

# Review

## *The School Story: Young Adult Narratives in the Age of Neoliberalism.*

David Aitchison.

University Press of Mississippi, 2022.

Amy Naylor

First a keystone of the traditional children's literature canon, the school story has developed an important role in YA fiction. In the Introduction to *The School Story: Young Adult Narratives in the Age of Neoliberalism*, David Aitchison asserts his intention to “encourage critical interest in a genre known well for its classic but hardly at all for its contemporary significance” (9). Aitchison's work is well-informed, taking care to examine thoroughly many elements of the school story that have historically sparked debate. Delivering a chronological walk through the literary history and criticism of the genre in Chapter One, Aitchison lays a detailed foundation that is invaluable to any scholar with an interest in the school story as it is traditionally defined. At the heart of this monograph, though, is the desire to stretch the boundaries of what is considered a ‘school story’ under neoliberalism. In Chapters Two to Five, Aitchison shifts the conversation away from older narratives of the traditional British boarding school, and toward the contemporary YA school story. Focusing mainly on US-centric titles, each chapter interacts with a different form of school story text.

Chapter Two uses the lens of neoliberalism to study the American pedagogical novel, exemplified by Andrew Clements' *Frindle* (1996) and Tommy Greenwald's *Charlie Joe Jackson's Guide to Not Reading* (2011). Aitchison centres the idea of success as measured by the marketplace, rather than academic achievement, in these types of novels. This approach

is a particular strength of the book as it explores a crucial part of school life that is often left untouched in academic literature.

Trauma is well-documented as a common feature in contemporary YA fiction, but Aitchison's consideration of the theme within the school story in Chapter Three opens new perspectives for the genre. Caroline Levine's theory of rhythmic forms (qtd. in Aitchison 93) features heavily throughout this chapter, allowing an exploration of suffering within the specific social structure of the school. Using Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999) and *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, Aitchison investigates the role of positive student-teacher relationships through a neoliberalist lens. Aitchison takes care to consider the importance of the teacher in each text, not simply in relation to the student characters, but as figures similarly caught up in conflict with neoliberal ideologies of power.

In Chapter Four, which moves to the school story as represented in world cinema, Aitchison turns to representations of child violence in response to the school environment. Using school horror films *Battle Royale* (2000) and *Cooties* (2014), this chapter centres texts that explore "disinvesting in the idea of school as a public and democratic good" (147). *Battle Royale* is the first text discussed in *The School Story* that stretches traditional definitions, given that most of the novel is not set in a school, but Aitchison suggests that it is the use of "school spirit" (127) that positions it within the school story genre. Despite transgressing the boundaries of the genre, Aitchison's argument is so well-researched and supported by cultural context that it is difficult to disagree with. This raises a larger question of what the YA school story must contain to remain within the genre. Whilst this debate has long been central to considerations of the children's literature canon, the contemporary YA school story is still yet to be fully defined.

Caren Irr's figure of the "ideal neoliberal child" (qtd. in Aitchison 153) plays an important role in the fifth and final chapter, alongside Caitlyn Howlett's *Neoliberalism, Critical Pedagogy, and the Child*. This chapter focuses on childhood in the age of neoliberalism and both featured texts are authored by teenagers. Again, neither Faiza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* (2004) nor *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up For Education And Changed the World* (2014, young readers edition) would typically be considered part of the school story genre, but Aitchison argues for their inclusion because "they are consistently weighed down if not haunted by the idea of school life" (155). A lot of attention is paid here to authorship over content, particularly in the case of Malala. As a result, of the five chapters, this is the least in keeping with the overall intention of the book, but makes an excellent case for the use of neoliberalism as a framework.

In the afterword, Aitchison claims that the school story "gives powerful expression to a critical nexus of young identity, education, and growth" (183). *The School Story* makes evident the ways in which these texts demonstrate not only young identity, but young agency, and issues varied and detailed insights into the ways in which neoliberalism has influenced how the school story has evolved as a part of YA fiction. Despite an initial in-depth

examination of the form of the school story, Aitchison's choice of primary texts is sometimes questionable, but is ably defended on several occasions as being because "the school story in the age of neoliberalism – that is, in an age of increasing hostility to public education – might have just begun to register the absence as much as the presence of school" (155). Aitchison argues for the uncoupling of the school story from the traditional sense of pride in the institution that it may connote, and for the most part is incredibly effective in doing so. However, to fit into a genre as previously well-defined as this one, some of these texts may be pushing the limits slightly too far to fully land Aitchinson's argument.

Shifting focus from the school story as traditionally defined, *The School Story: Young Adult Narratives in the Age of Neoliberalism* provides a creative and intelligent response to an ever-expanding and evolving genre, and firmly cements the school story as a permanent feature in the YA world. The chapters that move beyond the confines of Anglo-centric YA indicate that there is much room for growth in future academic criticism in this area. Given that the genre is so firmly rooted in British literature, it will also be interesting to see explorations of the contemporary British school story in future. Overall, this is a rich and valuable addition to the wide array of existing literature on the school story. The combination of the neoliberal framework and the focus on YA texts creates a compelling argument for the need for future scholarship to consider the role of the neoliberal school story in YA fiction.