

Dreams and Devils, Devils and Dreams: The Risk Factor in Monica Hughes's *Devil on My Back* and *The Dream Catcher*

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Monica Hughes has for some time been acclaimed as Canada's leading writer of science fiction for children and young adults. Indeed, many critics regard her as among the best of the genre's practitioners in the world. While some maintain that she writes science fantasy rather than science fiction, whether her futuristically and technologically oriented books are one or the other is of little importance, considering their vast amount of absorbing substance. Hughes herself has said they are science fiction, and that is good enough for most of us.

Her paired novels, *Devil on My Back* and *The Dream Catcher*, fit the usual description of the genre: high in action, message, and setting, with heavy reliance on extrapolated technology; low in character delineation and development and in distinctiveness of style, practicality of tone predominating.

While any of these aspects might usefully be explored with respect to these two books, it is enough to say that the main characters, and even some of the lesser ones, are sufficiently individualized to linger in the memory. The scientific aspects serve the plot and themes and not the other way around, as in many lesser representatives of the form; and the straightforward style supports the story, as it should, and does not call attention to itself. Adventure and survival-story action abounds, the kind where the outcome depends upon something not immediately apparent and where tension-filled, even close-encounter incidents keep the reader absorbed.

It is in the arena of message, or theme if you will, where these books most deviate from type. Usually, broad socio-political ideas propel the form: post-holocaust utopias, or their opposites; political oppression; the rights of the group vs. the individual; mindless aggression; the clash of advanced vs. undeveloped cultures; distribution of resources; the dangers of unbridled technology; and the practicalities of space exploration and settlement, among similar matters—and are most often driven home with a heavy hand. While didacticism appears in *Devil* and *Dream Catcher*, the difference lies in the books' more subtle shadings and the writer's far defter touch.

Devil on My Back begins in the year 2146, in domed, fortified, and class-stratified ArcOne, also known as the City, one of several "entirely independent" (*Dream* 61) such domed edifices that were constructed six generations earlier in the year 2006, early in the Age of Confusion, which followed the Age of Oil. The purpose was noble, echoing that of the monks in the Dark Ages, to preserve what remained of learning through, in this case, highly sophisticated computers. When viewed from the outside in the sequel, *The Dream Catcher*, however, the City seems "a prison, lying in the forest like an ugly blister" (*Dream* 108).

Son of Lord Bentt, the Overlord of ArcOne, Tomi, 14, looks forward to the elite life of those who are topmost in the four-tiered social structure. At his initiation on Access Day, he becomes one of the thousand men privileged to have access to all accumulated knowledge. A slave insurrection, however, propels him down river (echoes of Mark Twain), where he encounters a small enclave of escaped slaves, who live a hand-to-mouth yet satisfying existence off the land and through whom he gains new insights into the meaning of life, an understanding of people of which he was incapable before. As a result, he dares subsequently to risk the previously unthinkable, to share knowledge and understanding with, first, the lowest class of all, the slaves, and ultimately with the other classes, too, to their mutual benefit, it is hoped.

When first met, Tomi Bentt is quite literally bent, his underworked, obese body bowed and hunched from the weight of the infopaks that are attached to the nape of his neck. He quite literally bears a burden of great knowledge. The weight of these paks, along with the burden of pride inherent in being one of the ruling class, have made him in appearance and attitude a younger version of his father, Lord Bentt, whom he learns later is the most hated man in ArcOne. Tomi rejoices in his high station and accompanying physical burden. He thinks to himself that “Knowledge was power and power was splendid” (*Devil* 8). (Parenthetically, I feel compelled to point out that the cities were the idea of a group of university professors.) Ruth, the main character in the second book, remarks that for ArcOners, ““The computer and the information it contains have become the only meaning of life,”” (*Dream* 149).

An early concrete example of Tomi’s separation from what might be called human understanding and a hint of his future redemption can be seen in his relationship to the family slave, Seventy-Three (slaves are referred to only by number). In fact, Seventy-Three’s gender and age are unknown to the reader until later, so nonhuman is she to Tomi. When, in the first chapter, for a brief second she forgets her station in life and looks directly into his eyes, a forbidden act, Tomi thinks for the first time that her eyes are “as human as his and quite young” (*Devil* 3). The reader recognizes that this episode may foreshadow a change in his attitude and character. References to nature, to the unurbanized land Outside also hint at what might come. Tomi reacts positively to the brightness and warmth of the sun, to the depths and greenery of the forests, and to the vegetation and plants being grown in the City’s special greenhouses.

On the Outside, where Tomi’s infopaks are inoperable, a young woman his age named Rowan, who dresses in animal skins, wears her red hair long, and is the freeborn daughter of escaped slaves, has much to do with changing his attitude toward the position and responsibility of the lords, toward the distinction between knowledge and understanding, and toward the benefits of risk. Through associating with her, a kind of nature girl, her mother, notably called Healhand, and others in the band of about fifty escaped slaves and through the nurturing power of nature, Tomi grows to understand, in the sense of knowing with attendant appreciation, what the lords have done to the slaves, how he as a lordling can enrich their lives, and what as a lordling he has the responsibility to do. Once-haughty Prince Brat becomes Worthy Leader.

The lords enslaved the escapees' bodies and withheld from them the knowledge that they, the lords, deemed essential to existence, but they did not take from them the essence of life that lies in free will. Unlike everyone else, except for senior Lord Bentt, as it happens, the slaves can make choices, and these slaves chose to run. They chose to risk, so that, in the words of one of their leaders, Swift, they could be “free to live, to love, to be at peace with this beautiful land” (*Devil* 85). They were determined to survive through the vitality of nature and cooperation and teamwork, here epitomized in the slaves' ceremony called Sharing and their common meals. Sharing involves not only a community of spirit but a rehearsing of their common history, the story of how and why they have become what they are where they are, a kind of mythology.

These ex-slaves, however, are dependent upon such relatively primitive technology as a knife and a saw (they have only one of each) and lack seeds and a plow. In a grand risk, Tomi offers to return to ArcOne and smuggle out for them such necessities from the City's storeroom. “I have to go back to ArcOne,” he exclaims as they are seated at their common meal. “You see, everything's the wrong way round. You have so many needs and ArcOne has everything. We need to change the balance” (*Devil* 135).

His risk pays off, big time. In addition to smuggling out periodically such items as seeds and hardware, he produces stories and images for the City's entertainment center called the Dreamland. He sends out messages cloaked in the form of dreams to inspire people to pursue individual rights and freedom, all this with his father's tacit consent. Tomi thinks to himself that “What people needed was a change of heart, to stop being so smug and to start to dream real dreams . . . [and he wants] to give men and women dreams of how they might reach out and risk and learn to live, to make Earth green and beautiful once more” (*Devil* 169). And so he produces “freedom dreams” (*Dream* 148).

These dreams of a “Freedom Man” (*Dream* 35) dancing out of the Ark form the bridge to the next book, which begins in a neighboring but unlinked City called Ark Three, a community of 5,000 people. Ark Three also relies on a computer, but unlike ArcOne, only for such necessities as running the power plant. Moreover, information, also unlike in ArcOne, exists in hardcopy in archives as well as in the master computer. In the words of the Warden, one of the leaders, “The whole purpose of Ark Three is to develop a strong people dedicated to peace, justice and loving kindness to their fellow humans . . . to complete the Great Pattern in which humankind's virtues will work so strongly that they can overcome the weaknesses of greed, avarice, anger, envy, all the faults that led to the Age of Confusion” (*Dream* 28).

In spite of such idealistic aims, the inhabitants are both linked and occasionally divided by the Web, that is, communicating via extrasensory perception with one another. Ruth, who possesses great Esper power, as they call it, and is also psychokinetic, only the second PK in a generation, sometimes has trouble Webbing because of intrusive dreams, later discovered to be Tomi's dream projections. Ruth is deemed an Innovator, a person with unique powers of both receiving messages and reaching outward toward new horizons.

Ruth catches pieces of Tomi's dreams, communicates to Ark Three leaders the perplexing bits she has seen and heard about someone named Tomi; a girl with long, red hair; a verse about a Freedom Man dancing; and a mysterious rowan, which they think must be a tree. A party of twenty set out on a hazardous journey to investigate, in particular, to find ArcOne, from which they think the dreams must emanate.

One leader, the Initiator, explains the importance of seeking the answer to the puzzle, "But a society that does nothing more than hold onto what it believes is bound for self-destruction. To survive one must grow. To grow one must reach out. To reach out one must risk. My position as the fourth [leader] is to remind you all of the necessity of risk taking. I am a goad" (*Dream* 56-57). A little later, another leader, the Custodian, echoes the Initiator's sentiments, ". . . a society fully occupied with holding on to what it has can never survive. . . Well, then, be ready. The time has come to risk!" (*Dream* 60).

Almost all the last half of the book takes place in the countryside, where the seekers have intriguing adventures. Here again, nature is a renewing and nurturing force and brings out, particularly in Ruth, previously untapped resources and strengths.

The risking that Tomi embarked upon earlier, by projecting dream messages and smuggling out various agricultural items, takes center stage in *The Dream Catcher*. After the group reach ArcOne, Ruth and the Initiator leave the others outside the City, to wait there while they continue investigating. They fall in with Rowan and the other escapees, learn the truth about the socio-political climate of ArcOne, and return to find that their comrades have been taken prisoner. Ruth daringly enters ArcOne to release them and, while inside, connects with Tomi.

It is now learned that the senior Lord Bentt had long wanted to dismantle the computer of objectionable elements but was ignorant of how to do it. Tomi is disheartened by how little his dream messages have accomplished among the inhabitants of ArcOne. He remarks, "But, although I walk about the Ark listening and watching, I have never heard a grumble. Workers and soldiers alike are content to spend their lives as mindless servants. The control of the computer through our infopaks is just too strong to break. If it were not for my memories . . . of friends outside, I think I, too, would succumb to its pressure" (*Dream* 156-57). Ruth interrupts, assuring him that his efforts have not been in vain. "I wanted to be free, to discover the Outside. And because of your dreams we are here, from Ark Three, with the Esper skills you need to help you to free yourselves" (*Dream* 157).

In a daring and risk-filled enterprise, Ruth and a fellow Innovator, Luke, through Espering and psychokinesis, disable the computer without destroying its knowledge-retaining capabilities. As the second book ends, Ruth and Luke prepare to help Tomi, who, in Ruth's words, is "having a terrible time persuading those poor workers and soldiers that if they all take turns in the work of running the Ark, life will go so much more smoothly, and there'll still be plenty of time over for learning how to build a new

world” (*Dream* 170). Obviously, others are going to have to learn that risking can bear fruit. Risking can pay off, but first it must happen.

Generous use of texture makes these books unusual for their genre. For example, circles abound, which in indigenous thought signify security, protection, good health, and beneficial power. The circle of ArcOne has become degraded, however; the atmosphere of ArcOne is no longer circular but a set of layers or broken lines. The circle of Ark Three is endangered by inhabitants who cannot or refuse to Web or who even choose to scuttle the Webbing act. The slave escapees, on the other hand, have a circle of sharing that supports them, encourages them, and nourishes them. The need for balance is another old idea that plays itself out in these books, as does the notion of the mysterious restorative and healing power of the rowan tree.

Names and naming are important. In addition to Rowan, other names contribute depth and meaning; Ruth, the loyal and dedicated; Luke, a name variously interpreted, maybe lucky, maybe light, maybe healing; and Faith, Charity, and Patience, who are Ruth’s companions. Angela is an ironic Webbing and traveling companion, a messenger of jealousy and envy.

Biblical resonances are frequent. These include the arks; the senior Lord Bentt, a kind of elder Noah, and Tomi, a Noah in the making; Ruth, the loyal risker who ventures forth, here more than once; and the river that flows by ArcOne, a sort of river of life. One of the ex-slaves speaks of having emerged from it feeling “washed clean, like a kind of baptism . . .” (*Devil* 115). Also resonating is Solomon’s dream at Gibeon in I Kings, in which he asks the Lord for an understanding heart.

Other factors worth exploring, in addition to the obvious rites-of-passage and outsider elements, are such strongly romantic aspects, ironically more often associated with fantasy than science fiction, as the child as savior and the aforementioned healing/nurturing/revitalizing power of nature. The stars, moon, sun, trees, even buzzing bees, one of which is the last creature to be seen in the second book, are benign and beckoning. Critic Raymond Jones has aptly called Hughes a “technological pastoralist” in a paper of that title. Worth examining further also are an attractive warmth and even a kind of gentility about these books seldom encountered in the genre, except perhaps in the books of another Phoenix Award Winner, Sylvia Louise Engdahl.

All this aside, these two books taken together suggest that knowledge is important, but more important than acquiring knowledge, which can be a devilishly burdensome pursuit, is to seek understanding and compassion. This is a dream for which it is worthwhile to risk. Dreams and devils, devils and dreams—distinguishing between them may be risky, but can also be an endeavor of potentially immense value.

Works Cited

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