

Macquarie University

Jodi McAlister

Girls growing up Gordie: the post-apocalyptic heroine and the Australian girl reader of Isobelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn Chronicles*

Abstract:

Australian young adult (YA) fiction has a post-apocalyptic tradition that considerably pre-dates dystopia's current global popularity. Long before characters like Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior emerged into mainstream popular consciousness, Australian YA fiction gave us several strong heroines struggling for a better life in a post-apocalyptic setting. One such was Elspeth Gordie of Isobelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn Chronicles*. The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are unusual in that they have been published across a considerable span of time. The first book was published in 1987, while the final instalment is not due to be published until the end of 2015. Numerous readers of the series have, in many ways, grown up with it: discovering it as pre-teens or teenagers, and continuing to follow it into adulthood. The first *Obernewtyn* fan site – obernewtyn.net – was established in 1999, and continues to be active to this day. However, despite the current popularity of texts like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are not especially well known outside Australia. This article will explore the ways in which fans interact with and respond to the *Obernewtyn* books, and the ways in which this has evolved and changed. It will investigate two key questions. Why have the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* appealed so strongly to an Australian audience? And why have they appealed so strongly to a girl audience? I will draw on several different critical theories to unpack this appeal, including postcolonial theory, feminist theory, girlhood studies, and auto-ethnography. I will also integrate this with reader-response theory, looking closely at the responses of readers who began reading these books as children and who are continuing to engage with them decades later.

Biographical note:

Jodi McAlister is a literary historian at Macquarie University in Sydney, specialising in popular genres for and by women and girls. Her PhD thesis is on representations of female virginity loss in female-authored popular literature.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Young adult – girlhood – dystopia – Isobelle Carmody

Introduction

When I was nine years old, I picked up a book in my school library and never really put it down again. This book was *Obernewtyn* by Isobelle Carmody, the first book in her long-running *Obernewtyn Chronicles* series. Entranced, I devoured the story of its girl heroine Elspeth Gordie, her extraordinary powers of telepathy, and her struggles to find a safe place in an unfriendly post-apocalyptic world. Elspeth is a misfit – both in the accepted sense of the word and literally, because ‘Misfits’ are what people who do not fit it into her society are called. However, she is different from other Misfits: she has incredible mental powers that would see her burned at the stake if they were discovered. She is sent to Obernewtyn: a Misfit prison camp in the mountains, isolated from the rest of the world. But in a society of people who do not fit in, Elspeth finally finds people who share her powers and a place she can call home – she finds friends, love, power, agency and destiny.

It is hardly surprising that a book about a misfit heroine finding her place would appeal to a nine-year-old more comfortable with books than with other children. To someone who felt like a misfit herself, the isolated, socially awkward Elspeth was a relatable heroine. She possesses extraordinary mental powers (called ‘Talents’) and is set apart from others by her mind. As a girl reader who felt isolated by her own intelligence, this was a loneliness I could relate to and a level of power to which I fiercely aspired. But my personal relationship to Elspeth and the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* alone does not explain the peculiar resonance that this series has had with its audience. I am not the only young reader who discovered *Obernewtyn* and found herself hooked for life. Many girl readers who discovered the books in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s have become woman readers, and are still engaging with Elspeth’s adventures today. The first *Obernewtyn* fan site – obernewtyn.net – was established in 1999, and continues to be active at the time of writing (mid-2015).

This curious longevity is partially a function of the fact that the publication of the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* have been stretched over a remarkable time period: *Obernewtyn* was published in 1987 and the seventh and final book in the series, *The Red Queen*, is not due to be published until late 2015. I, like many others, have been reading these books for nearly my whole life. But while I and others like me have aged, Elspeth remains a girl heroine. The most recent book, *The Sending* (2011), dealt with girlhood milestones such as virginity loss as well as with the more serious matters of Elspeth’s quest to save her world. Many readers, though, are no longer girls. So why are we still fascinated with Elspeth?

The fact that many adults read and engage with young adult fiction has been well-documented, so it is not surprising that these books have an adult readership (McLean 2012). However, the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are an interesting case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, because so many girl readers have continued to follow the series into adulthood – as author Carmody notes in the press release announcing the publication of *The Red Queen*, ‘Many fans... have made [this] journey with me, some having started as children, now having children themselves’ (Penguin Teen Australia 2015). Secondly, because there is something uniquely Australian about the series. The books are not set in a recognisable Australian landscape, but despite this, the series

has not enjoyed great popularity outside Australia. The books are published overseas, but often not until well after they have been released in Australia – for example, Random House, who publish the series in North America, split penultimate book *The Sending* into two parts and did not publish the second instalment, *The Waking Dragon*, until early 2015, more than three years after the Australian publication (Penguin Random House 2015).

The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are part of a specifically Australian tradition of young adult post-apocalyptic/post-disaster/dystopian fiction, which considerably predates the current global popularity of the dystopian genre. I am using the term ‘dystopian’ here in the sense described by Thomas Moylan, who argues that ‘dystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic’ (Moylan 2000: xii). This is not necessarily true of all post-apocalyptic fiction in the Australian tradition – indeed, it is arguably not true of the genre’s most well-known example, John Marsden’s *Tomorrow* series, which also features a central girl heroine – but it is true of much of it, including the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, which deals with systemic issues in considerable depth. This is true also of many of the popular dystopian young adult texts today, such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series, but the Australian post-apocalyptic/dystopian tradition does not seem to have attracted much attention overseas. While Marsden’s series enjoyed some popular reception overseas – the American Library Association named it one of its 100 best books for teens (ALA 2000), and the Swedish government financed the printing and distribution of the first book to high school students (Denton 2004) – it, like *Obernewtyn*, was mostly popular locally in Australia.

What the popularity of the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* seems to suggest, especially when read alongside the popularity of the *Tomorrow* series, is that this kind of post-apocalyptic literature had a particular resonance for young Australian readers, particularly girl readers, in the late 1980s to early 2000s. In this article, I will unpack specifically why the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* have been such a significant text for this group of readers. I will draw on a variety of methodologies to explore these issues. I will situate the texts in their Australian historical and cultural context and use postcolonial ideas to explore their relevance in an Australian context, and also use feminist theory and approaches from girlhood studies to explore their relevance to a girl reader. Moreover, I will use online responses to investigate the ways in which readers have related to the text, as well as an ethnographic approach based in reader response theory. This is partially auto-ethnographic, but also relies on the responses of many other readers for whom the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* have been influential texts. Overall, I wish to situate the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* as both an Australian text, and a seminal text for girl readers. What was it about the transgressive, active, and extraordinarily powerful Elspeth that resonated so strongly with Australian girl readers – and why are so many of us still so invested in her story today?

The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* as Australian texts

At first glance, the fact that the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are written by an Australian author does not seem to be especially significant. The books are set in a post-

apocalyptic Europe, with most of the action taking place in a country called simply 'the Land'. In later books, Elspeth and her companions travel to other countries, but Australia, if it still exists, is well off the map of the series (which is provided in the front of each book as part of the traditional paratext of the fantasy novel). However, while the fact that the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are by an Australian author is certainly a contributing factor, the popularity of the books having been concentrated so heavily in Australia does suggest that they have an especial resonance with the Australian reader. As Roslyn Weaver notes, the post-apocalyptic genre provides the opportunity to 'articulate and address concerns and fears in the Australian cultural imagination' (2011: 187), and this is something that can certainly be seen in Carmody's books, despite their non-Australian setting.

Maurice Saxby situates the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* in a wave of 1980s post-apocalyptic/dystopian young adult fiction which includes texts like Victor Kelleher's *Taronga* (1986) and Caroline MacDonald's *The Lake at the End of the World* (1988). This is a group of texts that project a particularly pessimistic view of the future: he argues that 'the rosy glow of the affluent 70s was fading [and] the 80s were growing bleaker and bleaker' (2000: 18). Heather Scutter agrees, calling the 1980s the 'Decade of Dystopia' in Australian fiction for young people (1991: 30). The early 1980s saw widespread economic recession in Australia, leading to an unemployment rate of over ten per cent (Groenewold and Hagger 1998: 24). This might partially explain this dystopian turn in Australian literature, and seems to be the explanation Saxby is gesturing toward. However, it is worth noting that *Obernewtyn* and the books Saxby reads it against are post-apocalyptic dystopias that take place after a single major disaster has befallen the earth: an unspecified, probably war-related apocalypse in *Taronga*, environmental degradation because of nuclear accidents in *The Lake at the End of the World*, and a nuclear holocaust referred to as the 'Great White' in *Obernewtyn*. The last two texts suggest that it might be more productive to read these works against the Australian anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly given the widespread public debates about uranium mining that took place in the late 1970s. The Ranger Enquiry of 1976-1977 reported that, 'The nuclear power industry is unintentionally contributing to an increased risk of nuclear war. This is the most serious hazard associated with the industry' (Martin 1982: 28). This was the period when a young Isobelle Carmody was hard at work on the manuscript that would become *Obernewtyn*, and it is difficult not to read the human-triggered Great White against fears of nuclear war in contemporary Australian cultural consciousness.

This does not adequately account for why the books have remained so popular – or why they resonated so much with readers in the 1990s and 2000s, when the Australian debate over nuclear power had largely subsided. However, we can situate these books in a broader tradition of Australian fiction in which the environment is portrayed as harsh and dangerous. In the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, large areas of land are poisonous 'Blacklands', deadly to anyone who ventures there. Indeed, the reason that Elspeth is deemed to be a Misfit and sent to Obernewtyn is because it is believed that she fell into contaminated water and has been 'tainted'. Although the Australian landscape is not often represented as literally poisonous as it is here, it is regularly represented in fiction as treacherous and hostile. In addition to nuclear poisoning, other natural

disasters often sweep the Land. In *The Farseekers*, Elspeth and her companions find themselves caught in a ‘firestorm’, in which one of their party perishes – an obvious analogue to the bushfires which plague the Australian continent. The landscape in which the series is set is monstrous, menacing and distinctly unfriendly to the people that live there: something recognisable when read against the regular portrayal of the Australian landscape as unforgiving and deadly.

Unlike the authoritarian government of the Land, Elspeth and her friends learn to navigate this environment, living in harmony with it rather than seeking to tame it. Elspeth’s body is literally made impervious to the toxic environment via a pseudo-magical intervention. The inhabitants of Obernewtyn also learn to live in an environmentally friendly way. At the end of the first book, the Misfits overthrow the despotic regime that runs Obernewtyn and turn it into the site of their own community. This community is defined by its democracy, cooperativeness and – perhaps most importantly – its sustainability. Because many of the Misfits have the Talent that allows them to ‘beastpeak’ – talk to animals – animals are seen as sentient participants in the community. All of the Misfits who inhabit Obernewtyn are vegetarian, several are conversant with the medicinal uses of plants (‘herbal lore’), and some are actively researching ways that they can clean up the poisoned Blacklands. It is not difficult to read this against the growth of environmentalism in Australian culture, which emerged in a noticeable way in the 1980s (McAllister and Studlar 1999: 778). The 1990s and 2000s saw severe droughts in many parts of Australia, which forced environmental consciousness on its citizens, including children, through the enforcement of water restrictions (Grafton and Ward 2008: 57; Dolnicar and Hurlimann 2010). The emphasis on a sustainable relationship to the land thus has a particular resonance with Australian readers. Indeed, this is also one of the ways in which the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* has influenced its readers: as one of the readers I surveyed stated, ‘this series had a particularly significant impact on me in terms of developing in me a strong interest in environmental, animal and humanitarian causes, which have only strengthened as I’ve gotten older’ (Personal communication 2015).

This desire to live in harmony with, and heal, the damaged land speaks not just to the environmental consciousness of Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, but also to a specific postcolonial anxiety – and it is perhaps this which offers the most compelling explanation as to why the books have resonated so strongly with an Australian readership. Elizabeth Braithwaite has compellingly argued that Australian post-nuclear disaster fiction is distinct from that of other nations, and that it is often used not to explore the reasons for the disaster, but other concerns, unique to Australian cultural consciousness (2015: 26, 28). The postcolonial anxieties we see articulated in the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* would seem to prove her point. The Misfits do not wish to be colonisers. Indeed, the specific failure of their community as colonisers is represented in later books in the series, where they find themselves drawn into a rebellion that seeks to overthrow the Land’s tyrannical government and the patriarchal religious order which upholds it. Unlike the Misfits, many of the rebels are aggressive colonisers, who seek to dominate and subjugate in a way no different than the government they seek to depose. After agreeing to participate in ‘Battlegames’

(games which mimic the conditions of war) in order to justify their place in the rebellion, the Misfits discover that their communal priorities of harmony and sustainability mean that they are entirely unsuited to this kind of colonial warfare. Despite the fact that their Talents that would let them dominate and break the minds of any who opposed them, the Misfits are pacifists.

We can read this Misfits' desire to harmonise, not colonise, and to treat the environment and its inhabitants with respect as indicative of a particularly Australian postcolonial guilt. Australia was violently colonised by the British, its Indigenous peoples displaced and subjugated. This was an issue that was in the forefront of Australian cultural consciousness in the 1990s. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was formed in 1991, tasked with developing strategies for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians over the ensuing nine years: essentially a project targeted at healing the wounds left by violent colonisation. Even after the election of the conservative Howard government in 1996 saw much of the work of the Council undermined, reconciliation remained an issue with considerable cultural currency, becoming a movement of the people, rather than the government (Higgins-Desbiolles 2003: 38). In many ways, the Misfits of the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* represent the ideals of reconciliation: a diverse community of powerful people who have chosen not to fight, living peacefully and cooperatively together, focusing on harmony, constructiveness and a sustainable relationship with the environment, each other and the outside world, rather than a colonial domination and destructiveness. At the end of *Ashling*, Elspeth tells Rushton (the leader of the new Obernewtyn, and her romantic partner), 'I think we should try to reshape ourselves and our purposes around empathy' (1995: 517). This is not an easy task for Elspeth, who we can read as having colonial impulses. Her mental powers make her suited to domination: one of her strongest Talents is 'coercion' (using her mind to force people to do what she wants), she can literally kill people with her brain (a force she has exercised more than once), and the only Talent she lacks totally is 'empathy'. This is the ability to which she is referring in the quotation above – empathys can feel (and to an extent, influence) emotions – but we can also read it in the more common sense of the word. When Rushton replies that Elspeth is not an empath, she responds, 'No, but I can try to understand and care for the unTalents. Any one of us can learn to do that' (Carmody 1995: 517).¹ This is the reconciliatory project of the community of Obernewtyn: one which resonates especially strongly in an Australian cultural context troubled by an uneasy relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

In this sense, we can read the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* as espousing a progressive post- (and anti-) colonial politics, one which resonated with a social movement in a particular moment in Australian history aimed at reconciliation. However, Australian postcolonial guilt also manifests in other ways. Rosemary Ross Johnston has argued that much Australian youth literature is characterised by a fear of not belonging, not having a physical home. This, she contends, arises out of a postcolonial fear and resentment characteristic of non-Indigenous Australians – something which is mirrored in the Canadian context, which has a similar history of displacing and subjugating Indigenous peoples (2003: 4). Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs agree, and

refer to the Australian landscape as ‘uncanny’ because of ambivalence arising from colonisation, where ‘one’s place is always already another’s place and the issue of possession is never complete, never entirely settled’ (1998: 138). This kind of anxiety about belonging and home is integral to the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*. As a both a Misfit and an orphan, Elspeth has never belonged anywhere. Obernewtyn provides her, and others like her, with a ‘realm without alienating conditions’ (Zipes 1979: 148), to which she innately belongs.

The pioneering sustainable community that the Misfits form might be read not only as a way of assuaging postcolonial guilt, but also of absorbing indigeneity, especially given the almost spiritual relationship they establish to the natural world. This is reinforced by the problematic habit the Misfits have of dying their skin dark whenever they need to go into the outside world, in order to disguise themselves as gypsies. The gypsies of the Land are not presented as Indigenous peoples *per se* – in that they are not presented as more indigenous to the Land than its white inhabitants – but they are a nomadic dark-skinned people who are disproportionately Othered and discriminated against by the Land’s despotic government, which echoes issues faced by Indigenous people in the Australian context. The Misfits establish peaceful race relations with the gypsies. In particular, Elspeth becomes a close friend of Swallow, the leader of the gypsies. At one point, his people save hers from a massacre at the hands of the viciously colonial rebel leader Malik, who is determined to destroy anything he deems aberrant (which includes both the mentally aberrant Misfits and the racially aberrant gypsies). This incident mirrors the massacres suffered by Indigenous people in Australia’s colonial history. Nonetheless, the ‘brownface’ regularly adopted by the Misfits makes for uneasy reading through a postcolonial lens, mirroring as it does the Misfits’ attempts to belong to the Land they occupy, as well as reinforcing the image of the Misfits as almost entirely white. Are the Misfits, despite their best intentions, unable to escape white colonial attitudes when they co-opt this other culture? This is another undercurrent of the postcolonial guilt inherent in the text, pointing to – appropriately, for the dystopian genre – systemic impulses that even the Misfits have yet to unlearn.

Elspeth regularly feels uneasy about her own belonging, even though Obernewtyn is her home, she is one of its democratic leaders, and she is romantically paired with its chief leader Rushton. It is her role as the chosen one of a prophecy which isolates her, as she knows one day she will have to leave (which comes in *The Sending*). However, her position as subject of prophecy also counterintuitively means that she belongs to multiple communities, including the animal community (who believe she will be their ultimate saviour) and the gypsies – as one of the readers I surveyed remarked, ‘Elspeth belongs to everyone, and so any group, no matter how divided from each other, belongs to her’ (Personal communication 2015). In this way, the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* both speaks to a specifically Australian postcolonial anxiety about belonging, expressing an anxiety about the impossibility of ever truly belonging, and seeks to assuage this concern through a sort of recuperation of indigeneity across multiple strata. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Carmody chose not to set her books in a post-apocalyptic Australia. Ken Gelder and Paul Saltzman write of another Australian fantasy author that her work represents ‘a fascinating attempt by a fantasy

author to reconcile the remote, other-worldly aspects of the fantasy genre to her Australian predicament; but it means that Australia must in the process be transformed into some other kind of place altogether' (2009: 161). They might well have written this of the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, whose uneasy relationship with postcolonial guilt and anxiety is intrinsically Australian.

***Obernewtyn* and the girl heroine**

Above, I discussed the resonances the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* might have for an Australian reader. Many readers of the readers – myself included – were children when we first read these books, and were not aware of the specifics of these issues: the phrase 'postcolonial guilt' is not one many nine-year-olds know. Nonetheless, issues like reconciliation and the need for a sustainable relationship with the environment were ones that young Australian readers were familiar with in a broad sense in the late 1980s to the early 2000s, and this may account for why these books enjoyed success disproportionately with an Australian audience.

In this section, I will turn to the figure of the girl heroine, and the appeal of Elspeth to a girl readership. As a powerful heroine in a dystopian world, Elspeth considerably pre-dates heroines like Katniss of *The Hunger Games* (2008) and Tris of *Divergent* (2011), who are currently familiar figures in global popular consciousness. However, we should not just assume that Elspeth represents a proto-version of these heroines, because she has characteristics that set her apart. Firstly, she is younger than them: her age in *Obernewtyn* is indeterminate, but she is younger than her sixteen-year-old brother. Secondly, while she undergoes several physically challenging episodes, her primary strength is not physical: Elspeth is defined by the peculiar strength of her mind. This locates her identity firmly outside her body, offering radical new possibilities for ways of doing girlhood.

Like me, many readers of the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* have an origin story. Most of the readers I surveyed started reading the books between the ages of eight and twelve. The majority began with *Obernewtyn*, but some encountered the second book, *The Farseekers*, first. What is particularly remarkable is the way that many have a distinct memory of the first time they picked up an *Obernewtyn Chronicles* book – for example:

I was eight. I remember that I had been swimming at the Smithfield pool, in Cairns, after school, and then going next door to the Smithfield Library as we always did after Mum finished her laps. The library was airconditioned but my hair was still wet from the pool so I was extra cold. On a low beige metal shelving unit, turned face outwards, was an orange book, with an eagle hovering midair over a girl sitting on a ledge of rock. The girl had wild dark hair, and something about her pose struck me and held me completely: her position was half-prostrate, her hands spread in supplication, and yet the powerful eagle seemed compelled by her. I couldn't have put it into words, but Elspeth in the cover image perfectly matched my eight-year-old self's affective fantasies, which were to be both on the brink of adventure and powerful action, and also abjected and near perishing (Personal communication 2015).

The clarity of memories like the one above demonstrates the extraordinary impact that the books had on their young readers. Elspeth's comparative youth may explain why the series resonated so strongly in particular with pre-teen readers, who found in her a peer: Elspeth 'was almost a friend of mine,' said one of the readers I surveyed (personal communication 2015). A reviewer on obernewtyn.net remarked that, 'Elspeth has been like an old friend to me throughout my adolescence and into my adulthood' (n.d.) and a Goodreads reviewer wrote that, 'These were books that touched me personally, that felt like friends, that seemed to have been written for me alone' (2015). Multiple people discussed the way in which they related to Elspeth:

the name of the mutant teenagers gives you a clue of why they also appealed to the dorky, loner child I was. These kids were outcasts, rejected by society, but we're [sic] better and more enlightened than ordinary people (Personal communication 2015).

As an outsider who's [sic] best friend was a cat, I felt very linked to Elspeth - I'd just moved into high school and felt incredibly alone the whole time there, so I really felt we had that in common (Personal communication 2015).

Elspeth is a Misfit, alone and isolated because of her own nature, and I wonder if this resonated so strongly with me because this was probably also the time that I was being the most heavily bullied by the other kids in my class for reading so much and writing complicated stories and using 'big words' and 'being smart' (Personal communication 2015).

Like most teens I was torn between different parts of myself (Like Elspeth and Obernewtyn/the quest), felt outside most social circles (in fact my small group of friends referred to ourselves as the misfits in high school), confused by and cautious of relationships (though certainly not to the extent of Elspeth), and more likely to talk to my cat than my friends. In this sense Elspeth... gave [me] the sense of not being alone in this (Personal communication 2015).

At the time I first read Obernewtyn, I was moving to a new country with a new school to navigate – and I felt scared and out of place. I instantly connected with Elspeth ... I knew exactly what Elspeth was feeling (obernewtyn.net).

Elspeth's role as Misfit and outsider seems to be what readers related to most. I have already discussed the way the idea of belonging functions in the narrative as part of a kind of postcolonial anxiety, but there is also a simpler resonance here: the anxiety of young people over their inability to fit in.

There is another layer to this, because key to the *Obernewtyn Chronicles* is the fact that Elspeth and her friends embrace the Misfit identity: embrace not belonging anywhere and not fitting in. This seems to have been one of the pleasures of the text for many young readers. 'I am a Misfit,' reads the tagline of fan site obernewtyn.net, which explicitly invites fellow Misfits to join its community (in which, as in the books, they are sorted into 'guilds' and take place in traditions that the Obernewtyn community do in the series, such as the annual Moonfair). Girlhood scholars Dawn Currie, Deirdre M Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz have discussed the ways in which girls sometimes adopt labels like 'geek', positioning themselves against an emphasised femininity often equated with popularity (2006: 422). They argue that

‘girls’ self-expressions cannot be read as choices of being liberated from femininity or being oppressed by gendered conventions; rather, girls must choose between being deemed ‘OK’ or ‘normal’ by their peers rather than ‘weird’ or ‘different’ (2006: 422). Choosing to identify with a marginalising label such as ‘geek’ – or, in this case, ‘Misfit’ – becomes a strategy for adopting a self-defining identity, positioning oneself against what is perceived to be the mainstream. Elspeth is thus a girl heroine with significant resonance: not just a relatable heroine, but one with a relatable label, which some readers actively took on and embraced, using it to construct an independent selfhood.

Feminist scholar Kate Millett has argued that the representations of women in the books they read impacts how they ultimately define themselves as agents in their own lives (1970). More research would be needed if we were to more fully unpack the impact Elspeth had on her readers, but the testimonies above and the adoption of the Misfit identity by members of the fan community certainly seem to suggest that she had some kind of effect. To turn briefly to auto-ethnography: I can certainly report that she had a considerable impact on me. This was partially because of her assumed identity as outsider, but also because of the reasons that made her an outsider: her extraordinarily powerful mind. I both related to the fact that Elspeth was isolated by her mind, and aspired to the preternatural powers her Talents gave her. The emphasis placed in the text on Elspeth’s mind created for me the possibility of a femininity based on the mental and the intellectual: based on the exercise of cerebral power, and not located in the body.

Many scholars have written about the way girlhood is repeatedly confined by a heterosexual matrix that constructs the girl body as an object of desire and consumption (Bartky 1988: 81; Currie et al 2009: 175-176; Griffin 2004: 35). While Elspeth does have a heteroromantic plotline – and her romance with Rushton is something many readers have found pleasurable – it is largely a romance that takes place in a mental realm rather than a physical one. They form a mental bond during *Obernewtyn* which links their minds together, and it is this mental linkage, rather than a physical attraction, which forms the basis of their romantic relationship. Indeed, when Elspeth and Rushton have sex for the first time in *The Sending*, it is portrayed not as a joining of bodies, but as an intimate joining of minds, as they access memories and thoughts each had not yet revealed to the others. Elspeth is constructed as an object of desire to Rushton, but also as a powerful agent, valued for her mental capacities rather than her body – something pleasurable in a social context in which the girl is regularly defined in physical terms as a desired object. The emphasis on the cerebral in the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, and, in particular, in Elspeth’s incredible mental powers, which exceed those of all other Misfits (tellingly, the only other Misfit who comes close to Elspeth in terms of power is also a girl) allows for a heroine who occupies a genuinely agentic position in terms of her relationships to other people.

Within the Misfit community of Obernewtyn, gender is essentially irrelevant. It does occasionally become relevant when Elspeth steps into the outside world: she is regularly slut-shamed by rebel leader Malik for her relationship with Rushton, and the all-male religious order of the Herders clearly represents organised patriarchal religion, something against which Elspeth fights. However, the Obernewtyn

community itself offers a radical alternative to patriarchy. Based on mental strength rather than physical ability, it presents a world where gender does not matter. We might call the Misfit community neoliberal and postfeminist: terms that have also been applied to the ‘Girl Power’ discourse which emerged in the 1990s, which attempted to rewrite scripts of female passivity and emphasised embracing one’s authentic selfhood (Aapola et al 2005: 19, 36-37). The radically equal Obernewtyn community is based on celebrating and cultivating this authenticity, represented through the Misfits’ Talents, and shows multiple girls, not just Elspeth, in powerful positions of leadership. Catherine Driscoll argues that, ‘the difficulties with which girls negotiate adolescence have mostly been interpreted as the struggle for proper femininity, or the struggle to retain a sense of self in the face of expected femininity’ (2013: 58). The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* offer a pleasurable departure from this pressure for the girl reader, offering a picture of a postfeminist community where femininity (and masculinity) is not policed, and the individual’s talents are all that matters.

Shauna Pomerantz, Rebecca Raby and Andrea Stefanik have argued that the postfeminist narrative of Girl Power obscures the power inequalities faced by girls in the real world and problematically relocates sexism to the individual, rather than the social sphere (2013: 188). However, although we might read Elspeth as emblematic of this 1990s Girl Power discourse, we cannot overlook the way she and her community offer new ways to do girlhood – ways which resonated strongly with its young readers, myself included. Hers is a transgressive, powerful girlhood, situated within a transgressive, powerful community. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz wonder whether girls who resist dominant discourses of girlhood and actively take up alternate positions – such as ‘geek’, or, in this case, ‘Misfit’ – are rewriting girlhood on a social or an individual level (2006: 431). The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* appear to offer both possibilities through the figure of Elspeth and her community. This is a community which, as I discussed in the previous section, is not only radically equal in terms of equality, but also seeks to establish a harmonious way of living with others, with animals, and with the environment. It offers a picture of a cooperative, collaborative future: one which undermines the hierarchical male-dominated systems of power represented by the patriarchal Council and Herder religious order, and is instead based on individual merit.

This is, as Joanne Baker has argued, a promise characteristic of neoliberalism. She reads this against discourses predominant in Australian education which position ‘successful girls’ against ‘failing boys’, arguing that the optimism inherent in this is problematic in a context which still traps girls and women in a limited gendered construct (2008: 6). In the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, however, this construct does not exist – at least within the Misfit community. Girls like Elspeth are free to be successful girls: to be powerful and agentic without having to worry about failing boys. Given this, it is no wonder that readers have continued to be fascinated with Elspeth, even though she has remained a girl while they have grown up. It offers the fantasy of success and power in a world without a glass ceiling. Elspeth is a flawed heroine, and this is something which many readers reported finding appealing: one reader wrote that ‘Elspeth ... with her flaws and problems ... highlighted that other

people had the same problems that I did' (personal communication 2015). Elspeth does not have to be perfect to occupy a powerful subject position: something often required of the modern 'Supergirl', who must perform all the tasks regularly ascribed to both femininity and masculinity while still presenting herself as unambiguously feminine (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2007: 10). Indeed, Elspeth is notably poor at performing many stereotypically feminine roles: in particular, she has difficulty expressing her emotions. However, in the radically equal world of the Misfit community, this does not matter. Elspeth is a girl heroine, but she is also allowed to be simply Elspeth, a person. As one reader remarks, 'Having a heroine who was flawed, powerful and not pressured to be pretty or nice was ... Well it was a big change' (personal communication 2015).

Conclusion

Although it is firmly part of an Australian dystopian tradition of young adult fiction, there is much that is utopian about the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*, and this might explain why it has had such a long term resonance with so many of its readers. Lyman Tower Sargent discusses utopianism as 'social dreaming,' and this is what we see played out strongly in these books (1994: 3). In an Australian context, they obliquely address issues of environmentalism, humanitarianism, reconciliation, and race relations. While the postcolonial context in which this takes place is undoubtedly problematic, it speaks to a dream of a better world – one in which people can live harmoniously with each other and sustainably in their environment. This is an excellent example of the 'new modes of collaboration and engagement that address the dysfunctional relations of colonialism' that often characterise utopias in youth literature, and speaks particularly to Australian concerns (Bradford et al 2011: 9). Likewise, the Misfit community of Obernewtyn presents a radically harmonised view of gender relations: one where heterosexual romance is certainly still possible, but also one in which people are valued as individuals with unique powers and abilities, not for their gendered bodies. This is something particularly pleasurable to the female reader who finds herself constrained by a patriarchal politics. It offers a vision of another way to do girlhood: one where the 'successful girl' of Australian educational discourse is not a problem to be defined against 'failing boys', but one where she is valued and celebrated.

Elspeth herself offers a captivating vision for an alternative femininity: one of strength, power, and intellectual capability. This was a vision which was compelling to my nine year old self, and it is one which remains compelling to me today. To many readers, Elspeth and Obernewtyn represented the possibility of finding a place and a community where one could be one's authentic self: where it was all right to be a misfit, and the things that set people apart were important and were nourished. Moreover, being a Misfit – being different – was something endowed with enormous power and possibility. 'I am a misfit, but in this world misfits have power,' a reviewer on obernewtyn.net remarks. This expresses neatly the utopian fantasy at the heart of the books which appealed so much to girl readers like me, and which continues to hold an appeal today: being isolated from a mainstream or normative community –

particularly a gendered one – can lead to the formation of a new, better community, where the things that set us apart make us powerful.

Endnote

1. While this seems to have patronising overtones out of context, it should be noted that this is not especially the case within the text: this is a genuine attempt from Elspeth to express concern for the perspectives of others, not to condescend about the worthiness of those perspectives. Likewise, the term ‘unTalents’ is not used to constitute those without her mental powers as lacking – Rushton himself does not have powers – but simply to refer to those who do not possess them

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