

Social Upheaval and Psychological Scarring:

Exploring the Future in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*

It would be much easier to tell this story if it were all about a chaste and perfect love between Two Children Against the World at an Extreme Time in History but let's face it that would be a load of crap. (Rosoff 46)

Daisy, the sardonic narrator of Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*, knows the tale she shares is going to trouble the waters of her audience's sense of normalcy. She knows it, flaunts it, and demands it. She wants to stir her audience out of any sense of complacency, lest we miss the significance of her story. Her tale is one of survival in the midst of war, a familiar theme in young adult literature. This novel, however, explores not the past experiences of war, but the ways in which war might impact life in the future. *How I Live Now* is a critically acclaimed novel that has won several awards, including the Printz award and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. Reviewers have praised the novel as "sweet and sinister, innocent and irreverent, implausible but not impossible" (Faust 31) and a "likely future classic" (Guardian). The recognition the novel has received makes it a compelling case for analyzing how young adult literature envisions life in the future. What picture does *How I Live Now* paint? What is the meaning in the implied contrast between the life lived now and the life lived before? The issues presented in *How I Live Now* engage the reader in speculation about the conditions resulting from armed conflict in the age of global terror. Although the novel shares similarities with other young adult literature about the trauma of past wars, *How I Live Now* offers a distinctly contemporary view of war and its impact on youth.

The war that sets the context for the novel reflects the global age of terror in which warfare is not the exclusive prerogative of nation states. In the global age of terror, collectives of ideologically aligned individuals wreak destruction and engage in prolonged warfare. In contrast to "traditional warfare" wherein war "has meant a clash of wills between opposing military forces on the field of battle, from which one side usually (though not always) emerged as a recognizable winner" (Mazarr), war in the global age of terror has become something altogether more amorphous. Combatants may be nation states but may also be a small band of extremists; warfare may involve guns and bullets, but may also involve bioweapons, psychological warfare, information warfare, and technological warfare. Most significantly, the prospect of future warfare invokes the radical possibility of the end of civilization. Living under the specter of such potential devastation proves not easy. Part of our work as humans is to come to terms with the very real circumstances of our current situation. One way we do this, of course, is through exploring literature that considers issues which face us. Understanding the nature of the social and psychological dimensions of the global age of terror offers readers of *How I Live Now* a way to see the novel as more than the story of one individual character and, instead, to view it more fully as a means of speaking to, for, and about a generation of readers who must come to terms with the social and psychic consequences of living in an age of such uncertainty.

Before exploring the social and psychological dimensions of life in the future as presented in *How I*

Live Now, a brief summary of the plot provides a necessary base for discussion. The novel is set in England in the indeterminate future. Life does not seem so different from life today until the violence of global conflict erupts, setting the context for the plot of the story. Rosoff employs a first-person narrative voice in which Daisy addresses the reader as she gives an accounting of what has led her into her current circumstances. In an interesting stylistic move, Rosoff allows Daisy to use unconventional capitalization to emphasize strong and often sarcastic sentiments. Daisy also shifts tenses as she tells her story, thus lending immediacy to the storytelling event.

The novel is divided into two sections. The first opens with a brief chapter in which Daisy introduces herself and sets the context for her narrative. Daisy, a world-weary, 15-year-old New Yorker, has been sent to England to stay with her cousins as her father and stepmother adjust to life with a new baby. Daisy's subsequent resentment toward the circumstances is unequivocal. However, she is fascinated by the apparent inversion of social control she finds in the world her cousins inhabit. It is a strange world to Daisy (and, indeed, perhaps to many readers) in which 14-year old Edmond smokes without censure, animals and kids live together in a peaceful menagerie, and adults abdicate the responsibility of managing daily living to the children. The setting that Daisy encounters is reminiscent of the particular strand of British children's literature in which rural living is romanticized as country houses with hidden passages, fecund landscape, and children left to play with little adult supervision. The situation suits Daisy, and she quickly feels safe and secure in the house and imagines she has belonged there for a long time (9). This is significant because it is clear that Daisy has long had deep feelings of alienation and depression. This is

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most clearly illustrated in her eating disorder in which self-starvation symbolizes her emotional hunger.

Daisy's inner battle to find security mirrors the external global conflict. From the start of the narrative, the shadowy threat of war hangs over Daisy and her cousins. Shortly after Daisy arrives, Aunt Penn departs for Oslo to give a speech on the threat of war. Aunt Penn never returns, setting the stage for the children's forced independence. It is not long before the threat of war morphs into the presence of war, as bombs go off in London. Soon war expands to a global scale, though it is still unclear exactly who is at war with whom. Initially, the crisis of the war seems to have little impact on the lives of the children. They go about their daily lives, albeit in the context of uncertainty. As the war escalates and rumors about its cause abound, Daisy avows little interest in it. Ironically, Daisy comes to find a renewed interest in

life despite the erupting chaos around her. It is not the international crisis that fuels Daisy's new-found energy, but the intense sexual and emotional relationship she develops with her cousin Edmond. Daisy recognizes that her relationship with Edmond is unconventional, but she rationalizes the relationship as an event beyond her control, much like the war. In her typically over-the-top manner, she narrates:

Let's try to understand that falling into a sexual and emotional thrall with an underage blood relative hadn't been on my list of Things to Do while visiting England, but I was coming around to the belief that whether you liked it or not, Things Happen and once they start happening you pretty much have to hold on for dear life and see where they drop you when they stop. (47)

Daisy casts her concern about the war strictly in terms of how it affects her. Recognizing that she ought to feel compassion and interest, she boldly declares, "No matter how much you put on a sad expression

and talked about how awful it was that all those people were killed and what about democracy and the Future of Our Great Nation the fact that none of us kids said out loud was that WE DIDN'T REALLY CARE (43).” Soon the war does impact her, however, as unrest and confusion sweep from the cities to the countryside. The cousins’ house is sequestered by the military and the children are separated by gender. Daisy and nine-year-old Piper are sent to live with a family while Edmond, his twin Isaac, and sixteen-year-old Osbert are sent to a camp facility. Daisy realizes that in order for them to survive, she and Piper must be reunited with the boys. Through a difficult and dangerous journey accentuated by war’s brutality and horror, Daisy leads Piper back to their house where they marginally survive. The first section of the novel concludes with the phone ringing and Daisy recognizing the voice at the other end.

The second and briefer section of the novel begins six years later. Daisy narrates this section with a more mature voice, one deeply rooted in her will to survive. She had been sent back to New York, she reveals, where she was hospitalized. Finally released, she

worked at the library and waited for the war to end. Now, some six years later, she is journeying back to England to reunite with Edmond, Piper, and the rest of her cousins. The novel ends with Daisy attending to a psychologically-scarred Edmond. “I have no idea how damaged Edmond is,” she writes. “I just know that he needs peace and he needs to be loved. And both those things I can do” (193).

How I Live Now inscribes the ultimate

power of love as a healing force. Toward the end of her story, Daisy reflects, “I was dying, of course, but then we all are. Every day, in perfect increments, I was dying of loss. The only help for my condition, then as now, is that I refused to let go of what I loved” (168). Daisy’s love for Edmond and the rest of the family saves her, and, presumably, will eventually save Edmond. The reader, however, is left with the implied

question: Will such love be enough to save the world? By juxtaposing the power of love against the power of global terror, *How I Live Now* pushes readers to acknowledge the twenty-first century demand that society act to avoid the catastrophic loss of life and meaning.

Along with the message about the enduring power of love, a close examination of the depiction of war and its social and psychological impact on the characters reveals that adolescents in this future will bear a heavy burden. The novel paints a bleak picture of the social breakdown that accompanies war in the age of global terrorism. Adults are remarkably distracted, displaying little ability to actively care for the welfare of the young. Early in the story, Aunt Penn departs for anti-war work in Norway and never returns. Daisy learns much later that Aunt Penn had been shot when she tried to return to her family. The symbolic importance of Aunt Penn’s absence illustrates the preoccupation adults have with the business of war, a theme that recurs in the novel. After weeks of the children living alone and “carrying on our happy little life of underage sex, child labor and espionage” (57), a doctor comes to the house. He visits not to check on the welfare of the children but to see if the household has any prescription drugs which can be contributed to the war effort. It is only when the military sequesters the home that adults make a move to shelter the children. Ironically, Daisy and Piper are sent to live with a family, Major McEvoy and his wife, who seem to provide information rather than protection. It is from Major McEvoy that Daisy learns about the numerous infrastructure problems crippling the country. “Later Major M told us you’d be amazed at the number of things that can go wrong for civilians in a war,” Daisy recounts. “Once you start thinking about all that stuff that wasn’t working it’s kind of hard to know where it all ends” (84).

The chaos that ensues in the social fabric—disease, technology failures, food shortages, fuel shortages, vigilante groups—echoes the chaotic nature of the information Daisy learns about the war. From the first mention of the possibility of war, it is clear that Daisy does not understand the specific causes of the conflict. What becomes increasingly clear as the novel unfolds is that neither do the adults. Shortly after the first bomb attacks, the adults in the village spout contradictory “crackpot theories” about the cause and conditions of the war (41). Later, when

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Daisy is with the McElvoys, she observes, “I didn’t really understand The Occupation because it didn’t seem like the kind of War we all knew and loved from your average made-for-TV miniseries” (86). When, toward the end of the novel, she describes a ceasefire of sorts, the war is not a political event but a catastrophic social event: “It was only a few months ago that there was finally a pause in the thousands of wars being waged all over the planet. Or was it one big war? I forget. I think everyone has.” (171). The lack of clear information about the war symbolizes not so much the failure of the information infrastructure but the nature of conflict in a terrorist age. When there are no clear demarcations between the “good guys” and the “enemies,” when battlefronts are not empty fields but shopping malls, when weapons are as likely to be bullets as germs, the control and flow of information is also subject to confusion and chaos.

While the social conditions of future war depicted in *How I Live Now* are disturbing, the psychological consequences of life in times of terror are equally troubling. Living in this age necessitates psychological adaptation to the possibility that the narrative of human life—perhaps all life—may be destroyed. Psychologist Robert Jay Lifton argues that the threat of nuclear annihilation has become “a shadow that persistently intrudes upon our psychology” (3). While nuclear weapons are not specifically named in *How I Live Now*, the psychology of the characters, Daisy in particular, exemplifies what Lifton terms *radical futurelessness*—a concept that acknowledges the possibility that war and/or industrial technology has the potential to extinguish life and sever the biological narrative. This possibility is so grave, so unimaginable, that while we hold that possibility to be true, we simultaneously engage in thinking and behaviors that shield us from the enormity of potential destruction. This theme is woven throughout the novel as Daisy displays multiple ways of denying the extreme conditions in which she lives.

One way of coping with this potential threat to human culture is through cynicism that masks Daisy’s utter detachment from meaningful human interaction. We see this in her sarcasm toward every potential source of disruption in her life. She reminisces, for example, about her stepmother: “Davina the Diabolical, who sucked my father’s soul out through his you know what then got herself knocked up with the devil’s spawn” (11). Just as she greets the coming of

her step-sibling with sarcasm and detachment, she professes disinterest in the brewing global conflict: “I didn’t spend much time thinking about the war because I was bored with everyone jabbering on for about the last five years about Would There Be One or Wouldn’t There and I happen to know there wasn’t anything we could do about it anyway so why even bring the subject up” (15). Placing such cynicism in the context of the global age of terror situates it as part of an array of psychological responses to genuine threats to humanity’s future and past. Given the number of potential sources of threat and the minimal influence many individuals feel they can exercise against such threats, cynicism can serve as a powerful psychological defense mechanism. Daisy’s character illustrates this in ways that may chafe some readers but nonetheless reminds us of how difficult it can be to cope with the psychological realities of modern society.

Another such mode of psychological response to the threat of potential extinction is the seeking of transcendent states. Lifton points out that humans have long sought transcendent states as a means of enlightenment and that the pursuit of intense highs is not a result of living in the nuclear age (76-77). However, with the intensity of crisis as experienced in the global age of terror, transcendent states are especially powerful as a means of experiencing an alternative to extinction (77). Daisy’s experiences with Edmond create such a transcendent state. Edmond’s first kiss fills Daisy with strong pleasure: “And after a little while of this my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was alive was flooded with the

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feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond. And what a coincidence, that was the feeling I loved best in the world” (45). She describes the intensity of their sexual attraction: “And sometimes we had to stop, just because we were raw and exhausted and humming humming humming with something we didn’t even have the strength left to do anything about” (54). The connection between Daisy and Edmond was spiritual as well as physical. From the

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first time they meet, Daisy senses that Edmond can read her thoughts. Later, when they are separated, she draws upon their psychic connection by achieving a transcendent state: “I had to be in a certain state of mind—quiet, distracted, sometimes half asleep—and then I might feel a kind of aura, a lightening of the space behind my eyes and I’d know he was there” (89). The intensity of their connection is such that he can read her mind and she can, at times, see what he sees. While the romantic

overtones of this bond have a natural teenage appeal, the powerful psychosexual characteristic of the relationship between Daisy and Edmond exemplifies her search for escape from the realities of her world.

At the other end of the spectrum from the seeking of transcendent states is the tendency for humans to cope with the psychological burden of global terrorism through psychic numbing. Numbing occurs when feeling is suppressed because the intensity is too difficult or overwhelming to reconcile (Lifton 100-105). Daisy exhibits psychic numbing on multiple occasions early in her narrative. For example, when the first bombs hit London, she remarks that “something like seven or seventy thousand people got killed” (24). Her indifference to the number of casualties is indicative of her deadened sense of connection to others. This is apparent, too, in her admission to Edmond that she thinks about dying in the context of making other people feel guilty (44). As Daisy’s relationship with

Edmond becomes a source of life for her, she awakens to the presence of life all around her. In the midst of war, she sees that England was “drowning in fertility” (52) as roses bloomed and animals roamed free. She counters this recognition with her awareness that the personal security she is feeling is threatened by the war: “I didn’t know if we would be taken prisoner, tortured, murdered, raped, forced to confess or inform on our friends” (56). Perhaps the intensity of such threats enables her to connect so deeply with Edmond and his family. This connection serves as a source of life for Daisy: “The only thing I knew for certain was that all around me was more life than I’d ever experienced in all the years I’d been on earth” (56).

It is this sense of life that propels Daisy onward and eventually surfaces in her ability to replace the falsely imposed hunger for psychological alienation with an intense hunger for life. Daisy reflects that “somewhere along the line I’d lost the will not to eat” (159). A powerful hunger for life accompanies this renewed appetite for food: “By saving Piper I saved myself, and all the things that might have killed us were also the things that saved us. Saved from the ravages of war by stubbornness and ignorance and an insatiable hunger for love” (193). Daisy’s reengagement with living resonates in part with characters Millicent Lenz terms *biophiles*. In her study of nuclear-age children’s literature, Lenz argues that a deep commitment to life beyond oneself sets apart successful protagonists in nuclear-age fiction:

I believe a new heroic voice must be found to address the human predicament meaningfully in a world permeated by fear of global catastrophe. Survival itself is now the first condition, but mere physical survival cannot suffice. We need to survive with our specifically human qualities of choice, love, and reverence for the dignity of all life still intact if life is to continue to be worth living. (xv)

While Daisy’s affirmation that life is worth living is demonstrated through her complete devotion to Edmond, their garden (itself symbolic of life), and their extended family, it is not clear whether her commitment to nurturing life encompasses the global community. It seems more likely that—given Daisy’s steadfast devotion to life as she experiences it with her cousins—the love that provides healing and hope is one circumscribed by her immediate relationships. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs suggests the garden at the end of the novel represents a separation of the characters

from the world:

The novel ends with the damaged survivors cultivating a garden, removed once again from the outside world but with the violence it has inflicted on them inscribed in their seemingly seriously curtailed subjectivities and emblemized in the eponymous way they live now (254).

The reader can certainly appreciate Daisy's desire for isolation from the world when the forces of global terrorism impinged upon their world. Contemporary society has little to offer them, it seems. It is easier, safer, and altogether saner in the context of this novel to isolate oneself from the reach of global terror. The problem, of course, is that the possibility for such isolation does not exist in reality. Daisy and her cousins may tend their garden and sow seeds of love, but in the world outside the novel, real predicaments exist that threaten the security of today's youth. In a review of the research on the psychological consequences of children's exposure to war, Paramjit Joshi and Deborah O'Donnell describe the impact of war on those most vulnerable:

Any war or act of terror, as a sudden, unpredictable, and dramatic event has a tremendous negative impact at various levels including the community, family, and individual. War encompasses exposure to trauma-related events, which may become chronic . . . often leading to marked disruptions in the contextual and social fabric within which one lives. Children are usually affected most by these experiences (276).

Daisy's story is the story of one character. Grim numbers tell a different story: according to a study done in 2000, an estimated 12 million children around the world had been displaced in the previous decade as a result of conflict (Shaw). The violence, environmental stress, and social upheaval these children have been exposed to is shocking. Faced with the knowledge that children are in such peril, that the world is far from being a safe place for all of its inhabitants, many youth may feel similar to Daisy. They may feel numb, depressed, cynical, and disengaged. This is precisely why a close reading of *How I Live Now* matters. Peeling back the layers on Daisy's story, we see the enormous cost youth must bear as they come to terms with the fragility of the social and ecological order. As dystopic literature, the novel does more than offer a vision of the future; it offers an interrogation of the present (Bullen and Parsons). It is not just the "now" in Daisy's life that matters; it is the now in

every reader's life. Thoughtful dialogue with young readers of *How I Live Now* opens the possibility for imagining a different future. It is with imagination that change can begin. As Joshi and O'Donnell assert, "Averting future conflicts will require not just caring for the youngest victims of war, but also educating them for peace" (289). Our work as educators calls us to help today's youth consider the kind of future they can thrive in and to work with them to make that happen.

Judith K. Franzak is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at New Mexico State University. In her program area of Language, Literacy, and Culture, she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses related to literacy pedagogy and policy. Her research focuses on adolescent literacies, critical approaches to literature for adolescents, and the intersections of policy and practice in secondary language arts.

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