

The Books That Rock the Cradle

Libertarian themes in children's fiction

Stuart Anderson

YOU ARE 12 YEARS OLD, and you're watching your father cradle an infant in his arms. He works for a special branch of the government tasked with population control and ensuring the health of those deemed "normal." He weighs the infant on a scale, then places the baby on a blanket. As you watch, he fills a needle with a clear liquid, then plunges the syringe into the baby's skull. The newborn squirms, wails faintly, and dies. You have just watched your father commit murder in the name of controlling the size and quality of the population. What would you do?

The scenario comes from Lois Lowry's 1993 novel *The Giver*, which won the prestigious Newberry Medal for children's fiction. If it doesn't strike you as the usual children's fare, you're right.

Many people perceive children's books as the most politically correct genre in all publishing. Look through the kids' section in your local bookstore, and you'll see aisle upon aisle of vanilla. These days, celebrities like Madonna and Jay Leno produce anodyne children's books carefully manufactured to contain nothing offensive to anyone. Although books for older readers will tackle serious issues, these will usually be "safe"

themes—say, combating prejudice.

But not every book for young readers fits those stereotypes. During the last 12 years, two popular, critically acclaimed authors have written series that combine the familiar themes of rebellion and coming of age with some of the most subversive story lines seen in juvenile fiction. The novels of Lois Lowry, 68, and Margaret Peterson Haddix, 41, are thoroughly skeptical of the idea that the state should be an all-powerful benefactor. They have gained a large and loyal following, striking a receptive chord in a market not normally associated with anti-government themes.

The Giver tells of a futuristic society where the government directs births, marriages, career choices, food distribution, and more. Women are selected to give birth and their offspring are raised for one year in state-run day care centers. The children are then distributed to families, with each allowed only two kids—one boy and one girl. The Committee of Elders makes all decisions for individuals, who are heavily medicated to manage mood and desire.

A boy named Jonas is selected to train as a privileged adviser to the Committee of Elders, learning to absorb

and differentiate good and bad emotions so he can recommend the best course to maintain social control. At one point Jonas, still naive, says, "We really have to protect people from wrong choices." His mentor, The Giver, an adviser to the Elders who has turned into a silent rebel, does not agree, and replies to Jonas with irony, "It's safer." It becomes clear to Jonas that making his own choices about how to live his life is anything but safe. He nevertheless decides to act after witnessing the government brutally wield its power to deal with those who dissent or allegedly impose a burden on society, such as the elderly or underweight infants.

The Giver is taught in many schools, public and private, around the country. The American Library Association ranked it the 11th most frequently challenged book by parents during the 1990s, having been banned for a time by the Bonita Unified School District in Southern California's Inland Empire and elsewhere, despite the fact that the book contains no profanity or explicit sexual references.

Lowry believes *The Giver* is best used in the seventh or eighth grades, and says some of the complaints have come from parents of younger kids being taught the book. Some of the

objections, she says, come from those who are at least subconsciously reacting to the depiction of a boy who, when faced with a set of rules established for seemingly benevolent purposes, rebels and tries to change the rule book. Her rebuttal? That when faced with immoral leadership, “children have the right—and sometimes even the responsibility—to rebel.”

Lowry got the idea for the book growing up in post-war Japan. Instead of experiencing life in a Japanese city as she hoped to do, her family lived in an enclosed faux-American city, complete with its own stores and movie theater. Years later, when she asked her parents why they did this, they told her it was to make the family feel safer. “I always resented the benevolent attempt to create comfort that takes away the opportunity

and the richness of diversity that is out there,” she says. The world of *The Giver* is a place where society’s ills—crime, extreme poverty, divorce—are removed, but when you lift up the rock, Lowry says, you see the price paid. It’s a comment on the “terrible compromises we’re in danger of making to rid ourselves of [social problems] and the need to be vigilant.”

Through the end of 2000, *The Giver* ranked as the 63rd best-selling children’s book of all time, according to *Publisher’s Weekly*, having sold more

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than 6.5 million copies in paperback. Movie rights have been sold, and the book has been translated into 21 languages.

Lowry followed *The Giver* with a sequel of sorts, *Gathering Blue* (2000), which presents a different community controlled by another group of wise men determined to impose their vision of how everyone else should live. It is a society where Kira, a girl with a twisted leg, must defend herself in a rudimentary court proceeding or be put to death as a burden on the community.

Kira turns out to be a skilled weaver, and she is allowed to live so the government can use her abilities. She grows to understand the leaders, known as “guardians”: “The guardians with their stern faces had no creative power. But they had strength and cunning, and they had found a way to steal and harness other people’s powers for their own needs.”

Paperback sales of *Gathering Blue* have reached 800,000.

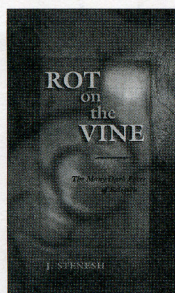
A surprising third book, *Messenger*, published in 2004, connects characters from both *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*. Lowry portrays a land that serves as a refuge for those who escape persecution, including from the societies described in the previous two books. It is a place where those who are different can live and thrive in freedom. But something changes in the people. They begin to care primarily about themselves, their personal appearance and petty wants, forgetting their humble origins and the welcome they received in this new land. These people, who would not be there but for the openness displayed to them or their parents, crowd a community meeting and say they no longer want to accept newcomers to their village: “Our school is not big enough to teach their children; only our own.... They can’t even speak right.... We’ve done it long enough.” And finally: “Close the village! Close the border!” *Messenger* suggests that once people have achieved their own security they have few qualms about denying opportunity and security to others.

Margaret Peterson Haddix’s series of books deals with the frightening effects of population control, describing a future where the government hunts down children born beyond the two-child-per-family limit. Using eugenics and population control as literary devices to warn against modern society’s encroachment on the individual is not new. They’re not often deployed, however, in novels for the young.

The first installment, *Among the Hidden* (1998), won an American Library Association Best Book for

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**Rot
on the
Vine**
*The Many Dark
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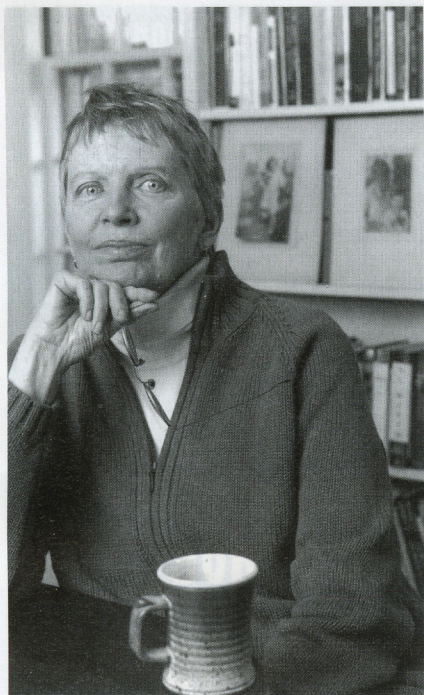
*A unique blend of fact and fiction
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to the point of recklessness, engaging in online chats and nascent activism with other third children. She teaches Luke to question authority and derides the government at every turn. Luke learns that Jen is more than mere bluster when she asks him to attend a protest rally she has planned with other third children in front of “the President’s House.” Part of Luke wants to go, but he’s too worried that a public demonstration would be fraught with peril.

Parents should note that this book is hardly a Disney film with cute kids easily besting the grown-ups. After days go by without hearing from Jen, a worried Luke comes upon Jen’s father. He relates to Luke what happened at the rally: “They shot her. They shot all of them. All forty kids at the rally, gunned down right in front of the President’s house. The blood flowed into his rosebushes. But they had the sidewalks scrubbed before the tourists came.”

The aftermath of the protest means

Luke can no longer hide in safety with his parents, and must instead go

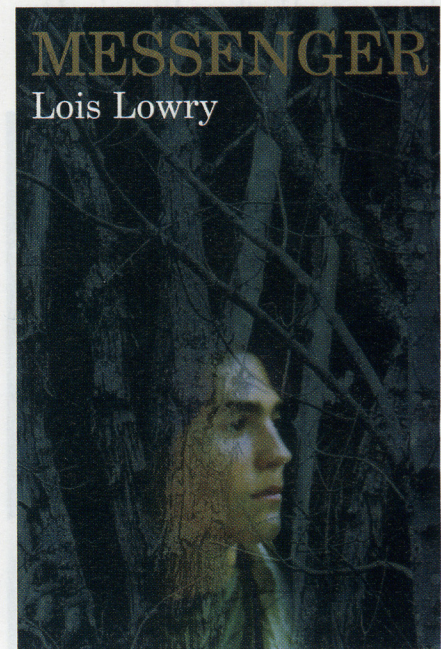
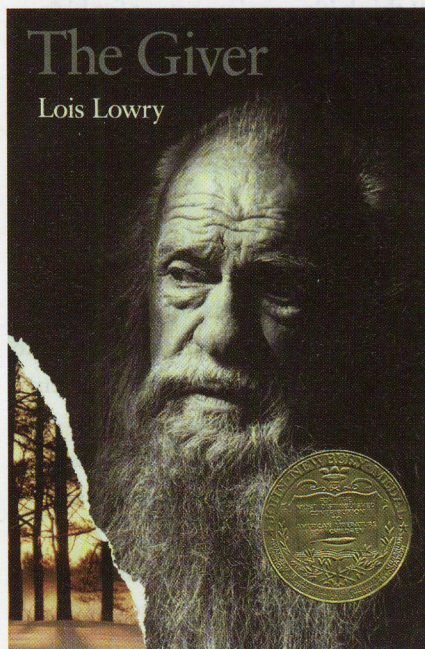
to a school formed by dissident adults to protect the identities of third children. The seven-part series—Haddix has just completed the final two—follows Luke and other kids as they cope with betrayal and the fear of government authorities, moving from battling to stay alive to sowing the seeds of rebellion.

Haddix says the idea for *Among the Hidden* came after discussing with her husband whether to have a third child themselves. She started thinking about the one-child policy in China and its impact on individuals and families. As research, she read Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 book *The Population Bomb*, in which Ehrlich stated: “The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” Haddix notes that she read the book already years past the deadline for that dire prediction, so it was easy to take Ehrlich’s warnings with a grain of salt.

In popular works, particularly movies, environmentalists are often

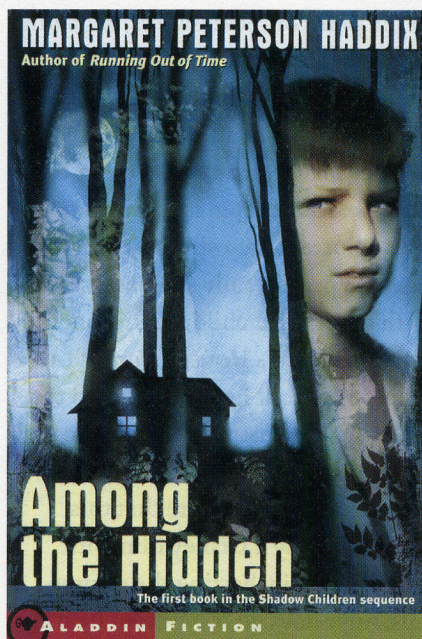
Young Adults award. It’s the story of Luke, a 12-year-old boy who must hide to avoid detection as a “third child,” while his two older siblings live a normal life. Haddix establishes the story’s tone on the second page, relating Luke’s thoughts: “At twelve he knew better, but sometimes still pictured the Government as a very big, mean, fat person, two or three times as tall as an ordinary man, who went around yelling at people, ‘Not allowed!’ and ‘Stop that!’” In Haddix’s world, children and adults fear the government, rather than view it as a solution to their problems.

The fear is for good reason. *Among the Hidden* introduces early on the dreaded Population Police, who monitor phones and computers, and possess unlimited authority for search and seizure. The children they apprehend are executed. This frightening context is tempered by the down-to-earth portrayals of Luke and his neighbor Jen, another third child. While Luke knows little of the outside world except that he is forbidden to participate in it, Jen is worldly



portrayed as selfless do-gooders fighting evil corporate executives for the good of society. (Think Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*.) Given the fears of overpopulation still found in certain segments of the environmental movement, it shouldn't be surprising that Haddix has a more skeptical view. In her book *Running Out of Time* (1995), a young girl comes upon a man to whom she later refers as "the fat environmentalist." The man says to her: "It's not like I care that much about losing weight. It's for my wife. She keeps asking, 'Isn't there something hypocritical about being a fat environmentalist?' Using up all the world's resources?"

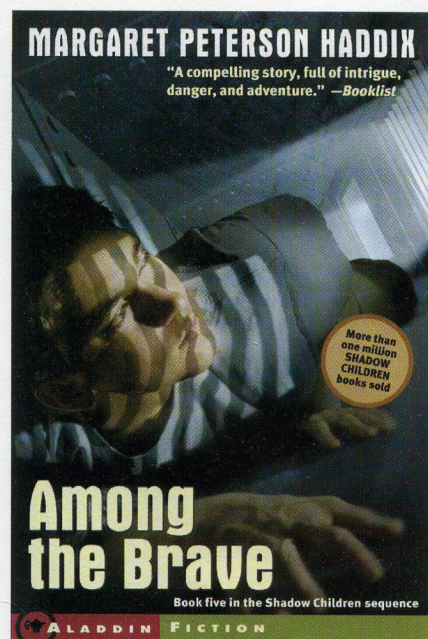
In that novel's clever premise, eugenicists turn a Williamsburg-like tourist attraction into a virtual prison. They plan to sacrifice the inhabitants, using an epidemic, for medical research purposes, supposedly to help humanity. The young Jessie must escape this fabricated 1840 world and find help in modern America, or else her family and friends may die. She comes to understand the danger posed by those determined to impose their ideas for how to live on the rest of us.



The *Among the Hidden* series has sold more than 800,000 books, making it one of Simon and Schuster's best-selling children's titles each year, according to company spokesperson Tracy van Straaten. For parents, perhaps the strongest part of Haddix's books is her willingness to be blunt about two inescapable truisms: People in power sometimes lie, and things presented as "facts" may not reflect how the world actually works. "I think it's very important for kids to learn critical thinking skills," she says. She declines to state any political alignment. (Lowry, a resident of Massachusetts, says she voted for John Kerry.)

There is enough information in Haddix's books to ensure that young readers understand that it is not necessary to curtail population growth to feed people or save the environment. Moreover, the forged documents prevalent in her novels caution readers about the misuses of national ID cards.

While it is often difficult to pinpoint the impact of specific books, with so many copies sold and avail-



able in libraries, it's clear that Lois Lowry and Margaret Peterson Haddix are exposing millions of children to ideas vital to the functioning of a free society. They offer young readers a world where individuals need not be sacrificed for the sake of those who quest to expand both the reach of government and their own personal power.

But what makes the work of Lowry and Haddix so effective is that neither writes to achieve a specific political end. In fact, in conversation neither seems political at all. Instead, they want to tell stories that encourage young readers to question what they're told, especially if the information is presented as part of a vision that requires individuals to give up their liberties in the name of safety or equality. It's a lesson many adults could learn as well. ■

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