right and wrong becomes more focused on his interactions with others, and his effect on them. Initially, his desire to be an adult like everyone else on board – and believing that Carver no longer cares about his well-being – leads him to side with the mutineers, but later he understands that he will not be safe if he does so. When he intrudes into the adult world during the revolt and warns Carver, he also discovers that his belief about Carver was wrong:

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[23] Wheatle, Alex, pp. 169

[24] Kidd, David Comer & Castano, Emanuele, *Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind*, (2013) Science 342.6156: 377- 380, DOI: 10.1126/science.1239918, found in Nikolajeva, Maria, *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2014).

[25] Marinescu, Vlad, pp. 30

> ‘Next to the hanging jacket, there were several drawings pinned to the wall which Hayn drew a long time ago on pages he’d torn out of Carver’s books.
>
> ‘My drawings. You kept them!’ Hayn said.
>
> ‘Of course I kept them. I’d never throw them away. Plus, they liven up the place. Why would you think I got rid of them?’[26]

The unpacking of being wrong in this example continues on the page and asks the reader to derive meaning from the text, while bringing together space and character to point towards Hayn’s progress in understanding Carver. Even though the captain is not a good role model for Hayn, this moment is a first step for the young protagonist to begin questioning what right and wrong means to him.

By focusing on the journey towards a safe family in the post-apocalyptic space that challenges traditional moral values and transports the familiarity of childhood into the fictional setting, Hayn’s journey becomes one of self-discovery. The post-apocalyptic space morphed into a vehicle which focused on nuances of morality through characters who cheat, lie and betray each other, while Hayn (and the implied reader) discern right from wrong and learn about the importance of family.

By using the post-apocalyptic as a focalizer on Hayn, it meant that the good thing for him to do in a given situation is to take another step on the journey towards safety (survival). That translates to him doing right by Captain Carver from a place of empathy, even if Carver is a morally complex character. For Hayn to make sense of the adult world without a code of ethics or cultural borders, he must tap into the essence which makes us human to navigate it. I asked the eleven-year-old daughter of a close friend how she would know something is wrong if there was no one to say so. She responded by telling me that it is something everyone knows inside, that if you do it, it will make other people feel bad.

My insights on these matters will continue to be applied through to the novel’s completion. I believe these kinds of spaces and characters have much to offer middle-grade readers and look forward to discovering more on this subject.

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[26] Marinescu, Vlad, pp. 31

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Vlad-Madalin Marinescu is a Creative Writing Masters student at Lancaster University. Vlad has a background in acting and scriptwriting within the film industry in Romania. His passion for creating stories, along with the skills he's acquired as a creative professional have led him to pursue further academic study in the field. His goal is to bring a contribution to knowledge in children's literature through fantasy fiction writing and research into cognitive approaches to the field. He is inspired by literature which transcends borders, age groups and culture. In his spare time, Vlad enjoys watching movies at the cinema, occasionally playing video games as he did with his father from a young age, and racing, earning his accreditation as a rally car pilot in 2021.