

“Forget about Eden”: (Violations of) Children’s Rights in *The Last Book in the Universe*

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Abstract

Dystopian tales, both post-apocalyptic wastelands and carefully manicured ultramodern utopias, offer the opportunity to demonstrate what can happen when human rights are not respected and upheld. This paper examines the violations of children’s rights in the novel *The Last Book in the Universe* (Philbrick, 2000). Using the United Nation’s *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989) as a framework for analysis, the paper investigates how science fiction can communicate children’s rights to them, through negative examples of their violations.

Keywords

Children’s Science Fiction, Young Adult Science Fiction, Children’s Rights, Human Rights, Dystopia, Post-Apocalypse

1. Introduction: Children’s Rights and Children’s Literature

All you gotta know is, if you live here, you’re either down with the Bangers or you might as well be dead. There’s no escape because every part of the Urb is latched by one gang or another. The only escape is Eden, and you can’t get in there unless you’re a proof, and if you’re genetically improved, you’d never leave in the first place, so forget about Eden (Philbrick, 2000: p. 8).

In the 35 years since the passage (1989) and implementation (1990) of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989: section 3), adults have questioned how best to communicate the list of rights to children themselves. Koren (2001) suggests that “One thing children really need to know is that the need for basic human respect is there for all ages and all cultures, including their own” (p. 252). As stories have often been used as a method of con-

veying information to children, they are a possible approach.

Stories from various parts of the world have been used to demonstrate to children (and adults) what these basic expectations of respect are and how they are lacking in many people's lives. While [Koren \(2001\)](#) focuses her recommendations in using non-fiction stories from around the globe to illustrate children's rights, it is possible that texts might also communicate the rights and values of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN-CRC) through fictional examples of challenges to basic respect. [Deyab & Elshaikh \(2022\)](#) examined a novel about a Palestinian youth that analyzed children's rights violations as demonstrated through the story.

Likewise, [Valls & Martin \(2023\)](#) analyzed 244 fictional texts for children ages 0 - 12 using the UN-CRC as well as the 1955 declaration it was based on. Their work identified both the presence and absence of rights in a text, but the texts were primarily traditional literature, historical fiction, and contemporary realistic fiction selected for educational purposes in Spain.

However, [Sambell \(2004\)](#) argues that because "Dystopian authors predominantly teach by negative example..." (p. 248), dystopian tales, both post-apocalyptic wastelands and carefully manicured ultramodern utopias, offer the opportunity to demonstrate what can happen when rights are not respected and upheld. [Hintz & Ostry \(2003\)](#) propose that "exposure to these types of texts can lead young readers to see inequality in their own communities and countries" (p. 8) because they "mirror and criticize reality, forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it" (p. 6). [Hariharan \(2019\)](#) concurs, suggesting that "these stories raise questions very relevant to an increasingly unsafe and intolerant today" (n.p.).

Why might dystopian tales of science fiction and fantasy serve to engage both tween and teen readers into reflection on their own rights and the violation of those by others? [Basu, Broad, & Hintz \(2013\)](#) posit that "wildly fantastic premises may provide young people with an entry point into real-world problems, encouraging them to think about social and political issues in new ways, or even for the first time" (pp. 4-5). Like the human rights abuses in fairy tales, "as a guide to ethics (the broad principles that govern a fair society) or rights (in terms of individual freedoms to be or to do) they are somewhat lacking" ([Longstaff, 2015: n.p.](#)).

Although for privileged adolescents the losses of family, home, freedom of movement, access to health care, and freedom of expression might seem just as fictional as fairies, wicked Queens, genetically improved humans, and post-nuclear wilds, "[s]uch narratives play upon deep, unresolvable fears from 'reality', exaggerating (and sometimes solving) them in fictional scenarios ([Ames, 2013: p. 6](#))." A novel of contemporary realistic fiction that describes a young teenager who is homeless, without family, controlled by and in service to local warlords could appear much more bleak to a young reader than a fantastical future relaying the same. The reality might prove too frightening, but the fantas-

tical fiction allows them to see the consequences of such losses and how those losses might affect young people like themselves, while still appealing to them as readers. So although “[t]hese worlds spell the death of childhood as a secure, cherished state” (Sambell, 2004: p. 250), they are still less terrifying than the same situations within the readers’ known world.

It is possible to help young readers translate their responses to the human rights abuses of dystopian worlds into their own (and others’) real experiences. For example, Bach, Peters, & Bourgeois (2019) asked secondary students to interact with *Scythe* (Shusterman, 2016), the tale of a utopia where death no longer occurs naturally, and so Scythes, appointed and trained by the government of Scythes, take lives on a seemingly random basis. While reading, students focused on several themes, but the value of life was central to their study. Students began to examine what was missing in this utopian future, noting that the right to live and the value of life seemed unrecognized in the future with no natural death. Bach and her colleagues argued that “Speculative fiction offers an important distance from present-day reality, including students’ realities, and so promotes questioning big ideas” (p. 40).

As a further example, Simmons (2012) helped students apply their reading of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and its two sequels into concrete understanding of how the violence and violations of the texts are a reality to many children and adolescents. She assisted them in finding ways that they could try to change this reality, even in a small way, through social action. Students read and learned about parallel issues, such as the use of child soldiers, and Simmons introduced them to campaigns led by young people that were active in campaigning for the rights of others like themselves. Simmons’ students used dystopias as advocated by Alexander & Black (2015): “opportunities to interrogate how we understand and imagine our present” (p. 210).

I selected Rodman Philbrick (2000)’s *The Last Book in the Universe* for this analysis because it is a tale centered in children trying to survive a harsh life, while other children have access to families, homes, schools, and medical care. And the governments (and adults) don’t care. Although that sounds like most countries with a wealth gap (which is most countries), it is the dystopic Urb and utopic Eden. And in the Urb and Eden, we see children’s rights (and violations of them) very clearly.

2. The World of the Last Book in the Universe

Spaz is a young adolescent living on his own in the Urb, a postapocalyptic wild land governed by warlord-like gang leaders, each who control their own polluted pieces of poverty, or latches. Banished from his family, and his beloved adopted sister, Bean, because of his epilepsy, Spaz resides several latches away from his sister and his adoptive parents, Charly and Kay. In the center of the Urb, beyond The Forbidden Zone, is Eden, where “provs” or improved humans, who have been genetically modified for perfection, live with blue skies, fresh water, and

plentiful food, or so the stories say.

Spaz, not even a normal, but a “deef” or defective, scratches out an existence stealing for his latch leader, Billy Bizmo, targeting others upon his command. Due to his epilepsy, he cannot use the mindprobes that others use for entertainment, plugging a needlejack directly into their brains for a wholly immersive virtual reality. Ryter, a gummy, or older person, is his target for the day, and Spaz meets a young feral child, whom he calls Little Face, who helps him find Ryter’s squat. When Ryter has little of value to steal, Spaz learns of his “Book”, something that he had heard existed in stories of the backtimes, but no one reads anymore because of the probes.

Spaz leaves, but he’s intrigued by Ryter and his book. After an encounter with a prov, Lanaya, at the Maximall, where she gives him edibles, he returns to see Ryter again with Little Face’s help. Ryter tries to convince Spaz that his epilepsy, his spaz, is a good thing because it allows him to retain his memories, of Bean, and other things. Most people’s long-term memory has been eroded by the probes. Spaz doesn’t believe him, but when he learns that Bean is dying (she’s had a reoccurrence of her bone marrow sickness, and there are no medical facilities to help treat her), and Billy won’t give him permission to leave the latch to visit her, he returns to Ryter.

They plan to travel to Bean’s latch by the Edge of the Urb, through The Pipe, which once carried fresh water to all of the citizens. Little Face tries to come along, but they send him back. Nevertheless, by the time they reach the next latch, he has caught up with them and becomes another member of their party. At this latch, they discover a warlord who has dissolved his brain with uninterrupted use of his probe, leaving even more anarchy than usual. They suggest a new leader and quickly leave, only to find Lanaya in trouble in the next latch.

They rescue her, and then she sweeps them into The Forbidden Zone. Even though she is haughty and privileged, she agrees to help them travel to Bean. They drive through The Zone, and arrive at Bean’s latch, only to encounter another warlord, and more fighting, over the illegal importation of probes, which along with the entertainment, seem to be coming from Eden. They escape and are able to travel to Bean, who is extremely ill and without medical treatment. After visiting with Spaz, she lapses into a coma, and it is decided that the only thing that can be done, even though it is illegal, is to take her to Eden.

In Eden, they discover that no one knows how to treat Bean’s leukemia because it had been bred out of the provs. However, she is successfully treated with gene therapy, and Bree, Lanaya’s female contributor, or mother, wants to take Little Face and raise him as her own. Although Lanaya has been bred to be a Master of Eden, when Bean’s treatment is discovered, Lanaya, Bean, Spaz, and Ryter are put on trial, though Little Face hides. While Lanaya argues convincingly that the laws should be changed and the “normals” be allowed to live in Eden, the Masters do not agree, and Bean, Spaz, and Ryter are banished.

Upon their return to their latches, Ryter is publicly executed because Eden has

made the mindprobes inoperative, and Spaz learns that Billy is his biological father, thus why he is spared. Spaz begins to write his Book with a voice writer and assumes the name Ryter. Lanaya lets Spaz know through a messenger that although they did not win this time, they will continue to fight.

3. Violations of Children's Rights

Philbrick's creation of *The Urb* reifies a world where children's most basic rights are violated, some as protocol, some by neglect, and some through lack of access. Although critics might argue that dystopias written for children and adolescents focus on the fears of the adults writing the books, these rights are, nevertheless, still central to the well-being of minors.

The examples of these breaches demonstrated in a dystopian and post-apocalyptic future serve as a magnifying mirror of the experiences of unprotected children and adolescents in contemporary reality. The rights violations of children in *The Last Book in the Universe* will be discussed in the following thematic groupings of the applicable Articles from the UN-CRC (1989):

- Right to a Family (specifically Articles 8 and 9);
- Right to a Safe Living Space (Articles 27 and 30);
- Right to Freedom of Movement (Articles 10 and 22);
- Right to Life and Medical Treatment (Articles 6, 19, 23, and 24);
- Right to Freedom of Expression and Information (Articles 13 and 17).

Text from the individual Articles noted will appear in the footnotes, although they will be summarized in each section. The full text of Articles can be accessed at <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>.

3.1. Right to a Family (Articles 8 and 9¹)

It is a child's right to know who he/she/they is and who his/her/their family is, to live with said family, and to be reunited with the family as soon as possible if separated. In *The Last Book in the Universe*, no child character, outside of Eden, lives with his or her full family. In Spaz's case, "The spaz is why I lost my family unit. Why I can't ever see Bean again" (Philbrick, 2000: p. 36). When Bean first became ill, Charly feared that Spaz's epilepsy would be passed on to Bean, so he demanded that Spaz no longer be a part of their family and sent him off to the

¹Article 8:

1) States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.

2) Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity (UNICEF, 1989: section 4).

Article 9:

1) States Parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child's place of residence.... (UNICEF, 1989: section 5)

other latch. Although Spaz is living with his biological father, that information is unknown to him until the very end of the story. Throughout the novel, Spaz is a child without a family and without knowledge of his true identity.

Likewise, Bean has her brother torn from her, against her will. She misses him, and when Spaz arrives, he's told, "She's been asking for you... I told her you couldn't come. I told her it was against the rules" (Philbrick, 2000: p. 140), emphasizing that even with her illness, she was not to be reunited with her brother. When Spaz and Bean reunite, they excitedly exchange old stories from before his banishment, and she tells him, "I was afraid you'd never see me again..." (p. 144). He then tells her more stories until she falls asleep, later lapsing into a coma.

Little Face, the street urchin, represents "thousands like him...Orphaned or abandoned, fending for themselves" (Philbrick, 2000: pp. 56-57). When Little Face follows Spaz and Ryter into The Pipe, it is this reality that forces their hand: "We're stuck with him because there isn't time to take him back, or anybody there to keep him, even if we did" (p. 65). Where his parents are is unknown, and it is uncertain if he even knows who his family is, or his own identity. "He's a feral child. No mother, no father, no one to care for him or raise him or teach him how to be human" (pp. 105-106).

The trauma of these violations would be clear to a young reader. Little Face, although around 5 years old, has developed no language. Both Bean and Spaz are scarred by their separations, forced upon them by Charly. And Spaz blames himself, and his epilepsy, for the loss of his family and Bean, both unfairly. "Spaz isn't just a name, it's a warning. Look out for the spaz boy, he might have a fit and bite you! He'll infect you! He'll infect your unborn children! Cast him out. Banish him (Philbrick, 2000: p. 36)." He is forced to live a hardscrabble existence, like Little Face, trying to make his way with no adults caring for him

3.2. Right to a Safe Living Space (Articles 27 and 30²)

Even though it is a child's right to an adequate living space that supports his/her mental and physical growth, even as a member of a minority population, children, especially those left without family and adult protectors often end up homeless and unable to keep themselves safe. In the Urb, the lack of adequate housing and adult protection is a constant threat and fear for both the normal and the deaf children. Their minority status, as non-proofs without families, relegates them to inadequate and dangerous living situations.

Although Spaz has a small home, he lives in fear of Billy Bizmo, and what will

²Article 27:

1) States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.... (UNICEF, 1989: section 9)

Article 30:

2) In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language. (UNICEF, 1989: section 10)

happen if he discovers Spaz's betrayal:

I broke his rules. If he finds out, he might decide to have me canceled or he might decide to let me live but ban me from the Crypts. "Disfavor", they call it, which means you're out on the curb, fending for yourself without protection or shelter. (Philbrick, 2000: p. 30)

Even living in the Crypts is better than being out in the streets.

Little Face survives without a roof over his head or water. A small child, he is unable to care for himself and keep himself safe. "[T]his little face pokes up again from the rubble and looks at me with big, scared eyes...The face belongs to a little kid, maybe five years old, although he's got at least a million years' worth of dirt on his cheeks. I bend down to look at him closer and a tear cuts through the dirt..." (Philbrick, 2000: p. 12)

Both Spaz and Little Face bring to mind what Sambell describes as the scavenger child. "[T]he child-as-scavenger can, like common 'pest' species such as rats, effectively populate the dump-cultures of far-future fantasies (262-263)." Spaz and Little Face scamper on their daily errands, trying desperately to survive, and then scurry back to their little hidey holes, trying to avoid the larger predators that might strike at any time.

The child-as-scavenger is a repetitive trope throughout literature, for both children and adults. We see it commonly in, for example, the work of Charles Dickens, but it is in dystopian and post-apocalyptic worlds where scavenger children are the norm, from *The Road Warrior* (Kennedy et al., 2007) to *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006). Like Dickens's Victorian streets and alleyways, the settings of imagined futures reject the personhood of children (other than the privileged few), leaving most without a place to live, without a family, without safety.

3.3. Right to Freedom of Movement (Articles 10 and 22³)

Children have the right to travel to rejoin their family, without consequences, and to be considered a refugee when involuntarily removed from their homes, whether with or without their parents. This right to freedom of movement, and recognized status if expelled from, or driven out of, their country or place of residence allows children and families to reunite if necessary and to stay together.

However, there is no freedom of movement in the Urb. Spaz's movement is

³Article 10:

1) In accordance with the obligation of States Parties under Article 9, paragraph 1, applications by a child or his or her parents to enter or leave a State Party for the purpose of family reunification shall be dealt with by States Parties in a positive, humane and expeditious manner. States Parties shall further ensure that the submission of such a request shall entail no adverse consequences for the applicants and for the members of their family... (UNICEF, 1989: section 5)

Article 22:

1) States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties. (UNICEF, 1989: section 7)

controlled by Billy, even when he wants to travel to Bean as she is dying: “Billy might grant me safe passage. He has the power. If he wants to make it happen (Philbrick, 2000: p. 41).” Billy not only does not allow Spaz to travel, and but also threatens his life if he disobeys, violating two of the principles of freedom of movement.

“Hear me, Spaz boy... No one leaves my latch without my permission, and that includes you. Too bad for your little friend, but people die every day...”

He places the splat gun under my nose.

“Billy says no... If you ask again, you die.” (p. 45)

So Spaz courts a death sentence by traveling to see his sister. He has become a refugee.

His status is reinforced by his choice to use The Pipe, at Ryter’s suggestion. Ryter even uses the term when describing the route: “Many refugees used the Pipe in those days, to move around the city (Philbrick, 2000: p. 60).” However, there is no refugee status, and the protection that it would offer, as Spaz attempts to travel through the latches to Bean.

Even as he is traveling with Lanaya, his status as a boy without a country is reinforced. She can travel freely. However, he is not safe at home, he is not safe in the other latches, unless he earns the protection of the latchboss, and as he enters The Forbidden Zone, more danger precludes his freedom of movement. “The mines are Eden’s first line of defense. This vehicle has the codes to disarm them. If not, we’d already be blown to particles (Philbrick, 2000: p. 100).” The Forbidden Zone, like his epilepsy, keeps Eden inaccessible in the center of the Urb. We are reminded that “[t]he only escape is Eden, and you can’t get in there unless you’re a proov...” (p. 8).

3.4. Right to Life and Medical Treatment (Articles 6, 19, 23, and 24⁴)

Children’s right to life is ensured by support of their survival and development, through prevention of neglect and abuse, and the provision of health care and

⁴Article 6:

1) States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life.

2) States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child. (UNICEF, 1989: section 4)

Article 19:

1) States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child... (UNICEF, 1989: section 7)

Article 23:

1) States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community... (UNICEF, 1989: section 8)

Article 24:

1) States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services... (UNICEF, 1989: section 8)

treatment, so that they can be active members of their community. Children fear being isolated from their community due to illness, and they fear being ill; however, the fear of treatment being withheld or not being available might not have yet occurred to them.

In dystopias “commonly, the tropes of discrimination are projected onto a group who is distinguished not by external markers like skin color but by internal markers like DNA... (Guerra, 2009: p. 286)” This creation of haves and have nots, based on the level of genetic improvement (whether a proov or a normal or even a deaf), has established in the Urb a stratified society with opportunity and access for the most privileged in Eden, and none for the least in the latches. Speaking generally, Guerra continues that

If the method of oppression is familiar, it is because biotechnology has allowed the creation and identification of a new minority group; if the victims are familiar, they are being oppressed through new biotechnical methods or denial of access to necessary biotechnology. (p. 289)

In the Urb, there are no formal medical staff; no medical knowledge has been maintained. In Eden, flaws are genetically eliminated, so medical services exist primarily for injuries. Thus when an illness, like Bean’s bone marrow sickness occurs, there is no treatment available in the Urb, and there is no access to Eden, where the availability of treatment is still uncertain.

The violation of Bean’s rights is demonstrated through the lack of treatment for her illness:

Once when she was eight years old, Bean almost died. They said she had the bone marrow sickness and her blood was so weak...Nothing helped until this old woman came, a healer. The healer passed her hands over Bean and said she might live or she might die, but the only thing that might save her was a special remedy to strengthen her blood. (Philbrick, 2000: p. 47)

Even Spaz was quick to admit that the remedy was possibly not effective. When Bean improved, he noted, “Either the remedy worked, or Bean had gotten better on her own” (p. 48). She may have gone into remission, whether through her own strength or the treatment, but the remedy does not work a second time when her illness re-occurs. The only choice for Spaz is to take her to Eden, even with the threat of death for doing so.

However, even entering Eden with the protection of the privileged class does not guarantee Bean access to adequate medical treatment. Although Lanaya promises, “We’ll find a way to help her. We must (Philbrick, 2000, p. 149)”, the best that the medical support in Eden can do initially is stabilize her. The medical knowledge of Eden has atrophied because of a lack of need by the proovs and their genetically improved health. “Backtimer treatments involved complex chemical therapies and bone marrow transplants, specific methods that are no longer available (p. 168).”

Spaz lashes out at the inequity: “I don’t care how perfect you are, or how

beautiful. Bean is a million times better than anyone in Eden...But you're going to let her die because she wasn't 'improved' before she was born" (Philbrick, 2000: p. 169). And although she is taken to Primary Laboratory, Spaz continues to question the privilege that result in a lack of medical treatment for everyone else. "So what do you care if a normal dies?...They die every single day from all kinds of disease and you don't do anything to stop that (p. 173)." When Bean is finally cured, by becoming a member of the privileged class through gene therapy, she becomes improved and her right to medical treatment is restored. But others, including Spaz, are still prevented from exercising their rights to life and medical treatment.

3.5. Right to Freedom of Expression and Information (Articles 13 and 17⁵)

Children's rights to seek out information, to remember and learn, as well as to express both ideas and statements of fact are preserved by the UN-CRC. In the Urb, the primary foes of access to information and expression are the mindprobes and their interference with memory formation. This role for the probes, created by Eden, aligns with the suggestion that "contemporary dystopian fiction, and the utopian fiction it derives from, often includes a critique of a 'postmodern,' advanced technological society gone awry" (Zipes, 2003: p. ix).

Although he cannot use the probes himself, Spaz is aware of their effect, but still he does not read. When Ryter states emphatically that "My book is the work of a lifetime". Spaz quickly retorts "You're wasting your time...Nobody reads books anymore" (Philbrick, 2000: p. 19). It is only later, when observing brain ooze leaking from the probe in the latchboss Mongo the Magnificent, that Spaz realizes the addictive trap that the mindprobes offer: "You never have to come out if you don't want. This one is called Forever Eden, and it's his favorite trendie. Mongo is in Eden now, living the life of a proov. He refuses to leave. He loves it there (p. 81)." The probes must be destroyed to provide the children of the Urb the right to expression and information. It is the memory of Mongo that looms large in Spaz's mind when he tells Lanaya's paternal contributor (father) about the probes and their effects on the memory of the residents of the Urb.

However, in Eden, the right to expression, if not agreement, is preserved. Spaz speaks out against the probes. And testifying that, "I say that if saving lives is against the rules, then the rules must be changed (Philbrick, 2000: p. 207)." La-

⁵Article 13:

1) The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice. (UNICEF, 1989: section 5)

Article 17:

1) States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. (UNICEF, 1989: section 6)

naya lays forth a forceful defense of the normals in Eden, of their similar intelligence, and of their shared genetic code. She suggests that if given the right to stay in Eden, with all of its resources, the normals might just improve the proofs. In response to her defense and request to let them stay, the Master nevertheless responds: “Lanaya, you spoke well...When you are a Master, things may change. But for now the rule must stand. Eden shall be Eden. The Masters have spoken (p. 207).”

4. Conclusion

“And I thought about books. And for the first time I realized that a man was behind each one of the books (Bradbury, 1953: p. 49).”

The themes of *The Last Book in the Universe* have been explored before (e.g., *Fahrenheit 451*), and they continue to be explored in adult fiction as well, such as the film *Elysium* (Blomkam, 2013). The privileging of one class of citizen over others, resulting in the denial of rights, is a central theme in dystopian literature. The loss of shared memory and story is another. Yet in her criticism of the book (and others like it) Mendlesohn (2004) argues that “repeatedly many of these [middle grades and YA] novels follow a recursive and consolatory pattern that appears to prize stasis over the provision of agency and consequence (p. 305).”

It is true that the text demonstrates the powerlessness of children, even children created to be future leaders, in greatly changing the political structures that seek to control them. But that there is change, even small change, seems to be ignored by this criticism. Mendlesohn (2004) suggests that true science fiction, “does not accept that change can be undone, or the universe returned to its starting place, but it does insist that we can shape that change, that we are in control, even if only **barely** [*emphasis mine*]” (p. 291). The children of *The Last Book in the Universe* have begun to make those incremental changes, even in the face of adults thwarting their attempts at every turn. Nevertheless, Mendlesohn concludes that

The book refuses a happy ending. The children are not admitted into the upper-caste world, and there is no sign that the upper caste will change their attitudes any time soon, so although...there is the promise of change from above, there is no program for change, and certainly no possibility of revolution. (p. 306)

Is revolution the only way to make change? In working for small, and ongoing changes, might Spaz and Lanaya be better examples for the young adolescents who are their intended audience? Using a dystopian novel to demonstrate children’s rights, through their violations, can allow young people the opportunity to begin to reflect on the change that they can be in the world. And perhaps acknowledging that small change is part of a cumulative strategy for advocacy and reform gives our children and adolescents the opportunity to see themselves as reformers, if not revolutionaries.

At the end of the novel, Little Face is hidden in Eden, having found the family

he was denied in the Urb. Lanaya has brought the outside into Eden, and Eden to the outside, through giving Little Face a home and through healing Bean. And although Spaz is cast out of Eden, he finds family, and he begins to tell the story of his life, following the actions of the now dead Ryter:

And so I started talking about the old man, and all the things he told me, and how he helped me run the latches and save Bean and everything, and after a while I sort of figured out what he meant about me being the last book in the universe. (Philbrick, 2000: p. 222)

Spaz (now Ryter) recognizes he has a story to tell, and the power that comes with being a storyteller. Lanaya's final message supports continuous, incremental change. In it she declares, "Do not despair, my friend. Today is theirs, but the future is ours (p. 223)."

For the children of the world, the future is theirs. And to take it over, they need to know what it is they deserve to have, and ideas of how to get it if they don't. Books like *The Last Book in the Universe* can show them that they can forget Eden, but they might be able to change where they are for the better.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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