

## Great Expectations of Human Rights: The Postcolonial *Bildungsroman* in *Mr. Pip*

Benjamin Walker  
Boston College

### Abstract

New Zealand author Lloyd Jones' novel *Mr. Pip*, winner of the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Overall Best Book, is set on the island province of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, amidst the violence of the island's attempted secession in 1990. The book takes its title from the facts that students at one village school are reading Dickens's *Great Expectations* during the island's blockade and that the protagonist, Matilda, in particular begins to identify with Dickens's main character, Pip. My argument draws on Joseph Slaughter's analysis in *Human Rights, Inc.*, particularly his contention that "[i]n many postcolonial *Bildungsromane* . . . the genre's traditional conclusive event of social, civil, and self-integration is perpetually postponed, so that the sovereign, undivided human personality remains a vanishing (plot) point beyond the frame of the text" (215). In *Mr. Pip*, Matilda's integration as a rights-bearing citizen of a modern nation is disrupted precisely because her society itself has been fragmented by war. Although the novel seems to portray the children's imaginative identification with Pip as positive and even somehow redemptive, I argue that, given the atrocities that the book's characters witness, Matilda's observation that "the white world had forgotten us" is closer to the truth (49). The metropolitan plot of incorporation and inheritance into society available to Pip ultimately fails to have meaning for Bougainvilleans, despite the well-meant attempts of schoolmasters and novelists. The insurgents in Bougainville, as a people in rebellion against one state and seemingly left alone by "the white world," share interesting correlations with Giorgio Agamben's definition of *homo sacer*, the ambiguous figure of the refugee or denationalized citizen as someone "abandoned" before the law and outside the domain of citizens' rights while ironically also fulfilling Hannah Arendt's definition as "the man of rights."

Lloyd Jones' 2006 novel *Mr. Pip*, which was shortlisted for the Booker prize, is set in a place that few readers outside the South Pacific or even Papua New Guinea are likely to know. Jones, a New Zealander, fictionalizes the civil war and blockade on New Guinea's island province of Bougainville in late 1991 and early 1992. In *Mr. Pip*, protagonist Matilda Laimo's integration as a rights-bearing citizen of her nation is disrupted precisely because her society has been fragmented by war. Thirteen-year old Matilda and her classmates develop a positive (and even in some ways redemptive) imaginative identification with Dickens's character Pip as their teacher reads *Great Expectations* to them. However, the traditional *Bildungsroman*'s plot of incorporation and inheritance into society, available to Pip, ultimately fails to have meaning for Bougainvilleans such as Matilda. The insurgents in Bougainville are a people rebelling against their state and left alone by "the outside world" (Jones 166). In this way the entire island of Bougainville (or any besieged population) becomes part of Giorgio Agamben's definition of *homo sacer*, the ambiguous figure "abandoned" before the law and standing outside the domain of citizens' rights while, paradoxically, as Hannah Arendt argues, also becoming the quintessential "man [or woman] of rights" because bare rights are the only things left to them. Hailing from a place that has been literally cut off from the Western world, and unlike Pip, who is destined by the *Bildungsroman*'s plot as well as his race, gender, and class to become a

bourgeois English citizen, Matilda's full incorporation as a right-bearing modern citizen must be, in Joseph Slaughter's words, "perpetually postponed" (215).

The province of Bougainville, geographically and culturally more closely related to the Solomon Islands than to Papua New Guinea, declared its independence from New Guinea in 1990, the second time in less than twenty-five years that it had done so. The 1990 declaration, however, was taken much more seriously than its predecessor because Bougainville had become the site of an Australian-run copper mine at Panguna that, during its seventeen-year period of operation (1972 to 1989), provided up to forty-four percent of the recently decolonized country's total export earnings (Regan 94). The insurgents were led by a former mine surveyor named Francis Ona, while their grievances revolved around compensation, environmental, and land-tenure issues connected with the mine, as well as the fact that only one third of the mine's employees came from the local area. Their protests eventually escalated into violence and sabotage against the mine, causing it to be shut down in 1988, to which the government of Papua New Guinea responded by declaring a state of emergency and blockade of the island.

Jones' *Mr. Pip* begins after the hardships of the blockade have set in, as Matilda's isolated village waits to see whether rebel or government soldiers will reach their area first. Anthony Regan's overview of the conflict in Bougainville enumerates just some of the war's terribly devastating effects in the period from 1988 to 1997: "perhaps several thousand deaths (at least hundreds in armed conflict, many more from extrajudicial killings on all sides, and an unknown number due to the PNG blockade)"; "deep divisions among Bougainvilleans"; destruction of almost all infrastructure, private assets, and government capacity; and an estimated "60,000 of the total population of 160,000 living in refugee camps by 1996" (102). Into the suffocated, expectant state of the island is introduced the singular, appropriately Dickensian character of Mr. Watts, an eccentric New Zealand man married to a local woman who becomes the interim village schoolteacher. Most of his curriculum consists of introducing the school's twenty students to nineteenth-century British literature in the shape of *Great Expectations*. The sudden production of a canonical English book in the rather unlikely scene of the village is reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's well-known discussion of the "sign taken for a wonder," the miraculous discovery of the English text in the uncivilized wilds of the colonial or post-colonial world (163). Indeed, many of the cover designs for Jones' novel echo this trope. In the Dial Press edition, for example, a book lies open on a stretch of pristine South Pacific beach; two other editions feature, respectively, Charles Dickens reading beneath a palm tree and a dark-skinned girl holding a book amidst the flowers and birds of a stylized jungle. In Bhabha's examples, which come from colonial India and the works of Joseph Conrad and V.S. Naipaul, "the institution of the Word in the wilds is [...] an *Enstellung*, a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition—the dazzling light of literature sheds only an area of darkness" (166). Using similar terminology, Mr. Watts tells the children that he hopes to make his classroom "a place of light...No matter what happens" with what he terms "the greatest novel by the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century," presumably a major source of that illumination (Jones 16, 21). However, Mr. Watts's Western literary humanism is soon questioned by the challenges that interpretation, translation, and the clash between local and imported values bring to the surface.

While initially, to quote Bhabha, "the idea of the English book is presented as universally adequate," a central part of the apprenticeship process that Matilda undergoes is her discovery of

the inadequacies and translation problems underlying this giant of the English literary canon (166). One of the most obvious differences between the world of Charles Dickens and the world of Matilda Laimo is that Matilda's village society is still attached to its traditional oral culture (although this connection has combined with reverence for the written "word of God" instilled by early German missionaries). Dolores, Matilda's mother, occupies a position quite similar to the hybridized Indian Christian converts in Bhabha's essay, who question the catechist about whether they are required to take the sacrament of communion, "because the Europeans eat cow's flesh" and question how the Bible can be a European book if it is truly God's book. Dolores attempts to pass on to Matilda her understanding of Christian orthodoxy, but it is one unselfconsciously mingled with "pagan" elements of her traditional culture, such as the clan genealogy she recites that includes "sea gods and turtles" in its list of ancestors (Bhabha 164-5, Jones 48). The interplay between written and oral culture is partially based on necessity. Mr. Watts is not a teacher, but as the only remaining expatriate, he is presumed to have some special knowledge to pass on to the village's young people.

Lacking proper materials or preparation (he possesses only his personal copy of the book), Mr. Watts reads *Great Expectations* one chapter to the class per day, in installments imperfectly transmitted to each student's family in the evenings. The conditions of reading on Bougainville in curious ways echo the original English conditions of reception for Dickens's texts, which John Irving argues in his introduction, "were [texts] consistently written to be read aloud" (Irving xxvii). One major difference between the two situations, of course, is the lack of a language barrier for the original audience (Irving xxvii). Mr. Watts also alternates these readings with what might be called guest lecturers from the surrounding community, inviting the students' mothers, uncles, and grandmothers to share their own local knowledge in the context of the classroom. Thus, the class's education becomes a *mélange* of European and South Pacific cultural transmission, readings of the great white male author interspersed with advice about how to kill a pig, songs to get rid of sores and boils, and parable-sermons about moral and immoral behavior by Matilda's mother (61, 79).

As violence heightens on the island, however, oral and written culture become even more dramatically intermingled, as government soldiers come to the village and mistakenly assume that the name Pip, playfully written on the beach by Matilda, is the name of a local fighter in the rebel army. When the soldiers burn the houses in the village to retaliate against the village's inability to hand over the fictional character, the book is also destroyed, as Matilda's mother had hidden it in her house after confiscating it from the schoolhouse (119). Mr. Watts' solution for this development, in a moment recalling Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, is to have each student in the class recite any detail they can remember of the story, which is written down in a notebook. Orality thus comes to assume a place of privilege over writing, as Mr. Watts transcribes and reconstructs the story as remembered by the students. Another key aspect of the difference between many oral cultures and written cultures is the centrality of the storyteller in an oral culture. As critic Irina Bauder-Begerow explains, "[i]n the island's dominantly oral culture and therefore non-European aesthetics, it is no longer the tale which is important. The teller is of particular standing here as a mediating negotiator of content and form" (132). Mr. Watts and Matilda find themselves both thrust into the role of storytellers, as they and the community's

other members react to increasingly harsh, even brutal human-rights violations inflicted by both sides.

When a group of rebels arrives at the village and discovers the anomalous Mr. Watts, they grow suspicious of his intentions and begin interrogating him. Mr. Watts, however, surprises the villagers by identifying himself as Pip when asked his name. Taking on the role of village Scheherazade, Mr. Watts persuades the rebel soldiers, just as bored and sick of the blockade as everyone else is, to agree to hear out his explanation for his presence on the island (164). To do so, however, Watts must enlist the help of Matilda in order to translate his narration into the local language. As Mr. Watts's tale unfolds, Matilda and the children soon recognize the amount of fictionality in his story, as he freely mingles events from his own life with ones from *Great Expectations*, depending greatly on Matilda not to reveal the fabrications. For Sue Kossew, the scene of Mr. Watts enthraling the hardened soldiers with the mere power of story cobbled together from fiction, imagination, his own experience, and the details of other people's lives is one of the strongest examples of Jones' emphasis on literature's "powers of sensation and its potential to change lives," although the dangers that arise from an inability to distinguish between reality and fiction (it is Mr. Watts's identification as Pip that eventually causes his death), highlights the extreme ambiguity of this power (284).

Here the fragile sway of storytelling and of simple curiosity to preserve a small amount of psychological normalcy during times of chaos comes to the fore. The rebels wait on the serialized "chapters" of Mr. Watts's story while the villagers also hope to discover more about his life before he moved to the island and married a local woman. Matilda narrates that "[t]his time the whole village listened in wonder, sitting by a small fire on an island all but forgotten, where the most unspeakable things happened without once raising the ire of the outside world" (166). In an interview, Jones, who witnessed the conflict on Bougainville as a journalist, mentions his amazement that "no one bothered to enquire what was happening on that island" after the Papua New Guinea Defence Force's blockade as provoking his urge to explore the individual and societal effects that such enforced isolation would have on the province's people ("Author Lloyd Jones"). The novel repeatedly emphasizes the strangeness and the hardship of separation from even the most basic supplies and contact with the outside world that create the reality on Bougainville for months. When the children report to their parents after the first day of school that they will meet a Mr. Dickens (presumably white since nobody else goes by Mister), they return the next day with requests for him: "anti-malaria tablets, aspirin, generator fuel, beer, kerosene, wax candles" (19). The immediacy of their needs illustrates the desperation of their situation while posing the question of what literature can and cannot provide in times and places of real bodily and physical crisis. It is only years later, when Matilda has escaped the blockade, been reunited with her father in Australia, and even begun a literature Ph.D. dissertation on—who else—Charles Dickens, that she begins to fully understand both the meaning and the final inadequacy of the tale of Pip's economic uplift and education into society.

Matilda is clearly, then, not to be read as a postcolonial female sister to Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, primed and ready by novel's end, through the intervention of mysterious but beneficial forces, to assume her harmonious place in a modern society. Bauer-Begerow attempts to lend some support to what we might call the "happy ending" reading based on the formal shape of Jones' novel. She describes *Mr. Pip* as "a self-begetting' novel," one that narrates its own

moment of creation at the time that “Matilda describes how she came to write down its first sentence in an attempt to process her traumatic experiences and fight her growing depression” (131). This form’s circularity does suggest completion or self-actualization in the protagonist, a self-actualization that should be correlated to stable, homogenous citizenship in the modern world. In his classic study *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti makes an important point about the English *Bildungsroman* such as *Tom Jones* or *Pride and Prejudice* (as opposed to continental versions that tend to focus on making or finding one’s own way in society). In the English *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist experiences his or her incorporation into society in terms of an inheritance (of land, money title, or all of the above). Moretti argues that this inheritance for Tom Jones or Elizabeth Bennet is specifically not a gift, but

something which Tom, [Edward] Waverly and Jane [Eyre] *have a right to*. And this ‘something’ is not only a vast rural estate, or a nice sum of money, or a title: it is their very identity—better yet, their identity as *people endowed with rights*. They had been deprived, we could say, of the right to have rights: restoring it to them is nothing more than an act of justice (Moretti 205, emphasis in original).

Likewise, in *Great Expectations*, Pip receives not a simple gift, but an *inheritance* from Magwitch, thus ensuring that he, also, is guaranteed his right to have rights. But what happens if one is, as Mr. Wemmick might delicately phrase it “a person not altogether of uncolonial pursuits” (Dickens 342)? How is Matilda’s own process or path of incorporation framed?

One way to understand the route through which Matilda reaches the point at which she can retroactively make sense and meaning from her tale is to see it in the way that Bruce Robbins reads a variety of cultural texts: as stories of “upward mobility and the common good,” to use his title phrase. Robbins notes that one of the biggest problems that protagonists of upward-mobility tales confront is a strong sense of guilt borne from the “conflict between loyalty to the family and friends left behind and a desire for the options and rewards of a life elsewhere” (56). *Great Expectations* opens with a scene of Pip mourning his family in the church cemetery, and the literal death of his family “enacts a social distance” that Pip would have created anyway in order to follow his gentlemanly aspirations (56). Likewise, in *Mr. Pip*, Matilda’s eventual educational and cultural achievements are accompanied by the death of her mother and a distance from the father she has reunites with in Australia. Dolores asks the “Rambos,” the Papua New Guinea soldiers, to take her life rather than raping her daughter, Matilda. This request might be an example of the zero-sum logic that, Robbins writes, “fills the upward mobility story with deaths just as it fills the upward mobility story with prisoners,” the idea that “[s]omeone has to die in order for someone else to rise” (55). Matilda naturally wonders if there is any other way in which events could have happened differently. However, within the plot logic that Robbins outlines, events could not have happened differently in the sense that Matilda’s claim to the right to have rights seems predicated upon not only her mother but also Mr. Watts giving up their own most basic human rights in order for Matilda to experience her own. Interestingly, grotesquely, the scene of Mr. Watts’s and Dolores’s deaths echoes a strange moment in *Great Expectations* that Robbins makes much of, when Wemmick urges Pip (avoiding his rooms, which are under surveillance) to avail himself of a bit of sausage made from a pig Wemmick used to keep as a pet

“if it is only for old acquaintance sake” (Dickens 346). This “politeness” to a dead pig, Robbins argues, “suggests that a domesticity that would be truly self-reliant would mean devouring your relations” (78). In *Mr. Pip*, the atrocity of a man and a woman (Matilda’s educational benefactor and mother, respectively) being hacked to pieces and given to the village pigs makes the same point with the terms reversed: being truly self-sufficient is predicated upon throwing your relations to the swine.

Many critics of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre have illuminated the classed, gendered, and historically specific nature of its successful protagonists. Moretti examines this issue in terms of social class, arguing that “social mobility, which is such an essential trait of the *Bildungsroman*, literally vanishes in the presence of manual labourers...it seems to defy narrative imagination” (Moretti x). Moretti sees the protagonists of the working-class *Bildungsroman* (texts such as *Jude the Obscure* or *Sons and Lovers*) as “[a] youth without the right to dream,” a designation that applies all the more strongly to the female, nonwhite, non-European subjects of postcolonial *Bildungsromane* (Moretti x). Joseph Slaughter makes this argument central to his study *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* by observing that “[i]n many postcolonial *Bildungsromane* [...] the genre’s traditional conclusive event of social, civil, and self-integration is perpetually postponed, so that the sovereign, undivided human personality remains a vanishing (plot) point beyond the frame of the text” (215). For example, in one of the novels that Slaughter discusses, Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, the protagonist Tambudzai, like Matilda, chooses to pursue a Western-style education, and tells us that she is narrating her story as a way to explain “the events which put me in a position to write this account” (Dangarembga 1). Tambudzai’s recounting of those events, however, implies a wide and crucial gap in terms of perspective and experience between the persona of older Tambu, the mature narrator, and younger Tambu, the young black Rhodesian girl “coming up” through the colonial education system. The expected, epiphanic point of self-knowledge that allows reader and narrator to connect those two stages, however, finally happens offstage: the novel suddenly ends, shortly after Tambudzai’s acceptance into a prestigious convent school and the long, difficult “process of expansion...whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume” merely hinted at, never narrated (208).

Compare this “process of expansion” in *Nervous Conditions* to the resolute, goal-oriented, optimistic final sentences of *Mr. Pip*: “Pip was my story, even if I was once a girl, and my face black as the shining night. Pip is my story, and in the next day I would try where Pip had failed. I would try to return home” (256). The question of whether, or how, Pip could be said to have “failed” to return home is an important one, because Pip does, after all, recount at the end that he “lived frugally, and paid my debts, and maintained a constant correspondence with Biddy and Joe”—his honest labor being bundled to reconciling with Joe (Dickens 446). Pip, in this sense, has returned home, even if he does not work at the forge side by side with Joe, but has instead become modestly but securely middle class in his clerking role with Herbert’s firm (whose money Pip indirectly supplied). Matilda, now a Ph.D. candidate dissertating on “Dickens’ Orphans” in London, finds herself slipping into a state of depression and disconnection from which she begins to emerge through her attempt at narrating (in writing) her own life. In doing so, her story is narrated up to and beyond the point of its own genesis. Matilda has achieved some sort of return home on a moral level with the understanding and proclamation

of identity that comes from writing her book (basically a memoir), but this type of “literary” return home is also a way of protecting her achievement of cultural capital. As Robbins puts it, “the law protects those who have property. And literature protects those who have the cultural capital needed to produce more literature” (62).

Reading Jones’ novel from this perspective, the key moment of incorporation into the stream of great Western literature is clearly depicted: like Pip, after fruitlessly pursuing a false understanding of them, Matilda’s “expectations” have finally been fulfilled when she begins writing her own story. Part of the reason that *Mr. Pip*’s ending can retain its sense of optimism, however, is the fact that Matilda is still trying to “return home” and has not completed the process. Paloma Calleja argues that “Matilda’s story necessarily concludes with a voyage of return home, from England to Australia,” delineating a movement “in a direction contrary to that of Magwitch in *Great Expectations*” (Calleja 126, my translation).

Although Calleja importantly highlights Jones’ reversal of movement regarding Dickens’ novel (Matilda’s rejection of the center for the margins, in a rehearsal of the “empire writes back” paradigm), she overlooks the problematic fact that the story ends on a note of intention to return rather than picturing any kind of actual return to the village in Bougainville. The novel ends with only a metaphorical journey home (which is not to say a negligible sense, but merely to emphasize that Matilda remains in the metropolis when we leave her at the novel’s conclusion). Moreover, although the inversion of Magwitch’s journey in *Great Expectations* is certainly an important parallel (an inversion of roles that Peter Carey fully exploited in his 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*), naming Australia as “home” for Matilda is problematic. Australia, Papua New Guinea’s former colonial ruler, for most of the book plays the function of the metropolis, the “mainland” to Matilda’s smaller island, the place to which her father disappears and from which the rapidly-imposed industrialization and globalization of the huge mining operation comes.

In short, Matilda’s situation at the end of the novel is more analogous to that of Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* than Wilhelm Meister at the end of his eponymous apprenticeship, that of the (perhaps permanent) expatriate. Like Stephen, another educated exile, coming into consciousness necessitates escape from (rather than harmonious reconciliation with) a rights-less situation back “home.” If not “expatriated for the term of his [or her] natural life” like Magwitch, in Jagers’ words, Matilda is nonetheless placed in a situation of exile at the novel’s end (Dickens 311). In this way she is similar to Moretti’s working-class *Bildungsroman* protagonist, the “youth without the right to dream” who is “no longer at home among his old fellow workers, but never accepted by the new bourgeois milieu,” by “[seeing] the impossibility of [her] position” (x). However, Matilda’s experience of transculturation and adaptation, I would argue, preserves her from the despair that this insight precipitates in the working-class novel of development. Even Matilda’s name, after all, results from her father’s contact with Australian mine workers. Narrating her own story is what allows Matilda to synthesize the incredibly disparate experiences and influences on her life into one patchwork-quilt type story, even if it is from the “interrupted” or “perpetually postponed” position of exile that she must do so (Moretti 118, Slaughter 215).

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- “Author Lloyd Jones on Mr. Pip.” *BookLounge.ca*. 7 Dec. 2007. Web. 8 Apr. 2010.
- Bauder-Begerow, Irina. “Echoing Dickens: Three Rewritings of *Great Expectations*.” *Semiotic Encounters: Text, Image and Trans-Nation*. Ed. Sarah Säckel, Walter Göbel, and Noha Hamdy. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 119-35. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817.” “*Race, Writing, and Difference*.” Ed. Henry Louis Gates. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 163-84. Print.
- Calleja, Paloma Fresno. “Dickens En Las Antípodas o La Re/Visión Postcolonial de un Clásico: *Mr. Pip* de Lloyd Jones.” *Garozza: Sociedad Española de Estudios Literarios de Cultura Popular* 8 (2008): 113-28.
- Connell, John. *Papua New Guinea: The Struggle for Development*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions: A Novel*. Banbury, U.K.: Ayebia Clarke, 2004. Print.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. New York: Bantam, 1986. Print.
- Jones, Lloyd. *Mister Pip*. New York: Dial, 2006. Print.
- Kossew, Sue. “‘Pip in the Pacific’: Reading as Sensation in Lloyd Jones’ *Mr. Pip*.” *Literature and Sensation*. Ed. Anthony Uhlmann et al. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2009.280-289. Print.
- Moretti, Franco, and Albert Sbragia. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 2000. Print.
- Regan, Anthony. “Development and Conflict: The Struggle over Self-Determination in Bougainville.” *Security and Development in the Pacific Islands: Social Resilience in Emerging States*. Ed. Anne M. Brown. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007. 89-110. Print.
- Robbins, Bruce. *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.
- Rose, Jeremy. “Bougainvillian Thumbs-up for *Mister Pip*.” *Scoop Review of Books*. Scoop Media, 7 April 2008. Web. 12 April 2010.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007. Print.