



Worldcon 75 Academic Track  
**Session 17: Society and Subversion**

**Sunday 10:00-11:30**  
**Room 209**

Chair: **Katja Kontturi**

Abstract 1:

**Jenniliisa Salminen** (University of Turku, Finland):  
**Ostranenie in Soviet Children's Fantasy Literature**  
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*Ostranenie* is a concept that has not been widely applied to Soviet children's literature. However, it had a special function in Soviet children's fantasy. Fantasy as a genre allowed authors to take distance from the totalitarian society they were living in so they could write about themes that would not have been allowed in more realistic genres. For example, in his book *The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* (*Korolevstvo krivyh zerkal* 1951) children's author Vitaly Gubarev tells a story of a land ruled by a stupid king and his corrupt government oppressing their people by using violence and propaganda. Outside the boundaries of children's fantasy, such a story would hardly have been acceptable in the early 1950s Soviet Union at the height of the Stalin cult.

In the heart of Shklovsky's concept *ostranenie* lies the idea of showing an object in a new light thus revealing some of its aspects that people do not usually pay attention to, or telling something new about the object. At the same time when fantasy elements make it possible to write about forbidden themes, they reveal something new about them. In the context of Soviet culture, it is interesting to make connections between Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and so called Aesopian language that was used in the Soviet Union as a way to convey unorthodox or subversive ideas in literature and art: Lev Loseff (*On the Beneficence of Censorship – Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* 1984) presents the model of "screens", textual or non-textual elements that hide the forbidden meanings from the censors, and "markers", elements that help the reader to find the hidden meanings in the text.

In my presentation, I want to examine, how in the Soviet context *ostranenie* has a dual function: to both conceal and reveal. I am going to draw examples from Soviet fantasy novels where the existence of fantasy elements – e.g. secondary worlds or magical characters – serves as a screen for possibly subversive context and at the same time draws the readers' attention to some aspects of Soviet life that otherwise would go unnoticed and suggests them new meanings.

**Jenniliisa Salminen**, PhD, works as a senior lecturer in Russian Studies, University of Turku, Finland. She is specialised in Soviet and Russian children's fantasy and wrote her dissertation *Fantastic in Form, Ambiguous in Content: Secondary Worlds in Soviet Children's Fantasy Fiction* in 2009. In addition, she has written articles on Soviet fantasy fiction and contemporary Russian literature. Her current research interests include the image of the child and the power structures between children and adults in Soviet and Russian fantasy.

Abstract 2:

**Alison Baker** (University of East London, UK):

**Anarchy for the UK: Michael de Larrabeiti's *Borribles*, Punk and Protest**

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De Larrabeiti's *Borribles* children's/young adult fantasy trilogy was written and published between 1976 and 1986, a period of huge political, social and economic change in the UK. Set in London, it tells the story of Borribles, a group of children who have had a 'bad start' in life and become Borrible; 'wild' children with pointed ears who can never grow up. They squat in abandoned buildings and live by their wits, while the police and other adults seek to destroy their communal, anti-capitalist ways of life.

In the early 1980s the UK punk movement evolved into the football fan/ skinhead Oi movement, Goth, indie and the more political anarchist punk movement of such bands as Crass, Hagar the Womb and the Poison Girls, coming out of communes, squats and protests against the miners' strike, the Falklands and the anti-police riots. Songs such as Crass's 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands' and Hagar the Womb's 'Dressed to Kill' commented on international politics, social structures and economics of the time. The movement was broadly anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist.

The Borribles sing songs to celebrate victories and as exhortations to action, as well as to comment on the action, in the style of Bertholt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*; while Tolkien used it in his epic quest fantasies, they can alienate the reader in a mimetic depiction of London; as I state in a previous presentation, *The Borribles* (1976) is an epic quest across London with geographical and mythical beast hazards replaced by urban features.

While I will not argue that Michael de Larrabeiti was influenced by, or was an influence on, the punk movement, their shared political concerns and anger provide an additional context to the trilogy. I will take a new historicist approach to discuss punk and *The Borribles* as political responses to the Thatcher government of the 1980s and contemporary cultural concerns.

**Alison Baker** qualified as a Primary school teacher 22 years ago. After a teaching career in schools in Yorkshire and London, she worked for Local Authorities in early teacher development. She is now senior lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at University of East London. Her research interests include cultural representation and picture books, and she has just started a PhD on White Working Class Children in Children's Fantasy Fiction. She is a fan of all speculative fiction and a keen convention-attender, dragging her partner and seven-year-old stepson along with her.

Abstract 3:

**Kaisa Kaukiainen** (University of Helsinki, Finland):

**Fiery Eyes and Thundering Voices: Mad Preachers Estranging Religiousness in Young Adult Dystopias**

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Religion is not a common phenomenon in dystopian fiction in general, and even less so in works addressed to young adults. In many dystopian descriptions religion is among the institutionalized structures of our contemporary world that supposedly have vanished or at least have lost their importance. Thus religion or religiousness rarely gets much attention in dystopian novels. However, religiousness is sometimes presented as malevolent and dangerous, which of course fits well into dystopian surroundings. This often comes to the

fore in form of religious cults or leaders, such as fanatics preaching of damnation and sacrifice. The gloomy dystopian surroundings give weight to their teachings. These depictions of the preachers, who build their message on scripture, contain a criticism of an institutionalized religion and strictly followed doctrines.

I am claiming that as mad preachers are used in dystopias to represent the “lost” world’s faults and crookedness, they seem to distance the readers from seeing positive meanings in religions. The characters of religious lunatics question the very principles of contemporary institutionalized religions and show them in negative light. It is important to note, that for the protagonists of the narratives the mad preachers are a great source of fear, and they always completely dissociate themselves from any of their views.

In my presentation I am using as examples portrayals of religious fanatics in Young Adult dystopias, for instance in Steve Augarde’s *X Isle* (2009) and in Patrick Ness’s *Knife of Never Letting Go* (2010). I am observing how and why through these descriptions of mad preachers religion, especially religiosity of any kind, gets a negative interpretation. Young adult dystopias literally “make religion strange” and rarely offer a religious alternative to the mad preachers’ teachings – another option tends to be a quite secular world-view.

It seems that by presenting the preachers as completely evil and delusional but yet justifying their actions with sacred texts (eg. the Bible), the narratives alienate the message of goodness in the core of every religion. I am trying to see what the purpose of this distancing of religion in the stories is: is it really to make the readers feel estrangement from religion? Or is there an attempt to shake the readers (especially young readers) to think what the world would be like if there was not the comfort and companionship of churches and congregations? Perhaps the exaggerated figures of religious lunatics are instead attempts to alienate the reader from the idea of blindly following any doctrine and stress individual choices and values such as altruism, compassion and forgiveness.

**Kaisa Kaukiainen:** I am doing my PhD for Comparative Literature in University of Helsinki with a title ”Religiousness in dystopian novels”. In my research I am concentrating on recent Anglo-American dystopian literature (Margaret Atwood, Octavia E. Butler, David Mitchell and so-called young adult dystopias). I am observing, what kind of role religiousness has in dystopian novels and how dystopian World shapes religiousness.