

THE SEARCH FOR UTOPIA: A CRITICAL  
ANALYSIS OF ROBERT C.  
O'BRIEN'S NOVELS

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by

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by

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Since Robert C. O'Brien's emergence from newspaper journalism into the field of young adult fiction in the late 1960s, his work has received not only praise and several awards, but also a consistent place on children's reading lists. Specifically, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971), O'Brien's second novel, and *Z for Zachariah* (1974), his fourth and final novel, have often been referred to as "classics" in young adult science fiction.

Despite this consistent praise, little substantial critical analysis of O'Brien's novels has been published. Anthologies of science fiction and children's fiction give his works credit as valuable literature, especially in the realm of children's science fiction, but there are few critical evaluations of any of O'Brien's novels. Particularly *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*, but also *A Report from Group 17* (1972) and *The Silver Crown* (1968), are worthy of critical analysis because of their progressive commentary on technology and the environment, and their demonstration of the continual search for utopian societies.

In the tradition of other classic children's novels such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and even Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, all of O'Brien's novels uniquely blend a kindness and respect for nature and animals, but they do so in the modern genre of science fiction. *A Report from Group*

*17* and *The Silver Crown* demonstrate O'Brien's early interest in the natural world and the threat of dystopia, and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* more thoroughly develop the brutality of technology against nature and the benefits of a life away from the city, which emphasizes the search for utopia. All of O'Brien's works are significant because they brim with valuable social commentary about preserving the environment.

O'Brien develops narratives that express a dichotomy between technology and the rural world, and this dichotomy reveals itself in language, setting, character, and plot. O'Brien implies the brutality of technology against nature, presenting it in a mode that is accessible to children and young adults. To understand these themes, we must further explore the socio-political movements occurring when these novels were written. The dichotomy of technology versus nature, the emphasis placed on respect for the natural world, combined with the fact that all of O'Brien's protagonists experience a separation from community, suggest an attraction to the idea of building a utopian society by making a move to a rural lifestyle.

*The Silver Crown* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, O'Brien's first two novels, blend the genres of fantasy and science fiction to create literature that is appealing as well as appropriate for young children. O'Brien's last two novels, *Z for Zachariah* and *A Report from Group 17*, which are directed toward an older audience of adolescents, address the fear of nuclear warfare, a common theme in science fiction. In further development of O'Brien's themes of technology versus nature, these last two novels explore the idea of nuclear and biological warfare that is brought on by technology's

invasion of the natural world. All of the novels, however, demonstrate the dichotomy between nature and technology.

With further analysis, O'Brien's work demonstrates a connection specifically to communitarianism, which is a political and social theory that advocated migration into commune societies. These societies looked to foster a pattern of ideals and social arrangements, and ultimately involved the desire to create a utopian society separate from the civilized world (Bennett 64). Though communitarianism cannot be directly linked to O'Brien, the movement revived in the 1960s, just before O'Brien published his first children's book. Themes of isolation from the city, respect for the natural world, and the interest in utopia are all ideals of the communitarian society, and are all evident in O'Brien's lifestyle and writing. Once O'Brien makes evident the brutality of technology against the natural world, he may be suggesting that communitarianist societies could serve as an alternative to the destruction of the natural world.

In examining O'Brien's contribution to children's and young adult science fiction literature, a look at his biography is helpful for analyzing the themes of utopia and technology's devastation of the natural world. O'Brien was born Robert Leslie Conley in Brooklyn, New York, on January 11, 1918, the third of five children. He took on the surname of Robert C. O'Brien, from his mother's maiden name, to separate himself from his professional name as journalist and editor. Robert took the name because he most identified with the O'Brien side of the family in "his Irishness, Catholicism, and in his complex, creative temperament" (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 277).

Perhaps directly responsible for leading O'Brien to a career in writing was his well-educated family who emphasized a literate atmosphere at home. Both of O'Brien's

parents graduated from college; his father attended the University of Rochester, and his mother attended Smith College. The emphasis on reading and writing that O'Brien received in his youth is reflected in his novels, as all of his works place an emphasis on a good education. O'Brien himself graduated from the University of Rochester in 1940 with a Bachelor's degree in English, and his novels also reflect an interest in literature and the importance of reading.

O'Brien's parents were activists in the New York Fresh Air Fund, an organization created by the New York *Times-Herald* that operated summer camps for poor city children. Robert and his four siblings were involved as well when they were old enough to be camp counselors (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 275), which reveals that O'Brien had early experiences with the benefits and beauties of nature. The offspring of environmentalist activists and educated parents, O'Brien's affection for nature was fostered in his childhood and is expressed in his works.

Fictional writing, however, was not originally O'Brien's career; he actually began in the journalism field. In 1943, O'Brien married Sally McCaslin, who was O'Brien's co-worker at *Newsweek*, and moved to Washington, D.C., where he covered Capital Hill for the Washington *Times-Herald*. O'Brien covered national and city news for the *Times-Herald* and later for *Pathfinder News* magazine (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 276). These positions gave O'Brien nearly thirty years of experience in writing before he began writing for children. He joined *National Geographic* magazine in 1951, revealing his interest in the natural world by writing articles concerning Northern Ireland, where, he says, "you cannot buy a toothpick without an exchange of meteorological data with the shopkeeper" ("Northern Ireland: From Derry to Down"

235). He also, during his time with *National Geographic*, reveals a respect for animals as he explores the intelligence and friendliness of the porpoise, which he studied “on and off” for a year (“Porpoises: Our Friends in the Sea” 397). But perhaps most revealing of O’Brien’s interest in the danger of technology appears in his 1954 *National Geographic* article about technological advances in the telephone, television, radio, and rockets made possible because of the transistor, “the ‘electronic midget’ that makes cautious physicists and sober businessmen talk like science fiction writers” (“New Miracles of the Telephone Age . . .” 87). In addition to exploring the improved communications as a result of the new technology, O’Brien also notices that this technology is expanded to include warfare (110), especially the Nike, an anti-aircraft weapon in the 1950s that contributed to the “hard clenched fist to defend the country if it becomes necessary” (120). This position at *National Geographic* also gave O’Brien access to information about current affairs that he uses in his novels, especially *A Report from Group 17* and *Z for Zachariah*. Eventually O’Brien became a senior assistant editor with the publication, and his experiences with *National Geographic* magazine undoubtedly contributed to O’Brien’s awareness of the natural world and the threat of enemy attack on American cities.

During this time, Robert O’Brien and his wife had a growing family, which may explain why he was interested in literature for children. His first child, Christopher, was born in 1944, and three daughters, Jane (1948), Sarah (1952), and Catherine (1958), followed. He took up hobbies in music, reading, furniture making, and a “growing interest in the world of nature” (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 277). As his novels clearly show, O’Brien felt drawn to the quiet nature of country life and driven to escape the high pressures of the city and his job. As described by his wife and obvious

in his novels, O'Brien had a fascination with caves, valleys, hidden worlds, and new societies (O'Brien, Sally 351). In 1950, O'Brien bought a small weekend house on seventeen acres near North Anna River in isolated Spotsylvania County, Virginia. Here he began to connect with the wild nature of the river, woods, and animals around him (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 277). Of course, O'Brien's attraction to the rural, isolated lifestyle is mirrored in each of his novels, and perhaps this movement from the city, which he considered very positive, is responsible for his attraction to communitarianist ideals and utopian societies.

O'Brien's portrayal of farm life in especially *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* may be because O'Brien and his family soon chose to move to the countryside full-time, buying a small farm near the Potomac River where they raised chickens and ducks, kept a horse and cow, grew flowers and vegetables, built fences, and chopped wood. He became a friend to small animals and birds, and even kept, in a cage in their dining room, a small sparrow named Jenny. Jenny was raised from a fledgling and may have been the inspiration for the constant presence of helpful birds in all of O'Brien's novels. O'Brien drew on these experiences to create his four novels, and in fact, used the farm setting as the locale in *A Report from Group 17* (*Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* 277).

Due to his position as editor at *National Geographic*, the daily commute to Washington, and the chores constantly required of a farmhouse, O'Brien had little time to write novels. In fact, O'Brien only began writing fiction in the last ten years of his life. In the early 1960s he developed glaucoma to the extent that he could no longer drive at night, and was forced to return to the city in 1963. Suddenly blessed with the time to

write fiction, but also dislocated from the rural setting he loved, O'Brien wrote four novels that revisit the rural setting.

These experiences with the city and the country, from the time O'Brien was a camp counselor with the New York Fresh Air Fund to the heart-breaking move back to the city, all affected the way O'Brien viewed his surroundings. Sally M. O'Brien, who wrote the biographical sketch of Robert C. O'Brien for the *Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*, even admits that

Two aspects of Robert C. O'Brien's writing seem closely related to his actual life – one his fascination with the lore of nature, which he so lovingly details, and two, his sympathy and understanding of children. . . . He never forgot what it was like to be young and vulnerable; and he is able to make the reader share his concern for the weak and defenseless whether his characters are animal or human. (278)

O'Brien's focus on the environment and his choice of genres in his writing connect with the larger genres of ecocriticism, science fiction, and fairy tales, which promote social and political change. Over the past thirty years, "ecocriticism," which is, according to Carolyn Sigler, "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry," has developed "in response to growing academic concern about the responses of literature and literary theory to the global crisis of environmental degradation" (148). The tradition of writing about the natural world for children, or "green worlds" according to Suzanne Rahn, "still seems natural to us" (148), and Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd declare that writers often connect children and nature together because children are "innocent and/or virtuous," and are still presumed to have a "privileged relationship" to nature (5-6).

*St. Nicholas* magazine published Charles Fredrick Holder's "How Some Animals Become Extinct" in 1887, a milestone in providing a solution for the exploitation the natural world (Rahn 155). This article is an early example of a work directed towards children that focuses on "unnatural rather than natural causes of extinction" (Rahn 155), in the growing effort to use children's novels to ignite "profound cultural change" (165). Young people should be educated at an early age about nature appreciation and analysis (Dobrin and Kidd 6) because the assumption is that a child who is not exposed to the concerns of the natural world at an early age will "never acquire the respect and value of nature that society deems appropriate" (Dobrin and Kidd 7). Furthermore, teaching children kindness to animals is expected to lead to "a larger ability to feel compassion and respect for the weak and powerless," which may lead the child to a closer understanding of the "unifying ideal of God" (Sigler 149). Recently a large variety and number of ecologically conscious books for children have revealed a "complexity and range of environmental children's literature" (Sigler 151), and O'Brien, perhaps one of the earliest contributors in this ecocritical study literature for children, joins other authors who raise important questions about the treatment of nature and animals.

In addition to this focus on the treatment of nature, O'Brien chose the perfect genre, science fiction, to present environmental, apocalyptic, and utopian themes. According to Kay E. Vandergrift, science fiction in particular is a form of literature that allows "readers opportunities to explore the consequences of various ethical decisions" (419) through the imagination. The technological images that O'Brien uses in his novels are not uncommon, for they often "abound in science fiction and other contemporary literature for young people" because they "offer rich possibilities for the exploration of

personal and social values necessary for the very survival of our society” (Vandergrift 419). Also, speculative fiction is a great way for literature to contribute to the process of re-shaping the world and to envision a more humane environment in the ever-increasingly technological world (Vandergrift 420). Furthermore, science fiction is often the perfect genre to present utopian ideals, and O’Brien presents these ideals not by creating a pure utopia or dystopia, but instead by developing plots in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* that represent the continuous need to *search* for the ideal community.

Science fiction in general is a genre that, in its early years, was known for producing novels of very little literary value. More than this, according to Francis J. Molson, children’s literature historically has been “burdened with hackwork, and juvenile science fiction is no exception” (Molson 397). There was little “good” science fiction available to the child reader until about the 1950s. The first American juvenile science fiction novel to merit serious critical attention was *Rocket Ship Galileo*, by Robert Heinlein, in 1947. This novel was praised for the use of conceivable extrapolation in the subject of a trip to the Moon in a rocket, and also for meeting the didactic criteria demanded of literature for young readers (Molson 393).

Prior to Heinlein’s publication, children (boys in particular) had access to science fiction in the form of series, comics, and pulp adult science fiction. Girls at this time were considered “uninterested and unsuited” for science and adventure stories (Molson 395). Characters were often highly stereotypical, and stories were directed toward the action-adventure genre. However, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the use of stock characters became unpopular as people’s social consciousness grew, and feminists, among other

social groups, noticed that the women and girls in young adult novels “always took a back seat to men and boys” (Donelson and Nilsen 34). O’Brien joined the revolution of young adult literature not only in that his novels address serious subjects, but also in that all of his protagonists are female.

Heinlein’s milestone revolutionized the genre because science fiction demonstrated that it could be written “competently and contain didactic elements,” and thus was allowed to enter the mainstream of young adult literature (Molson 394). By 1958, science fiction was on its way to becoming an important subgenre of both American and British children’s and young adult literature. This genre’s popularity may be because of several inherent attributes: it is exciting, does not patronize its audience, is imaginative but not childish, portrays heroes at a time when the world is devoid of admirable characters, and encourages intellectual curiosity (Molson 400).

In the 1970s, science fiction and fantasy became more popular for teenage readers, and O’Brien’s four novels joined the ranks of young adult science fiction novels of the time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, according to Linda Bachelder, the young adult novel in general began to treat subjects of “real depth” (Bachelder et al. 86). According to “Young Adult Literature: Looking Backward: Trying to Find the Classic Young Adult Novel,” if any young adult classics “have been produced, they are likely to have been published during the seventies” (86). In fact, O’Brien’s *Z for Zachariah* is suggested as one such classic for young adults.

It is difficult, however, to clearly define O’Brien’s novels as purely science fiction or purely fantasy; *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *The Silver Crown* contain recognizable elements of fantasy works. Vandergrift points out, though, that it

is often difficult to distinguish between science fiction and fantasy because both use created creatures, transformations, and a mix of the ordinary and extraordinary to reflect upon the nature of the world. (Vandergrift 418).

Brian Attebery agrees, noting that in truth there are no clear boundaries between genres because “fantasy edges into science fiction; science fiction impinges on mainstream fiction” (*Strategies of Fantasy* 13). Attebery briefly defines science fiction as “predominantly speculative, looking forward and outward,” while fantasy is “more introspective and traditional” (*The Fantasy Tradition . . .* 27). It is appropriate to define O’Brien’s works as primarily science fiction because he addresses mind control, extrapolation, animal testing, biological and germ warfare, and technological advances, in the effort to critique society and look forward.

O’Brien also uses fantasy in addition to science fiction and ecologically conscious novels to make political and social commentary. Often children’s fantasies or fairy tales are overlooked as vehicles of debates on political or social topics, but, as Jack Zipes points out in “Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale,” the fairy tale’s main impulse was “at first revolutionary and progressive, not escapist, as has too often been suggested” (131). Like other forms of literature, the fairy tale can be used and explored as a way for artists to discuss important societal issues. Zipes applies this “main impulse” to general fairy tale, specifically from the early sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, noting that the fairy tale was an appropriate metaphorical mode to express unfulfilled desires for social and cultural liberation. He declares that it was “through the fairy tale as narrative and drama that bourgeois artists presented the need for social

change by purposely reutilizing folk motifs, elements, and plots” (“Breaking the Magic Spell” 131). Zipes’ theories about fairy tales can apply to O’Brien’s science fiction/fantasy texts, which are also geared for the child audience. As with the fairy tale, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* present the need for social change.

By utilizing characters and themes of folktales in animal figures, and through plot structure, setting, language, character, and an abundance of philosophical and political ideas, O’Brien inspires a debate about socio-political issues, primarily involving human’s brutal use of technology against nature. *The Silver Crown* and *A Report from Group 17* play with the importance of the natural world and the threat of technology upon it, but they do not develop the utopian themes as deeply as his more notable works; however, all of his novels share the same dilemma in that the protagonists’ worlds teeter dangerously between utopian and dystopian societies.

Because *The Silver Crown* and *A Report from Group 17* do not fully develop the complexity of a utopian society, I will only examine the development of these ideas in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*. All of the commentary on environmentalism and nature, in all four of these works, is vital to understanding the importance of O’Brien’s literature and its message encouraging the search for the perfect society. For this reason, the remainder of this thesis will describe how all of O’Brien’s novels suggest a respect for the natural world and the dangers of technology, or, more accurately, the danger of man’s use of technology to destroy nature. O’Brien’s themes, I argue, lead to a solution to the dangers of technology through the communitarian

tradition, and I will finish by examining the many ways *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* endeavor to discover the ideal community.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE NATURAL WORLD IN *THE SILVER CROWN*: O'BRIEN'S FIRST ATTEMPT

O'Brien's first novel, *The Silver Crown*, is half fantasy, half science fiction. Critics have called this novel a "slighter achievement" compared to his more well-known *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, but is "nonetheless a stylish, humane exciting book" (*Children's Literature Review* 128). The beginning of the novel relies on magic, crowns, kings and queens, and a young girl whose "unusual mind" gives her the ability to complete the "hero's journey" as described by Joseph Campbell, which is typical of fantasy works. Ellen awakes on her tenth birthday to discover she has been presented with a silver crown that seems to have magical powers in that she is "more" herself when she wears it. Soon after she assumes her role as queen in the garden, Ellen's house burns down. Her parents and siblings presumed dead, Ellen begins her long trek to her Aunt Sarah's house in Kentucky. Ellen hitchhikes with Mr. Gates, finds herself running from the "green hoods" who wish to kidnap her, and meets helpers like Otto, Mrs. Fitzpatrick, and Mr. Carver, ultimately making her way unknowingly to the very place she should have avoided, the castle. Up until this point, *The Silver Crown* is much more a fantasy work than a science fiction novel because it closely follows the typical hero's journey of mythology and high fantasy.

The novel makes a sharp turn towards science fiction, however, when Ellen arrives at the castle in the heart of the forest. Here readers discover that Ellen's silver crown is rivaled by its polar opposite, the black crown. Both of these crowns are a part of what O'Brien describes as the "Hieronymus machine," an ancient technology from St. Jerome that uses mind control. Whoever wears the silver crown rules the machine while, by contrast, whoever wears the black crown is ruled *by* the machine, which apparently is on an urgent mission to cause chaos and control the entire world for its own purposes. Though the two crowns represent the dichotomy of "good" and "evil," once the origin of the crown and the purpose of the Hieronymus machine are revealed, all elements of magic and fantasy drop away from the novel, and they are replaced with questions of mind control, machinery, and calculated world domination common to the science fiction genre. Though *The Silver Crown* received no awards after publication and has rarely received critical attention, O'Brien's first novel demonstrates an early interest in the positive portrayal of the natural world, whether it be through fantasy or science fiction. In this case, he uses both to reveal a fascination with dystopia through technology and utopia through nature, a fascination that continues in all of O'Brien's novels.

*The Silver Crown* demonstrates O'Brien's early, though not entirely successful, attempt to express a respect for the natural world and the potential dangers of technology. This novel, a *bildungsroman* of a ten-year-old girl in search of family, is for the most part a fantasy work. The writing style in *The Silver Crown* is similar to *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, but it does not offer all of the same themes as successfully as his later novels. *The Silver Crown* is O'Brien's first published novel, and though it presents obvious themes of respect for nature and the benefits of the natural world in plot,

character, and setting, the theme of the brutality of technology is not developed as thoroughly as in his later novels.

Like many of O'Brien's novels, the book is a product of its time. Published in the late sixties, *The Silver Crown* mentions current issues of "race riots," "juvenile gang fights," and mass chaos in the major cities, specifically Chicago (227). These themes may have been influenced by the civil liberties movement occurring at the time. Rioting, gang fights, looting, and arson were often in newspaper headlines during the sixties, with hundreds of people killed, thousands arrested, and hundreds of millions of dollars in damage in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Washington. These sorts of protests and movements were also occurring in Northern Ireland at the same time between the Protestant and Catholic communities (Abshire 149). The Catholics began demonstrating for improved civil rights, and though the "movement initially modeled itself on the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the United States and practiced non-violence," the protests, like in America, became increasingly more "provocative" (150). This is significant, because O'Brien, in 1964, published an article in *National Geographic* titled "Northern Ireland, From Derry to Down," in which O'Brien recognizes the friction occurring there (267). After visiting and studying Northern Ireland, O'Brien would have been familiar with the similar chaos in both America and Ireland, and might have been troubled by the seeming spread of rioting and violent protests across the world. Obviously, O'Brien intends, even in his first novel, to make some political commentary on the events of his time, and he continues to do this throughout each of his novels.

The beginning of *The Silver Crown* relies on magic to explain mysterious events. Ellen awakes on her tenth birthday to discover a small silver crown on her pillow. The

reader is forced to believe it is a magical event because the questions of the crown's origin, how it arrived in Ellen's hands, and whether or not Ellen is truly a queen are not addressed until the end of the novel. The reader is also asked to accept that the crown is mysterious and contains powers unknown. The magical quality of the crown never truly disappears, but its purpose is better explained at the close of the novel. The introduction of the crown and its magical qualities indicate that this novel is probably a fantasy work; however, *The Silver Crown* is both fantasy and science fiction.

The plot involves a heroine's journey to another place; the journey moves from city to country, though this can be said to occur in many fairy tales, as often the magical and unknown occurs in the "wilderness." In some ways *The Silver Crown* belongs more in the fantasy genre in that Ellen's journey follows the typical "hero's journey" described by Joseph Campbell and addresses issues of the battle between good and evil. The hero's journey is common in mythology, but is also characteristic of fantasy novels like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Ellen's adventure follows a distinct pattern of the typical hero's journey. When Ellen's family is supposedly killed in the sudden fire, Ellen receives the "call to adventure," in that she must find a way to her Aunt Sarah's house in Kentucky. She is able to do this because she has "supernatural aid," in the crown, and her "unusual mind" is her inherent gift that lets her use the crown to her advantage. Ellen then must "cross the first threshold," which she does when she accepts the ride from Mr. Gates, representative of the mythological "gateway" to her heroic adventure. Ellen meets some "helpers:" Mrs. Fitzpatrick, Otto, and Mr. Carver, and then begins the "road of trials," when she travels with Otto on the desperate journey to her Aunt Sarah's house (Campbell 36-37). However, Ellen does not complete the hero's journey in its entirety, because

once she reaches the castle in the middle of the wilderness and finds her way inside, the fantasy elements of *The Silver Crown* drop away.

In addition to *The Silver Crown*'s use of mythological patterns, this novel also addresses issues of good versus evil that are common in fantasy works. The Hieronymus machine, probably named after Hieronymus Bosch, a fifteenth-century artist of religious and apocalyptic subjects, is a mind control device built by "sorcerers" (261) at the time of St. Jerome, "more than a thousand years ago" (261). Again, the machine rules whoever wears the black crown, and whoever wears the silver crown rules the machine. The Hieronymus machine is in the process of brainwashing every person who becomes "in tune" with its orders when they come in contact with black "malignite." The King, who wears the black crown, is under the machine's control. Only the silver crown can stop the machine from continuing with the large-scale mind-control, and since Ellen's silver crown and "unusual mind" (258) prevents her from being hypnotized by the machine, she is the one who must stop it.

The Hieronymus machine is not evil in itself, but the two crowns connected with it maintain the opposition between good and evil. Ellen's silver crown works to stop the brainwashing while the black crown enables the evil to continue. O'Brien uses other imagery to portray the battle between good and evil. A natural cave that provides Ellen and Otto with shelter has walls lined with sandstone and light colored quartzite and is a direct opposite to the castle where the King lives, which is floored and walled with menacing, mind controlling malignite. This chiaroscuro imagery created in the setting further reinforces the battle of good versus evil.

*The Silver Crown* alternates between fantastical and folklore-ish elements; however, it flirts with science fiction when Ellen reaches the castle and learns of St. Jerome and the Hieronymus machine. O'Brien avoids providing rational, scientific explanations of how the machine works, and the creators of this technology are "sorcerers" (291), not scientists. To change the magical element of the crown to make its purpose more logical and rational, O'Brien eventually explains that the crown is famous, but

magical is not exactly the right word for it, unless by magic you mean simply something you do not understand. And if that's what you mean, why then almost everything is magical. (*The Silver Crown* 71)

O'Brien creates an uneasy mix of magic and science, for the machine is often referred to as an "ancient science" (252), or a technology, and the brainwashing scheme is frequently referred to as an "experiment." In addition, when the focus of the novel turns to issues of race rioting, mind control, and a looming dystopian society, the novel becomes much more science fiction than fantasy. This science fiction turn occurs in Chapter 21, titled "Elementary Destruction," and continues in this style for the next eleven chapters, until the end of the novel.

*The Silver Crown* separates itself from O'Brien's other novels because his other books do not focus on journeys, and this journey in itself is useful to demonstrate a movement from "civilization." Plot progression and changing setting reinforces a movement from the city to the rural world. The majority of the novel takes place in the wild mountains of Kentucky, in the rural and isolated countryside. With each scene, Ellen moves further from civilized society into a more rural setting. She begins at her

family's house in the city when she awakes early to hold her court in a garden in a nearby park, which is a "civilized" and cultivated imitation of nature. Ellen experiences the traumatic events of losing her entire family and her house to the sudden fire, and then tries to hitchhike to her Aunt Sarah's house with Mr. Gates, a man who turns out not to be as trustworthy as she originally thought. As Ellen escapes from Mr. Gates and makes her way to her aunt's house, she finds herself lost in a wooded area not far off the highway. She successfully evades her pursuer, sleeps in the forest just off the highway, and the next morning is "awakened by a flock of crows" who were "talking" (43). In contrast to events from the night before, Ellen awakes "in a gentle way" this "quiet morning," to the shining sun and a squirrel scurrying around her (44). She then makes her way even further from society, to Mrs. Fitzpatrick's and Otto's home, a small cottage near the highway in a very rural part of the state.

Ellen and Otto then begin their long journey, setting out from civilization on an old logging road that is "partly overgrown but still passable" (79), implying that it is a trail that is rarely used but could still serve as a link to civilized society. This road, the first on their journey, leads straight back over the mountains and deep into the wilderness. They follow the path into a shadowy forest (110) and then to Mr. Carver's isolated log cabins, which are nearly "invisible" because they are made of "rough pine logs" and blend in with the natural surroundings (112).

The two children continue to move away from their society, as Ellen and Otto's trek continues on an old mountain road until they come to a stretch of the path that is completely impassible and steep, presumably from a landslide. The two children decide to move off the road, even further away from the last element representing civilization,

and continue deeper into the woods. Each step takes them further from the road that was guiding them and deeper into the natural world. When Ellen and Otto find that they cannot rejoin the road, they are forced to continue through the valley until they reach a very deep, wide crevasse. Here they are in the pit of the valley, with no highway, road, house, or any sign of civilization in sight, and their isolation is highlighted with descriptions that magnify its natural occurrence by pointing out that “centuries ago, the earth had split” (153). This also implies the phenomenon that the children regard with wonder has existed long before humans even walked the earth. Because of the danger of attempting to scale the cliff to cross the crevasse, Otto and Ellen decide to travel north until they can find a place to easily cross it. Unfortunately, the place they choose is not as safe as they had perceived, and Ellen falls and sprains her ankle.

Just when readers think that these two protagonists could not get farther away from civilization, Otto and Ellen find themselves in a cave at the bottom of the crevasse where they remain for a couple days to allow Ellen’s ankle to heal. Each movement away from society reinforces O’Brien’s emphasis on the natural world as opposed to the city, and the cave, made of quartzite so that it shimmers with natural light, not electricity, is what Ellen refers to as a “magic room” (166). Though the cave is a purely natural occurrence, the children associate it as a “modern house,” with a “front door,” and “back door,” and three “rooms,” because of the three levels of the cave floor (167). Outside the cave runs a clear stream, and though it is a place the children find very comfortable, they soon discover that they are running out of food, and must go on “starvation rations” (170). Otto attempts to hunt and gather to keep them fed, but soon even this fails. Because the cave cannot sustain their basic needs, Otto sets out by himself to find more

food for them, and stumbles upon the malignite trail that leads to the castle. When Otto disappears, Ellen sets out from the cave to find him. Moving to an even more rustic setting, to get out of the rain, she finds refuge in a hollow tree, the ultimate form of natural shelter.

Here, when Ellen's surroundings are most closely connected to the natural world, she comes across the King's dark castle. The story turns here to the plot of suspenseful science fiction, and the castle is in fact the opposite of the natural world, for in the middle of the forest, the black paths leading to it are strikingly industrial, described as "shiny as wet asphalt, but curiously metallic in appearance" (196). Lined with malignite instead of quartzite, the castle, instead of being naturally lit like the cave, is dark, with narrow stairways, smaller corridors, heavy iron doors, and a dark maze of dungeons.

Though the chapters in the castle do not embrace the natural world, *The Silver Crown* concludes at Aunt Sarah's beautiful thirty-room farmhouse outside of Lexington where they can ride horses and sit outside in the fresh air (305). O'Brien wrote two different endings to *The Silver Crown*, one for American audiences and one for British audiences, but both endings take place in this country setting. The plot demonstrates a positive movement from the city, and while the beginning of the novel takes place at Ellen's home in the city, with fire engines and gunshots, the happy ending takes place in the calm fresh air of the beautiful countryside.

In addition to the plot and setting progression, O'Brien expresses a respect for the natural world through a regard for the wildlife and animals in it. All of the animals in *The Silver Crown* are represented positively. Richard, Otto's crow, and King, Mr. Carver's large mastiff, both act as "watchdogs" that protect the humans. While Richard

is always flying with the children, King guards Mr. Carver's house, and more than once both of these pets warn of approaching strangers. Even the chipmunk that visits Ellen in the shelter of her hollow tree is a positive presence because he is described as a "gay little animal" (193) who shows nearly starving Ellen where to find mushrooms to eat. He helps to guide her, and Ellen takes the mushrooms with appreciation, specifically leaving a few for the chipmunk before she continues her search for Otto (195).

O'Brien also makes a determined effort to point out the special qualities of the birds in this novel, which continues in his next three publications as well. Otto says: "birds feel things we don't" (157). This proves to be true, because as the children get closer to the evil castle, Richard suddenly abandons them, and Otto attributes it to his either being sick, or that there is "something here he doesn't like" (157). Once in the cave, the children realize that there were not "any birds [there] at all. No birds, no nests, no eggs" (174). However, when the black crown and the Hieronymus machine are destroyed, a "beautiful and miraculous (302)" event occurs. The birds return to the forest, flying "in by hundreds, by thousands, from the forest in every direction. They filled the sky over the castle, soaring, twittering, diving, chirping, cawing, a ballet and chorus of joy at having got rid of the evil emanation" (302). The return of the birds after the machine has been destroyed helps reinforce the danger of technology, however magical it might be.

O'Brien demonstrates a respect for the animals and wildlife around them. Twice Ellen realizes the value of animal life. The first revelation occurs when Otto describes the way a pig squeals when it is killed for bacon. Ellen feels bad for the little fish Otto catches for Richard, and then rebukes Otto's assumption that fish are too dumb to feel

things. Upon hearing about the squealing slaughtered pigs and suddenly understanding the significance of an animal's life being sacrificed for her to eat, Ellen resolves "firmly, for about ten seconds, never to eat bacon-or fish-again" (64). Although this resolution does not last, the significance of this scene is useful to demonstrate a respect for animal life. The second revelation occurs when Otto hunts in order to replenish the dwindling food supply. When he brings home a squirrel and a rabbit, Ellen "still felt she should protest killing the small, furry creatures" (179). In both of these instances the commentary could easily have been omitted, but O'Brien purposefully includes these scenes in the interest of magnifying awareness of the animals' worth. Rahn believes that the idea to teach children to "regard animals with respect and love" is a tradition from more primitive societies who began to realize that, to ensure the food supply, they must change from "thoughtless exploitation" of the hunt to "care and restraint" (166). Therefore these societies taught children by incorporating rituals to thank the animal for providing them with food (166). O'Brien hints at this in *The Silver Crown*, and then effectively continues the idea in *Z for Zachariah*.

Furthermore, Ellen, Otto, and Mr. Carver demonstrate a love and respect for nature. A respect for nature exists in Ellen early in the novel when she goes out to play with the crown in her make-believe country, where the young queen "allowed no hunting" (4) in her "forest" full of wildlife, and she prefers to hold her "court" in the garden (5). Ellen loves the mountains and the "forests that covered them, with hardly a house anywhere" (31). Early in *The Silver Crown* readers know that these mountains and forests "made Ellen want to get out and walk through their shadowy corridors, heading

up and up until she reached the top of the mountain, the only person for miles around” (32).

O’Brien also clearly shows how Ellen benefits from the fresh air and exercise, and like many *bildungsroman* children’s stories, Ellen has matured by the end of the novel. After hiking all the first day, Ellen wakes up stiff and sore (104). With the continuing journey, the stiffness eventually passes as Ellen becomes accustomed to the exercise. As Otto and Ellen continue, Ellen becomes braver and more accustomed to the wilderness, and eventually even traveling on the highest part of the mountain does “not bother Ellen as much as it used to” (136). Also, after hurting her ankle twice, upon devising an escape from the castle, Ellen “landed gently on the floor, knees bent to spare her ankles. She was learning” (241). Ellen eventually becomes comfortable with activity in the natural world and when she returns with Otto and Jenny to retrieve the silver crown, she refers to the quartzite cave as “the nearest thing to a home she had” (282).

Otto acts as Ellen’s guide and is also a character who embraces nature. Although he is what some would consider a troubled youth, his resourcefulness and knowledge of nature help them on their journey. Mrs. Fitzpatrick sends Otto with Ellen not only for his own good, but also because he “knows how to get along in the woods” (80). Readers discover this is true, as he is able to use the sun as a natural timekeeper and compass, identify specific trees, hunt, build fires, and in one instance make a homemade torch out of pine knot (168). Otto also, like Dickon of Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, tames Richard, the crow, from a fledgling and manages to teach him to talk. All of these skills clearly demonstrate that Otto is well connected with the natural world.

The other helping character that Ellen meets is Mr. Carver, also close to nature, who acts as a spokesperson for the benefits of removal from society. Mr. Carver's profession is fitting, because like his name, he "carves" figures from wood to make the little money that he needs, and the figures consist of some sad faces, but also "prancing horses, of leaping deer . . . a sleeping panther of some jet-black wood, and a dove of pearl white" (118).<sup>1</sup> More than demonstrating an affinity to sculpting animals, Mr. Carver uses wood, a natural element, to create his art. Like Michelangelo's marble statues, Mr. Carver explains that the creature is there in the wood, but "[y]ou can't be sure of that until you cut away all the wood that's holding him in" (119). Instead of trying to mold the natural world into his own devised creation, Mr. Carver is able to bring the natural beauty of the wood out.

Mr. Carver also demonstrates the positives of leaving the city. His wife and daughter died of an epidemic of flu that passed through their town. Although he survived, he was left alone with his dog, King, and decided to move to the isolated country. Feeling lonely after the death of his family, he took a long walk in the mountains and realized he was happier there. He says:

I like living up here. I like to hunt and to fish. I don't like crowds of people, and I like to be independent. Here I can grow most of my own food in my garden. I have plenty of fish for the catching, and there's game in the woods. (121)

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<sup>1</sup> The black panther and the white dove may further demonstrate the good versus evil themes and foreshadow the relationship between the black crown and silver crown. While the white dove represents purity, the panther, a predator, can be caught unaware because he is asleep.

So, through plot progression, setting, and character, O'Brien's first novel demonstrates that he was, even in the beginning, concerned with preservation of and respect for the natural world, and he hints at the benefits of life away from the city.

Though there is no search for a utopia here, the alternative world created by the Hieronymus machine has many dystopian elements. The machine itself demonstrates an early effort by O'Brien to introduce the apocalyptic themes that reappear in *A Report from Group 17* and *Z for Zachariah*, because he is probably referring to Hieronymus Bosch, a painter of the fifteenth century who had an affinity for religious art and diabolical folk legend and literature.

Bosch is known for his lively, bizarre works full of demons and strange creatures, but probably his most famous of the seven works he signed is *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which is a paneled work ("Hieronymus Bosch"). Closed, the two panels, lined with gold, reveal a large globe in black and white, titled *The Creation of the World*:

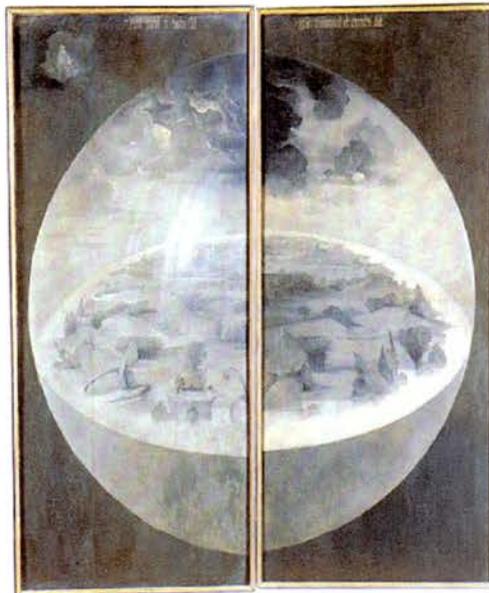


Fig. 1 Bosch, The Creation of the World

With the panels open, the work reveals *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, portraying three very colorful panels:



Fig. 2 Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights

The black crown and the silver crown that lead up to the climax of O'Brien's novel may connect with the black and white of *The Creation of the World*. Open, however, the left panel depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, while the right portrays death, fire, and apocalyptic images. The center panel shows a large orgy of people dancing, eating, and chatting, with another large globe in the top center of green and blue. O'Brien seems to be referring to this specific painting with the description of the Hieronymus machine, which is a "great globe" behind two golden doors (291). O'Brien describes the Hieronymus machine in a way that resembles the globe in Bosch's painting, as

a single glowing globe the size of a basketball. Smoky as an opal, it flickered and changed color constantly, from pale green to blue to deepest purple and back again. Its hard, perfectly spherical edges seemed to melt and flow beneath the eye. (260)

The globe of Bosch's painting is similar, but its surface is not smooth and flawless, which O'Brien also describes. The globe, in a magnified view, actually shows thin black lines, like cracks, throughout the surface of the sphere. Interestingly, O'Brien also describes the Hieronymus machine with "[w]ires and tubes of silver, gold, and copper intertwined through it in patterns of terrifying complexity" (261).

Perhaps when Ellen takes the crown, opens the two golden doors (which is appropriate because Bosch's painting is lined with gold), and places both hands on the globe, she is taking control and avoiding the upcoming apocalypse. The painting implies that an apocalypse is inevitable because the panels appear from left to right, in reading order. However, because Ellen stops the machine from creating a world-wide dystopia, O'Brien may be insinuating that our world is teetering dangerously close to dystopia, but it can also return to utopia. This idea continues throughout O'Brien's works, which present neither a pure utopia nor dystopia, but always the *threat* of apocalypse or the *pursuit* of the ideal society.

The search for utopia and extremity of apocalyptic themes do not appear as clearly in *The Silver Crown* as in O'Brien's other works, but through plot and setting progression, characterization, and animal representation, he demonstrates an early interest in the value of the natural world. However fantastical many elements of the novel are, O'Brien's shows an early interest in science fiction as well. Although this first work awkwardly combines fantasy and science fiction, his next novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, more easily blends the two genres. However, because the focus of this thesis is on the search for utopia in O'Brien's more successful works, the next chapter will

examine the treatment of the natural world in *A Report from Group 17* before continuing with *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE NATURAL WORLD IN *A REPORT FROM GROUP 17*: O'BRIEN'S ADULT NOVEL

Although *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is O'Brien's second published book, I will now discuss *A Report from Group 17* because it, like *The Silver Crown*, does not develop a search for communal society that appears in O'Brien's other two novels. While these early attempts do not explore the search for utopia as his other novels do, O'Brien's less well-known first and third novels also encourage respect for the environment and animal life. Both are novels that reinforce O'Brien's attitude toward the natural world.

O'Brien's third book, *A Report from Group 17*, was named ALA Best Young Adult Book, and is probably the most purely science fiction of all of his novels. Often referred to as a novel for adults, not for young adults, *A Report from Group 17* is a suspenseful thriller that begins with the kidnapping of twelve-year-old Allison Adam by scientists of a Russian Embassy near Washington, D.C. However, the primary focus of the novel is an examination of animal testing as well as biological and chemical warfare. Ironically, the potential weapon here is the mutation of a natural resource, water, to work as a killer.

Dr. Schutz, a biochemist, is working within the Embassy grounds with his dim-witted assistant, Georg Wolter, and under the supervision of KGB agent Kublitz. Under

the guise of working to perfect biological warfare, Schutz has actually found a way to change water in order to create a hypnotic that will make people easy to dominate. Though he is provided with all the apes he needs for testing, the experiment demands a human test subject in order to provide accurate results. Allison becomes involved when she is kidnapped, and Schutz arranges the situation to look as if she had fallen off her bicycle and drowned in the river. However, Allison's brother, John, finds this hard to believe, and her younger brother Willis, who is only five, knows a vital piece of information about Allison's disappearance, but, being sworn to secrecy, Willis does not reveal Allison's interest in the zoo of the Russian Embassy or her attempt to see inside.

Fergus O'Neil, of Cornell University, is called in to help the government investigate supposed biochemical experiments within the Embassy. He discovers Schutz' plan to infiltrate the water population in order to take over the nation and, with the help of the U.S. government and Allison's younger brothers, Fergus is able to track Dr. Schutz down and rescue Allison. Schutz, unfortunately, escapes, but the open-endedness of the novel adds to the sense of urgency reminiscent of both the Cold War and biological warfare in general.

Though this novel is clearly more "science fiction" than any other of O'Brien's works, *A Report from Group 17* also reveals a respect for nature and animals, while leaning toward more political subjects reminiscent of the Cold War. Published in 1972, O'Brien's novel entertains the idea of a Russian Embassy's attempt to infiltrate the water supply of the Potomac River as a weapon for dominating the nation. Unlike his previous two novels, *A Report from Group 17* is heavy on the "science" of the science fiction genre, and clearly takes on subject matter that is more adult, such as mind control, the

extremes of animal testing, and mass murder. Although named ALA's Best Young Adult Novel, often *A Report from Group 17* is often listed as an adult novel due to its intense and more adult subjects.

The main threat and conflict of *A Report from Group 17* is rooted in the scheme to mutate water for destructive purposes. A scientist tampers with Water X, a mutated strain of water, in order to create "Stone Head Syndrome," which works as a slight sedative to cause a "morbid lack of anxiety," a loss of identity, an induced euphoria, and even suicidal tendencies through mind control (88). Even though the victims are completely healthy, they, like those brainwashed by the Hieronymus machine of *The Silver Crown*, become "like sheep," and will do nothing except on command (125). Simply put, the problem is "direct, straightforward, and predictably horrifying," and the predicted result is "mass murder in a style to make atomic warfare look like mercy killing" (71). Water, the natural life sustainer, is mutated by technology to have the potential to kill.

Here O'Brien actually *reverses* the struggle between technology and nature. Although the contamination of water, a necessity for fueling life, perfectly demonstrates how technology can infiltrate and destroy life and the natural world, there is also discussion of the need for technology. If these brainwashed humans lack the motivation to keep up the conveniences of the modern world, the effects will be gradual malfunctions in society. Upon investigation, Fergus O'Neil predicts that the decline will begin with the malfunctioning of the telephone system and electricity, which demand human attention to operate, before spreading to the machinery that mass-produces products like automobiles. Eventually, the "deterioration would show up most acutely

and quickly in the most intricately complex areas – the big cities” (169). Furthermore, the nation would decline in its industrialization and technological advancements, while the infiltrating alien nation’s telephone system would still be working efficiently, its machines running smoothly, and its demand for exports steadily increasing (169). Water X is a natural occurrence that causes mass hypnosis, while the *lack* of technology allows for an easy take-over. However, science or technology, not nature, manufactures this invisible weapon for even more destruction.

O’Brien perfectly develops this theme of technology’s brutality and at the same time diminishes technology’s ingenuity. Nature came up with mass destruction first, is more powerful than technology, and deserves respect, because nature can “sneer at the guns and gases of men, which have murdered only a fifth as many” (72). Obviously, the effect of warfare and man’s use of technology upon nature are in the forefront of O’Brien’s mind as he writes *A Report from Group 17*.

O’Brien achieves the effect of technology’s brutality against nature through tone, setting, character, and language as well as in plot. Published just after *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, *A Report from Group 17* has a drastically different atmosphere than O’Brien’s previous novels and it is much darker in tone. Addressing typical controversial subjects of the science fiction genre, the novel includes animal testing as well as the threat of biological or “germ” warfare. The first sentence of the novel begins: “He got sick three days before he died” (9), and just one full page later, Abel, the chimp, dies a horrific death at the hands of his brother primate man, who is obviously Cain. Abel’s twitching never stopped; he lay on the floor of the cage, whimpering; his long arms and legs were knotted around his body in such a way that

[Allison] could no longer tell his front from his back. His neck was the worst. It was bent backward, so that his head seemed to be put on upside down. The keepers made no attempt to help him, but only watched. . . . Then, in one great spasm of twitching, under the terrible pull of the muscles, a bone broke, and then another. She heard the two snaps clearly, and the sound made her feel sick. (10)

Not long after this scene readers discover that this is not the first animal death, but that there had been several – all monkeys, excluding one dog – none of which made it longer than two or three weeks (10). However, this is not the last gruesome death that occurs, because Abel's death is finally revenged. When Victor, the new ape, strangles Georg Wolter to protect Allison, Wolter's "neck had been literally wrung, twisted, like a braid of rope; the head, still tenuously connected with the shoulders, lay at an impossible angle in a pool of blood" (193).

Obviously, the detailed description of these scenes and the political subject matter suggest that *A Report from Group 17* is directed toward an older audience, but it also in some ways brings up issues of nature's version of "an eye for an eye," in that the violent mistreatment of nature is paid with a similar act of violence. Therefore, the effects of the mistreatment of nature will produce an equally violent punishment for man in the end, which is more fully developed in O'Brien's next book, *Z for Zachariah*, in which biological warfare has nearly killed humanity entirely.

As in *The Silver Crown*, O'Brien promotes a respect for nature and animals through characterization. Allison, a twelve-year-old rambunctious girl, is only drawn to the "zoo," at Villa Retrograd because of the chimps she watches there. In addition to this

attraction to animals, all of her characteristics demonstrate her connection with nature and ability to survive in the natural world. Her brother John declares when she goes missing that she is not scared of animals. In fact, she likes “animals better than everybody” (60), and all “she wanted to do was go to the zoo” (78). Allie can also “swim like a fish” (76), and befriends her fellow captive Victor, the ape (84). Even when she is not completely sure of her surroundings and is drugged, she still connects with the natural world, and her friendship with Victor helps to save her from the sadistic actions of Georg Wolter. Furthermore, this fascination with animals continues in Allison’s younger brother Willis, when Fergus uses a chipmunk’s den as a way to engage Willis in conversation. Willis watches the chipmunks rebuild their home and wants to help (105).

Perhaps even more telling in the characterization of Allison and her connection with nature is the representation of her as a bird. Almost immediately upon hearing of Allison’s disappearance, Fergus subconsciously connects it to an incident when he was young in which he watched a drowning baby bird float by his boat, its parents frantically trying to bring it to safety. The thought of his ability to have reached out and saved the little bird, and his lack of instinct to have done it, plagued him for the next several days after that (81), and this realization perhaps subconsciously leads him to pursue the reason for Allison’s disappearance. The representation of Allie as a bird continues later in the novel as well, when Fergus dreams of a wounded bird inside the Russian Embassy, calling for help (125). Upon awaking from this dream, Fergus realizes that Allison is inside the Villa Petrograd, and that she is most likely the next subject of Dr. Schutz’ tests.

All of the animals mentioned in this novel are respected and described compassionately, from the baby bird Fergus still recalls to the apes used for testing.

Victor, the ape, is represented positively, as he displays fear and pain, demonstrates compassion, and makes a bold move to protect Allison by killing her torturer. He is intelligent enough to be afraid of the cattle prod that Wolter uses on him, and Allison demonstrates a real compassion for him as well (99). Though Victor brutally kills Wolter, O'Brien makes it clear that this is unusual behavior for an ape unless humans provoke it (195).

Fergus O'Neil, who studies biology, the study of living organisms and their surroundings, is more comfortable in his temporary log cabin than he was on his campus. He is the "good" scientist of the conflict between good versus evil that resembles the struggle in *The Silver Crown*. An outdoorsman who desires to be connected with the natural world, Fergus loves to fish, and prefers "the purer art of fly casting" (49). He is connected with natural world in that he associates Allison with a bird and appreciates the change of scenery from the university to the isolated log cabin.

The "villain," Dr. Helmuth Schutz, however, directly contrasts with Fergus and is the "evil" of the good versus evil battle. While Fergus studies and teaches biology, Schutz tampers with the natural world. Working illegally in the United States and publishing as "Group 17," Schutz is a character who perfectly represents how science endangers nature. He wrote a book, "Genetics and Virology," in which he learned to alter genetic cells (before he even knew that DNA existed) that would pass on for the next ten to twelve generations (27). The idea of the scientist who experiments without real knowledge of his science continues in O'Brien's next novel, *Z for Zachariah*, with Mr. Loomis. This work is used not for the betterment of the world, but instead for mass destruction. Similarly, Schutz' assistant, Georg Wolter, is a criminal biologist in hiding,

whose real faults begin to appear in Chapter 21, when his “visual masochistic transference” (160) is revealed and he abuses both Allie and Victor with the cattle prod. This cruelty to animals moves on to cruelty to humans, and eventually leads to his death at the hands of the very ape he abused (190).

The setting of *A Report from Group 17* also represents a stark dichotomy between the technological and the rural. Allison’s family’s house is, like the O’Brien’s country house, isolated and a “white, neatly kept oblong of frame and cinderblock” (11). The Adam’s house stands on ten cleared acres with a barn and pasture in the woods (22) and is cherished for its “quality of remoteness” (23). To prove its isolation, the road “came to and end in mud and river not far beyond” the house (23). Here Alison’s family has kept a “jumble of animals” over the last fourteen years.

Fergus is placed in the same area as the Adam’s house, in a log cabin owned by a Mr. Wilcox, whose own mansion overlooks a geese-filled lake. It is a simple cabin with the bare necessities: one “roughly finished” large room with a small bathroom, a storage closet, a stone fireplace, and a simple kitchen. The cabin overlooks a meadow and the river, and is perfect for the minimalist fisherman. In this cabin, Fergus notices that it “was easy to lose track of days, with only the noises of the wind and songbirds to break the flow of time” (70). Both Fergus’ and the Adam’s residences promote a sense of calmness and solitude, and are perfectly situated in the natural surroundings.

In contrast, Villa Petrograd, the Russian Embassy laboratory, like the castle in *The Silver Crown*, is a building that is a “painful incongruity in this sylvan valley” (52). O’Brien continues the violent language to demonstrate the aberrant nature of this building by stating that a “cornice had been blasted or drilled away to accommodate its base” (52).

Described as an “insane bastion built by a xenophobe” (52), this unwelcome mark on the landscape is full of cages, machines and instruments, and rooms filled with “things of shiny glass and steel, with switches and tubes and dials. On the wall were shelves covered with jars, bottles, and glass dishes” (67). Inside the Embassy, Kublitz’ office is completely underground with no windows, the stone walls and bare cement floor release a rancid odor, and it is a “sour place, shadowy despite the fluorescent lights in the ceiling; a perfect habitat for the sharp-faced KGB agent behind the desk” (37). In contrast to Fergus’ songbirds, all that can be heard inside the Villa Petrograd is a quiet motor and the throb of a pump.

O’Brien takes determined notice of the natural world, and the trees, the weather, and the season and temperature all act to reveal tone. The opening description of the outside of Fergus’ office is “dirty snow,” a “murky sky,” and “bare birch trees standing like skeletons holding hands” (15), which support Fergus’ desire to begin a new project at his university. He describes the surroundings of the campus as covered with “last October’s snow,” which has “rotten” and “decayed” (17). However, when Fergus is on the Potomac River for the first time, it is a “wide and placid lake,” with a mild breeze and pleasant spring sunshine (51).

Also, when Fergus first discovers the dock of the Villa Petrograd in his explorations, O’Brien foreshadows the potential for the devastating effect of Schutz’ project upon the natural world with a singular passage: “a small green leaf, floating lightly on the surface [of the river], swirled in a circle and sank gently into a miniature whirlpool” (53). The action of the leaf being swallowed by the mechanical pump under the dock symbolizes the potential mass destruction of Dr. Schutz’ project.

More than this, the natural world helps to drive the plot. For instance, the only reason Allison witnesses the death of Abel and is kidnapped into the Russian embassy is because a conveniently placed young aspen tree, “newly green with spring leaves (24),” serves as a ladder to her look-out place. Similarly, activity in the garden helps to provide a release for the grieving family. John, Willis, and their mother Jennifer take to tending the garden after the disappearance of Allison, and because they are not yet expected to go to work and school after such a tragedy, they plant seeds and “tried to pretend that was a normal and useful thing to do” (102). But this is not the last occasion when nature takes part in the action. When Fergus and Officer Simon track Dr. Schultz within the Embassy grounds, they have the heavy rain and soggy leaves to thank for a quiet entrance into the compound (180).

Several references are made to animal testing in general. For instance, Dr. Schutz expresses frustration at being made to use primates for testing, and admits that in most cases rats were a more reliable subject, as well as being more available for use. Almost as direct response to this, from the outside Fergus notices that these experiments resemble those of a cancer researcher at NIH who had “suddenly lost interest in cancer and become fascinated with the rats themselves” (75), which is what occurs in O’Brien’s previous Newbery award-winning novel. In making a clear issue of animal testing, O’Brien furthers his point on the value of animal life, but then pushes the moral limit, for the testing must inevitably involve human subjects. By placing Allison and the ape side-by-side in the cage, and by constantly likening Allison to a wounded bird, O’Brien is revealing that animal testing is just as immoral as human testing, or that one may eventually lead to the other.

Though *A Report from Group 17* takes on very different subject and is more advanced than *The Silver Crown*, these novels are similar in that O'Brien uses plot, setting, character and language to reinforce the importance of the natural world. *A Report from Group 17* makes more a determined effort to expand on the danger of technology and the lack of respect for animal life. The subject matter, as with his previous novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, questions the morality of animal testing, and like his last novel, brings up issues of biological warfare and apocalyptic themes, but it still does not develop the search for a utopian community as clearly as his more famous novels.

Perhaps because of the already highly political and controversial nature of *A Report from Group 17*, communitarianist ideals and the movement to a communal society do not surface as strongly in this novel as they do in O'Brien's others. Obviously morality, the pastoral setting, and animal cruelty are addressed, but the solution does not seem to lie in retreat to a more simple lifestyle, although Allison's family has in some ways already done that by moving to their home. Here, instead of suggesting a retreat from technological advances, the story is a suspenseful mystery thriller, determined to keep the reader on the edge of his or her seat and make clear commentary on animal testing, biological warfare, and political subjects.

O'Brien again makes his interest in preservation of the environment clear, and these ideas that he demonstrates early in *The Silver Crown* and *A Report from Group 17* lead to the fuller development of technology's threat toward nature and the search for utopia that appears in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NATURAL WORLD IN *MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH*: O'BRIEN'S MOST PRAISED NOVEL

O'Brien's most notable and popular work, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, is often on children's reading lists, and it was even adapted into an animated film called *The Secret of NIMH*. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is the most critically praised of all O'Brien's novels. It won the 1972 Newbery Medal, the 1972 Mark Twain Award, the 1971 Boston Globe Horn Book Award, was a runner-up for the National Book Award in 1972, and received the 1971 William Allen White Children's Book Award ("Conley" 45). In addition, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* was awarded the 1972 John and Patricia Beatty Award, the 1974 Pacific Northwest Young Readers' Choice Award, and the 1978 Massachusetts Children's Book Award (Molson 437). It has been called a novel that is "realistic and without a trace of whimsy" ("O'Brien," *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*), and "beautifully written and thought-provoking" ("O'Brien, *Children's Literature Review* 127).

The story begins in a pastoral setting, and all of the characters are animals, which leads many readers to believe upon first impression that the novel is a fantasy. Certainly, like *The Silver Crown*, many aspects of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* are fantastical in that the mice, birds, rats and other rodents can talk, and some can

even read, make baskets and other elaborate items, and prescribe medicine. O'Brien incorporates other elements of fantasy by naming the feared house cat "Dragon," a nemesis who is eventually "slain," though only temporarily. Also, elements of Aesop's fables are incorporated, which connects the novel to folktale as well.

Mrs. Frisby and her mouse family live in a cinderblock in the garden of Farmer Fitzgibbon. Her son, Timothy, falls ill just weeks before "Moving Day," when the family must move before Mr. Fitzgibbon comes through with the plow. Mrs. Frisby enlists the help of Jeremy the Crow and the owl, and finds herself tangled in the story of the rats who have escaped from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). These rats, led by Nicodemus, have undergone animal testing and emerged from the laboratory super-intelligent rodents whose main goal is, surprisingly, not to take over the world, but instead to find a quiet community where they can live simply, work hard, and build their own utopia away from the civilized world. The rats struggle to find their place in the world, and create "The Plan" to move away from the farm to avoid recapture. At the same time, they are able to help Mrs. Frisby and her family escape the plow.

Obviously, the subject matter goes beyond what the audience would consider reality, but O'Brien keeps this novel in the realm of science fiction by incorporating ethical questions about the morality of animal testing and the alteration of natural intelligence, issues picked up again in his next novel, *A Report from Group 17*. Many issues of the treatment of the natural world also abound in the novel, and the super-intelligent rats of NIMH join the constant struggle for the search for a utopian community typical of the science fiction genre.

O'Brien admits that during the conception of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* he was consciously concerned with the "seeming tendency of the human race to exterminate itself" ("Conley" 46). He found himself wondering what kind of civilization would out-live ours, and imagined that if humankind was to eliminate itself by war or pollution, rats might be the survivors. This theme of human extinction is hinted at in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, but it is also more directly addressed in his other novels. O'Brien's last two novels, in particular, address this fear in more detail. However, the threat of extinction lies consistently in the destruction of the natural world around us.

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, the most famous and praised of all of O'Brien's novels, is the only one in which the main characters are all animals in the animal world, although, of course, animals have important roles in his other novels. O'Brien speculated that if people were to eliminate themselves by war or pollution, rats might be the survivors because they are tough and highly adaptable, and though this is a grim subject for a children's novel, O'Brien admits that the rats turned out much "saner and pleasanter" than he thought, and are even more pleasant than humans ("Newbery Acceptance Speech" 345). The point of view is from animals, so the same attention that is paid to animal cruelty in *The Silver Crown* and *A Report from Group 17* is even more intense in this novel because the animals are the victims, not the casual observers that the human protagonists in the other stories are. Early in the novel, this is clear when Mrs. Frisby stumbles upon an abandoned store of corn shuck and remembers the last year's November hunting season, when "near that edge of the woods the sound that sends all of the animals of the forest shivering to their

hiding places – the sound of hunters’ guns shooting, the sound that is accompanied, for someone, by a fiery stabbing pain” (6).

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, as the title shows, details two individual plotlines. The overall struggle of the novel follows Mrs. Frisby’s dilemma to find a way to move her family, especially her sick son, Timothy, to their summer home before the plow mows through their current cinderblock residence. Usually Mrs. Frisby and her three children move before the plow can endanger them, but this year Timothy’s pneumonia and the early arrival of spring cause problems. In the search for a solution, Mrs. Frisby enlists the help of Jeremy the Crow and the owl, who direct her to seek the assistance of the rats of NIMH. When she meets the rats, the rats’ story takes over as the leader rat, Nicodemus, tells of their long journey to Mr. Fitzgibbon’s farm.

After briefly following Mrs. Frisby’s quest to seek assistance in moving her cinderblock house out of the path of the plow, we find ourselves immersed in and thoroughly engrossed by the story of the rats of NIMH’s escape from the NIMH laboratory and quest to form a new utopia. This story is O’Brien’s first book concerning animal testing before addressing the same issue (albeit more morbidly) in *A Report from Group 17*. Mrs. Frisby discovers that the rats had once lived in the city, normal rodents scavenging for food, when they were captured and taken for testing at NIMH. Dr. Schultz (a name oddly similar to Dr. Schutz, the antagonist in *A Report from Group 17*) and two graduate assistants are (once again) tampering with nature through science, but this time they are experimenting with intelligence

enhancements. The rats soon become super-intelligent; they are so intelligent, in fact, that they teach themselves to read and thus escape from the laboratory.

Critic Althea K. Helbig declares that this “shift in emphasis deprives plot of its unity” (205), and criticizes the climax for not relating to the primary questions (204). However, the plot structure of this novel is not as flawed as Helbig thinks. This leap from Mrs. Frisby’s story to the rats’ story does not occur only at the beginning of the novel. O’Brien uses approximately the same amount of pages for Mrs. Frisby’s quest as he does for the rats’ journey. The novel does not leave Mrs. Frisby’s dilemma without a solution, and the same is true of that of the rats.

This novel resembles classics of folktale/fantasy and science fiction, which is perhaps part of the reason this novel is so valued. In the tradition of *Frankenstein*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* shows the hazards of tampering with nature. *Frankenstein* is generally accepted to have begun the science fiction tradition, as the fiction of Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke is “descended directly from Mary Shelley’s novel” (Sullivan 104). Since *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*’s genre is questioned because it is an animal tale and in a pastoral setting, comparing it to this first science fiction novel helps establish its science fiction elements.

Like Mary Shelley’s version of a tale of a scientist who cannot control his own creation, the scientists of NIMH in O’Brien’s novel create animals more intelligent than themselves. Tampering with natural intelligence proves to be more than these scientists can handle, just as in *Frankenstein*, the Monster himself says to his creator, “[r]emember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself” (Shelley

95). But this is not the only way the novels are similar. The rats undergo a transitional period similar to that of Frankenstein's monster, who spends months observing human behavior in order to learn the language. He must do this in order to move forward and address his creator. The rats of NIMH, similarly, spend months in the large abandoned mansion, reading and learning all they can through the massive library there. The rats would not have been able to move forward if they had not taken the time to develop the skills necessary to build their new community. Both of these transitional periods take place in the winter, perhaps as a symbolic hibernation period, and the transition is complete with the arrival of spring.

Also, in both novels some of the same dilemmas appear in the creation of an unnatural "monster." In *Frankenstein*, Shelley raises the question of who the real monster is. O'Brien does the same, in that the rats, unlike the scientists, desire to live peacefully in the natural world instead of exploit it. Moreover, even though the rats have an increased IQ, are they really better off with more intelligence? Once they have been mutated, they run the risk of being caught by NIMH, and they cannot find a place where they are truly happy. The rats have also lost the bliss associated with an ignorance of how the world really works.

In addition to having qualities of *Frankenstein*, the first science fiction novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is also animal fantasy. But this novel is fantasy not only because the animals speak, but also because Mrs. Frisby, like Ellen, makes a type of "mini" hero's journey (which is appropriate because of her size), answering a call to adventure to move her family safely and help the rats, meeting a few helping characters like Jeremy, Nicodemus, and Mr. Ages, the mouse doctor, and embarking

on a road of trials in which she must meet face to face with an owl and help the rats move her cinderblock house out of harm's way. Also, Mrs. Frisby eventually slays a "dragon" when she takes the dangerous journey to sneak sleeping powder into the food bowl of Farmer Fitzgibbon's farm cat, Dragon (186).

While Mrs. Frisby struggles to avoid the plow, the rats are enduring a similar struggle to escape danger, because they fear the scientists of NIMH who are desperately trying to track them down. This dual plot structure combines fantasy and folklore with Mrs. Frisby's story, and science fiction with the rats' story. While O'Brien utilizes the same sort of blend in the *Silver Crown*, this time the story does not appear to change from primarily fantasy to primarily science fiction halfway through the novel, but instead smoothly blends the two plotlines and genres together.

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* also has elements of beast tales, didactic stories portraying animals escaping human evils, like the rabbits of Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (Gose 5). Elliot Gose declares that using animal characters is also effective in making social commentary because they are "simple," and stories about them can "highlight the basic concerns and problems of our culture" (Gose 5). *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is certainly effective in revealing many of the dangers of man's use of technology to destroy the environment from the point-of-view of the victims of the destruction, in that with increased intelligence, the rats have a heightened awareness of the many ways this destruction occurs.

More than being a mixture of science fiction and fantasy like *The Silver Crown*, this novel remains rooted in folklore and fable because it makes use of themes from "The Lion and the Mouse Who Returned a Kindness" of Aesop's fables,

when Mrs. Frisby untangles Jeremy, the crow, and saves him from Dragon.

According to Gregory Maguire, Aesop's fables are known for creating the "archetype of animal heroes" (Maguire 104), but more than this, the novel's style resembles elements of folktale.

For instance, Pat Pflieger notices that the characterization in this novel is "almost nonexistent" (406), and Helbig also calls the characterization "flawed" (204). Although Pflieger and Helbig criticize the flat characterization of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, I would argue that since this novel is more than just science fiction, and is also animal fantasy and based in folktale, O'Brien's characterization and plot structure are actually fitting to the genre mix. According to Elliot Oring, folk narratives are often actually governed by the plot, and "folk-tale figures are two-dimensional rather than three dimensional" (Oring 128). Furthermore, the plot structure helps to once again represent the dichotomy between technology and the natural world, so it is necessary for the characters, though important, to not overpower the major issues addressed in the plot. Helbig acknowledges this, praising *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* for embracing "important themes of courage, survival, self respect, and cooperation, as well as a *subtle* commentary on human mores and ecological concerns" (211, emphasis added); however, this commentary on "ecological concerns" is far more prevalent and vital to the novel than merely "subtle." The ecological issues raised concerning nature and the technology of industrialization are some of the primary driving forces of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, and the shifts in character emphasis works in a practical agenda to further develop these ideas.

We may consider Mrs. Frisby's story as representative of the "natural" life (though her surroundings are somewhat industrialized), because she has very little knowledge of the urban world and knows only what was taught to her by her husband Jonathan, a genetically modified mouse who escaped with the rats of NIMH. Mrs. Frisby is a natural character because she relies primarily on her instincts to protect herself and her children from the cat and from the plow. The rats' story, on the other hand, is representative of an "industrialized" life, because they have been exposed to and taught the "key" to the world of technology. Their entire world relies upon knowledge of technology to carry on, but their increased intelligence has taught them that they must move away from civilization to be happier.

But this dichotomy of Mrs. Frisby's life versus the rats' life is just one indication that O'Brien is engaging in a social and political discussion. In many subtle ways O'Brien immerses the natural with the industrial in portrayal of setting. The dwellings of the animals are in themselves a blend of the urban and rural. Paradoxically, Mrs. Frisby's house is a part of the urbanized world, a cement cinder block, and surrounding it is the rural world, a remote part of the garden. Though the structure is industrial, the inside is lined "with bits of leaves, grass, cloth, cotton fluff, feathers, and other soft things" so their dwelling stayed dry and warm all year (4). The cinderblock is lit with natural sunlight through a small opening "slightly larger than a mouse and slightly smaller than a cat's foreleg" that also provides air and a doorway.

The rat's cave achieves the opposite effect and is more extravagant. They live in a natural cave, while the inside is industrialized with elevators, air conditioning,

and electricity. In fact, they are even able to design lighting which created the effect of “stained-glass windows in sunlight” (76). This urban within rural of the rats’ cave, and the rural within urban in Mrs. Frisby’s cinderblock home set the ongoing dichotomy and blending between technology and nature in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, demonstrating an infusion of the two opposites.

O’Brien is clearly setting the stage to make a statement of ecological interest through character and setting. The progressive movement of both Mrs. Frisby and the rats in their quests for freedom suggests a desire to move away from industrialized society. Mrs. Frisby’s primal, instinctual desire is to move away from the danger of the plow as she does every year. The garden represents a natural but controlled place scattered with industrialization. She then moves to a rock which is still in the garden but further from harm and out of the way of the ominous plow, and then to a field even further away from industrialized society. Each move takes them further away from society, and finally they reach their summer home, “a roomy chamber with a pleasant, earthy smell. Its floor was hard-packed dirt, and its wooden roof was an arched intertwining of roots, above which rose the tree itself, an oak” (230). Just as Ellen in *The Silver Crown* finds shelter in her hollow tree, the shelter of a hollow tree is the Frisby family’s last destination. Their new home is completely surrounded by the natural world, and appropriately, at the end of their quest they are safe, happy, and free from the danger of technology (230).

Timothy’s health, especially, symbolically demonstrates the positive change in moving from the cinderblock. In the beginning of the novel he has developed a sickness (10), which we later learn is pneumonia. Timothy struggles with this illness

throughout the book, and his ailment actually is the driving force for plot advancement. By the end of the book when the Frisbys reach their summer home in the field, Timothy can run with the other children, and “Mrs. Frisby was glad to see that he showed no trace of his sickness” (230). The movement away from industrialization results, though perhaps indirectly, in healing Timothy.

The rats’ journey, though much longer, is similar to the Frisby’s movement away from the farmhouse and the plow. They begin in a city, living within a paradise full of food, unaware that there may be any danger around them. They are captured and taken to the laboratory, which is dense with technology and industrialization, and as they learn to read and rationalize, they discover a way to escape. From the lab, they move to a luxurious abandoned mansion, then to a plush cave somewhat away from the city, and then finally to a place secluded from civilization completely where they have plans to create a utopia.

The rats’ progressive movement, like Mrs. Frisby’s, is characterized by a desire to escape civilization and technology. The antagonists are not the scientists of NIMH, though these ominous figures represent real danger. Maguire notices that the “weapon,” or the villain, in this epic mouse tale, as is common in many “little hero” stories, is “uniformly and unabashedly technological” (114). This suggests that O’Brien means to promote a movement away from the convenience that accompanies technology to a more natural lifestyle. Aidan Warlow agrees, saying that “the rats are confronting the questions that face industrial man,” and they struggle with the issue of “whether to use technology expertise to destroy its environment, or whether to opt for

a civilization that uses individual and natural resources” (949). Warlow also believes these issues “clearly” obsessed O’Brien.

Also, O’Brien demonstrates through language that one of the dangers of industry is its power to destroy nature. Mrs. Frisby and the other animals that live in the garden accept the fact that Moving Day will come, and if they do not move, they will be destroyed. The language describing the effects of the farming machines is quite hostile, beginning very early in the book when Mrs. Frisby’s neighbor, the shrew, comments that she wished “someone would drive a tractor through *his* [the farmer’s] house and see how he likes it” (32). O’Brien qualifies this by commenting on the necessity of the plow for the garden to exist there at all; however, the tractor exists in the animals’ minds as a monster, or an object of dread. The language referring to the machinery of the farm is ominous, as the sound of it causes Mrs. Frisby to “[fill] with alarm,” as it “came sputtering from across the fence in the farmyard, a loud sputtering roar” (32). When the exterminators come to get rid of the rats, the bulldozer they use is also an object which seems to fight with the land, clear in the language that describes how the rosebush is pulled out of the earth:

The bush fought back, then yielded angrily, snapping and crackling before the inexorable thrust of steel. A single sweep, and a third of it lay, a writhing heap of thorns, in a pile twenty feet away. The ground trembled under the wheels. . . Another sweep, and a third. Only a thorny stubble now stood where the bush had been. (219-20)

The natural fights against the industrial in this passage, and the language indicates a sense of defeat or death in the rosebush.

O'Brien also makes the assertion that the industrial breeds laziness, greed, pride, and carelessness. Nicodemus notices that life was becoming "too easy," with all of the technology and convenience surrounding them (170), and the entire colony, excluding the six rats led by Jenner, plan to remedy this and move to Thorn Valley, though all agree it will be hard work. As Nicodemus begins work on the plan to move the colony, Jenner makes comments demonstrating the greed and pride that has grown in him as he has grown accustomed to the convenience of technology. He steals from others and thoroughly protests against "The Plan" to move to a simpler life away from convenience because he expects it to be too hard. Jenner's response to the suggestion that stealing is wrong demonstrates both the greed and conceit within him:

Is it stealing when farmers take milk from cows, or eggs from chickens? They're just smarter than the cows and chickens, that's all. Well, people are our cows. If we're smart enough, why shouldn't we get food from them. . . . People have been trying to exterminate rats for centuries, but they haven't succeeded. And we're smarter than the others. What are they going to do? Dynamite us? Let them try. We'll find out where they keep the dynamite and use it on them. (174-75)

Jenner also demonstrates carelessness in his character. Because he is so reliant on electricity and greedy to live the way to which he has grown accustomed, he and the six others must resort to stealing the motor from the hardware store. In their haste, they forget to unplug it and are caught in the short circuit (190-91).

Through Jenner's character, O'Brien is able to show how idleness, greed, pride, and carelessness build within the luxuries of societal and industrial conveniences, and the price that Jenner must pay for his reliance on technology is to forfeit his life. Jenner's desire for material objects and his controlling personality (and subsequent frustration when his efforts fail) appear also in the King in *The Silver Crown* and foreshadows the similar characters of Dr. Schutz in *A Report from Group 17* and Mr. Loomis in *Z for Zachariah*.

Again, because this novel is from the point of view of animals, O'Brien is better able to expand upon the idea of respect for nature and the dangers of technology from the point of view of the victims. Also, the rats, even though previously living a comfortable life in the city, with an increased intelligence, discover the peace and benefits of living in rural surroundings. O'Brien's most popular work succeeds for many reasons, and its ability to incorporate and smoothly blend folklore, fantasy, and science fiction makes this novel unique and enjoyable to readers. At the same time, O'Brien is able to discuss issues of animal testing and the destruction of nature via technology, science, and man, and begins to develop the search for a utopian community that reappears in *Z for Zachariah*.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE NATURAL WORLD IN *Z FOR ZACHARIAH*: O'BRIEN'S FINAL NOVEL

*Z for Zachariah*, O'Brien's final novel, was published posthumously. Like *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, *Z for Zachariah* received great accolades. It won the Jane Addams Children's Book Award in 1976, earned a place on the *Horn Book* honor list, was named ALA Best Young Adult Book, won the Edgar Allen Poe Award, and was called the best juvenile novel by Mystery Writers of America in 1977 ("Conley" 45). *Z for Zachariah* is often suggested as a "bridge" to more adult material like *Hiroshima* (Norris 83), and is praised for its ability to avoid sentiment and whimsy ("O'Brien," *Children's Literature Review* 129).

This post-apocalyptic novel entertains readers by relaying events through the perspective of Ann Burden, a nearly sixteen-year-old heroine, who writes in her journal after a week-long war destroyed almost every living creature on Earth, minus herself and a few of the animals safe in her family's valley. After living an entire year alone, Ann is surprised and scared to discover someone coming into her valley.

This someone is a scientist, Mr. Loomis, who arrives in a radiation suit and at first appears to be non-threatening. When he falls ill to radiation poisoning, Ann nurses him back to health. Soon Mr. Loomis' true personality reveals itself, and his

emotional and physical abusiveness forces Ann into hiding. Mr. Loomis, in his ranting fevers of the radiation poisoning, actually reveals that he had killed another scientist, supposedly his friend, in order to keep the radiation suit. Once he begins to regain his health, he secretly relearns to walk, and sneaks into Ann's room late one night. If Ann's dog, Faro, had not warned her of his approach, she probably would have been raped.

But Ann escapes, goes to a secret cave with only a few possessions, and decides to let Mr. Loomis keep the house. She resolves to continue plowing the field, milking the cow, and fetching water, and as long as he leaves her alone, she will leave his half on the porch. However, this is not enough for him. He teaches Faro to track in order to find Ann, locks up the tractor and the one store, and eventually attempts to shoot Ann and imprison her in the house. Fortunately, Ann again gets away, but when Mr. Loomis finally tries to shoot her in the leg to capture her, she decides something has to change.

Extrapolating what would happen if humans destroyed themselves through biological warfare, O'Brien builds a potential "Garden of Eden" that fails to serve as the new beginning, because, in the end, Ann decides to steal Mr. Loomis' radiation suit and search for other life instead of remaining imprisoned by a controlling man. She refuses to believe that there is no hope left, and sets out to find another valley that can sustain life. Although O'Brien died before completely finishing his last novel, his wife and daughter finished the last few chapters according to his notes, and developed a satisfactory ending. With *Z for Zachariah*, O'Brien helped prove that children's literature could use the science fiction format to examine profound social

and personal issues (Bachelder 87). Deeply religious in theme, *Z for Zachariah* explores many critical questions of creation, biological warfare, the relationship between man and woman, the search for utopia, and environmentalism.

Just as *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and O'Brien's other works address a struggle with technology, so too does *Z for Zachariah* in that technology and the development of biochemical warfare has wiped the earth clean of not only humans and animals, but also the majority of habitable land and resources. This novel probably demonstrates the most extreme consequences of technology's encroachment on nature. By extrapolating on the destruction of the world, *Z for Zachariah* "reverse[s] the person-against-nature plot and [has] made nature the protagonist and people the antagonists" (Donelson and Nilsen 32). A war that lasted only one startling week manages to kill almost every living creature with nerve gas, bacteria, and "other antipersonnel weapons" (*Z for Zachariah* 31). Everything, from the trees and leaves, to the fish and birds, to the telephones and radio stations are all "dead." The only survivors seem to be Ann and a handful of animals with enough "sense to stay around" (29) her family's valley; that is, until Mr. Loomis shows up with his radiation suit.

In addition, O'Brien takes advantage of other literary devices to make his points about the environment. For instance, *Z for Zachariah* again uses the pastoral setting in the science fiction genre to point out the benefits of rural life over city life, but also this novel fits into what Margaret Atwood describes as "speculative fiction" (513), in that here O'Brien, like Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* or Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, is speculating on how humankind can and will destroy itself.

Written directly after *A Report from Group 17*, *Z for Zachariah* also expands upon the dangers of using technology against nature with apocalyptic themes, while demonstrating that the fusion and mutation of nature with technology can be even more deadly. In both novels, water is contaminated to be a killer; in the first book, water is mutated to become a sedative for easy world domination, while in the later novel, water is contaminated by nuclear warfare, cannot sustain life, and nearly kills Mr. Loomis. *Z for Zachariah* has received much critical attention, and as with *1984* or *Brave New World*, is often praised for its ability to “look at profound social and personal issues” (Bachelder 87). Vandergrift, as have many other critics, notices that this novel raises critical questions about the way society treats the environment, and raises ethical questions concerning genetic engineering and whether or not the end justifies the means (Vandergrift 419). In these ways, *Z for Zachariah* is very similar to *A Report from Group 17* in that the subject matter is more pessimistic than in his first two novels, and it appears O’Brien tended to write what may be considered science fiction for his older audience, while his novels for younger audiences often blended science fiction and fantasy. But unlike *A Report from Group 17*, *Z for Zachariah* further develops the search for utopia that previously appears in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*.

By using Ann’s journal for narrative, O’Brien successfully can avoid the sometimes complex intricacies of political warfare, while still enforcing the tragedy and grave importance of the war. Politics are not an issue because they are not important to Ann. Because everything has been destroyed, and radiation and biological warfare have killed humanity and wildlife, Ann’s focus is survival: taking

good care of the farm. According to Paul Briens, inserting political issues might only cause children to feel powerless and afraid; they only need to know that “bombs are built and used by humans, and that human beings can prevent their use or dismantle them” (141). The novel does address serious issues that may potentially be upsetting, but Betty Greenaway points out that it may be necessary to upset readers so that they may “sympathize with the characters” (146). So the issue of the novel is not *how* the earth was destroyed or the politics behind the war, but instead what *should* be focused on: respect for the natural world and avoidance of using technology for this type of destruction.

O’Brien’s novels also contribute to a growing use of female heroines in a genre where girls were previously viewed as unfit for adventure or high-suspense novels. In these four novels, all of the “good guys” are female. In O’Brien’s first three books, Ellen, Mrs. Frisby, and Allison team up with equally good male characters. Ellen relies on Otto and Mr. Carver to guide her, Allison would not have escaped with her life had it not been for Fergus O’Neil, and Mrs. Frisby finds an equally strong male character in Nicodemus. However, in *Z for Zachariah*, the competition between good (the natural) and evil (science) is now one-on-one, and the protagonist is another female who is well connected with nature, while the antagonist is another male scientist who desires to control and manipulate.

Like *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, *Z for Zachariah* takes place primarily in a pastoral setting. It is so rural, in fact, that only two humans exist in the entire world. The setting is a remote valley filled with horses, chickens, and cows on Ann Burden’s farm. Called a “meteorological enclave” (56), the Burden valley escapes

the deadly effects of the nuclear war because it seems to have a weather of its own, disconnected from the outside world. Even before the war, Burden Valley was extremely isolated, because the only people who lived in the valley were Ann's parents and brothers, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Klein, who owned the general store. Their closest neighbors were a small Amish community.

Because of the extreme isolation in *Z for Zachariah*, O'Brien is able to make clear commentary on human nature, the relationship between men and women, and the inability of some to get along with others in their society, even when it appears they should have no choice but to co-exist peacefully. Even after nuclear war, the last two individuals left find a way to make war on each other, although Ann tries to avoid this at nearly all costs. Of course, *Z for Zachariah* falls into the category of apocalyptic literature, but similar to Melville's *Moby Dick* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, *Z for Zachariah* uses isolation to explore humanity (Bachelder 87). Because Ann and Mr. Loomis are the only two characters, O'Brien can speak about human nature and relationships more directly.

In *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, the scientists of NIMH are the catalysts who interfere with the natural state of the world by creating rats who are super-intelligent creatures. Dr. Schutz, also, in *A Report from Group 17*, is the antagonist who creates the suspenseful plot. A scientist is the catalyst in *Z for Zachariah* as well, when John R. Loomis comes onto Ann Burden's farm. A man twice her age who at first appears to be harmless, Mr. Loomis soon reveals that he is controlling, evasive, manipulative, violent, and abusive both physically and emotionally. Unintentionally he later reveals that he is a murderer as well. While Ann had hoped

to someday become an English teacher, according to Joseph Milner, “science is the exploiter and destroyer of man” (73). This teacher versus scientist opposition is not the first in O’Brien’s novels, for in *A Report from Group 17*, biology professor Fergus directly contrasts the biology scientist, Dr. Schutz. This stereotype of the “evil scientist” may be a more recent tradition in literature and film after World War II, but this stereotype continues in *Z for Zachariah*. Upon arriving in the valley, Mr. Loomis sets *Z for Zachariah* into motion when the second sentence of Ann’s journal is: “Someone is coming” (1). The only sentence preceding reveals what readers soon discover about this “someone:” that she is, and should be, afraid.

Yet another representation of science that is less than admirable, Mr. Loomis lives up to O’Brien’s typical antagonist. Like Jenner, the King, and Dr. Schutz, he misuses nature, is obsessively materialistic, and desires ultimate control of his world. A chemist from Ithaca, New York, Mr. Loomis, who worked on a project to magnetize plastic, comes to Ann’s valley from Cornell University with apparently the only radiation suit in existence (61). Though a scientist in a university, Loomis’ title is not “Dr.,” but “Mr.,” perhaps implying a lack of education and some inadequacy in his field.

Ann Burden is a character tied to nature and demonstrates many of the same characteristics as O’Brien’s other heroines. She takes over the farm when her family, most likely killed by radiation poisoning, never returns, and since then has had good luck with the animals and has taken good care of them. She must, if she is to survive. When asked about how she managed to stay alive to raise the chickens, eggs, and cows, her response is that it “hasn’t been so hard” (56). Having grown up on the farm

since she was little, nearly sixteen-year-old Ann has grown accustomed to tending the garden, milking the cow, and fishing for food. She acts as the nurturer to Mr. Loomis not only while he is sick, but also afterwards in doing the milking, mowing, and cooking for him even after she has moved out of the house. She clearly understands what needs to be done in plowing and planting the crop, and is patient when Mr. Loomis assumes to be in charge of chores she had already planned. Ann's resourcefulness keeps her alive, and is to thank for keeping Mr. Loomis alive also. O'Brien keeps the dichotomy of nature and technology alive again in these two opposing characters who are "pitted against one another: Ann with her closeness to earth, her love of nature and books, her religious feelings; John Loomis with his rational engineering skills and ruthless skill to exploit his surroundings" ("O'Brien," *Children's Literature Review* 129).

Mr. Loomis severely lacks the emotional and social skills needed to co-exist and interact with others, while Ann, half his age, seems to understand much more about personal relationships. O'Brien attempts to build a potential romance between them, which is awkwardly pulled together and never fully developed. While part of this disunity is because of Mr. Loomis' inability to interact socially, this awkward romance is not the first to appear in O'Brien's works. In *The Silver Crown*, the outcome of Aunt Sarah and Mr. Carver's romantic relationship is ambiguous. The point of view is from the children, who admit they do not fully understand the love relationship between man and woman. This lack of relationship appears again in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, for the characters are animals, and when the novel opens Mrs. Frisby's husband is dead.

The awkward development of possible romances can be forgiven in O'Brien's novels for younger children, because it does not affect the outcome of the novel. O'Brien's approach is not to subtly build a relationship between characters through intimate scenes, meaningful conversation, or a gradually increasing fondness for one another; instead, readers understand that there *should* be a romantic relationship because the protagonists *feel* they might like to begin a relationship. The real awkward romances truly become apparent in *A Report from Group 17* in the case of Fergus, who is clearly attracted to Allison's mother. Ann's behavior in *Z for Zachariah* mimics Fergus', in that she dreams of marriage and children and then struggles to build a relationship with Mr. Loomis.

Perhaps this subject is difficult for O'Brien to address, because in *Z for Zachariah*, Mr. Loomis' attempted rape seems rather sudden and uneasy. It is not described as a sexual act because he touches her in a "dreadful, possessive way" (175). Ann never even revisits the terrifying moment or refers to the attempted rape for what it was, but instead she "knew what he was planning to do as clearly as if he had told [her]" (175). Ann then flees the room, and O'Brien does not address the sexual aspect of his actions further; instead, Ann feels she must stay away primarily because of Mr. Loomis' desire to possess her.

Similar to O'Brien's other works, a major character in the novel is an animal. Faro, Ann's dog, is a "mongrel, but mostly setter" (33). Faro is a constant presence in the novel, and acts to warn Ann when Mr. Loomis sneaks into her room and keeps her company. But he also innocently helps Mr. Loomis track her down. Showing her

character and compassion for animals, Ann cannot bring herself to shoot Faro, even for her own protection (224). When Faro gives “a soft pleasure bark,” Ann relays that it is “so gentle and familiar, my finger went limp on the trigger, and I could not do it” (224).

In addition to this, Ann understands the value of animal life. She will not eat the chickens until there are enough newly hatched chicks to sustain the species (202). On the other hand, Mr. Loomis hastily shoots one within hours of his arrival, a technique that shocks Ann, because it “is not the accepted method of killing a tame chicken” (27). Though the proper method is never explained, perhaps the acceptable alternative would be something less painful and more humane. O’Brien revisits the idea he began in *The Silver Crown*. If humankind intends to ensure a continuous food supply, Ann’s model showing “care and restraint” (Rahn 166) towards the limited number of animals on the farm is preferable to Mr. Loomis’ “thoughtless exploitation” (166).

Birds are constant symbols of good luck, innocence, and life in all of O’Brien’s novels. In *The Silver Crown* they are guides and signs of goodness, fleeing when there is evil present and returning when there is good, and in *A Report from Group 17*, birds represent a young innocent girl. In *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* the birds are also benevolent guides; even the owl, who is a predator for mice. These benevolent creatures return in *Z for Zachariah* because Ann believes they are a sign of good luck. Throughout the novel, Ann muses that she misses the songbirds but is glad to see the crows, who are “probably the only wild birds left anywhere” (97). In the end, Ann is given hope to find more life when Mr. Loomis admits that he has seen

birds circling somewhere to the west. These birds act as good luck for Ann, but they also serve as a warning, for when she goes to church to pray that Mr. Loomis lives through his illness, she discovers a baby crow has fallen (which, Ann admits, is the “wrong direction for a prayer” (125)) out of its nest. Nature tries to warn her; just as the throbbing pump swallows the leaf in the whirlpool in *A Report from Group 17*, the young bird’s tumble out of its nest foreshadows the wrong turn the novel takes when Mr. Loomis actually does regain his health.

Though O’Brien’s other protagonists make positive movements away from the city, *Z for Zachariah* differs in that Ann begins her story already separated from her family and any other person, and the isolation is not exactly positive because she longingly reminisces about her family and previous life. But Ann also experiences a movement away from her comfortable home when she must escape Mr. Loomis after he tries to rape her. When she flees the house, the limited options of alternate shelter are the store, which is almost *more* convenient because of all the supplies she would have access to, or the cave, where she has few supplies and difficulty cooking her food without being caught. The idea to live in the Kleins’ apartment above the store never really crosses her mind as an option, and she admits that since her parents left she had only been in it one time (212). Instead, like some of O’Brien’s other characters, she finds refuge in a cave more than once in the novel, where she can “see most of the valley,” including the house, the church, the store, the brook, and the road (11). The cave is even more isolated and hidden than the rest of the valley, because Ann admits that she and her brothers had played near it nearly every day and never found it (11).

Ann moves from the house to the cave, and when Mr. Loomis discovers her location and destroys what few possessions she has, she must retreat even further into the wilderness. It is raining, and, like Ellen and Mrs. Frisby's family, she lives in the shelter of a hollow tree to keep dry. Though "it is cramped, and [she] has to worry about spiders," she actually feels "more hopeful than [she has] in a long time" (226). Her decision to steal the radiation suit and leave the valley for even more isolated territory is risky because she cannot even be sure that she will find a place to live or other survivors. Mr. Loomis, in his one act of decency, tells her that he had seen birds circling to the west of the valley, which is a direction in and of itself for American culture that implies the unexplored wilderness and historical American quest for manifest destiny and expansion into the wild west. Though manifest destiny was not always met with open arms, westward travel has become a symbol of hope in American culture.

In addition to setting, plot movement, characterization, and the treatment of animals, O'Brien takes care to mention the beauty of the countryside and the happiness it brings Ann just to plow the field. Critics have attributed O'Brien's "real triumph" to the "quiet beauties" the novel describes ("O'Brien," *Children's Literature Review* 129), and the detail of the landscape. For example, in the effort to bring Mr. Loomis back to health Ann places a bouquet of apple blossoms by his bed. The valley she finds them in is described in more detail than many of the other events that occur in the novel.

Similarly, Ann recognizes the beauty in the crab-apple tree and describes it as if it was magical, because she never noticed the tree “look so beautiful or smell so nice” (80). But she continues to muse:

I supposed it seemed that way because the air was still and the fragrance just hung there, concentrated instead of blowing away on the wind. And because the light was dim, a morning twilight, the branches and all the white blossoms looked misty and delicate, an almost magical look. I walked a few steps closer and then sat down, right in the wet grass, to stare. (80)

In describing the sunset, Ann also goes into great detail:

Because the walls of the valley are so high, the sun always sets early and rises late; there is a long twilight, and we never have really big sunsets the way they do when the land is level. My father used to say, ‘in a valley the real sunset is in the east,’ and that was how it was. As the sun disappeared over the west ridge, the last of the orange light moved up the hill on the east, with the darker shadow climbing up after it. At the end only the tops of the last high trees were lit, and they looked as if they were burning. Then they faded and went out, and it was dusk. (71)

All of O’Brien’s works reveal his interest and respect for the natural world, and in this final novel he again uses beautiful descriptions to advocate this respect and the rejection of technology. Because Burden Valley is perhaps the last area able to

sustain life, it is fitting that each detail of the natural world be highlighted to show readers what would be missed if humanity continues to abuse its environment.

It is obvious that the natural world is revered once again in this novel, and in addition to presenting this dichotomy between technology and nature in a way similar to that of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, O'Brien further develops the search for a utopia that I will expand upon in the next chapter. Ann's life was very happy before the war, when she and her family lived in the already very rural and isolated valley, and O'Brien demonstrates the undesirable effect of man's use of technology to destroy nature. In this novel, people have gone too far and ignored the value of the natural world. However, now the earth, though most inhabitable land has been destroyed, has made room for a new potential Garden of Eden in Ann's isolated valley. Though Ann lives adequately in this idyllic valley, her paradise is endangered when Mr. Loomis, representative of technology, enters into her world and tries to control it. Her brave and optimistic decision to continue to search for a new opportunity for a peaceful life shows the continuous need to search for utopia.

## CHAPTER 6

### COMMUNITARIANISM AND THE SEARCH FOR UTOPIA IN *MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH* AND *Z FOR ZACHARIAH*

Clearly, all of O'Brien's works demonstrate a respect for nature and an awareness of the potential for destruction of the Earth via technology. Most of all, his novels demonstrate his interest in the natural world as opposed to the city and effectively portray a respect for the natural world within pastoral settings. Again, technology imposes on nature in the most destructive way, and the end of humanity, in O'Brien's final novel, is not a threat, but nearly an actuality. While O'Brien's novels address this fear of apocalypse or dystopia, the opportunity to find utopia also exists. Ellen is able to correct the small dystopia in *The Silver Crown*, and Fergus O'Neil discovers Dr. Schutz' plan before it can truly go into effect and cause mass destruction. But, in *Z for Zachariah*, Ann escapes Mr. Loomis and is hopeful of finding the paradise she nearly had, and in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, the rats actually pack up from a life of comfort and move into a society that promises happiness and the good life; therefore, the idea of utopia is most developed in these two novels. O'Brien's works emphasize values necessary for a utopian society, and specifically *Z for Zachariah* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* express how the solution lies in a communal society that emphasizes the ideals of communitarianism.

By examining the historical timeframe of these novels, as Jack Zipes suggests doing for fairy tales (“Liberating Fairy Tales for Children” 312), the tensions between the natural and the industrial throughout *The Silver Crown*, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, *A Report from Group 17* and *Z for Zachariah* can be explained. *The Silver Crown* draws from current events of the civil liberties movement of the 1960s, and *A Report from Group 17* reflects the skeptical attitude of society during the Cold War. O’Brien’s two most notable books reveal similar historical implications. These novels retain their entertainment value despite critics’ desire to apply political or social meaning to their pages; however, taking another look at these historical elements allows critics and readers alike to enjoy these stories from another perspective: as novels that utilize folk motifs and science fiction to make a strong social statement. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* specifically develop the search for a utopia through the communitarian tradition.

O’Brien does not take the stance that industrialization is necessarily an unwanted or corrupt thing within itself, as his works avoid denying all benefits of technology. After all, the rats still maintain the possibility of generating their own energy for electricity sometime in the future of their new utopia (*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* 174). Similarly, Ann Burden uses gasoline for the tractor, contemplates creating an electricity generator from the waterfall, puts together the oven, and begins to use the plow again in order to survive in *Z for Zachariah*.

Similarly, O’Brien does not seem to be condemning technology itself as evil, but seems to be pointing directly to humanity’s use of technology for inappropriate means such as war or greed. O’Brien himself says that it is not always easy to “separate good

from bad; they become deviously intertwined.” He is not against movies and television when the “programs are reasonably good,” and admits that there are thousands of children who would never pick up a book anyway, and there always were such children even before electronics (“Newbery Acceptance Speech” 348). He agrees that television can at least inform, and that the medium of movies and television does not necessarily wean real readers away from books (“Newbery Acceptance Speech” 348). O’Brien seems to take the same attitude with the telephone, because in *A Report from Group 17*, Fergus deliberately mentions that he wished, not for the first time, that there was a phone in the isolated cabin. Although the lack of the phone is deliberate because “it added to the sense of rustic isolation” and is a “pleasant feeling in ordinary circumstances,” the novel does not completely reject the idea or purpose of the technology, but instead values the peace and isolation that can come from the natural world (*A Report from Group 17* 143).

In addition to this, O’Brien seems to believe that evil, or humanity’s carelessness, is the source of man’s troubles (*Twentieth Century Children’s Writers* 949). This is especially obvious early in O’Brien’s works with the Hieronymus machine in *The Silver Crown*. It is not the technology itself that is destructive, but man’s use of technology for evil purposes that endangers the world by intentionally brainwashing society to commit destructive and murderous acts. The same is true in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, as the real fear comes from not only the plow, but also the risk of recapture by the scientists of NIMH. Also, the threat of apocalypse in *A Report from Group 17* and the aftermath of the nuclear war in *Z for Zachariah* are both caused by human use of science to destroy.

O'Brien's use of the children's tale to promote these political and social ideas is appropriate. As Zipes points out about fairy tales, after the onset of the Cold War, writers tended to introduce "endeavors purported to conserve humanity rather than the so-called civilizing process" ("Liberating Fairy Tales" 314). Using fantastical creatures (or in O'Brien's case, animals) is the perfect way to demonstrate the changeability of social relationships ("Liberating Fairy Tales" 316). Gose agrees, stating that animals can be used to "lay bare the underpinnings of our complex social relations" (5). *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* utilizes the qualities of folktale and animal story to reveal O'Brien's agenda, and *Z for Zachariah* promotes the same ideas through apocalyptic science fiction, which also encourages social change.

So why is there a deliberate dichotomy between technology and nature? While O'Brien may not be condemning technology completely, his work does, as Zipes suggests for fairy tales, "reflect a *process of struggle* against all types of suppression and authoritarianism and project various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia" ("Liberating Fairy Tales" 312). *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* accomplish just this "process of struggle." The movement away from technology and the city, along with an emphasis on respect for the environment, further stress the search for utopian community, which, with exploration into the socio-political movements occurring when these novels were written, show signs of influence from the 1960s revival of communitarianism.

Published in the 1970s, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* were written during a time of great political and social strife. By placing O'Brien's novel in the context of its history and the social and political issues of the 1960s, which is

known for experimenting with alternative lifestyles (Guarneri 464), we may be able to discern the reasons for the strong dichotomy between technology and nature in the novels. During this time, according to John W. Bennett,<sup>1</sup> there was a sharp rise of migration into commune societies, which contained a pattern of ideals and social arrangements and involved the desire to create a utopian society separate from the civilized world (Bennett 64). Communitarianism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a theory or system of social organization based on the creation of small self-governing . . . communities” (“Communitarianism”). The tradition of the communal society, in fact, has existed for twenty centuries, since the Qmran community in the Dead Sea (Bennett 64).

The trend has succeeded in that the message suggests “a hopeful vision of an alternative” (Bennett 64). The movement to a communal society is a basic feature of Western thought, and in the nineteenth century the “wilderness of America offered space and isolation” for these communal experiments (Bennett 67). Communal societies existed in every decade of the twentieth century in the rural parts of Georgia, Missouri, California, Pennsylvania, and, most directly related to O’Brien’s experiences, in upper New York State (Bennett 67), near where his country house was.

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<sup>1</sup> The philosophy of the communitarian tradition is not static, and throughout the years it has received different reactions from critics and several different definitions. In the past decade, critics have addressed the tradition as one that is more concerned with tyranny, social democracy, and liberalism. Bennett’s article, though not the most recent opinion on communitarianist societies, was written in the seventies, and reflects the attitude towards the movement at the same time O’Brien was writing. The argument is not whether Communitarianism is a useful and perfect method for achieving utopia, but whether O’Brien used the philosophy to suggest a change.

This fad has faded in and out of American history throughout the centuries, but during the 1960s the movement revived with philosophies borrowed from the transcendentalist philosophies of Henry David Thoreau and his experiences at Walden Pond, where many desired to live “the Waldenesque good life on the bare essentials” (“Communes”). Brook Farm, a communal society in New England founded by George Ripley in the mid-nineteenth century, enjoyed participants such as Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and philosopher Orestes Brownson. Alcott’s version of the communal society was carried out in his establishment, the Fruitlands, and in his mind, communitarianism “was the social extension of his perfectionist belief in education as an alternative to politics” (Thomas 665). Also appropriate to O’Brien’s themes of nature, Alcott was convinced that the “self sprang from divine origins in nature” (Thomas 664). Though these experiments often failed, the “belief in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of human kind, and the supremacy of insight over logic and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths” (“Encyclopedia of Literature” 1128) pervaded the literature of the American Renaissance.

O’Brien’s writing and themes do emphasize many of the transcendentalist attitudes toward the natural world. This is because “the roots of an environmentalist consciousness can be found in Romanticism and (in America) Transcendentalism” (Rahn 151). Also, because the revival of communitarianism in the 1960s sprung from the transcendentalist ideas of the mid-nineteenth century, O’Brien’s works reflect some of the same ideals.

In the 1960s, one element of the culture “was a genuine attempt to recreate that lost harmony through an ‘alternative lifestyle’” (Rahn 150). Based on the communal

experiments of the transcendentalist movement, in these communal societies, people “sought to escape from the tensions of acquisitiveness, amorphous freedom, and social hierarchy, toward the sharing of possessions, decisions, and brotherly love” (Bennett 64). The most basic desire of the communitarian tradition is to “work,” “love,” and “share” (Bennett 84), and O’Brien’s novels strongly reflect these values. In *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* the rats’ story and quest advocate these values by separating duties, providing services to their neighbor, Mrs. Frisby, and sharing the land with fellow creatures. In *Z for Zachariah*, Ann Burden’s escape from Mr. Loomis to a new society implies that she is on a similar search because she cannot encourage Mr. Loomis to work with her, love her, or share with her; furthermore, Mr. Loomis’ lack of ability to conform to these ideas destroys Ann’s potential Eden.

While O’Brien did not participate in one of these migrations to a communal utopian society, he did make a move that he considered very positive from the city to a rural farm. Also, O’Brien’s career with *National Geographic* magazine would have given him access to information about these increasingly popular communal societies, and perhaps ignited a desire to live in nature. Though he did not actually participate in these communal societies, the strong presence of natural elements and its conflict with industrialization and technology in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* are most likely a direct result of the socio-political ideas of the commune society erupting during the time these books were written.

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* is similar to *The Silver Crown* in that they fall into the folklore/fantasy genre, and are more appropriate for a younger audience. But this novel is also like *A Report from Group 17* because it deals with animal testing and

explores the science aspect of their transformation. All three focus on the duality of technology and nature in plot setting, character, and in language; however, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* presents an alternate solution in the search for the ideal communal society. The same is true of *Z for Zachariah*, which clearly highlights the pursuit of utopia in the face of dystopian threats. The search for utopia, perhaps, may be why these novels are so praised and recognized as the greater achievements.

Probably the first communal societies were monastic, and O'Brien draws on this idea in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. Nicodemus gets his idea for a utopia from a history book he reads in which he discovers:

the old civilizations fell apart and the only people who could read and write were the monks. They lived apart in monasteries. They led the simplest kind of lives, and studied and wrote; they grew their own food, built their own houses and furniture. They even made their own tools and their own paper. (159)

The rats claim that they wished to escape the luxury of the mansion, while praising the monks in monasteries for growing their own food and building their own furniture. This is perhaps the first indication that O'Brien is making a social and political statement about human nature and society, and this specific reference suggests that he is promoting the search for a utopia through the communal society.

O'Brien further perpetuates his social standpoint, as he clearly distinguishes humans from rats, and heightens the rats' desire to avoid being like men. In the chapter "The Toy Tinker" of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, O'Brien makes a subtle indication of his political agenda when the rats "realized that a rat civilization, if one ever

did grow up, would not necessarily turn out to be anything at all like a human civilization” (161). The rats, Nicodemus relates, after spending months at the Boniface Estate, decide:

None of us was sorry to move out of it. It had given us shelter, free food, and an education, but we were never really comfortable there. Everything in it was designed for animals who looked, moved and thought differently from the way we did. Also, it was above ground, and that never felt quite natural to us. (161)

Here O’Brien refers to humans as animals, and to the shelter of the mansion as something unnatural. In reference to the “Rat Race,” “a race where, no matter how fast you run, you don’t get anywhere,” Nicodemus declares, “it was a People Race, and no sensible rat would ever do anything so foolish” (170). Similarly, the communitarian society specifically sought out isolation and move to a simple, rural life to get away from the “rat race” of society for a while (Bennett 83).

But this emphasis on utopia does not end with *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. It is clear that Burden Valley in *Z for Zachariah* has the potential to be the new “Garden of Eden,” for the only two left on the earth are a man and young woman, supposedly alone on the planet in the only valley left full of life. O’Brien sets up the garden perfectly with reference to *The Bible Letter Book*, for since “A” is for Adam, the first man, the “Z” in *Zachariah* must stand for the last (75). Obviously O’Brien has created the potential for a new paradise, but this paradise fails for several reasons. If the rats’ community is representative of one communal society that works, Ann Burden’s farm is perhaps an example of one that fails.

Communitarian societies specifically emphasize morality and education and reject capitalism, and *all* of O'Brien's novels reveal a similar agenda. Within the communitarian tradition, many of the societies rejected institutions and churches, although the heart of the philosophy lies in Jesus' teachings. Despite this rejection, members of communitarian societies did stress a sense of morality and ultimately sought to return to "spontaneous worship" (Bennett 80), which O'Brien's works also encourage.

Morality first reveals itself in *The Silver Crown*. At the heart of the novel, the black crown represents totalitarian mind control that uses violence, while the silver crown represents free will. O'Brien obviously raises moral issues of brainwashing and teaching arson, weaponry, and cop killing, but he also establishes a focus on more personal morality as well. Ellen finds herself struggling in one instance of whether or not to take something that is not hers. She thinks, "it is not my apple juice. It belongs to somebody. I can't just take it" (46). When her thirst overcomes her, she decides to drink now, wait for the owner, and then pay him for it.

In *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, the rats experience a similar ethical struggle with the idea of stealing electricity and water from Farmer Fitzgibbon. Because in this book we are dealing with the animal world, there is a definite morality, but no organized religion or biblical references, which may be why the novel does not deal with a doomsday or Armageddon as do O'Brien's other books. And of course, morality is touched upon in *A Report from Group 17* by addressing kidnapping, physical abuse, brainwashing, animal testing and human testing. This more adult novel discusses the ethical implications of such criminal actions, and at least one of the villains (Georg Wolter) meets the consequences of his actions.

In *Z for Zachariah*, Ann is obviously a moral character, though her “devoutness” is vague. She attends church several times throughout the novel, if only to make herself feel better. The book itself is apocalyptic in nature, but the character of Ann is not specifically devout. On Sundays during the spring and summer she goes to church to read the Bible. Sometimes she chooses (she likes Ecclesiastes and Psalms), and sometimes she reads at random (37). She can play hymns on the piano “better than anything else” (73), and begins to feel homesick when she remembers going to Sunday School with her family before the war (74). She admits that church, for her, is “associated with normalcy” (198). But probably most telling of Ann’s morality is that she will not kill Mr. Loomis, even to protect her safety, and when it seems that she must shoot Faro, she cannot bring herself to do it. However, Ann makes the point to say about praying when she is helpless to cure Mr. Loomis:

I do not want to sound as if I am extremely religious, but I did not know what else to do, so I thought it might do him some good; maybe what I really thought was that it might do me some good. I cannot be sure. But I knew he needed help, and so did I. (119)

Ann spontaneously worships, does possess a clear morality, participates in prayer, and believes in a higher power, though no specific denomination is mentioned.

In addition to morality, the value of education is stressed in O’Brien’s works, especially reading. This emphasis is fitting in connection with the communitarian tradition, which emphasized study as one of the important activities beyond worship and manual labor (Bennett 74). O’Brien’s first book makes specific mentions of *Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, while his third makes several references to *Heidi*,

appropriately, a book “about a girl who lived in the mountains” (*A Report from Group 17* 22).

However, the greatest emphasis placed on reading as a vehicle for improvement occurs in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*. At the beginning of the chapter “The Air Ducts,” in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, Nicodemus states simply that “by teaching us how to read, they had taught us how to get away” (129). Also, when the rats discover the vacant Boniface Estate, they declare that the “greatest treasure of all” is the mountain of books of history, philosophy, and sciences (147). The rats also have made a life based on teaching their young, as we are shown by Isabella, who is proud to have moved from the Third Reader to the Fourth, and who indicates that reading is a vital element of their curriculum (90). Without reading, the rats would not have been able to free themselves from the laboratory, nor would they have been able to create the world to which they have grown accustomed. Though the theme of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* may circle around an escape from technology, O’Brien certainly makes clear the importance of reading as a vehicle for intelligence and society’s progress.

O’Brien again places importance on education and reading in *Z for Zachariah*. Ann Burden’s one desire before the apocalypse appears to be that she wished to become an English teacher, and the driving factor that pushes her to free herself from the constant oppression of Mr. Loomis is her reoccurring dream that a school full of children exists somewhere with no teacher to guide them. The importance of reading is emphasized because Ann spends much of her time longing for new books to read, making plans to perhaps get some new books from the adjoining city, Ogdentown – specifically,

Shakespeare, Dickens, and Hardy - and when Mr. Loomis deliberately destroys one of her favorites, *Famous Short Stories of England and America*, she mourns the loss of her most prized possession (231).

Another important value the communitarian tradition sought to achieve was the ability to minimize personal property and place less importance on possessions (Bennett 74). In *The Silver Crown*, Mr. Carver rejects capitalism by saying that he has “little need of money – just to buy clothes now and then, books, a few tools, and a sack of flour” (121). The issue of capitalism is only indirectly raised in *Z for Zachariah*, because the nuclear war has eliminated all need for money and fashionable materials like cars and clothes. Ann does realize, however, that at some point all of the food, clothes, and gasoline at the store will not be available to her, and that she must learn to survive by living off the land.

But *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* makes the most poignant statement about capitalism of all of O’Brien’s novels, and attempts to point to a solution. In the chapter, “The Crow and the Cat,” Jeremy the Crow is caught on a fence by a “silver-colored string, probably left over from a Christmas package” (22), and Mrs. Frisby chews through the string to free him before the cat attacks. This scene is similar to the Aesop’s fable, “The Lion and the Mouse Who Returned a Kindness,” and not only is the title of the chapter and the fable similar, but also the plot, in which a mouse sets a lion free from a trap (set by man) by chewing through the rope that binds him (Aesop 154). Though the structure of the scenes are similar, as the crow represents the lion of the fable, O’Brien opts to change the material of the trap, the rope becoming a string of tinsel, either for a Christmas tree or a Christmas package. Here Jeremy the Crow, like the lion, is caught by

a man's trap, but also is caught by a material which is linked to a holiday that has come to be widely known for encouraging capitalism, especially in America. By making this deliberate change, O'Brien is making a subtle reference to the danger of capitalism early in his career and early in his most successful book.

Besides stressing these values of communitarianism, in each of O'Brien's novels the characters experience a severe separation from community. This separation is important because the goal of the communal society, "first and foremost," is "an attempt to escape from the majority society" (Bennett 70). In *The Silver Crown*, Ellen endures a separation from her family, and a long journey to return to family once again. She meets Otto, who has lost his family twice. The first occurred when he was abandoned on the side of a road as a young child, but the second as he must leave Mrs. Fitzpatrick and travel with Ellen. Mr. Carver, whose wife and daughter died of a flu epidemic in his previous town, experiences a severe separation from family and moves to an isolated area. The escape to the valley is the main goal of the rats in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, but also the death of Mrs. Frisby's husband prior to the beginning of the novel, the threat of death for her son Timothy, and a short mention of the rats' separation from their families when they are captured and placed in NIMH also show separations from community.

Allison, obviously, is separated from her mother and brothers when she is kidnapped by Dr. Schutz in *A Report from Group 17*, and Ann is separated from her family when the war destroys all humankind, and she again separates from the last of the community when she leaves Mr. Loomis in *Z for Zachariah*. The separations from the community that all of O'Brien's main characters experience are reminiscent of O'Brien's

life, as he experienced the same sort of movement from society, explaining in some ways his attraction to the theme of communitarianism.

*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* develop other communitarianist ideals as well. Bennett asserts that the pattern of ideals common in communal societies are to:

- (1) share thy possessions; (2) share thy tasks and decisions with others;
- (3) minimize thy wants; (4) love thy brother, who is all men. (Bennett 64)

In the rats' society, these values are key. The rats share their possessions, or their knowledge of reading, with their children, and live together sharing food, electricity, and shelter. The community has similar policies to a democracy, and the duties are split up among members of the community. Mrs. Frisby runs across the "Schedule" and sees that groups are labeled and delegated to certain duties concerning the plow and carrying loads of oats, corn, wheat, and other miscellaneous seeds (84), showing the way they share tasks. Also, though Nicodemus is generally accepted to be the "leader," all rats join in the decision-making process.

In making the move to Thorn Valley, the rats are attempting to minimize their wants by eliminating their reliance on stolen electricity, food, and water. Also, the rats love their brothers and their neighbors, particularly noticeable in their aid to Mrs. Frisby by taking the time to move her house out of danger, as well as their desire to not have to steal from Mr. Fitzgibbon and his family. The rat community is woven together, which is clear when Isabella says that her mother does not like the Plan, but "she isn't deserting or anything" (*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* 86). The rats have a certain solidarity,

which is upset when Jenner and his group abandon the cave, the community, and the Plan.

In addition to this solidarity, the novel values the community over the individual, which is another quality of the utopian commune system (Bennett 64). Out of 115 rats, only 6 are named: Nicodemus, Jenner, Brutus, Arthur, Justin, and Isabella. Also, the book tends to waver ambiguously around death. Death is not regarded as the loss of an individual, but as a weakening of the community. Mrs. Frisby and her children mourn the death of their husband and father, but readers do not discover until far into the book that Jonathan died at the paws of Dragon, the cat. The Toy Tinker man's death is mysterious and his body is never discovered by men, and then the seven rats who are electrocuted are never truly identified as Jenner and the other rats of NIMH. The most intriguing instance of ambiguous death, however, occurs at the end of the novel, when two rats are killed in the cave by the exterminators. There are hints that one of them might have been Justin, which arouses our curiosity; we would like to know who should be mourned. Despite our desire to discover which of the rats have been sacrificed for the greater good, this fact is never revealed to us. This lack of information demonstrates that the deaths of those two rats are not the point, because the focus is primarily on the fate of the whole community. Lack of mourning for the dead individual acts as a way to emphasize the community, not the individual, and further perpetuates the ideals of a commune society.

The same values, of course, appear in *Z for Zachariah*. The qualifications to "share thy possessions" is at first difficult for Ann when Mr. Loomis appears on the farm, but she attempts to remember she will have to get used to the idea that "he considered the

valley as much his as mine” (*Z for Zachariah* 143). Though Ann tries to come to terms with this fact, and even tries to find a way to peacefully coexist in the valley, Mr. Loomis does not see nor treat the valley the same way. He begins to see Ann as his, the valley as his, and even Faro as his, when he ties him up and teaches him to track Ann. Slowly Mr. Loomis begins to take over the house (189), the tractor (204), the store (216), and Ann’s freedom (219), making it nearly impossible for her to live in the valley. Mr. Loomis’ extreme mistrust, also, causes him to be overly protective of the “safe suit,” which could have been even more beneficial if shared between the two of them.

Along with this desire to control, Mr. Loomis’ ability to “share thy tasks and decisions with others” is equally difficult for him. Even upon his recovery, Ann is still the one to do the plowing, the gardening, the fishing, and the milking, while Mr. Loomis sits and waits for her to bring him his half. Even when he is at full strength, he does not participate in several of the tasks required for the farm, nor does he allow Ann to participate in the decision-making. Mr. Loomis begins to take charge and becomes “disturbed” upon learning that Ann has not yet planted the field, and he becomes visibly upset when he learns that she had gone to church instead (142). Ann effectively “minimizes her wants” and learns to live without many of her “luxuries” when Mr. Loomis takes over the house, while Mr. Loomis continues to want to take possession of everything in the valley. He chains Faro (182), padlocks the store, tries to possess Ann when he attempts to rape her (175), and then attempts to “chain” her when he shoots her in the ankle.

When Mr. Loomis falls ill to the radiation, Ann “loves thy brother” by revealing herself and risking her safety to take care of him and nurse him back to health. Even in

her distrust and fear of Mr. Loomis, Ann knows she cannot bring herself to harm him. After everything he has done to her, the manipulation, the attempted rape, the shot to her ankle, and his motives in tracking her down, she still admits: “I know I could not kill him” (237). She is faced with the opportunity to leave the valley with his radiation suit and wagon without even having to confront him, but she resists the idea because she remembers his face during his illness and the sadness she felt when she thought he might die (243). And even though she leaves him in the valley, she leaves him with the promise that if she finds other people, she “will tell them about [him], and they may come” (247). Ann’s character leaves readers believing that she will stick to what she says, for she has been nothing but kind to Mr. Loomis, while he has shown none of the same compassion for her.

Sheila Schwartz believes that the end of *Z for Zachariah* shows that “even the only two people left in the world must make war on each other” (128); however, Ann wishes to be at peace with Mr. Loomis. His desire to have ultimate control makes the valley uninhabitable for Ann, and she leaves in self-defense and self-preservation, but does not “make war” on Mr. Loomis, who does not fit in the peaceful valley. If Mr. Loomis had been the type of character who came into the valley and was able to take on these tasks required of communal living, then perhaps Ann might have had the Garden of Eden that O’Brien sets up. However, Mr. Loomis’ inability to act within the ideals of the communal society makes the valley not the hopeful paradise that Ann has imagined, but instead a prison that she must escape. Ann thoroughly proves her ability to regard the community over the individual, but Mr. Loomis cannot. This inability is why the new “paradise” does not function to its potential.

Bennett's opinion of the communal society is that it is "not the heaven for which everyone seeks, but rather a clear demonstration of the continual need to search for that heaven" (64). Nicodemus carries this idea out himself, making plans for continuous movements to a more perfect society. He and Justin lead the escape from the laboratory, then from the Boniface Estate, and then from the cave, each time claiming that something just did not feel right, and "a feeling of discontent settled upon [them] like some creeping disease" (*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* 169). Nicodemus and the others, then, may be continuously searching for their paradise. We never know if they are happy or if they make it safely to Thorn Valley, but by the continuous feeling of a lack of satisfaction in the rats' life, it may be suggested that they will not be completely content at Thorn Valley either. The rats themselves seem to embody a "continual need to search" for paradise.

Similarly, Ann's bold escape with the radiation suit demonstrates further the "continual need to search" for utopia. Her hopeful dreams that someday she would marry and have children with Mr. Loomis are not childish fantasies, but a rational and determined effort on her part. She tries to learn more about him and his past in the effort to build intimacy, and when that fails, she tries to coexist with him peacefully. When both attempts are unsuccessful, she must leave to find the heaven for which she was searching.

O'Brien's own standpoint on political issues did not seem to be extremely liberal or extremely conservative, but seemed to straddle the line. He was neither for nor against television, does not completely reject technology, and his choice of genre does not sway to completely science fiction, nor completely fantasy, but is a mix of the two. Fitting to O'Brien's assumed position on political matters, communitarianism, by

definition, rejected “theories of political conservatives and the liberal concern for individual rights, advocating instead a recognition of common moral values, collective responsibility, and the social importance of the family unit” (“Communitarianism”). In each of O’Brien’s novels, he makes these values of main importance.

Interestingly, neither *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah* present the true utopian society, but like the looming apocalypse that threatens to be just around the corner, they show the possibility that utopia is just out of reach. Hopeful, however, is the idea that this utopia is attainable and real, and O’Brien provides some hints to achieving it in respect for the natural world, respect for animals, the avoidance of technology for evil purposes, an emphasis on morality and education, and by utilizing many of the ideals of the communitarian tradition.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT

In analyzing the themes of technology against nature as meaningful commentary on environmentalism, Robert C. O'Brien's contribution to science fiction and children's literature becomes clear. Through young adult literature as well as science fiction, two modes which have often been referred to as "escapist," but are more often revolutionary and progressive, O'Brien comments on environmentalism by using themes of the abuse of technology and the search for a utopian community. In all four of his works for young adults, O'Brien asserts that there is real danger involved when the industrial world violates the natural world, and that this invasion will lead to destructive and fatal effects on the earth for both nature and humanity.

Though the alternative that O'Brien presents seems to lead toward a communitarian society in especially *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*, this does not suggest that his solution is to reject technological society altogether, nor does this imply that O'Brien intends to direct his audience specifically to communitarianism. O'Brien himself says that "we may be happy that our society is not yet perfect. Still, we must not strive for imperfection; it is contrary to our nature" ("Newbery Award Acceptance" 347). Despite the model for utopia that O'Brien uses, it is important to realize that O'Brien joins authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin, or T.H. White, who, according to Ann Swinfen, "address themselves in

some way to the question of what makes a desirable society” (228). This inclination toward communitarianism is a way to describe the search for utopia in O’Brien’s works, and in order to find the ideal community, he places great emphasis on the natural world. O’Brien makes it obvious through his novels, his interviews, his speeches, and his lifestyle that he finds a great value in the natural world, and a great danger in the ability of technology to diminish the beauty and cleansing quality of nature. It seems most likely that O’Brien is attempting to draw humanity’s attention to the value of wildlife and wilderness surrounding us, and in situations such as a communitarianist society without distractions and surrounding technology, these wonders and beauties can be better perceived and experienced.

With each publication, O’Brien’s novels became more inclined to seriously address the ultimate destruction of the natural world. In *The Silver Crown*, Ellen stops the brainwashing from spreading across the major cities of the United States. In *A Report from Group 17*, Fergus is able to stop mass murder on the scale of the entire continent, and in *Z for Zachariah*, Ann Burden and Mr. Loomis are the only human beings left on Earth to deal with the destruction that has already occurred. *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* stands out from the others in that it concerns the animal world, a world of citizens who have only recently learned to use technology, have no desire to manipulate the natural world for their own purposes, and who are simply attempting to survive within it. The rats reveal a solution to the madness in that they clearly desire to escape to a utopian community removed from technology.

Only O’Brien’s second novel and fourth novel are praised and portray more developed themes, but there is a pattern to his publications. O’Brien experimented

with his writing, and first wrote two novels for children that blend science fiction and fantasy. After publishing *The Silver Crown*, he was better able with this experience to expand on his ideas for utopia in his second book for children, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. After publishing those two books, O'Brien began to write for an older audience, and in a style that is more science fiction than his previous two. In changing his intended audience, *A Report from Group 17* can be seen as a stepping stone to achieving the search for utopia that is better accomplished in *Z for Zachariah*. This process may help to explain the seeming inconsistency between O'Brien's novels.

*The Silver Crown* appears to refer to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which can be interpreted to reveal that the apocalypse is inevitable, because the utopia begins on the left, depiction of the current world in the middle, and the end of the world on the right, in reading order. However, if O'Brien interprets the painting as one in which our current world sits dangerously on the line between utopia and dystopia, with no inevitable conclusion but every opportunity to avoid apocalypse, then he is suggesting that readers can take control, the way Ellen does, and avoid certain disaster. The fact that this suggestion appears in O'Brien's first novel, and since his three following novels deal with very similar themes and issues, suggests that this subject obviously intrigues him. O'Brien reinterprets Bosch's painting in that current society is teetering dangerously between the two extremes. This idea, though not as obviously portrayed in his first novel, continues in each of his following publications, especially *Z for Zachariah*, where Ann's valley is so very

near becoming the new Garden of Eden, and yet also so very close to another dystopian situation.

Many aspects of O'Brien's novels can be analyzed, from his ability to incorporate the female heroine into a genre that was previously considered inappropriate for girls, to his penchant for drawing from real events, real ideas, and real controversial issues as well as any notable science fiction author. At the same time, O'Brien keeps his novels, except perhaps, *A Report from Group 17*, in the realm of children's literature by using didactic techniques, a heavy weight on moral aspects, and, in the tradition of such classic children's novels as *The Jungle Book* or *Black Beauty*, a strong pull toward maintaining kindness for animals and respect for the natural world.

Children's exposure to the natural world through literature as well as personal experience can have profound effects emotionally, physically, psychologically, and even spiritually on an individual for the remainder of his or her life. Eventually, "green" works for children may affect the world's ecological reality. Rahn says that the "long-term effects of children's books, on a single child or a whole society, are always hard to pin down and impossible to quantify" (161). With each children's book that advocates a respect for the natural world, a kindness for animals, an awareness of man's misuse of technology, and an interest in betterment of society as a whole, there is still hope that the world will improve for all generations to come.

O'Brien has contributed four novels that are unique to children's literature because he effectively incorporates the modern world into pastoral tales, and at the same time, inserts a compassion for wildlife and animals within works that are also

considered science fiction. Science fiction has often been respected for its ability to comment on environmentalism and man's potential to destroy the earth, but O'Brien does this in a way that emphasizes the value of wildlife and the natural world not only for continued survival, but also to make life more fulfilling and enjoyable. Animal testing, pastoral settings, and the way humans use technology to endanger our world are not new subjects, but O'Brien presents this commentary without completely condemning technological progress. Instead, O'Brien emphasizes the devastating effect this progress can have when people demonstrate a lack of respect for the natural world.

O'Brien's most famous works, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and *Z for Zachariah*, develop a solution to the looming dystopia facing our world by searching instead for utopia. To return to a perfect society, we must acknowledge and take care of the natural world, avoid the misuse of technology and science to control nature, learn to live peacefully with one another, and maintain societies that can return to the "simple life," as those in communitarian societies have throughout history. O'Brien's ultimate message is that our world is not necessarily destined for apocalypse, but that to find the utopia for which we long, we must, like the rats of NIMH and Ann Burden, continue the search for it.

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