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A Parable for our Times: Activism and Terrorism in Anne Fine’s Survival Quest, *The Road of Bones*

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This paper examines representational issues that emerge when Anne Fine’s coming of age depiction of an extreme journey based on an historic period of social and political conflict is read as a parable about world politics. The Road of Bones explores, through an adolescent character’s struggle to survive State-led terrorism against its subjects, political process, societal upheaval, and the loss of human rights. But if Fine’s novel raises issues about political governance in ways that interrogate post 9/11 contemporary politics, the work also raises issues about cultural representation and global audiences when the compromised position of Fine’s heroic subject draws upon previously established East/West polarities that privilege a Western readership. In the concluding scenes the protagonist’s agentic response may be dually interpreted: is this response to be construed as activism or, more negatively, as a form of terrorism?

Key words: Anne Fine, utopia/dystopia, political change, terror, national stereotypes, soviet history, cultural representation.

Mostly I simply put one foot in front of the other and told myself there was nothing to be done except endure. This road was colder, fouler, even more dangerous that those before. But my whole life had gone down the wrong track [. . .]. And that was nothing special. We were all slaves walking a road of bones. (*The Road of Bones* 205)

In a comment on her novel about rapid political change, *The Road of Bones*, which was inspired by socio-political upheavals in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Anne Fine affirmed that she was not writing historical fiction but rather uttering a warning about contemporary shifts in global politics. In particular, she hoped to draw the attention of young readers to ‘shifting ideologies, these sorts of beliefs and panics and fears that can somehow get things changed, bit by bit, until you have a society you could never have imagined and you don’t really want’ (‘Meet the Author’). Similar concern and intent was expressed by British author
George Orwell, amid the political re-alignments of a post WWII Europe, in his preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, in which he describes how he ‘thought to expose the Soviet myth’ of a successful socialist State in a manner ‘that would be easily understood by almost anyone’ (118). Orwell’s concern for a responsible participation in political process, a concern he made quite evident in his animal fable, is one similarly voiced in the expressed intention of Anne Fine’s *Road of Bones*: ‘I would hope that anyone who reads it, most particularly curious and intelligent young people, would have far more of the sense of how politics actually work’ (‘Meet the Author’). What Fine has portrayed as a journey into the death camps of ‘Father Troffim’s’ glorious revolution – a veiled reference to the Stalinist State and its ‘Gulag Solution’ – has a dual purpose: the survival quest simultaneously depicts the road toward subjective alienation even as it traces, through a dystopian lens, a political rite of passage driven by a nation’s revolutionary utopian vision. Throughout these depictions of societal upheaval, the legacy of ‘Father Troffim’s’ regime, Fine relates a political parable by which the devastating effects of a political and social experiment might be easily understood. In like manner to Orwell’s political allegory, which identifies the fascist distortion of socialist reform in a simple farmyard microcosm as a cautionary tale, Fine’s novel draws attention to the impact of rapid political change and its enforcement of utopian ideals as a journey survived by few, a ‘road of bones’. As demonstrated in the novel’s setting, this survival quest is grounded in protest, a violent response to the cruelty depicted in scenes of socio-political suppression that were endemic to Father Troffim’s regime.

The novel’s title is metonymic of other social and political journeys into failed utopian visions by which political change is constructed upon the ‘bones’ of innocent citizens. Its bleak, pessimistic outlook is both determined and unrelenting: a dystopian mode informs narrative point of view in a way that precludes any future hope within the text. By employing this strategy the author conveys a warning about utopian visions past and future, but the implied criticism of contemporary ‘New World Orders’ similarly offers little hope for the success of utopian ventures: ‘Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises’ (1). Filtered through an interpretive lens of present political concerns – for example, the failure of a more contemporary utopian concept that a new world order would ensue after the collapse of the Soviet Union – the author’s portrayal of human endurance depicts just how desolate a route the failed utopian vision may become.

The novel opens with a portrayal of the deprivations suffered by the protagonist, Yuri, and his kin as social change follows years of political upheaval. What Fine depicts as initial limitations in the daily routine of an ordinary family is intensified as rapid leadership displacement and increased societal controls lead to further loss and disillusionment. Restrictions of speech, non-essential travel, and a variety of deprivations – food, work, wages, and living accommodation – portray societal uncertainty at the most basic level of human existence. Fine depicts Yuri’s complaint about poor workplace protection as the catalyst that ends his association with family and friends and precipitates
his solitary existence as a fugitive. His ignorance of the political protocol that restricts public speech, namely the loss of the right to criticise workplace safety, is portrayed in an angry outburst following the death of a close friend, Alyosha. But the subsequent depiction of personal sacrifice – by flight Yuri hopes to ensure protection for his family – signals the journey’s beginning. Yuri’s growing reliance upon silence and deceit demonstrates a process of attrition that is directly related to the State’s systemic disciplinary controls founded upon punishment and fear. In this manner Fine affirms the connection between individual subjectivity and socio-cultural forces and verifies what McCallum has identified as an authorial concern in adolescent literature to reflect subject formation in relation to ‘how notions of identity are formed within specific contexts and shaped by larger social structures and processes’ (‘Young Adult Literature’ 218). Thus, commonly depicted concerns that dominate constructions of the subject in adolescent fiction (Bradford et al. 12) have been stripped back because of the context of Fine’s novel. Concerns that dominate constructions of the subject in adolescent fictions – Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? – are no longer relevant in Yuri’s world of political upheaval. Instead adolescent inquiry centres upon the subject’s interactions within an aberrant and unpredictable system of punishment. The single issue that is foremost to this coming of age journey remains: What does it all mean? (Bradford et al. 12).

Subsequent labour camp experiences, which serve to harden Yuri’s determination to survive amid the societal consequences of living under a reign of terror, may identify his acts of protest as the response of an activist. But equally, as Yuri’s activities spiral from acts of sabotage into an ‘ends-justify-means’ resolve to engage in acts of brutality, his transformation could be understood as a progression from activism to terrorism. Hence, inasmuch as the subject’s coming of age quest results in alienation, representational aspects of heroic subjectivity may be interpreted in two ways: Yuri may be considered an activist whose acts of protest against abuses of human rights, from a Western perspective, have been interpreted as heroic. But such a reading would fail to consider the author’s concluding scene (242–3) where the alignment between sabotage and the subject’s diminished capacity for moral reasoning depicts the loss of a moral and societal conscience. Here the intertext of ‘terror’ informs interpretations of political issues and because this aspect is tainted by more global terrorist activities of our post 9/11 world, the subject’s resolute turn toward violent action will be perceived through this interpretative lens.

As a consequence of this tension in concluding scenes, Yuri’s alienation and societal disengagement not only demonstrates a compromised emergence of the heroic subject, but also becomes a problematic representational issue for Fine’s global audience. Because it is affirmed by pre-existing East/West polarising discourses, such a representation of national identity in heroic subjectivity may confirm what Marek Oziewicz (11) identifies as a sustained trope of national stereotyping in Western literature for child/adolescent readers. As with any retelling of historic and political journeys, The Road of Bones raises important issues about present global interventionist policies through the unresolved questions
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of the past. Problematic representational aspects in the novel are emphasised, however, when the contemporary lens, a ‘cautioning’ perspective that grounds the novel in the dynamic of present political perspectives, confirms Yuri’s alienation in the concluding scenes. Hence, previously established East/West stereotypes are validated and convey cultural positions of power because positive and negative alignments in the novel’s portrayal of child/adolescent subjectivity derive from the polarising political influences that dominated the Cold War era.

Overtly, as a survival tale for young adolescents, The Road of Bones evokes a powerful and commemorative metaphor that aligns recorded history with depictions of the subject’s journey through social and political turmoil. During the years of the Soviet Perestroika many Soviet authors sought to record and explain the societal conditions by which totalitarian regimes silenced criticism. In an analysis of changes in children’s dramatic arts of this period in Russia, Anna Gubergrits comments that, even though the period of ‘political thaw’ was too short, children’s performances permitted a critique of the system which, although reluctant to depict systemic failures, ‘was shown in a convincing, lively and understandable manner, supported by true to life characters’ (64). Within Eastern European nations this capacity for critical appraisal is evident as more recent releases of Soviet archival material have enabled a review of Stalinist policies. Commemorative museums for Gulag victims permit a transfer of knowledge that exposes what many identify as the Gulag holocaust. Similarly, as the numbers of Soviet citizens who experienced Gulag imprisonment diminish, renewed attempts to commemorate their stories have led to further collaborative effort: Frierson and Vilensky, for example, have recently published some aspects of the NKVD Gulag records alongside the personal memories of Gulag survivors in Children of the Gulag (2010); and Anne Fine credits Applebaum’s Gulag (2003), which draws extensively upon recently opened Russian archives, as the creative stimulus for The Road of Bones (Official Web Site). But Fine’s work sets out to be more than memorial or commemoration. The Road of Bones takes the form of a parable about failed utopian visions and thus functions in a similar manner to Orwell’s animal fable: both authors intentionally provoke further thought on the impact such socio-political upheavals may enact upon innocent citizens. Thus Fine’s narrative expresses concern as much about present political change as about the atrocities of the past.

As a strategy which links the subject’s coming of age journey with Stalin’s socio-political route to revolution, Fine constructs a road motif by which the political process of Yuri’s descent into horror intersects with the physical route by which his quest has been framed. But perceptions of Gulag imprisonment and of the work camp conditions experienced in these infamous sites will also become grounded in a powerful human rights intertext: during the physical journey undertaken by those who experienced Gulag life, many succumbed to the extreme conditions including those whose only crime was, like Fine’s Yuri, an inopportune statement, incorrect papers, or even kinship with possible dissident elements in Soviet society. Anne Applebaum mentions, for example, execution
quotas as well as the effects of starvation and overwork as instrumental in causing the disappearance of millions of Soviet citizens (Gulag 114).

Because any contemporary allusions to the historic route through the Kolyma, named the ‘road of bones’ by Gulag inmates, will provide intertextual links with the political issues of expediency and compartmentalisation as practised under Stalin’s regime, Fine’s title for the novel also draws upon the political concept of Stalin’s forgotten holocaust. Depictions of civilian imprisonment and/or execution due to dissident protest ground the notion that an individual human life has value only inasmuch as it is connected to the national agenda, the utopian vision. During Stalin’s regime a sentence to the Gulag camps of the Kolyma was considered a death sentence, since so few returned. Describing the willingness to expend dissident elements of society, Solzhenitsyn affirms this perspective – the term katorga (penal servitude) signifying the intention of Stalin’s Gulag phenomenon:

Little attempt was made to conceal their purpose: the katorzhane were to be done to death […] but in the Gulag tradition murder was protracted, so that the doomed would suffer longer. (iii. 8)

Thus the geographical existence of Stalin’s ‘road of bones’ provides a political mise en scène for Fine’s tragedy. Linking work-camp settlements, the Kolyma route stretches from Magadan to Yakutz and was constructed by inmates of labour camps scattered across the far north eastern regions of the Siberian tundra. This link with the historic setting of national atrocity informs Fine’s use of dystopian strategies and results in a powerful novelistic depiction of the road as an archaeological site by which a failed utopian vision might be studied. The same bleak outlook is depicted in Yuri’s ‘road of bones’ journey when his survival quest and further alienation is acknowledged as a death route. So, although the author cites liberties that were taken ‘with history, geography, language and culture’ (Road of Bones, ‘Note to the Reader’), the physical existence of the Kolyma Route tends to centre the journey within the Soviet historical record. This strategy also allows the author to construct intertextual links with existing works of Soviet authors. Solzhenitsyn, for example, introduces The Gulag Archipelago with an archaeological metaphor:

And the Kolyma was […] the pole of ferocity of that amazing country of the Gulag which, though scattered in an archipelago geographically, was, in the psychological sense, fused into a continent […]. And someday in the future, this archipelago, its air, and the bones of its inhabitants, frozen in a lens of ice, will be discovered by our descendants like some improbable [prehistoric] salamander. (i. xviii)

Baccolini and Moylan have identified a new trend in critical dystopian science fiction whereby contemporary fictions have tended to revise past traditions of dystopian pessimism in order to depict a future hope within the text (7). In children’s and young adult fiction, current research has identified a similar trend in the use of utopian/dystopian themes and motifs: transformative utopianism is identified in the impulse of such fictions to imagine ‘transformed
world orders’ that propose utopian outcomes or possibilities (Bradford et al. 6). *The Road of Bones*, however, reverses this contemporary paradigm of hope when, in response to a particularly bleak depiction of socio-political history, the author adopts what Baccolini and Moylan note as a past tradition in adult dystopian fiction: any hope for future redemption is centred outside the text and the novel’s concluding scenes retain tragic interpretations of adolescent subjectivity (7). Noting this same trend early in the emergence of YA realistic fiction, Bradford et al. suggest that the tradition of dystopian fictions which promote ‘bleak analyses of human society’ has been ‘a major impediment for authors seeking to engage with new world orders by envisaging more utopian outcomes’ (29). What becomes evident is that *The Road of Bones* reverts to a more bleak thematic frame in order to depict Yuri’s tragic journey and that darker modes of established adult dystopian fictions, which have tended to challenge utopian visions of past, present and future world orders, ground Fine’s parable in admonition. That the authorial use of this dystopian impulse reflects an urgent intent to examine injustice, Gottlieb suggests, indicates the extent of disillusionment with failed utopian visions. Gottlieb further identifies the transition from socialist hope to disillusionment in the soviet experience as one that has become ‘central to the utopian/dystopian axis of our times’ (7). This perspective, dominant in political thought during the past century, similarly informs literary representations that examine the consequences of utopian politics. As Gottlieb suggests, such depictions are as much projections of contemporary Western concerns that ‘a type of totalitarian dictatorship’ (7–8) could arise under current political alarms and restrictions as they are reconstructions of failed ideologies in political history. So the intention to interrogate utopian thought in society, made evident in well known adult political satires of the speculative genre (Huxley’s *Brave New World*, for example), resists the expression of hope through transformation. Gottlieb affirms this dystopian interpretative lens as evidence of political reversals in utopian thought and further asserts that ‘there are historical phenomena that create societies that should be classed as dystopic’ (5). This aspect of the dystopian genre, an authorial intent to identify injustice through the dystopian lens in order to contest aberrant societal practices, is similarly evident in Fine’s disengagement from the utopian visions advocated by transformative depictions of contemporary new world orders.

Consequently, *The Road of Bones* draws attention to unresolved issues in the soviet commemoration of Stalin’s legacy and provokes further thought about current political processes, most particularly those contemporary issues of injustice and atrocity that are frequently concealed by contemporary political silences. Yuri’s questioning of the soviet political process during Father Troffim’s rise to power: ‘What I don’t understand […] is how it all went so wrong?’ (137), imbricates the puzzlement of other citizen voices, those voices similarly silenced by the effects of sudden political terrors, transitions and disappearances.

To address Yuri’s inquiry about ‘how it all went so wrong’ (137) Fine outlines the process of Father Troffim’s dictatorial regime. Through the
perspective of fellow camp inmates the author refines the parable, clearly linking utopian policy and consequence:

‘All it takes is faith […] It’s all you need […] A theory behind you giving wind to your sails. What else would give them the determination to wade through torrents of blood? […] It’s faith. They’re blinded by it. Fortified by it. So fortified that what they do seems good and worthy even if, done for any other purpose, those things would seem shocking’. (160)

This potential to re-frame historic contexts in ways that promote a review of the social and political aspects of a past utopian vision has been readily accommodated in children’s literature. Telling and interpreting history in ways that confront unresolved issues, suggest Bradford et al. (24), serves to confront the dystopian possibilities of both past and contemporary ways of seeing. Hence the dystopian representations of historic events, in this case depictions of repressive regimes and totalitarian governance portrayed in The Road of Bones, offer opportunities for review. But at the same time, as Fine’s novel demonstrates, historic depictions may also function as a frame for viewing present political and ideological concerns. Yuri’s questioning invites a similar awareness that political regimes and revolutionary visions may be corrupted by the desire for power.

Whilst the very notion of ‘terror’ has undergone a shift in meaning through those local and global restrictions by which contemporary life has been reconfigured amid the post 9/11 fears of the past decade, the lens of fear, which demonstrates how the application of terror derives power, is very evident in both fiction and non-fiction portrayals produced by soviet writers who sought to convey the impact of Stalin’s regime upon soviet cultures. Anatoli Rybakov’s Deli Arbati [Children of the Arbat] (1988), for example, an historic trilogy centred in the fashionable Arbat district of Moscow, sought to convey the controlling impact of that culture of fear to an emerging Russia, a young adult readership, which was largely ignorant of Stalin’s use of terror to subdue and eradicate all opposition to his regime. The characters and story-world settings of Deli Arbati, portray terror in the silencing of critical voice through exile and execution. Fine's portrayal of Yuri’s flight demonstrates another perspective: ‘I knew that neither my grandmother’s age nor my parent’s innocence would be any protection […] the guards would beat them’ (to provide a confession). But even in assuming responsibility for his own vocal protest, twelve year old Yuri is unaware that his journey into fear had just begun and that his public statement: ‘Ah, yes! Of course! The revolution! Rolling on towards our Glorious Future’ (53) would provide sufficient evidence for his arrest.

Whilst fear is evidenced in the narrated actions and reactions of parental figures that inform the initial chapters of Fine’s novel, Yuri is permitted a critical point of view, one that refuses to silence the inner capacity to reject socialist visions and propaganda depicting the ‘Glorious Revolution’. Throughout his fugitive years Yuri’s protest remains silenced by this awareness of powerful governing systems. Protest, nonetheless, fuels his determination to survive
transportation and imprisonment even though a sense of despair pervades and intensifies his awareness of human fragility.

Hence, what the author identifies as ‘stages of despair […] steps down through layers of misery until you reach a place where nothing, not even your own life, seems to matter’ (128), is balanced by the subject’s growing perception of activism, of unseen protest groups that sabotage the rail network. In the work camp, where overcoming deprivation, starvation and work quotas consumed all energy, and the dead ‘passed through the camp like shoals of fish’ (148), Yuri is educated in the signs of resistance: ‘yellow and black’ signifies the subject’s movement toward an expression of agency. Fine employs these protest colours as a literary motif by which Yuri’s interest in activism and sabotage becomes a developmental route. So, even as Yuri hears tales of saboteurs and their branding activities along transport routes, activism and sabotage are increasingly identified as a form of agentic power in the novel. This same motif identifies Yuri’s protest after he escapes work camp imprisonment: ‘yellow and black’ ground his response to injustice when Yuri decides to ‘take a leaf out of the Leader’s book’ but the motif also marks a developmental transition toward more violent action: the subject intention informs this resolve to make his own new social and political code with ‘pitilessness our only right, and pity our only wrong’ (242).

Fine’s strategy in depicting protest as a form of agency and as a response to atrocity emphasises how enforced silence, concealing the loss of human rights, will tend to invite opposition. Stalinist procedures in the Gulag worked toward the withdrawal of inmate identification, the denial of humanity through starvation and deprivation, and the complete segregation of dissident elements from society. When Yuri becomes a fugitive, he secludes himself in the forest and pursues silence for his own safety, but once he is interred within the work camp, the extreme environment of this segregation ensures that voice and identity lose significance. Compartmentalisation, suggests De Swaan, works to maintain control through limitation because protest is silenced by segregation (270). Representations of the Gulag in Fine’s novel replicate what De Swaan has termed a ‘dyscivilising process’: this process occurs in secrecy ‘in demarcated spaces, in delineated episodes, well separated from the rest of society. The barbarity is compartmentalised’ (268). Compartmentalisation, as reproduced in Fine’s novel, is immediately recognisable as a contemporary strategy. When political expediency dictated urgent changes in the West’s ‘War against Terror’, for example, dyscivilising strategies which separate and silence both the perpetrator and the innocent through associations of culture, race, nationality or kinship, soon emerged. In this manner compartmentalisation permits dyscivilising patterns to go undetected and conceals a similar disregard for human rights that has become a form of terrorising power.

Whilst The Road of Bones invites a contemporary investigation into the silencing of human rights issues that ensue from past dyscivilising systems, Fine’s depiction also implies that such systems can be activated in any society when what De Swaan identifies as the ‘spectre of transformation from democracy to tyranny’ is sanctioned by a process of segmentation. Any political change that
enables acts of extreme violence to be rationalised through separation from established civilising codes can create a dyscivilising process (265). Because of this alignment between the Stalinist regime and a contemporary politics of human rights, *The Road of Bones* invites reading audiences to give further thought to how political violations of recognised human rights issues might occur; to consider how political systems permit atrocities to remain hidden.

An analogy between failed utopian visions, one based upon the soviet historic record, the other, an underlying contemporary interrogation of political interventions undertaken by Western nations, informs the novel’s representation of Yuri’s transition from youthful protest to violent action. Fine’s admonition is clear: the practice of atrocity is a dyscivilising process which invites the oppressed to become oppressors. The author signifies this journey as a ‘never-ending road of bones’ and although a quest of development, Yuri’s journey is depicted, at both national and personal levels of narration, as a reversal of adolescent developmental norms (241). Thus, even as Yuri’s early loss of relational connection is intensified by imprisonment, the dystopian mode locates portrayals of his liminality within an increasing sense of societal alienation. Identified first in a loss of identity, Yuri’s isolation deepens as both security and personal integrity are displaced by atrocity. He can trust no one; he must adopt other roles, concoct half truths about his life, and remain silent about his past. Because his original identity is compromised, he is severed from kinship ties and restricted in making new relationships. Even so, until concluding scenes in the novel Yuri’s emergent self demonstrates survival through agentic behaviours that can be readily identified as heroic.

When Fine’s story-world becomes the frame by which the route through terror is mapped upon the life of the subject, the author’s dark tale is as much a commentary upon contemporary notions about the problematic role of activist/terrorist protest as it is a memorial to the millions of Russian citizens, children among them, who were interred in the Gulag labour camps. Certainly *The Road of Bones* depicts Yuri’s journey as a survival quest, an adolescent coming of age through socio-political upheaval. But even as Yuri successfully escapes work camp imprisonment, the experience of treachery at the hands of his criminal companions during this escape is portrayed as the final demarcation that separates Yuri from his more humane self. Applebaum’s historical record informs Fine’s portrayal of her protagonist’s sudden realisation that cannibalistic intent had prompted two adult inmates, Leon and ‘The Bear’, to select him as a third companion in their escape plot:

Pairs of prisoners would agree in advance to escape along with a third man (the ‘meat’), who was destined to become sustenance for the other two on their journey.

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Yuri escapes this fate when he outwits the pair: creating a diversion, he breaks away and appropriates all food, camouflage clothing, and other supplies. Even so, in this loss of innocent trust which is portrayed as the novel’s transforming moment, the terror of cannibalistic intent acts as a pivotal incident. At this
point in the novel Fine’s depiction shifts to the emergence of an activist whose escape is sharpened by survival needs and misshapen by the politically induced maelstrom of Father Troffim’s regime. Because this representation takes an ominous detour as Yuri’s protest leads to determined acts of sabotage in final scenes, the novel reaffirms the dark tones of tragic endings preferred by some writers of adult dystopian fictions, particularly, as Gottlieb suggests, those whose narratives intentionally reflect a critique of political utopianism (7–8). Fine’s representation of an alienated subject who achieves agency through activism is utterly compelling, but when that protest implies the reciprocation of violent acts through sabotage, then the rejection of moral and societal codes suggests a tragic, but negative outcome in subject development.

Thus Yuri’s survival quest portrays an alternative pathway to the more traditional developmental phases identified by McCallum as the most commonly depicted aspects of adolescent fictions (‘Young Adult Literature’ 217). Premature adult responsibilities coincide with environmental and event atrocities to become formative experiences in the same way that flight patterns to avoid arrest dominate Yuri’s fugitive existence. The movement from solipsism toward relational connection and responsible action is established, however fleetingly, when Yuri attempts to protect his family from arrest and interrogation through flight. But survival, the most dominant agenda in the fugitive’s journey, invites a regression into solipsistic behaviours when Yuri is sentenced to an adult prison. Arrest and exile to Father Troffim’s work-camp reinforce his isolation and without protective relationships Yuri is exposed to treachery. Under such conditions, adolescent developmental processes—particularly the creation of a stable identity—are depicted as problematic. The need for food, shelter and obscurity supplant a desire for identity and place in society. By assuming the identity of others, Yuri conceals his own identity: papers are gathered first from the dead grandson of the woodsman and his wife where Yuri takes refuge under the pretence of official directives. Similarly, a stolen uniform—taken from a murdered guard during the ill fated Gulag escape—permits new identity and rail travel under cover of official personnel: no one questions members of the NKVD guard.

Concomitant with Yuri’s need for obscurity, Fine portrays a subject increasingly distanced from his own moral centre as Yuri’s survival priorities dominate his actions and responses. Consequentially the subject is liminally inscribed within an already limited societal construct and Yuri’s existence in the fringe work camp settlement is depicted as one of few options. Essentially, the remote settlements portrayed in the novel form a spatial barrier against Yuri’s return to home territory in the same way that, according to historical records, escaping or freed Gulag inmates were banished from family contact. Because of this social segregation and the complete lack of peer companions, relational connection is significantly absent. In this manner Fine acknowledges both the silencing strategies and the peripheral isolation that were so indicative of recorded Gulag imprisonment experiences. Recently released historical evidence indicates that, to the time of Stalin’s death, categories of ‘enemies of the people’
included consequences for children based upon ‘the principle of punishing the entire family for the enemy or enemies among them’ (Frierson & Vilensky 9). Fine’s portrayal of Yuri’s isolation depicts the consequence of this limitation: Yuri’s next decision is marked by the motif of resistance – ‘yellow and black’. Moreover, even as terrorist activities give voice to Yuri’s protest, he is aware of his difference from other saboteurs: ‘Compared to me the rest were babes in arms. Good-natured innocents, as different from myself as I was from the old Yuri of long ago’ (236). Thus tragic outcomes inform the novel’s concluding depiction of the subject’s intensified alienation.

For these reasons motifs of passage, traditionally important to the coming of age quest structure and which tend to define the key developmental tasks of adolescent subjectivity, are noticeably absent or upended. The author’s watershed of horror, by which Yuri’s moment of realisation portrays the awareness that naivety and misplaced trust have led to the imminent possibility of death, serves to intensify the novel’s dystopian theme in a sense of extreme isolation:

Terror. The realisation that a boy who’s desperate can be plucked as easily as a peach. [...] I was their only way forward. I was the meat. (199–200)

Upon this final severance with childhood, survival patterns of self preservation sustain Yuri’s protest within a darker sense of desperation such that, annexing the patterns of an adult dystopian mode, future hope in the novel now becomes situated in events external to the text (Baccolini & Moylan 7). Patterns that emerge in The Road of Bones therefore create a blurred representation of moral development: in order to survive Yuri must adapt to extreme conditions, so, unable to trust any companion, the protagonist invents, lies, evades capture and commits theft. In short, after first adopting any strategy of deception in order to survive oppression, Yuri becomes the oppressor.

In this manner Fine constructs a compromised transformation: Yuri chooses sabotage. What McCallum (‘Young Adult Literature’ 217) notes as a developing solidarity with group ideals is depicted in his acceptance of violent retaliation: yellow and black – agency through protest.

If life in the camp had taught me anything at all, then it was this: keep to the rules of the nursery and things would stay as grimly insupportable as they were now. A simple, never-ending road of bones. (241)

Linked with this portrayal of a compromised heroic ideal, Fine depicts Yuri’s evaluation of values, world-views, and belief systems as a movement against what has become a ‘road of bones’. His rejection of moral values as the ‘rules of the nursery’, confirms the novel’s tragic outcome and in conclusion the author permits a glimpse of subject awareness. As Yuri’s inner self scorns this new resolve, the reiteration of his grandmother’s favourite saying suggests that enacting a more violent form of justice through sabotage is just as debilitating as the penal system which he has so narrowly escaped: ‘Only a fool cheers when the new prince rises’ (243).
The author’s intention to inform and confront an adolescent ambivalence toward political and societal changes among her youthful audience—most notably their lack of political awareness—is an admirable and necessary pedagogical mission. Nonetheless, *The Road of Bones* conceals a cultural divide that Oziewicz—analysing the work of prominent British authors Pullman, Stroud and Rowling—identifies as problematic to a global readership. Oziewicz draws attention to evidence of a powerful cultural map embedding narrative imaging strategies that, ‘when examined through the lens of imagology, can be seen as evoking the discourse of national stereotyping’ (11). In the concluding scenes of Fine’s novel the protagonist’s resolve to express protest through acts of sabotage that then may victimise innocent civilians invokes an alignment with national imaging in a manner that inscribes meaning through existing intertextual discourses. Derived from historically established cultural maps, a polarising East/West dialogue is grounded in political discourses of the past century. Any narrative link established between the coming of age emergence of an Eastern European protagonist and the violation of moral and societal codes will draw upon this discourse. Because the author indicates her intention to inform and challenge the political complacency of adolescent audiences (Official Web Site), the ideological power of national stereotyping may not seem obvious. Nonetheless the historical frame delineating positive and negative outcomes within *The Road of Bones* invites an East/West dualism that emerges in any discussion of an alignment between the novel and contemporary political processes. Because the author’s warning commentary is grounded in an East/West discourse that draws upon the past cultural maps of national identity, imaging strategies that permit a progressively alienated subjectivity in *The Road of Bones* will continue to operate in ways that reassert Western assumptions of political dominance.

In this rapidly changing technological era where e-texts and multiple translations invite global audiences, Oziewicz [3] rightly draws our attention to problematic representations that derive from past cultural mapping. In Anne Fine’s tragic representation of adolescent survival a powerful imagery is constructed in such a manner as to convey a deeply emotional record, one that, because of its historic significance, first registers as a commemorative act. Fine’s work is therefore powerful in the way that Wegner, noting a contemporary surge of interest in the utopian genre, suggests is ideologically grounding: although the imaginary communities devised in narrative texts are fictional, ‘they are real […] in that they have material, pedagogical, and ultimately political effects, shaping the ways people understand and, as a consequence, act in their worlds’ (xvi). Hence, an analogy between Stalinism as a failed utopian vision in *The Road of Bones* and the more contemporary failed utopian intent in the West’s pursuit of a new world order may well demonstrate a failure of democratic process, but the linking intertext also invites a subliminal East-West polarisation historically established during the Cold War era. Any exemplar that demonstrates pedagogical frames in this manner has the potential to privilege Western audiences over ‘other’ audiences.
In his introduction to the study of narrative utopias, Wegner suggests that a contemporary representational dilemma has emerged because modernity has entered ‘a new phase, marked by a growing consciousness of the place of the nation-state in a global cultural and social space’ (xvii). Because the international dialogue which ensues from global connection will also require a new representational ethic in order to negotiate similar changes, Wegner’s discussion raises important issues in the discourse of ‘how global communities might be imagined and how their histories might be spoken’ (xvii). This ethical dilemma therefore has representational implications that emerge in Fine’s survival quest.

Harry Willetts, commenting upon Solzhenitsyn’s inquiry: ‘Why did we stand for it?’, argues that terrorist activity which arose in response to that of the Stalinist regime ‘shows that when evil assumes inhuman dimensions, it ends up by forcing people to use evil ways even to escape it’ (xvii). Situating representations of the alienated or transgressive subject within adolescent fiction in this manner, as McCallum suggests, permits the construction of ‘interpretive positions from which to examine or interrogate the limitations that the dominant cultural and social discourses and practices of a given society or culture place on experience, action and subjectivity’ (Ideologies 101). In Yuri’s decision to seek out and enact his protest more violently in the closing scenes of Road of Bones, the historical events of Gulag history are posited to inform comparable scenes in the media files of more recent atrocities. Yuri reflects: ‘Just as a general in command must send some units off to certain death to save the battle, so anyone who wanted to rid our land of evil might have to sacrifice what he had thought until then was simple kindness’ (242). This connection with a nation’s lapse into barbarism becomes Yuri’s justification for action and defines his acceptance of a loss of humanity and diminished civility as a survival strategy.

There is a real sense that the political system which shapes the protagonist’s final resolve is ultimately responsible for this transition. In the concluding scenes, Yuri is portrayed as an alienated and vengeful young adult whose willingness to engage in sabotage attracts those with similar intentions. As the sole focalising agent, Yuri’s ironic perceptions contest the call to Father Troffim’s ‘great and glorious future’ even as his acts of protest initiate what would be considered as terrorist activity in the contemporary world. Because his ‘road of bones’ fails to link him within a positive societal framework, the shifting social and moral paradigms that have defined his new resolve in the concluding scenes convey the author’s intended parable wisdom: Yuri’s journey along the road of bones implies that the victimisation of innocent civilians will propagate further terrorist activity through the perpetuation of violence. Thus Yuri’s transition from victim to activist/terrorist portrays patterns of moral conflict rarely depicted in children’s fiction: in order to maintain her parable intention, the author resists the redemption of heroic subjectivity. The problematic consequence is that the novel draws upon already existing national polarities: embedded in the representation of atrocity are hidden cultural assumptions, national stereotypes that are problematic for a contemporary global audience.
Yuri’s road of bones obviously commemorates what has become known as ‘the soviet holocaust’ and the novel is intentionally thought-provoking. The archaeology of political process to be discovered in this particular ‘road of bones’, a seemingly improbable [historic] salamander (Solzhenitsyn xvii), informs Anne Fine’s parable. In the same way that Orwell’s deceptively simple tale, Animal Farm, is intended as a warning against complacency, so too, Fine’s novel conveys a contemporary warning against ambivalence. In giving voice to the past and drawing her reading audience into Yuri’s inquiry, ‘How does it happen? [...] How can whole villages of people allow themselves to be tormented by so few?’ (92), the author seeks to provoke thoughtful consideration of how, in a time of rapid political change, utopian vision may conceal a road of bones.

NOTE

1. Whilst cannibalism is rarely (if ever) a feature in YA fiction and never appears in children’s fiction, recent adult dystopian novels by Margaret Atwood (The Year of the Flood 376) and Cormac McCarthy (The Road 110, 198) intimate this possibility as an aspect of societal collapse.

WORKS CITED


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