

Le talent de Champetier est tout à fait indiscutable et il est à espérer qu'il entreprendra un jour l'un de ces gigantesques projets qui aboutira en un *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien) ou une *Unendliche Geschichte* (Ende). Entre-temps, savourez un des beaux plaisirs de cette saison littéraire: *La Prisonnière de Barrad*, de Joël Champetier.

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PROGRESS VS. FREEDOM

The tomorrow city. Monica Hughes. Mammoth, 1992 (1978). 137 pp., paper. ISBN 0-7497-0212-5. **Ring-rise, ring-set.** Monica Hughes. Mammoth, 1992 (1982). 122 pp., paper. ISBN 0-7497-0785-2. **Devil on my back.** Monica Hughes. Mammoth, 1992 (1984). 170 pp., paper. ISBN 0-7497-0216-8.

In these three novels, the prolific Monica Hughes serves up three different and frightening versions of brave new worlds. Each work, dependent for its impact on the skilful use of the ironic mode, invites the reader to weigh the advantages of technological progress cut loose from human compassion, love, and freedom. At the end of each of these novels, we are compelled to conclude, without having felt manipulated—something, by the way, that each of the novels speaks out against—that even the most brilliant social engineering and laudable designs for the general good come at too high a price when *individual* freedom is sacrificed to them. Orwell and Huxley, among others, have told us this already. Hughes is entitled to join their company by virtue of her talented portrayal, for adolescent consumption, of three highly questionable utopias.

In two of these three novels, Hughes depicts two environments radically opposed to each other in terms of their goals, aspirations, and life-styles. In all three novels, an adolescent gradually and painfully recognizes the enormous affront to human dignity and freedom that occurs when society places social stability and a sanitized world above all other considerations. Ironically, by showing the reader the tremendous power of pure reason and logic when they are applied to society's ills, these three novels also call into question the limits of pure reason and logic when they are divorced from the spiritual, emotional, and unquantifiable components of human nature. Hughes, through her protagonists' troubled and lonely journeys to enlightenment, demonstrates the importance of balancing Dionysius with Apollo if true social progress is to take place.

Characteristically in the story line of most children's literature, it is a child who must confront forces immeasurably greater than her/himself without the support of parents or others traditionally seen as more worldly wise and experienced. Indeed, more often than not, the worldly-wise adults are depicted

as positively antagonistic to the child's perceived sense of his or her mission. Hughes's three novels are no exception to this normal pattern. In the first of these novels, *The tomorrow city*, first published in 1978, the protagonist, Carol Henderson, known throughout as Caro, gradually becomes aware of the formidably destructive powers of a computer known as C-3 designed and programmed by her father to help transform their town of Thompsonville, into a model city, "a place where people live and grow, where there is emphasis on beauty and safety, on parks and playgrounds. Where the streets are clean and the citizens proud and happy" (5). In the process of carrying out its mandate, however, the computer, as it must, fails to take into account the human dimension, and goes about its task with a terrible efficiency. It does away with all that is not expedient and useful—animals, old people, alcohol, cigarettes, dirt, resident tramps, and the like. Programmed itself, it also programmes the citizens of Thompsonville to work like automatons on its behalf, all, of course except Caro and her good friend David who find themselves in a struggle to rescue the city from its deadly sterility and imprisonment. The novel is a presentation of this struggle between Caro and the computer and all of its grown-up, muddle-headed allies. In this novel, as in the other two under review, Hughes does not provide us with a contrived and happy solution to the problem with the ostensibly puny forces of David defeating the technological Goliath. Although the computer is de-programmed, it is done so at a very real cost to Caro, and there is no feeling at the end of *The tomorrow city* that what Caro has destroyed in the name of "Feeling. Thinking. Even hurting" may not assert itself again when the technocrats of efficiency help us with the planning of our sanitized tomorrows.

Ring-rise, ring-set, published first in 1982, is more obviously a work of science fiction than *The tomorrow city* and, for that reason alone, is perhaps less frightening than the earlier novel. In her introduction to *Ring-rise*, Hughes hypothesizes on the disappearance from the earth of the great mammals some thirty-four million years ago. She claims that they may have died because of starvation and increasingly cold winters brought on by the particles of a meteor or comet forming an opaque ring (hence the title of the book) and "holding back the sun's energy from the temperate and polar latitudes of the Earth." *Ring-rise* is about the possible repetition of this phenomenon and a society's attempts to forestall the inevitable disaster. If *Ring-rise* is a less frightening novel than the more "realistic" *The tomorrow city* (despite rumblings we hear from time to time about the coming of a new Ice Age), it is, nevertheless, a far more morally complex study. In *The tomorrow city* it is always clear that the computer represents a good-intentioned, mechanistic evil that has to be defeated in order for the truly human, with all of its wonderful imperfections, to flourish. In *Ring-rise* such is not the case. *Ring-rise* pits one set of human standards against an equally valid set, such that the reader (to say nothing of the fifteen-year-old protagonist Lisa) must constantly weigh the validity of the decisions that the two societies make. The novel poses a series of moral conundra, some of the most

complex being when, if ever, is it appropriate to sacrifice a few for the sake of the many? How does one assess the relative value of different and opposing life styles? To what extent does a society motivated by scientific discovery take precedence over a more primitive and primal one? Remarkably, in this novel, these questions are confronted by a fifteen-year-old girl who feels the pressures of having to choose between her legitimate but scientifically-driven family (known as the Techs), and her adopted, primitive family (known as Ekoes). The girl's problems with her identity, symbolized in the novel through images of death and re-birth and through her two names, Lisa and Iriook, serve as the novel's major structuring device. As was the case in *The tomorrow city*, there is no clear sense at the end of *Ring-rise* that anything has been resolved. Lisa chooses one family over the other, but her continued survival, and that of the society she has opted for, rests very much in the hands of the scientifically-driven society she has abandoned. There are no pat answers, no easy solutions in Monica Hughes' novels.

The third novel, *Devil on my back*, first published in 1984, brings us face to face again with the damnable computer whose blessings, Hughes seems to be saying both here and in *The tomorrow world*, are mixed at best. As was the case in *Ring-rise*, *ring-set*, Hughes structures this novel around two conflicting worlds and focuses our attention on the effects of these two worlds upon Tomi, the novel's adolescent protagonist. Initially at least, before he begins his painful education by living with and coming to love the slaves who have revolted against their enslavement by fleeing ArcOne, Tomi is strongly prejudiced towards the world and values of ArcOne, a highly-structured, stratified, and utopic world in which he holds a privileged position by virtue of his father's high political office. However, after gradually coming to learn that freedom with pain is far preferable to a leisurely enslavement, he makes his journey back to his home with a view to helping his friends on the outside by sending them much needed implements and foodstuffs from the capacious stores of ArcOne. Without giving away the ingenious conclusion, suffice it to say that, upon his return, Tomi finds an ally in the most unexpected place and the novel ends with Tomi working to peacefully subvert the enslaved condition of the inhabitants of ArcOne by providing them with "dreamy" alternatives to their present life. As was the case in *Ring-rise*, Hughes makes use of a death-rebirth motif to suggest Tomi's new awareness of the nature of true freedom. Nine months after his enforced departure from ArcOne, he returns to his birth-place a new person.

In each of these novels Hughes provides the reader with a vision of the world in which nothing is quite as important as human freedom and the ability to choose, despite the mistakes we often make when we assert these precious gifts.

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