# Forever in the Postcolonial Process of Growing Up: Change and Changelessness in Christopher Koch's *Bildungsroman*-Inspired Novels

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**Abstract:** *Bildungsromane* are often debut or early novels by writers who relate part of their youthful experiences by means of an archetypal growing-older-and-wiser narrative in which the adolescent theme is paired with other concerns such as growth, identity and independence. This article examines the strong *Bildungsroman* streak which pervades half of Koch's multifaceted novels by highlighting the main characteristics of the genre. The discussion of the transformation element in these novels, of tensions between change and changelessness, and of the writer's conceptual use of metaphors, will draw attention to Koch's postcolonial project.

**Keywords:** formation, transformation, *bildungsroman,* cognitive literary theory, postcolonialism, psychology of fiction.

It is not uncommon for young writers to bid farewell to their youth by modelling their first novels on *Bildungsromane*; hence the fact that debut and early novels by Australian writers often relate the story of a character whose experiences are largely modelled on their author's youth. Among Australian coming-of-age debut novels are Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901), Seaforth MacKenzie's *The Young Desire It* (1967), Barry Oakley's *A Wild Ass of a Man* (1967), David Ireland's *The Chantic Bird* (1968), David Malouf's *Johnno* (1975), Gabriel Carey and Kathy Lette's *Puberty Blues* (1979), Sue Woolfe's *Painted Woman* (1989) and Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* (1993), Andrew McGahan's *Praise* (1995) and more recently Belinda Burns's *The Dark Part of Me* (2006). In these growing-older-and-wiser fictions, the exploitation of the adolescent theme is often allied with a cluster of closely related concerns such as growth, identity, independence, progress and transformation. This article examines Christopher Koch's four *Bildungsroman*-influenced novels—*The Boys in the Island* (1958), *Across the Sea Wall* (1965), *The Doubleman* (1985), and *Lost Voices* (2012)—which constitute half of his fictional output.

While Christopher Koch fully embraced the *Bildungsroman* tradition with *The Boys in the Island*, his debut novel which fits squarely into the subgenre, it is noticeable that he was less obviously committed to the "formation novel" in *Across the Sea Wall*, *The Doubleman*, and *Lost Voices*—to the point that "*Bildungsroman*-inspired" would be a better description. Nevertheless, the first two sections below will discuss the formal features of the *Bildungsroman* in Koch's novels and the ways in which the characters become transformed in the course of the narrative. It will be argued that a strong *Bildungsroman* streak runs through these novels, and that Koch's postcolonial literary project is structured around tensions between change and changelessness and metaphorical conceptualisations of growth.

## The Formal Features of the *Bildungsroman* in Koch's Novels[1]

[1] Part 1 and 2 of this article discuss *Lost Voices* in relation to Koch's three earlier *Bildungsroman*-inspired novels. For detailed discussion of the *The Boys in the Island*, *Across the Sea Wall*, and *The Doubleman*, see the *Bildungsroman* section in Vernay, *Water from the Moon* (22–33).

Originally coined by Professor Karl Morgenstern in 1809, the term *Bildungsroman* was only developed into a new genre in his 1819 lecture, in which he opposed the epic to the novel. This label inspired by? his critical analysis of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) was initially used for narratives based on the experiences of a youthful—though generally biophysically mature—straight male protagonist. [2] After going through a process of transformation, the protagonist becomes aware of certain realities at the end of what turns out to be an illusory quest. Developmental novels of this kind often explore psycho-emotional changes, perceived as some form of movement towards completeness, or maturation into adulthood. Rebekka Horlacher notes that:

> the term *Bildungsroman* is itself difficult to define: the distinctions between novels of formation, novels of education, novels of development and novels of *Bildung* are imprecise …. Despite their differences, they all focus on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood that leads to a change in his or her character. (Horlacher 15)[3]

Christopher Koch's male characters match the archetypal profile of the *Bildungsroman* protagonist. Koch began to explore the theme of adolescence with *The Boys in the Island*, a coming-of-age story told in the third-person, which relates the early childhood and adolescence of Francis Cullen from the age of four to his young adulthood. This Tasmanian boy grows out of the many illusions he had been harbouring, after two tragic deaths have put him in a daily, mundane frame of mind. In *Across the Sea Wall*, Robert O'Brien is already of age when the novel opens, even though he reflects that "twenty-three is a peculiar age, … you are not quite a man, not a boy. ... He was still safe; he was not yet old" (57). Initially portrayed as *homo suburbiensis* par excellence, O'Brien breaks off his engagement with Christine and separates himself from a dreary urban existence by embarking on the vessel *Napoli* with his adventurous friend James Baden. Koch's fourth novel, *The Doubleman*, reads like a modern fairy tale as it gives an account of the various events which have punctuated the life of Richard Miller, beginning with his pre-adolescence and moving to the prime of his life, as he approaches thirty by the end of the book. Like Francis Cullen, Miller creates an imaginary, enchanting, but deceptive world with the help of fairy tales, a toy theatre, dreams and the media world, after he contracts poliomyelitis at the age of nine, and the illness confines him to his bed and a wheelchair. In the first and third part of *Lost Voices*, readers are presented with an account of Hugh Dixon's adolescence through reminiscences of his life from age 11 to 22. Looking back at his past, Hugh explores the lives of the charismatic male figures in his family, particularly his father Jim and great-grandfather Martin.

By and large, the protagonists of Koch's formation novels all anticipate the arrival of an event which will upset their habitual way of life—some revelation which will take them beyond the ordinary. Their expectations come as a result of loneliness, motionlessness, and routine, all of which have put the characters in a state of boredom. As with *The Boys in the Island*'s teenaged Francis Cullen, who is strongly aware of Tasmania's isolation, it is boredom which prompts another Tasmanian, Hugh Dixon, to dream of some form of human and geographical otherness:

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[2] The *Bildungsroman* character's gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation eventually became more diversified in literature, thus aiming at developing a more inclusive representation of real-life demographics. Jane Austen's female *Bildungsromane* were among the first novels to challenge this canon emerging in the nineteenth century.

[3] The terms "developmental novels," "education novels," "formation novels" and *Bildungsromane* will therefore be used synonymously in the course of this article.

> I was trapped in the hallway's bland afternoon, where nothing finally happened, and the coloured lights shimmered on the wall; and I didn't know what to do. I was only freed by the melodious chiming of the mantel clock in the sitting-room: a sound that told me that Time was continuing after all, and that I was free to go: to escape. (*Lost Voices* 5)

Similarly, a sense of boredom encourages Robert O'Brien to reject his tedious suburban life in *Across the Sea Wall* and introduces bedridden Richard Miller to a new enchanting world of fantasies in the form of storytelling, playful activities and dreaming in *The Doubleman*.

Koch's *Bildungsroman* protagonists harbour illusions, based for the most part on hopes, ideals, and high expectations that might elevate their lives, or related to ambitious goals which can hardly ever be met. Francis is caught up in his fantasies of belonging to an imaginary place; Robert wishes to be given a new lease of life by turning away from his unexciting routine; Richard longs for a successful acting career at a time when he is reduced to eking out a living from minor performances, while Hugh, an aspiring artist, secretly hopes to succeed as a painter but is employed as a book illustrator:

> I still intended to try and earn a living as an illustrator, but my ultimate ambition was to paint. I'd spoken about this to no-one except Walter Dixon, and didn't intend to declare it to anyone else or to try and exhibit until I had reason to be confident of my talent. Meanwhile, my final aim remained secret. (*Lost Voices* 288–289).

The call for otherness translates into the search for an actual and/ or imaginary location. In *The Boys in the Island* and *The Doubleman*, the unrewarding here and now is challenged by a seductive fantasied otherness of this kind—referred to respectively as "Otherland" (*The Boys in the Island* 36) and "Otherworld" (*The Doubleman* 134)—whose charms and strength lie in the unprovable quality of its existence. Christopher Koch would later admit that "Since I was a very small child I have been convinced that the world of appearances is just that—that there is another reality, an Otherworld if you like, between us and the mundane world" (qtd. in Masson, "Interview with Christopher Koch" 73). Elsewhere, the author specifically defines the Otherland as "a region of the imagination that doesn't exist in this world" (qtd. in Hulse 18), yet Sophie Masson contends that it is a place grounded in reality:

> Both in his creative and his non-fiction work Koch frequently evoked what he called "the Otherland," which he depicted as a liminal, ambiguous, destabilising but nevertheless very real and potent presence only thinly veiled by the everyday world. This Otherland is not the same in all his fictions, but is always part of an actual place, whether that be Java in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Hobart and Sydney in *The Doubleman*, Tasmania, Vietnam and Cambodia in *Highways to a War*, and Ireland and Tasmania in *Out of Ireland*. It is this sense of the "Otherland" below the surface, a fairy tale, mythical realm beyond logic or explanation, which gives his work its distinctive and particular power. And in *The Doubleman*, this motif, set within a vividly evoked real world, complete with precise period detail, transforms the Piper figure into one which could easily appear in a Hobart lane, yet which loses none of its uncanny potency. (Masson, "Fairy Tale Transformation," par. 21)

In *Across the Sea Wall*, Asia's exoticism epitomises a dreamed-of location for Robert O'Brien, who "was looking for a special place: a place repeated in many ways, multiform, but always

instantly recognisable, because it would be undeniably *other*: existing in a climate of otherness" (67). In *Lost Voices*, though the action is largely confined to Tasmania, the call for otherness insidiously colours the narrative through Hugh Dixon's confession: "At nineteen, I half-believed love might be found in such a house: behind those glowing windows, in that last spellbound suburb *where an unknown land waited behind the hills*" (310; emphasis added).

Journeys—whether on passenger-liners or on foot, by car, bicycle, or plane—allow Koch's characters to escape social strictures and their home environment and emancipate themselves from the grip of their families (even though family relations are, by and large, underrepresented, or scantly depicted in Koch's *Bildungsroman*-inspired novels). To say that family associations are not at the forefront of Christopher Koch's fiction is to put it mildly. Koch himself has admitted to having no interest in "writing about family associations." He goes on to say that

> It never occurred to me that family bonds were not as important as friendship. I suppose that if you write about anybody's life, it's the association with other people that matters, once they've moved beyond the family circle, once they're adults. (qtd. in Vernay, "Repetition and Colonial Variation on the Europe Theme" 116).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the presence of the family becomes more conspicuous in the most recent of these texts, *Lost Voices*, where Hugh's father, Jim Dixon, portrayed negatively as a quick-tempered man with a gambling problem, stands in sharp contrast to Hugh's erudite great-uncle Walter, who takes on the role of mentor and benefactor.

Questing implies both geographical movement and a change of environment in the form of a physical or psychological escape, deriving from the claustrophobic suffocation generated by confinement or entrapment. The dynamics of freedom and constriction are pervasive in Koch's work and square well with a shrewd observation by the French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto, who has noted that in education novels, initiation cannot occur without some form of displacement. She observes that some form of uprooting or confinement is responsible for triggering the liberating crisis, which in turn leads to the place of initiation (Dolto 56).[4] Subverting the Romantic cliché of protagonists who simultaneously discover nature and themselves, the peregrinations of Koch characters occur in urban contexts: Francis bitterly discovers industrialised Melbourne; Robert edges his way into India's crowded cities; Richard (with the exception of an episode at the Bradys' farm) catches a glimpse of Sydney's city life following his seven-year stay in Melbourne; while first-person narrator Hugh recounts his experience of 1950s Hobart.

Each initiatory step in *The Boys in the Island* and *The Doubleman* drags the protagonists out of their illusions by fits and starts and brings them to opt for a less naive conception of life, thus experiencing a transition from innocence to experience. Nowhere is this process more clearly revealed than in *The Boys in the Island*, when readers become aware of what anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identifies as the liminal stage (11). This phase includes a series of rites of passage (the discovery of sexuality, the boozy excursions and parties, the racing car, the first kiss with Heather Miles) construed as acts of transgression which enable the young Tasmanian Francis to make headway in the adult world. In *Lost Voices,* Hugh's rites of passage have been omitted from the narrative on the grounds that Hugh is giving us

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[4] "dans les romans d'apprentissage … l'initiation ne s'opère pas sans un déplacement dans l'espace. C'est le déracinement ou l'enfermement qui déclenchent la crise libératoire. Le dépaysement (grandes vacances, cures), ou la clôture (internat, chambre de malade) mène au lieu d'initiation" (Dolto 56).

a memoir, rather than an autobiography. … The reader is thus spared details of other youthful friendships, [the narrator's] time at Art School, and [his] first erotic adventures with girls: exchanges, like so many in the 1950s, which led to much sensual pleasure and moist frustration, and usually fell short of consummation. (293)

Added to these key features is the central character's transformation process, which is the driving force behind these growing-older-and-wiser stories. In most cases, epiphany, disillusion and loss lie beneath the brittle surface of the ontological journeys of Koch's characters, functioning as pivotal elements in their transformation.

**Transformation in Characters Following Epiphany, Disillusionment and Loss**
It cannot be denied that Koch's *Bildungsroman* protagonists lose their illusions and gain a sense of maturity through epiphanies that occur at various stages of their epic adventures. Derived from the Greek, *epi* (on) and *phanein* (shine), an epiphany is to fiction what Aristotle's *anagnorisis* is to tragedy, namely the crucial moment when, for a character, sight becomes insight. Epiphanies occur stylistically through parallax which sheds light on new information allowing the character, and consequently the readers themselves, to suddenly attain clarity of vision. Slavoj Žižek defines parallax as "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background) caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight" (Žižek 17). In a way similar to that in which readers of short stories are invited to renew their interpretation of the plot line after the pivotal twist, *Bildungsroman* protagonists are prompted to reread, in a new light, the string of events they have gone through.

Traditionally placed at the end of narratives, as in *The Boys in the Island*, but nonetheless at the core of stories, epiphanies provoke an epistemological shift in perspective. For instance, after Shane Noonan's suicide and George's accidental death, Francis Cullen realises that life is no game, but quite the reverse—on two counts. First, it is to be taken seriously and therefore must not be toyed with. Second, life—which is in a more general sense taken as a byword for reality—would, as Sigmund Freud has it, be opposed to playful activity. *The Doubleman* is a doubly subversive text in the sense that the epiphany not only manifests itself halfway through the novel, but it comes after Richard has voiced his disillusionment. In this it resembles *Across the Sea Wall*, where the protagonist's epiphany is only made possible with the help of a shrewd outside observer—fellow traveller Michael Maleter, who diagnoses Robert as "an emotional dependent" (129). Hugh Dixon, the first-person narrator of *Lost Voices*, also needs a third party to stimulate an epiphany. Here the role is played by Walter Dixon, who offers an insightful analysis of Hugh's love affair with Moira Doran: "You're an artist, and artists can't be relied on, especially young ones. They're flighty and unpredictable and self-centred. It's the nature of the beast. She'll have realised that of course" (379).

After their enchanting interlude, insight develops, challenging the characters' simplistic vision of life until they adopt a more critical outlook. Koch's *bildungsroman* characters are often disillusioned by their first-hand experiences, which systematically defeat their high adolescent expectations of profound social relationships, enhanced personal identity, as well as of personal growth and development. Their disillusionment ranges from unhappy love affairs and disappointing friendships, or failure to start a new life, to the disintegration of dreams they held dear. Reality in Koch's *Bildungsroman*-inspired narratives often comes across as a bitter pill to swallow; indeed, the characters often experience a painful and lingering sense of ontological loss after their sudden epiphanies. *The Boys in the Island*, for example, classically ends with

the Wordsworthian loss-of-innocence motif added to the nostalgic sense of a past golden age, which Francis will have to renounce in order to adapt to the adult community. In keeping with this Judeo-Christian ideology, which links the loss of innocence to the acquisition of knowledge, growing up is seen as a matter of accepting the burden of responsibilities and distinguishing good from evil.

Interestingly, Joseph Slaughter points out that *Bildung* is "a notoriously untranslatable word that denotes image and image making, culture and cultivation, form and formation" (Slaughter 1409). *Bildungsromane*, which roughly translates as "formation novels," go *beyond* the simple idea of formation, as they imply a *trans*-formation in the protagonist at some stage through knowledge and insight, which are bound to be the logical outcome of the character's trials, and provide evidence of self-transformation. While the observant reader will surmise that Francis has rounded off his education by the end of his adventures, Robert's transformation is announced from the outset—a narrative strategy that turns *Across the Sea Wall* into "a plot of predestination" (Todorov 65). While it takes an outsider to point out the transformation that occurs in these first two novels, in *The Doubleman* it is the central character himself who acknowledges the change, while the sudden shift of interest in Robert Wall's fate in the third section of *Lost Voices* deprives readers of detailed evidence of Hugh's transformed self.

The transformation comes through the epistemological maturation of the young characters, whose ontological journeys become allegorical of their cognitive and emotional development. Of *Across the Sea Wall*, Koch once stated that he "wanted to put a man, again of rather ordinary nature, into a journey which would pull him inside out" (qtd. in Hulse 20). Gradually, by "charting inward journeys" (Koch, *Crossing the Gap* 152), the *Bildungsroman* symbolically segues into a Socratic quest in which an arduous geographical search stands as a metaphor for the inner spiritual journey. The male protagonist's separation from his birthplace epitomises a departure from his earlier self and initiates an encounter with otherness that marks the return to the new-found strengthened self. This three-stage pattern aligns with the ontological theory propounded by French philosopher Daniel Sibony in *Entre-deux. L'origine en partage.* Put simply, an origin only materialises when it is lost. It is only a starting-point, which it is necessary to leave in order to possess.

While a major trait of *Bildungsroman* narratives in general, this literary nomadic aesthetics is also bound up with the question of emancipation from the paternalistic over-attention received in patriarchal ex-colonies. Paternalistic over-attention is taken to be one of the major psychological causes of infantilisation—the tendency to deny grown-ups their maturity (understood as age and experience) and treat them, instead, as dependent children. As part of the psychological relations that underpin the social dynamics of colonised and coloniser, infantilisation is precisely one of the two ailments which plagues the condition of the Australian white settler society. In his essay "A Spirit of Play" included in the collection of the same title, David Malouf has commented on his people's "tendency to see [themselves] as childlike, forever in the process of growing up or coming of age" (Malouf 98).

As such, the *Bildungsroman* is the perfect subgenre to cathartically express, on an allegorical as well as on a metaphorical level, the idea of stunted growth, of a nation perpetually acting as a dependent child trying to break away from the grip of the lawful father, namely the metropolitan centre. More often than not, the metropolitan centre which is allegorically represented by the father figure in postcolonial fiction generally is neither the foster father (*parens*) nor the biological father (*genitor*) but rather the lawful father (*pater*). In fact, the word "emancipate" is derived from the Latin phrase *ex manus capere* (to detach from the hand),

referring to the father's hand. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that, with the notable exception of *Lost Voices*, the nuclear family itself—if not eclipsed—always unconsciously deserves no more than a passing mention in Koch's entire literary *œuvre*. To some extent, it could be argued that these Koch narratives are symbolically illustrating the breaking away from the grip of the lawful father by the absence of the biological father.

The cyclical narrative of *Across the Sea Wall* signifies that Robert O'Brien has failed his attempt at emancipation: he leads the routine life of a civil servant and has a crush on young Christine, whom he plans to marry, but two months prior to his wedding, he leaves his wife-to-be and Australia for Europe in the company of his best mate Jimmy Baden. On board the *Napoli*, Robert meets showgirl Ilsa Kalnins and they decide together at the last minute to abort their journey to England in order to discover the charms of Indonesia and India. Later, impoverished and struck down with dysentery after separating from his Latvian girlfriend, Robert falls back on his father's financial help to return home. The impact of these *Bildungsroman*-inspired literary representations of growth can be further explored in the light of cognitive literary theory, by drawing on Roberta Trites's ground-breaking work in the field.

**Trapped in Metaphorical Conceptualisations of Growth**
Christopher Koch has always taken an interest in visual imagery, as well as in allegory and extended metaphors, both of which he first conspicuously exploited in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *The Doubleman*, and *Out of Ireland* (1999).[5] In an interview, Koch confessed that he had "always regarded the novel, for my purposes, as a poetic form, or rather as a narrative poetic form. And images and metaphors are central to the sort of novel I write" (qtd. in Mitchell 67).

In *Across the Sea Wall*, the journey carries a greater ontological weight, as it allegorizes the cultural search of Australia's pre-1960s settler colony (its national adolescence, so to speak) for the identity and new bearings which Asia was expected to provide. To an extent, *Across the Sea Wall* demonstrates the reciprocity of cultural exchange between East and West, as its storyline concerns the crossing of the Pacific by a number of young Australians who finally embark on a journey through India. As a counterpoint to this, Sunder Singh, the local Indian guide of the character Robert O'Brien, undertook the reverse journey at 21, when he sought education in Britain and Australia. It is worth noting that the publication of Koch's second novel in 1965 marked a watershed in terms of the representation of Asian people in Australian literature; it could be said to have anticipated the nation's 1970s catchphrase "turning to Asia," which marked the post White-Australia-Policy and the turn to cosmopolitanism. Historically speaking, *Across the Sea Wall* was published at a time when Australians, in search of a renewed sense of belonging, began to swap their traditional pilgrimage to Europe for the exploration of spiritual nations in neighbour countries. In one of his essays, Koch observes that:

> Australia's identity, in this post-colonial period, is rapidly changing. Geography being the great shaper of human development that it is, New Guinea and our nearest South-East Asian neighbours – in particular Indonesia – are assuming an inescapable importance in Australia's future. Young Australians make the pilgrimage to Asia as often now as they make the pilgrimage to Europe – and inevitably, as young writers undergo formative experiences in Asia, they will set their work there. (*Crossing the Gap* 103)

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[5] For a detailed discussion of these three allegories, see Vernay, *Water from the Moon*.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Koch's novel heralded the cultural revolution which struck Australia at the end of the Menzies era. At the same time, however, Koch confesses that this turning-to-Asia-attitude is far from being a novelty, since there were pre-existing links with Asia:

> In describing the voyage of the ship, north from Australia, I was charting the discovery of that world just over our fence, which we then seldom thought about and which lay between us and the northern hemisphere. It began with Indonesia, only a few days' sailing from Brisbane. ... what was startling to my characters was that they had entered in those few days not just a new world geographically, but a whole different culture—having lived until now in a dream of ancestral Europe. But that dream was not purely a dream of Europe. Since it was a product of Empire, it included the Indian Empire; and the experience of India, unlike that of Indonesia, wasn't totally unexpected—it did have an echo; a familiar resonance. (*Crossing the Gap* 7)

Metaphors, as Umberto Eco argues in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, transgress the order of reality and rearrange the world poetically through implicit comparisons whereby one word is used for another, resulting in a mental and textual construct. In *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphors and Cognition in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Trites investigates through cognitive linguistics "how metaphors of growth influence scholarly conceptualisations of adolescence and adolescent literature" (Trites 124) and draws on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, two American philosophers and cognitive linguists who have persuasively argued in *Metaphors We Live By* that metaphors consciously and unconsciously structure the life experiences of individuals. In their opinion, "metaphors that are outside our conventional conceptual system, metaphors that are imaginative and creative … are capable of giving us a new understanding of our experience" (139). They further contend that:

> new metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. (Lakoff & Johnson 145)

In cognitive narratology, scripts "are dynamic repertoires comprised of a series of sequences" (Trites 36). Roberta Trites explains that scripts aim at cognitive efficiency and can be seen as paradigmatic stories building our expectations into simplistic predictable patterns of how real-life events are meant to unfold (Trites 36–39). In this respect, Koch's new-scripted metaphor of growth, which he created in *The Boys in the Island* through olfactory associations and by symbolically opposing the malleability of childhood to the rigid steeled or moulded character inherent to adulthood, is very likely to consciously or an unconsciously impact on the minds of readers:

> You are a fool, Lad said, because you went on listening to the story of childhood. Others forget it; but you would not. That is why you are a fool. It's a story whose end doesn't arrive: we lose it. Into the paper-sweet smell of Everything comes the tang of enemy iron. (*The Boys in the Island* 196)

Earlier in the narrative, Koch subtly had associated childhood with paper and adulthood with iron through tactile metaphors stressing texture, commenting on the smell "of childhood: a pleasant smell; flat and clean like paper" and of "the iron bonds of his imminent adulthood" (196).

Through the use of this paper and iron analogy, Christopher Koch clearly defines growth as an ambiguous dual process involving a positive movement from weakness to strength but also a negative movement from flexibility to rigidity. The *a contrario* moral which is given between the lines is that maturity only comes when accepting a series of inevitable renunciations and inflexible restrictions in life. Like the Tasmanian novelist, who seems to question the validity of swapping childhood for adulthood, readers may be left to wonder whether it is worth exchanging romantic illusions for an embittered reality. The sad overtones of the esperectomic (i.e. hope-depriving) ending of *The Boys in the Island* is likely to affect readers, specifically the preadolescents and adolescents who got acquainted with Koch's debut novel through school curricula. As Roberta Trites puts it, "How we think about growth influences how we experience growth – and what we tell adolescents about their growth, in turn, has significant ramifications for their own conceptualisations of maturation" (Trites 8). Responding empathetically to Koch's nostalgia for the lost Edenic innocence of childhood, this younger readership may conceivably be made to deeply regret the transformation process and to adopt a more critical outlook on the less enchanting world of adults. Koch's novels are not the kind of narratives of resistance in which the central characters come to some form of empowerment or self-actualization in the final stage of their rites of passage. Indeed, the reverse is true. Koch follows the archetypal pattern of adolescent literature which "initially appears to empower teenagers" when in actual fact "empowerment proves to be something of an illusion in many novels because so frequently, teenaged characters demonstrate to teen readers that the only true form of empowerment comes from growing up and leaving adolescence behind" (Trites 1).

It appears that Christopher Koch is caught up in the meshes of the very condition he seeks to scrutinise and depart from. Like many young writers, he tried in his mid-twenties to bid his youth farewell by turning his debut novel, *The Boys in the Island*, into an archetypal *Bildungsroman* and by modelling his protagonist, Francis Cullen, on his own youthful experiences. The fact that three of his other fictional narratives (amounting to half of his literary production) are *Bildungsroman*-inspired and share a similar esperectomic resolution suggests that Koch is somewhat fixated on this particular stage of development. Whether represented through internal or external focalisation, Koch's one-sided view of growing up remains the same as he repeatedly casts an adolescent eye over issues of growing up. Arguably, the lack of nuance that transpires as a result of his Manichean vision is itself typical of adolescent perception. His teenage subject position produces narratives propounding a rather jaundiced view of the adult world, to which his Edenic descriptions of childhood and adolescence stand in sharp contrast.

**Conclusion**

A close reading of *The Boys in the Island*, *Across the Sea Wall*, *The Doubleman*, and *Lost Voices* reveals that Koch's debut novel is modelled on the stereotypical *Bildungsroman*, while the subsequent fictional narratives borrow in a more or less diffuse fashion some of the formal features of that genre's tradition of formation through transformation. With his novels closely aligning with the predominant script of "growth" inherent in adolescent literature, Koch consciously or subconsciously aims at transforming readers' ideas about psycho-emotional

growth and maturation into adulthood. In so doing, he ends up being trapped in two significant ways.

First, as part of the requirements of the novel genre, and all the more so with respect to the *Bildungsroman* tradition, well-rounded protagonists ought to grow, which means that in terms of strategic intent Koch had no choice but to introduce epiphanies and epistemological shifts for his central characters to acquire the sheen of well-developed characters. Added to this narrative constraint is the fact that, by mere analogy, his recurring clear-cut stance of a corrupt adult world pitted against the blissful innocence of childhood and adolescence makes his novels read like they are tinged with a nostalgia for the enchanted Anglo-safety zone which prevailed during the White Australia Policy era. These implicit white nation fantasies, which appear to stem from the British-centred culture of Koch's generation, have unfortunately contributed to the lack of critical attention paid to his body of work in the last decade or so.

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