The Question of Truth: Postmodernism in Brandon Sanderson's *Alcatraz* series

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Tarkastelen tässä Pro Gradu -tutkielmassa sitä, miten postmoderni totuuskäsitys heijastuu Brandon Sandersonin lastenkirjasarjan *Alcatraz* (2007-2010) neljässä ensimmäisessä osassa. Tutkielma nojautuu enimmäkseen eri kirjoittajien postmodernismiin liittyviin teorioihin, mutta kuuluu myös lastenkirjallisuuden tutkimuksen piiriin, sillä tutkimuskohteena on ensisijaisesti lapsille markkinoitu kirjasarja, ja tutkin sitä, mitä teokset voivat lukijoilleen opettaa. Hypoteesini oli, että *Alcatraz*-sarja opettaa (lapsia) aktiivisesti kyseenalaistamaan oletettuja totuuksia.

Johdanto-osuudessa esittelen metodini ja Sandersonin fantasiasarjan, joka kertoo 13-vuotiaasta kasvattipojasta, jonka luokse ilmestyy eräänä päivänä hänen isoisänsä. Tämä paljastaa, että Alcatraz ei olekaan orpo, että Alcatrazilla on mystinen Lahja (*Talent*) rikkoa asioita, ja että maailmaa hallitsee ilkeiden kirjastonhoitajien salaliitto.

Teoriaosuudessa nostan ensin esiin teorioita, jotka liittyvät postmodernismin käsitykseen totuudesta ja tiedosta yleensä. Totean näiden kysymysten olevan keskeisiä postmodernismille, ja viittaan esimerkiksi Foucault'n kiinnostukseen tiedon ja vallan keskinäisestä suhteesta, Lyotardin ajatuksiin historiasta ja Linda Hutcheonin ajatuksiin kyselevän asenteen keskeisyydestä postmodernismissa. Osoitan, että postmoderni totuuskäsitys on pluralistinen, ristiriitaisuudet hyväksyvä ja jatkuvaan kyselyyn kannustava. Käsittelen myös lyhyesti lastenkirjallisuuden tutkimuksen historiaa ja sitä, onko eettisesti kyseenalaista tutkia sitä, mitä lapset voisivat oppia kirjallisuudesta.

Analyysiosiossa tarkastelen postmodernin totuuskäsityksen heijastumista sarjassa kolmella eri pääosa-alueella: piilevässä ideologiassa, kirjallisissa tyylikeinoissa ja henkilöhahmoihin liittyvissä piirteissä. Havaitsin, että totuuden epävarma luonto tuodaan sarjassa esiin lukemattomilla eri tavoilla. Alcatraz esimerkiksi oppii, että suuri osa historian opetuksesta on ilkeiden kirjastonhoitajien propagandaa ja oppii arvostamaan kykyään rikkoa lähes mitä tahansa lahjana eikä kirouksena. Tämä kaikki voi auttaa lukijoita toteamaan, että joskus totena pidetyt asiat osoittautuvat ennakkoluuloiksi, ja että kyseenalaistava asenne on siksi hyvästä. Postmodernin ristiriitaisuuden hengessä Alcatraz toteaa kuitenkin myöhemmin, että noissa valheellisissa ennakkoluuloissa saattoi olla osa totuutta. Hän esimerkiksi huomaa, että kirjastonhoitajat eivät ole väärässä kaikesta, ja että hänen kykynsä rikkoa asioita saattaa sittenkin olla *sekä* lahja *että* kirous. Sama kaava toistuu myös kirjallisten tyylikeinojen kuten sanaleikkien, sekä henkilöhahmojen ja näiden perhesiteiden suhteen. Sarja osittain sekä kyseenalaistaa vanhoihin normeihin mukautumisen että vahvistaa niitä. Tutkielmasta käy ilmi, että *Alcatraz* todella opettaa kyseenalaistamaan oletettuja totuuksia, sillä totuuden osoitetaan olevan monivivahteinen ilmiö.

Avainsanat: postmodernismi, lastenkirjallisuus, totuus

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1. Introduction

> To open a book or article by, for instance, Derrida or one of his disciples is to feel that the mystification and intimidation of the reader is the ultimate aim of the enterprise.
>
> *David Lodge* (1981, ix)

This thesis explores how a postmodern conception of truth is represented in *Alcatraz* (2007-2010), an American children's series by the noted fantasy author Brandon Sanderson. I address the question of why we would choose to offer texts such as these to children.

Postmodernism can be a difficult term to grasp. Some writers of introductions to literary theory or to postmodernism itself attribute the confusion caused by the term to the fact that it can refer to several things, such as a literary mode and a largely poststructuralist form of literary criticism (Bertens 2008, 110). Others refer to the veritable jungle of terms created by postmodernism, modernism, postmodernity and modernity (Sarup 1993, 129-130; Barry 2009, 78).

I would argue that some of the confusion stems from the very nature of postmodernism and the thoughts it is built upon. As Frederick Jameson (1994, xiv) notes, postmodernism and pluralism, a kind of all-inclusiveness, go together. Although he goes on to revise this to some extent, stating that the true plurality of postmodernism can be found in the individual responses to it rather than in an inherently unlimited scope that postmodernism itself would have (Jameson 1994, xv), he does say that postmodernism has been difficult to characterize globally or link to any specific style because it *has* been defined by the fact that it includes all possible styles (Jameson 1994, xiv). Even taking into account that postmodernism does not have to include absolutely every cultural act since the Second World War, one can still say that postmodernism encompasses a great variety of styles and tends to mix and match them. According to Harland G. Bloland (2005, 122), the views of postmodernists are so varied that "it is not possible to define postmodernism as a coherent theory"

and it would be better to follow Lyotard's lead and think of it “as an intellectual trend or condition” instead.

Besides this inherent pluralism, postmodernism's truth-concept and general take on knowledge and information as such can make it difficult to understand. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) is one of the earliest and most influential texts on postmodernism (see for instance Barry 2009, 82). In it Lyotard argues that the modern information society's distrust of metanarratives such as Marxism or Christianity, overarching theories and ideologies that claim to explain everything, can be said to be what constitutes postmodernism (1984, 7). According to Jean Webb (2003, 51), without these master narratives to believe in we have no centres of truth which would act as foundations for the type of certainties and absolute truths typical to nineteenth century writing.

Postmodernism has been highly influenced by poststructuralism, some of whose leading figures (see for instance Derrida) seem to have attempted to convey their distrust of absolute representations of absolute truths by writing without even attempting to structure their texts so as to make them comprehensible. They seem to think that if there is no order to reality, if there exist only partial truths, it would be wrong to present and organize their writing in a way that would clearly convey any overarching conclusions. This has undoubtedly led many readers to feel as David Lodge (1981, ix) seems to, according to his comment quoted in the epigraph above – that their texts are more intimidating than illuminating, and quite incomprehensible.

According to Linda Hutcheon (1988, xiii) postmodernism builds on contradictions and paradoxes, it “uses and abuses the conventions of discourse”, in order to pose questions without attempting to resolve them in any finite way. Similarly, Lyotard (1997, vii) notes that people keep asking questions even if the answers are always deferred – at most there is a semblance of knowing the answers. Hutcheon suggests that not only does postmodern theory embrace contradictions, the

word postmodernism has also often been used in such annoyingly contradictory ways that its commentators have “refused to define precisely what they mean by their usage of the term” (Hutcheon 1988, 37).

This general distrust of absolute truths and the consequent opportunities for confusion can be seen to be reflected in many aspects of postmodern theory and writing, as I hope to prove in this thesis. It also complicates attempts to define postmodernism, for how are we to say anything definitive about something that distrusts absolutes.

Children's literature has traditionally endeavoured to educate children, in earlier times mostly on moral and religious questions (Hunt 2001, 295; Egoff 2003, 4). While it may be argued that entertainment has become more valued especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Kimberley Reynolds (2005, 3) states that books still have an important role “in acculturating children by introducing them to the manners and mores of society”. In other words, children's books are expected to teach valuable lessons about being a functioning member of society.

It is clear that some understanding of postmodernism will come in useful in navigating the (western) world of the twenty-first century. Postmodern thinking has greatly influenced practically all Anglo-American literary theorizing since the late 1970's (Bertens 2008, 210). Arguably, the reason it has been so predominant in theorizing is that it has managed to become part of all culture, “high” and “low” alike. According to Frederic Jameson (1991, np), one of the things that distinguish postmodernism from modernism is precisely the way it effaces the distinction between so called high culture and popular culture. Not only part of the *Zeitgeist* or Spirit of the time, Ihab Hassan (2003, 4) argues that we actually interpret everything through postmodern ideas, “see the world through postmodern-tinted glasses”, as it were. Bloland (2005, 124) notes that as part of this “postmodernization” incredulity and uncertainty are becoming more and more central to the way we

see the world.

Many theorists[1] have begun to argue that postmodernism is dead, that our culture has moved on to a new phase. Even if that be the case, it seems clear that postmodernism continues to have an influence on culture and theory. Older styles and theories do not simply vanish. Even romanticism and realism are still very much alive in contemporary literature and entertainment no matter how many new theoretical winds have blown since their respective golden ages.

It is therefore no wonder that postmodernism has made its way to several children's books, as well, for postmodern thinking and questioning are something that children need to be acculturated to. The phenomenon has consequently also drawn the eye of children's literature critics. A number of studies have been conducted on postmodern children's literature, and especially on postmodern picturebooks[2].

I have been following the work of Brandon Sanderson for several years, and I chose to write about his middle-grade children's fantasy series *Alcatraz* (2007-2010) because it is an especially interesting example of interaction between postmodernism and children's literature. My hypothesis is that the series is meant to acquaint its readers with postmodern conventions and thinking. It helps the readers to start questioning things instead of taking all everyday things for granted. Its point is not to sell postmodern ideology to young readers, but simply to give them tools to deal with postmodernism. These tools may prove especially useful if those readers study literature later in life. It would not be too misleading to say that *Alcatraz* seems to do to postmodernism what Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* (1995) did to philosophy, though the will to educate is more hidden between the lines in Sanderson's case.

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[1] See for instance Hassan 2003, “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an aesthetic of trust”; McHale 2007, “What was postmodernism?”; or Zimmermann 2004 “*Quo Vadis*?: Literary Theory beyond Postmodernism”.

[2] See for instance Michèle Anstey's “‘It's not all Black and White’: Postmodern Picture Books and New Literacies” (2002); Katherine O'Neil's “Once upon Today: Teaching for Social Justice with Postmodern Picturebooks” (2010); and Sylvia Pantaleo's “Mutinous Fiction: Narrative and Illustrative Metalepsis in Three Postmodern Picturebooks” (2010).

It may seem illogical to discuss the postmodern truth concept in the context of a fantasy series, but it is not any less logical than discussing truth concepts in relation to any novel, since all fiction is by definition fictitious. Peter Hunt (2001, 271) suggests that on this basis we could even call all fiction fantasy.

The series came out fairly recently, so there has not been much literary criticism on it yet, only one published article[3] is available, and its focus is not on postmodernism but on Wolfgang Iser's concepts of implied reader and implied author. My study is therefore the first of its kind.

I begin by briefly introducing the series and the author. Then I explain how I have conducted my study and outline the theoretical background for it. The actual analysis section is centred on how a postmodern tendency to question the concept of truth is visible in the books in three main areas: (1) in the underlying ideology; (2) in the stylistic devices used; (3) in the people depicted in the story.

1.1 The *Alcatraz* series

Brandon Sanderson is a Utah-based writer who mostly produces epic fantasy for an adult audience. The writing of the *Alcatraz* series began as a side project when he was taking time off from his usual projects. He says that it was an opportunity for him to experiment with things such as humour in ways that he could not do in epic fantasy, which tends to take itself more seriously (*Writing excuses* 4:1).

Sanderson was born in 1975. After spending some time studying biochemistry, and serving as a missionary for The Church of the Latter-day Saints in Korea, he switched his major to English and graduated with a Master's degree in creative writing in 2004. He has published several books, including *Elantris*, a *Mistborn*-trilogy, *Warbreaker* and *The Way of Kings*, which is to be the first of

[3] Michele D. Castleman's “Alcatraz and Iser: Applying Wolfgang Iser's Concepts of Implied Reader and Implied Author and Reality to the Metafictive Alcatraz Smedry Series” from 2011

a ten-part fantasy-series. In 2007, Sanderson was chosen to complete *The Wheel of Time* series after Robert Jordan passed away.

Sanderson likes to be open with his readers and, as Delgado (2010, 47) notes, this has led to his having a strong presence on the internet: he writes a blog, has a twitter account and participates in a weekly podcast aimed at aspiring writers. He also publishes annotations to his books on his website[4].

There are currently four books in the *Alcatraz* series: *Alcatraz Versus the Evil Librarians* (2007), *Alcatraz Versus the Scrivener's Bones* (2008), *Alcatraz Versus the Knights of Crystallia* (2009) and *Alcatraz Versus the Shattered Lens* (2010). (Hereafter sometimes shortened to *AvEL*, *AvSB*, *AvKC* and *AvSL*, respectively). Sanderson is planning to write a fifth and final book sometime in the future. Not to get pulled into the mire of what is and is not fantasy, I choose to call *Alcatraz* a fantasy series because that is how its author classifies it, and that is how the publisher markets it, as a fantasy series[5]. Being a postmodernism-inspired fantasy series, *Alcatraz* has a fairly complicated premise and plot, which cannot be explained very briefly.

The books tell the story of Alcatraz Smedry, a foster child who finds out just after his thirteenth birthday that he is not an orphan, after all. His eccentric grandfather appears at his doorstep and whisks Alcatraz away on an adventure during which the boy finds out that most of the world is controlled by evil Librarians, that his mother is one of them and that his father has been missing for almost 13 years. And that he himself is not named after the infamous prison, but the prison named after him – or at least after the ancestor whose name Alcatraz inherited.

Alcatraz is the narrator of the series, which he introduces in the foreword of the first book in the following manner:

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[4] http://www.brandonsanderson.com/

[5] http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/bookwizard/books-by/brandon-sanderson

> In the Hushlands – those Librarian-controlled nations such as the United States, Canada and England – this book will be published as a work of fiction. Do not be fooled! This is no work of fiction, nor is my name really Brandon Sanderson. Both are guises to hide the book from Librarian agents. . .
>
> For you Hushlanders, I know the events of my life may seem wondrous and mysterious. I will do my best to explain them, but please remember that my purpose is not to entertain you. My purpose is to open your eyes to the truth.
> (*AvEL*, np)

This can be read as a parody of the opening to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, originally published in 1885. Its NOTICE from the Author similarly denies that the book contains motive, moral or plot, and the first paragraph of the first chapter (1994, 11) declares that Twain mostly told the truth in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but that most people lie at least sometimes. Similarly, truth and lies turn out to be recurring themes in the *Alcatraz* books.

One of the things the Librarians have kept secret from people in the “Hushlands”, that is, the world as we know it, is that sand is powerful. It can be used to power flying glass dragons and other silimatic technology, forged into magical lenses that Oculators such as Alcatraz are able to use to create laser beams, to see and identify footprints where people have passed recently, and to do a host of other things. Apart from being an Oculator and being able to wield their lenses, the fact that Alcatraz is born into the Smedry family means that he also has a magical Talent. He has spent his life thinking that the fact that things always seem to be breaking around him is a curse, but his grandfather, whose Talent is being late, assures him that his ability to break things is actually a powerful gift.

In the first book, Alcatraz's father has sent him a treasure, the Sands of Rashid, for his birthday but the Librarians steal them before Grandpa Smedry arrives and tells him what they are. They then have to set out on a mission to retrieve the Sands of Rashid from the downtown library. They get help from Bastille, a feisty 13-year-old girl who is a Knight of Crystallia and has been assigned as Grandpa Smedry's bodyguard. Alcatraz also finds out that his social worker of many years is an evil Librarian, and later that she is actually his own mother. Towards the end the

Librarians forge the sands into Translator's lenses, which Alcatraz then manages to steal back.

That mission completed, in the second book Alcatraz is trying to escape from the Hushlands to Nalhalla, one of the Free Kingdoms located on the three continents that are kept secret by the Librarians. Having been picked up by a glass dragon flown by a young cousin of his, Alcatraz gets a message from his grandfather. He has been delayed after hearing that his son, Alcatraz's father, might be at the Library of Alexandria. Alcatraz is the most high-ranking person on the airship and he orders that they go after his grandfather. The library of Alexandria has been camouflaged to look like a small hut in the jungle, but when one enters it one discovers the largest library in the world. It is run by undead curators who have sold their souls in exchange for the right to read one of its books, and who then try to lure or trap all who enter into doing the same. While dodging their traps and the attacks of a powerful librarian of the cult of the Scrivener's Bones, Alcatraz and his friends also manage to find a way to release the boy's father Attica, despite the fact that he has become an undead curator. Before Alcatraz gets there, however, his mother has had time to come and claim Attica's own Translator's lenses as his widow.

In the third book, Alcatraz and his companions finally get to Nalhalla, where Alcatraz finds out that being a Smedry is like being royalty – his family even has its own castle in the city. They arrive into the capitol in the middle of negotiations for a truce between the Free Kingdomers and the Librarians. It soon turns out that Alcatraz's mother Shasta and the other Librarians have been using the negotiations as a cover to get into the Royal Archives (not a library) in Nalhalla to steal a book written in the forgotten tongue that can only be read with the translator's lenses, one of which was stolen by Shasta in the previous book. Alcatraz is captured by the Librarians and his mother but he manages to escape in time to stop the negotiations before the Free Kingdomers agree to turn over the kingdom of Mokia to the Librarians. Unfortunately Shasta gets the book she was after and escapes with it.

In the fourth book, Alcatraz tries to help the war effort in Mokia by forcing the Knights of Crystallia to come and rescue him from there, thinking that once they get there, they cannot help but take part in fighting for their allies. He succeeds in making his way into the war-torn Mokia but discovers that it was all a stupid idea. Tuki Tuki, the capital city, is about to fall, Bastille falls into a coma in the midst of battle, and even the knights can only postpone the inevitable. In utter frustration, Alcatraz manages to use his powerful Breaking Talent to destroy all the weapons of the Librarian army in the whole of Mokia at one go – but inadvertently breaks the Smedry Talents in the process.

As time goes on Alcatraz makes it clear that he wants the reader to think of him as an extremely unreliable narrator. Postmodern stylistic tricks such as over-the-top allusions and meta-fictitious jokes on literary conventions seem to become more and more common as the series progresses. For instance, where the second book in the series contains a short list with its three items numbered 1), II) and C) (*AvSB*, 206), the fourth has no apparent logic, or at least logical progress, in all of its chapter numberings (see 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 below). In order to keep this study as compact as possible, I have attempted to mainly focus on just two of the books, and to get the most amount of contrast in their levels of postmodern features, I have chosen the first and the fourth book.

1.2 Method

In his introductory book to literary criticism Peter Barry sums up what postmodernist critics do. He says (2009, 87-88) that they, among other things, study “postmodernist themes, tendencies and attitudes” and “their implications”, the “disappearance of the real” and “shifting postmodern identities”, metafiction, and texts that mix high and low culture. These definitions all fit fairly well to what I am doing.

On the other hand, my work is aligned with Children's Literature Criticism firstly in that I am studying a work that is primarily marketed for children. Secondly, I am interested in what the series teaches, and educational concerns have traditionally been one of the most popular topics of Children's Literature Studies – for better or for worse (Hearne 1988, 114). One could therefore say that when it comes to methodology, my study is a mix of postmodernist criticism and criticism of children's literature.

Next I will address how I have actually conducted my study. For the postmodernism-part of my theoretical framework, I use texts from some of the most influential theorists of the previous century, and texts that evaluate where postmodernism stands today. Most critics would agree that poststructuralism strongly influenced the birth of postmodernism (see for instance Bertens 2008, 110; Bloland 2005, 122). Some go so far as to use the terms poststructuralist and postmodernist almost interchangeably (Sarup 1993). My approach is that since postmodernism has largely emerged from poststructuralism, theorists who are traditionally labelled poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are equally valid in terms of my study as for instance Jean-François Lyotard and Frederic Jameson. Nevertheless, I limit myself to the more philosophical implications of their works and do not go deep into poststructuralist techniques such as pure deconstruction.

In the section on postmodernism, I attempt to give a general overview of postmodern theory, followed by a slightly more detailed discussion of the way truth is regarded in postmodernist thinking. Lastly, I say a few words on the cultural significance of postmodernism in the twenty-first century.

The children's literature section similarly tries to give a brief introduction to the history of literary criticism in connection with children's books, followed by some discussion on books that teach. As the last part of the theoretical background chapter I give an overview of relevant aspects

of previous studies on postmodernism in children's literature.

The analysis chapter is divided into three main sections. Building on the theoretical background, I attempt to perform a close reading of the postmodern thematic in the series. I attempt to prove that in spite of its complexity, postmodern theory can have functioned “as a formative influence and imaginative resource, a repertoire of embryonic stories and radical ideas” (Greaney 2006, 2) even in the case of this children's series. First, I examine the underlying ideology and the philosophy of incredulity evidenced by the Talents, the treatment of knowledge and of religion. Second, I consider the typically postmodern stylistic devices Sanderson uses, by which I mean different types of metafiction and intertextuality. The final analysis section covers the characters and their family relationships. I try to answer the following study questions: In what ways is the concept of truth questioned in the series? And why would we offer such books to children?

I do not intend to prove that every aspect of the books is postmodern, but that they have many postmodern characteristics and make use of many postmodern conventions. My aim is to discuss several aspects of them that relate to postmodernism, and especially to a postmodern concept of truth. I use the word *truth* to describe a fairly wide range of phenomena ranging from absolute fact and religious Truth to something that holds some truth-value to someone in a given context. The terms *knowledge* and *information* are typically thought of as having some truth value when not otherwise indicated, and the term *real* often refers to something that is true or that truly exists, so I refer to these concepts as well from time to time. My hypothesis is that the series uses postmodern conventions that efface the truth in ways that may encourage the reader to actively question things that are taken as established truths, for instance to question prejudices such as conventional views on people who are supposedly “abnormal” or in some way “disabled”.

As I mentioned above, I largely focus on the first and fourth books in the interest of narrowing down my study. But since the books form a continuing narrative, it would be difficult to

completely ignore the middle two books especially in the analysis of ideology and the characters. It is easier to accomplish when it comes to the stylistic devices, but there is a degree of continuation in Sanderson's treatment of them, too, and they contain features that exemplify the postmodern take on truth too clearly to be ignored.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Postmodernism

Postmodernism is not only ambiguous in terms of its definition but also concerning the question of timing. There are several differing opinions as to when it started and whether or not it is over. Wain (1999, 360) argues that this is because postmodernism resists being anchored to a specific historical moment as it views history as just another narrative. In other words, the postmodern distrust of absolutes may contribute to the fuzzy edges of the phenomenon itself. And, according to David Robertson, "postructuralist challenges to positivist thinking have brought about" changes in "literary studies, cultural studies and History" (1994, 1). So not only does the poststucturalist-postmodern relativism show in the writings of postmodern theorists, it has influenced academics in other domains as well, including historians.

Still, what can be traced with some accuracy is the use of the term. According to Barry (2009, 82), the word postmodernism was first used in the 1930's, but received its current meaning and prominence only after the publication of Jean-Jacques Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979. This does not mean that postmodernism itself was born in 1979. Bertens (2008, 108) traces its appearance in literature to the 1960's and 1970's. *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Rivkin and Ryan 1998, vii) lists two texts by Friedrich Nietzsche from the late 19th century in its section on post-structuralism, deconstruction and post-modernism. Readings and Schaber have edited a book titled *Postmodernism Across the Ages* (1993). They (Readings and Schaber 1993, xiii) challenge the notion of a "rigidly periodized temporality" and say that they have gathered articles discussing postmodernism and placed them in an order that "parodies a chronological arrangement" so that part three, for instance, is called The Postmodern Eighteenth century. Lyotard (1997, 96), on the other hand, traces the beginnings of modernity to the apostle

Paul.

Some of this seems extreme even though, as I mentioned in the introduction, there are never absolutely clear-cut lines between literary periods. The past ones linger and features of the future ones surface here and there. It is for instance still relevant to know about romanticism even though it is said to have peaked (in English literature) over two hundred years ago (see Perry 1999, 6). As Ihab Hassan (1982, 264) formulated it in his well-known POSTFACE 1982: “We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern and Postmodern, at once.” Still, in 2003 Hassan states that, despite the fact that we can find postmodern features in Rabelais, Sterne or Jane Austen, he would not under any circumstances consider them to be postmodern. It might not be impossible to interpret his statement as an indication that, as a theorist, Hassan had taken a step toward a more rigid, traditional view on history. This, in turn, could be an indication that he is right in talking about postmodernism in the past tense in the article in question (Hassan 2003, 3).

In any case, the timing of postmodernism is ambiguous. In line with the pluralistic nature of postmodernism, there is not even a consensus on whether or not postmodernism should be used as a historical concept or not. As shown above, some scholars, such as Readings and Schaber, do not seem to think that it should, whereas some seem to think the opposite. When it is thought of as a periodizing concept it is often linked to the rise of a consumer society after the Second World War. (See for instance Wain 1999, 360; Jameson 1999, np.) Even Baudrillard (1999 [1983], 393) discusses the values of capitalism and socialism in connection with the phenomenon of simulacra and simulation.

Many writers have approached the concept of postmodernism in part by attempting to list the ways it differs from modernism, its immediate predecessor – assuming one chooses to maintain a fairly conventional, historical view on temporality. Even while noting (Hassan 1982, 269) that these dichotomies are equivocal, Hassan (1982, 267-268) goes so far as to draw a table where he

contrasts, among other things, postmodernism's play, dispersal, schizophrenia and indeterminacy with modernism's purpose, centering, paranoia and determinacy. Hassan (1982, 267) also notes that postmodernism differs from the modernist avant-garde movement in that it does not require one to disdain everything that the majority of society enjoys. Similarly, Jameson (1991, np) argues that much of postmodernism was actually born as a reaction against high modernism and one of the key features that separates it from modernism is the way postmodernism effaces the boundaries between high culture and popular culture. Jameson (1991, np) says that while modernists may have quoted elements from popular culture, postmodernists go further and *incorporate* them.

Apart from listing how postmodernism differs from modernism, several authors have gathered lists of literary devices and other features that are typical of postmodernism in an attempt to explain the use of the term. In the more recent article “Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an aesthetic of trust” Hassan (2003, 4) attempts a retrospective view on postmodernism and lists words that apply to it: “fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, an ironic, sophistical stance, an ethos bordering on kitsch.” I discuss how most of these may be related to an underlying postmodern philosophy below (see 2.1.1).

2.1.1 Truth-concept: plurality, relativity and contradictions

As I noted in the introduction, postmodernism encompasses a vast field of thought. I will therefore not even attempt to examine all the ways postmodern thinking may be reflected in the *Alcatraz*-series. Rather, I will focus on different aspects of the concepts of truth evidenced in several postmodern theorists' writings. I do not mean to imply that postmodernism could be reduced to its take on truth (cf. Hassan 2001, 9) but I do believe that this is a good starting point for an analysis of postmodern features, since the notion of truth has been quite important in postmodern writing.

One of the distinctions one often hears to help distinguish between modernism and

postmodernism is that according to modernism, art is a way to find meaning in the baffling world we live in, whereas according to postmodernism, all meaning is an illusion, there is no concrete meaning to be found – not in art nor in the so-called real world (Lodge 1981, 12). In other words, according to modernist views we can find the truth even if it is very difficult to do so at times, but according to postmodern views there is no one truth to be found about anything, everything is formed of often contradictory possibilities and fragments. This implies that its take on truth is quite central to postmodernism – it is offered as a generalization that actually could be made about something as undefinable as postmodernism. Given that postmodernism itself is so fragmented there is good reason to be sceptical about whether or not this actually applies to all, or even most, postmodern writers, but the fact that this remark is so often made would suggest that there is at least some truth to it (pun intended).

McHale (1987, xii) seems to be talking about something similar when he argues that modernism is mainly concerned with epistemological questions and postmodernism with ontological questions. McHale (1987, 11) admits that this is not an absolute, but rather a question of which is more central or more in the foreground in which. Hutcheon (1988, 50) argues we cannot say even that, but that postmodernism simply asks both epistemological and ontological questions. This both-and view is supported for instance by the fact that one of the seminal texts of postmodernism is Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984 [1979]). As the title indicates, Lyotard's (1984) text is about knowledge and how the way people regard knowledge has changed largely due to new technologies, and how this constitutes the postmodern condition. This would suggest that epistemological questions are still extremely relevant in postmodernism.

In any case, one of Lyotard's major arguments is that trusting the grand narratives such as Christianity or Marxism is not in accordance with the postmodern condition. Instead of these

totalizing attempts at explaining everything within the confines of one uniform theory, postmodernism embraces pluralism. This applies to history as well: in place of a uniform story of History [*l'Histoire*] recounting every major event to have ever happened, we get a multitude of little stories [*petites histoires*] at a more personal level (Lyotard 1989, 155). Interestingly, Lyotard (1989, 152) links this development to a discussion on the relationship between names and myths among a people called Cashinahua. He tells that among the Cashinahua especially, myths act as an identificatory force because they are anchored in the tradition of the people's names (Lyotard 1989, 152). The telling of a myth requires a formula, which effectively frames the story by the name of the hero and by the name of the person telling the myth (Lyotard 1989, 152). The names mentioned as the story is told will also tie in with the Cashinahua identity because they have a finite number of names, all of which identify their bearer as Cashinahua and as part of a specific Cashinahua kinship group (Lyotard 1989, 153). According to Lyotard (1989, 155), the great, universal history would do away with particularisms such as names, whereas the little stories create and bestow them. This can all be said to fall under a pluralistic concept of knowledge and truth, which is typical of postmodernism – even annoyingly typical according to Ihab Hassan (2001, 169).

Another of the great French thinkers whose writings have had great influence on postmodernism, Michel Foucault, was especially interested in the relationship between knowledge and power. Even this concern is naturally not unique to postmodernism, but does seem to be central to it. Foucault argues “that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1998 [1975], 465). According to him, however, there need not be a concrete instance such as a government in possession of that power (Foucault 1998, 465). For instance, psychology and clinical medicine objectify human beings and make us self-regulate ourselves (Foucault 1998, 483). Thus, scientific

theories can exert power without the need for any concrete policing enforcing them (Foucault 1998, 481).

As an aside, some interesting parallels can be drawn between Foucault's ideas and those presented by Louis Althusser (see Montag 1995), even if Althusser is typically labelled a Marxist. Althusser focuses on the power of ideology, not of knowledge in more general terms, but the two are hardly opposites. Almost contrarily to what Foucault says about knowledge, Althusser argues that “ideology always exists in an apparatus”, what he calls Ideological State Apparatuses (Alhusser 1998 [1968], 296). But his thoughts on the way ideology “interpellates”, or hails, individuals, transforming them (Althusser 1998, 301), could be seen to be analogous with the way Foucault argues we apply the power of knowledge on ourselves without someone else enforcing it on us. In any case, Foucault is not alone in arguing that sciences do not tell objective truths but are constructions – and ones with great power over human beings even as they are created by us.

This view on knowledge has been highly contested; it is one of the things that those who criticize postmodernism often take offence at, finding it naively relativistic. An example of this was the commotion that followed the so called Sokal Hoax. The physicist Alan Sokal wrote a parody of a postmodern article in which he pretended to argue that science does not deal with anything objective. *Social Text* published it, not realizing that it was intended as a joke, and this seems to have caused a vast amount of embarrassment to actual postmodern theorists. (See for instance Hodge 1999, 255; Franklin 2000, 359.) Terry Eagleton (2004, 108) argues that the fact that things that at one time are taken to be scientific truths are often later proved to be wrong does not mean that there are no objectively true things. In other words, “it cannot just be raining from my viewpoint” (Eagleton 2004, 109). And even when the rain stops, it will still be true that when it rained, it rained. But even Eagleton (2004, 103) admits that not all postmodernists take the relativism to such extremes as to argue that there is no truth whatsoever.

A case in point, Hutcheon's theory as presented in her 1988 book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* takes a slightly more moderate view on truth and knowledge than some other postmodernists have. Her focus is on historigraphic metafiction, so she discusses truth and knowledge mostly in the context of history. According to Hutcheon (1988, 222), the very structure of postmodernism is inherently paradoxical: postmodern theory and practice challenge prevailing norms, but in so doing also inscribe them. She also repeatedly emphasizes that the contradictions at work in postmodernism do not mean that it would challenge the existence of a past real, on the contrary, it is overtly acknowledged – what is inscribed in postmodern thinking is the relative *inaccessibility* of any objective reality, not its existence (Hutcheon 1988, 146). In simpler terms, "[t]he past really did exist, but we 'know' that past today only through its texts" (Hutcheon 1988, 128), and the texts are constructs. According to Hutcheon (1988, 41-42), postmodernism recognizes the fact that making order of things is a basic human urge, but points out that the order we see has been imposed on the world by us and is thus a human construct, not a given. So truths are constructs, they are truths because they happen to be acknowledged as such at a given time, whether that acknowledgement happens to be universal or not. Postmodernism does not set out to explode these constructs, but rather to problematize them (Hutcheon 1988, xii). According to Hutcheon (1988, 8), this questioning attitude is positive in that even if it does not seek ready-made answers it can produce knowledge that enables change.

Hutcheon (1988) also makes no attempt to disguise her disagreement with Terry Eagleton, among others who have criticised postmodernism, throughout her book. Hutcheon acknowledges that her own approach can be seen as typically postmodern in that she can for instance accept two contradictory models (1988, 51-52), believing in both/and instead of either/or (1988, 49). And one of the things she reproaches Eagleton for is precisely "his absolutist binary thinking" that "negates much of the complexity" of postmodern art (Hutcheon 1988, 18).

In any case, the point of this thesis is not to debate which theorists are right, but simply to examine how postmodern ideas are reflected in the *Alcatraz*-series. Whether or not those postmodern ideas are relevant or useful to readers today is a more important question in terms of my study (and I discuss it below in 2.1.2), but this question is more or less independent of the question of who is right and who is wrong. Even ideas that are complete humbug can bear enormous cultural significance.

On a less philosophical level, the poststructuralist practice of deconstruction can also be said to tie in with a postmodern truth-concept and with Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism as a cultural mode that builds on contradictions. McGillis (1996, 170) discusses deconstruction in the context of children's literature and says that its aim is to discover many partial readings as opposed to one absolute reading. To an extent, I do this to *Alcatraz* in this thesis. I point out several apparent contradictions: ways in which the series both endorses and challenges not only traditional literary conventions but also the postmodern incertitude itself – which can be said to be a very postmodern thing to do indeed. Analogously to deconstruction, then, postmodern philosophy tends to claim that there are no absolute truths but a plethora of partial ones, which are often more or less contradictory.

Finally, Patricia Waugh (1984, 2) argues that metafiction's purpose or effect is drawing the readers' attention to the fact that they are reading something that has been constructed. Being thus drawn out of the story can then make the reader take notice of the "constructedness" of the real world, as well, and make them start questioning things they have taken for granted (Waugh 1984, 2). The tendency to incertitude and to questioning is typical of postmodernism, and Waugh (1984, 21) accordingly states that metafiction is a hallmark of postmodern literature – while it can be found to a lesser degree in all literature.

The postmodern truth concept, whose presence in the *Alcatraz*-series I am studying, can be

summed up with the following words: plurality, contradiction and relativism. Postmodernism teaches that truth is not an absolute, and that it should be questioned.

2.1.2 Cultural significance

Frederic Jameson, whose theoretical roots come from Marxism, argues that postmodernism as an ideology is a symptom of the current culture as a whole – of capitalism and the consumer society it has promoted (1994, xii). Bloland implies that postmodernism stems largely from poststructuralism (2005, 122). As discussed above (see 1. and 2.1), many theorists seem to portray it in contrast to modernism or even as a reaction against it (see Hassan 1982, 267-268, Jameson 1991, np).

But regardless of what its influences are, it seems clear that postmodernism itself has had an enormous influence on contemporary culture. The fact that postmodernism does not care about lines between "high" and "low" culture (Jameson 1991, np; cf. Hassan 1982, 267) has enabled it to be embraced in very diverse cultural instances. On one hand, popular animated series such as *The Simpsons* regularly make use of postmodern techniques such as over-the-top parodic allusions. On the other hand, there are highly literary works of postmodern fiction such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), which examines questions of truth in the setting of a secretive library in a medieval abbey.

Even the more experimental novels have often been able to gain a wide audience, perhaps because many of them are quite playful and easy to read. A prime example of this is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which manages to be accessible and amusing to many readers despite its being a postmodern account of someone's experience of the infamous bombing of Dresden in World War II. One fairly recent example of this is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is illuminated* (2003). It also explores questions of truth and history for instance through a highly unreliable narrator. The book was even adapted into a film – although most of the positive response

the film got was from critics and not from the box office sales. Hutcheon (1988, 20-21) suggests that these kinds of books can be popular both in the best-seller lists and in academic studies because they “parodically use and abuse the conventions of both popular and élite literature” and in so doing in fact challenge both the money-driven cultural industry and the (overly) fragmented and specialized elite culture from within them.

As I mention in the introduction, Ihab Hassan (2003, 4) states that we have come to “see the world through postmodern-tinted glasses”. It has transformed culture in both its dimensions: culture as art and culture as social conventions and ways of thinking. It seems clear, then, that postmodernism has had an enormous influence on the world. But does it continue to be relevant?

Several theorists have suggested that postmodernism is over and that we have entered a new age, *post-postmodernism* or whatever it will be named (see for instance Hassan 2003, 3). This alone is not, however, sufficient proof to unequivocally state that postmodernism would be dead since literary critics have been talking about postmodernism in the past tense even before its golden days in the 1980s (cf. McHale 2007, np).

And even if postmodernism is becoming a thing of the past, whatever era we are entering will inevitably be a reaction to what has come before it, to postmodernism. It is likely to borrow some traits directly from postmodernism and to form some others as a counter reaction to it. For instance, Hassan (2003, 3) speculates that we are moving away from the postmodern attitude of suspicion and questioning to an opposite attitude of trust. If this be the case, it can certainly be seen as a counter reaction to postmodernism. Therefore, understanding postmodernism will help to understand the period or cultural mode that follows it. And, once again, there is no reason why it should become completely irrelevant even after a great number of cultural modes have come and gone after it, or why would romanticism and classicism still be taught at schools?

2.2 Children's literature and literary criticism

Children's literature amounts to a very wide field of research. According to Kimberley Reynolds (2005, 2) it encompasses everything from early myths to contemporary works, from picturebooks for new-borns to novels for teens.

Apart from being an enormous field of research, it is also one with hazy lines, as Peter Hunt notes (1990, 1). According to Hunt (1990. 1) it is not really defined in terms of any textual characteristics but by its primary audience, "the child reader", which is in turn very difficult to define and make statements on. Hence, there exist several studies that address questions such as "What is children's literature?" and "How is the child constructed in children's literature?" (Reynolds 2005, 1). Furthermore, as Immel notes (2009, 19), children and their books have not been constructed the same way across history and across different cultures.

I need not delve too deep into these questions here, however, since the main focus of this thesis is not explaining how the *Alcatraz* series is an example of children's literature, but its being an example of children's literature which has been highly influenced by postmodernism. Still, a brief discussion on the history of children's literature research is relevant since the fact that the books are primarily aimed at children seems crucial to their make-up. It also has some interesting effects, as I hope to prove below.

One of the ways in which the *Alcatraz*-series being aimed at children may be relevant has to do with their somewhat boundary-breaking nature. Reynolds points out that while some may consider children's literature a lighter field of research than "adult" literature, it often experiments with things such as new formats in ways that adult literature sometimes never dares attempt (Reynolds 2005, 2). This may be partly because children's literature is not bound by the same rules as many genres of adult literature. As a case in point, Brandon Sanderson[6] has stated that he was

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[6] http://www.brandonsanderson.com/annotation/446/Alcatraz-Chapter-Two

freer to experiment with quirky, self-conscious humour in a children's series than with his usual epic fantasy.

2.2.1 Historical overview

As Grenby and Immel (xiii) point out in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (2009), a separate field of children's literature has existed for at least over 300 years, since the seventeenth century. The earliest children's fiction was meant to educate children on questions of morals and religion. According to John Stephens (2009, 91) old myths and folktales were already then often retold to children precisely in the purpose of indoctrinating them into the social and ethical values of the society. While writers often strove to educate in a pleasant way, entertainment value was apparently not the dominant one until the latter half of the 20th century (Golden 1990, 197). In any case, today there is a staggering variety and number of books published for children from picturebooks to novels, from school stories to adventure stories, from realism to postmodern retellings of the traditional fairytales. There are over six thousand new children's books published every year in the UK alone (Reynolds 2005, 1).

Golden (1990, 13) argues that while many find the idea disturbing, there are some differences between adult and childhood literature. She mentions the rarity of features such as complex time shifts, dense symbolism and themes of passion, and the profusion of child (and animal) protagonists as typical characteristics of children's literature (Golden 1990, 13). These apply more or less to the *Alcatraz* series: there is little experimentation with time shifts, any symbolism is usually explicitly explained, there are only hints at romantic feelings between the youngsters and nothing concrete in the way of passion, and finally the two most central characters are children. And even though some of the ideas presented in the books are fairly complex, the actual prose is mostly quite simple, containing much of the direct speech and uncomplicated

vocabulary that children prefer according to Nicholas Tucker (1981, 13).

As Hunt (1990, 2) notes, the history of children's literature criticism in a modern form can be dated back to the nineteenth century. For most of its existence, it has essentially been about choosing good books that we would want our children to read (Lesnik-Oberstein 2004, 4; Egoff 2003, 4). Like literary criticism in general, it began as subjective commenting by people who felt they were qualified to pass judgement on what is good literature. It did not develop into a reputable scientific analysis that encompasses literary theory at the same time as adult literary criticism. Rather, the subjective "method" persisted until the latter half of the 20th century (see Hearne 1991, 117).

Naturally, the most relevant trend in children's literature in the context of this thesis is the postmodern one. Postmodern characteristics have been present in some children's books for several decades. For some reason, a large proportion of critics who discuss this seem to favour picture books as examples, and it may be possible that there actually are more picturebooks than other types of children's books that embrace postmodernism or take it further. Another reason for their relative popularity in Children's literature criticism might be that they are an ideal vessel for postmodernism in that they inherently combine two mediums, words and pictures, which can be seen as typically postmodern in itself, and which gives opportunity to try and further break the line between words and pictures (cf. Pantaleo 2010, 13).

For example, Michèle Anstey (2002, 445) argues that postmodern picturebooks are especially interesting in that they compel the reader to be active and "to engage with the text in new ways". Sylvia Pantaleo (2010) discusses examples of postmodern picturebooks from a largely narratological standpoint.

The *Alcatraz* series is not, however, the only non-picturebook with postmodern features on the children's book market. One could argue that for instance Mary Norton's classic from as far back

1952, *The Borrowers*, has some distinctly postmodern quirks. The very first paragraph (1975 [1952], 7) raises doubt about who the story is being told to: “It was Mrs May who first told me about him. No, not me. How could it have been me . . . ? Kate, she should have been called.” According to Godek, this is an example of how “Norton deconstructs the illusion of reality created in mimetic storytelling” (2005, 98). And the last lines of the book suggest that Mrs May's brother has made the whole story up, going so far as to plant counterfeit evidence (1975 [1952], 159). According to Kawabata (2006, 126) the ending can make the reader doubt whether or not even the boy exists. The fact that the story thus toys with the identity of its original teller, Mrs May's brother, and with the identity of Mrs May's audience, Kate or the narrator, draws the reader's attention to the constructedness of the story and can be seen as an example of metafiction in postmodern style, even if *The Borrowers* pre-dates most assessments of when the cultural mode truly took flight by roughly a decade. According to Godek postmodernism was then “on the rise” (2005, 90).

And there are also critics who have expressly studied postmodernism in non-picturebook children's books. The book *Modern Children's Literature* (Reynolds, 2005), for instance, contains two chapters that name postmodernism in their topics: “Fantasy – Postwar, Postmodern, Postcolonial: Houses in Postwar Fantasy” by Sarah Godek and “Postmodernism, New Historicism and Migration: New Historical Novels” by Pat Pinsent.

Fantasy, the genre chosen by Brandon Sanderson, has long been associated especially with children's literature (Hunt 2001, 269). Many still consider adult fantasy as somehow inferior to more realist fiction, since it is construed as being less “high-brow” material. But Godek (2005, 97) argues that the fantasy genre may be especially well-suited for postmodernism. According to her, fantasy “is open to a multiplicity of meanings” and interpretations due to the fact that it does not attempt to mimic the real world of our experience directly (Godek 2005, 99). Fantasy could also be said to be an exercise in believing in the unbelievable, which is very much in line with the notion of

embracing contradictory truths.

But if postmodernism is dead or dying, what does this mean in terms of postmodern children's books? It does not have to mean that postmodern children's books would stop being read or even published. Reynolds brings up the possibility that children's literature can act as “a safe-house and incubator for literary modes that are temporarily out of fashion” (2005, 4). It is not impossible for postmodern writing to be conserved and kept alive in children's literature even after it has become *passé* in adult literature.

2.2.2 Educational values today

People are still concerned with the educational value of books. They express concern if they feel that a particular children's book does not teach anything of value or exposes the readers to something they deem unsuitable. On one hand, there is continued debate about whether or not children should be allowed to read *Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, because characters in the book portray nineteenth century attitudes to African Americans, and some find this potentially harmful. Another example is the response Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books sometimes elicit. As McGillis (2003, xiii) mentions, some are concerned with the element of witchcraft in them, among other things.

On the other hand, many older stories with distinct pedagogical aspirations, such as Edith Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (1902), which encourages children to behave “properly”, keep being read. As do more recent ones, such as Gaarder's *Sophie's World* (1995), which, as mentioned above, attempts to teach its readers the basics of the history of philosophy. As McGillis (1996, 9) writes, we still have a tendency to view “good” literature as a vessel of truths much in the same way as critics in the nineteenth century did, as something that “strengthens the imagination, toughens the moral fiber”, civilizes us and thus even “makes us better human beings” (1996, 9).

Still, several theorists have reproached previous Children's literature criticism for having had the aim of finding good books for “the child” to read (Lesnik-Oberstein 2004, 19). This is at least partly justified. Lesnik-Oberstein (2004, 19) points out in a book she edited, *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, that this old approach would require the critic to know the child and the book – which is impossible in any absolute sense. But I would argue that if one adopts a more relativistic view than many of the previous generations of critics, trying to find good books for children may still be a valid approach in Children's literature criticism.

At its heart, most literary criticism can be said to be about finding good books. What critics do is discuss books that they can find something to say about. This usually requires that the works in question are rich enough in interesting ideas that somehow “deserve” to be analysed. As postmodernism has brought the boundaries between so-called high and low culture crumbling down, people in the academia have slowly recognized that this richness can be found (even) in popular romance-novels, graphic novels and children's fiction – and not only in Shakespeare and Proust. This does not mean that the notion of literary value would have completely disappeared, but that it is being seen in new places. Theorists keep looking for interesting ideas in books. And in my albeit limited experience, many adults choose books to read in order to expose themselves to new ideas as well as to entertain themselves. Even Umberto Eco (1984, 59) has noted that he wanted to write *The Name of the Rose* so that its readers could both enjoy themselves and learn something. Inherent in most literary criticism and in most people's reading lists can be found the very same twin values that are often explicitly articulated in traditional Children's literature criticism: finding books that are entertaining and that teach (the children) something (cf. Golden 1990, 195).

The only major difference, then, would seem to be that whereas adults may themselves choose the books they read, children are said to be almost passive, the parents and teachers being the ones who choose what they are to read (Immel 2009, 21). This is largely true, for practical and

conventional purposes, though the *Alcatraz* books, for instance, are marketed to children that may be old enough to ask their parents to buy certain books or even to borrow them themselves from a library. Still, the often passive role of children in choosing what they read can make it morally questionable to dictate which books are good children's books.

Indeed, critics have gone so far as to question whether all education is somehow morally dubious as it might be said to subject the learners and violate their right to autonomy (Thomson 2004, 160). Melanie Eckford-Prossor, among other critics, has compared the general relationship between children and adults to the more clearly stigmatized one between colonizer and colonized (2000, 241). Interestingly, Eckford-Prossor (2000, 239) seems to be drawing on Foucault's ideas (see 2.1.1) when she argues that adults use the language of psychoanalysis to build an image of children that justifies adult dominance, much as the languages of dependency and economics were used in mastering the colonized. This is especially apparent in some older books on children's literature. Bolin and Zweigbergk's book from 1961 claims for example that 10-year-old children would be in a primitive state, which would explain their liking adventures that take place in the Stone Age or in the jungle (67). In today's standards, this may seem condescending to say the least.

But these questions seem too vast and philosophical for the scope of this study. I therefore try to sidestep them as best I can in that my aim is not to pass judgement on the *Alcatraz*-series and to decide whether or not they should be read by children. Rather, I discuss how several of its aspects relating to postmodernism might make it educational and thus at least plausibly useful to (child) readers.

I believe this to be a sound line of questioning since I do not claim to know anything definitive about the often contested child-reader, but analyse *possibilities* (cf. Lesnik-Oberstein 2004, 20 and Thomson 2004, 160). Additionally, as Lesnik-Oberstein acknowledges (2004, 19), educational values are an extremely traditional focal point in children's literature criticism – so I can

be said to be following in the footsteps of noted critics. She (Lesnik-Oberstein 2004, 18) also discusses two experienced critics, McGillis and Rudd, who have, according to her analysis, tried and failed to find a new approach different from the search for the good book. It follows that it might be futile for me to even attempt to do so, as it might prove highly difficult. Thus, I believe that my relativist but tradition-inspired approach is not only valid but more suitable for the limited scope of this thesis.

Furthermore, there exists other recent criticism that addresses the educational value of children's literature; it is by no means a thing of the past. See for instance Holly Anderson's book *Teaching through Texts: Promoting Literacy Through Popular and Literary Texts in the Primary Classroom* (1999) or *Children's Literature in Education* (1993-) an academic journal dedicated to the virtual marriage of children's literature and education. Castleman's article on the *Alcatraz* series (2010, 20) makes mention of the way the series teaches the readers to ask critical questions. The fact that readers can learn from fictitious books is mentioned even in some texts of *Children's Literature: New Approaches* (see for instance Miller 2004, 82).

Several academics have expressed concern about young people today being poorly prepared for higher education or, even, to the world we live in. According to McGillis (1996, 32), the approach to literature that has largely reigned in schools for over fifty years, which owes much to New Criticism, has taught the students rules about how to break down a text into components such as plot, character, setting; or metrics, metaphors and alliterations. What it has failed to do, however, is teach them to be active readers who would take the initiative and question the established reading (McGillis 1996, 40). McGillis (1996, 40) links this to the way many children's books themselves have opted for the traditional, shying away from the complexities of postmodernism, partly because "[w]e continue to consider children incapable of difficult linguistic and literary types" (40).

But when some of the child readers grow up and decide to study literature at university

level, they may find that the method of approaching literature they have been taught over the last ten years or so helps them all too little in their studies. As McGillis (1996, 46-47) notes, they have mostly learned to do a type of close reading which, while a good starting point, does not in a major way relate to the many literary theories that have come to dominate the academia after the hay-day of New Criticism.

Similarly, Lisa Schade Eckert (2008, 110) discusses the discrepancies between teaching literacy (in the sense ‘skillset used to read and analyse literature’) at secondary schools and at universities and how this has led to students being poorly prepared for studying at college level. Schade Eckert argues that it would help if literary theories were explicitly introduced to students at an earlier stage (2008, 112) and refers to several studies conducted since the 1970s which suggest that when students are aware that they are applying literary theory and theoretical terminology it is easier for them to start questioning things such as cultural influences at work in texts – starting from an elementary school level (2008, 113). Thus, it seems that it would be beneficial for literature students to be exposed to literary theory and to be helped to be more cognizant of the processes of constructing text already as children. But literary students are unlikely to form a very high percentage of the population. Might more theory-led reading be of use to other people, as well?

Due to the 20th century approach to teaching literature, McGillis (1996, 109) complains that “[b]y the time the students reach my classroom at the university, the majority of them have learned that the best way to deal with the world is through accommodation”. This statement may concern his classroom at university, but he is not talking solely about students' approach to literature, but to the world in general. He is complaining about a general tendency to be accommodating instead of questioning the system. But a deeper understanding of literary conventions can help even on this larger scale. McGillis (1996, 24) argues that by understanding critical theory to some degree, children can become more active, self-aware readers and as such they can understand codes and

conventions not only in literature but also in their daily lives. He goes on to say that that will give them an understanding of how the market system "impinges upon them" (McGillis 1996, 24). Thus, literary theory can benefit even those who do not go on to pursue a higher education.

There is no reason why postmodern literary criticism should be less useful than other approaches, indeed quite the opposite. As discussed above (see 2.1.2), postmodernism continues to be a relevant trend for several reasons. Therefore, as Bloland (2008, 124) argues, "perspectives, concepts, and vocabularies of postmodernism" may be indispensable in understanding the fast-changing society we are living in. Anstey (2002) even argues that postmodern picturebooks can be useful in teaching people new kinds of literacies that will "empower them to take more informed and critical control of their workplace, public and private lives" (446). Nor is there reason to think that child readers would not be able to pick up on multiple or contradictory truths in a postmodern vein. Even Tucker noted that children can be able to "hold two contradictory, abstract ideas together in one concept" around the age of eleven (1981, 9). After studying book reviews written by children aged between eight and eleven years, A. Robin Hoffman (2010, 248) concluded that children are more capable of assuming a critical approach to form, genre and composition than children's literature critics have given them credit for. And as Anstey (2002, 455) points out, young readers can indeed make sophisticated interpretations and multiple readings. Taking all this into account, it is not surprising that several children's books introduce postmodern conventions to their readers.

3. Analysing truth

3.1 Underlying ideology

By ideology, I do not necessarily mean some fully formed school of thinking that would be apparent in the series or that would be the “message” that the texts tried to convey. I am referring to something vaguer: to a tendency to regard knowledge and truths in a postmodern, questioning manner. Still, as Hutcheon (1988, 224) states “[t]o claim that questioning is a value in itself is ideological”, and it can certainly be argued that the series does value a questioning attitude.

I have hypothesized that this postmodern tendency is apparent in several aspects of the series, and here I discuss how it comes forth in several of the underlying constructions, or larger building blocks, of the Alcatraz universe as presented in the series: the interconnectedness of knowledge, power and history; the Talents; and the *apparent* lack of Religious themes.

3.1.1 Knowledge, power and history

Information matters. The close relationship between knowledge and power, which, as Sarup (1993, 66) points out, is so central to Foucault's studies, is difficult to miss in the *Alcatraz*-series. Grandpa Smedry continuously tries to teach Alcatraz that information is much more powerful than things such as firearms or Firebringer's lenses, while the evil Librarians tend to trust brute force in dealing with the Smedries.

Alcatraz repeatedly defeats his enemies through cunning, which is in line with his grandfather's teachings, but also a staple of traditional child empowerment in children’s literature. In the second book Alcatraz deduces what mechanisms his father has used in order to leave him a message (*AvSB*, 312), which allows him to free Attica from eternal curatorship. In the third book Alcatraz realizes at the right moment that if he declares Folsom and Himalaya husband and wife, Himalaya will get Folsom's Talent and will be able to fight off the evil Librarians (*AvKC*, 270). And

it is having worked out that the way the Talents work depends on the perceptions of the Smedries in possession of them, not the actual physical conditions, that enables him to end the war of Mokia in the fourth book. He can trick his own Talent so as to be able to momentarily bestow it to all the knights via Bastille's Fleshstone (*AvSL,* 276). Even the Lenses "react to information and intelligence" (*AvEL*, 228), and are thus in a way subject to the power of knowledge.

One of the themes that are carried throughout the entire series is the importance of the Forgotten Language that hides untold secrets, and the resulting importance of the Translator's Lenses. Alcatraz's parent's lives revolve around the discovery of those secrets. Attica has spent almost thirteen years hunting down the Sands of Rashid. Once he manages to forge them into Translator's Lenses he risks his life to get access to important books in the Forgotten Tongue in the Library of Alexandria. After returning to human form, he spends most of his time reviewing the data he has collected. The result is that he discovers a way to do something that will change the lives of all human beings in the universe of the books, if Alcatraz and his mother Shasta fail to stop him. Attica's life's work revolves around information, and the information he has gained could literally give him the power to give every Hushlander and every Free Kingdomer special powers. This gives an ironic twist to the adage "knowledge is power", and thus clearly relates to a foucauldian or more generally postmodern concern with the relationship of knowledge and power.

The fact that the Smedries recognize the value of information is also shown by the fact that most of Alcatraz's relatives are revealed to be scientists of one form or another. Sing Sing is an anthropologist specializing in ancient weaponry (*AvEL*, 91) and Quentin is a language specialist, albeit only at graduate student level (*AvEL*, 92), to name but a few examples. This focus on the sciences is a direct response to their belief that information is the strongest weapon, and thus more or less connects with Foucault's (1998, 483) notion of the role sciences play in controlling us. It is also interesting that despite already having physical power through Smedry Talents and

conventional power by virtue of being nobility, they still find it necessary to dedicate their lives to information.

It is also noteworthy that the traditional keeping places of information, libraries and archives, play a central role in the series. The first book is about infiltrating the downtown library, the second about freeing Alcatraz's father from the Library of Alexandria, and the third about protecting the Royal Archives (not a library). The fact that the Nalhallans call their not-a-library the Archives might be a nod to Derrida, whose “Archive Fever” can also be said to treat the history or the archaeology of the way knowledge has been constructed and ordered and the power relations that relate to those processes (see Derrida 1995, 10). Even Lyotard touches on the subject. In discussing how museums, libraries and archives have the power to turn entities into monuments, Lyotard (1997,165) notes that the *archivists* and *curators* are the ones who “must decide what deserves retention and what deserves exhibition”. In other words, the archivists and curators wield the power of information by controlling what gets seen. In the *Alcatraz*-series the Librarians certainly match that description.

To make a very un-poststructuralist move and actually consult the author, Sanderson[7] has mentioned that he himself thinks that the theme of *Alcatraz versus the Evil Librarians* is the power of information.

So the importance of information is clearly a central theme in the *Alcatraz*-series much like it is one in postmodern theory. But the way information is used by different actors in the series also has many points in common with different postmodern theories.

The fact that there exists an evil, government-like faction which is deliberately manipulating information in order to exert power over the general populace is at first glance not quite in accord with Foucault's theory, since he points out that the process of power is not “localized in the relations

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[7] http://www.brandonsanderson.com/annotation/450/Alcatraz-Chapter-Six

between the state and its citizens" (Foucault 1996, 465). As Sarup (1993) phrases it, "relations of power do not emanate from a sovereign or a state" (73). On the contrary, power "has the character of a network; its threads extend everywhere" (Sarup 1993, 74). But it is noteworthy that the Librarians do not rely on a police force or an army in order to control their subjects, only when they fight against Free Kingdomers. Rather, they control the Hushlands through careful management of information, letting the Hushlanders self-regulate accordingly. As Grandpa Smedry (*AvEL*, 99) explains: "The Librarians control the information in this city – in this whole country. They control what gets read, what gets seen, and what gets learned. Because of that, they have power." They preach the values of law-abidingness and order to make people like they are and teach false physics so that they would find the idea of silimatic technology ludicrous.

The Librarians believe in making flying vehicles which all look like similar "long tubey contraptions" instead of building them in the shape of different animals (*AvSB*, 29), since they like order and conformity in all things from ideas to material objects. This is why what gets read, seen and read remains fairly uniform in the Hushlands. This parallels Hassan's (2001, 177) argument that political power can act as a delimiting factor to postmodern pluralism.

The significance of names also ties in with the power of information. According to Lyotard (1989, 152), names can function as identificatory myths. They are something around which people and communities can build their identities. This would make them a powerful tool for self-regulation and for propaganda. In the *Alcatraz*-series the names do function as such. Both high-ranking Free Kingdomers and Librarians reuse the names of their ancestors, apparently to remain in touch with their people's histories. The Librarians then use this information for propaganda purposes by naming mountains after themselves and prisons after their enemies (*AvEL*, 158). This is why Librarian names tend to be such as Blackburn, Kilimanjaro and Himalaya, while Free Kingdomer names include Alcatraz, Bastille, Leavenworth, Sing Sing, Kazan, Australia and Brig.

Another example of the way the Librarians distort knowledge is through teaching false history, making their version of history the accepted truth in a few generations after conquering an area from the Free Kingdoms (*AvEL*, 100, 292). In keeping with Lyotard (1989, 155), this suggests that the series is somewhat against universal history, since it is specifically being used by the evil Librarians as a uniforming tool. History can be said to be a subdomain of information that has particularly interested postmodernists, even if some think postmodernism is ahistorical (see Wain 1999, 360; cf. Hutcheon 1988, 87). To name a few examples aside from Lyotard, Sarup (1993, 58) argues that the idea that connects all Foucault's writing is “a vision of history derived from Nietzsche”, and Hutcheon (1988, ix) argues that historiographic metafiction is *the* postmodern form of literature.

History is notoriously written by the winners, as Pinsent (2005a, 174) points out, but what the Librarians have done in their lands takes this to parodical extremes, emphasising the fact that history books do not necessarily tell the truth. Alcatraz learns that much of history as he knows it is pure fiction, especially concerning the last five hundred years (*AvSB*, 106). The Free Kingdomers tell Alcatraz that swords are actually more advanced than firearms (*AvEL*, 120) and stairs more advanced than elevators (*AvEL*, 128). The in-world explanations for these views are that “stairs take more effort to climb, are harder to construct, and are far more healthy to use” and thus “took longer to develop” (*AvEL*, 129), and that the moving parts of firearms make them extremely vulnerable for Smedry Talents (*AvEL*, 61). But whatever the reasons are, these views could still be said to challenge the notion of history as progress, as postmodernism has done. We may think that humankind is advancing and making scientific progress, but in comes a thirteen year old knight who claims that we are being repressed and therefore going backwards. This might be read as an example of Hutcheon's postmodernism which “critically confronts the past with the present, and vice versa” (1988, 39). On a more general level, this ties in with a distrust of absolute truths.

It can also be said to exemplify Hutcheon's notion of truth being formed by contradiction, since Alcatraz keeps having to change his mind about what to believe in. First he believes that as an American he has always had access to the most advanced technology possible, and then he comes to accept that the Free Kingdomers are right and that Hushlander technology is primitive in comparison with theirs (*AvEL*, 112). But later he realizes that this is only partly true. Firearms may not work well against Smedry Talents, but a handgun will still kill most humans and wooden doors quite effectively, as he notes after Sing has blasted their way through a door using two handguns, leaving it “shattered and splintered” (*AvEL*, 254). In essence, then, Hushlander technology both is and is not as primitive as Free Kingdomers think it is. There may have been regression due to the Librarian oppression but there has also been progression in spite of it, or partly even due to it, considering Alcatraz's realization in the third book that the order and organization that the Librarians advocate do have their uses especially when it comes to passing information on to others in an efficient manner (*AvKC*, 186-187).

Thus, the partial or contradictory nature of truth goes hand in hand with the manipulation of information. Castleman (2011, 30), too, points out that already in the foreword to *Alcatraz versus the Evil Librarians* Alcatraz implies that “the control of information influences the [very] way reality is perceived”. This also works on a more metafictitious level. A clear example of this is the map of the world which Alcatraz discovers at the downtown library, and which shows all the extra continents. Within the reality of the novels, this is absolutely the hidden truth about the world. The reader, however, will most likely know not to believe that there actually would be “censured” continents here and there in the middle of the great oceans in the real world. Alcatraz practically invites this kind of incredulity towards the novels by talking about satellite images and airplane pilots (*AvEL*, 119). But with Bastille's reply (*AvEL*, 119) about the satellites being controlled by the Librarians who are also misleading the navigating apparatuses of the pilots, the reader may well be

left with a playful *what if* ringing at the back of his or her mind.

Truth is not elusive in the series only as a consequence of the Librarians' meddling with it. For instance, the theme of the second book is that Alcatraz the narrator is a liar, which is interesting given that lying is one of the constant themes of postmodern fiction as defined by Hutcheon (1988, 153), even if the series is not really a typical example of historiographic metafiction.

The Truthfinder's Lens is also made out to be very important. Alcatraz finds the Lens in impressive circumstances: in a mysterious Pharaoh-style tomb, on the sarcophagus of his extremely distant ancestor, Alcatraz the First, along with a sinister warning that gives him deeper insight into his Talent (*AvSB*, 222-223). Later, Grandpa Smedry shows great enthusiasm at the fact that the Lens allows you to see if someone is lying or telling the truth (*AvKC*, 59). And the Lens does prove useful. Most notably, it allows Alcatraz to find out that his mother is not all evil and that she does care about him, which probably helps him decide to set out on the course to stop his father by the end of the fourth book.

It is also brought out that information often almost seems to twist itself over time and distance, forming legends out of history without any outside help. Alcatraz discusses the misleading legends and novels which are supposed to tell about his heroics but which sound exaggerated even in comparison with the series itself:

> I hope you Free Kingdomers aren't *too* put out to discover that dragons didn't come and bow to me at my birth. I wasn't tutored by the spirits of my dead Smedry ancestors, nor did I kill my first Librarian by slitting his throat with his own library card.
>
> This is the real me, the troubled boy who grew into an even more troubled man. (*AvEL*, 102.)

Passages like this may remind the readers of how legends are born out of gross exaggerations in the so called real world as well. Again, this fits into the theme of challenging the authority of grand narratives. It can also make the reader take notice at the use of the word *real*. In the end, there is of course actually no such thing as the real Alcatraz, since he is a fictive character (cf. 3.2.1 below).

The real could also be said to be questioned in relation to Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, especially to his Disneyland illustration (see Baudrillard 1999, 385-386). It could be said that within the diegesis of the series the Librarians have purposefully constructed Disneyland and presented it as imaginary "in order to make us believe the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (Baudrillard 1999, 386). In the series, America has not simply become simulation; the Librarians have wilfully constructed it along with the other Hushlands to make it play out Biblioden's ideals. Conversely, it could be argued that Nalhalla has been modelled after Disneyland, after the ultimate simulation, since it is a city where people live in castles – crystalline or otherwise impressive – travel by dragon-taxi and can visit a corny simulation of an American diner. In either case, the varying degrees of "realness" of the different places in the series offer a chance to start questioning what is real and what is not.

Considering the prominence of school stories in children's literature over time (Reimer 2009, 209; Hunt 2001, 299) it seems curious that no scenes in the series seem to take place at school, especially since they are the quintessential place of learning – where knowledge is most typically transmitted and acquired. Alcatraz refers to his implied reader's teachers on several occasions, and to false things he has been taught at school. But he does not mention anything about the social aspects of his own school days before Grandpa Smedry turned up on his door, nor are there any scenes where he would attend school after he finally reaches the Free Kingdoms in the third book. It seems that the only somewhat systematic instruction he receives is delivered by Bastille, who teaches him about the Teddy-bear grenades in the early pages of the fourth book – and that teaching takes place in a weapons testing facility, not in a schoolroom.

One possible explanation could be that the Librarians do not leave much room in the plot for another authoritative system that is meant to dispense knowledge, even if said authoritative system

is said to be subordinate to the Librarians (*AvEL*, 67). This can be said to fit in well not only with Foucault's ideas about the relationship of knowledge and power, but with Althusser's theory: schools can be seen as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses, as Althusser (1998, 298) mentions.

In any case, it is clear that the relationship between knowledge and power is explored in several ways in the series, for instance through the concept of history, and that that knowledge is shown to be formed of partial or contradictory truths.

3.1.2 Talents

To the uninitiated, the Smedry Talents sound like defects. They include breaking things, being late, tripping and falling, spouting nonsense, being bad at maths and dancing poorly. In the Free Kingdoms these Talents are, however, appreciated and they prove very useful in various situations in the course of Alcatraz's adventures. Grandpa Smedry arrives late for the bullet intended for him (*AvEL*, 59). Sing Sing creates a distraction by falling elaborately and thus wreaking havoc at the library (*AvEL*, 103). Aydee can multiply the amount of teddy-bear grenades in Alcatraz's possession by miscalculating how many of them they have (*AvSL*, 168).

The usefulness of the Talents can produce an upside-down look; it makes the readers think that they really are powerful Talents instead of defects, and possibly helps them not to think that something is bad just because there happens to be a general consensus claiming so. Then, towards the end of the series there is a double-reversal: Alcatraz becomes increasingly convinced that there is something sinister about the Talents after all. The major unresolved problem at the end of the fourth book is even the fact that Attica has found a way to give everyone Talents and Alcatraz realizes that this would lead to disaster since the Talents can be very unpredictable (*AvSL*, 286). As Alcatraz says, the Talents can be “both blessings and curses” (*AvKC*, 7) – not either or. This can be tied in either with the notion of postmodernism undermining itself that Bertens (2008, 112)

mentions, or with Hutheon's (1988, 231) theory that the contradictions of postmodernism serve to make us question things and not take anything for granted.

Postmodernism can be said to be about breaking things, such as the boundaries between high and low culture that Jameson discusses (1991, np), and about fragmentation, which celebrates a liberation from the control of the master narratives, as Barry (2009, 81) notes. The notion of fragmentation can also be said to be closely connected to the notion of breaking; if something is fragmented, it has typically been broken. It is therefore interesting that the Breaking Talent is the most powerful Talent. It is literally at the centre of the diagram that depicts the "science" of the Talents, the Incarnate Wheel, which Alcatraz discovers in his forefather's tomb (*AvSB*, 210-212, see my illustration of the Wheel below), since the other Talents can be seen as limited versions of it. The Talent of being late is a way of changing time and the Talent of looking spectacularly ugly when you wake up is a way of changing matter, as Kazan explains to Alcatraz (*AvSB*, 162). Later, Alcatraz realizes that it is actually a question of *breaking* things such as time and matter (*AvSL*, 48).

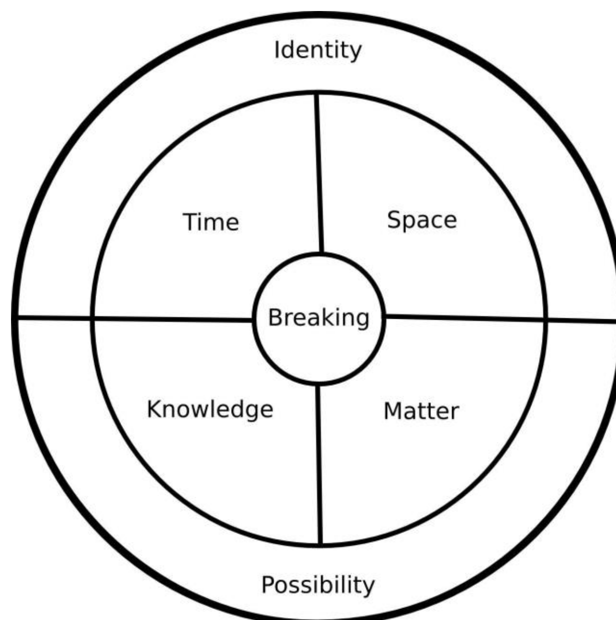

Illustration: The Incarnate Wheel

The Incarnate Wheel thus implies that nothing is permanent; everything can be broken, and it could be argued that postmodern theorists have tried to do just that, especially according to those who have been opposed to postmodern thinking. Postmodernists have broken the notion of identity by destabilizing the individual subject (see Bertens 2008, 107). They have broken the notion of time by dehistoricising everything (see Wain 1999, 360). They have broken knowledge by claiming we should be ever sceptical, questioning all information (see Bloland 2005. 124). Following Foucault (1998) and Baudrillard (1999), they have broken matter by claiming that true power lies with information, not with material weaponry, and by embracing simulacra instead of real things. Following Lyotard (1984), they have broken space by being the product of an IT-driven world where we can access everything and everyone from the comfort of our own homes. Following Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence (1975), and Umberto Eco's irony (1984, 67), they may even have broken possibility by realizing that everything has already been done and we can no longer do anything pure and innocent but are prisoners of our own ironical, knowing stance on everything .

3.1.3 Religion

Traditional religions can be read among the grand narratives, which postmodernism rejects (cf. Lyotard 1997, 97). Accordingly, they get treated in a fairly flippant and humorous way in the series when they are not completely ignored.

Alcatraz recounts once mistaking a church for a mental institution before he learned to read. He had asked a foster mother of his what some buildings were for and she had answered they were where the crazy people went. Only later, after having learned to read, had he realized that the foster mother had not meant an asylum, but a church. (*AvKC*, 75-76.) Not only does this poke fun at religions, it could also be read as an allusion to Foucault's interest in madness and asylums. In his book *Madness and Civilization* (1967) Foucault even discusses the role of religion in asylums at

some length, stating for instance that an asylum “must resume the moral enterprise of religion, exclusive of its fantastic text, exclusively on the level of virtue, labor, and social life” (1967, 257). In a manner of speaking, Foucault is saying that asylums truly are churches, but churches without dogma. Later, Alcatraz explains that the church anecdote was an example of a situation where we need to turn to Socrates (*AvKC*, 91). According to him, what Socrates taught was that we need to “ask questions about everything. To take nothing for granted. Ask. Wonder. Think.” (*AvKC*, 93.) Alcatraz says that this is a way to resist the Librarians (*AvKC*, 93). This clearly encourages the reader to question everything, never to get caught up in other people’s preconceived notions, which accords with Hutcheon's ideas about postmodernism as something that sees questioning as a value in itself (1988, 224) and with Bloland's remarks on postmodern doubt (2005, 124).

This sequence could be seen to point out that the Librarians are representatives of the grand narratives, including religions, and that the best way to resist the standardizing force of those narratives is to ask bold questions. Alternatively, it could simply urge the readers not to assume that everyone shares the same viewpoint, or that we can ever fully understand other human beings or, by extension, anything they utter, which is essentially just another narrative. And narratives can only refer to, never truly convey the real. The original church anecdote did, after all, revolve around a misunderstanding between individuals. The master-narratives reading could be linked with Lyotard (1984, 7) and the narrative-(mis)interpretation reading with Hutcheon (1988, 128) among others.

The other two instances where religion is explicitly discussed are in the fourth book. First, Alcatraz acknowledges the fact that the books have not dealt much with religion and explains:

> This is intentional, mostly from a self-preservation standpoint. I've discovered that talking about religion has a lot in common with wearing a catcher's mask: Both give people liberty to throw things at you. (And in the case of religion, sometimes the “things” are lightning bolts). (*AvSL*, 107.)

He goes on to say that since he has “chronic smart aleckiness” (*AvSL*, 107) he would only end up saying something offensive like comparing religion to explosive vomiting, which would be bad

since people take their religions very seriously" (*AvSL*, 108). As Hassan (1982, 267) mentions, postmodernism can laugh at itself, it does not have to take itself as seriously as modernism did. Alcatraz is essentially contrasting the postmodern sense of humour with the modern seriousness. Postmodern writers can have a humorous take not only on theoretical truth, but also on religious truth.

And Alcatraz continues in the humorous vein in the last religion interlude he takes. In it he supposedly takes it upon himself to explain Hushlander religion to the Free Kingdomers (*AvSL*, 124). He claims that different religions are about which foods you boycott and when, naming for instance that Hindus give up beef, Mormons alcohol and coffee and Muslims all food if only during the daylight hours of Ramadan (*AvSL*, 125). Food being the major differentiating factor between religions is a humorous thought, but apart from that, it is possibly the least controversial and least doctrinal difference imaginable, which is appropriate for a children's book. Unlike in the 19 century, mass market children's books today are not really expected to give religious education except when it comes to tolerance (cf. Pinsent 2005b, 202). This may also be part of the reason why religion is such a peripheral element in the *Alcatraz*-series.

The apparent lack of religious commenting in the series seems especially significant in comparison with Sanderson's production in general. Religion is one of the major themes in his other novels. One of the main characters of *Warbreaker* is a god who does not believe in himself. The *Mistborn* series includes the dethronement and death of an evil god, the Lord Ruler, the purposeful development of a messiah myth, and the birth of a new god or godlike being. *The Emperor's Soul* tells the story of a young woman who is asked to Forge a new soul for the Emperor after he has been injured and essentially become brain dead. Those who require this of her find Forging souls to be heretical and repulsive, but still necessary under the circumstances.

But even if *Alcatraz* has significantly less of a religious thematic than most of Sanderson's

works, there are several more subtle nods at religion. Most of them seem like a twist on Christianity. Alcatraz could be read as a reluctant messiah-character (cf. Hillel 2003, 57). He is the heir to the pure Smedry line, but lives out his childhood unaware of his heritage. He is the bearer of a legendary Talent. This makes him seem to be predestined to perform acts of greatness. Hence, the Free Kingdomers tell legends of him even before he has set foot outside the Hushlands. Alcatraz's autobiography is ostensibly meant to disillusion his Free Kingdomer readers, who have apparently entertained some interesting notions of his childhood:

> I hope you Free Kingdomer's aren't too put out to discover that dragons didn't come and bow to me at my birth. I wasn't tutored by the spirits of my dead Smedry ancestors, nor did I kill my first Librarian by slitting his throat with his own library card. (*AvEL*, 102.)

Alcatraz implies that his reputation only grew from that after he single-handedly saved the Kingdom of Mokia (*AvSL*, Author's Afterword, np). But Alcatraz is unwilling to see himself as a hero, and ostensibly tries to convince his readers not to think of him as one even while recounting his impressive adventures.

It is interesting that Alcatraz repeatedly refers to the stories Free Kingdomers tell about him as legends. As we discover in *Alcatraz versus the Knights of Crystallia*, people have written novels about him as well, but the word *legend* has some religious connotations, as it is often associated with myths. Several ancient religions have not left behind much else but legends and myths, which are recycled in comic books and films. Unsurprisingly, Alcatraz discusses legends with the flippancy characteristic to the books: "In a way, a legend is like . . . a virus or a bacteria. . . infecting more and more of the population . . . The only cure for a legend is pure, antiseptic truth. That's partially why I'm writing these books." (*AvSL*, 140.) So, first Alcatraz tells that legends cannot be trusted since they have a life of their own. Then he claims that his autobiography is true, and meant to disclaim the ridiculous legends that are told about him. In fact, though, the books are not true. They are fictitious, and often almost rival the legends Alcatraz is referring to in ridiculousness.

They tell the story of a thirteen-year-old boy fighting against a cult of evil Librarians. They include some dragons (*AvSL*, 47), one of them a dragon-taxi (*AvKC*, 35), not to mention things such as quasi-zombies made out of romance novels (*AvEL*, 232), or teddy-bear grenades (*AvSL*, 5).

As an aside, Alcatraz's description of legends spreading from human to human like a virus or bacteria seems analogous to the way memes in general are said to transmit culture. If read this way, it could be argued that Alcatraz's words also mock the arbitrariness of cultural mores, since people have adopted them simply because the corresponding memes have happened to infect them. And if culture is this arbitrary, the limits and boundaries it prescribes can be questioned.

In any case, even actual mythology contains many instances that may seem quite odd to those who do not believe in them. According to Greek mythology, winter lasts six months because Persephone happened to eat six pomegranate seeds after Hades has taken her to his domain (Philip 1995, 83). According to Finnish mythology, the earth was formed from the lower half of a scaup's egg and the heaven from its upper half, the egg having been broken because the warmth from the scaup's hatching disturbed the water-mother upon whose kneecap it had built its nest (the *Kalevala*, 7). The main reason the incredible situations that Alcatraz mentions may seem more jarring than those in ancient myths and legends is that they are supposed to take place in the present era, some of them even in the United States, an actual country. Still, there is enough of a jarring element to make it seem like the series is parodying legends, not just echoing them. Together with Alcatraz's legends-are-viruses monologue this can make the reader think about questioning other legends and myths as well, perhaps including the clearly religious ones. Again, this could be linked to the challenging of master narratives and to the general questioning attitude to all truths.

The Librarians act in many ways like a medieval religious order: They base their beliefs on a mystical book written by a man called Biblioden (*AvEL*, 145) and Alcatraz calls them cultists (*AvEL*, 50), they have split up into different sects who have different opinions of how the words of

Biblioden should be applied (*AvSB*, 117). Some of them even perform sacrifices on altars made of outdated Encyclopedias, as we learn in the opening lines of the first book *(AvEL*, 1*)*. The name Biblioden may have been derived from the Greek word that meant 'book', but most readers are at least as likely to make the connection to the Bible, whose name derives from the same Greek word. The history of Christianity also has distinct parallels with that of the Librarians. Even if Christian religions supposedly derive their doctrines from the same book, they interpret it in different ways, and have often gone to war against other Christians whose interpretation of the Bible differs from their own. Similarly, Kazan comments that if the Librarians ever win their war against the Free Kingdomers, they are likely to fall into fighting each other (*AvSL*, 127).

The mysterious people of the past are called the Incarna (*AvSB*, 213), which is most likely derived from *incarnation*. The word *incarnation* has definite religious connotations especially in connection with the incarnation of Jesus, his being born as a human being (cf. Zimmermann 2004, 513). The Incarna are also quite mystical as a people. They withhold information from the later generations by magically breaking their language (*AvSB*, 213), and when Attica discovers the knowledge they had tried to keep secret, the dangers that Alcatraz fears are involved are somewhat reminiscent of the myth of Prometheus – which is interesting for several reasons (see also 3.2.3) – for instance since Prometheus is mentioned in the title of a book by Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethan Fire* (1980), which could be said to be an exercise in literary criticism in postmodern style.

Prometheus taught men to use fire, which lead to Pandora releasing all the afflictions of humans into the world, and to Prometheus himself being tortured by Zeus (Philip 1995, 59-60). In trying to give Talents to everyone, Attica may think he is giving them something as useful as the knowledge of fire, but the ensuing chaos could be more like the onslaught of disease and vice released by Pandora (*AvSL*, 286). This reading might seem almost anti-postmodernist, since it

would mean that the series promotes keeping too dangerous knowledge in the dark. But even questioning postmodern values can be postmodern in itself. As Bertens (2008, 112) notes, postmodernism has a tendency to strive to undermine even itself, and as Hutcheon (1988, 42) argues, postmodernism is about not reaching definitive answers. Teaching that it is always right to question authority and that one should never keep quiet when any kind of authority figure – be it religious, patriarchal or governmental – asks us to do so would be just that, a definitive, simplistic answer. The *Alcatraz*-series contradictorily teaches us to question even the incessant questioning.

It is interesting that religion and the idea of truth in general is dealt with in such a postmodern manner in the series, since Sanderson himself is a practising member of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Even this might be subjected to a postmodern reading. Hutcheon (1988, 224) points out that one of the paradoxes of postmodernism is that we cannot question anything without inscribing it at the same time. To give a concrete example, if we ask “Why should we believe in authority figures?” we need to incorporate words from the sentence “We should believe in authority figures.” Similarly, one could argue that any author can only engage in postmodern questioning if he or she also posits the things he or she is questioning. And religions are not necessarily absolutely averse to a questioning attitude. Even while arguing that we need to move on from postmodernism to a kind of neo-humanism in a periodical called *Christianity and Literature*, Jens Zimmermann admits that postmodernism has provided “legitimate criticism of *ungrounded* trust in human reason” (2004, 505). This implies that questioning is acceptable at least if used to make sure that we have sufficient grounds to trust information produced by humans.

Another approach would be to delve into Hutcheon's statement that “[t]he contradictions of postmodernism are not really meant to be resolved but rather are to be held in an ironic tension” (1988, 47). Therefore, it would be highly postmodern of an author to both believe that an absolute (religious) truth exists and that all truths are relative and should be questioned

3.2 Literary devices

As I mention above (see 2.1) several literary techniques are commonly considered to be typically postmodern. Here I discuss a few such techniques that can all be linked to the notion of metafiction, and their implications in the *Alcatraz* series.

3.2.1 Metafiction proper

Patricia Waugh (1984, 2) defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality". In other words, metafiction is fiction that draws attention to its own fictiveness and in so doing even questions the reality of reality. As mentioned above (see 2.1.1), Waugh argues that metafiction appears in all novels, but that it has become more and more prominent in literature after the sixties (1984, 5), and that it is a particularly postmodern mode of writing (1984, 21). Similarly, Hutcheon (1988, 5) argues that the true form of postmodern fiction is historiographic metafiction, wherein the *meta* element comes from an intensive self-reflexiveness.

Waugh (1984, 21-22) includes most of the typical postmodern literary devices mentioned above, and several others as well, under the blanket term metafiction. She lists such techniques as an over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator, ostentatious typographic experiment, obtrusive proper names, critical discussions of the story within the story, continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions and explicit parody of previous texts (Waugh 1984, 21-22). While I agree that they can all function as metafiction as defined by Waugh, I might make a distinction between this general kind of metafiction and metafiction proper, by which I mean text that is more or less explicitly discussing its own textuality by for instance referring to its own writing process (cf. Hutcheon 1988, 40). I will first discuss instances of metafiction proper and then move on first to

wordplay, which highlights a text's textuality on a smaller level, and then to types of intertextuality under the following subheadings.

Alcatraz is clearly an over-obtrusive narrator and discusses his writing process in several ways. He continually talks about himself writing and the reader reading the text at hand. Accordingly, Castleman (2011, 20) states that metafictive techniques are used throughout the books and that they “guide readers to ask critical questions of the books, the fantasy genre, reality and Alcatraz's characterization of himself”. Castleman's brief article from 2011 illustrates how this happens in the series by drawing attention to the following things: mixed messages about the author and his reliability (20-21); explicitly addressing multiple readers both in the Hushlands and in the Free Kingdoms (23); Alcatraz's discussions of Classical arguments about the nature of reality (27); and the way Alcatraz claims to be writing a memoir and redefines fantasy as books that do *not* include glass dragons and ghostly curators (30).

Using an over-obtrusive narrator is possibly the most straight-forward way of making the readers aware that they are reading fiction. The narrator can for instance directly discuss things such as foreshadowing (*AvEL*, 143), the physical writing process (*AvEL*, 252) or literary laws such as the teddy bear on the mantle (*AvSL*, 260). In the *Alcatraz*-series, the narrator sometimes even visibly intrudes into the dialogue, as in the following conversation between Alcatraz and Bastille:

> “I'm not staring at you,” I said. I'm having an internal monologue to catch the readers up on what has happened since the last chapter. It's called a denouement.”
> She rolled her eyes. “Then we can't actually be having this conversation; it's something you just inserted into the text while writing the book years later. It's a literary device – the conversation didn't exist.”
> “Oh, right,” I said.
> “You're such a freak.” (*AvKC*, Royal Epilogue, np.)

This passage forcefully draws attention to the fact that it is part of a fictitious book, whose narrator does not claim to always tell the absolute truth of what has happened to him. Combined with the mixed messages about who the author is – Sanderson or Alcatraz – this can make the reader aware

of a chain of voices: Sanderson says that Alcatraz says that Alcatraz says what Alcatraz did not actually say. It can be confusing to try to decipher where the lines between truth and falsehood and between reality and fiction are to be drawn here. And that may teach us to see similar multi-layered constructions in our everyday life, as well – often masquerading as straightforward information. A newspaper article, for instance, may include a reporter saying that a scientist has said that their research group's research has shown that people like some entity or phenomenon. The layers of reported speech hide a number of voices with their own agendas and can thus have distorted the original information, which may not have represented any kind of absolute truth in the first place. Being aware of these pitfalls can constitute a step toward being the active, nimble readers that McGillis is in search of (1996, 24).

A passage like the one quoted above can also blur the lines between fiction and reality (cf. Waugh 1984, 2). It draws the readers' attention to the fact that it is a fictive text, but in confessing its own fictiveness it confesses something that is actually true. The conversation between Alcatraz and Bastille never did take place, not in the universe of the books, but not the real world either. So a fictive text can say something that is true, and this can create confusion regarding, again, where the line between reality and fiction should be drawn.

Other things that are there to make the reader take notice of the "constructedness" of the texts include the seemingly out of control chapter numbers of the fourth book. They begin from 2 and continue as 6, π (pi), 4½ and 42. Alcatraz refers to things he supposedly said in the missing chapters and implies that he forgot to put them in the book because he is so stupid (*AvSL*, 5). In true postmodern fashion, the chapter headings include jokes for those who stop and look a little closer. For instance: The ninth chapter is entitled "Chapter No!" and the German word for 'no', *nein* is pronounced the same way as *nine* in English. The eleventh chapter is numbered 24601, which is the prison number of Jean Valjean, the main character of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1998 [1862]),

which is Sanderson's favourite novel. The thirteenth heading is “Chapter 6.02214179 x 10^{th23}”, featuring a number also known as Avogadro's constant, which was mentioned in the previous chapter when Alcatraz was trying to make Aydee confused about the number of exploding teddy bears in their possession so as to get more of them.

Aside from the metafictive angle of attracting attention to the fact that *Alcatraz versus the Shattered Lens* is a book, and that the division of events into chapters is a literary convention and as such something that can be mocked, this technique ties in with postmodern philosophy. Instead of portraying the world as something that can be organized into neat numbered chapters with linear numbering, they emphasize the chaotic nature of the world as seen by Alcatraz. He contrasts that with the way the Evil Librarians see the world, saying that they are afraid of change and the unknown (*AvSL*, Author's Afterword, np). They thrive on organization and on putting everything in its neat little pigeon hole, and therefore the chaotic-looking numbering is in fact a trap for them:

> And so, I present to you the perfect Librarian trap. They'll come along, pick up this book, and start to read it, thinking they're so smart for discovering my autobiography. The chapter titles will be completely messed up. That, of course, will make their brains explode. So if you have to wipe some grey stuff off the book, you know who read it before you. (*AvSL*, 199.)

Sanderson does not appear to be trying to be subtle about the metafiction even in the first book. For instance, he opens the second chapter by having Alcatraz explain that now that he is an author, he enjoys torturing readers by beginning the book with an exciting altar scene only to move on to a more boring discussion of his childhood and making them wait almost the entire length of the whole book before getting to read how the exiting scene continues (*AvEL*, 14). This begins a habit of directly addressing the reader at the beginning of each chapter and discussing the book or some larger more or less philosophical question for some paragraphs.

By the fourth book the metafictiveness, like several other postmodern devices, has escalated into impressive proportions. Besides the chapter titles, one of its most extreme examples of how

Alcatraz bludgeons the readers with the fact that they are holding a book includes telling them to act out all the events of the book and immediately afterwards claiming to pick his nose, punch himself in the forehead, prance down a hallway while flapping his arms like a chicken and smack his brother (of which he has none) “if he happened to be near” (*AvSL*, 37-38). The text is thus trying to intrude into the real world, again blurring the lines between fiction and reality.

One interesting topic that Alcatraz discusses in his narrator's monologues is the concept of narrative time versus real time. Making a casual allusion to the time Edmond spent in prison in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Dumas 1990 [1844], 184), he points out how he has at one point spent three chapters in the Librarian's dungeon, while he covered his whole childhood in just a few sentences, and explains what happened in the timeless gap between chapters (*AvEL*, 192-193). In the next book, Alcatraz says that chapter breaks “defy time and space” much like Smedry Talents (*AvSB*, 259).

> Think about it. By putting in a chapter break, I make the book longer. It takes extra spaces, extra pages. Yet, because of those chapter breaks, the book becomes *shorter* as well. You read it more quickly. Even an unexciting hook, like Australia's showing up, encourages you to quickly turn the page and keep going.
>
> Space becomes distorted when you read a book. Time has less relevance. (*AvSB*, 259).

Metafiction is clearly being used here not only to draw attention to the constructedness of the books, but also to the way these constructions can in a sense break physical laws. This implies that they *are* breakable in accordance with the more radical postmodern views about the inexistence of objective, scientific truths.

This metafictitious discussion of time is also an interesting way to experiment with narrative time without actually experimenting with narrative time. As Golden (1990, 13) mentions, children's books rarely contain things such as complex time shifts. Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, does often experiment with time shifts, often combined with other elements designed to problematize the linearity of events (see for instance Robert Coover's “The Babysitter” in his *Pricksongs & Descants*

or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*). By theorising on the power of narrative time, the *Alcatraz*-series can make the reader think about the way time can be fragmented without being as jarring and confusing as actual time shifts can be. This can make it more accessible to a child audience, or at least easier to sell to a children's book publisher.

3.2.2 Wordplay

Wordplay can be said to fall under metafiction, since it emphases the constructedness of one of the smaller building blocks of text – words. Like the other literary techniques discussed here, it was by no means invented by postmodernists, but several postmodernists have experimented with it. More importantly in terms of this thesis, it can be read as another manifestation of a postmodern irreverent attitude to truth. If the words we use to say something are essentially playthings, how can they be used to convey anything that would be true in a finite, absolute sense?

In a way, as McGillis (1996, 171) notes, wordplay thus deconstructs text, which “highlights the literary text's similarity to life; they are similar in that the text is no more unified or coherent than life is” (1996, 170). McGillis seems to here approach the issue of constructedness from a different angle than Waugh. Waugh (1984, 2) argues that drawing attention to the fictiveness and constructedness of a text will open our eyes to the constructedness of the real world, whereas McGillis seems to argue that we are well aware of the lack of coherence in the real world and it is deconstruction that can open our eyes to the fact that text, while a construction, is not a stable one. McHale (1987, 148), on the other hand, notes that techniques that draw the readers’ attention away from the story that is being told to the words used to tell it cause an “ontological flicker”. Wordplay can certainly be said to draw the attention to the individual words in a text. Suddenly, the words can appear more concrete and real than the world of the narrative (McHale 1987, 148). In any case, drawing attention to the constructed, arbitrary nature of words and their meanings can encourage

the reader to be inquisitive – be it about the text or about the real world.

According to Tucker, wordplay also specifically caters to children, since they can be "exceptionally sensitive to the sound and overtones of words" (1981, 13). Wordplay can therefore be said to be a marker of children's literature, and there are several examples of its use from before what is normally thought of as the postmodern era, such as the wordplay in Lewis Carroll's Alice-books (see below). But some of its effects are still especially well-suited for postmodernism.

One example of irreverence to words in the series is a play on the word *break*. When Alcatraz muses on what would happen if the evil Librarians managed to get his Talent, only one of the examples he uses is one that his Talent could actually be used at. The others are Alcatraz toying with different meanings of the word. He is worried that the Librarians would then break dance, recess, and wind. (*AvSL*, 20.) In another example (*AvSL*, 23), Alcatraz takes apart more the morphology than the meaning of the word *assassination*: "As a side note, I hate assassination. It looks way too much like a dirty word. Either that or the name of a country populated entirely by two donkeys." In an extended pun, Kazan uses types of birds as swear words all throughout the fourth book, exclaiming for instance "Woodpeckers!" and "Sparrows!" – only to have Bastille ask him towards the end: "Kaz, where did you pick up all that fowl language?" (*AvSL*, 205.)

Another type of wordplay Alcatraz engages in is that of making up words himself and defining them at will. In *Alcatraz versus the Shattered Lens*, Alcatraz is trying to convince his readers that he is stupid, or as he phrases it "so stoopid I don't know how to spell the word stupid" (*AvSL*, Author's Foreword, np). He then develops words relating to different degrees of stupidity. *Stoopidalicious* means "about as stoopid as a porcupine-catching contest during a swimsuit competition" (*AvSL*, 43). *Stoopiderific* means "the level of stupidity required to go slip-'n'-sliding at the Grand Canyon" (*AvSL*, 89). *Stoopidanated* means "about as stoopid as Alcatraz Smedry, the day he snuck into Tuki Tuki just in time to be there when it got overwhelmed by Librarians" (*AvSL*,

128). This type of wordplay can demonstrate that words are not something official defined by learned academics in the confines of daunting universities. Everyone has the power to use them as they wish.

The same kind of wordplay can be found in several children's classics, such as the *supercalifragilisticexpealidocious* of the film *Mary Poppins* (1964), or the wordplay found in Lewis Carrol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. In the “Jabberwocky” Carroll uses made-up words such as *slithy* and *mimsy*, which Alice says fill her head with ideas only she doesn't exactly know what they are (*Through the Looking Glass* 151). The break-dance type of wordplay can be found in Alice's discussion with the March Hare and the Hatter where Alice mentions she has had to beat time when she learns music and the Hatter replies that Time will not stand beating (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* 73). According to Tucker (1981, 99), this is wordplay at the literal level and accessible even to small children.

Alcatraz is not the only one to toy with words in the *Alcatraz* universe; even the Librarians seem to have the capacity for it, as turns out when Alcatraz deconstructs the word *librarian*:

> Evil Librarians control the world. They keep everyone in ignorance, teaching them falsehoods in place of history, geography, and politics. It's kind of a joke to them. Why else do you think the Librarians named themselves what they did?
>
> Librarians. LIE-brarians.
>
> Sounds obvious now, doesn't it. If you wish to smack yourself in the forehead and curse loudly, you may proceed to do so. (*AvSB*, 4.)

The word is literally taken apart and a quirky new meaning is applied to it. Later, it is put back together in a new way. After realizing that the problem with the evil Librarians is not really the Librarian part, but the evil part, the good Librarian Himalaya decides to found an organisation called Lybrarians, “for those who want to take the ‘Lie’ out of ‘Liebrarian’” (*AvKC*, Royal Epilogue, np).

Another example of the occasional powerlessness of words is the fact that they are ephemeral and changeable over time, and not just by design. One of the themes of the fourth book is

that things can change (cf. *AvSL*, Author's Afterword, np), and Alcatraz uses the changeability of language as one example of this, noting how the meaning of the word *nice* has changed over a period of hundreds of years from ‘idiot’ to ‘agreeable’(*AvSL*, 224). If words are changeable as times and circumstances change, then why would not the truths they convey be equally changeable?

A different example of the occasional powerlessness of words is the case of the Royal Archives (not a library). The Nalhallans are very keen to keep reminding themselves that the Royal Archives are not a library but, as Alcatraz notes, it does not really matter what they call it, a repository for texts still “sounds an *awful* lot like a library” (*AvKC*, 169). Nor is it very informative to just say what something is not: “I could put out a blodgadet and hang a sign on it that said ‘Most definitely not a hippopotamus’ and it wouldn't help. I'd also be lying, since ‘blodgadet’ is actually Mokian for hippopotamus.” (*AvKC*, 169.) In similar manner, the Nalhallans can hang up a sign saying “ROYAL ARCHIVES (NOT A LIBRARY!)” (*AvKC*, 115) but it will not make the building any less library-like. Words do not necessarily have much power over the real world in the real world, either. This means that things that are written or said, even if the writing and saying are done by many people, *can* be questioned.

3.2.3 Intertextuality, allusion and parody

Sanderson alludes to a plethora of texts and popular culture phenomena. When Grandpa Smedry curses, he usually uses the last name of a fantasy author to do so. In the first book we encounter “Blistering Brooks!” (probably Terry Brooks), Galloping Gemmels! (David Gemmel), Hyperventilating Hobbs! (Robin Hobb) and Jabbering Jordans! (Robert Jordan), among others. This may be part of the on-going joke in the series where Sanderson on the one hand, as Castleman (2011, 30) mentions, tries to redefine fantasy novels as the ones with boys whose mothers, dogs or both mothers and dogs die (*AvEL*, 50), while on the other hand poking fun at the fantasy genre.

Alcatraz for instance says that the only sensible use for Sanderson's fantasy novels is hitting yourself on the head with them in order to induce amnesia (*AvSB*, 88).

The chapter titles of the fourth book also reveal allusions. *Les Misérables* was already mentioned above. Another example is the eighteenth chapter whose number is 4815162342, which are the mysterious numbers that keep coming up in the television series *Lost*. In that chapter Alcatraz confronts his mother after having locked her up in a cage in an abandoned zoo, which is reminiscent of the way some characters in the third season of *Lost* get locked up in animal cages by the Others.

Another interesting allusion made in the fourth book is to Shakespeare. Alcatraz begins chapter 144 by making an allusion to *Hamlet*, followed by a short discussion on literary allusion, and then recounts the beginning paragraph without the allusion (*AvSL*, 72-73). Later he comes up with a plan to sneak into Tuki Tuki, which is under siege, and to do it while quoting *Hamlet* (*AvSL*, 80). Being Free Kingdomers, Bastille and his other companions claim never to have heard of Shakespeare (*AvSL*, 80). Nevertheless, all the utterances in the following chapter (as they are trying to get past the enemy soldiers) are quotations from *Hamlet*, and they are made to work surprisingly well in the context. See for instance the extract below where Alcatraz is using an Oculatory Lens that enables him to transfer things like feelings and thoughts to other people, a Bestower's Lens, on an attacking Librarian:

> "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" a Librarian cried, dashing toward me.
> I spun, focusing on him, and did the first thing I could think of. I pretended that I was crazy. *I'm insane, I'm insane, I'm insane!* I thought.
> The man hesitated, lowering his sword. He cocked his head, then wandered away. "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?" he asked, glancing at the sky.
> Bastille was in the center of a furious battle. She tried not to hurt people too much, but there was no helping it here. She'd had to stab several of the Librarians, and they lay on the ground holding leg wounds or arm wounds. One man, shockingly, had been stabbed in the mouth. He clutched something in his hand, and as I ran past him, he mumbled, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. . ."
> "O, woe is me," I said, squeezing my eyes shut, "to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (*AvSL*, 90-91)

While all the allusions are made tongue in cheek, some are even more clearly meant to parody the original. An example that even Castleman (2005, 25) mentions is *Harry Potter*. After the library excursion of the first book is complete, Grandpa Smedry drops Alcatraz off at his foster parents' house to make peace with them. To Alcatraz's surprise, he returns some hours later saying:

> What did you expect? That I'd leave you here all summer, in the exact place where your enemies know where to look? With people that aren't even your family? In a place you don't really like, and that is depressingly normal compared with the world you've grown to love? Doesn't that sound a little stupid and contrived to you? (*AvEL*, 306.)

This obviously parodies the way Harry is made to spend his summers with the Dursleys against his will.

Aside from parodying specific works, the series seems to parody some literary conventions. For instance, the over-obtrusiveness of the narrator and the chapter openings seem to parody the kind of narrator's interlude found in older books such as the following in Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*:

> The curtain now rises upon the last act of our little drama – for hard-hearted publishers warn me that a single volume must of necessity have an end. . . . The book has been a most grateful task to me, and I only hope that you, my dear young readers who read it, (friends assuredly you must be, if you get as far as this,) will be half as sorry to come to the last stage as I am. (279.)

Traditionally, these interludes only occur here and there, but Alcatraz takes it upon himself to include one at the beginning of every chapter and to thus continually stop the flow of the story, and even circumspectly points this out (*AvEL*, 149).

Similarly, sections such as Author's Foreword, Author's Afterword, Epilogue, and About the Author throughout the series all seem to parody the literary convention of including such additional remarks outside the narrative proper. They seem to make fun of the author's need to explain the text by ostentatiously explicit explanations of what the reader is about to read or has just read. For instance, Alcatraz concludes the first epilogue (*AvEL*, np) by stating: “For now I hope this narrative was enough to show you that even supposed heroes have flaws. Let this be your warning – I'm not the person that you think I am. You'll see.” The concept of authorship is even more clearly toyed with in the About the Author -sections. They tell the readers for instance that “‘Brandon Sanderson’ is the pen name of Alcatraz Smedry” (*AvEL*, np), that Alcatraz knows a Brandon Sanderson, who is “a fantasy writer and is therefore prone to useless bouts of delusion in literary form” (*AvEL*, np), “the second-leading cause of cancer in domesticated fruit bats” (*AvKC*, np), and “one of those annoying people who always answers questions with other questions” (*AVKC*, np). According to Castleman, these sections present “Sanderson as untrustworthy, opening the possibility for the reader to examine the story, Sanderson and Alcatraz critically” (2011, 21). In other words, they provide an opening to start questioning different aspects of text and authorship.

But these sections also seem to ostentatiously conform to Barthes' (1977, 161) idea that the “Author” of a “Text” can only return to the text as a guest, no longer the father, and that his inscription into the novel will be ludic. The mentions of Sanderson in the body of the texts and in the About the Author sections always seem to depict Sanderson as very far from being in control of the texts, and are nothing if not playful. To paraphrase Barthes (1977, 148), the birth of the active, questioning reader has come at the cost of the death of the Author’s authority. This play on the very

concept of authorship might also be poking fun at Foucault's famous article "What is an Author?" (1979), in which Foucault sets out to examine and redefine authorship.

As I mention in the introduction, the Author's Foreword of the first book in the series could be said to parody the opening of *Huckleberry Finn*. As Carl F. Wieck (1994, 113) explains, Twain's writing actually "joyfully mock[s]" the tradition of authors claiming their fictions to be true, based on personal experience or on some documents they have found. Thus, Alcatraz's words "this is no work of fiction" and "my purpose is to open your eyes to the truth" (*AvEL*, np) could even be said to be the parody of an earlier parody. Alternatively, it could simply be a parody of the original literary convention of claiming to tell "nothing but the truth" in one's novel (see Wieck 1994, 103). But the picture is even more complicated in the second book in the *Alcatraz* series. In its Author's Foreword Alcatraz first informs the readers that he is a liar and that the readers should not believe anything they read about him, but then adds (*AvSB*, np): "Except – of course – what you read in this book, for it will contain the truth." This is somewhat contradictory and confusing, which the narrator later acknowledges, admitting that this is faulty logic (*AvSB* 58). He then goes on to "clarify" the issue as follows:

> The things I'm telling you here are factual. In this case, I can only prove that I'm a liar by telling the truth, though I will also include some lies – which I will point out – to act as object lessons proving the truth that I'm a liar.
>
> Got that? (*AvSB* 59.)

This fairly extreme toying with the truthfulness or lack thereof of the narrator could be said to be a new way of parodying the truth-claims convention, or *Huckleberry Finn* specifically.

Allusion and intertextuality may be especially closely associated with postmodernism, but they are also in some ways universal (Waugh 1984, 5). If things such as conforming to general expectations on form and genre are considered to be intertextuality, texts without it would be utterly indecipherable (Waugh 1984, 12-13). Intertextuality becomes more clearly a literary device that is especially typical to postmodernism when it starts to draw attention to itself. Even in fairly subtle

cases it can work to “assert the text's value while leaving undisturbed the texts originality and spontaneity”, as Daniela Caselli (2004, 184) states when discussing the intertextuality in *Harry Potter*. But the intertextuality in *Alcatraz* is on several occasions so exaggerated that it does not seem to be about asserting the text's value. Rather, it is making fun of the very concept of intertextuality. This is especially clear in the Shakespeare example for several reasons: Firstly,the allusions are especially ostentatious even for this series. Secondly, the narrator explicitly makes fun of writers who run out of ideas and have to use other people's old ones. And thirdly, because the writer being alluded to is Shakespeare, the “bard”, plausibly the most quoted fiction writer of all time. What better way to parody the whole institution of intertextuality?

This explicit kind of intertextuality – be it in the form of allusion or parody – can function much in the same way as other types of metafiction mentioned by Waugh (1984, 21-22). It can draw attention to the fact that the text is an artefact, that someone has constructed it, thus blending the line between fiction and reality (Waugh 1984, 2).

There is also a level of intertextuality that does not necessarily fall under clear allusion or parody, but is more a matter of common thematic elements. Notably, the *Alcatraz*-series has much in common with Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* even beyond the fact that they both have many postmodern features.

Both have a more or less malignant library-related entity that wishes to keep information from others. In *The Name of the Rose*, Jorge da Borgos goes to great extremes to keep the second volume of Aristotle's *Poetics* hidden, because it deals with humour. Jorge thinks that humour should be kept in its place and that elevating it to an art would cancel man's proper fear of God. He thinks it would be even worse than what Prometheus did: “But Law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God. This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for cancelling

fear." (*The Name of the Rose* 475.) Similarly, the evil Librarians work to make the world a sombre place where all airplanes are cylinder-shaped instead of looking like butterflies or dragons (*AvSB*, 29). Again, fire is used as an example:

> [Biblioden] taught that the world is too strange a place – that it needs to be ordered, organized and controlled. One of Biblioden's teachings is the Fire Metaphor. He pointed out that if you let fire burn free, it destroys everything around it. If you contain it, however, it can be very useful. Well, the Librarians think that other things – Oculatory powers, technology, Smedry Talents – need to be contained too. Controlled. (*AvEL*, 145.)

The element of keeping order is present in the reasoning of both Jorge and Biblioden. Jorge says that humour will lead to lawlessness, and the followers of Bibilioden similarly fear chaos if silimatic technology were to be available to all. Order and homogeneity are natural enemies of postmodern plurality, so it seems natural that the protagonists of the two books are against their champions.

But since postmodernism is, as Hutcheon (1988, 49) notes, not about either or but both and, it is also logical that neither William of Baskerville nor Alcatraz are unequivocally against law and order, either. William tries to reason out who is killing monks at the abbey, murdering being an act against both law and morals, all through *The Name of the Rose*. And by the end of *Alcatraz versus the Shattered Lens*, Alcatraz has come to realize that there is such a thing as too much chaos, and decides to join forces with his mother the Librarian in order to prevent his father from giving everyone Smedry Talents (*AvSL*, 286; cf. 3.1.2 above). Hutcheon (1988, 210) notes that there are similarities between Jorge's distrust of laughter and those who criticize postmodernism for being too ironic and frivolous, forgetting that irony can be used as a serious political weapon.

It is also interesting that both Eco and Sanderson have incorporated the image of the library-labyrinth. In *The Name of the Rose*, the library at the abbey is shaped like a labyrinth and rumours are spread that evil spirits roam there at night in order to keep intruders away (33). Much of the intrigue at the abbey revolves around the post of the librarian (464). And the heart of the library-

labyrinth is where the coveted Aristotle manuscript has been kept hidden for years (465).

In *Alcatraz versus the Scrivener's Bones*, the Library of Alexandria is made out to be a giant labyrinth, which has made some so frustrated they have given up their soul in order to get access to a map telling them how they could have gotten out (*AvSB*, 149). There is even at least one especially maze-like portion to the larger labyrinth that is the Library of Alexandria (*AvSB*, 228). Alcatraz's father has chosen to risk his life by becoming a librarian, or Curator, there in order to gain access to the information on Smedry Talents that is being kept there (*AvKC*, Royal Epilogue, np). So in both works, the potentially dangerous information is being held in a library-labyrinth, whose secrets are supposed to be known only by its keepers. As Adso wonders, “Is a library, then, an instrument not for distributing the truth but for delaying its appearance?” (*The Name of the Rose* 286). The libraries in the Hushlands are ironically just that – they are meant to feed the people copious amounts of false information in order to hide the truth, which is kept in the back, behind closed doors.

According to Eco (1984, 57), the labyrinth itself is also a model of conjecturality. He explains that while the labyrinth in his library is a maze, which has an exit, William realizes that the world in which he lives is more of a rhizome, a potentially infinite labyrinth that has no exit and “can be structured but is never structured definitively” (Eco 1984, 57-58). Similarly, Alcatraz finds a way to navigate the labyrinth that is the Library of Alexandria but realizes that the world can be much more confusing than any material labyrinth. Long-lost fathers are not necessarily good at being fathers, evil Librarian mothers are not necessarily that evil, and sometimes there is no choosing a side between chaos and order.

The image of the labyrinth is also central to the work of Jorge Luis Borges, another writer aside from Eco to have inspired much postmodern theorizing. Foucault (1974, xv) even states that the inspiration for his book *The Order of Things* was a passage in Borges. In a famous collection of

short stories by Borges, which is called *Labyrinths* (1964), the image of the labyrinth repeats several times, but it is most often an allegory for a book, not for a library. Similarly, according to Mark Parker (1988, 57), the trope of the labyrinth controls the very structure of *The Name of the Rose*. The concept of book the labyrinth is less present in the *Alcatraz*-series. It could be possible to read the passage quoted above (see 3.2.1) which states that the confusing chapter headings of the fourth book are meant to be a trap for the order-loving Librarians as suggesting that that book itself is meant to be something of a maze, but the comparison is somewhat tenuous.

Finally, the theme of truth being complicated is very much present in both the *Alcatraz*-series and in *The Name of the Rose*. In doing his detective work, William does not commit to one truth but maintains several possible ones (*The Name of the Rose* 306). Like Alcatraz, William encourages a questioning attitude, saying for instance: “Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry.” (*The Name of the Rose* 316.) It is also interesting that both books present themselves as autobiographies of sort, the stories of what extraordinary things happened to and around the narrator's when they were teenagers, even if the term *teenager* would hardly have been used in fourteenth-century Italy, where the events in *The Name of the Rose* take place. In the eighteenth century novelists may have claimed their works to be autobiographies (Wieck 1994, 14) in order to defend them against people's mistrust for fiction as untruth (Wieck 1994, 103), but in the postmodern era of incertitude what is distrusted is anyone who claims to be truthful. Accordingly, autobiography-writers as a rule are notorious for bending the truth here and there, so even presenting a novel in autobiography form could now be seen as an invitation to start questioning whether or not the narrator is telling the truth.

It is interesting that there would be so much in common between the books. I would suggest that this has some relevance even if it is not a question of deliberate allusion but of some central themes of postmodernism surfacing in both books. The reader need not even pay attention to the

similarities, and I feel it is not too bold of me to say that few children will have read *The Name of the Rose*. Rather, I would suggest that *Alcatraz* functions as a stepping stone into heavier things. It introduces postmodern thinking in a way that may be accessible to a child reader, whereas Eco's masterpiece delves into postmodern philosophy in a way that is accessible to adult readers – especially if books like *Alcatraz* have been training them to deal with postmodern concepts since childhood.

3.2 Personal issues

In this subheading I discuss the characters and their complex relationships with each other. Some norms relating to personal issues are broken in the series, and I argue that the effect is that readers are encouraged to question some established truths.

3.3.1 Characters

Several of the characters are quite unconventional and could be seen to be meant to make the readers question their assumptions regarding some groups of people. I will focus my analysis on what I consider to be two of the most interesting examples of this: Bastille, and Alcatraz's uncle Kazan.

Bastille challenges the image of the traditional girl heroine who is supposed to be polite and composed like Sara in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. There is nothing particularly new about feisty, independent-minded girl characters who have been used to undercut the values of piety and domesticity, as Coats (2001, 405) notes. Even Mary in Burnett's other classic, *The Secret Garden*, could be said to portray one, as could Jo March, the iconic tomboy in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Bastille only takes this to the extreme. Bastille Vianitelle the Ninth does not aspire to be a princess; she is born one and rejects her "birth right" to become a knight instead:

> “Aren't princesses supposed to be nice and sweet and stuff like that? Wear pink dresses and tiaras?”
> “Well . . .”
> “Pink dresses,” Bastille said, her eyes narrowing. “Someone gave me a pink dress once. I burned it.”
> Ah, I thought. That's right; I forgot. Bastille got around fame's touch by being a freaking psychopath. (*AvKC*, Royal Epilogue, np.)

Bastille rejects both the institution and the expectations that go with it. But then again, she is seeking her mother's approval in doing so (see for instance *AvSB*, 253-254).

What is more original is the way that people in the Free Kingdoms respond to Bastille. She is a skilled fighter, and because of that people do not raise too many questions when she is named a full Knight of Crystallia. There is apparently no uproar even when she is given the job of protecting Grandpa Smedry, who is not only one of the most high ranking people in the Free Kingdoms and as such aware of many important secrets but also a very challenging charge due to his recklessness (*AvEL*, 196). Similarly, Alcatraz and his cousins Australia and Aydee are given power and responsibility despite their young age. It being given to them due to their competence is fairly novel, it being given to them because of their lineage is not. The other characters also seem to calmly accept Bastille’s violent temper and her tendency to utter things such as: “I'd stab you with something if I didn't know you'd arrive too late to get hurt” (*AvEL,* 68).

According to Judy Simons (2009, 145), naughtiness in traditional girl's stories was “a phase they must outgrow”. Contrarily to this, Bastille's cantankerousness is not represented as something that should pass in time. Alcatraz is apparently writing his autobiography several years after the events have taken place and both he and Bastille are more or less adults, but after commenting on Bastille's “particular way of seeing the world” (*AvSL*, 105) he still explains: “That means that she's bonkers. But I can't *write* that she's bonkers, because if I do, she'll punch me. So, uh, perhaps we should forget this part, eh?” (*AvSL*, 105.)

In her feistyness, Bastille is not unlike Lyra, a main character in Philip Pullman's *Northern*

Lights and its sequels. Both Lyra and Bastille have a tendency to resort to violent action as a means of solving problems. But where Bastille is lauded for her capabilities as a knight, Lyra is lauded for her intuitiveness with what is essentially a scientific instrument, and she starts studying to become a scientist by the end of *The Amber Spyglass*. The society Lyra lives in may be willing to respect intelligence in women, but is still quite constrained by traditional gender norms if compared with the one Bastille lives in.

Bastille might be a fruitful subject for a feminist reading since she is such a strong female character, who is depicted as having some of the strengths traditionally associated with both sexes – both physical prowess and emotional intelligence (see *AvKC*, 202-203). This exemplifies that just because the book is highly influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, it need not be intrinsically hostile to feminist theory. As Greaney notes, it would be exaggerated to portray poststructuralism as the absolute opposite of feminism (2006, 100), even if a relativistic attitude to truth may at first glance seem incompatible with feminism's endeavour to provoke real change in the state of things.

Kazan, on the other hand, challenges traditional ideas about people of short stature. He keeps a long list about why it is actually better to be short than to be tall, and tries to sell this idea to Alcatraz by reciting items off his list. For example, reason number 82 (*AvSL*, 58) is: “When you plummet to your doom, you don't fall as far as tall people.” When someone challenges the logic behind his statements, he always has an equally quirky argument to defend them with. In the case of the example above he reasons (*AvSL*, 59): “Maybe our *feet* fall as far as yours, but our heads have less distance to fall. So it's less dangerous for us on average.” So not only does his list of reasons question the advantages of being of a so called normal height, it can also be said to question the laws of physics.

Kazan's Smedry Talent is getting lost and it is actually while being lost with Kazan that

Alcatraz comes to realize the kinship between his Breaking Talent and that of Kazan's and – by extension – those of everyone else (*AvSL*, 48). Kazan's Talent is essentially the Talent of breaking space, or the way motion works (*AvSL*, 48). (See 3.1.2.) He is also an academic, like most Smedries (see 3.1.1). Kazan's specialty is arcane theory, Talent-theory.

The treatment of both Bastille and Kazan in the books shows that the Alcatraz series boasts an "ethics of resistance" according to Lynne Valone's (2009, 183) definition:

> An 'ethics of resistance' argues that difference should neither be effaced nor explained away, but celebrated, rejecting and resisting the narrative of conversion that holds that the girlish boy or tomboy must become conventionally gender-normed . . . or that disabled characters can be miracuously cured of their disability.

So in true postmodern fashion, the Alcatraz-series celebrates plurality even on a personal level. Not only are Bastille and Kazan accepted as full members of the Free Kingdomer society despite the fact that they might seem different from what some would call normal, their differences are in some ways lauded in the series. Bastille's skills as a knight are appreciated, especially after she has defeated the traitorous knight Archedis while the other knights "lay on the ground drooling" (*AvKC*, Royal Epilogue, np). And Kazan likewise has valuable tasks to perform as a Smedry and as a scholar and is never belittled by anyone in the series – with the possible exception of Alcatraz, who has been disadvantaged by a Librarian education and therefore has to unlearn the idea of short people as somehow inferior to tall people (*AvSB*, 96-97), unlearn the notion that people could be categorized into neat boxes. And, as mentioned above, Kazan's list suggests that being shorter is actually an advantage rather than a disadvantage, and thus cannot be thought of as a "disability" or even, necessarily, as a "challenge".

In fact, what both characters could suggest is that there is no such thing as abnormality, there may be difference but everyone is different in some way or another, so it need not be an issue. In a world reigned by plurality, there need not be a paradigm for normality.

But a world like that might seem excessively utopistic for twenty-first century sensibilities,

so it may be a good thing that the notion of contradiction complicates the notion of pluralism even regarding the people of the Free Kingdoms. They may seem open-minded when it comes to people who might stand out from the crowd, such as Bastille and Kazan. But they are significantly less open-minded when it comes to people who seek uniformity – the Librarians. They are so prejudiced against the Librarians that they seem to be afraid to imitate them in any way – even to organize the books in their Royal Archives (not a library). But paradoxically, even intolerance of intolerance *is* intolerance, it is the kind of black-and-white absolute thinking which postmodernism tends to oppose. And it therefore makes theoretical sense for Alcatraz to learn to appreciate that not only are Bastille and Kazan perfectly valid individuals as they are, so is Himalaya – and she does not need to stop being a Librarian for that to be true (*AvKC*, 217).

3.3.2 Family relationships

Neither Alcatraz nor Bastille have very conventional relationships with their respective parents, though Bastille's case is probably more traditional. She tries to gain the approval of her extremely strict mother Draulin while her father, King Dartmoor, is more lenient towards her (*AvKC*, 56). The relationship between Draulin and Dartmoor, on the other hand, is a reversal of the traditional fairy-tale gender-roles: the wife is literally the knight in shining armour and the husband is royalty (*AvKC*, 56).

Alcatraz's parents have separated and chosen to let their child be brought up by strangers (*AvEL*, 296). Alcartaz is thus a kind of pseudo-orphan with which literary history abounds – even Lyra in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* books is one. But the way his parents treat him after he is reunited with them could be said to be even more unusual than Lyra's complicated relationship with her parents. When Alcatraz rescues his hero-father, he hardly takes notice of his son, which confuses Alcatraz (*AvKC*, 10). When Attica essentially abandons his son a second time in order to

continue his quest, Grandpa Smedry tries to explain this to Alcatraz (*AvSL*, 18): “Your father doesn't know what to make of you, lad. He didn't have a chance to grow into being a parent. I think he's scared of you.”

There is ample opportunity for Alcatraz to be confused by his mother as well. Shasta is supposedly an evil Librarian but she has at least kept an eye on Alcatraz all his life in the guise of a social worker – even if she has been less than supportive (*AvEL*, 186). When Alcatraz finds out that his mother did love his father and does care about her son, he finds himself ever more confused. He also seems to experience traditional child-of-divorce feelings of guilt:

> “They were in love once. When we were captured a few months ago, I watched my mother talk about me to the other Librarians. She said she didn't care about me, but the Truthfinder's Lens said that she was lying.”
> Huh,” Bastille said. “Well, that's good, right? It means she cares.”
> “It's not good,” I said. “It's confusing. It would be so much easier if I could just believe that she hates me. Why did they break up? Why did they think a Librarian and a Smedry could marry in the first place? And what made them change their minds? Whose fault was it? They were together until I was born. . . .”
> “Alcatraz,” Bastille said. “It's *not* your fault.” (*AvSL*, 76.)

The fantasy-setting may allow real, difficult questions relating to a child's possible feelings of abandonment when his or her parents separate to be dealt with slightly removed from the quotidian, which may make them seem less depressing. In fact, the books are not only educational in terms of postmodern theory, they are also precisely the kind of “meaningful books about dysfunctional families” that Alcatraz mocks (*AvEL*, 285), even if they are also fantastical, humorous adventure stories. They describe people in a much more realistic way than they do the world around those people. This means that they can have some of the advantages of both fantasy and realist writing, even if the two styles are continuously portrayed as natural enemies. In truth, the two genres are capable of borrowing each other's best sides, as Lewis Roberts (2008, 123) points out. It would not be surprising if the fifth book revealed the series to be about a boy who loses a parent, as well, given that some hints to that effect have been presented – though it need not be his mother, and it

seems unlikely that he would acquire a dog in time for it to die during the climax of the story-arch (cf. *AvEL*, 50). The *Alcatraz*-series clearly mocks the boundaries between realist fiction and fantasy, again contributing to a postmodern view on the inexistence of black-and-white truths.

Towards the end of the fourth book, Alcatraz has to change sides. In essence, he stops following the labels attached to his parents – Free-Kingdomer father ceases to trump evil-Librarian mother – and Alcatraz simply does what seems to be the right thing to do. He decides to join his mother in the effort to stop his father from giving everyone Talents (*AvSL*, 286). The complex and ever-changing relationship between Alcatraz and his parents can be read as yet another demonstration that truth is not black and white. What is true can change from one moment to another, and can have contradictory elements such as parents who do love their child being, in Gradpa Smedry's half-joking words (*AvSL*, 18), “horrible” parents nonetheless.

The abandonment issues could also justify a very different reading of the entire series. The series opens with Alcatraz the orphan, and over the first book he realizes that he had not gotten over his longing for a family that would be related to him by blood and that would therefore be obliged to love him and keep him no matter what he did – even if he thought he had (*AvEL*, 25). This could suggest an incredulous reading of the series, especially when combined with the fact that Alcatraz is a self-proclaimed liar. One could argue that the whole series depicts the fantastical imaginations of an orphan boy who craves for family and a sense of power to offset his having been shipped from foster family to foster family all his young life, much like Ariko Kawabata (2006, 127) suggests Mrs. May's brother to have done in *The Borrowers* after being sent to England as a “pseudo-orphan”. But I do not think there is enough evidence to make this a likely reading. It is more plausible that what the narrator tells is true-ish in the universe of the books. Then again, the fact that any evidence for this kind of a reading exists could be said to undermine the books' internal credibility, which would be in line with the postmodern tendency to put everything into question.

On a brighter note, there is a degree of similar role reversal in the budding romance between Alcatraz and Bastille as in the relationship between Draulin and Dartmoor. Bastille is the knight and Alcatraz the pseudo-prince protectee. But otherwise the romance between them is quite conventional. There are awkward moments between two teenagers:

> Bastille shot Australia a glare, but she kept on talking, oblivious. “She must have been really worried about you, Alcatraz. She ran right over to your side. I –”
>
> Bastille tried, subtly, to stomp on Australia's foot.
>
> “Oh!” Australia said. “We squishing ants?”
>
> Remarkably, Bastille blushed. Was she embarrassed for disobeying her mother? Bastille tried so hard to please the woman, but I was pretty certain that pleasing Draulin was pretty much impossible. I mean, it couldn’t have been concern for *me* that made her jump out of the vehicle. I was well aware of how infuriating she found me.
>
> But . . . what if she *was* worried about me? What did that mean? Suddenly, I found myself blushing too. (*AvKC*, 26.)

Alcatraz is fairly clueless and Bastille slightly more observant when it comes to feelings (*AvKC*, 202-203). It is even hinted at that they may end up married: Alcatraz says that he and Bastille were not (yet) directly related at the time of the events in the fourth book (*AvSL*, 149) and mentions that they have a house by the time he is writing his autobiography (*AvSL,* Author's Afterword).

All this accords with some of Reynolds' arguments. According to her, the fact that the traditional family is repeatedly challenged in current children's literature “does not mean that the traditional family will disappear from either society or writing for children” (Reynolds 2009, 207). Interestingly, she adds that “it could be argued that precisely by questioning the traditional family and showing it as under threat, books such as these are working to preserve it by reminding readers why they think it is important” (Reynolds 2009, 207). In other words, it can be argued that even when depicting outright weird family structures the series is promoting at least the more warm and fuzzy aspects of the traditional image of family.

Even though the series thus conforms partly to traditional family conventions, and even if the final book in the series were to leave Alcatraz's family situation in a more “normal” state,

indeed, even if the last book turned out to be an outright celebration of traditional values in every way possible, ending with Alcatraz's parents being reunited and living happily ever after in their castle a stone's throw away from Alcatraz and Bastille's picturesque cabin, it would not change the fact that the books have exposed the readers to many less conventional ideas about family, to something more fractured and pluralistic. That, in itself, is enough to potentially help readers question whether they should uphold any narrow assumptions of what a normal family should be like.

4. Conclusions

> This book means whatever you make of it. For some, it will be about the dangers of fame. For others, it will be about turning your flaws into talents. For many, it will simply be entertainment, which is really quite all right. Yet for others, it will be about learning to question everything, even that which you believe.
> For, you see, the most important truths can always withstand a little examination.
>
> *Alcatraz versus the Knights of Crystallia,* Royal Epilogue

My study questions were: In what ways is the concept of truth questioned in the series? And why would we offer such books to children? The concept of truth is questioned in a myriad of ways in the series. The complicated relationship between knowledge and power demonstrates that we cannot expect the information we are presented with by books, newspapers or teachers – not to mention librarians – to be pure, objective and neutral. The fact that someone is in a position of authority does not mean that everything they say is the absolute, incontestable truth. The Talents not only show that disadvantages can be turned into advantages regardless of what the Librarian-minded may think, but also allow the readers to see things such as the laws of physics as sometimes breakable constructions. The series cautiously shows that even religious truths can be poked fun at. The different more or less metafictitious literary devices pose questions about the relationship between fiction and the real world, and the quirky characters and their relationships question the notion of normality. This incessant questioning can encourage the readers to start asking more questions themselves and to tolerate confusion and contradictions – which can be highly valuable skills in today's complicated world.

I would therefore argue that my hypothesis proved to be correct. The series does use postmodern conventions that efface the truth in ways that may encourage the reader to actively question things that are taken as established truths. But it does not forcefully sell even the ideology of questioning since – in true postmodern fashion – even the virtue of questioning is sometimes

questioned. The hypothesis even proved to be quite central to my work; I rarely ventured very far into topics that would not have related to it in any way. But that is not to say that I would have managed to keep my thesis in tight focus, as the hypothesis and the study questions allowed for a fairly wide range of research.

In fact, one of the bigger weaknesses of my approach is probably a certain lack of focus. Since the texts seem to familiarize the readers with a host of diverse postmodern phenomena, I have felt the need no address a wide variety of postmodern theoretical aspects that relate to them. I have therefore not been able to choose a restricted number of theorists and focus on how the texts relate to them, though at least Hutcheon and Foucault proved to be especially useful in my analysis of *Alcatraz*. Partly to blame is also the lack of previous research. There remains so much to be said on the series that I may have been tempted to cover more ground than I would have if I had only found a narrow strip of unploughed land for instance in the field of Shakespeare criticism. On the other hand, this lack of focus can even serve make my conclusions more trustworthy, since it has made for a wide variety of evidence to support them.

Due to my theme, I had less need to explore different ways in which the *Alcatraz*-series conforms to traditions of children's literature, and I have hence been able to be somewhat more focused when it comes to my sources in children's literature criticism. Section 2.2.2 has the most relevance in terms of the study questions of the thesis. In it, I lean mostly on the arguments of Roderick McGillis in *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (1996), since his notion of an active reader is extremely useful for my study, and compare them to some opposing arguments to be found in *Children's Literature: New Approaches* (2004), edited by Karín Lesnik-Oberstein.

Apart from a lack of focus, another possible problem point is the word *truth* itself. I may have used it in confusing ways – referring to different gradients of truth values. But I do not know if

it would have been possible to avoid doing so in a thesis whose central point is after all *postmodernism*'s take on truth.

Within the limited scope of this thesis I have not been able to discuss all of the ways the postmodern truth concept and the resulting encouragement to questioning comes forth in the series. And, perhaps due to the lack of previous research, I suspect I was partly trying to write a thesis that would present several possible avenues of research, instead of doing a very close reading of few small details. It would therefore be possible to delve deeper into most of the aspects I have analysed.

There is certainly more to say at least in relation to the quirks of the narration, and to the norm-breaking characters. According to McHale (1987, 134), postmodern writing treats metaphors in a specific way as part of the ontological discussion he argues to be foregrounded in postmodernism. It might be interesting to explore how Alcatraz's quirky metaphors relate to this, and to the question of truth – something I did not have time to study even a little. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study for instance child-readers' responses to the metafiction in the series, or how the books could be used in a new kind of literacy teaching in elementary school or lower secondary school.

The Alcatraz-series is *the Name of the Rose* for pre-teens. Much like Eco's masterpiece, it teaches readers to think about postmodernism. The lesson seems to be that there may well be an absolute truth out there, but that it is good to apply enough postmodern philosophy to question whether or not it is the one that everyone else seems to believe it to be. More often than not, a little questioning will prove truth to be plural or even contradictory rather than absolute. An astonishing number of details in the series accord with different postmodern theorists' writings, which may mean that the books are a testament to just how central postmodern concerns still are in our culture.

Brandon Sanderson's fantasy series about the boy called Alcatraz can thus help readers in at

least two ways. It can teach them to read postmodern literature, and to read and navigate the postmodern – or *post*-postmodern – world.

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