Follow the Money: Implicit Messages in Children's Texts on Activism

—Laurel J. Felt

Milway, Katie Smith. *Mimi's Village and How Basic Health Care Transformed It*. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Toronto: Kids, 2012. 32 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-5545-3722-8. Print.

Newhouse, Maxwell. *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew*. Toronto: Tundra, 2010. 24 pp. $19.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-88776-913-9. Print.

Wilson, Janet. *Our Earth: How Kids Are Saving the Planet*. Toronto: Second Story, 2010. 32 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-897187-84-5. Print.

What is activism? How does change get made? What role do children play? How can you get involved?

One might assume that children's and young adult books about activism would tackle such basic questions accurately and exhaustively, in a way that empowers young readers. Yet despite their evident desire to tackle activism, the three books I review here either sidestep these questions entirely or address them obliquely, contributing to flawed, partial, or disempowering responses.

To identify the biases of texts by Katie Smith Milway, Maxwell Newhouse, and Janet Wilson and to generate the aforementioned list of questions oriented toward youth activism, I rely on the lens of critical literacy, a method that urges readers to encounter texts carefully and critically using questions designed to illuminate assumptions, ideologies, underlying messages, and hidden agendas. Stemming from the social justice framework of Brazilian educator and theorist Paolo Freire, critical literacy is intended as a means to combat oppression and to support empowerment. Applying critical literacy to three texts that purport to relate to activism has led me to conclude that all three examine efforts to impact

community well-being rather than activism. Within this frame, each book characterizes and grapples with the role played specifically by money.

Newhouse's *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew*, a book that is intended for children aged four to seven, depicts young people of a range of backgrounds applying their respective interests and skills to tasks requested by their neighbours. "We can make a difference!" the book's narrator exclaims on the first page, but the text on the subsequent page articulates the (more modest) purpose of the young people: "Together we can earn money, have fun and make our neighborhood shine." Rather than demonstrate care for communal resources, this text shows solitary agents (and, in rare cases, pairs) performing specialized labour on private property for discrete individuals. "Neatnik Nancy" washes windows, Barney babysits, and the "Garage Guys" Sam and Len declutter a neighbour's garage.

Is there anything wrong with performing odd jobs for neighbours? Certainly not, provided that the terms are non-exploitative, an especially crucial consideration given that minors are involved. But the text does not explore the terms of the children's labour, such as how often they work or whether their compensation is fair. The author would not have had to bog down a picture book in financial details in order to explore such labour issues either: Newhouse could simply have represented how the "crew" operates as a collective, perhaps by featuring a sign emblazoned with a common hourly wage in one of the illustrations or, alternatively, by reviewing the crew's unified advertising campaign. Newhouse does neither, opting instead for a focus on individualism: the "crew" moniker is not justified in any way and, for the vast majority of the book, we see each child working alone.

Only at the end of the book do we see Weber Street residents setting up for an event, with all members of the Wonder Crew focused on one project. Predictably, whether the youngsters volunteered or hired out their labour is not articulated, but the commercial nature of the event is annotated extensively. At this Weber Street block sale, the youth have "been putting on prices, making change, and packing up purchases all day" (20). This reveals two significant choices in terms of collaboration and currency. First, Weber Street neighbours decided to collaborate for the purpose of commerce (establishing private, curbside businesses), *not* for the purpose of community service (such as a discussion of communal concerns or an engagement with civic outreach). Second, the neighbourhood decided to trade in "real" currency, *not* to swap goods or barter services. Collectively, these choices suggest that the residents of Weber Street want for nothing but money. It is also possible that, other than the universal desire to line their pockets, neighbours lack communal concerns: after all, Ross and Rob had already gathered up mail and flyers while the Hendersons were away on

vacation, making their home appear inhabited, which was sufficient for Weber Street to be deemed "safe" from burglars or other threats (18–19).

Since capitalist ideals such as private property, wage labour, and the accumulation of personal wealth propel this tale, it is frustrating that the language of the book conjures philanthropic connotations. The narrative uses the verb "help" to describe the work that Sylvia, Ava, Sam, Len, Amy, Rosie, Ross, and Rob all do in the community, despite the fact that Mr. Flannigan and other adults hire these youngsters formally. While their work does seem helpful, and while gratitude may have been extended, the young people are neither motivated by the pure desire to help nor solely compensated by thanks—they are motivated by the desire for financial profit. To borrow from Jamie Paris's critique of Kat Mototsune's non-fiction text *Money: Deal with It or Pay the Price*, Newhouse's narrative does not thereby "encourage a view of money based on sharing, helping others, or giving to charity" (208). Not even the Weber Street Barbecue, the concluding event of the book, is explicitly characterized as a potluck. In this neo-liberal community, helping means selling, and everything is for sale.

The activities described by this text may be read as the latest steps in a documented trend toward commercializing every aspect of childhood. The ages at which young people begin to engage with advertising, to develop brand relationships, to influence household purchases, and to make purchases of their own has only been decreasing, and the extent to which they have embraced these processes has only been increasing, as Susan Linn has shown recently. This trend can explain why the seemingly middle-class Weber Street wonders need money in the first place: to fuel avid consumption. Economist Juliet B. Schor observes that, between the years 1989 and 2002, purchasing power among American youth skyrocketed by 400% (23). How could such a marked increase have occurred, and how might this trend continue? Savvy marketing campaigns can help to explain such boosts in engagement with advertising, development of brand relationships, and influence over household purchases, while an era of economic prosperity can have facilitated the transfer of more funds into the hands of young people.

For this overall trend to continue, and specifically for youth purchasing power to keep growing, perhaps new markets, products, and services must be developed in tandem with workarounds for child labour laws and transportation challenges. In this sense, commercializing residential spaces and commodifying good neighbourliness is the perfect solution. Neighbours comprise the new market, doing chores is the new service, operating in the so-called grey market provides a workaround in child labour law, and catering exclusively to job sites within walking distance renders moot any transportation challenges.

If a young person's objective is acquiring more, more, and more (and such an objective appears to be increasingly common), then the ways of Weber Street are irresistible.

To the original set of questions—"What is activism? How does change get made? What role do children play? How can *you* get involved?"—seems to be answered in *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew* quite straightforwardly: activism is entrepreneurship. Change is made through buying and selling. Children participate by being cheap labourers. "You" (meaning the young reader targeted by the book) can get involved by hiring yourself out in such positions. The implications of this information are significant. On a macro level, the text lauds self-interested systems and frames young people's money-making labour as joyous and generous. As with Gary Paulsen's young adult novel *Lawn Boy*, this book implicitly suggests that "[c]apitalism, once you have grasped it, is fun, . . . a benevolent institution and an impeccable, 'groovy' system" (Burcar 55). It is also, as Lilijana Burcar goes on to emphasize in her critique of Paulsen's novel, "simply the way '[things] are done'" (55). Since the readers, aged four to seven, intended as the audience of *Weber Street* lack the cognitive capacity and life experience to criticize such a stance—as studies of consumer culture and cognitive development by Patti Valkenburg and Joanne Cantor, by Albert Bandura, and by Emily Moyer-Gusé would suggest—they are likely to accept it as valid or ideal. Applying pro-capitalist theory to practice would suggest engaging with certain behaviours (such as seeking to help neighbours by charging them a fee) and refraining from other behaviours (such as offering assistance with no strings attached). From an atomistic context like this, citizens may experience what Charles Taylor calls "*fragmentation*," a sense in which "people [feel] less capable of forming a common purpose

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and carrying out" larger political goals (112). Thus, the logic of the Weber Street crew may facilitate the undoing of collectives near and far.

Milway's *Mimi's Village and How Basic Health Care Transformed It* is aimed at children aged eight to twelve. Inspired by real people, places, and events, it tells the story of young Mimi, who sees her sister become ill after drinking polluted water. At a clinic many miles away, Mimi subsequently witnesses her sister's recovery. A vivid dream compels Mimi to suggest to her father that their village establish its own clinic. He rejects her idea initially but then changes his mind and brings it before the elders. The elders consent and procure from an internationally endowed mission church both materials and land—"a gift, they said, that came from friends living far away" (18). The women, seeking from the government both medicine and a nurse, "showed the officer the maize money they had saved, and he agreed to send them what they needed" (18). The men erect the structure and, at the opening ceremony, the children dance. Thanks to the nurse, Mimi's new brother is safely delivered, the villagers employ mosquito nets to aid against malaria, and many illnesses are prevented and treated. Now Mimi dreams of becoming a nurse or a doctor so that she can "help other villages become healthy, too" (25).

Mimi's Village features beautiful illustrations by Eugenie Fernandes, who uses sensitive facial expressions and animated body language to give life to each character. Katie Milway Smith, a former staffer at Food for the Hungry in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, delivers factual information accessible to the age group for which the book is intended, primarily through the vehicle of Mimi. But, as with *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew*, *Mimi's Village* is less about youth activism than about something else—in this case, public health in western Kenya. Young people, moreover, are not framed as makers of change; it is adults who contribute meaningfully to community change while children dance on the periphery. While Mimi dreams outside of the box and takes the initiative to share her dream with her father, her role appears to end there. It is indeed possible that cultural norms or physical limitations prevent Mimi's participation in an elder council, journey to town with the women, or clinic construction with the men. But bright, determined children tend to work around setbacks related to passion projects, and authors committed to emphasizing children's agency tend to elaborate how children remain involved.

Mimi could have informed her youthful peers about the potential clinic and participated in the organization of helpful missions, such as marshalling community support for the clinic, staging a dramatic demonstration of its utility, gathering medicinal plants to stock its stores, creating cheery artwork for its walls, making a welcome gift for its nurse, or learning through play about prevention and compassionate care by operating a "clinic" for toys. Perhaps in the evenings, Mimi

could have queried her parents about the evolution of the project and continued to offer feedback and suggestions, acting as "dreamer in chief." Realistically, children cannot do everything that adults can do, but this does not mean that children's role must be eliminated entirely. There is a range of options between "all" and "nothing."

Meanwhile, the actions of adults—establishing the clinic, for example—hardly qualify as activism, defined by *Oxford Language Dictionaries Online* as "the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change." The first missing ingredient is vigour. In this story, consensus and resources are secured relatively easily. The second missing ingredient is "campaigning." The elders agree, the church donates, the men build, the women ask, the government consents, and the nurse arrives. This is a process, to be sure, but is it a campaign? It is worth questioning whether this definition of activism deserves to be modified. Rather than requiring both a strenuous quality of effort and a civically oriented intention, perhaps only the intention is the essential part. If such were the case, then *Mimi's Village* would indeed describe activism. Yet is there still something absent from this one-part characterization? Perhaps an uphill battle is not required, but does activism demand more than tidily achieved change? In her examination of everyday resistance, scholar Mariana Pacheco reviews what Yrjö Engeström calls "radical localism," which she characterizes as "essential as it conceptualizes the dialectical relationship between local resistance activities and societal structures that are nonetheless dynamic, permeable, and vulnerable to change" (130). Set beside this articulation of struggle, the total omission of resistance, conflict, or societal structures within the book is not only striking but highly problematic if it sets up aspiring young activists to expect trouble-free processes and exclusively serene contexts.

Mimi's Village differs from *The Weber Street Wonder Work Crew* in its treatment of money; rather than being the central preoccupation of the community, it is an abstract obstacle that is perfunctorily overcome. When villagers need money, they either have plenty to begin with (in the case of the women's encounter with the government officer) or receive it effortlessly (the men's entreaty to the mission church). Still, space exists for a more thorough examination of the role of money in this community. What are the implications of the women's show of maize money? Is this a bribe to the government officer? Is it a demonstration of the community's ability, in both the short term and the long term, to buy medicine and to pay the nurse? Is the money that the women furnish just enough or more than enough? The presence of the mission church and its network of faraway, gift-giving friends is another site for interrogation. What else does the church subsidize, and at what (spiritual, political) cost?

To the original set of questions, *Mimi's Village* seems to reply that activism is easy group work. Change gets made by asking and receiving. Children do not play a role (at least, not a sustained role) but can get involved by dreaming (literally, while asleep). When it comes to supporting youth activism, therefore, this book fares poorly. It gives an inaccurate impression of how political or social change is generally wrought and disenfranchises young people from the process entirely. This may set up young activists for disappointment or for a premature abandonment of projects perceived as "unusually" intransigent. It may also dissuade youth subliminally from enlisting in activist pursuits.

Mimi's Village nevertheless triumphs in terms of informing North American readers about life in western Kenya, specifically how public health can affect communities there. As Burcar observes, "the practices of children's literature can result either in the implantation and further consolidation of racialized attitudes . . . or in the evocation of the need for social justice and hence in the fostering of critical consciousness on the part of young readers" (37). *Mimi's Village* pushes against the encroachment of race-based prejudice successfully by honouring the humanity of its characters, all of whom are people of colour; as such, it avoids the pitfall that Burcar identifies in the practices of children's literature. By failing to inspire youth activism or to raise young readers' consciousness to the struggles associated with making change, however, particularly in economically underprivileged and/or rural communities, *Mimi's Village* also may avoid delivering the benefits of children's literature that Burcar envisions.

Wilson's *Our Earth: How Kids Are Saving the Planet* profiles ten young eco-activists from around the world. An additional six pages of blurbs feature even more kids taking action to help "save the planet." Non-fiction texts present information in two ways: explicitly, through the overt articulation of (seemingly objective) information, and more subtly, through narratives and language that express cultural, social, political, or historical values. As Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer argue, "In the process of conveying factual information about science or history, nonfictional texts can and do easily reinforce ideological assumptions about individuals and society" (129). With *Our Earth*, author-illustrator Janet Wilson explicitly frames passionate young people as capable of spearheading national and international change, but implicitly she presents the participation of youth as symbolic and the role of money as essential. As Paris remarks regarding the children's picture book *Money: Deal with It or Pay the Price*, "Like much of children's non-fiction, this text takes up ideological positions that it assumes its readers will accept, without argument or question" (208). The same can be said of *Our World*.

A close reading reveals that six out of ten cases included in the book require considerable financial

support—unfortunately, the money needed to plant one million trees does not grow on trees. Similarly, opening a store, cultivating a garden that can produce one thousand pounds of food annually, establishing a foundation to fund five hundred water and sanitation projects, producing a television program, and purchasing an overseas airline ticket all require significant funds. By curating this collection of stories, Wilson attaches a price tag and a social position to becoming a young environmental activist. Basically, it is a nice gig if your network of friends, family members, and neighbours can afford it.

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Indeed, despite the entrepreneurial efforts of youth in real and fictitious neighbourhoods such as Weber Street, the sums that these specific environmental projects demand both come from and are managed by adults. Is this youth activism, then? Somewhat. The extent to which these activist initiatives can be qualified as "youth" initiatives is murky and unique to each case and depends on the quality of the young people's participation. Public health researchers Naima T. Wong, Marc A. Zimmerman, and Edith A. Parker review several typologies of youth participation, or forms of adult–youth power-sharing, to develop their own synthesis. Their Typology of Youth Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid suggests five types of participation situated along a continuum that consists of three categories: "adult control," "shared control," and "youth control" (105) (see Table 1). Wong, Zimmerman, and Parker do not prize the poles of their pyramid-shaped typology, where either adults or youth alone reign supreme; rather, they praise the middle position of shared control, an arrangement that allows for co-learning, "where educators and students pool their skills and knowledge and share in the tasks of teaching and learning" (Felt et al. 215; see also

Adult Control		Shared Control		Youth Control
Vessel	**Symbolic**	**Pluralistic**	**Independent**	**Autonomous**
Lack of youth voice and participation; adults have total control.	Youth have voice; adults have most control.	Youth have voice and an active participant role; youth and adults share control.	Youth have voice and an active participant role; adults give youth most control.	Youth have voice and an active participant role; youth have total control.

Table 1: Typology of Youth Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid

Felt). This bidirectional exchange optimizes collective intelligence and guards against novices floundering unsupported or arriving at inaccurate conclusions, namely that exploration is scary, that leadership is solitary, or that achievement is impossible.

Since information related to power-sharing is subtly embedded in each of the ten narratives, coding the cases is part art and part science. It appears nonetheless as though adults exercise control in at least five cases (one case of vessel control, four cases of symbolic control), young people and adults share control in two cases (one case of pluralistic control, one case of independent control), and young people exercise autonomous control in three cases. Holistically, then, does *Our Earth* depict youth activism? Yes, but only half of the time. To ask a more useful question: does *Our Earth* depict ideal youth participation (read: shared control)? The answer, sadly, is barely, since only 20% of the cases qualify. The rest of the time, either adults run the show or young people bowl alone.

The last six pages of the book offer short accounts of other environmental efforts spearheaded by young people; within this limited range, Wilson twice recommends "Pester Power," a synonym preferred in the United Kingdom for the phenomenon known in the United States as the "Nag Factor." Mildly defined as "the tendency for children to request that their parents buy them advertised items" (Henry and Borzekowski 298), this strategy has a controversial history. In order to maximize the "kidfluence" of young consumers (McNeal 39), marketers designed advertising that urged children's protracted nagging. Given that outraged parent groups have roundly decried this tactic, Wilson's use of the term "Pester Power" is disturbing for two reasons. First, Pester Power is a strategy for

neither engaging in rational debate nor brokering fair trade—it is low-level terrorism. Pester Power is a method for children to apply brute force (in other words, obnoxious pestering) in order to take hostage familial peace and quiet, which may be ransomed for the price of desired consumer goods. Deliberately enacting Pester Power is shrewdly manipulative and therefore unethical to employ or encourage. Second, even if Wilson was unfamiliar with the heavy baggage attached to this alliterative phrase and simply wanted to string together two words starting with the letter p, her word choice would still merit criticism since the word "pester" demeans the dignity of children's advocacy. When children lobby for political or social causes in which they believe, it should not be framed as badgering, hectoring, nagging, or pestering. Such a noble pursuit as speaking out against injustice or speaking up in support of personal beliefs deserves to be respected, regardless of the age of the advocate, and thus should be characterized as championing, not as pestering.

The answers in *Our Earth* to the original set of questions are, then, disempowering. They suggest that activism is synonymous with fundraising. Change gets made through the donation of funds, whereas the role of children is symbolic. Young people can get involved by starting a club, developing a media campaign, making art, developing green products, giving speeches, unplugging electrical devices, giving your school an e-report card, establishing an e-waste receptacle, taking a pledge, and so on. But do not let this long list of ways to act like an activist fool you into regarding *Our Earth* as a change maker's guide. The *how* of it all is never explained: how to start a club, for example, or how to make your school care about its e-report card (what is an e-report card anyway?). The book may very well leave readers with a sense that they should be doing more but without much idea of where to start. By focusing on youth activists who raised considerable sums and by omitting any explanation of logistics and procedures, *Our Earth* fails to scaffold youth activism and might even put off young readers from acting altogether.

In order to "cultivate much-needed critical literacy and raise the awareness of children and young adults to the power structures that frame our social realities" (56), Burcar calls for texts that transparently own up to their socio-economic stances. In her view, educational resources such as these "may give rise to a different collective consciousness and the kind of young people who will not perpetuate the socio-political status quo, but, rather, make a difference" (56). Unfortunately, the three books under review do not answer Burcar's call. They offer flawed, partial, and disempowering information vis-à-vis youth activism, and they occupy problematic positions in terms of money. Instead of supporting youth activism by showcasing textual models exclusively, one also might consider applying

to texts an activist-friendly tool: critical literacy. Not only is this option easier to exercise in a landscape where empowering young people's texts about activism are relatively scarce, but it might even prove more productive. After all, as Paulo Freire declared, "achievement of liberation" can only be realized by engaging in the praxis of critical literacy: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (33).

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