

# American Children's Fiction of WWII and the Dissensual *Bildungsroman*

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This essay studies the representation of families and growing up in America in three children's World War II fiction texts, namely Bette Greene's *Summer of My German Soldier* (1973, hereafter *SMGS*), Mary Downing Hahn's *Stepping on the Cracks* (1991, hereafter *SC*) and Janet Taylor Lisle's *The Art of Keeping Cool* (2000, hereafter *AKC*).

Each of these novels presents protagonists in small-town America during 1942–45 and uses the war as a backdrop to explore the uneasy and troubling equations/dynamics of family life. The books serve both as reflections and reflectors of/for the battlefields of the international war. The war features in these books in several ways. There are, expectedly, the reportage and radio broadcasts of the progress of war; there are the children's war games, and then there is the theme of the casualties of war: each family in these novels usually has at least one member serving in the armed forces and on the warfront, some of whom die during the course of the narrative.

This essay argues that in these novels about WWII written for children (i) the battles and conflicts at the international warfront are reflected on a smaller scale within the family and (ii) this smaller scale conflict becomes the context of the children growing up. It concludes that these children's literature texts, by offering a view of war-as-context, constitute a dissensual *bildungsroman* where the child's coming-of-age is hindered and, as I shall argue, his/her social integration – a key feature of the *bildungsroman* – is severely problematic. In the classical *bildungsroman* the protagonist develops from childhood or early youth into an adult who takes his rightful place in society. This development is marked by some tumultuous confrontations with the values and mores of society until he achieves integration with, and an appropriation of his society's values for himself. In contrast to this traditional model of the *bildungsroman*, there is the 'dissensual *bildungsroman*' as theorized by Joseph Slaughter and, more recently, Pramod

Nayar. The latter describes it as portraying

a self that has not been allowed to grow due to the social contexts it finds itself mired in [...]. The dissensual *bildungsroman* is a narrative of the dissonance between self-determination and integration. More importantly it gestures at the social contexts of the self. (99)

I propose that the fractal nature of the war becomes the unfavourable context within which the child has to grow up. The essay therefore moves from contexts – families, communities, social structures – to individuals, tracing the growing up of the protagonist. I treat the war fiction under study here as instances of the dissensual *bildungsroman*. Fractal war is the necessary context, the essay argues, in which the growing-up of the protagonist is to be mapped. Thus war is a fractal shape, or condition, that is symbolically and materially reflected with considerable exactitude in the form of smaller fragments at the level of the family. The war-enemy is fractally reflected here in the form of an ‘insider-enemy’, very often a parent. Soldiers on the battlefield facing the extreme violence of war are uncannily miniaturized in the form of children growing up in abusive homes and facing mind-numbing violence. Children’s fiction’s fractal war, I suggest, relies on

a key theme of such a shared precarity. Fractal war, with the shared precarity of the soldier on the battlefield and the child in an abusive home and their similar victimage, leads to comparisons of parent-abusers to Hitler and the homogenization of cruelty. It proposes a kinship of abuse and violence in terms of quality even though the abuse is different in terms of scale.<sup>1</sup> ‘Home’ is a war zone that closely, and fractally, replicates the larger violence. In addition this fiction focuses on the development and self-fashioning of the protagonists in opposition to their abusive and violent home lives, thus partaking of the nature of the dissensual *bildungsroman*.

While critics have noted that children’s war fiction set in mainland America does suggest parallels between international war and domestic conflict, there is no sustained analysis of these three novels in conjunction with each other. In her article titled “A Capsule Overview”, a survey of war fiction for children, Mitzi Myers argues that books such as Greene’s, Hahn’s and Reeder’s

link abusive parents and international abuses of power. The parallels between youthful war games at home and bloody combat abroad and the exploration of how war develops and of the human capacity to hate are worked through. (330)

Kristine Miller writes about children's "Blitz Fiction" that:

children's war fiction makes plain the task of war fiction more generally: rather than offering an escape from violence, the literature helps readers to think constructively about a world being destroyed. [...] The fiction makes this topic accessible to children by describing its protagonists in heroic or fantastic terms; these heroes fight not just in one specific battle but in the ongoing archetypal battle between good and evil. (273)

While this comment is specifically about fiction set on the battlefield and in embattled zones, this essay demonstrates that it can be extended to wartime fiction set on the homefront as well.

Although the novels are set in different locations (from Arkansas to New England) and in different years (1942–45), they share certain features. Each of them works with the notion of the shared precarity of human life: that victimage is a definite possibility whether German PoW or American Jew (Greene); whether German refugee or American middle-class boys (Lisle); or poor American boys and girls (Hahn). But while this is a central concern, these narratives also highlight the banality of evil and its power to pervade ordinary lives. Evil is not just Hitler's actions in far-off Europe but

also what parents do to children and what neighbours do to each other.

This essay consists of three sections. In the first I explore the nature of the family in the books. The second section demonstrates the heroic nature of the protagonists and their resilience in the face of antagonistic familial and societal conditions. In the final section I conclude that the protagonists' journey through these books locates the novels themselves in the category of the dissensual *bildungsroman*.

## **S**urviving the Family or: **A** Family of Survivors

The texts analyzed here demonstrate that "your enemy can be someone who lives close to you, where you're most vulnerable, not just on the other side of an ocean" (Lisle 205). The families in these works are flawed: the family as a structure which provides love, security and comfort is replaced by a tension-filled space which is stressful and unstable, completed by violent physical damage inflicted upon the children by their fathers/grandfathers (see Greene 107, Hahn 144, Lisle 192–193). In this section I first demonstrate how war becomes a personal engagement when one family member is an active combatant on the front; secondly I analyze the war within the family when a parental

figure is recognized as the enemy and the further recognition that the other adults are colluding with the abusive parent either via their silence or their active participation in the abuse. In the final sub-section I look at alternate families that the children turn to, which serve as their spaces of refuge.

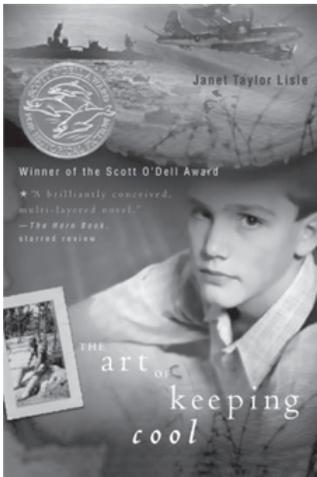
War in these works appears in a shared set of recurring markers and signs: thus letters home from the front, the blue and gold stars that people hang in their windows (to indicate that someone from the family is on the warfront), the listening to radio bulletins and the reports of Allied progress, the playing of war games by the children, the nationalistic rhetoric used by most of the adults, are common to all these books. But the World War is tangential to what really

happens within these narratives as the war comes home. Yet the protagonists of these novels emerge from these wars and their traumatic home lives not as cowed victims but as survivors who are strong enough to stand up to abuse and make self-defining choices.

## War as Personal/Familial

Each of the novels places the family at the center, taking the focus away from the war in Europe and other theaters of World War II. Yet these theaters of war figure in the novels as at least one of the main characters have one or more family members serving overseas, seeing active combat and writing home about life on the front. The fragmented and damaged nature of the family in wartime is immediately apparent as those left behind constantly await letters from the front, look back on happier days and wait for the soldier to return so that they can once again be a complete unit (see Greene 5–6, 51; Hahn 12, 100, 155; Lisle 83, 104). These soldiers are focal points for the patriotic and nationalistic impulses of the main characters until they discover for themselves that the war affects them personally. Thus in *SC*, it is after Margaret's brother dies that she says:

In some ways, it didn't make any difference to me what happened in



*The Art of Keeping Cool* (2000) by Janet Taylor Lisle

Europe. Jimmy was dead. Nothing was going to change that. Not even victory and the end of the war. (Hahn 184)

For some of the characters the necessity of war is juxtaposed with the fact that their son/brother joins the fighting. At that point the international crisis is seen as less important than the departure and possible death of the family member. In *SMGC*, Patty's nanny Ruth says: "Honey, I don't care about no war. I jest cares about my boy" (Greene 52). Robert in *AKC* when awaiting news of his father's possible death begins to think not of the war and its end but of how his father's death might affect him:

I thought of Willie Vogel, whose father had died fighting at Midway, and wondered if I would start being a bad student like him. (Lisle 181)

## The War Within the Family

The soldiers on the war front are replicated in miniature on the home front by their brothers/sisters who face not Hitler's forces but their parent's aggression, anger, and often enough neglect. Thus Patty in *Greene's*, Gordy in *Hahn's* and Elliot in *Lisle's* novel all suffer either psychological or physical abuse or both from their parent or grandparent.

If one parent/grandparent is outright abusive, the other is also culpable as they either augment it with verbal abuse (Patty's mother in *SMGC*) or pretend that everything is alright (both Gordy's mother in *SC* and Robert and Elliot's grandmother in *Lisle's AKC*). In addition the other adults in these families, in refusing to acknowledge the problem, make it possible for the abuse to continue. Thus homes become a legitimate space wherein abuse can be perpetuated. This is particularly true for Gordy's mother who – though beaten up and bruised – refuses to admit that her husband is responsible for any of it:

You mustn't get the wrong idea, [...] I'm clumsy, I fall a lot, and the children, well, you know how kids are, they play so rough. (Hahn 163)

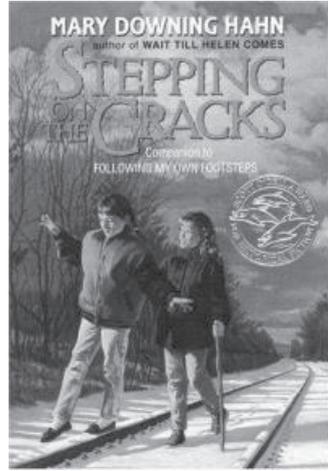
When her daughter insists that it was Mrs. Smith's husband who hurt her Mrs Smith's face turned red, and she tried to laugh. "Now isn't that silly, you bad girl, talking about your daddy like that". (ibid.)

Patty's parents in *SMGC* are both abusive, her father beating her regularly while her mother is verbally and psychologically abusive. The mother constantly compares her to the younger sister, the parents' favourite. In addition she also finds fault with Patty who

cannot seem to get anything right: "Just being in the same room with you, Mother, is like being feast for a thousand starving insects", is how Patty puts it (Greene 149–50): Her mother consistently points out her shortcomings, whether it is her untidiness or her lack of friends.

The children in these embattled situations realize that they cannot hope for help from any of the adults around them because most of them collude to cover up the damaging truth. After this realization they begin to move away from the familiar familial configuration to a sense of self and society which is not necessarily rooted in familial identities and structures. Hahn's Gordy comes to this stage in the companion book to *SC*, *Following My Own Footsteps* (1996): Patty arrives at it in the Reformatory she is sent to (see Greene 192) while Elliot begins with a fairly strong idea of himself which does not include his family members.

Wartime in families is the time of acts of commission (abuse and extreme behaviour) but also omission. The authors, having explored the violent nature of familial relations in wartime, also examine the neglect that wartime seems to engender in families, especially when a son or husband is away at the warfront. The children who are left behind face inattention and a partial abandonment



Mary Downing Hahn's *Stepping on the Cracks* (1991)

as the thoughts of the parents/wives are focussed on the missing family member. This is particularly so in Hahn's *SC* where Margaret's and Elizabeth's mothers are seen as too busy running their homes and worrying about their sons who are fighting in Europe to pay much attention to what their daughters are up to in their 'safe' neighbourhood. It is only toward the end, after her discovery that Margaret has been aiding a deserter, that her mother acknowledges "I had no idea what you and Elizabeth were up to. If I hadn't been so preoccupied, I might have noticed" (Hahn 207). Though non-abusive in the strictest sense of the term, these are parents who are indifferent to their children because they are caught up in their own worries and concerns. Another example occurs in Lisle's *AKC*: Robert's little sister is left

in her grandmother's care, at their home, as are Elliot and Robert, because their parents are busy with their jobs in order to sustain their families in wartime. This is in spite of knowing that the children's grandfather once shot his son rather than let him pursue his aims. These situations make it possible for the children to investigate spaces and relationships which might otherwise have been declared off-limits for them.

## **A**lternate Families?

In the books analyzed here, the family is not eliminated; rather, the children invent new families, more fluid and shifting, for themselves: these are supportive and caring, offering the children a temporary space wherein they can be safe. In a context where parents retain legal rights over their children, the supportive extra-familial individuals are largely rendered powerless, unable to rescue the children, and only able to offer them impermanent spaces of refuge wherein they can be at peace for a while before encountering once again their annihilating home environments. Thus Patty in *SMGC* finds comfort in her grandparents' home, with Anton in the shelter above the garage, and with Ruth, her nanny. Yet at the end, she is still uncertain of what will happen to her once she comes out of

the Reformatory: although she has no desire to return to her punitive home, the only choice she has is "goin' back home and finishing up with [her] high school education" (Greene 194). She dreams of other options, of staying with her grandparents, and of finding a job. However, the reality is that she must return to her parents and all they stand for. Elliot in Lisle's *AKC* moves out of his grandparents' house and into his uncle's, where he has "wing room" and can study to be an artist (see 202). This is because his uncle knows the extremes to which Elliot's grandfather can go: the latter shot him, his son, because he wished to become a pilot rather than a doctor which was the career chosen for him by his father (Elliot's grandfather). Before Elliot can leave he finds refuge in the German artist, Abel Hoffman's company, again a case of someone who is able to understand Elliot's desires and aims. Gordy in Hahn's *SC* has only one place of refuge throughout the novel: his hut in the woods which he transforms into a refuge for his brother Stuart as well as June, his younger sister, when life becomes too threatening for each of them. His friends provide him with companionship and support, but eventually all of them are children who can be friends, maybe, but cannot provide the supportive structure that he needs.

For that, Gordon has to wait until the companion novel where he finds his 'home' with his grandmother and his sister June.

While families might need to be re-invented and relationships reconfigured, some basics remain the same: Even though not explicated except in *SMGS* (see 125), love is posited as the basic minimal necessity for a satisfactory life. Each of the abused children searches for affirmation and even if it is only a fleeting moment, this affirmation and love then defines them. Thus when Ruth visits her at the Reformatory, Patty discovers that

in spite of everything I did and everything people say about me I don't feel bad, not anymore. I'm not bad, and right now that seems important. (Greene 192)

Elliot finds his affirmation via Abel Hoffman and Robert's father's invitation that he should stay with them on their farm, "It made him pretty happy. I think he would have left right then if he could have" (Greene 201). And for Gordy, there is only the small hope held out by his mother taking them to their grandmother's house, away from their father: "She never wants to see the old man again, not after what he did to Stuart. This time she better mean it" (Hahn 199). It is also significant that in the face of sustained abuse none of the children

lose their ability to love someone else. In their survey of children's literature about war Agnew and Fox have remarked on the centrality of love in *SMGS*: "The value of human love has been emphasized throughout the novel" (117) and this can be extended to *SC* and *AKC* as well. Patty loves Sharon, Ruth, Anton and her grandparents; Robert and Elliot find brotherhood through the traumatic events of that year etc. Thus the brutalization suffered by the children is not total: they remain capable of love and affection. This attempt to survive brutalization and remain caring and loving is not only a mode of survival but also self-fashioning in the face of horrific contexts. The protagonists grow up, heroically, in contexts that hinder their growth.

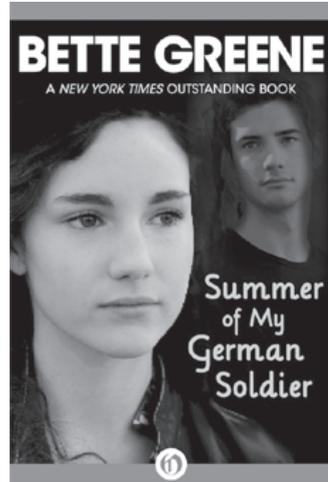
## Heroic Individuals

Heroism is a thread that runs through all or most war fiction: the soldiers on the warfront are heroic in their fight against the enemy and the medals that are awarded them, often posthumously, testify to this heroism. However, when the enemy is within the family and often not acknowledged as such, the notion of heroism is itself complicated. By locating evil and violence in the family and home, a form of heroism in the face of conflict and

danger becomes an imperative for survival. The heroism of the child protagonists in these works is atypical. These children do not defeat their tyrannical parents, they do not win battles or succeed on quests. What they do achieve is less tangible: they are able to preserve the quotidian values of love, loyalty, courage and independence in the face of sustained, often violent, opposition and tyranny. Their heroism lies in being 'bloody, but unbowed' as they try to craft a sense of self despite the daily attempts at annihilation they suffer. Heroism here is the battle to reinforce qualities of dignity, affection and bonding. It is also the fashioning of a self in hostile contexts.

The soldier's heroism – shooting down the enemy and making the world a safer place for those waiting at home – is fractally replicated (though not in quantitative or scalar terms) by the actions of children facing abusive parents and unfriendly/indifferent communities. Like the soldiers, the children discover that they are part of the battle to make the world a safer place for themselves and others.

For Greene's heroine in *SMGC*, twelve-year-old Patty Bergen, her parents are the people whose approval and love she seeks even as her continued and painstaking efforts are rejected with regularity, sometimes



Bette Greene: *The Summer of My German Soldier* (1973)

brusquely (see 20–21), and sometimes violently (see 103). Their repeated rejections cause Patty to see herself at fault, especially as their reactions to their younger daughter are warmly approving and loving (see 14, 21, 138). In Patty's case, her efforts to please her parents by reinventing herself lead to recurrent heartbreak for her until she is offered affirmation from others and is able to recognize her value and worth in spite of her so-called shortcomings. For Patty, the family is not a space wherein she can be herself and discover her potential: it is a space of punitive violence, often for imagined sins and crimes, a place where violent beatings and wounding words are an everyday feature (see Greene 57–59, 107, 143). Her acceptance of this truth

and her movement away from this space mark her rise to heroism as she accepts the horrifying truth of her parents' lack of love for her and their complete rejection of all that she is. Accompanying this is the realization that though "shipwrecked", she might have been taken by a raft "not exactly to the land, but only in view of land. The final mile [is her's] alone to swim" (Greene 198). With that faint realization, Patty Bergen becomes more than just a victim: she becomes a survivor who tries to make "plans for a lifetime" (Greene 180).

Gordy Smith in Hahn's *SC* is an unlikely hero as his behavior is largely destructive and abusively violent towards the narrator, Margaret, and her friend, Elizabeth. Gordy's violence and abuse towards the girls begins in the first chapter (see Hahn 6–7) and continues until nearly the end. Even when he is forced to accept their help, he continues to be verbally abusive, ungrateful and surly. In addition, the text positions him as akin to a Nazi as the narrator says: "You'd think he was a Nazi, the way he acted, fighting with everyone and picking on girls and little kids" (Hahn 5). But in the clean and tidy world of College Hill, unwashed, dirty, rude and vicious Gordy is revealed as a heroic figure in three distinct ways: as one who in spite of his

own brutalization protects his siblings (see Hahn 78–79, 94, 159–160); as someone who risks his life rather than betray what he thinks is important (see Hahn 144), and as a person of rare courage who – knowing what awaits him at home – still returns to it (see Hahn 190). At first only seen as a cruel bully, Gordy earns not just the sympathy of the girls whom he bullies and of the reader (which would mark him out as victim), but also their initially grudging, but eventually wholehearted, respect. Hahn further portrays Gordy as heroic by demonstrating the enormity of the evil that he faces on a daily basis in his own home. Initially, the girls do not even think about Gordy's home life, seeing him only as he appears to them in their everyday life. When they do recognize that Gordy appears to suffer some physical damage fairly frequently, they rationalize it by saying "if his father beats him, he probably deserves it" (Hahn 88). It is only after they meet Gordy's father, witness his treatment of his daughter (see Hahn 92–93), and finally see him beat Gordy (see Hahn 144) that they recognize the reality of Gordy's life. His pugnacious attitude and his demeanour are explained via his abusive father, but the strength of his character is finally revealed in his attempts to keep standing even though he is

knocked down so frequently. After that, though Gordy remains unchanged, rude and obnoxious as ever, even though they still find Gordy difficult, there is also an element of grudging admiration for him (see Hahn 146). Gordy's pride is also problematic, as he recognizes the unstated opinion of most of the characters regarding his family, that they are "poor white trash" and as such unlikeable and unwanted (Hahn 142). This in part fuels his rejection of help from the well-meaning families of College Hill. It is also this pride that compels him to hope for a fresh start far from this location: "We'll get out of this town as soon as Stuart's better [...] It can't be soon enough for me" (Hahn 199). To recognize the truth and yet to try to move forward despite it is what makes Gordy heroic.

In not transforming Gordy into a reformed character and by not making the girls like him consistently, the text marks Gordy as heroic but also makes his character realistic: it is after knowing the reality of his home life that Elizabeth says, "[e]very time I think I'm starting to like Gordy a little better, he acts horrible, and I hate him all over again" (Hahn 154). Gordy does not fit the stereotypical victim role of someone who needs to be helped and is grateful for kindness. Nor does he fit the traditional heroic role which

would necessitate him transforming into a reformed character. His independence and his sturdy determination to remain so also mark him as heroic (as they do the major characters in each of these books). When his father is finally taken away by the police at the very end of the novel, Gordy remains a spectator, but also a survivor:

His face was a mass of bruises, and tears were seeping out of his swollen eyes. I thought he would yell at us, curse us, chase us away, but he just stood there. The expression on his face reminded me of a photograph I'd seen in *Life* of a soldier suffering from battle fatigue. The weariness and sorrow in his eyes made me hurt inside. (Hahn 198)

The final fractal equation of Gordy with a surviving soldier also casts him as heroic in the genre of war fiction.

In Janet Taylor Lisle's *AKC*, heroism is more complicated. Set in 1942, soon after America's entry into WWII, the multiple plots of the novel all include some element of psychological and/or actual physical violence, visited upon the boy Elliot, the German painter, Hoffman and Elliot's uncle, and Robert's father when he was a boy. Thus Lisle offers several kinds of victim situations.

Robert, his mother and little sister come to Rhode Island in 1942, to stay

with Robert's paternal grandparents whom they have never met. His father is away in the war, having joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. Robert notes that his father is never mentioned in the presence of his grandfather, though he does not suspect an abusive situation between them. The grandfather bullies Robert's cousin Elliot who stays in the same house with his parents. Elliot tries to render himself invisible and is difficult to know or befriend, as Robert discovers. There is also a German painter who lives in the woods and who is a target for the townspeople's hatred and nationalistic fervour.

Heroism is not restricted to any one character in this novel: Robert's father, the war hero, emerges as having been heroic in the past too as his son discovers the truth about his father's departure from his parents' home. The German painter, Abel Hoffman, is also courageous and undaunted, suffering through hate attacks and organized persecution until he finally chooses what is most valuable to him. Of the two boys, Robert and Elliot, it is Elliot who is the more nervous and diffident, but it is also Elliot who shows a rare heroism in adhering to his beliefs, all the more impressive in the face of his characteristic timidity. It is the narrator, Robert, who informs us of all this, surviving a

time when he has to decipher the true nature of the people and situations around.

Robert's father, who never returns to his parents' home, is discovered to have been shot in the leg by his own father for wanting to leave home to follow his dreams: nonetheless he leaves once his leg is bandaged, lives with a lifelong limp and never returns. Elliot, who knows about his uncle being shot by his grandfather, bends before his grandfather's verbal abuse (see Lisle 99, 178) but is single-minded about what he wishes to do with his life, something which remains unaltered in spite of all the abuse he experiences. Though he appears feeble and spineless, he reveals his secret in the end when Robert begins to rage against their grandfather and the everyday pusillanimity of the rest of the family: "'Don't let it bother you,' he said. 'That's the trick'" (Lisle 205). The heroic quality of the characters in *AKC* is problematic as none of them are heroic in the stereotypical sense. Rather, they each demonstrate a sense of survival which is due to a commitment to their art/work, which they see as paramount and for which they willingly sacrifice their dignity and pride (even finally their lives, as in Hoffman's case).

Abel Hoffman, who escapes from Nazi persecution only to find Americans persecuting him in the land of the free and the brave, is resolute in his dedication to his art, to the point of committing suicide when he finds that his life's work has been set on fire by his neighbours. While it is debatable whether suicide is heroic or cowardly, Hoffman's unyielding devotion to his work, his determination in the face of physical ailments, foul weather and persecution from his neighbours is heroic, especially in the light of the fact that he recognizes that his refuge in America is slowly becoming what Nazi Germany had earlier become to him: a place of persecution and torment (see Lisle 143–158).

Patty, Elliot and Gordy all survive their parent/grandparent's attempts to destroy them as individuals. Their sense of self is crafted in the face of their families' attempts to deny them any individuality or personal identity, while the community around them also does not see them as having any personal worth.

In *SMGC*, Patty's parents' negative opinion of her is accepted at face value by the townspeople until they discover that she had sheltered an escaped German POW, when they turn against her (see Greene 164) and her entire family (see Greene 167), seeing

them as traitors. The only exception to this is the Sheriff, who recognises the abusive nature of the father and deals gently with Patty when he is called in to interrogate her (see Greene 146–148). Hahn's *SC* also portrays a community that is wilfully blind to the outrage being perpetrated by Gordy's father. When Margaret informs her mother of Mr. Smith's abusive behavior, her mother's response is: "What people do in their homes is their own business. It's not for us to interfere" (Hahn 101). A similar lack of concern is evinced by most of the other adults in the novel as well. Elliot and Robert's community in *AKC* is portrayed extremely negatively in their interaction with the German painter Hoffman. From the beginning, they see him as a potential traitor and eventually burn down his home and his work (see Hahn 165, 169). The townspeople have no inkling about the abusive nature of Robert's grandfather as the rest of the family colluded to keep it from public knowledge and therefore Elliot's elusive nature and the non-appearance of Robert's father is not seen as unusual by the townspeople. The indifference of the community is thus a feature that has to be factored in when speaking of these children who survive abuse and manage to create an identity for themselves.

## War Fiction as the Dissensual *Bildungsroman*

In each of the texts analyzed here, as argued, the protagonists are embedded within social and familial frames that are inimical to their self-development and growth. I propose that we can treat this war fiction as a version of the *bildungsroman*, the traditional novel of growing up.

The classical European *bildungsroman*, Frank Moretti notes, is marked by a tension between self-determination and social integration. The full and proper citizen is one who has been convinced that his (the gender is clearly male) internal development is in line with social requirements, that one's formation as an individual coincides with one's social integration as a simple part of a whole. However, Moretti also accepts that in many cases the tale of growing up deals with the many obstacles in the way of the protagonist's growth, which have to be 'incorporated' into the life in order to build a personality (as cited in Nayar 98–99). Joseph Slaughter, discussing human rights narratives, has argued that in many cases we find narratives of growing up

hold[ing] onto the ideal of harmonious integration even as it narrates the unfulfillment of human rights and idealist *bildung*. (181)

This dissensual *bildungsroman*

protests the protagonist's exclusion from the public realm of rights, yet articulates this protest within the normative genre of the rights claim.<sup>2</sup> (181–182)

War fiction as dissensual *bildungsroman* first shows the rejection of the father figure. The traditional *bildungsroman* employs the father or a father figure as a means of integrating the youth into his social structures (see Castle 672). War fiction such as the texts discussed here shows the rejection of such a figure as essential for the protagonist to grow and become an individual, to claim his/her place in the social order. These fathers/father figures are inimical to the protagonists' ability to determine their own futures. Thus, even though the fathers might still be in evidence at the conclusion of the tale, they are shown as possessing little control over the children: the children have crafted an identity for themselves. Patty no longer hopes for or desires her father's approval. Gordy's peace comes from knowing that his father has been put into prison and that they will leave College Hill. Elliot escapes from his grandfather's house and is able to pursue his desires.

Within the antagonistic social world of each of these novels, there is an

*awareness* on the protagonist's part of the disconnect between what is seen as a 'normal' childhood and what their own childhoods are like.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Patty wishes she could be loved and liked as Sharon, her sister, is (see Greene 137–138) and finds it difficult to reconcile her life to what she sees as the real lives of other little girls in her town. Gordy Smith recognizes caring, loving parents in the families he sees in College Hill but also recognizes the problems that are rife in his own family. Elliot, living with his grandparents, is able to see the potential that exists in Robert's home and gladly escapes from his own when the chance is offered him. If the dissensual *bildungsroman*, as Slaughter argues, opens up the gap between what is claimed and the reality of the victim's experience, then these novels function as *bildungsroman* which show the disparity between what is seen as 'normal' and what is the actual lived experience of the protagonists, and the protagonists' awareness, or a coming-to-consciousness of this disparity.

This war fiction as dissensual *bildungsroman* extends the theme of awareness to map the growing knowledge of the protagonists that they cannot hope to change these circumstances and that they can only move out of the social/familial spheres wherein their

identities are jeopardized and their lives are in danger. Each of the children comes to this knowledge, and once they acknowledge this, they are determined to move out and make a life for themselves (as has been demonstrated in the section on heroism). Thus instead of integrating into a societal/familial structure which requires them to obliterate all sense of self, Patty, Gordy and Elliot prefer to hold on to what they have chosen, even if these are not values that their families or societies endorse as worthwhile. They work with the humanist ideals of love, loyalty, determination and fierce independence and recognize that their social contexts are such that they are denied all sense of self. It is only by rejecting those contexts and by holding on to what they have chosen that they can craft any sense of identity for themselves.

The texts transform themselves into dissensual versions of the *bildungsroman* wherein the chief characters labour through adverse contexts to arrive at an identity that is created and maintained in opposition to the world and social order within which they have been brought up. This is achieved in opposition to the values of their parental figure and in the absence of any assistance from either society or the family. Alongside the

rejection of the fatherfigure, the protagonists also reject the social order which had enabled and even implicitly endorsed the abuse at the hands of their families. Each of these texts thus ends with the departure of the protagonist from the home/town. The dissensual *bildungsroman* thus presents young adult protagonists as heroes who have grown up within conditions of war.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is explicitly stated in Greene's novel in a conversation between Patty and Anton. The German soldier likens Patty's father to Hitler: "Cruelty is after all cruelty, and the difference between the two men may have more to do with their degrees of power than their degrees of cruelty. One man is able to affect millions and the other only a few [...]. Doesn't it seem to you that they both need to inflict pain?" (117).

<sup>2</sup>Feminist readings of women's texts show as a 'growing down', in contrast with the male protagonist's 'growing up' due to hostile contexts (see Lazzaro-Weis).

<sup>3</sup>This is close to the 'ironic *bildungsroman*' that Anne Salvatore discerns in Toni Morrison, where there is an *awareness* of the limitations as opposed to the commitment to progress in the classical *bildungsroman*.

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