

All Fiction Has an Agenda

Political Activism in China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* and Other Great Works of Young Adult Literature

by Chris Schluep

Young Adult literature is experiencing an upswing in popularity among readers and publishers these days. Authors like Stephenie Meyer, Christopher Paolini, and J. K. Rowling are blazing a hot path for the genre, and as the field expands, interesting questions are being raised about YA's role in the culture and in the marketplace. While the main goal in publishing YA books will always be to entertain, is it possible to aim toward a higher purpose as well? One of the questions that I'm particularly interested in is whether YA books are an appropriate vehicle to promote activism among younger readers.

Since Young Adult books span the gap between childhood and adulthood, it seems like the perfect genre in which to focus on elevating minds. But activism in fiction is a tricky subject. No one likes being preached to, and we all know that a book can be easily closed and set aside, never to be opened again. Still, as China Miéville, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Un Lun Dun* (Del Rey, 2007), put it to me: "If people are concerned about so-called 'activism' in writing, they might remember that all fiction, whether it knows it or not, comes with agenda."

Although I couldn't agree more with this statement, I know that many people see fiction as just another form of entertainment. In their eyes, nonfiction is the natural arena for promoting activism—recent nonfiction titles like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and Bill Clinton's *Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World* certainly add to that conviction. *Giving* also highlights the work of one Dr. Paul Farmer whose work providing medical care to the world's poor is unprecedented and inspirational. Paul Farmer's full story is covered in the bestselling and widely college-adopted book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. But it's possible to have your cake and eat it too, in my opinion, and there are numerous examples of fiction titles whose stories have managed to transcend their time, make a dent in popular culture, and help to create a new language of activism among readers—books like *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, *The*

Grapes of Wrath, and even *Huckleberry Finn* are some of the more classic examples. These are books that manage both to entertain and aim their readers toward a higher purpose. In my opinion, that's the best of both worlds.

And indeed, there's a surprising amount of activism in Young Adult literature. According to my quick review of Wikipedia, the 1950s presented the advent of YA literature—or, as it was known back then, “teen literature”—with the publication of *Lord of the Flies* and *Catcher in the Rye*. These are not light books, and there are clear messages presented within the pages of both of these fine novels. Fast forward to the present, and you'll not just run past Judy Blume's books, but also books on rape, incest, drug use, physical abuse—the list of difficult subjects seems endless. Surely, these books are making a positive difference in young people's lives.

While China Miéville's first foray into the Young Adult market doesn't address such disturbing subjects as those listed above, as his editor, I was very interested in seeing how he weaved his messages into *Un Lun Dun*. I'm well aware that he's a socialist—in fact, he ran for the British Parliament a few years back. (While he didn't win, he did get declared “the sexiest man in British politics” by the *Guardian*, a compliment that China attributes to a lack of any serious competition.) When China writes his adult fiction, his politics are always teetering at the edges of his story, motivating both characters and plotlines. But *Un Lun Dun* seemed much more subtle—and that, to me, is the best way to handle things in the YA field.

Two of China's main messages revolve around environmentalism and that eternal mainstay of fantasy fiction, “the Chosen One.” In *Un Lun Dun*, a girl named Zanna is prophesied to save both London and its shadowy, through-the-looking-glass twin city of UnLondon from a dark Smog that is slowly trying to take over. When I asked China about the Smog and its obvious relationship to pollution in our own real world, he admitted to me that he only created the Smog because he thought it would be “a cool monster.” Any environmental message was strictly secondary to his desire to write a good story with a scary threat. That sounded good to me, and I can't help thinking that young adult readers, who are undoubtedly smarter than we give them credit for, would quickly pick up on

whether a book was trying to force-feed them an environmental message. When message gets in the way of the story, it's a surefire recipe for disaster.

But on the subject of the Chosen One, China had a real agenda. He himself admits to being "kind of a sidekick" during his youth, and it was very important for him to send the message to young readers that there's no need to feel helpless if they're not the typical alpha, always waiting for a savior, but rather that it's possible to test fate and make decisions for yourself regardless of whether you're more like Robin than Batman. In *Un Lun Dun*, the Chosen One doesn't have all the answers; for once, the prophecies turn out to be wrong—and in the end it's the sidekick that saves the day! This seems like an essential lesson to teach young readers: that of independence and self determination no matter your assumed lot in life. It's the kind of message that shouldn't wait until adulthood.

My favorite moment in the book comes well into the story, in chapter thirty-six, when the sidekick, Deeba, is safely back in London where she could easily forget about the problems over in UnLondon. She isn't the Chosen One—she's just *someone*—and no one is counting on her to help:

It'll be fine, Deeba thought, You saw how Brokkenbroll and Jones and the binja got on.

But she was never a hundred percent convinced.

Besides. . . she found herself starting to think. She got ashamed of herself then. Because the thought that had been creeping out was Besides, even if something terrible does happen, you don't need to know about it.

How many of us have had that thought before? I know I have. But Deeba fights the impulse to ignore someone else's problems (otherwise the book would only be 141 pages long), and she makes up her mind to get back to UnLondon and do her best to help. It's a moving piece of narrative and a wonderful message to send to readers—not just young ones, but adults as well.

That's activism in the strictest, most important sense, and we can only hope to see more of that kind of message in the future.

About the Writer

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Excerpted from **RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Citizenship"

Suggested Reading

Giving: *How Each of Us Can Change the World*

by Bill Clinton

Here, from Bill Clinton, is a call to action. Giving is an inspiring look at how each of us can change the world. First, it reveals the extraordinary and innovative efforts now being made by companies and organizations—and by individuals—to solve problems and save lives both “down the street and around the world.” Then it urges us to seek out what each of us, “regardless of income, available time, age, and skills,” can do to help, to give people a chance to live out their dreams.

Knopf, HC, 978-0-307-26674-3, 256 pp., \$24.95

Also available in Audio: Read by Bill Clinton

RH Audio, Unabridged CD, 978-0-7393-6806-0, \$29.95

Mountains Beyond Mountains *The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*

by Tracy Kidder

ALA Notable Book A New York Times Notable book

Pulitzer Prize-winner Tracy Kidder tells the true story of eccentric medical genius Paul Farmer, an “American male Mother Teresa,” and shows how one person can effect global progress against seemingly impossible problems—TB, AIDS, poverty—with creativity, knowledge and determination.

Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7301-3, 336 pp., \$15.95

Also available in Audio: Read by Tracy Kidder:

Random House Audio, Abridged CD, 978-0-7393-0765-6, \$27.50

Fahrenheit 451

by Ray Bradbury

Winner of The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters

A novel of the future in which censorship has gone wild. Acclaimed as a modern classic in the tradition of *Brave New World* and *1984*, this novel predicts a chilling but believable future.

Ballantine, TR, 978-0-345-41001-6, 192 pp., \$13.95

Del Rey, MM, 978-0-345-34296-6, 208 pp., \$6.99

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

Afterword by Alfred Kazin

Hilariously picaresque, epic in scope, alive with the poetry and vigor of the American people, Mark Twain’s classic story about a young boy and his journey down the Mississippi was the first great novel to speak in a truly American voice.

Bantam Classics, MM, 978-0-553-21079-8, 304 pp., \$4.95

Other editions available:

Ivy Paperback, MM, 978-0-8041-1571-1, 384 pp., \$4.99

Fawcett, TR, 978-0-449-91272-0, 384 pp., \$14.00

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Modern Library Classics, TR, 978-0-375- 75737-2, 304 pp., \$6.95
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Laurel Leaf, MM, 978-0-440-24073-0, 768 pp., \$6.99

Listening Library (Audio), Unabridged CD, 978-0-7393-3094-4, \$39.95

Eldest: *Inheritance, Book II*

by Christopher Paolini

Knopf Books for Young Readers, TR, 978-0-375-84040-1, 704 pp., \$12.99

Listening Library (Audio), Unabridged CD, 978-0-307-28072-5, \$55.00

“Harry Potter Audio”

by J.K. Rowling and read by Jim Dale

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Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 978-0-8072-8259-5, \$69.95

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, 978-0-307-28365-8, \$75.00

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, 978-0-8072-2029-0, \$75.00

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 978-0-7393-6038-5, \$79.95
