

Electronic Texts and Adolescent Agency: Computers and the Internet in Contemporary Children's Fiction

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KEY TEXTS

- M. Blackman, *Computer Ghost* (1997)
 L. Cooper, *Incy Wincy Spider* ('Creatures', no. 8, 2000)
 M. Haddix, *Amongst the Hidden* (2001)
 L. Howarth, *Weather Eye* (1995); *Ultraviolet* (2001)
 C. Jinks, *To Die For* (2002)
 J. Larkin, *Ghost Byte* (1994)
 C. Plaisted, *e-love* (2001)
 W. Sleator, *Rewind* (2001)

The majority of this study has been concerned with conventional print media; in this final chapter, Noga Applebaum looks at the interactions between prose fiction in book form, and electronic narratives, including those developing on the Internet. While Chapter 13 considers some of the ways that picturebook readers and makers are adjusting their expectations about the organization of space and narrative in response to the icon-based organization of the computer screen, this chapter looks at both the ambivalence surrounding electronic narratives – and, indeed, the whole domain of the Internet – and their potential to facilitate political action in the young. Judith Butler has pointed out that agency is 'always and only a political prerogative' (1992: 13): the problem for the young is that for the most part they lack the tools of

agency (public platforms, economic influence, individual experience), and in recent years particularly, many forces at work in culture, not least corporate capitalism, have worked to make them apolitical. If young people are to acquire political agency in tandem with maturity, they need narratives that require them to engage with topical issues and which require them to position themselves. Such narratives must resist the use of the conventions of classic realism (Box 6.1) and demand that readers are consciously involved in and aware of the narrative process. As this chapter shows, the innately non-linear nature of electronic narratives may offer useful ways forward for writers who seek to urge their readers towards positions of agency.

In the last decade, Information Technology (IT) has become a part of everyday life, so much so that it is hard to imagine the world running smoothly without it. Millions of people worldwide use computers to work as well as to surf the Internet in order to find information, buy different products, entertain themselves with games and even pay bills. Many stay in touch using email, and a considerable number of people meet new friends and form online relationships. Not only do computers make our pace of life quicker and our communication abilities broader and more efficient, they also change the way we think and interpret the world around us. Distances diminish, information is more readily available to more people rather than to a selected few, and networking across geographical divides empowers marginalized groups to draw the public's attention to their needs and interests.

The Internet, advanced computer games and virtual reality environments also create an exciting tension between the real and the virtual body, as users can adopt new online personas and may alter any components of their real selves, from age to gender identity. The new technology allows for fresh and intricate stylistic forms as well. Internet and virtual reality (VR) environments are non-linear and enable users to become authors of their own narratives, exploring and creating versatile, sometimes limitless, storylines.

Ambivalent attitudes

Although the Internet is here to stay, and more people get connected each year, it seems that there is still a general fear of the new technology. A recent survey showed that although more than 16 million Britons are regular Internet users, over half of all adults in the UK still believe that the Internet undermines the morality of the nation (*Which? Online Annual Internet Survey, 2001*). Other surveys show that a significant proportion of computer and Internet users is composed of children and young adults (*2-in-10 Are Connected Kids, 2003*). However, a quick look at titles published in the last ten years shows that children's books in which protagonists send owls are increasingly prevalent, while it is still rare to find books in which they send emails.

Adults' attitudes towards young people's use of computers and the Internet are ambivalent. While most western parents believe that information technology contributes to their children's education, many still fear that online activities might expose them to harmful influences and even put them in

physical danger (*Safe and Smart*, 1999). These fears exist despite the evidence showing that most young Internet users would not give away personal information online, and that only a small minority encounters frightening or upsetting information on the Web (*Kids Wise Up to Cyberspace Danger*, 2002).

A less widespread concern is that teenagers, especially males, will actively search the Web for pornography. However, while researchers into online sexual addiction recommend that parents do not install a computer in their child's bedroom, they also admit that they are uncertain as to the potential of teenagers to become sexual compulsives as a result of their online sexual behaviours (Freeman-Longo, 2000: 86–9).

Another popular adult fear is that surfing the Web, or generally spending time in front of the monitor, can damage young people's social skills, distract them from activities considered more healthy, such as reading and sports, and turn them into recluses (*Which? Online Annual Internet Survey, 2001*). In their appraisal of online communities, Wellman and Gulia respond to these allegations, asserting that

Such fears are overstated in several ways. For one thing, they treat community as a zero-sum game, assuming that if people spend more time interacting on-line they will spend less time interacting in 'real life'. Second, such accounts demonstrate the strength and importance of on-line ties, and not their weakness... strong, intimate ties are capable of being maintained on-line as well as face-to-face. (1996: online at www.acm.org/ccp/preferences/wellman/wellman.html)

One of the main reasons for these fears is the technological gap existing between parents and their children, as it is often children who bring the technology into the home and explore its potential while the parents' online time is limited to sending a few emails (Wallace, 1999: 246). The vast circulation of child-pornography-related stories in various media contributes to parents' fear (34–5), while policy decisions regarding internet regulation also reflect adult fears about children's activities and presence on the Web by constructing children as passive victims, and focusing on protecting them from harmful online material. They seem to offer parents greater control and reinforce adult authority and power over children, and so politicians submit to adult fear rather than hearkening to the needs of the young (Oswell, 1998: 271–91). With this background in mind, it is not surprising that children's and young adult literature, written and published by adults and bought by parents, reflects the same ambivalence towards young people's use of the Internet and computers.

On the other hand, as publishers have realized, computers exert a powerful allure for children and teenagers, who are technology's most avid fans. For this reason, images of monitors and Internet jargon increasingly appear on the covers of children's books, even when their content is only remotely related to IT. *Yo! Dot UK* (2001) uses a website address as a title, setting up expectations that the text will involve the Internet; in fact, the only connection to the Web is an Internet café where a group of teenagers often

meet. *Lone Bytes* (1997), the first of the teen-romance series @café, also uses both Internet jargon ('bytes') and design ('@') on the cover, yet in the book itself, Internet activities are limited to personal columns published on a cyber-café's website by a group of teenagers employed there. The plots of these two books remain very much in the realm of real life. *PS Longer Letter Later* (1998) revolves around a series of letters exchanged between two girls. In the sequel, the correspondence continues; however, it is now sent by email, and the novel is entitled *Snail Mail No More* (1999), again using popular Web jargon. It is clear that this change is an attempt to increase the book's allure by tapping into contemporary technological culture; significantly, the format of the sequel is virtually identical to that of the original, showing how superficial the change has been. These books, and others like them (see Further Reading), often reflect the ignorance of publishers and authors; ignorance that prevents them from incorporating current technology into a children's book in a manner that does more than pay simple lip service to popular culture in the service of increased sales.

For some years the Web was regarded as 'the preserve of the nerdy 15-year-old boy closeted in his bedroom', a notion which is contradicted by the overwhelming numbers of children of all ages and walks of life that use the Internet today (Clarke, in *Kids Wise Up*, NOP Research Group, 2002). However, 'nerdy' boy characters are abundant in the children's books that incorporate elements of IT to some degree or other. It seems that while adult authors may be keen to hop on the cyber wagon, they shy away from making their central characters too computer literate. Instead they construct loyal sidekicks to the main protagonist in the form of minor characters, unpopular amongst their peers, yet wizards when it comes to computers. These 'nerds' embody parental concerns that the Internet will isolate children from the community. They may also reflect the way in which adults writing for children choose to deal with the feeling that information technology poses a threat to their own profession as a result of the alleged competition between surfing and reading.

The protagonist of John Larkin's *Ghost Byte* (1994) is Brendan, a witty, popular teenager who has a beautiful girlfriend, and whose main interests are swimming and surfing. In contrast, his friend Brains is constantly picked on: 'Brains came wandering across the quadrangle with kids kicking him up the backside as he walked along' (31). Brains, as the nickname suggests, is very clever; however, he is branded a 'geek', and even his best friends wonder: 'Why are we friends with him? ... Shouldn't we have some sort of standard sports? (33). Unlike the healthy image of boys his age, Brains hates playing sports and his chief interests are maths and computers. Although Brendan dismisses Brains' 'techno tangents' (85), he still confides in him when a strange ghost starts haunting his computer.

In a similar manner, Louise Cooper provides a computer-literate sidekick to Leo, the hero of her book *Incy Wincy Spider* (2000). Milkey is known as 'the class brainbox' (2), and his chief interests are computers and space. Like Brains, Milkey dislikes sports. He is also the shortest child in his year and wears glasses. As sport is usually associated with a healthy lifestyle, providing

children with strength and stamina and involving going outdoors and working in a team, Mikey and Brains' dislike of athletic games reflects the popular fear that a child in front of a monitor is (or will become) unhealthy and weak. Although Mikey saves the day by beating the vicious computer game that Leo downloaded from the Web, Cooper chooses the latter, a 'normal' child, to narrate the story, thus turning Leo into the focal point of her novel and implying that he is the character with whom children should identify.

The situation is summed up succinctly by Adamina, an Internet message board user in Catherine Jinks's *To Die For* (2000), who describes the average Web user thus:

The Internet is for antisocial losers. . . . People who hardly ever emerge from their dark, untidy rooms. People who don't have any real friends. People who don't play sport, who are addicted to computer games, and who are either (a) cursed with enormous IQs together with disfiguring acne, or (b) planning to massacre half the kids at their school. (14)

In truth, the other users of the board *are* all social outcasts, perverts, or in one case, snowed in. Similar associations between unpopularity and computer literacy can be found in Malorie Blackman's *Computer Ghost* (1997), and Caroline Plaisted's *e-love* (2001).

As mentioned earlier, one of the prominent fears of parents regarding their children's use of the Internet is that an ill-meaning adult will approach their children online, or that they will encounter harmful material. Examination of a range of children's books shows that not only parents, but also authors subscribe to the notion that the Internet gives evil free access to young people.

In Blackman's *Computer Ghost*, Jade, who has recently lost her father, begins to receive emails from him from beyond the grave. He implores Jade to help him but not to tell anyone of their correspondence: 'no one must know about me but you . . . don't even tell your mum' (117). To the adult ear, this type of request sounds alarming, as child abusers often emotionally blackmail their victims into silence. Jade, however, being an inexperienced and trusting child, replies to the emails, promising to help the sender, who she believes to be her dead father (15). Luckily, she decides to consult her friends, who raise doubts as to the authenticity of the emails. When the sender asks Jade to search her house for a package and drop it off in a litter bin, her friends point out that 'if it really was your dad, he'd have known where the package was from the beginning . . . and since when does a ghost need a package to be dropped off in a bin . . .?' (137). After some clever detective work, the children discover that the emails were sent by a corrupt work colleague, who is trying to obtain an advanced computer game, developed by Jade's father. Once caught, the criminal and her accomplice declare that they are 'not in the least bit repentant' (199) for manipulating Jade's feelings. Although the crime committed in the book is not of a sexual nature, the fear that the Internet opens a door through which ill-meaning adults can abuse children resonates throughout the novel.

Evil worming its way through the monitor is also at the centre of *Incy Wincy Spider*. Leo downloads from the Web a new computer game called *Incy Wincy Spider*. The game turns out to be a vicious virus that causes Leo's

computer to crash. The trouble does not end here, for the virus crosses the border between the real and the virtual, and the spider from the game emerges from the back of the computer, begins growing at a terrifying rate, and starts spreading cobwebs all around Leo's house. An email from a friend in the USA reveals what is in store for Leo, for it tells of other teenagers who have fallen victim to the spider; their families have had to leave their homes as giant spiders have invaded them (94). Although all ends well, it is not difficult to see the spider and its cobwebs as a metaphor for the amazing speed at which the World Wide Web has established itself as a powerful global medium. The fact that teenagers were responsible for letting the dangerous spider into their family homes further emphasizes how this text reflects perfectly the fears discussed earlier. At the conclusion of this book, Leo declares that: 'He could do without computers for a while. Quite a long while' (148), showing *Incy Wincy Spider* to be a product of the ambivalent attitudes described above. Although she has written a novel revolving around computers, Cooper seems to advise teenagers that they are better off without them.

Unlike Cooper's novel, Caroline Plaisted's *e-love* seems to prefer the direct approach, rather than metaphors, to convey a warning that the Internet is a danger zone. The novel is narrated by Sam, a bright and popular teenager who visits chat rooms only to gossip with her friends because it is cheaper than using the phone (and despite the fact that she believes that anyone using chat rooms to make new friends must be 'a geek' and 'a sad case' (12). Sam warns the readers about the danger that lurks online: 'I know that you have to be a bit careful about what you give away to people when you're on-line. I mean we've all read in the papers about those weirdos out there, haven't we? You know, all those dirty old men who try and chat to young kids' (26). Sam's tone resembles that of an adult lecturing a child rather than a teenager speaking to her peers. Plaisted does not seem to be content with one warning, for it is later repeated by Sam's best friend, as well as by her mother:

We've read all about those perverts who prey on people via the Internet in the paper. . . . You have to be really careful with these people. We've all read about people posing as someone perfectly innocent and then turning out to be truly dangerous. (84–5)

Even Sam's teacher demonstrates her concern for innocent teenaged Internet users: 'Mrs Jones has been telling us all about the nutters that the police reckoned were out there surfing the net and trying to whisk us away' (41). To seal the matter, Sam meets a pervert online. One day, while she is waiting for Dan to log on, she is approached by someone who identifies himself as Steve. After asking 'Do you prefer bikinis or swimsuits?', Steve gets wiped off Sam's screen, 'presumably by whoever was monitoring the chatroom', to Sam's evident relief (61).

However, after constantly warning the reader not to chat to strangers online, Sam does just that. She falls in love with Dan, a boy that she meets in a chat room. Plaisted's novel is equivocal, as it is trying to tell a modern love story that will appeal to teenagers and reflect their own online experiences, while simultaneously embedding within it adult fears in the form of repetitive

warnings. The result is a confusing 'don't try this at home' plot that ends, in line with parental morals, with the conclusion that online romance cannot lead to a real and satisfying relationship (141).

Similar warnings about the dangerous potential of the Web can be found in *To Die For*. Neville, the only adult on an Internet message board, constantly warns young users not to give any email addresses or personal details online and to check with their parents before contacting anyone. He reminds them that 'it is easy to lie on the Internet' (79), and asks them not to log on to unknown sites, which may turn out to be obscene. Neville refers to his co-users as 'you girls' (113) and 'a nice girl' (87) when he issues these warnings. Together with the fact that he remains a 'good guy' throughout the book, this establishes his position as a protective adult who only has the children's best interest in mind. However, Neville himself posts his own email address on the message board (14), thus exposing society's double standards when it comes to online conduct for children and adults.

The children's book market does not ignore the information revolution; on the contrary, at times it is keen to exploit computer technology's appeal. However, it has still to resolve the tension between young people's fast-growing technological interest and the fears it evokes in the adults surrounding them. As of yet, this tension continues to be reflected in many books written for children and young adults.

Narrative forms

Computer games, CD-ROMs and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon or Dimension: a text-based online virtual world created for gaming or social purposes), are all VR (Virtual Reality) environments that challenge the traditional narrative form by dismissing the linear story, which has a beginning, middle and end. Sherry Turkle, a MUD expert, uses terms borrowed from the literary world to describe the attractions of this particular environment:

There are parallel narratives in the different rooms of the MUD; one can move forward or backward in time. . . . The MUDs are authored by their players, thousands of people in all, often hundreds of people at a time, all logged on from different places. (1994: 158–67)

Unlike a reader of a book, a VR player is not merely an observer, but an active participant in the creation of a narrative. Although some VR games, mainly those marketed on CD-ROMs, have an official 'end' – a mission the player needs to accomplish – there are many ways to complete the game, and much of its enjoyment derives from the time spent exploring the different options on offer. MUDs and MOOs (MUD Object Oriented) are more radical, as they usually do not have a starting or an ending point at all.

The interactive nature of these technological gaming environments blurs the boundaries between what is considered 'real life' and what is termed 'virtual'. VR is not merely a 'text' to be 'read'; it is a parallel world, existing simultaneously with the physical one. For example, a VR user can be walking

with a friend in a busy virtual street while physically sitting at home alone. Moreover, gamers in MUDs can form relationships and even get virtually married while maintaining similar partnerships in real life. As virtual identities and physical bodies mingle and shift, the very essence of what is 'real' is questioned.

Although many VR environments are based on literary works (such as games based on *The Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter series), and despite the fact that young people are more likely than adults to be immersed in VR activities (Wallace, 1999: 246), not many books written for this audience have taken on board the radical literary styles that VR has to offer. However, two novels that do incorporate narrative forms undoubtedly influenced by VR are Lesley Howarth's *Ultraviolet* (2001), and William Sleator's *Rewind* (1999).

Howarth's novel is set in the not-too-distant future, when planet Earth becomes an ecologically damaged world in which, for ten months of the year, the sun's radiation makes it impossible to go outside. Complex, all-immersive VR environments are designed to compensate for outdoor activities. Vi, the protagonist, like many of her teenaged friends, is spending most of her time in Quest – a sophisticated multi-levelled VR adventure game, which includes 'feelies' – physical props to enhance the sensation of reality. Quest also allows gamers to 'paste in' elements of their own life into the gameplan (15).

However, Vi is tired of being cooped up and decides to 'leak', slang for going outside. She undergoes many adventures and meets a charismatic 'leakers' gang-leader named Jope. Jope convinces Vi to betray her father, who works for a corporation manufacturing expensive anti-radiation material, by breaking into his computer files and disclosing the location of his secret factory, so that the 'leakers' can raid it. The plot unfolds through the first half of the book, at which point Vi's father rips the headset off her head and Vi, and the reader, discover that she has been Questing for months and all her adventures have taken place in Virtual Reality. This surprising turn of events makes the reader reconsider the narrative told so far. As Vi tries to piece together her story, separating what was real and what was virtual, the reader must do the same in order to understand what has happened and what is about to happen. Howarth does not overtly signal the shift between the reality of the game and the reality of her protagonist (there are clues, but many readers will only notice these on a second reading). Thus the fluid boundaries between the physical world and the virtual one is experienced at first hand.

The second half of the book includes a section in which Vi and her father seem to go on a journey; however, the experienced reader knows that the episode may well be virtual. Vi and her father create a rosy future scenario, one which they both agree is 'a bit over the top' (242). The plot continues; however, at this point the reader is already supplied with one version of an end.

Howarth successfully conveys the playfulness of the virtual narrative, not only the one played by Vi, but also the one held by the reader. By the end of the book, Vi produces a manuscript printed off the Net. It is entitled *Ultraviolet*, and it is the result of her questing. She declares it is 'at least my fifth different ending' and that 'it leads back to itself' (243–4). The reader is therefore holding the looped product of a VR journey and is invited to re-read

the complete text in a new light. Howarth is unusual in striking a balance between new and old narrative technologies; she suggests that a handheld book can be regarded, and function, as a kind of Virtual Reality, and that computerized Virtual Reality games are just as valid as other forms of narrative (Stratton, in Porter, 1997: 259–64).

Unlike *Ultraviolet*, the novel *Rewind* does not engage in a computer-driven plot. However, the structure of the narrative implies that the author was influenced by Internet and computer games, for it is non-linear and includes several beginnings, middles and endings. Peter is an eleven-year-old whose adoptive parents are expecting their first natural child. The fear of being unwanted brings the conflict between artistic, temperamental Peter and his down-to-earth parents to a tragic climax when the boy runs out of the house and is killed by a passing car. Once dead, Peter is given various opportunities to change his life story in ways that would prevent his death. He is given the power to go back in time, to a moment of his own choosing, to make different decisions. If he fails, he knows his death will become permanent. Peter does fail, twice, but as he moves backwards and forwards in time, he learns new things about himself and his relationship with his parents and friends, things which help him to succeed on his third and final attempt.

Rewind resembles a computer game in a number of ways. There is a task to accomplish, and many possible paths to achieve it. However, a wrong move leads to the termination of the game. The player can then start again, benefiting from information gathered in previous attempts. There are crossroads along the way, where decisions must be made that can easily affect the outcome of the game. In this manner, Peter's reaction to the same, seemingly insignificant, event, such as the new assignment in his favourite art class, can lead to his failure or success. Moreover, while an ordinary computer game has one starting point, *Rewind* has several, as in each attempt Peter chooses to go further and further back in time.

Steator supplies his reader with a multi-stranded narrative. Following each strand separately introduces the reader to a linear, stand-alone story, but together they encompass a rich variety of options, implying that other ways to succeed or fail in the mission still live beyond the written text.

Ultraviolet and *Rewind* are both unusual examples of the influence of Internet and VR narrative styles on literature written for young people. It seems that authors of prose fiction have not yet come to grips with these radical influences, and there is still much confusion about the ways VR's narrative forms may be adopted into the written text. Undoubtedly this confusion will be resolved in the future, as the next generation of authors, who have grown up with electronic narratives as well as those in print and other media forms, begin to write of their own technological experiences.

Internet and politics

The Internet is a meeting place for people from all walks of life. Unlike other media, such as television or newspapers, which typically broadcast the

opinions of a minority to a silent, absorbing majority, the Internet offers an unsupervised, interactive arena where people may voice their opinions and debate them publicly. It is therefore potentially a powerful democratic tool. Furthermore, the Internet cuts across geo-physical boundaries, and its users interact with each other on the basis of shared interests rather than common cultural denominators. This allows marginalized groups, which were formerly oppressed by either state or culture, to network globally and make their voices heard. Young people, having been denied the right to vote or be elected, and thus being dependent on adults to represent their political and social needs, may be one of the chief groups to benefit from this online alternative political sphere. However, the open nature of the Web is a cause for concern, not only for nation-states, democratic or non-democratic (Haselton: online at <www.peacefire.org/info/why.shtml>), but also for parents and teachers. There have been many attempts to regulate and supervise the Internet, and as the debate about online censorship goes on, it becomes clear that it has much to do with adults' attempt to control minors' Internet activity. Although the discourse revolves around protecting the vulnerable, it is clearly a struggle for control, which perhaps reflects adults' fear of young people's potential political power. Indeed, teenagers have already founded an online organization to fight blocking software often used by parents to prevent their children from accessing parts of the Web (Lockard, in Porter, 1997: 228).

The debate about censorship is not the only political discourse surrounding information technology. The Internet is frequently referred to as the 'global village', as many believe that it can bridge the gap between different cultures and help create a multicultural, more tolerant, society. However, experts such as Joseph Lockard claim that this potential is yet to be fulfilled. Lockard criticizes the Web for engaging in a pseudo-multicultural discourse that is in fact dominated by western culture (Lockard, in Porter, 1997: 228). The fact that getting connected is still a luxury, and that the necessary equipment is beyond the means of many, reinforces Lockard's criticism. Furthermore, as most of the information and communication on the Net is available exclusively to English speakers, it seems that there is a long way to go before the dream of the democratic global village will come true.

A small number of novels for children and young adults capture the main themes of this wider debate regarding the Internet as an alternative public sphere. They echo the discourse of Internet liberalism – of its potential to promote multiculturalism, freedom of speech and the possibilities for minors' online political activism. *Amongst the Hidden* (1998) and *Weather Eye* (1995) are two such novels depicting young people's attempts to transcend their inferior political status by networking online to gain recognition and change society. However, they differ in their attitudes towards such networking.

Margaret Haddix's *Amongst the Hidden* tells the story of Luke, a secret third child living under a totalitarian regime that forbids families from having more than two children, because of food shortages. Cooped up, scared and lonely, Luke spends his time spying on the new houses built near his parents' farm. One day he discovers Jen, the third daughter of a neighbouring high-ranking government official. Jen is streetwise, and while Luke and his family

fear the authorities, Jen already reckons that 'everybody knows the Government's not that competent' (48). She knows that the government's declaration that public television and the Internet are monitored is nothing but 'propaganda stuff' (54), and she sets up a secret chat room for third children. Using the web, Jen plans a rally to free the shadow children, an open challenge to mainstream political power. Through Jen, Haddix begins to confront issues such as propaganda and human rights. Jen believes that it is up to her and the other children to change their fate. She believes that 'action's the only thing that counts' (89), and thus she represents the rebellious child who challenges adult authority, in this case using information technology as a revolutionary tool.

Unlike Jen, Luke is cautious. He refuses to join her rally and finds out later that she and sixty other children who dared to show up were shot dead by the police. Luke escapes using fake papers and makes his own plans for helping the shadow children, all of which involve finishing his studies and becoming an adult first (116).

Although the Internet in Haddix's novel is constructed as a place of free speech, where children may create political and social networks, Jen's bitter fate suggests that child power is a problematic issue for the adult writer. Luke is the one who remains alive to carry on to the next book in what is planned to be a trilogy. Thus it is implied that if children wish to challenge adult authority, they need to do it slowly and individually, and preferably grow up first.

Lesley Howarth's *Weather Eye* also engages with an online network of socially aware children. Written before the end of the millennium, it predicts violent global weather during 1999. Telly lives on a wind-farm in England. She is an active member of Weather Eye, an online international club for young meteorologists. She realizes something is wrong with the weather and that the adults around her are too afraid to admit it: 'there would be no adults in Weather Eye Club, because they didn't want to see what was going on' (55). The online network of environmentally aware children is thus constructed as superior to the adults, and their actions are almost subversive.

Following a near-death experience, Telly realizes that the weather reflects society's violence. She hatches a plan to calm things by posting a picture of a tree on the Web and asking Weather Eye members to meditate on it every evening at 7:00 pm their time. The campaign, under the motto 'One Safe Haven in Our Mind' (96), is successful. It mobilizes other children to campaign for environmental awareness in their localities. The children announce their supremacy online: 'Kids, active on all fronts. Adults, brighter later' (171). Telly, satisfied, declares 'Kids could make a difference' (173). Indeed, by the end of the book, *Weather Eye* is a song of praise to the Internet as a political domain for children. The website's diverse members, all from different cultural backgrounds, connect online to make a real difference. Howarth's text strongly reflects the notion that the Web creates positive opportunities for children to be heard globally. The adults in her text are anachronistic and weak, afraid to make changes, and online activity gives young people the chance to network behind their backs and challenge their authority and experience. In this sense Howarth is different from Haddix as she is aware of the permanent

gap between adults and children and chooses to celebrate the potential of children's solidarity, independent of adults' authority and control. Haddix, in contrast, perpetuates the rift by questioning children's ability to mobilize themselves as a unified political force.

Conclusion

Information technology plays an integral part in young people's lives, and is slowly finding its way into the books written for them; however, at the time of writing, representations of computers and the Internet in books for young readers are characterized and burdened by confusion and fear, as a consequence of the technological gap between adult authors and their constantly evolving young readers. The likelihood is that in the near future, books for children and young adults will make more sophisticated use of non-linear narrative formats and exploit the tension created between the virtual and the physical body. The recognition of IT's literary potential will perhaps lead to a cease-fire in the war between surfing and reading.

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