

Child and Youth Agency in Science Fiction: Travel, Technology, Time, edited by Ingrid E. Castro and Jessica Clark



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The conceptualization of children as agents has been an often-overlooked factor in academic conversations. This collection, edited by Ingrid E. Castro and Jessica Clark, contains twelve essays that serve as an excellent introductory point for those studying depictions of agency in science fiction. It also sets the stage for further development by beginning specific lines of inquiry and creates theoretical foundations by which future studies can interrogate cultural conception of the child and childhood. Although the collection lacks in its theoretical engagement with science fiction as a genre, favoring the application of sociological theories of agency and childhood to a chosen text, the essays provide arguments about child and youth agency that can be brought into many future studies of science fiction.



The introduction by editors Castro and Clark and the first chapter, Joseph Giunta writing about *Stranger Things* (2016-), lay an excellent groundwork for the rest of the collection. Castro and Clark establish the dearth of scholarship on children in science fiction. Giunta's chapter further elaborates this history of children's agency by outlining the “‘new’ sociology of childhood, [which] embraces agentic youth and their active participation within hierarchies of social order” (25). This “new” sociology of childhood—that children are beings that fully act in and influence the world—is the foundation on which the essays engage with their chosen science fictional texts. Indeed, none of the essays argue that children do not have agency: a core supposition in each essay is that the actual agency of children is often overlooked, and therefore, almost all the essays outline how the characters in their chosen texts use agency. However, most of the essays don't take the added step of detailing how the use of agency then affects the theory of agency or genre of science fiction.

For many of the essays, agency is most visible in oppositional acts. In Jessica Clark's riveting assessment of masculinity and boyhood in the anime film *Akira* (1988), Clark declares that the use of agency shows that “adult status, political authority, and ideological principles are all questioned and transgressed” (123, emphasis mine). This transgression of strictures, systems, and hierarchies

around the characters is what forms the ability to see the character's agency at work. Similar to Clark, Megan McDonough argues that each book in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) "culminates in one major *agentically defiant* act against the powerful government in charge" (134-35, emphasis mine); for McDonough, then, agency is about defiance and is thus a reaction to power. This approach to agency always already assumes agency as an act of opposition: a response rather than a decision. Essays like Clark's and McDonough's do well at showing agency, but in future studies, we must consider how an agency that emphasizes "impacting" or "subverting" rather than being in and of itself might hide some forms of agency.

Agency is also outlined in the relationship between child and parent. In Kip Kline's chapter on *Back to the Future* (1985), Marty McFly is given power over not only himself but also his parents in a reading of his use of time travel as reversal of who determines whose futures: McFly becomes the metaphorical head of his family as he changes the past to align his present with his wants and desires. Kwasi David Tembo and Muireann B. Crowley look at the relationship between the X-Men characters Jubilee, X-23, and Wolverine, arguing that Jubilee and X-23 make agential actions but that those actions are always marked by Wolverine's influence, the cultural experience of gender, or the influence of the bio-power of the controlling hegemonies. Whereas Tembo and Crowley find a frustration of agency within this relationship, other chapters, like Joaquin Muñoz's chapter on *Ender's Game* (1985) and Castro's essay on David R. Palmer's novel *Emergence* (1984), find agency in the rebellion against parents or figures of authority. Muñoz argues that in *Ender's Game*, the protagonists "operationalize their agency for gaining power and control over their respective situations" (223); in other words, for Muñoz, the agency of children exists in an exerted influence on surroundings, contrary to what is controlled by the adult characters. In *Emergence*, Castro argues that the posthuman and biological relationships (e.g., with animals, with the surrounding world) is a place in which agency finds "purchase and context within their new intersectional and interdependent relationship" (259); in other words, a child's agency is not determined only by a relationship with adults but by the child's contextual world. The relationship of parent and child is also seen in Stephanie Thompson's argument that youth agency in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) and Neal Shusterman's *Unwind* (2007) is found in the child's transgression and subsumption of the adult's role of home provider.

This relationship between child and adult as space for agency creation is navigated in different ways in Erin Kenny's article on fanfiction of *The 100* (2014-2020) and Jessica Kenty-Drane's essay on *Black Mirror* (2011-). Kenny's article shows how the fanfiction communities that navigate and imagine diverse sexualities of youth characters in *The 100* gain power over the narrative and their own sexualities by using their agency to pen alternative couplings than what the adult creators of *The 100* intended. Kenty-Drane writes about how adult authors fear and speculate children's use of technology as potentially binding of agency in two *Black Mirror* episodes. While these articles aren't necessarily about how children gain power or voice through their use of agency, as in other articles, they do show agency as an interaction and conversations between adults and youths.

The collection is a good tool to establish one's self in the conversation of agency in children and youth. However, even though the collection centers itself on science fiction, the theory of science fiction seems secondary to arguments about the conception of agency. While the texts considered in the collection are all science fictional in nature, the science fiction nature of the texts isn't discussed. The collection favors describing agency and what that means to our cultural conceptions of agency to its engagement with science fiction as a field. This choice, then, leaves room for further investigations between conceptualizations of children's agency and theorization about science fiction media, especially those that speak to science fiction studies and science fiction as genre.

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