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## Compte-rendu : Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers

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*Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers.* Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2016. 185 pages.

In *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression*, Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak analyses radical fantasy texts (China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun*, Jonathan Stroud's Bartimaeus sequence, Frances Hardinge's *Gullstruck Island*, *Fly by Night*, *Twilight Robbery* and *A Face like Glass*, and David Whitley's *Agora* trilogy), alongside what she calls 'radicalizing rather than already radical' fiction (102), such as Ursula Le Guin's *Powers*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Terry Pratchett's *Nation*, Rachel Hartman's *Seraphina* and *Shadow Scale*, and Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* and *Bitterblue*. The book as a whole, though, is much more than a collection of literary analyses. As the subtitle suggests, Deszcz-Tryhubczak's concern is to examine not merely how these utopian/dystopian YA novels discuss political, social and economic oppression, but also the internalisation of and the collective resistance to that oppression, and the role of young characters as 'catalysts of change' (74). The author also aspires to determine the potential influence of such utopian literature on young readers and to engage with real young readers. With this aim in mind, she combines reader-response criticism and reception studies (which she calls 'empirical reader-response research' [18]). The result is a metacritical reflection on children's literature research, on how to create intergenerational spaces where adults and children can express their views on specific texts, and on how to empower children so that they believe in their agency.

Deszcz-Tryhubczak aptly identifies 'the fantasy of the utopian young reader who will create a better future' (35), a fantasy generated by some YA literature critics, who, at the same time, seem to ignore real young audiences and their actual reactions to some utopian novels. Moreover, she reflects on the paradox of showing that the young reader is captured in a certain position by the textual structure of some utopian novels, or of imposing the (adult) critic's interpretation of these novels while promoting the idea of children's agency (40). Although Deszcz-Tryhubczak acknowledges that many children's literature critics have previously advocated a child-centred approach, and that some have ventured into the field of empirical research in the past, she believes there is still room for furthering this agenda. Indeed, she regrets what she identifies as the widespread scepticism towards empirical research in the field of children's literature studies (19), and argues that it is of crucial importance to engage with real young readers in order to challenge the prevalent idea that children are solely constructed by adults or that they are mere

projections of adult desires. In other words, she seeks to qualify the authority that adults (including academics) actually have on children, and to foster genuine dialogue between children and adults.

After setting out the context in which radical fantasy fiction emerged (Chapter 2), Deszcz-Tryhubczak shows how the novels of her corpus variously problematise the processes of collective action, the role of young people in bringing about change (Chapter 3), the difficulties of actually implementing radical transformations, and the need for permanent negotiation between the different parties concerned (Chapter 4). The book's core preoccupations are tackled in the last third of the book. In chapters 5 and 6, Deszcz-Tryhubczak presents the empirical studies she led in 2014. For the first, she asked 20 teenagers from Wrocław high schools to read China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* and then answer a questionnaire. She wanted to determine how these young readers reacted to the conventions and themes of radical fantasy fiction and whether the novel had a cognitive impact on them (119). The study revealed, among other findings, that Miéville's novel did *not* affect the participants' beliefs concerning young people's agency, but rather that after reading it 'their schema of the impossibility of children's political agency became substantially reinforced' (130). Additionally the study 'exposed some serious limitations of using questionnaires comprised of open-ended questions with young readers' (136), since some students did not answer or answered only very briefly. The author concludes that the 'one-way communication between children and adults' (136) that the questionnaire embodied is, in essence, very conservative. Chapter 6 is, therefore, devoted to a new and original type of reception study based not on questionnaires, but on collaborative conversations in which the academic is a peer reader of the novels under analysis. While the findings of these conversations are not, in fact, very different from those Deszcz-Tryhubczak presents in Chapter 5 (for instance, the participants in the study presented in Chapter 6 do not believe they can change the adult world until they grow up (159), much like the participants in the study presented in Chapter 5), she maintains that because this approach respects young adults as individuals and does not rely on an age-based power imbalance, it comes closer to what children's literature studies should be. In her conclusion, Deszcz-Tryhubczak argues that if children's literature studies are to be relevant to children's lives, researchers should treat participants of reception studies not as objects of research, but as research protagonists. She champions 'participatory research' (168–169) which empowers adults and children alike, and which 'may lead to civic engagement and

active citizenship of children in the here and now' (168). The reader may be somewhat frustrated that no such participatory research project is presented in the book, as this seems to be the culminating idea of the author's reflection. Researchers working in the field of children's literature, childhood studies and reception theory should be on the lookout for Deszcz-Tryhubczak's next publications on the topic, which could well be of utmost significance.

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