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The Representation of Alternative Education in Katherine Rundell's *The Girl Savage* and David Almond's *My Name Is Mina*

Two early twenty-first century British children's novels, Katherine Rundell's *The Girl Savage* (2011) and David Almond's *My Name Is Mina* (2010), represent a particular type of alternative education. Both texts are characterised by formal features including linguistic uncertainty and non-linear narration: aspects defined by their opposition to a conception of realist linear narrative that, it will be argued, is consistent with a view of mainstream education shared by many of its critics. The purpose of the following pages is not to suggest that either of these models of education—alternative or mainstream—is superior. Significantly, though, the dominant ideological position in the UK sits in favour of the mainstream, which marries up with the similarly dominant position that realist linear narrative holds in the genre of the children's novel. One result of this correlation is the tendency for representations of education within children's fiction to implicitly support the mainstream model. The effect of this formal and ideological pressure can be seen in *The Girl Savage* and *My Name Is Mina*, as, to different degrees, the novels' affirmation of alternative education fades just as the experimental nature of the texts gives way to a more straightforward prose and the need for satisfying conclusion. To put this another way, it is apparently a challenge to tell a good story about alternative education.

Disequilibrating Narrative

The concept of mainstream education does not name a neatly self-contained category. In the UK, mainstream education includes models based on funding (state and private), selection (grammar schools and academies) and choice (single-gender and faith-based). The uneven practice of

“progressive” and “traditional” modes of teaching also characterises the sector. With so many different “mainstreams” to reject the similarly diverse range of alternative modes of education is unsurprising. Alternative options within the educational landscape of the UK thus include independent schools that work to the Steiner and Montessori method, forest schools, youth centres, care farms and home education. Each of these models, and the variety of approaches that are practiced within them, form a different relationship to the mainstream. For example, while some home educators might reject the formal discipline of school they implicitly affirm the content that it delivers by also following the National Curriculum.

The alternative education that I write about in this essay, by contrast, entirely rejects a broadly conceived of mainstream education on principle. This style of alternative education has numerous forerunners but rose to prominence with “The New Education Fellowship”: a loose network of privately-funded schools that emerged in the inter-war years. These schools included Susan Isaac’s Malting House, Bertrand Russell’s Beacon Hill, William Curry’s Dartington Hall and, what has latterly become the most well-known, A. S. Neill’s Summerhill (Howlett 147). The guiding philosophy of such establishments was, as John Howlett writes, to give “free reign to the pupil’s natural instincts which meant, in practical terms, leaving them alone to discover what interested them rather than imposing order upon the day and the curriculum” (148). This philosophy has sometimes been termed “progressive,” leading to the unhelpful conflation between its extreme sense of child freedom and the more moderate progressivism practiced in British state-schooling (especially in the primary years). In attempting to circumvent this conflation Laura Tisdall refers to the former as “utopian progressivism” and the latter as “non-utopian progressivism.” While in broad agreement with the separation of terms that Tisdall makes, this nomenclature can become somewhat obtrusive and the term “utopian” also carries a

rather loaded connotation. For the sake of clarity and neutrality I will therefore refer to modes of education that priorities children's freedom as simply "alternative education" for the remainder of the essay (while acknowledging, here, the variety of contrasting models that also claim a share of that title).

In its rejection of imposed discipline and advocacy of self-directed learning, alternative education envisages childhood in distinct, but recognizable, ways. Neill's claim "that a child is innately wise" (4) and the emphasis that is placed on the creativity of children, for example, both seem to echo Romantic idealizations of the "child." The critique of such idealization which, as Judith Plotz has argued, serves to silence the experience of real children, however, assumes a central place in alternative educational practice.¹ Neill's statement in full thus reads that "a child is innately wise *and realistic*. If left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of developing." (4) (my emphasis). While suggesting a potentially problematic notion of "capability" this approach fundamentally respects the individuality of every child. It also respects the self-directed activity of children whether those pursuits are demonstrably "educational" or not. In Summerhill, for instance, classes remain to this day entirely optional and if a child wants to "loaf," as Neill put it, then they are free to do so (Neill, 5). After practicing for several decades Neill's writing on education rose to prominence in the nineteen-sixties when the radical critique of formal education received fresh impetus through like-minded individuals such as R. F Mackenzie, John Holt, Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire.² A similar ethic influenced the short-lived and state-backed "free school" movement of the seventies, as is evidenced by several of their mission statements. Barrowfield School in Glasgow, claimed a philosophy in which "each activity and course of study is in the last resort a matter of choice to each pupil and it is up to the teachers to find out each pupil's

interests and develop both the interests and the skills needed for this development,” while a statement from Leeds Free School read that “it is a school where the children tailor their education to their own needs” (Wright 104 & 105).³ In the contemporary landscape, such freedom is perhaps most associated with children that are home-educated and whose parents or guardians practice a form of “unschooling”: glossed by the campaign group “Personalise Education Now” as a philosophy in which “students learn through their natural life experiences including play, household responsibilities, personal interests and curiosity, internships and work experience, travel, books, elective classes, family, mentors, and social interaction.”⁴ “Unschooling” thus places itself in opposition to mainstream education in terms of children’s freedom but also, as Peter Kraftl points out, with a belief in learning both as “an encounter that could happen anywhere as well as at any time” and as “embedded in the banal, material details of childhood experience” (Kraftl 443). While unique in itself, “unschooling” therefore also shares an affinity with the wider sense of alternative education that has thus far been sketched out.

While never referred to as such, Katherine Rundell’s *The Girl Savage* (2011), depicts the alternative education of its twelve-year old protagonist Will (a shortening of Wilhelmina). Up until the age of twelve, Will has spent her childhood living on the remote Zimbabwean farm run by her father, her mother having died some years earlier. She does not attend a school, have any visiting tutors or follow any kind of formal curriculum. These elements of her upbringing are intensified through the extreme freedom that Will enjoys. The son of one of the farm-hands, and her best friend, Simon, reflects that “it was one of the hazards of being her friend, that you might be left for hours, days—even, once, a week—waiting for her to return, while she rambled over the bush, singing softly, eating fruit, telling stories to aloe and birds” (Rundell *The Girl Savage* 11). The expression of Will’s freedom is further developed through her characterisation as “wild”:

the repetition of animalistic descriptions being supplemented by her nickname of “wildcat.” The novel’s African setting and Will’s indeterminate race render this manifestation of Romantic primitivism problematic. Yet, Will’s “wildness” codes for a sense of freedom that also revels in much more prosaic activities and in what Kraftl refers to as the “banal” sites of learning such as in the completion of domestic and farming-related tasks. She has also “read every book” (73) in the farmhouse library and extends her thinking in lengthy conversations with her father, Captain Browne (the farm’s owner) and various employees.

The constitutive role played by reading and conversing renders Will’s learning as an intrinsically linguistic endeavour the experience of which is also performed by the text for its reader. This effect is partly developed through an expansive vocabulary and partly through the text being written in one language (English) while referring at times to another—the indigenous Shona that Will speaks imperfectly and with an awareness that “there were subtleties that hung out of sight, things that she knew she didn’t know she didn’t know” (8). The first half of the novel is also distinguished by the quasi-synaesthetic effects that Rundell creates through their distinctively incongruous description of affects and phenomena. For example, in describing the period of sunset that represents “Will’s world at its best” the text claims that “the air tasted of excitement” (32). This mixing of sensuous capacities and affective states is repeated throughout: for example, when “Will bit her lip hard. She thought, *courage, chook*. She could taste blood; and cold air; and bewilderment” (108). Or when she “struggled to force back the embarrassment, but it insisted on rising up from her chest and out through her eyes” (114). Significantly, this form of description often arises when Will’s own powers of expression are muted: “‘Oh’. A syllable can express a great deal; Will’s sounded of resignation; but also of swear words, and the smells of rotting vegetation, and wary amusement and bitten fingernails” (39).

Rundell has commented elsewhere on her experience of reading as a child and the encountering of words “whose pronunciation was straightforward but whose meaning I did not know, and slowly pieced together from their surroundings” (Rundell *Why You Should Read Children's Books: Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* 14).⁵ The writing style of *The Girl Savage* accentuates this process while also rendering it more challenging still by using words in non-standard ways and in unusual contexts. In doing so, Rundell’s prose opposes the dominant realist inclination of children’s fiction to, as John Stephens puts it, “render the world intelligible” by positing a “a one-to-one relationship between objects and their representation” that obscures the “textual production of meaning” (Stephens 8 & 4). The aesthetic employed in *The Girl Savage*, rather, immerses the reader in the uncertain condition of having to actively participate in the creation of meaning.⁶ This state resonates with the conceptualisation of learning found in the writing of many influential theorists. Margaret Donaldson, for instance, suggests that “those very features of the written word which encourage awareness of language may also encourage awareness of one's own thinking and be relevant to the development of intellectual self-control” (Donaldson 95). While, in more expansive terms, Jerome Bruner, argues that “once one takes the view that a culture itself comprises an ambiguous text that is constantly in need of interpretation by those who participate in it, then the constitutive role of language in creating social reality becomes a topic of practical concern” (Bruner 122). It therefore follows “that induction into the culture through education, if it is to prepare the young for life as lived, should also partake of the spirit of a forum, of negotiation, of the recreating of meaning” (Bruner 123).

While neither Donaldson nor Bruner went so far as to actively support alternative education their critique of mainstream practice rests on a similar premise about the agency of children. Alternative models of education, in this sense, do not actually propose radically new

forms of understanding learning but only take what are fairly widespread criticisms of the mainstream and transforms them into practical (though, it could be claimed, extreme) solutions. To flesh out this idea, and in order to provide a conceptual clarity to the fundamental differentiation between mainstream and alternative practice, I want to turn to the foundational thinking of Jean Piaget—and specifically to the idea that “development is a progressive equilibration from a lesser to a higher state of equilibrium” (Piaget 3). For Piaget, “equilibrium” is achieved through a dialectical process in which internal “structures” of understanding alter in order to “accommodate” newly experienced external stimuli—while concurrently those external stimuli are perceived by being “assimilated” within the structure of the understanding currently in existence (Piaget 103). When an eventual synthesis is made between these elements, equilibrium and a new, more advanced, “structure” is attained: as P. G. Richmond paraphrases it, “intellectual development is a process of restoring a disturbed balance between assimilation and accommodation” (Richmond 90). Much could be said about the contestation of the Piagetian model and how it has been interpreted (and misinterpreted) within mainstream schooling.⁷ But, for the purposes of this essay, I want to take one straightforward point from Piaget’s concept: namely, the thought that, while splitting the process into a variety of disciplines, mainstream education is premised on moving students towards predetermined states of equilibrium.

Will’s experience of the conformity of a British boarding school in the second half of *The Girl Savage* represents just this view. Given the fact that Will’s attendance at the school follows the death of her father the unremittingly bleak tone employed during this section of the novel is unsurprising. The draconian enforcement of needless rules and the unfriendliness of Will’s fellow pupils also contribute to the school’s negative portrayal. But mainstream schooling is also portrayed here as failing its participants by refusing to recognize their specific qualities. Thus:

“in that grey blur of a first day, Will learnt many things. She discovered that times tables had nothing to do with time, nor, in fact, with tables; that history was not [...] a thousand stories building up into the colossal, strange, heart-stoppingly-beautiful tower of the present; that knowing about cows and snake bites and birth and umbilical cords was irrelevant in science class” (118). Later, Will reflects that “at school, all the good bits of her—the tree-climbing-sunlit-jumping-catapulting parts—were useless” (154). The novel, of course, reflects the complete opposite by emphasising the “usefulness” of Will’s knowledge and skills and contrasting them with the “long-division” and “quadratic equations” of a curriculum that is pointedly represented as arbitrary (117).

Will never reaches a state of “equilibrium” during her time at school. More significantly, she also does not experience the perplexed state of “disequilibrium” that forms its necessary correlate. As Pulaski puts it “when equilibrium is established in one area, the restless organism begins to explore in another. This is the common characteristic of all living beings, as Piaget sees them. At every biological and intellectual level there is an urge toward adaptation, understanding, and mastery” (Pulaski 76). Importantly, “disequilibrium” does not equate to sheer confusion (as Will experiences classes at school) but rests on the delicate engagement between established knowledge and an imperfectly understood unknown. For Will, this state has been experienced before: but at home on the farm and dramatized as an exaggerated condition of wonder towards the physical environment and the signification of language. In lighting a fire, for example, Will asks Simon to notice how “it’s alive and it’s also-not-really-alive. Watch: it moves without the wind. D’you see? [...] *It is* amazing isn’t it, Si?” But then follows this with the reflection that “fire was such an odd thing—it was like water, she reckoned; if we didn’t have the name for it, didn’t have it every day, we’d be so choked and laughing and flabbergasted by it”

(17). To put Will's thoughts in the terms made famous by Viktor Shklovsky, perfunctory language-use "habitualizes" the experience of fire and hinders the capacity to truly perceive its strange qualities. Rather than intuiting a natural affinity with her environment, then, Will's condition rests upon a sense of creative disequilibrium that is dramatized through her own act of "defamiliarization"—a state that, to reiterate, is also performed for the reader in the "defamiliarization" of Rundell's own prose. This positioning is made clear in Rundell's own thinking about writing for children when she advocates for adults to read children's literature and "return to the time when new discoveries came daily and when the world was colossal, before your imagination was trimmed and neatened, as if it were an optional extra" (Rundell 44).⁸

In representing and mimicking states of disequilibrium the text speaks to a realistic sense of childhood learning that prioritizes its generative nature. This idea can be found within established critiques of mainstream education and in an alternative rhetoric that values children's freedom partly because of the highly individual character of each learner's disequilibrium. Reflecting on the difficulty of identifying such disequilibrium during his time as a school teacher John Holt writes that "for many years I thought I had been very clever in getting my students to reveal their confusions. Now I fear I may only have added to them. It is almost impossible for one person to see very far into the mind or thought of another, even under the best circumstances" (Holt *Instead of Education : Ways to Help People Do Things Better* 83). Holt's example questions the capacity that any teacher has to accurately gauge the knowledge-level of their pupils and then teach accordingly. The disequilibrium of learners, however, also speaks to alternative education's prioritising of why, rather than how, children learn. Effective education, in this philosophy, responds to the individual desire to learn a given topic rather than trying to generate that desire itself. In a typically pithy remark of Neill's, for example, he writes that

“whether a school has or has not a special method for teaching long division is of no significance, for long division is of no importance except to those who want to *learn* it” (Neill 5) (emphasis in original). How learning might take place is, in this view, entirely dependent on a motivation to learn that springs from the specific interests of the learner and by the “disequilibrium” of their very individual understanding and experience.⁹

Where the genuine following of “disequilibrium” might lead is unpredictable and stands completely at odds with the standardisation prevalent in most formal systems of mainstream education. In a text that reiterates points made famous in his TED talks from the early 2000s Sir Ken Robinson claims that the majority of education systems around the world operate:

on the manufacturing principle of linearity; in that there are distinct sequential stages to the process. Each stage is meant to build logically on the one that precedes it; overall outcomes can be predicted with reasonable reliability. The idea is that if students progress in the prescribed way through the system, and especially if they complete college, they will emerge at the far end educated and prepared for whatever the world throws at them (Robinson 57).

Robinson compares this sense of linearity to a “manufacturing principle” but it could equally be equated with the functioning of linear narrative. Indeed, to do so would be to evoke a far more entrenched form of sense-making that, in the scholarship of narratology, also has a potentially useful toolkit for thinking about how children’s learning is commonly thought to function. This analysis begins with the ending: which is to say that the prospect of ending is the logical basis that underpins both mainstream education and linear narrative. More than simply the expectation

that a text will end at some point, narratology emphasises the role that ending plays in establishing the connections between signs in a narrative. As Peter Brooks, drawing upon Genette, Sartre and Barthes, writes “any narrative telling presupposes an end that will transform its apparently random details ‘as annunciations, as promises’ of what is to come, and that ‘what is to come’ transforms because it gives meaning to, makes significant the details as leading to the end” (Brooks "Retrospective Prophecies: Legal Narrative Constructions" 99). When combined with Robinson’s claim about linearity, this theorization emphasises how mainstream education often rationalizes its learning activities through their relation to the goal of successfully obtaining qualifications—a situation that Illich thought contributed to the culturally dominant sense that real learning *only* takes place in the institutional setting of school (Illich 12). The presence of an ending that will transform the experience of “randomness” presupposes a sense of satisfying narrative resolution. This is, as Brooks points out, the promise of much narrative fiction—but to look ahead to the argument to come, it has an especial resonance in children’s fiction. Stephens, for instance, writes that in children’s fiction “the desire for *closure*, both in the specific sense of an achieved satisfying ending and in the more general sense of a final order and coherent significance, is characteristically a desire for fixed meanings, and is apparent in the socializing, didactic purposes of much children’s literature” (Stephens 41).

In contrast to stylistic analysis, narratology has also sought a vocabulary with which to describe the functioning of narrative at the base level of plot. One of the foundational thoughts in this endeavour is the Russian Formalist distinction between the *fabula* (the underlying sequence of chronologically ordered events that a narrative is representing) and the *sjuzhet* (the particular collection of signs that form any given narrative representation). The idea that, as Seymour Chatman puts it “words [...] are not the ultimate components of narratives; those ultimate

elements are, rather, events and existents in a chain of temporal causality” (Chatman "Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith" 262) positions linear narrative sequence as pre-existing representation. In developing an insight of Barthes, Chatman further suggests that *fabula* contain a series of “kernels” that no individual telling (*sjuzhet*) can do without—even though each of those tellings will also be characterized by peripheral “satellites” that simply embellish or add color to the story (Chatman *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*). In the context of mainstream education the implication is that a linear mode of teaching is most appropriate because developing learning is already and always narrative in form and reducible to definable stages (kernels) of development. There is, in essence, a *fabula* of learning.

But narratological theory would also counsel wariness towards such a conclusion. As Brooks, amongst others, has noted, narratives are only ever *sjuzhets*: meaning that they are “an inference we make, a normalized chronology and causality” (Brooks "The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric") that applies a narrative logic to events that, in themselves, may not be structured along linear lines at all.¹⁰ Thinking about this in terms of children’s education raises the possibility that ascribing a narrative “chronology and causality” to learning imposes an inexact and misleading logic upon that process—even though, once absorbed, that learning might be amenable to narrative reconstruction or even understood in the narrative terms of causal connection.¹¹ This is certainly the position taken by many critics of mainstream education. Robinson, for example, contrasts the linear understanding of learning quoted earlier with the reality of a lived experience “shaped by an unpredictable mixture of events and opportunities, which make sense only retrospectively when writing a curriculum vitae. At which point the basic human urge for narrative takes over, turning the chaotic process of randomness and chance into a well-crafted account of your sleek trajectory through life” (Robinson 59). The perceived tension between a

fluid lived experience and the overly-rigid sequentialism of mainstream schooling also characterises the writing of more alternative figures. Illich, for example, claims that “an individual with a schooled mind conceives of the world as a pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags” (Illich 76). Holt writes very similarly when disparaging a system in which “you can only learn at the designated pace. And you cannot enter a course unless you have already completed earlier programmes. Learning, in short, comes in packages” (Holt *Freedom and Beyond* 189). Finally, in a more specific example, Goodman expresses doubt as to whether “most of us who seriously read and write the English language ever learned it by the route of ‘Run, Spot, Run’ to Silas Marner” (Goodman 27).

The Girl Savage's representation and performance of the uneven accretion of language acquisition disrupts linear progression to a degree. But for a much more developed fissuring of linear narrative structure in the context of writing about alternative education I want to turn to David Almond's *My Name is Mina* (2010). Forming a prequel to Almond's earlier *Skellig* (1998), the novel develops the background of one of that novel's main characters—a young home-educated girl named Mina who believes that “schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity and intelligence of children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom” (Almond *Skellig* 47). Although not referred to as such, *My Name is Mina* proceeds to describe Mina's “unschooling” in more detail than the earlier novel. It does so through Mina's own first-person narration and in what she announces to be a journal but which she self-consciously extends to be much more than a straightforward record of daily activities. As she puts it:

I can't just write that this happened then this happened then this happened to boring infinitum. I'll let my journal grow just like the mind does, just like a tree or a beast does, just like life does. Why should a book tell a tale in a dull straight line? Words should wander and meander. They should fly like owls and flicker like bats and slip like cats. (Almond *My Name Is Mina* 7).

Mina makes an explicit connection here between the cognitive development of learning and the production of text. In a striking similarity to Rundell's prose, this development involves an appreciation of language rendered separable from its referential function. Mina thus writes that her journal will include "poems and scribblings and nonsense. Sometimes writing nonsense can make a lot of sense. That sounds nonsensical itself, of course, but it isn't. **NON-SENS-I-CAL! WHAT A GREAT WORD! WOW!**" (10) (emphasis in original). Mina's sense of writing is also pointedly juxtaposed with that encouraged by her schooling. This culminates in the SATS day test when Mina writes a nonsense-poem entitled "Glibbertysnark" in response to the instruction to "write a description of a busy place"—an act that leads to her mother being summoned and, ultimately, to Mina's withdrawal from school (95 & 94). But several moments build up to this. For example, Mina reports being "told by my teacher Mrs Scullery that I should not write anything until I had planned what I would write. What nonsense!" (8) while she later fails a task because her story-plan and story "do not match!": Mina's explanation being that the "story wanted to do other things" (9).

The idea that words and sentences might act to resist the functioning of a pre-planned story defamiliarizes not just language use but readerly expectations about narrative structure itself. These expectations are defied by Mina *and* by her text. As much is evident in Eve

Tandoi's report of how a group of school children reacted to having the novel read to them. Tandoi comments that the children found the novel "weird" and were mostly interested in discussing "how and why the plot in *My Name is Mina* diverged from the strong and recognizable storylines to which they were accustomed" (Tandoi 84). Resisting such recognizability, the text functions in many ways as an anti-narrative with Mina deconstructing the authorial control associated with the journal form in order to make it the very site of the alternative learning that she apparently records. Rather than simply a write-up of each day (a form that establishes an equivalency between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*) the journal fractures the straightforward with recollections, creative fantasies and ideas for what Mina refers to as "extraordinary activities" (intended as a contrast to school "lessons"). In one particularly striking passage, presented in a range of differently sized fonts, Mina states some "simple facts about children:"

THERE'S NO NEED TO KEEP ON SAYING:

LEARN THIS, LEARN THAT!

DO THIS, DO THAT!

ANSWER THIS, ANSWER THAT!

SOMETIMES CHILDREN MUST BE

LEFT ALONE TO BE STILL AND SILENT,

AND TO DO

ABSOLUTELY

NOTHING (68-69)

This statement leads to the question “why are we so scared of nothingness” and to the “extraordinary activity” of attempting to “write an empty page” (71). The puzzlingly philosophical nature of this task resonates with Mina’s experimental thinking and writing throughout the novel—she earlier proposes the activity of writing “a poem that repeats a word and repeats a word and repeats and repeats a word until it almost loses its meaning” (56). But, also typically within Almond’s text, the progress of reaching for an understanding of something is couched in a form that draws attention to its literary-aesthetic status (large bold font and central alignment) while also imagining its further development in the experience of a literary process (the act of writing an empty page).

At the same time, Mina’s point about “doing nothing” resists what Neill, amongst others, saw as the culturally dominant “notion that unless a child is learning something the child is wasting his time” (27). The novel, by contrast, takes the value of “doing nothing” seriously—Mina spends a lot of time simply sitting in the tree in her garden for instance—while also implying that such inactivity is an essential part of Mina’s impressive learning. The text is thus peppered with fairly lengthy expositions on the diverse range of topics that Mina takes an interest in, including ornithology, astronomy and literature. While never positioned as the result of studying, this learning is clearly in excess of either vague understanding or intuition. When the novel evokes Romanticism, for example, it does not present Mina as “The Child” of natural genius but, rather, in order to highlight how she self-consciously positions her refusal to fit into mainstream education partly through her own reading of Blake: she claims a line from “The Schoolboy” as her motto (12).

Mina's thought is further characterised by how it ranges across the disciplinary borders of mainstream education. In *Skellig*, when Michael sees her sketching the skeleton of a bird and asks if she is "doing science", she laughs and responds that "I'm drawing, painting, reading, looking" (56). In *My Name is Mina* the same idea is similarly represented but, in addition, symbolically expressed through the Mina's holistic thinking: an example being her reflecting that "water's moving all the time, running, flowing, swirling, splashing, gurgling, evaporating, condensing. Some of the water molecules that are in me now were once in the Red Sea, or in the Mississippi, or in Ernie Myers, or in a blackbird, or in an orange, or a sprout, or inside a dinosaur, or in a caveman, or a sabre-toothed tiger, or a three-toed sloth" (75). Yet, despite the extensive range of Mina's knowledge she claims that her "mind is a clutter and a mess" (7). Far from creating a paralysing confusion, however, this clutter is self-confidently related to the genuine complexity of her immediate and wider environment and intuited as the state of creative disequilibrium that prompts absorbed learning within the world.

My Name is Mina and *The Girl Savage* do not share precisely the same style or form. But the aim of the argument so far presented has been to show that their distinctive features spring from a shared motivation: the attempt to authentically represent alternative modes of education. In suggesting that such authenticity requires formal innovation both novels reflect their focus upon the process, as opposed to the product, of learning. In destabilising straightforward comprehension and disrupting the flow of linear narrative these novels produce the sense of disequilibrium that is so crucial to the alternative conception of learning. With this confluence an affirmation of alternative education is produced. But this affirmation relies on negating the linear logic that is perceived to dominate mainstream children's education and therefore, as will be argued in the following section, the dominant expectation of linear narration in children's fiction.

How complete the resistance to these influences can be in Rundell's and Almond's texts remains, for the moment, an open question.

The Pull of Conventional Form

Robyn McCallum argues that "childhood, adolescence and adulthood are culturally constructed categories, the relations between which are primarily determined by processes of education, enculturation and maturation" and that children's fiction is "informed by wider cultural assumptions about what constitutes these cultural categories and the processes involved in moving between them" (McCallum 9). Assuming the validity of this claim, a fair expectation of children's fiction would be that prevalent "assumptions" about "processes of education" commonly inform its representations of growing up. In other words, the predominant representation of child development that emerges in children's fiction is premised on the logic of mainstream education.

This does not mean that children's fiction never criticizes schooling. The genre of the school story in British children's fiction has, from its beginnings, included texts that have exploited the dramatic potential offered by the injustices and hardships of school (especially boarding school). Interpreting this apparently critical stance as a form of subversion should, however, be tempered by three caveats. Firstly, schools-stories are rarely invested in the functioning of schools as places of learning: as Beverley Lyon Clark points out, when reading a classic version of the genre "occasionally we might glimpse a classroom, for a paragraph or two" (Clark 4) but no more.¹² Secondly, and as P. W. Musgrave points out, even when adopting a critical tone school-stories tend to do "no more than suggest that the mechanism of the schools should be revamped in order to make them more efficient" (Musgrave 251).¹³ Thirdly, as Mavis

Reimer comments, this has remained “a comparatively thin thread through the tradition. More typical is the story in which the new scholar learns first to understand, then to accept, and finally to excel at, the ways of the strange world he or she is entering” (Reimer 223).

The fact that the inherent logic of formal schooling is rarely questioned and, even more importantly, rarely even represented by the school story indicates its position as a commonsense assumption of dominant ideology. Its representation within the similarly commonsense form of literary realism that dominates the school story and is so prevalent in children’s fiction further bolsters that position.¹⁴ But realism is not in itself reality. Rather, as John Stephens puts it, realism “is a set of conventions for constructing typical story existents” that are coded as realistic. The remainder of this essay will suggest that one specific convention of realism—its linearity—not only supports the assumptions of dominant ideology but is also bound in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the similarly linear form of mainstream education. To put it another way, realism cannot help but support mainstream education because the linearity that it produces as “reality” mirrors how mainstream education envisages the “reality” of learning to take place.

To see how closely aligned and mutually reinforcing these forms can be I want to briefly turn not to a school story as such but to a novel in which schooling features prominently: Michelle Magorian’s *Goodnight Mr Tom* (1981). Written in an archetypally realist, linear, form the novel charts the development of the wartime evacuee Willie from under-nourished and poorly educated waif to healthy and bright young boy. This development relies upon both the care given to him by the elderly Tom and the organised progression of his formal education at the village school. Barred from attending the class for his age group because of his illiteracy, Willie finds that, when his reading improves, “he now needed to learn his tables up to six times

and also be able to do multiplication, addition, subtraction and division, tens and units, shillings and pence and have a basic knowledge of simple weights and lengths” (Magorian *Goodnight Mister Tom* 146). Willie’s development is thus imagined to take place through learning the “basics” and passing through a pre-determined series of defined milestones (“kernels”). That this development *must* take place under Tom’s care and while attending school is dramatized when Willie returns to his abusive mother and regresses—a point made explicit when Tom rescues Willie and finds him tied up in a dark cupboard and starved of even basic sensory stimuli.. Willie’s mother is thus the novel’s antagonist because of her cruelty but also because she retards Willie’s progress Overcoming this antagonist restores Willie to safety while also restoring the linear narrative progress of his own development as he works to retrieve the level of attainment he had reached prior to this setback. Significantly, the strict linearity of the narrative (the novel’s *sjuzhet*) matches the reality of steady progression (the *fabula*) that it apparently narrates.

Joseph Zornando writes that there is “a master narrative to the story of childhood that continues to play out in the dominant culture through the stories the culture tells about itself to itself” (Zornando xiv). *Goodnight Mr Tom* serves as an example of one such story, the “master narrative” being the logic of linear narrative development itself. In this sense, Willie perfectly conforms to Jacqueline Rose’s influential conception of the child in children’s literature: meaning that he is an ideal of the child as construed by adult desire. Compliance and innocence are part of this ideal but so too is the depiction of a child that is perfectly responsive to the guiding system of linear learning. In fact, Rose makes just such an equation between childhood and narrativity when writing that “there is no child behind the category “children's fiction”, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes”—its ultimate purpose being narration itself (Rose 11). It may even be the case

that this dual ideological and narrative pressure means that imagining the “learning child” forms an apposite case for Rose’s model. Only, the child desired by this form is one that, contra Rose’s example of Peter Pan, *will* grow up, healthily developed and with full potential having been realised.

Rose’s innately conservative characterization of children’s fiction as always reproducing the child of adult desire has been questioned by several scholars. In a particularly compelling contribution to this work Kimberley Reynolds argues that “the stories we give children are blueprints for living in culture as it exists, but they are also where alternative ways of living are often piloted in recognition of the fact that children will not just inherit the future, but need to participate in shaping it” (Reynolds *Radical Children's Literature* 5 & 14).¹⁵ When it comes to the representation of alternative modes of education Reynolds’ claim is compelling—not least because they write of texts such as Josephine Elder’s *Exile for Annis* (1938) and Carol Forrest’s *Caravan School* (1946) in their study of radical children’s publishing in the first half of the twentieth-century (Reynolds *Left Out* 161-2). While there are examples of such novels in more recent times, the affirmation of alternative education that they apparently make is often hampered by a disconnection between the non-linear sense of learning that they apparently extol and the linear narrative form that they employ. Magorian’s quite different second novel *Back Home* (1984), is a case in point. It concludes with its twelve-year-old protagonist Rusty being taken out of a strict boarding school named Benwood House and set to attend an alternative school “based on the work of an American educationalist” (30) and in which “you don’t have to go to the classes if you don’t want to” (96). It would be nonsensical to claim that this does not place alternative education in a positive light. And yet, rather than being depicted directly this positive representation relies almost entirely upon the extensive, and extremely straightforward,

narration of Rusty's time at Benwood House—a narration that bears a marked similarity to that of Will's time at boarding school in *The Girl Savage* as the enforcement of a rigid curriculum makes Rusty feel “as though she was being shrunk to fit the school” (216). The conclusion to be drawn is that when alternative education begins narrative stops.

The opposing logic, but with the same result, characterizes Eva Ibbotson's *The Dragonfly Pool* (2008). This novel begins with its central character, Tally, being sent to a private school named Delderton Hall. Based on Dartington Hall, attended by Ibbotson herself, Delderton practices an alternative form of education in which lessons are optional, children are encouraged to follow their own interests and much of the decisions in relation to governance are reached in a democratic process involving pupils and teachers. The self-evident virtue of these qualities is indicated from an early stage as Tally's father reflects that “he himself believed in freedom and self-development—who didn't?” (27). Tally, on the other hand, finds the sudden granting of extended liberty disconcerting, while one of her new peers goes so far as to complain that “I don't mind being repressed [...] I don't like it when people tell me I can do what I like. I want them to tell me what to *do*” (52). In depicting these anxieties and thus refusing to idealise the experience that children have of alternative education, Ibbotson's text performs a significant degree of verisimilitude. Yet just as the linear narration of life at Delderton seems to be getting going the novel pivots to become an adventure story in which the children save the young prince of a fictional state named Bergania from a Nazi plot. For Ibbotson's narrative to proceed, melodrama has thus had to intervene and the representation of alternative education cease.

The argument made in the first part of this essay was that Rundell and Almond both buck this trend and authentically represent the spirit of alternative education by disrupting the even flow of realist linear narrative. Both novels are, in this sense, examples of what Stephens refers

to as “interrogative texts.” But one of the features that Stephens also identifies in “interrogative texts” is the employment of “narrative structures which do not lead to that form of closure which in classic realism is also a final disclosure of theme, moral, or transcendent significance” (Stephens 124). This does not apply to either *The Girl Savage* or *My Name is Mina*: though to varying degrees, both novels conclude by disclosing a theme that at least partially affirms mainstream education. Equally noticeably, they do so while also retreating from what has been argued to be the most distinctive features of their narrative style and form. This combination can be seen most clearly in *The Girl Savage*. Having reached a profound state of disaffection with her boarding school, Will escapes and goes on the run, sleeping rough for several nights, including some spent in London Zoo. While at the zoo, Will meets a boy named Daniel who lets Will sleep in the garage of his grandmother’s house. Having discovered this, Daniel’s grandmother initially appears to take Will’s side (warding off a pair of police officers that call in search of her) but then counsels Will to return to school of her own volition:

“But you do have to go back. In fact you don't have a choice. This is a land of compulsory education, my love. Do you know what that means?”

“Ja. But—ach. It's a land of compulsory everything.”

“What?”

“Rules...” Will could barely talk through her mouthful of sadness. “You only have rules.”
(216-7)

While Daniel’s grandmother is right in her claim about the UK requiring “compulsory education” she makes the common elision of equating this with “compulsory schooling” (home

education that does not follow the national curriculum is a perfectly lawful alternative in the UK).¹⁶ Her words also suppress the notion of their being alternative types of school that Will might attend. In this context, Will's statement that England only has "rules" refers not just to formal laws but to ideological convention: a point reiterated with Will's repeated description of Britain as a "land of common sense." Presented as a matter of geography, the acceptance of such "common sense," and so mainstream schooling, is more accurately the result of Will's transition from childhood to early adolescence and the implied anticipation of adulthood.

The Girl Savage concludes with Will returning to boarding school. As an ending this assumes the conservative position, diagnosed by Neill, amongst others, that "*life is hard, and we must train the children so that they will fit into life later on*" (Neill 109) (italics in original).¹⁷ Echoing this logic, Daniel's grandmother states that "it is real life that takes the real courage, little wildcat. School is very difficult. But that's because it takes toughness and patience. It's what life is, my love. Although life is very beautiful, it is also very difficult" (217). Mainstream education is imagined here as an arduous journey that must be endured for successful adulthood to be reached. This representation ties the linear path of learning itself to a conception of mainstream education as a narrative of hardship withstood and reward ultimately gained. It is hard to imagine a conclusion further removed from the affirmation of alternative education that appeared to accompany the depiction of Will's childhood in the first half of the novel. But, curiously, this does not read as a tragic, or even a lowkey, ending. Rather, Rundell shifts the point of affirmation from Will's younger self to an implied reader that exists within a mainstream educational setting. This encourages an interpretation of their experience as a narrative that is pushing towards a specific goal, with the hardships and limitations of the present

(especially in an educational sense) being, in fact, the very features that will see that narrative come to its desired conclusion.

Significantly, Will's own acceptance of this narrative line corresponds with a lexical turn towards "commonsense" language. In the final pages of the novel, as Will resumes life at her school, she writes to Simon:

England isn't like Africa. There's no dragonflies. But there are some good things.

This was true. There were girls like the twins. There were books. There was Miss Blake.

Will wrote again,

"Daniel is one of the good things. He's coming to visit me this weekend. He's bringing me his comics. You'll like him. When I come back to the farm, I'll try to bring him, and you'll meet. He's almost as tall as you. He can whistle with his fingers, but he can't swim (230).

While still characterized by child-like trains of thought—the inclusion of details about whistling and swimming—Will's use of language here has completely lost the vital strangeness of its earlier iteration. Accepting schooling, made synonymous with a push towards the narrative goal of reaching a "strong" adulthood has thus been matched by the inclusion of Will's expression within the accepted conventions of common-sense, well-ordered, language.

While in no way as absolute, *My Name is Mina* performs a similar turn away from experimental form as, running alongside its distinctive non-narrativity, a rationalising narrative that "explains" Mina and her circumstances emerges. This narrative springs from the "ONE BIG SAD AND HORRIBLE THING" (12) in Mina's life—the fact that her father has died—and

poignantly captures the grief that Mina is still working through. In the process, however, it positions Mina's removal from mainstream education as the protective measure required of a special case. This is accompanied by the repeated suggestion that Mina's time at home is only a temporary measure. Thus, when recounting an afternoon exploring the ideas of metempsychosis and astral travelling with her mother, Mina reports that: "I love being home-schooled, when we don't have to stick to subjects and timetables and rules. [...] Mum says it can't last forever, though. She says I'll become too isolated, especially as I'm an only child. She even says that schools aren't really prisons and cages" (49). Mina's attendance for a day's trial at "The Corinthian Avenue Pupil Referral Unit"—which represents a moderately-alternative middle ground between the mainstream of Mina's former school and her education at home—also takes up a particular significance in this narrative (134). Anticipating the trip with dread, Mina finds that she appreciates the kindness and creativity of the teachers (one of whom is an aspiring novelist) and feels a deep empathy for her fellow pupils. That this represents a significant step in a narrative of recovery is emphasised when, during a writing session, Mina "sees" her dad smiling at her and "she knew that despite everything, everything was OK" (144). Mina later reflects that "Corinthian Avenue wasn't for me. I enjoyed the day, I learned a lot. It taught me that misfits can fit together in weird ways. It taught me that one day even as a misfit I might fit into this weird world. I liked the people there [...] But it wasn't the right time. I needed to be at home with my mum, with my tree. I needed to be home-schooled" (145). These reflections emphasise a reading of Mina, by herself and, by implication, her readers, as a "misfit". In other words, Mina requires an alternative education because she is, herself, alternative. They also reinforce the temporariness of her current condition as the rejection of Corinthian Avenue is ultimately because it "wasn't the right time."

The text has also divulged that the passage of time might bring about a complete return to mainstream education. Mina admits, for example, that some of her teachers were “nice, and interesting, and creative” (75) and reports that “I would only ever whisper it, but I do sometimes think I will have to go back to school one day” (75). This narrative thread of recovery and return that pushes against the non-narrative surface content culminates with:

A CONFESSION. OK, maybe Scullery wasn't quite so horrible and screechy as I made her out to be. And maybe THE HEAD TEACHER wasn't quite so thick. And maybe they both showed a bit more understanding than I said they did. But when you're writing stories, sometimes you just have to do these things. You have to EXAGGERATE otherwise there wouldn't be any DRAMA. It's just what writers DO!! OK? (154)

Mina's journal has drawn attention to its textual status from its outset. But whereas the kinds of moments referred to earlier in this essay produced a sense of textual independence this declaration emphasizes referential status of the text and does so in order to acknowledge its lack of veracity. In doing so, Mina reduces her journal from a self-generating site of created meaning (and learning) to an imperfect recounting (*sjuzhet*) of an objectively real *fabula*. This positions Mina's representation of school as the distorted interpretation of an actually much more palatable reality. The unearthing of a more straightforward narrative form is therefore made consonant with a recovery that, at least to some degree, accepts mainstream education.

While these signs of narrative coherence push towards an expectation of closure the novel does retain an open-ending in which Mina's future education remains undecided. In fact, while the novel *My Name is Mina* ends, the narrative only really comes back to the beginning-

point of *Skellig*'s opening and the point at which Mina and Michael meet for the first time. The prequel prompts the realisation that Mina's lofty attitude in this scene springs from her insecurity rather than an innate confidence. From this perspective her burgeoning friendship with Michael becomes yet another sign of her recovery. While Mina remains home educated for the duration of *Skellig* the imagined conclusion of a fully developed recovery that involves a reintegration within the mainstream therefore persists. Crucially, this sense of Mina recovering (a process often described in the narrative terms of a journey) is both *the way that My Name is Mina* functions as a recognizably linear narrative and *requires* Mina's imagined return to the linearity of healthy development in a mainstream educational setting for its completion. That Almond resists fully representing this conclusion illustrates how effective the non-narrative strategy of his novel has been in authentically portraying alternative education. But the fact that such a narrative line does exist also indicates just how powerful the conventions of linear narrative form and mainstream education are.

Conclusion

The point that this article has concluded with—that two children's novels are apparently unable to wholly resist a dominant ideological position—may seem to only reiterate the well-worn, though contested, critical position that children's literature is often conservative. But the argument leading to this point has attempted to suggest that the reason for this specific acquiescence has at least as much to do with the effects of formal convention as it does cultural orthodoxy. There is a certain inevitability about the pull toward realist linear conclusions within both novels—these conclusions, and the affirmation or linearity they perform, then rendering the acceptance of mainstream education as similarly inevitable. Yet, although this outcome

undermines the subversive nature of each text the innovative use of style and form that distinguishes them remain as striking examples of how alternative education can be authentically represented. These representations cannot be wholly erased, just as the eventual endorsement of the mainstream that both novels make ultimately demonstrate how the demand for story in the children's novel produces effects that range beyond the formal. The linear form of storytelling within the children's novel determines that, while it is possible to write a stimulating text about alternative education, it is very difficult to tell a good story about it.

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Notes

¹ See Judith Plotz's *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001). It is also worth noting that though the shorthand term the "Romantic Child" is useful it also elides the diverse representation of children that characterised the period. Plotz is thus careful to situate their argument about the idealization of childhood within "limited readings of Wordsworth, De Quincey, and Lamb" (4) while Alan Richardson states that "contrary to the common belief that Romantic authors work from a shared notion of childhood such as "original innocence," no single or simple conception of the child characterizes the writings of the canonical Romantics, let alone the still more diverse body of texts from which their work is usually abstracted" (Richardson 8).

² There is a particular congruity between the thought of Neill and Holt. For example, while Neill wrote of progressive state education that "parents and teachers have confused true nonauthoritarian education with education by means of persuasion and hidden coercion" (Neill xi), Holt stated that "there is no way to coerce children without making them afraid, or more afraid. We must not try to fool ourselves into thinking that this is not so" (Holt, *How Children Fail*, 175).

³ While gaining a strong degree of support (including, perhaps surprisingly, in the mass media) the free schools were never placed on an entirely secure financial footing and almost all of them were permanently closed by the nineteen-eighties (Wright 102-3). Without a prolonged period of activity to assess, their success as an educational project is debateable. In Nigel Wright's critical account, for instance, he argues that the refusal to consider the "content of learning" (107) was a problem. He cites a statement made by the White Lion Street School in London that "at White Lion Street we discovered early that though a few children knew what they wanted to do, most didn't, beyond a (usually) guilt-ridden conviction that they ought to do reading, writing and numbers" (140). This seems like a definitive statement of failure but it is difficult to disentangle it from the fact that almost all of White Lion Street's pupils were coming from several years of attendance within mainstream schooling and hence approached learning with what Illich refers to as the "schooled mind" (Illich 76). The difficulty of recognizing learning outside of this view and the contradictions that ensue when moving between mainstream and alternative models is poignantly expressed by an ex-pupil of Durdham Park Free School in a collection of interviews amassed by Roger White. They state that: "we didn't learn much but it did me good. There wasn't set lessons; you'd go in and do what you like; you'd do yoga in the library; we'd go canoeing, ice skating, look after animals and make shampoo in the science lab. I learnt a lot, but it wasn't like what you learn in schools. It wasn't anything that would help me in a CSE but it was something that's helped me in life [...] I felt like I learnt a hell of a lot there, but it was nothing I could write down on paper" (White 12-13).

⁴ <https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/unschooling/>. Further organisations associated with home education in the UK include Education Otherwise, Educational Freedom and Home Education Advisory Service.

⁵ Francis Spufford writes beautifully about the same sensation in his memoir, *The Child that Books Built* (2010).

⁶ Two things are worth nothing here. Firstly, that this stylistic feature is characteristic of all Rundell's writing for children. Secondly, the majority of her children's novels depict characters that are, at least temporarily and often permanently, not taking part in regular mainstream education. See, especially, *Rooftoppers* (2013) and *The Explorer* (2017).

⁷ On the former see Bjorklund (181-183). For an account of the latter see Tisdall (144).

⁸ This approach is the opposite of what Marah Gubar refers to as the "deficit" model that characterizes much in children's literature and children's literature criticism ("Risky Business" 451).

⁹ In writing of his time as a teacher, John Holt asserts that "children who have been led up to answers by teacher's questions are later helpless unless they can remember the questions, or ask themselves similar questions, and this is exactly what they cannot do. The only answer that really sticks in a child's mind is the answer to a question that he asked or might ask of himself" (*How Children Fail* 122).

¹⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, using Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* as an example argues "there evidently are no sets and sequences of events that, already arranged in some particular way, could be spoken of as rearranged" by the *sjuzhet* (224).

¹¹ Margaret Donaldson, for example, writes that 'to Western adults, and especially to Western adult linguists, languages are formal systems. A formal system can be manipulated in a formal way. It is an easy but dangerous move from this to the conclusion that it is also learned in a formal way' (38).

¹² For critical work on the range of other issues that arise in school-set fiction see Hunt, Quigly, Reimer and Spencer.

¹³ David Aitchison has noted a similar tendency in the context of the American school story.

¹⁴ Stephens sees the majority of children's fiction as falling into the category of either realism or fantasy. I have refrained from writing about fantasy in this article because representations within that genre are not usually expected to be taken seriously as viable options in real life.

¹⁵ Burke and Coats make a similar point when asserting that "children's literature can be both conservative, reinforcing the status quo through the language and story structures that are most recognizable in its socially scripted worlds, and critical, suggesting that children have the motivation, ability and responsibility to fashion worlds that are more open and sustainable" (4).

¹⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/home-education>

¹⁷ John Holt writes in a similar vein on numerous occasions. In one example, from *How Children Fail* (1965), he reports that "a mother said to me not long ago, "I think you are making a mistake in trying to make schoolwork so interesting for the children. After all, they are going to have to spend most of their lives doing things they don't like, and they might as well get used to it now." (159).