

EDWARD COLERICK

THE CHILD AND THE ANTHROPOCENE:  
A TIME TRAVEL NARRATIVE AS A MEANS TO EMPOWER  
CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

Science fiction within children's literature is often used as a means to explore the child's contemporary reality and this has especially been the case within the first two decades of the twenty-first century, through such works as *Breathe* (2012) by Sarah Crossan, *Call of the Sun Child* (2014) by Francesca G. Varela, or *Landfill Mountains* (2021) by Rab Ferguson. Contemporary writers of children's literature, like their intended audience, are well versed in the potential consequences of the Anthropocene era in which we live: the understanding that human beings, whether through industrial manufacture or intensive farming, are having a powerful and largely negative impact on the world around them. Indeed, if we look at any one time at the plethora of available media platforms, we will no doubt be bombarded with stories and statistics predicting nothing short of impending catastrophe; of course, the message that the world is being endangered by certain forms of human activity needs to be made abundantly clear.

Nevertheless, there is a further hazard emerging from the frenetic debate, one which is often ignored or simply brushed aside in the urgency to get the message out: the fact that such a process has a potentially far-reaching psychological impact on children; as Zimmerman observes: "In the very process of imagining the future address the present, such scenes regularly obscure the traumatic threat structuring that present" (130). In other words, the future is being projected as something problematic and frightening, creating a traumatic climate in which the child is expected simply to join in with the general chorus urging their

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parents' and grandparents' generation to wake up and take serious action if the world is to avoid vanishing down the proverbial plughole. In a global civilisation, connected by the internet's ever multiplying tendrils, graphically constructing a future in which the children of today are set to pay for the sins of their fathers tomorrow, we can legitimately ask: how does the child cope and successfully navigate themselves within such a frantic atmosphere of doom and gloom? Certainly one major answer lies within narrative fiction itself. Indeed, a number of recent contemporary children's writers not only wisely refuse the comfort of merely escapist fiction but rather choose to face the crucial issues of our times head on in a bid to provide children with a sense of not only being fully conversant with the problems afflicting the world but also as a supportive means whereby they are able to deal with it on both a psychological and philosophical level. In this way, they serve to empower the child over an adult order which otherwise appears fated to drag the mass of humanity onto a sure-fire trajectory of failure. As Campbell notes, one of the most important functions of the science fiction genre is that it "can be used to help adolescents examine the 'us/them' orientation of the discourse that surrounds them" (43)—'them' in this case being the current stock of adults that simply got it wrong and 'us' being the current crop of children who are going to put it right.

The ideal narrative for dealing with the kinds of depression and social trauma created through an awareness of the effects of the Anthropocene, along with its accompanying sense of powerlessness, is surely one in which the future appears altogether malleable. Indeed, the very first widely known modern form of time travel adventure which is part of an awareness of a scientific technological age that has terrifying possibilities for the future is H. G. Wells' classic *The Time Machine* (1895). Here the intrepid inventor (we never learn his name) rides his small and delicate time vessel, as though it were nothing more than a bicycle, bravely into the future only to find a dark dystopian reality in which humanity, through past industrialisation accompanied by social pressures, has evolved (or in some sense de-evolved) into two separate species, the one feeding remorselessly on the other. The author's final image of the future is one of an unavoidable entropic death in which the earth along with the life it once held collapses into silence. "All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all was over" (Wells 75). As Terry Thompson observes: "[T]he Time Traveller's farthest leap into the future takes him to the beach, to the very edge of the primeval saltwater soup, that billions of years ago, gave birth to the earliest life on earth; the devolutionary cycle is complete. The rock of Sisyphus

is stilled” (22). At this early point in his writing career, the novella clearly demonstrates Wells’ somewhat gloomy determinism derived from his well-documented study of Darwinian evolutionary theory.

The difference between H. G. Wells’ piece of adult fiction and that of contemporary children’s works using this form of narrative lies in creating a sense of empowerment or potential control, of being able to do something by which the dystopian future, such as the one realised in *The Time Machine*, is altogether reversible. Not only is it reversible but it only becomes so through the actions of children who are, after all, the heroines and heroes of children’s fiction. A good example of such a narrative is Jule Owen’s *The Boy Next Door* trilogy: *The Boy Who Fell from the Sky*, *Silverwood* and *The Moon at Noon* (all titles published 2015), a time travel story initially set in the near future (2055) where the world is tormented by the terrible effects of rapid climate change.

In the present article, however, I am going to explore this process of child empowerment through another highly topical form of time travel adventure which explores the possibility of a dystopian future created by a global pandemic. It is important to remember that the global spread of human illnesses is now strongly connected with the technological present. Modern aviation, for example, allows individuals to travel in a matter of hours to more or less anywhere in the world; consequently, an innocuous market place in China, where wild animal to human infection *likely* took place, can become a seedbed of disease for the whole planet (Boseley).<sup>1</sup> Published in 2019, the rather finely written *Dog Who Saved the World* brilliantly anticipates the atmosphere and events that children now are all too familiar with in the current COVID pandemic, although in this particular narrative the rapidly spreading illness is a form of the far more deadly Ebola virus which is passed from humans to dogs and then, when it has saturated the canine population, back to humans.

## 1. THE PANDEMIC IN AND OUTSIDE THE NARRATIVE

The connection with the current COVID epidemic is made plain in the novel when a little girl from an eastern province of China visits “St Woofs” (an animal refuge in England that was formally an old church) and unwittingly passes the illness onto a dog she likes (ugly Dudley). Not only is the animal

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<sup>1</sup> In her investigative report for *The Guardian* (12 Dec. 2020), Sarah Boseley discusses detailed evidence concerning the origin of COVID-19 and the likelihood of it beginning in the marketplace in Wuhan, Hubei Province, eastern China.

refuge confirmed as the point of origin for the spread of the illness in Britain, but the various news reports presented in the work confirm that the disease began in eastern China before being carried elsewhere. However, its emergence in England is also the fault of Georgie, the novel's principal heroine, who fails to take the proper hygiene precautions when the Chinese girl arrives during her period of volunteer work at St Woofs. In fact, the novel begins with the children at the local school already having to follow strict regulations as to the use of hand sanitizers in the corridors, along with the stringent hygiene rules at St Woofs. This immediately serves to put the child reader into a familiar territory—the new world they have had to quickly adjust too in real life which is now, more or less, the new normal.

The fact that the place of origin, eastern China, given to the fictional canine disease is identical to that of COVID-19 obviously signals an intentional link between the two. Also, the way in which we hear of its spread and increasing threat to both dogs and humans alike through the various warnings, along with newspaper, radio and TV reports interpolated into the text, provides a sense of realism and specific atmosphere a child alive today is only too familiar with. At first the whole thing is simply in the background, barely a distant rumbling which Georgie and her Friend Ramzy first encounter at school when the head teacher gives a talk on the subject: “All I picked up was CBE—Something—something—Ebola—and, with a mouthful like that, it's hardly surprising I didn't make the connection...” (83). Besides its “free dress day” so the children do not have to wear their uniforms and even the staff have joined in with the fun, leaving everyone preoccupied with the far more important fact that the head teacher, Mr Parks, is sporting a kilt. Only much later, when Georgie reads the following news headline on the laptop, does the whole situation finally hit home:

**INDEPENDENT NEWS CORP.**  
**BREAKING NEWS**  
**New Canine Disease**  
**'Spreading Fast' says IHF**  
**Click For More**

Presented above in exactly the same way it appears in the novel, the reader experiences the sudden immediacy of the headlines which leap out at Georgie. In dog loving Georgie's case, and with many of the child readers of the novel, “canine disease spreading fast” (Welford 88) is what really catches the attention. The “click for more” is a typical online device used in order to avoid initially putting off the reader with too much text. Although the dogs can easily infect

humans, the fact that a form of Ebola has entered the dog population makes the urgency of the message all the more powerful: it is our cute and furry friends who will be the first victims of the disease. This is borne out later in the novel when the reader is presented with the Monarch's address to the people of Britain in accordance with other world leaders, warning of an impending dog cull if a vaccine has not been created in the impossibly short period of two weeks. It is not long before Georgie laments: "You don't hear of something ever, then suddenly it's everywhere" (84). This again smacks of the situation most children, as well as adults, have found themselves experiencing during the COVID epidemic. Indeed, the use of capitalised headlines, news on the internet, television or radio reports separated out from the main body of the text and/or italicised generates a particular atmosphere by breaking up the narrative, thus generating a growing sense of unnerving uncertainty as the reports come in ever greater frequency. It is important also to consider here that the news reports are created in the adult world and from there push their way into the personal space of the child. In this case, it is the adult world which appears to lose direction and break apart, reinforcing the fact that only the depicted children and the animals (dogs) they most identify with will ultimately save the day.

## 2. INITIALISMS AND OTHER FORMS OF ABBREVIATIONS

The headline presented above also employs initialism. In this case we have 'IHF' (International Hospital Federation), an innocent enough initialism which in fact gives the organisation more credibility as such abbreviations are often associated with scientific language. In addition, the employment of such abbreviated forms helps, along with the news reports, to replicate the external atmosphere generated by the global pandemic. Our obvious real world reference here is 'COVID', short for 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or simply COVID-19 (renamed SARS-CoV-2) (UK Health Security Agency), while in the novel the disease sweeping the globe via the dog population is 'CBE' (Canine Bourne Ebola).

Such use of scientific forms of abbreviation has a twofold effect; firstly, it is a part of science and scientific understanding, therefore the disease can be understood, controlled and eventually cured. However, it also obscures meaning by hiding the complexity of the thing being denoted, it distances itself from common human understanding and is thus alienating and even scary. The point to be raised here is that the second effect is more likely to be experienced by adults, because children today are particularly at home with

acronyms and abbreviations of various sorts; it is after all part of the language of text messaging, Facebook, Instagram, emails, etc. within the present smart-phone and gaming culture. As Tagliamonte confirms in her article entitled “So Sick or So Cool? The Language of Youth on the Internet”: “CMC [computer-mediated communication] forms, including abbreviations, initialisms, and short forms are the most often cited characteristics of CMC” (12).

Indeed, the youth culture of text messaging and emailing, as well as computer games, play an important part within the novel in terms of the communication taking place between 11-year-old Georgie and her friend Ramzy. It is part of their way of life, their thought processes even. It is possible to see this in the way the two children easily take to the scientific initialisms they encounter—whether it be from Jessica (even though Georgie resents her as her Dad’s girlfriend) who, coincidentally, works in the Biotic Department of the famous Jenner Institute, or from the eccentric Dr Pretorius whom the children befriend. Thus, along with CBE we have DTR (disease transmission risk) and the slightly more complicated HGR-66 (connected with swine Ebola). In other words, difficult scientific language is hidden behind the initialisms which serve to make complex science comfortable within the narrative without patronising our child heroine and hero. Initialisms also enable the children to easily deal with the tricky advanced science carried out by the mysterious Pretorius who freely bandies such language and concepts as MSVR (multi-sensory virtual reality), Quomps (Welford 104) an abbreviation for quantum computers, TDCS (transcranial direct-current simulation) (141), or the simple RL (reality) and VR (virtual reality) which allows for more complex formulations and metaphysical ideas, such as “Bridged the RL–VR gap” (150). In this instance, the glitch in the AI produces a monstrous scorpion (Buster) in the “virtual reality” world that is able to materially affect the “real world”. Of course, this is completely fictional and has no foundation in terms of real science but, nevertheless, it is made believable by using the scientific initialism which also obscures its ontological complexity. In this way, “RL–VR” allows both the reader and fictional characters to deal with the concept of “bridging the gap” between virtual reality and the real world without destroying the very credible elements and real science also represented within the story.

### 3. THE DOG AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR HUMANITY

Indeed, we have a very realistic and imminent threat conveyed within the narrative which relates to the real world situation of the reader (the COVID

pandemic they are experiencing outside of the narrative). In the fictional world of the narrative the initial threat is toward the dog. Dogkind, in this example, forms an effective substitute for humanity: dogs being portrayed as both more perfect and more defenceless than actual humans in that they are unerringly innocent in their comic antics and characteristics, earnestly loving and truly loyal. It also brings home the fact that the fates of dogs and humans are inextricably intertwined—after all, they have been living with humanity for many thousands of years. In relation to children as well as children’s literature in terms of being able to cross the boundary between other animal species and seeing “them” as essentially “us”, Zoe Jaques makes the following claim in relation to ‘posthuman’ critical thinking:

Children emerge as distinctive creatures who align with much posthuman thinking in their ability to accept (and enjoy) the possible and reject the absolute. That childhood itself is an ontologically unstable state is in keeping with such potency; it is one perpetually moving, a forward-focused period “on route” to a fully humanized adulthood, and simultaneously a static—if romanticized time (often in the past)—with a power of its own that defies many limitations inscribed by “being human”. Children’s fiction, then, has the capacity to provide more than a playful make-believe space that is eventually moved beyond or wistfully remembered. Its potent complications of the lines that demarcate one form of being from another can seep into relations with, and thoughts on, the real as well as fictional world. (8–9)

Here we are indeed presented with the view, romantic or otherwise, that children are in an elevated position, but this is based on the undeniable fact, according to Jaques, that as children go through their various developmental stages, the boundaries between themselves and other forms of life have yet to be fixed by the process of “humanisation”. This is something which children’s literature consciously plays with: a creative space which touches on both the real and the imaginative, enabling an intense identification with the other. In the particular narrative under discussion in this article we have the relation between dog and child. In a sense, Georgie, at least in the first instance, puts a higher priority on saving Mr Mash, the scruffy mixed breed which she regards as her own dog. This works within the novel because Georgie and the reader are made to identify so closely with the animal—its mannerisms and characteristics—so that it becomes *de facto* the “child itself”, the protection of which will prove to be the salvation of humanity.

In this instance, what is being pressed on the reader is a sense that the whole fabric of the human world could be taken out by CBE (more commonly referred to as “dog plague”), for if a human’s best friend goes the way of extinction,

so does the whole of humanity—something which is strongly alluded to in the following quotation: “Trailers for films, ads for holidays, food drinks.... And running under all, a crawling message with the latest headlines: *Dog curfew within days says British government minister*” (Welford 164; my italics). Here, brightly animated on a taxi’s news screen, we are given a kaleidoscope of advertisements that represent the fast moving modern world, especially its more fun bits; however, the whole is starkly undercut, threatened with obliteration, by the insidious “crawling” news ribbon indicating the consequences of the spreading disease. Indeed, for dog loving Georgie, the animal refuge volunteer, the consequences are all too obvious and must be avoided at all costs, especially since the so-called curfew will soon become a full cull if a cure is not found, which will surely (within the logic of the narrative) signal the beginning of the end for both the canine and human species.

#### 4. TECHNOLOGY AS DESTROYER AND PRESERVER

The author here is skilfully playing with two competing ideas concerning technology as well as two different sets of technologies. The first of these relates to the Anthropocene and the dystopian future it promises if left unchecked; in other words, we have science and so-called progress that have allowed pollution, climate change, excessive use of antibiotics and, in this case, the easy global spread of disease from remote to highly populated areas in a matter of a few short hours. In this case, human science and technology serve as the “destroyer”. The second set of ideas and associated technologies relate specifically to the life of both the children depicted in the novel and that of the child reader. Here we can include the holy grail of the story—the vaccine which will seemingly solve everything—but also the kinds of things which shape the children’s world, even the way they think and consciously go about things—smartphones, laptops, tablets, computer games, internet and multiple media platforms. After all these are the devices and software important for reaching out and communicating with ease in the specific language children use—being fun and, on top of all that, rather cool. In this instance, we clearly have science as “preserver”, especially given that in the narrative it is this type of technology that ultimately saves the day, which is hardly surprising since these are precisely the devices and apps, etc. which shape the contemporary world of the child.

The guiding presence of the mysterious Dr Pretorius is strongly allied with this type of *good* technology. For example, the reader learns that she is, in fact,



both a computer and software engineer of extraordinary ability, the creator of 3D virtual reality surround installations such as Disney's surround-a-room, as well as the person behind the social media app CLAppster. She is also the creator of a rather believable and easy to relate to, especially in terms of the mindset of twenty-first century children, time machine. The time machine here, though, is not the product of Victorian ornate styling and invention such as we find in H. G. Wells' dark masterpiece but rather, in design, it fits the very familiar technology of the child's contemporary environment. We must remember here that Pretorius is said to have created virtual reality gaming devices for Disney World, and this is the kind of technology her time travel device is based on, ingeniously taking the form of the MSVR (multi-sensory virtual reality) installation which one can only access via a TDCS (transcranial direct-current simulation)—in this case a converted bicycle helmet that connects with an individual's brainwaves. On first using it, the children mistake the device for an advanced virtual reality game akin to the Disney surround-a-room which Georgie has visited. However, the machine actually allows one to virtually visit the future by modelling the present so precisely it can work out where every atom or particle of dust will be days or even years later in real time. Consequently, it is able to exactly model the future (at least a projection of the future which can still be altered if the present is changed in some specific way). This nicely works in terms of the plot because Georgie, Ramzy and Mr Mash can enter the MSRV model of the future in order to locate the vaccine, which they predict will have been completed a year from now, and bring it back into the present.

##### 5. TIME PARADOX LEADING TO AN ONTOLOGICAL EXCHANGE

The time travel experience of seeing the future relates very well to the quotation we looked at earlier in the article from Zoe Jaques' "Children's Literature and the Posthuman" in which the author describes childhood as "ontologically unstable ... perpetually moving, a forward-focused period 'on route' to a fully humanized adulthood" (9). This is exactly what the author of *The Dog Who Saves the World* explores in terms of time travel: the "ontological instability" of childhood—and where better than through virtual reality in which existence and the nature of being are constantly called into question. In the process, it also necessitates what Campbell considers as a defining feature of science fiction in that it "can be used to help adolescents examine the 'us/them' orientation of the discourse that surrounds them" (43). For example, on first using the MSVR

Georgie and Ramzy wonder if the people in the virtual world, some of which they recognise, are fully conscious beings rather than mere simulations, especially when they find themselves being forced to interact with them: “Do they know they are not real?” (Welford 121) asks Georgie. The representation of a real (RL) and virtual (VR) world automatically sets up a complex set of metaphysical questions or formulas that the child reader can address and deal with, not least because they work through the various conundrums with Georgie herself. For instance, if the virtual people are self-aware can they be considered real people? Indeed, can they be real people without a real past or a real future? Do they have a past or future? When the AI running the simulation is turned off, or focused on something else, do the people in the virtual setting cease to exist? When travelling to the future in the MSVR has any time passed at all in the virtual world?

On travelling one year into the future in the virtual world, Georgie sees at least one familiar person, Jessica, with someone else she “can hardly dare look at” (Welford 310)—another person that she soon recognises to be herself. However, it is no perfect copy because this girl is taller and clearly a year older: “It’s not like looking in a mirror,” (314) she says. Georgie does, however, focus on a number of similar mannerisms and characteristics possessed by what she refers to as the “Other Me”: “She does that blinky thing that I do” (315); ‘I’ve got a nice smile, I think’ (316). Seeing an older version of herself from the outside is quite a shock for poor Georgie, made all the more effective in that the reader is only given access to the thoughts going on inside the RL girl’s head. However, we get a strong sense that the older VR girl (Other Me) is self-aware and that the virtual world is, in a sense, real and continuous. For example, on seeing Georgie, Other Me confirms: “I’ve been expecting you—kind of” (316). This is because Georgie planned to arrive at a specific date in the virtual future world which Other Me remembers. This is fascinating for the reader, because one can see a clear causal connection between Georgie and Other Me, even though they are in effect living in two separate worlds, one real and one virtual—the latter remembering the former’s plans as though the two children were “entangled” particles, the one always affecting the other. This sense of connection is further extended in an ontological exchange in which Georgie tentatively asks, in an attempt to deny the post-apocalyptic future she is now witnessing: “Does this mean you are not real?” only for Other Me to confirm “I’m real, all right. This is all real, although I wish it wasn’t” (315). This confirmation that both herself and the virtual world are real, again questions the nature of existence in that we have already noted that the real and virtual world are connected and one can clearly affect the other—for example, through

the act of retrieving the vaccine from the virtual world the real world changes, etc. This also questions Georgie's status in the virtual world, e.g., does Other Me take precedence in here? For instance, on Georgie vanishing from the virtual world for technical reasons, she suddenly reappears only to hear a shocked Jessica ask: "Are you a ghost?" (339). Finally, we also have to recognise the fact that we are dealing with two separate realities and not just a single timeline, even if interlinked. When Georgie claims the courage for her plan to rescue Doctor Pretorius and retrieve the vaccine was galvanised by the memory of the song from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* her long dead mother used to sing, Other Me sadly confesses: "I didn't think of [it]" (317)—thus, setting her world on a different path. It serves as a type of confirmation that the virtual world generated by the MSVR is not a mere simulation but an actual world within itself—more akin, perhaps, to a parallel reality, or an alternative timeline, than anything else.

In simple terms, the message the author appears to be getting across here is that what we choose to do and what we dare to do makes a real difference in defiance of any postmodern notion that we are powerless in the face of modernity. Indeed, it would seem that simulation and simulacra can lead to real world solutions. However, more importantly, in the context of the narrative it enables the heroine, Georgie, to really see herself and to understand that the harrowing situation Other Me has been through has also matured her in a positive way—for now, instead of resenting Jessica as a forced substitute for a mother, her older self freely calls Jessica "Mum". This clearly demonstrates that both herself and Jessica have truly changed along with their relationship; and this is something Georgie can take back to her own world and life. Accepting that childhood is a process of change and development helps Georgie to better understand herself and her family but also positively empowers her over an adult order which does not always act in the best interest of either the child or the world itself. As Sainsbury observes concerning the ontological exchange so common in children's literature: "[S]uch moments are by turn epiphanic, motivational, reassuring, reflective, uncomfortable, perplexing or disturbing and recognise that the process of being human in the world is complex" (19).

## 6. FAMILY AS KEY TO THE CHILD'S EMPOWERMENT

Curiously, this children's adventure novel, which explores time machines and virtual reality in the face of a global epidemic brought on through the actions

of humans, places the family at its very centre and powerfully associates it with nature. In part, this is done through the symbol of the tree—the tree beneath which Georgie’s mother is buried—and because of this, it is of deep importance to the girl, as the only memory she really has of her Mum is “a video clip on Dad’s phone” (Welford 76). Indeed, it serves as a place of pilgrimage around which the family gather on the annual “death-day” as opposed to birthday—given the context, this is quite appropriate, because the tree is perceived as a form of rebirth: the mother transformed, rather than having left the earthly plain, as in some ancient Greek myth or fable. And, since the children have hidden Pretorius’ research beneath its roots, it guards over technology that might otherwise be used for the purposes of evil in the hands of unscrupulous adults. Indeed, the image of the tree is a source of inspiration and at times appears immense, like the Nordic Yggdrassil,<sup>2</sup> which holds up and protects the world even though it is itself fragile and prey to the destructive actions of others: “I swallow hard and look up the lane and beyond our house to the evening-blue sky and Mum’s tree bent over the horizon” (Welford 243).

On at least two important occasions, the tree “as mother” provides the courage for Georgie to carry through with her plans. The first is when she and Ramzy rescue MR Mash from what the government calls the “humane dispatch” (the term which the girl easily recognises as a euphemism for murder), the very dog which will recover from Ebola and supply the necessary samples which ultimately lead to a cure for the disease: “Behind us, the breeze shook the leaves even louder as though it were wishing us on our way, despite my has been placed in a secure hospital; without Pretorius the girl will be unable fear” (186). The second time is when Georgie needs to free Dr Pretorius, who to travel via the MSVR into the future in order to secure the vaccine: “I look up through the leaves at the patches of sky peeking through. I can hear little bits of the song from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* that always makes me think of Mum: ‘Someone to tend to, be a friend to. I have you two!’” (258). This is not a memory taken from real life but from her Dad’s video clip; nevertheless, it has real potency because the mother, instead of being merely a ghost on the edge of her daughter’s life, now, symbolically and literally (as it seems to Georgie), takes on the substance of the natural world—Mother Nature protecting all. What this essentially does within the narrative is take the idea of being in control, of being brave, a step further in that such an empowerment in

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<sup>2</sup> This timeless tree, which seems to have no known origin and which will survive Ragnarok, is so vast that, as Snorri says, “its branches spread out over the whole world and reach up over heaven” (Crossley-Holland xxiii).

the face of the global epidemic is enabled through strong friendship and an awareness of the centrality and importance of family. Again, this connects with another form of empowerment discussed here and explored in the novel, the ability to use the comforting and enabling technology of communication which dominates the child's contemporary world. As Stephen Thompson observes concerning children stories in general:

[T]he idea that "story" can embody what is best in the world, and in our relation to it and to each other, is one of the most persistent refrains of children's literature criticism. Family finds itself curiously placed here. For it may be seen as the most natural site and model for educational relation in the broadest sense and is the natural home of storytelling. (147–48)

#### CONCLUSION

More or less everything within the time travel narrative explored in this article expresses a family unit largely free of unwanted baggage, whether on an ideological or emotional level. In fact, as far as the family is concerned, it suggests a kind of *naturalism*. In support of such a thesis attention has been drawn to the kind of technology harnessed by the children in order to do nothing less than rescue an entire vibrant world of dogs and humans, one unable to survive without the other. It is this precise multimedia technology that also powerfully aids communication between childhood friends, creating both a space and language of communication free from prying adult eyes. We see this in the very language and science that represents the time machine itself. This is opposed, of course, to the kinds of heavy industrialised mechanisms which in the past have seen a punctilious Phileas Fogg travel the world in eighty days with nary a sneeze. Even the attempt to mirror the atmosphere of the current pandemic in terms of the content and structure of the novel serves to reinforce the idea of a strong family unit and friendship as a means to empower oneself not only against the global pandemic but over the rest of human society.

It would appear, then, in this particular time travel narrative, that ideology supporting the family wins out; and it is no surprise, given what we have already touched on concerning the Anthropocene and its broad range of negative effects on the environment which are so colourfully and loudly publicised both on the streets and in the media. This is expressed through the relative ontological stability which sustains the maturation process in the specific context of a supportive family and the loyalty of friends, ultimately leading Georgie to

overcome her resentment towards Jessica in order for the family to function harmoniously. We see this expressed by Ramzy's reaction when Georgie tells him to think about the adventures in Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*—she does this to encourage him knowing full-well he loves such stories, even though they are considerably below his reading level. Ramzy, however, is left offering a somewhat ironic response: “Well I don't think the kids in an Enid Blyton story would be sneaking into a hospital with a bunch of stolen flowers to rescue a mad scientist” (Welford 269). This is of course true but the author, in drawing a distinction between his own fast-paced, comic piece of sci-fi (which by necessity is full of rule-breaking because the adult world is at fault and the children need to put it right), also requires the reader to make a comparison with this early to mid-twentieth century children's author from a twenty-first century perspective. Stephen Thompson commenting on the positive and negative ideologies connected with the family writes:

But it [the family] may also appear dangerous for much of the same reasons: its inevitability, its organic self-reproduction, may read as automatic; as an imposition on the individual who, after all, did not choose to be born into such and such a family. There is a long and complicated history of oscillation between these two positions. Arguably these oscillations are themselves symptomatic of an ambivalence inherent in the modern liberal idea of family as the relatively autonomous building block of civil society. (148)

When Blyton was writing, the family was very much seen as a foundation stone on which society rested and her works ultimately support that thesis but here, too, we have a contemporary writer foregrounding the family as something innocent, almost pure in and of itself, despite the kinds of negative ideological baggage it has carried ever since. In the face of this awareness of the Anthropocene and its effects, which include the current Covid global epidemic, we can see that this narrative explores family and friendship not only as a means to individual development and empowerment but also, through the symbolic transformation of the mother into a powerful embodiment of nature, the family, too, is posited as something natural, central and supporting. It would be fascinating to see how widespread this somewhat conservative process of actually purging the family of negative ideological associations is becoming in main stream children's and young adult literature as an antidote to both the current global pandemic and the negative associations of the Anthropocene, but this is well beyond the scope of the present study.

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THE CHILD AND THE ANTHROPOCENE:  
A TIME TRAVEL NARRATIVE AS A MEANS  
TO EMPOWER CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

S u m m a r y

The following article looks at a contemporary children's time travel story, *The Dog Who Saved the World* by Ross Welford, written and published just at the very outset of the COVID-19 epidemic. The novel is itself about an even more potentially dangerous epidemic which might have serious consequences in the near future for the whole of humanity. The author skilfully uses the narrative in order to include the child reader by replicating the mood and atmosphere of the current pandemic, thus, effectively empowering them against it. To achieve this, the author foregrounds what he considers to be "good" as opposed to "bad" technology and enables the child to comfortably deal with its complexities along with the complexity of time travel through scientific initialisms and other forms of abbreviation which children are highly familiar with (texting friends on smart-phones or using the social media).

**Keywords:** children; family empowerment; Anthropocene; pandemic; technology; initialisms.

DZIECKO I ANTROPOCEN:  
OPOWIEŚĆ O PODRÓŻY W CZASIE  
JAKO SPOSÓB NA UPODMIOTOWIENIE DZIECI  
W OBLICZU GLOBALNEJ PANDEMII

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje *The Dog Who Saved the World* Rossa Welforda, współczesną powieść dla dzieci traktującą o podróży w czasie, opublikowaną na początku wybuchu epidemii COVID-19. Książka opisuje epidemię, której skutki mogą być o wiele bardziej katastrofalne dla całej ludzkości w bliskiej przyszłości. Autor umiejętnie używa narracji do zaangażowania dziecięcych czytelników, odwzorowując nastrój panujący podczas obecnej pandemii, w rezultacie czego stają się oni wobec niej bardziej odporni. W tym celu autor kładzie nacisk na „dobrą” technologię, odróżniając ją od tej „złej”, co umożliwi dzieciom bezpieczną konfrontację ze złożonością współczesnej technologii. Jednocześnie czytelnicy zostają wprowadzeni w zawiłą koncepcję podróży w czasie za sprawą wszelkich skrótowych odniesień do technologii, które dobrze znają i stosują, na przykład, w wiadomościach tekstowych lub korzystając z portali społecznościowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzieci; rodzina; upodmiotowienie; Antropocen; pandemia; technologia.