The Need for a Double Kinship: Children's Literature, Intergenerational Relationships, and Climate Change

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Abstract

This article offers a plea for a consciously hopeful discourse in children's literature that addresses the environmental crisis—a discourse that puts intergenerational dialogue and kinship more central than it currently does. To do so, the article first explores the two meanings of the word "kinship" as they have been developed by Marah Gubar in children's literature studies and by Donna Haraway in posthumanism. It then offers an analysis of four children's books: one that relies on posthuman kinship but leaves out intergenerational kinship (*The Fate of Fausto* by Oliver Jeffers), one that features intergenerational but limited posthuman kinship to address the environmental crisis (David Almond and Levi Pinfold's *The Dam*), one that thematizes the failure of both (a short story from Shaun Tan's *Tales From the Inner City*) and one that features both to produce hope (*Bone Music* by David Almond). *Bone Music* shows that posthumanist and intergenerational kinship can reinforce each other so that people feel reinvigorated in their hope, willingness and agency to confront the systems that need to change.

Keywords: children's literature, kinship, age studies, posthumanism

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'Education is key to addressing climate change', the United Nations state prominently on the part of their website devoted to environmental solutions.[1] The plea to inform children and adolescents in particular has already led to various educational projects on climate change and produced many children's books and Young Adult novels that address this topic. At the same time, many adults struggle to explain the environmental crisis to the young, either because educators do not feel that *they* fully understand it, or if they do, because that crisis is deeply upsetting for children and for themselves. Western children's literature scholars know the dilemma between the need to inform and the desire to protect best from Holocaust literature for children. There too, authors and illustrators who feel compelled to educate children about disturbing events face the risk of downplaying the atrocities when they want to leave children with a hopeful or at least comforting message. This results in various ethical dilemmas (a.o. Pettitt 2014; Vloeberghs 2008; Kokkola 2003): must certain information be kept from children? If information is provided, what level of detail is desirable? Is it permittable to cast events in a more positive light, with the risk of giving children a distorted view of reality? Whereas Holocaust fiction deals with events from the past, the climate crisis is unfolding in the present, already destroying certain regions and species, with intensifying catastrophes predicted over the coming decades and the potential extinction of humankind in the more distant future. This puts a particular, unprecedented burden on educators: if they want to inform children honestly, they have to share disturbing facts about the present and deeply upsetting predictions about the future with them.

Moreover, adults may feel that they carry some responsibility for the current environmental crisis. They may dread the criticism of the young or the appeal of youth to radically change their habits. In fact, with the 'youth for climate' movement, the educational roles seem to have been reversed, with children and adolescents attempting to raise awareness (see a.o. Stemmann 2022) and not all adults accepting them taking the stage. The Flemish conservative critic Mia Doornaert

[1] https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/climate-solutions/education-key-addressing-climate-change.

spurred teenage climate activist Kyra Gantois to get a degree before 'burning up in a straw fire' (2019),[2] while Antwerp mayor Bart De Wever proclaimed: 'It's not because kids in puberty are demonstrating for the climate, that the politicians should react in a puberal fashion' (cited in Belga 2019; see also Pauwels 2021a).[3] Former US president Donald Trump mocked Greta Thunberg's speech at the United Nations climate summit in 2019, in which she pointed out that 'people are suffering, people are dying' and 'entire ecosystems are collapsing', by calling her 'a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future' (both cited in Lyons 2019). The British environment minister Lord Goldsmith allegedly tried to dodge eleven-year-old Licypriya Kangujam when she confronted him with critical questions at the COP27 summit in Sharm El-Sheikh in 2022 (King 2022). These adults try to re-establish traditional hierarchies by addressing young activists in chastising and condescending ways, or by trying to ignore and avoid them.

However, in the current environmental crisis, intergenerational dialogue and collaboration are crucial when it comes to achieving the large-scale changes that are needed to mitigate the effects of climate change. An example of a powerful intergenerational alliance could be witnessed in Belgium in 2019, when youth-for-climate activists Anuna de Wever and Kyra Gantois joined forces with climate scientist Jean-Pascal Van Ypersele. He expressed his respect for their impact in raising awareness about the environmental crisis and mobilizing large groups of people: 'We have been pointing out the problem for so long. But that did not suffice to forge a breakthrough. You have succeeded in doing that because of the power of your message: "Our future is in danger and you are bailing out. What are you going to do about it?"' (cited in Renson & Saelens 2019).[4]

Children's literature has a role to play in addressing the environmental crisis, and indeed in recent decades countless titles have already thematized mass pollution, extinction and global warming. Several of these works have been the subject of critical analysis, with some scholars pointing out the risk of pessimistic discourses (a.o. Oziewicz 2022a), and others highlighting limitations in the solutions that the books offer (a.o. van der Beek and Lehmann 2022). This article offers a plea for a consciously hopeful discourse in children's literature that puts intergenerational dialogue more central than it currently does. The idea of kinship seems particularly suited to establish this dialogue.

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[2] Original text: 'Brand niet op in een strovuur'.

[3] Original text: 'Het is niet omdat de puberteit betoogt voor het klimaat, dat politieke antwoorden puberaal moeten zijn'.

[4] My translation. Original text: 'Wij wijzen al zo lang op het probleem. Maar dat volstond niet om een doorbraak te forceren. Jullie slagen daar wel in, door de kracht van jullie boodschap: "Onze toekomst is in gevaar, en jullie geven verstek. Wat gaan jullie eraan doen?"' De Wever and Gantois' book *Wij zijn het klimaat* (We are the climate) was another example of intergenerational collaboration, as they authored it together with adult author Jeroen Olyslaegers.

Kinship—a term traditionally used for blood and family relationships—has recently gained currency both in children's literature studies and in posthumanism, albeit with distinct meanings. For Donna Haraway (2014), kinship signals a connectedness to the non-human, whereas Marah Gubar (2013; 2016) has developed a more anthropocentric definition of kinship to grasp the commonalities between childhood and adulthood. Both concepts highlight the importance of relatedness and define it in new ways that are particularly relevant to the current age of climate crisis and intergenerational tension.

As the British poet and artist Kae Tempest writes in their essay *On Connection* (2020): 'fine-tuning the ability to feel a creative connection can help us develop our empathy and establish a deeper relationship between ourselves and the world' (3) at a point where that world feels endangered. This article explores what children's literature and its engagement with concepts of kinship can contribute to fostering such a connection when it comes to addressing climate change. After a theoretical introduction, I discuss four case studies, which I have chosen on the basis of four different combinations of the two types of kinship: one that relies on posthuman kinship but leaves out intergenerational kinship (*The Fate of Fausto* by Oliver Jeffers), one that features intergenerational but limited posthuman kinship to address the environmental crisis (David Almond and Levi Pinfold's *The Dam*), one that thematizes the failure of both (Shaun Tan's *Tales From the Inner City*) and one that features both to produce hope (*Bone Music* by David Almond). My analysis is based on a close reading of the texts and, for the first three case studies, illustrations, paying specific attention to passages that describe the characters' interactions with the environment and with people of other generations, as well as to the way the narratives construct (the absence of) hope.

Hopeful Narratives in Children's Literature and Environmental Studies

The need to offer hope and stress agency is always strongly felt when dealing with children and goes hand in hand with what Clémentine Beauvais (2015) has called their might. While adults hold power on the basis of their acquired knowledge, experience, and status, might is a kind of power that young people derive from the promise that they hold for the future and the consequent desire of adults to invest in them (Beauvais 2-3, 57). As Beauvais explains, there is a 'paradoxical adult desire to *ask the child didactically for an unpredictable future*' (4) and she identifies in children's literature 'an acknowledgment of failure and of incompleteness on the part of the adult authority which overwhelmingly controls this discourse' (6). A related tension is at work in the intergenerational dynamics related to the environmental crisis, in which adult authority and control is matched with

a discourse of hope that relies on the might of the younger generations. A risk of this discourse that places hope in children's might is that it may shift responsibility to future generations and steer attention away from the need to act now. Activists have highlighted that is not just unfair, but especially problematic in light of tipping points that may reduce human agency in the future (a.o. Thunberg 2019). Deriving hope from children's might is therefore only credible if adults also take responsibility in the present.

Taking action relies on hope. While not denying the acute threat of the climate crisis, Elin Kelsey (2020) pleads for a position of conscious hopefulness. 'The environmental crisis is also a crisis of hope' (4), she argues in *Hope Matters*. The 'epidemic hopelessness' (4) that she observes produces mental distress (8) in people of all ages, including children and adolescents. Moreover, as Rebecca Solnit argues in the foreword to the third edition of *Hope in the Dark* (2004/2016): 'Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless' so that people refrain from taking action. Instead, Kelsey foregrounds signs of nature's resilience and effective human interventions in fighting some causes and effects of climate change, extinction and pollution. Sharing such information can help people understand what works and apply it themselves. The broader community that is thus created is crucial in tackling climate change, Kelsey argues: 'worrying about a problem that is *way* too big for you to tackle inevitably feels discouraging. It's disempowering. It breeds apathy' (18). Vice versa, small initiatives can have a rippling effect to create the large-scale shifts that are needed to fight global heating and mass extinction and pollution, and many people currently feel compelled to take action. In a joint interview with youth for climate activist Anuna De Wever, the Dutch children's author and politician Jan Terlouw reassures viewers that 'most people are good' (Terlouw and De Wever n.d); the challenge lies in uniting that goodwill to establish meaningful changes.

Marek Oziewicz (2022a) points out that a lack of knowledge is not the problem in the current stasis around the climate crisis: 'The contrast between how much we know and how little we have acted on this knowledge may be the greatest puzzle of our time'. When reflecting on the role of fiction in this paradox, he brings up that dystopic narratives may have paradoxically fed into the exploitative capitalist practices they criticize. The 'disaster frame' of dystopic climate fiction 'elicits despair, helplessness, and anger' and suggests that the carbon-based economy causing the climate crisis is unavoidable. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson's empirical research with American readers of climate fiction affirms this risk: while this fiction reminds concerned readers of 'the severity and urgency of anthropogenic climate change' (2018, 495), that is climate change produced by humans, he also observed that 'clifi' (climate fiction) elicited negative emotions in readers that 'were often intense, immediate, and self-directed' (2018, 489). Oziewicz and his fellow authors in

Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene (2022) 'focus on anticipatory imagination of sustainable futures rather than on critique of the ecocidal status quo' because they believe that 'the dominant "facts & rage" formula is antithetical to creating thought-spaces necessary for radical transformation of how we imagine ourselves in relation to the biosphere' (Oziewicz 2022a, 31). Anger about disturbing facts is not enough to establish change. To put it differently: 'Too long have we focused on projections of the future we dread instead of the futures we want' (Oziewicz 2022a, 32; see also Cole 2021; Milkoreit 2017). I would add that intergenerational solidarity—the willingness to grant people of other generations understanding and support (see a.o. Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Jaques 2021)—is a crucial factor of that desired future, as well as of the present, where action is needed.

What Kind of Hope? What Kind of Agency?

First, what does a hopeful children's book in the Anthropocene look like? Would it be fair if it put hope in the idea that the climate crisis can still be averted or mitigated if we take appropriate action? Or is that too much to hope for? Should such a book instead promote the idea that humans are adaptable enough to survive the climate crisis? That some humans will survive? Or that other forms of life will survive even if humankind perishes? Or should children's books steer away from those future projections and find hope in the fact that the current generation of Western children can still lead fairly happy lives despite the knowledge that the climate crisis is unfolding and already severely affects people in other parts of the world?

Second, how is this hopeful future achieved and what kind of agency can children's books suggest? Various critics in environmental studies draw on Ernst Bloch's distinction between passive and active hope (a.o. Kelsey 2020, Solnit). In her famous 'blah, blah, blah' speech from 2021, Greta Thunberg stresses that 'hope is not passive', but that it means taking action (cited in Carrington). Kelsey highlights the need for an 'evidence-based argument for hope' (2020, 11) that relies on research and fosters agency. The question of scale is a hot topic here. Clare Echterling (2016) is critical of the majority of picturebooks and easy readers in the US that only highlight individual acts. She pleads for more books that thematize environmental justice and match personal choices with political activism. In 'What Can You Do as an Eco-Hero', Suzanne van der Beek and Charlotte Lehmann (2022) point out that some children are more privileged than others to be able to take climate action and that the paradigm of the 'eco-hero' is biased towards white children, but they also problematize books that only highlight the agency of adults to take climate action. In the fight against the environmental crisis, big and small actions matter, and hope can only be achieved if systemic changes are envisioned.

In this movement, all generations are needed. 'Unite behind the science', Thunberg's famous slogan (2019a), is also a call for human connection, including intergenerational solidarity. The recognition of the mutual dependencies of various generations can give leverage to climate activism. In mitigating climate change, adults should take responsibility but also be prepared to 'decenter' themselves and adulthood as an ideal, as Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2019) argues in a plea for participatory research that involves children (see also Peter Kraftl's *After Childhood*). In the disappointment about the lack of action for the climate, adulthood itself sometimes becomes part of the disillusionment. For this reason, Adam Trexler (2015) sees no more space for the most popular type of Young Adult fiction, which centers on adolescents' maturation and attainment of adulthood: 'Coming-of-age books break down when the actions of prior generations trigger insolvable weather disasters and collapse economic opportunities for young people struggling toward independent adulthood' (14). Such generalizations, which homogenize entire generations, are not productive when it comes to addressing the environmental crisis: not all adults are equally responsible for it and not all young people will be equally affected by it. Moreover, the notion of 'independent adulthood' that Trexler mentions has come under pressure from various angles. Central to John Wall's concept of 'childism', which is gaining currency in various disciplines, is the awareness that generations are interconnected and interdependent and that reflections on children's experiences may serve as a lens to improve systems for other age groups too (see also Wall 2019; Joosen 2022). Like Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Kraftl, Wall pleads for decentering adult perspectives and validating children's experiences. This process of decentering adulthood, however, inevitably also involves adults who are willing to empower children. Climate activists usually make that distinction, but ageist clichés have surfaced in their speeches too, for example when Thunberg said in 2019 that world leaders 'are acting like spoiled irresponsible children' (Thunberg 2019b). Such metaphors are paradoxical in a context where children are pointing out adult responsibilities, and one can assume that Thunberg meant it as a parody of the adult condescendence to children that I mentioned earlier in this article. It is also ironic in the light of the title of her own book *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* (Thunberg 2019c). To this I would add: No one is too big—or old—to make a difference.

In addition to the scientific and technological challenges that the environmental crisis poses, the biggest challenge lies in creating meaningful human connections, to create empathy and to put aside personal interests and differences to get to action. These are aspects that children's literature has already promoted for years, as Frauke Pauwels (2021b, 279) shows in her work on representations of science in children's literature. She also argues that intergenerational connections may be more complex than they appear at first sight. Two books on environmental justice that she

analyses feature parents who are fighting climate change but commit illegal and—in the eyes of the child protagonists—unethical acts to do so. These books upset simplistic distinctions between children as activist and adults as conservative, and question the limits of ethical environmental activism.

Rather than thinking about adults and children in binaries and differences, it is more productive in the light of the environmental crisis to focus on what they share. As Kae Tempest argues, even in a time as polemical as ours, 'there is commonality' and it can be accessed 'through creativity' (5)—this is where literature can play an important role, to explore that commonality through fiction and literary means. In children's literature studies, the commonality between children and adults has been termed 'kinship' by Marah Gubar. She argues against thinking about children in terms of what they lack or how they differ from adults, but stresses that children and adults have a shared humanity, a common ground that is the basis for joint experiences and empathy. To posthumanists, this may sound very anthropocentric. There a different idea of kinship circulates that is best known from Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*.[5] She pleads for a feeling of kinship with the non-human (animals, plants, stones, etc.). What the two meanings of kinship have in common is that they detach kinship from its traditional associations with human bloodlines, and that they do not see it as something you are passively born into, but as a relationship that is actively established in the willingness to pay attention to common features and interests. Haraway calls this 'to make "kin"' (Ch. 4). This feeling of connectedness despite difference can form a basis for attention and care, and vice versa, through paying careful attention, a feeling of connection can be established.

Case Studies

In various recent children's books, hope lies in the survival of earth and some plant or animal life, rather than in the continuity of humanity. Such books can only be hopeful if readers adopt a deep sense of kinship with the non-human.[6] That is needed, because as Patrick Curry argues in

[5] In Oziewicz et al.'s *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene* (2022), kinship is always defined in Haraway's sense, for example in Tereza Dědinová's chapter on Terry Pratchett, Melanie Duckworth's chapter on arboreal magic in Margaret Mahy's work and Prema Arasu and Drew Thornton's chapter on human-monster and oceanic-chthonic kinships or Kim Hendrickx' work on Jeff Vandermeer. Gubar is not mentioned in the index of the book.

[6] For example, in *Astro-Nuts Mission Two: The Water Planet* by Jon Scieszka and Steven Weinberg (2020), Earth says that if humans become extinct, 'I'll be sad… but I will also… be just fine' (n.p.). Oziewicz finds hope in the idea that 'Earth in *AstroNuts* is able to tell its own story, unapologetically drawing young humans into an awareness of how humanity must act to prevent its own demise' (2002b, 144). Another example that he mentions is Barbara Henderson's *Wilderness Wars*, which features an island that resists a luxury resort being built.

Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life, the disenchantment of nature as 'blank canvas, an inert, featureless nothingness' enables ecocide (Curry 2019, 91; also cited in Oziewicz 2022a, 66 and 2022b, 146). If people feel too detached from nature, they are less likely to protect it; while a feeling of posthuman kinship with nature may facilitate attention and care. Some books that thematize such posthuman kinship are oblivious to intergenerational dynamics. One example is *The Fate of Fausto* by Oliver Jeffers (2019). The eponymous character is a man trying to control nature: he cuts off a flower, claims a sheep, and makes a tree and even a mountain bow for him. However, nature is resistant and shows its resilience. When Fausto foolishly tries to control the sea by stamping his foot on it—a trick that worked when he was trying to control nature on land—he is submerged in the water and drowns. It is said that 'he did not understand' the sea and thus got killed. With such a self-centered, authoritarian and foolish human protagonist, readers are invited to sympathize with earth as it first yields but then defeats the arrogant human figure and restores itself. As Oziewicz argues, 'we need to break the spell of the ecocidal unconscious' (Oziewicz 2022b) and in giving earth's non-human life and matter a voice and agency, *The Fate of Fausto* certainly accomplishes that.

However, it does so at the cost of homogenizing humankind, for whom Fausto becomes metonymic. He is cast as an individual: a white, middle-aged businessman in a suit. He is not part of a community, and children are completely absent from the story. The devil that might be expected in a Faustian story resides inside of him. After the disappearance of Fausto, when nature has repaired itself, the text reads: 'the lake and the forest, the field and the tree, the sheep and the flower carried on as before. For the fate of Fausto did not matter to them' (Jeffers 2019, n.p.). If Fausto is metonymic for humankind, this can be a disturbing picture. After all, humans are not isolated, they are connected. The acts of the Faustian people in real life, who exploit earth's natural resources without loving or understanding it, are here connected to the fate of people who think and act differently, and of those who are disempowered or not even born yet. In fact, one of the big inequalities of climate change is that those who are least responsible for producing polluting and damaging gases are the ones who are first and most affected by it. Despite the bleak ending for mankind, *The Fate of Fausto* does not end on a sad note—this is because readers are invited to feel akin to nature and to rejoice more in nature's resilience and restoration than pine over the loss of the human being that tried to control it. However, the reliance on posthuman kinship without intergenerational kinship can lead to frustration because the book does not include children or other human characters who want to care for the earth. Those more caring humans have been written out of the story.

By contrast, David Almond and Levi Pinfold's *The Dam* (2018) finds hope in intergenerational connections in an environmental crisis, but is more limited in its efforts to

establish posthuman kinship. 'Intergenerational' here refers both to family ties and social generations. In this picturebook, which is set in the past, a father and daughter visit a village that will be flooded by a dam. By playing music, they connect with each other and revive the village's former visitors, as they also regret all the life that will be lost. A series of small vignettes show that they contemplate some plants and creatures that are living in the village and that may not survive. The human characters cannot avoid the dam being built—in fact, no effort to do so is mentioned in the story. The loss of non-human life that this involves is quickly glossed over: 'The dam was sealed. / The water rose. / This disappeared. / This was covered over. / This was drowned. / The lake is beautiful' (Almond & Penifold 2018, n.p.). While the vignettes on the following pages signal that new fish arrive in the lake, the passage is reminiscent of the practice of quickly replacing a dead pet with another one to comfort sad children. It's poor comfort for a deeper sense of loss. Instead of the non-human life, the story focuses on the human connections that are formed: first between the father and daughter, as they play music together and connect with the spirits of people from the past, and then on the beaches of the lake, as people of various generations enjoy boating on the lake and picnicking on the banks. In the light of these human acts, the empathy for the non-human quickly fades. Moreover, the end of the book is distinctly anthropocentric, with the lake mainly featuring as the backdrop to human festivities.

Shaun Tan's short story 'We Found Them in Gutters' from *Tales From the Inner City* (2018) thematizes the failure of kinship in both a posthumanist and intergenerational sense. In this story, some humans cleaning up buildings after hurricanes find a group of lungfish. There is a sense of recognition that makes them keep the fish: 'I don't know how else to say this. They had our faces. The same eyes, noses, mouths… it was crazy' (Tan 2018, 150, ellipsis in the original). A feeling of posthumanist kinship is established through this perception of sameness in difference, and that feeling intensifies as the creatures further develop first amphibian and then more human features. The narrator finds them fascinating and helpful, especially when they start ironing shirts, cooking and mending things (151), but there is no sense of real connection. The lungfish, who stay small and are treated like children, learn language and first help the humans. As they have become educated, the transformed lungfish 'even presented illustrated lectures on climate change in our lounge rooms, complete with handout notes and feedback forms', the narrator recalls (152). Here, they are reminiscent of the youth-for-climate activists who try to call attention to the environmental crisis. Since they fail to capture the attention of the humans, the transformed lungfish retreat and end up building a parallel world, with a small environmental footprint, good health system, 'moneyless economy' and convincing 'plan for world peace' (153).

The lungfish are thus constructed as mighty childlike beings, in the sense of might defined by Beauvais and explained above. They are presented as accepting the authority of the adult humans, while also displaying the ability to move beyond those adult humans' knowledge and skills. Through that combination they display great potential for future change. They almost succeed in fulfilling their child potential for building a better society, except for one crucial aspect: they are not able to really get through to the narrator and the other adults in the story, and thus their impact on the world stays limited. Although the narrator maintains that their 'sense of kinship only deepened' (151) during late-night conversations, the humans are too busy and 'frankly, too tired' (152) to really learn from the small creatures they have started to call their better selves. The narrative paints a scene that is reminiscent of the risk of inertia when faced with disturbing facts that I have addressed in the introduction of my article. In Tan's story, the humans fall 'asleep to flickering images of global disaster and plaintive calls for action' (152). They are either bored or so overwhelmed that they no longer care. After some 'patient gifts of sympathy and tiny handpatting', the transformed lungfish retreat. They become so small that they are 'too infinitesimal for us to see' (153). Although the narrator attributes their disappearance to the creatures' inability 'to speak to us' (153), a reluctance on the part of the human beings to learn and change seems to be the real issue. Although the story leaves open the possibility that the small creatures will be self-sufficient in their environmentally-conscious redesign of society, the lack of connection is tragic. It recalls the frustration and even despair of climate activists and scientists that information and attempts at communication do not lead to the systemic change that is needed to mitigate the environmental crisis. Moreover, the connectedness of the various eco-systems makes it unlikely that the lungfish alone will be able to save the earth if the humans don't change. The final lines of the story are multi-layered and deeply ironic, when the human narrator says they can still feel the presence of 'all those other selves': 'The ones we first met as poor lungfish in the gutters of our crisis, who mirrored our good intentions so diligently, and who saw in our wind-blasted, bone-weary compassion a great hope for the future, right at the moment we bent down to pick them up' (153). Despite the kinship that the humans feel for their 'other selves', no change is achieved. The final lines make clear that the human adults are not prepared to de-center themselves: they are 'bent down', prepared to 'pick up' the small lungfish. The 'great hope for the future' can only be materialized in a situation where the hierarchies between generations and species are broken down and all are willing to listen and change. The story's ironic ending leaves readers with the question: what if the humans had paid proper attention to the lungfish and had joined their authority and might to accomplish true dialogue and change?

By contrast, David Almond's *Bone Music* (2021) matches kinship in its posthumanist and intergenerational meanings. In this Young Adult novel, an adolescent called Sylvia joins her mother on a visit to a village in Northumberland. For this city girl, the experience of being cut off from a mobile phone network and surrounded by strangers and an unfamiliar environment is at first alienating. Almond's novel explicitly addresses the feeling of smallness that can lead to a sense of disempowerment and insignificance. As Sylvia looks at the stars at the beginning of her visit, she reflects on her place in the universe and feels overwhelmed: 'Why was it all so huge? Why was she so small?' The answer that the book provides to this anxiety is a new feeling of connection with human and non-human life.

Sylvia engages in active posthuman kinship making through a process of rewilding that involves both the forest and her own mind and body. It starts with the experience that some birds in the forest sing back when humans whistle to them. This instills in her a sense of gratitude and beauty, but also connects her with her younger self and with her mother, whom her dad calls 'child of the forest. A wild child. He said she was a fellow of the deer and the fox'. Human kinship is expressed here in biological terms, as well as in an affinity between the life stages. Sylvia's father stresses the kinship between Sylvia and her mother, as well as between them and nature when he calls his daughter '[f]eral kid of a feral mum'. The common animosity between mothers and daughters in teenage fiction is absent; Sylvia and her mother are united in their love for each other and for the environment. Moreover, Sylvia's grandfather helped to plant and grow the forest – their environmental actions thus stretch over several generations.

Bone Music thematizes 'rewilding' as a strategy to restore nature and human connections with nature. Rewilding nature is a strategy that Kelsey lists as providing hope. She describes it as follows: to 'introduce native wildlife back into degraded ecosystems to regenerate wildness and natural processes. The goal is to increase biodiversity, enhance greenhouse gas sequestration, and improve people's access to nature' (81). In Almond's novel the process of 'rewilding' is extended from the non-human to the human. As Sylvia's friend Gabriel says: 'It's no good rewilding the world if we don't rewild ourselves'. This happens to Sylvia during a series of epiphanic experiences. In the rewilding climax of the book, she lets herself be taken over by nature and feels that she becomes one with the forest, with animals and plants growing through her body, which is also merged with that of a girl from a distant past. Her rewilding involves an intense, supernatural contact with both nature and the youth of the past that relies on intergenerational and posthumanist connections. This is presented as a temporary relief for Sylvia's existential angst, which is provoked by wars and environmental crises.

'How are children manifest archaeologically?' Peter Kraftl asks in *After Childhood*. In *Bone Music*, they are present through rock art that forms the basis of a connection between two young girls across thousands of years. In a series of mystic encounters, Sylvia meets a prehistoric girl who lived in Northumberland before the village was built. As her sense of self merges with that of the prehistoric girl, Sylvia also seems to return to a state in which human beings, animals and plants lived more in symbiosis. She reimagines herself as various animals, 'padd[ing] through this forest on all fours, looking for prey, nervous of becoming prey herself' and then experiences becoming the forest herself, with her name Sylvia being Latin for exactly that. This connection is profound: 'She was the forest, she was the earth, she was the air. They gave each other life'. In Haraway's understanding, such a feeling of posthuman kinship is immediately associated with an impetus to care: 'all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time)'. The idea of the 'assemblage' points at an entanglement of the human and the non-human that Sylvia also feels when she has transformed into the forest, the air and the earth: 'She wanted to love them and they wanted to love her. Why did we not realise that when we do things to the earth, we do things to ourselves; when we harm the earth, we harm ourselves?' Sylvia's awareness is inevitably anthropocentric (see also Oziewicz 2022b, 146; Curry 2019, 14-16): we only witness what she observes and what she feels, and readers never learn how the birds and the forest feel when Sylvia feels connected to them. Do they reciprocate, or are they indifferent to her presence or even disturbed by it? What is important is that her feeling of kinship with the non-human leads to empathy and a desire to protect the environment; it leads her away from her focus on herself and her friends (signalled in the novel by her desperate attempts to catch a mobile phone signal) and makes her attuned to the natural surroundings and the need to care for it.[7]

Bone Music stresses time and again that the human and the earth are entangled, for instance in art: Sylvia discovers prehistoric traces on a rock in which moss and lichen have intermingled with human markings. Similarly, the title of the book refers to a bird's bone on which Sylvia learns to play music. As Emma-Louise Silva (2023) argues in a cognitivist reading of this novel, the entanglement involves the human mind and body. 'Almond's protagonists resemble the natural resources they engage with', Silva (2022) argues in a related blogpost. This awareness of human and non-human entanglement instills in Sylvia and her friend Gabriel a painful confrontation with what humans are doing to the planet. They even ask the existential question whether humanity is

[7] While this change in Sylvia can be criticized for creating a simplistic opposition between urban modernity (captured in the image of the mobile phone) and nature, it is only a temporary one. At the end of the novel, Sylvia returns to the city, enriched by the knowledge and experiences she has gained through her rewilding experience.

worth saving and wonder if oil companies and warmongers are doing earth a favour by finishing off humankind more quickly, echoing the sentiments expressed in *The Fate of Fausto*: 'We're destroying ourselves so that the world can be recreated once we're gone'. However, the adolescents in *Bone Music* offer some tentative hope: 'Maybe if we change'. And: 'It doesn't need to end in destruction'. At first, Gabriel and Sylvia locate this potential in their own age phase: 'We are the ones who can change the world. We, the weird, passionate, troubled, loving young'.

But the shift from despair and cynicism is not just limited to the young. The potential for change is also highlighted in the adult characters, even if not in all of them. At the end of the novel, Sylvia's mother decides to leave her husband because she finds him incapable of change. More developed is the change in the figure of 95-year-old Andreas Müller. Andreas arrived in the UK as a German prisoner of war during the Second World War. Since then, he has evolved from hatred and a desire to destroy to a sense of belonging and serving the community. Andreas has become an important part of the social fabric of the village. Sylvia meets him at several social events and he produces various memories about the town. Towards the end of the book, Andreas shares with her photographs and memories from his past in the Hitler youth, confessing to Sylvia his profound dedication to Hitler and his genuine enthusiasm for the German army and the war. Sylvia finds this deeply disturbing. She wonders: 'How could this boy also be this kind old man?' The passage highlights the potential for profound change. Andreas believes that his imprisonment has saved him, a process in which nature and youth have played a crucial role and that continues to unfold in deep old age: 'I was saved by forests and music and skylarks and stone axes', Andreas explains, 'I am continually being saved. […] I am being saved, Sylvia, by you'. This potential for change in the adult is connected with hope as well as intergenerational bonding. 'Beware the adult', Andreas warns, 'who wants to regiment the child'. Andreas is prepared to decenter himself, both as an adult and as a human being, and this has transformed him into a character with whom Sylvia can connect. He is not cast as an adult teacher or mentor who is 'bent down' and unwilling to listen, to recall Tan's image; rather, 95-year-old Andreas shows Sylvia that adults are not just stable beings, but also dynamic adult 'becomings' (see Joosen 2018, 92) who are capable of learning from the young and changing as a consequence.

Sylvia's visit to Blackwood ends in a dance in which all generations participate, and that marks the connection of young and old 'linked each to each, everyone to everyone, making the spiralling, endlessly regenerating dance of life and time'. It is a moment in which age differences make way for connectedness and shared joy. But this dance is not the end of the novel. The final scene depicts a protest march that involves teenagers, poets, musicians, politicians, a ten-year-old girl, families with toddlers, 'old women and old men'. This is an idyllic scene, with children and

adolescents speaking up and adults – decentering themselves – listening and cheering. The event stands in stark contrast to the lack of connection at the end of Shaun Tan's story, where the lungfish have grown so small that they can no longer be seen, while the adult humans are dozing off. The young generation in Almond's novel gets center stage, and at least some adults are prepared to listen and protest together with them. The experience of intergenerational connection is one in which Sylvia has another epiphany, transcending herself once more to feel akin again with the forest, and she comes out of it feeling empowered: 'We are frail and we are small', she says, 'But we are beautiful and strong, and we can change the world'. That 'we' refers to humans of all generations, as well as to non-human beings and matter. Whether Sylvia's optimism is justified lies beyond Almond's novel – it leaves the future 'dark' in the sense that Solnit describes it, 'as in inscrutable, not in terrible' (Ch. 1). *Bone Music* leaves the reader with hope in the alertness, connectedness and preparedness to act that the climate march represents, without making any promises on the outcome of those actions. As Solnit puts it: 'we need to hope for the realization of our own dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imagination'. Where Sylvia's imagination and the potential for change will lead, remains unclear, but that very openness is key to its conscious optimism. That openness can also be considered a weakness, especially in light of recent developments. Although still a fairly recent book, *Bone Music* (2021) captures the spirit of a time that already feels to have passed, now that school strikes and climate demonstrations have moved to the background in the light of other events (the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and the conflict in Israel and Palestine). Nevertheless, its combination of addressing fear openly, while stressing the potential of posthuman and intergenerational kinship to produce agency and hope, remains relevant, especially in light of the effects of climate change that are becoming ever more visible.

Conclusion

There are some reservations that we might feel in taking kinship as a cue for active hope in these times of deep environmental concern. First of all, kinship should not be reduced here to a feeling of resemblance, but rather seen as an active process, as Haraway envisages it, that means to be prepared to see common ground, to feel connected, and to act on it. As Tan's story shows, seeing resemblance is not necessarily enough for kinship in this sense, while Almond's *Bone Music* highlights the potential to feel connected to other people and non-human creatures and environments despite profound differences and even disgust. Second, as *Bone Music* makes clear, conflict and kinship do not necessarily need to exclude each other; the opposite of kinship in

creating hope is either a lack of connection expressed through indifference towards the other, or a polemical opposition where differences are perceived as so extreme that empathy or dialogue are no longer possible. Conflict may provide hope if it leads to new insights and growth, as the figure of Andreas makes clear in *Bone Music*.

Current children's books play with the idea that hope may lie in the extinction of humankind. Jeffers celebrates it in *The Fate of Fausto*, where earth restores itself once the only human figure in the story is dead; Almond's Sylvia and Gabriel tinker with it in *Bone Music*; and Tan's 'We Found Them in Gutters' implies it as a potential outcome when the adult humans resemble sleepwalkers even as solutions are presented to them by the more childlike lungfish. The extinction of humankind is a bleak prospect that can only be considered hopeful if young readers feel more connected to the non-human than to the human, or if it is meant to shock readers into taking action. The latter strategy risks enhancing the feeling of smallness and insignificance that Sylvia expresses in *Bone Music* and may further prompt the climate anxiety that Kelsey identifies in people of all generations, and that affects young people worldwide (Thompson 2021; Hickman et al. 2021). The protagonists of Almond's *Bone Music* ultimately reject this scenario as the most desirable one for earth in favour of conscious and careful optimism. It places hope in the willingness to engage in active kinship on the one hand, and the preparedness and ability to change on the other. It situates that ability and willingness to listen, change and then to speak up and act not just in children and adolescents, but also in middle-aged and old adults. To rephrase Oziewicz's words when he criticized the dystopic as the dominant mode in fantastic fiction on climate change, David Almond's *Bone Music* fulfills the promise of not focusing on the world we dread, but on the one we wish. *The Dam* does so too, but remains limited in its attention for the nonhuman. *Bone Music* shows that posthumanist and intergenerational kinship can reinforce each other so that people feel reinvigorated in their hope, willingness, and agency to confront the systems that need to change.

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