
Capitalism Run Wild: Zizou Corder's *Lion Boy* and Victor Kelleher's *Dog Boy*

Elizabeth Parsons

While capitalism has long made highly efficient ideological use of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' principle to justify ruthless business practices, this appropriation of animal metaphor has taken on new and considerably more problematic resonances in the wake of globalization. At a time when the negative consequences of corporate greed are becoming more apparent, as inequalities widen and power is shifted beyond governments and their borders, there is a spate of children's novels that explicitly challenges this new world order. As cases in point, Zizou Corder's *Lion Boy* series (2003, 2004, and 2005) and Victor Kelleher's *Dog Boy* (2005) demonstrate a concordance of fictional representations between the UK and Australia. Both stories navigate neo-liberalism by trading on the classic schism between nature and culture, using animal tropes and instinctive behaviours in response to the artificiality and unnatural cruelty of business enterprises.

To put them in context, these novels are part of a broader trend in contemporary children's and YA texts that critique corporate practices in varied ways. For example, Irish author Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* (2002) uses fairies as cultural others in order to map the implications of humanity's relentless pursuit of wealth (Parsons, in press). In the US, Janet Tashjian's *The Gospel According to Larry* (2001) employs a realist, present day setting that directly challenges corporate and consumerist culture. Her compatriot, M.T Anderson, maps a futuristic dystopia in *Feed* (2002) to voice the same ideological agenda (Bullen and Parsons, under review). As this diversity of narrative approaches indicates, there is a variety of non-animal ways to metaphorically present the inhumanity of capitalism, but animals significantly situate the messages in opposition to humanity, and, interestingly, align with Christianity in ways that this discussion will track.

In the typical mode of children's texts, both *Dog Boy* and *Lion Boy* set out to promote morally sanctioned messages, in this case about the dangers of pursuing wealth. Instead, they posit a pack mentality in which family relations (both human-biological and blended across adopted species lines) are the key to happiness. But the packs also embody a patriarchal order that the names of the novels and protagonists explicitly highlight. The privileging of the family parallels and reinforces a lack

of confidence in the motivations of corporate enterprises, and demonstrates the ineffectiveness of governments to contain the outcomes of late capitalism. These novels are thus directly responding to the new world conditions Ulrich Beck describes under the rubric Risk Society (1992). Literature typically holds up a culturally inflected mirror to such economic and political changes. Noreena Hertz's *The Silent Takeover: global capitalism and the death of democracy* (2001) catalogues the adult texts that appeared in the wake of Reganomics and Thatcherism including: Tom Woolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Martin Amis's *Money* and Michael Lewis's *Liar Poker* (p.23). Literary responsiveness to cultural (global, economic) conditions makes analysis of the newest books to hit the shelves of profound importance in children's literature scholarship. As an academic discipline, we endeavour to understand not only how representations of current socio-cultural shifts manifest themselves, but perhaps more importantly, the ways in which the issues at stake are being presented and mediated to children. The following analysis is explicitly motivated by this agenda.

Corder and Kelleher's protagonists invite comparison because they share a need to embrace animal instincts in order both to regulate and to participate in a dehumanising economic world. *Lion Boy* takes on corporate malpractice in a not too distant future, while the excluded and embittered dog boy of a tribal past is seduced by the thrills of building his own corporate enterprise. Despite their alternative time-frames, both novels call on an identifiably Christian brand of altruistic morality as a redemptive alternative to the neo-liberal ethos they explicitly critique. *Dog Boy* is a Christ-figure who appears to have been a virgin birth and in the closing chapters is referred to by the people as 'Lord' and 'the giver of water, the bringer of life' (p.175). He abandons his possessions and, as he travels homeward, he bestows forgiveness on all those who reviled him. The woman who turns out to be his mother, Magda, had 'fallen' (in terms of sexual behaviour) like her biblical namesake, Magdalene. The birth of *Dog Boy*'s final dog, significantly called Faith, puts him on the path to a spiritual communion with his god that demonstrates his fallibility, bringing humility. He must submit to an agony in the (wild) garden at the mountain's summit before his



tears at discovering he is mortal bring the rain that is the salvation of his people.

The lions in *Lion Boy* are noble rulers that recall Aslan in C.S. Lewis's famous analogy. More particularly, as parables of faith they are readable in light of the Christian tradition in which St Jerome (and/or Androcles) takes the thorn from the paw of the lion. Essentially, relieving the lion of the thorn is an act of kindness in which the hero puts himself at great risk by demonstrating both compassion and a self-sacrifice based on faith, and is rewarded by loyalty. Charlie Ashanti, the *Lion Boy* of the series title, models this compassion by freeing a troupe of circus lions and going to great lengths to return them to their homeland; for which they are forever in his debt. This is quite a large and complicated thorn, but the moral principle remains consistent. The trilogy, however, continues beyond this event to a closure for which the famous lines from Isaiah are virtually the template: 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them' (Isaiah 11:5-7). *Lion Boy* solves the ills of the world by leading his animal friends in revolution against the evil Corporation. The people and animals then all lie down to sleep together before they gather to decide their futures under Charlie's guidance. There may well be a further intertext involving Daniel, corrupt administrators, and the lion's den, but pursuing it might border on overkill.

In relying on such pervasive Christian imagery and sentiment, these anti-corporate stories seem to uphold the biblical edict that 'You cannot serve both God and Money' (Matthew 6: 24). That said, there is a slippage inherent in this mediation of politics to children whereby Christianity cannot be simply deployed against capitalism in the contemporary political climate given that the new conservative right wing in much of the western world also embed their ideology in Christian beliefs. The most blatant proponent of this approach is George W. Bush, but British Prime Minister, Tony Blair and Australia's John Howard also overtly promote their Christianity as underpinning their politics and economics. The media focus on religion in global politics has also been heightened by the increasing division between Christianity and Islam which is regularly presented as motivating foreign policies and marketed as

impacting the 'ordinary' (read Christian) citizens through petrol prices and airport security.

In this religiously shaped political climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that both of these novels make direct bids to circumnavigate Christianity with surface narrative effects that deflect attention away from doctrine. *Dog Boy* holds spiritual beliefs centred around the mountain, the elements, the power of shamans and talismans, while in *Lion Boy* it is by the grace of science that Charlie has a gift for speaking cat. The process remains ontologically untenable, but Charlie's skill is nonetheless explained by a chance genetic splicing when his blood mingles with the blood of a leopard cub. His parents, as famous scientists, give credence to this story. The entanglement of science and religion is noted in Susan Bratton's assessment of Christianity in *Risk Society*. She makes the adept point that: 'Today's science makes the truth claims and has the freedom, that the church had in the Middle Ages' (online). Her examination of the relationships between democracy, American Protestantism and environmental issues of global consequence proposes that: 'Protestants often associate maintenance of democratic process with protection of their Christian religious heritage. Emphasis on "the free market," however, often neglects the fact that unequally distributed economic interests may outvote individuals, especially when dealing with international issues' (online). In these novels, the international issues include dramatic climate change (*Dog Boy*) and illness produced by genetic engineering (*Lion Boy* series).

Given the uneasy relationship between the neo-liberal agendas of western governments and their Christianity, it is also unsurprising that in both these children's novels, governments are demonstrably powerless in the face of the catastrophes inflicted on the general populace. In *Dog Boy* a debilitating drought has struck and the provision of water has been allowed to fall into the compassionless grip of market forces. *Dog Boy*, raised by dogs, has learned to sniff out clean water but dissatisfied with his 'natural' gift he longs for the spiritual power to summon the rain. To this end, he travels to the home of two famous shamans who live in the big city in order to apprentice himself to them, but these false prophets do not honour their word. Enraged at their rejection he becomes an unfeeling corporate CEO.

While the novel does not name him in these terms, he marshals his staff from the plethora of impoverished street children with the promise of shares in the company profits, and before long he has become the wealthiest man in the city. In these desperate times, when water is an essential commodity, he exploits the needs of others and gathers vast riches in the process. His lavish house, clothes and accessories are all testaments to his newfound addiction to consumerism, but the narrative punishment for this behaviour is that he then loses all contact with humanity and with his dog companion who (and whose line) has been his closest family for the duration of the novel.

Dog Boy's discovery that he is a bastard child is the revelation which provides the cataclysmic ending to his narrative. When the heavens open bringing rain, it appears that the natural order of things has been righted; thwarting the ideological hold of big business over Dog Boy as an individual, and over the community (given that private enterprise sells the essential commodity of water). There is an uncomfortable sense, however, that unless Dog Boy had undertaken his journey, and made a grand financial success of himself, he would have languished forever as an outcast in the village. His corporation effectively empowered him, giving him the ability to find the truth in ways that indicate the importance of these chapters in his *bildungsroman*.

In the final scene, Dog Boy says to the villagers who call him a great shaman, 'I think you mistake me for someone better than I am' (p.213). This profound state of humility is rejected by the village leaders who insist that he is Lord in the last sentence of the novel. As representatives of the government in this small community, these men demonstrate their dependence on the compassionate behaviour of big business. Only when big business voluntarily gives up its position of power and demonstrates humility and kindness, will the people be safe – in this case from drought. In a world in which catastrophic climate changes caused by industrial production threatens us all, the conclusion is as uncomfortably realistic as it is wildly optimistic about the inherent goodness in people. Further, it could be argued that this ending nullifies the text's criticism of big business by intimating an imminent change in corporate morals, not to mention naturalising the processes of corporate violence

by modelling the need to exploit an impoverished world in order to learn a valuable lesson.

In the Lion Boy series, the government is also deemed powerless in the face of the evil 'Corporacy'. The neologism smacks of a conflation between 'corporate' and 'democracy' in ways that point to the failure of democracy in a world constructed and regulated through advertising, where corporations pay vast sums into the coffers of political parties to fund the hugely expensive campaigns required to gain office. Of course, the suffix 'cracy' refers to governance, so the word speaks directly to the ways in which corporations rule the dystopic future world of the narrative. The future for neo-liberalism as Zizou Corder (a mother and daughter writing team) imagines it, is grim. Since the depletion of petrol resources the air content has improved such that asthma rates have dropped considerably, resulting in the pharmaceutical companies needing to increase their revenue. Their response is a (covertly) genetically engineered line of cats that produce severe allergenic responses in children, powerful enough to kill them. The need for asthma medicine is consequently vastly increased and profits soar – with no consideration for the people who cannot afford the medication. As part of the series' deployment of this issue in the service of Christian values, when Charlie saves a child by giving her his spare asthma pump, the Venetian women set up a shrine of worship to him, claiming he is a saint.

The narrative continues its promotion of Christian values as tempering the excesses of capitalism when it becomes clear that the government is either unwilling or unable to intervene when Charlie's parents, who are close to finding a cure for asthma, are kidnapped by the Corporacy. They are kept in a drugged torpor being 're-educated' in one of the club-med style gated communities where the Corporacy house their workforce. Here people are locked into cycles of earning and spending, drinking, smoking, eating junk-food and joining fitness and wellness programs in a society that mocks the contemporary western world of capitalist excess and the meaninglessness of this existence. When Charlie asks his powerful new friend, Boris, King of Bulgaria, why nothing has been done to recover his parents, the king's aide answers evasively and the following exchange ensues:

“Edward seems to be saying that the government of Britain thinks that it cannot afford a search,” he said. “And it doesn’t want to offend the medicine companies.”

Charlie was silent. He knew that the big companies were bigger than some governments: bigger, richer, stronger, more powerful. Some big companies had even bought small countries, so they could make up their own laws and do what they wanted (pp.327-328).

As Charlie goes on to say, this kind of new world order, ‘doesn’t fill me with confidence!’ (p.328). The description of the world and his response to it speaks to precisely the anxieties Beck describes as symptomatic of risk society whereby traditional institutions no longer encapsulate a life purpose. What Beck claims has been lost; the church, the extended family in which the concept of self is both formed and embedded, and the community, are all absent in the experiences of Dog Boy and Lion Boy who must forge on without family or faith in governmental leadership, and significantly for this discussion, without a stable religious doctrine.

In response this loss of religious direction, these boys are shown to be determining their own paths through a risk-filled life with an individualistic, self-directed, moral altruism that Bratton interprets in this way:

According to Donald Worster, environmentalism in the United States was encouraged by the “formative Protestant qualities” in John Muir and its other early leaders. These qualities include: moral activism, ascetic discipline, egalitarian individualism, and aesthetic spirituality (online).

For these male protagonists who are struggling to navigate risk society, their shared use of a ‘caring about justice for animals’ trope is the first step in the process of learning altruism in dealing with humans. The animal metaphors are perhaps unsurprising in children’s literature because of the essentially disempowered nature of children as subjects of political and economic protocols. Children are seldom encouraged to engage with politics in deference to the culturally sanctioned (or invented) need to enjoy a childhood innocent of politics. Examples of this attitude include comments in the Australian media by the

Immigration Minister, Amanda Vanstone, who criticised Morris Gleitzman’s refugee novels for children (*Girl Overboard* and *Boy Underground*) as a vehicle for political propaganda (*The Australian*, 2004), and Prime Minister John Howard condemnation of postmodern teaching of literature in schools as ‘rubbish’ and ‘gobbledegook’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2006).

The relationship between children and politics is nonetheless firmly embedded in the legislative reality that children are unable to vote and are therefore typically powerless in relation to political questions and governmental dictates. Yet children are situated in alternative positions of power; specifically, over animals. They are often given (or play with other’s) pets, and they have contact with the numerous living creatures who share their environments so that their relationships with animals can act as a pro-forma for their future adult position, especially if they are boys.

Shakespeare understood the interplay between boys and animals, gods and humanity that this paper has attempted to map: ‘As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport (King Lear 4.1)’. While Dog Boy and Lion Boy do not exhibit wanton behaviour, they indicate the power dynamic Shakespeare asserts. Boys, these books say, can rehearse power and (potentially) learn altruism by being in the position of gods to humans: namely as boys to flies or other weaker creatures. To claim that lions, and even dogs, are weaker than children is clearly dubious at best, yet both these narratives demonstrate these imbalances.

The dogs in *Dog Boy* are all devoted to the protagonist and they are all girl dogs: mother, sister, Girl and Faith. Perhaps because of their gender as well as their species, Dog Boy becomes less committed to them as he grows older. The narrative explains that ‘Sometimes he took Girl along, but mostly he ignored her whining pleas and left her behind. For, unlike Girl, he rarely made mistakes’ (p.157). When he makes his spiritual pilgrimage up the mountain he says to Faith, ‘This is man’s work, not a dog’s’ (p.195). In the Lion Boy series, Charlie imposes his moral code onto the Lions who wish to kill their former captor and tormentor. Charlie makes them keep him captive instead. These Lions are also subject to Charlie’s plans for the majority

of their journey. While both books make bids for equality between the children and animals, species difference typically absolves the narratives from presenting equality. The stories draw on real world logics whereby animals are not capable of participating in human culture without a speaking advocate – even if that advocate is only a child. Further, it is because of their powerful relationships with animals that these boy protagonists have an agency that would be beyond their years under normal circumstances. Charlie has physically powerful animals to back him up, Dog Boy has his gift for water-divining, learned from Dogs, to give him economic power. The boys both make direct (potentially exploitative) use of their relationships with animals. And it is a human pack mentality that prevails, so that both boys end up reunited with their human families (or the truth about their families) in happy endings.

Such endings are unashamedly patriarchal in their focus on a male hero who triumphs single-handedly over the adversity presented by the adult world of big business. Rosemary Hennessey examines the contradictions for women in capitalism, claiming that “the traditional mandate that women serve others is contradicted by capitalism’s prescription that we serve ourselves, be in control, and compete with others as fully autonomous individuals”(5). Her reading of the cultural climate of capitalism offers a pertinent explanation for the pervasive existence of boy protagonists in novels critiquing capitalism – all those I mentioned in the literary context at the beginning of this paper shared this gender focus. The preponderance of male protagonists suggests that bids to challenge corporate power in children’s texts are simultaneously post-feminist bids to reinstate patriarchal dominance. Dog Boy and Lion Boy also both employ the logic of the child who, prophet-like, has the profound insight and personal dedication to put themselves at the front-line, the individualism that drives capitalism is thereby far from critiqued. To assert the morality of Christianity as a means to overcome corporate greed, likewise entails a male individualist and a patriarchy in ways that indicate the web of cultural interchanges between religion, politics and economics under globalisation. Perhaps it is too hard a task for novels born of a particular cultural time and place to challenge the moment of their own inception. As George Orwell’s

1984, co-opted into the Big Brother television programs, indicates, the role of the novel may well be restricted to recording but not to overturning the ethos of its day.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Elizabeth Parsons lectures in literary studies at Deakin University, Melbourne. Her current research addresses class politics and texts for children and is part of a collaborative project with Elizabeth Bullen and Clare Bradford.

