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The Humanitarian Narrative: Defining and Problematizing an Emerging Literary Genre

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**THE HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE:
Defining and Problematizing an Emerging Literary Genre**

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April 20, 2016

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Abstract

This thesis defines and problematizes the emerging Anglo-American literary genre of the humanitarian narrative. It interrogates its characteristics, origins, and significance. It first defines the genre, noting its primary conventions, which include an exceptional Hero, exotic setting, and an autobiographical or laudatory-biographical narrative approach. The thesis then argues that its emergence flows from converging Anglo-American literary and political histories and traditions that extol (Western) Heroes, human rights, and Western humanitarian intervention in the Global South. Three extended close readings follow, illuminating and critiquing the genre's features: *Little Princes* by Conor Grennan (2014); *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin (2006); and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder (2003). The final section argues that the humanitarian narrative is problematic because it reinforces modern humanitarianism uncritically and is underpinned by the harmful power relationships of colonialism.

Chapter One: Introduction

“No, in the scales of knowledge all the museums in the world will never weigh so much as one spark of human sympathy” – Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism

“I mean – don't you think you've got a bit of a – a – saving people thing?” – Hermione Granger to Harry Potter in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix by J.K. Rowling

This thesis explores an emerging Anglo-American literary genre: the humanitarian narrative. To accomplish this, I ask three questions: (1) what is the humanitarian narrative genre? (2) From where and how did it emerge? (3) Why does the humanitarian narrative matter? This endeavor is interdisciplinary, blending literary analysis, human rights frameworks, and critiques of humanitarianism and development. With this approach, I argue that the humanitarian narrative is an emerging, Anglo-American literary genre produced by (and thus embodying) its late 20th and early 21st century socio-political context, including the normalization of human rights, the rise humanitarian intervention, and the spread of development work. I also contend that the humanitarian narrative is deeply problematic, as it blurs fact and fiction, can be complicit in global systems of oppression and the consumption of suffering, and perpetuates the White Savior complex and other harmful colonial and postcolonial narratives. To demonstrate this, I divide my thesis into five chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One outlines the key questions, arguments, and methodology for this paper. Chapter Two then explores the first question (what is the humanitarian narrative genre?) in two parts. It first evaluates what determines a genre, utilizing John Frow's foundational text, *Genre*. Frow highlights three interrelated components of a genre: it has recognizable conventions; it can be differentiated when compared to other individual

texts or genres (called “discrimination and taxonomy”); and that, through the genre’s conventions and process of differentiation, it produces meaning for its audience and the society in which it exists. Using these three attributes, this chapter subsequently defines the humanitarian narrative as a genre. First, it describes the humanitarian narrative’s main conventions, including a specific title-subtitle structure, the humanitarian Hero, an exotic setting, and a shared autobiographical or friendly biographical narrative structure. After these are discussed, the chapter evaluates the genres most closely related to the humanitarian narrative, such as memoir and non-fiction adventure stories, and argues (through the process of discrimination and taxonomy) that the humanitarian narrative is different from the others and developing into its own genre. The chapter concludes by discussing Frow’s final attribute of a genre—its ability to produce meaning—and the humanitarian narrative.

Chapter Three addresses the second question of this thesis, tracing from where and how this genre developed. The first part of this chapter addresses from where the humanitarian narrative came, taking a literary-historical approach to briefly trace the connection of literature to human rights, providing an informative literary foundation of the humanitarian narrative. The second half of Chapter Three takes a socio-political and historical approach to establish the context in which the humanitarian narrative genre emerged, including the 20th century rise of human rights, humanitarianism, and development. While these approaches are distinct, both are in dialogue and essential to contextualizing the humanitarian narrative genre’s emergence.

Chapter Four takes the definition and context of the humanitarian narrative genre provided in Chapters Two and Three and applies them in case studies of three texts: *Little*

Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal by Conor Grennan (2010); *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations...One School at a Time* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin (2006); and *Mountains Beyond Mountains: the Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man who would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder (2003). Each case study will primarily discuss the ways in which the text exemplifies or disputes the conventions of the humanitarian narrative, interweaving a similar discussion of the ways in which the texts do or do not embody their socio-political context. Chapter Four's case studies also engage more deeply with the problematic aspects of the humanitarian narrative at textual level, including the blur between fact and fiction, the consumption of others' suffering, and the perpetuation of the 'white savior' narrative. This last objective of Chapter Four's case studies, connected to the third question of thesis (why does the humanitarian narrative matter?), provides the foundation for Chapter Five.

Chapter Five, building off of the conclusions drawn at the end of Chapter Four's case studies, addresses the third and final question of this thesis: why does the humanitarian narrative matter? The first three sections discuss and problematize several interrelated aspects of the humanitarian narrative related to both its context and conventions: the tension between truth and fiction, empathy, and audiences and their consumption of the texts. The final section, 5.4, explores the ways in which the humanitarian narrative has an impact in media beyond books, such as in documentaries, news stories, blogs, and radio programs.

Chapter Two: The Humanitarian Narrative as a Genre

Though not yet widely recognized as a genre, a growing number of texts seek to describe the individual experience of humanitarianism. They share many structural traits and enjoy a considerable readership. This chapter addresses the first question outlined in the introduction: is the humanitarian narrative a genre? This will be answered in four sections: (1) what makes a genre? (2) What is the humanitarian narrative? (3) What is its relationship to other texts/genres? And (4) what is the genre's significance?

2.1 What Makes a Genre?

Delineating genres is an imperfect science. Classical thinkers, including Aristotle and Plato, defined genre in two distinct categories: Comedy and Tragedy. Over the centuries, genres increased in number and complexity. The modern genre is messy, crosscutting, and blends with other genres. There are so-called subgenres and genre crossovers. Many literary scholars write at length about these specifics of genre, but there is little contemporary scholarship on the concept as a whole. This is highly unusual, given its prevalence, complexity, and consequentiality. At its simplest level, literary critic John Frow defines genre as “a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning.”¹ Frow describes these constraints as the genre's “‘internal’ logic;” they are the defining, shared traits of a genre's membership.²

¹ Frow, John. *Genre*. Second ed. London: Routledge, 2015. 10.

² *Ibid*, 107.

Conventions allow genres to be differentiated from each other through an ambiguous social and historical process Frow calls “discrimination and taxonomy.”³ In this process, similar texts are first distinguished from others and then grouped in categories; comparing texts to each other creates genres. Genre categorization creates a helpful set of expectations for a text. Psychologists Reid Hastie and Robyn M. Dawes write, “Situations,” meaning narratives or stories, “are even more believable if the components form a good gestalt because they fit into or exemplify some familiar narrative schema.”⁴ It behooves everyone (author, publisher, marketer, reader, and librarian) to adhere to genre constraints, as the text can be more easily understood and integrated into existing frameworks.

In reality, however, even the texts within a genre are diverse. A Western was once identifiable by the American Wild West setting and cowboy characters. Today, even the Star Wars franchise is described as a new genre, the “Western in space.”⁵ There are many different ways to write a Western; at what point does a text become (or stop being) one?⁶

³ Ibid, 78.

⁴ Hastie, Reid, and Robyn M. Daes. *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World: The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making*. Second Edition. Los Angeles: Sage, 2010.

⁵ Lilly, N.E. "10 Most Influential Space Westerns." Space Westerns. 2009. Accessed November 30, 2015. <http://www.spacewesterns.com/articles/116/>.

⁶ For this reason, I have chosen not to use the phrase “subgenre” in this piece. At a certain level, all genres can be understood to be subgenres under Plato and Aristotle’s two principle genres of Comedy and Tragedy. While it is true that some genres are more dominant than others, as Frow suggests, this does not make them self-contained or pure. Thus, while the term subgenre can be helpful in that it signifies a genre’s relationship to other genres and its less-dominant, niche status, it is nevertheless misleading in suggesting a genre can be located entirely within another. The term also raises numerous secondary issues, such as the question of at what point a subgenre become its own genre.

Genres create an illusion of easy categorization that many critique. In *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*, Palumbo-Liu argues, “in sorting out the world into similar and dissimilar phenomena, we tend to shape our world to fit our needs...Choice is riddled with fictions we tell ourselves.”⁷ While texts inform beliefs, Palumbo-Liu argues they can also “be deployed to support, or instantiate, and indeed proliferate a false or irrational world.”⁸ Genres utilize the readers’ assumptions, expectations, and prior knowledge while simultaneously creating new knowledge. This can spread misinformation and reinforce harmful beliefs and power dynamics.

The ability to produce meaning is genre’s most significant characteristic. Discourse, including literature, relies on the belief that there is a common human nature and experience. Genre provide familiar frameworks for “constructing meaning and value” of otherwise unfamiliar narratives.⁹ Without genre, discourse across difference (including time, space, culture, narrative structure, and language) would be difficult. For example, Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* was written in the 1590s, but its generic conventions as a romantic comedy make it apropos for the 21st century, as demonstrated by its recent film adaptation by Joss Whedon, known for directing superhero movies and TV series.

The genre-given ability that allows readers to engage with unfamiliar narratives is one of literature’s greatest appeals. Frow argues, “Represented worlds are always, and by definition, generically specific.”¹⁰ Using readers’ assumptions, genre’s structural features

⁷ Palumbo-Liu, David. *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012. 33-4.

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Ibid, 79.

¹⁰ Ibid, 83.

“project worlds.”¹¹ Palumbo-Liu argues that this allows readers “to see our individual manifestations of humanness as somehow in conversations with those of others, alive or dead.” This inspires a range of reactions for readers, including empathy, distrust, and desire. Genre, as a result, affects how societies and individuals interact with each other in reality, not just on the page.¹² The recently emerged genre of the Tweet, for example, has had a profound effect on the ways in which people communicate beyond the Twitter platform, including quickening distribution of information and strengthening gravitation towards short and sensationalized comments.¹³

Given this brief introduction, a genre has three defining characteristics. First, there must be a selection of texts with “conventional and highly organization constraints.”¹⁴ Second, through Frow’s process of “discrimination and taxonomy,” the genre’s membership is determined by discerning the most similar texts compared to other texts and genres.¹⁵ Finally, the genre creates meaning through its impact on readers and writers. In the next three sections, each feature will be evaluated in the humanitarian narrative.

2.2 Defining the Humanitarian Narrative Genre

To borrow Frow’s terminology, each genre has a set of “conventional and highly organized constraints” that determine its “‘internal’ logic.”¹⁶ The traits can be structural,

¹¹ Frow, 108.

¹² Palumbo-Liu, 34.

¹³ Gross, Doug. "5 Ways Twitter Changed How We Communicate." CNN. March 21, 2011. Accessed March 01, 2016.

¹⁴ Frow, 10.

¹⁵ Ibid, 78.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10, 107.

narrative, linguistic, or apply to characters or the genre's audience. The humanitarian narrative is no different, with several key conventions in respect to character, setting, narrative structure, and plot, which will be outlined below. These terms about to be defined will also be used later in this project in close readings of some of the most successful (and controversial) humanitarian narratives.

Title Structure

The first key convention of the humanitarian narrative is its signature title-subtitle structure. The main title is catchy, meant to be profound, and often includes the English translation of a proverb local to the area in which the Hero is working. While there are many, ten notable examples include:

1. *Mountains Beyond Mountains: the Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man who would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder (2003);
2. *I Am Because You Are: How the Spirit of Ubuntu Inspired an Unlikely Friendship and Transformed a Community* by Andrea Thompson and Jacob Lief (2015);
3. *The Kindness Diaries: One Man's Quest to Ignite Goodwill and Transform Lives Around the World* by Leon Legothetis (2014);
4. *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace Through Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan* by Greg Mortenson (2009);
5. *Living Microsoft to Change the World: An Entrepreneur's Odyssey to Educate the World's Children* by John Wood (2006);
6. *Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World* by Doc Hendley (2012);
7. *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal* by Conor Grennan (2010);
8. *There is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Africa's Children* by Melissa Fay Greene (2006);
9. *The Voluntourist: A Six-Country Tale of Love, Loss, Fatherhood, Fate, and Singing Bon Jovi in Bethlehem* by Ken Budd (2012);
10. *The Promise of a Pencil: How an Ordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change* by Adam Braun and Caryle Adler (2015).

Following the catchy main title, the subtitles describe the Hero and his exceptionalism. These are succinct often grandiose, many using phrases like “an odyssey to educate” or “quest to ignite goodwill and transform lives.” The narrative’s Hero is never referred to as being unique. Rather, he is just “one man” or “an entrepreneur” looking to change the world. The message is clear: these texts are uplifting success stories, led by heroic individuals, that will take the reader on an inspiring journey. *The Promise of a Pencil*’s subtitle, for example, exclaims that an “ordinary person” has the capacity to create “extraordinary change.”

In addition to hooking and inspiring the reader, the humanitarian narrative subtitle is often grandiose and exaggerated. One example is a 2012 autobiographical humanitarian narrative by Doc Hendley, titled *Wine to Water: A Bartender’s Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World*. It is a classic humanitarian narrative title: catchy, engaging, and follows the “simple man,” in this case a bartender, on a “quest” to do something extraordinary.¹⁷ The title’s claim that he alone is bringing world water to the entire world is larger-than-life, however. His campaign begins in Darfur, Sudan, and eventually spreads to several other locations. It is an impressive feat, but not exactly global. As will be discussed at length in Chapter Four, Greg Mortenson also exaggerates in his titles, claiming to “build nations,” “fight terrorism,” and “promote peace” through his humanitarian work.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hendley, Doc. *Wine to Water: A Bartender's Quest to Bring Clean Water to the World*. New York: Avery, 2012.

¹⁸ Mortenson, Greg, and David Oliver Relin. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations-- One School at a Time*. New York: Viking, 2006.

The Exceptional Hero with the Admirable Flaw(s)

The second and most striking trait of the humanitarian narrative is its protagonist, the Exceptional Hero. The Exceptional Hero is almost always a man, white, well educated, wealthy (or with unusual access to resources), and from the United States or Western Europe. By trade, he is probably a high-achieving professional turned volunteer humanitarian, though the Hero could also be a journalist or professional aid worker. Notable examples include Paul Farmer (*Mountains Beyond Mountains: One Man's Quest to Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder), Greg Mortenson (*Three Cups of Tea and Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace Through Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan*), and John Wood (*Leaving Microsoft to Change the World: An Entrepreneur's Odyssey to Educate the World's Children*).

The Hero functions as both a relatable stand-in for the reader and someone for the reader to admire. This is a challenging narrative balance, as the Hero must experience unfamiliar challenges as his reader would, but respond exceptionally to them.¹⁹ The Hero is aware of this (at least subconsciously), and it often manifests in the exchange between their internal and external dialogue. In *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World: An Entrepreneur's Odyssey to Educate the World's Children* (2006), protagonist and author John Wood converses with a Nepali education advocate. "Eager to learn more, I peppered him with questions. I found it hard to imagine a world in which something as random as where you were born could result in lifelong illiteracy. Had I taken my own education for

¹⁹ In the context of the humanitarian narrative Hero, relatable means that the Hero has more characteristics of race, class, language and education in common with his intended readership than with the community he serves. The intended audience and readership of the humanitarian narrative will be discussed in Chapter Five at greater length.

granted?”²⁰ By the next page, he is discussing his success as a marketing executive at Microsoft and how he finally was able to give it up for service; “The job was financially rewarding but full of high pressure and stress. It seemed as if my mantra was ‘You can sleep when you are dead and buried.’”²¹ At first, he asks questions and sees the world through the eyes of the reader. Soon thereafter, however, he describing a career of rare caliber and a career move that most would never have the ability or desire to make. He balances the relatable with the un-relatable.

Similar to the dichotomy between the Hero’s internal and external dialogues is the Hero’s intense personality. Most often he is inspirational and inspired, but he can also be arrogant or foolish. His flaws are definitive, but not damning. Rather, the Hero’s flaws make him seem more relatable and even more endearing. Or, as is the case in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Paul Farmer is a know-it-all, but usually the most capable and knowledgeable person in the room.²² *Mountains Beyond Mountains* author Tracy Kidder’s writes:

I remember thinking that Captain Carroll and Dr. Farmer made a mismatched pair, and that Farmer suffered in the comparison...Farmer was about the same age but much more delicate-looking. He had short black hair and a high waist and long thin arms, and his nose came almost to a point. Next to the soldier, he looked skinny and pale, and for all that he struck me as bold, indeed down-right cocky.²³

²⁰ Wood, John. *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*. New York: Collins, 2006. 5.

²¹ Ibid, 6.

²² This is as good a place as any to acknowledge the difference between Paul Farmer the character and Paul Farmer the person. All of these stories fall under the nonfiction umbrella, some are biographical, others autobiographical. Regardless, there is an important distinction to be made between the characters in the narrative and people on whom the characters are based.

²³ Kidder, Tracy. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. New York City, New York: Random House, 2009. 4.

Kidder's first description breaks down his protagonist, calling him unattractive ("skinny and pale") and arrogant. True to humanitarian narrative form, Kidder divulges the Hero's flaws early in the text. As he continues, Kidder begins to mix in descriptions of Farmer's admirable qualities. He describes, "I sensed that Farmer knew Haiti far better than the captain, and that he was trying to impart some important information."²⁴ In the next several pages, Farmer is redeemed multiple times. Kidder describes how Farmer was raised in a trailer park, supports soldiers, and flies first class at the request of grateful flight attendants after he helped with medical emergencies on a flight.²⁵ Finally, Kidder arrives at his real description of Farmer:

He was thirty-five. He had graduated from Harvard Medical School and also had a Ph.D. in anthropology from Harvard. He worked in Boston four months of the year, living in a church rectory in a poor neighborhood. The rest of the year he worked without pay in Haiti, mainly doctoring peasants who had lost their land to a hydroelectric dam. He had been expelled from Haiti during the time of the junta but had sneaked back to his hospital.²⁶

With each sentence, Farmer's distinction increases. While his age, degrees, and professional history are remarkable, Farmer's devotion to his Haitian patients is monumental. His accomplishments are adventurous, admirable, and factual. The combination captivates readers.

Mountains Beyond Mountains is biographical, but the same duality between flawed and exceptional appears in autobiographical humanitarian narratives. Conor Grennan, author and protagonist of *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*, begins the book switching between flattery and self-deprecation.

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵ Ibid, 6.

²⁶ Ibid, 7.

In the Prologue, Grennan is the ideal humanitarian Hero. Injured and stranded in the frozen Himalayas with his two Nepali porters, he is on an important, unspecified humanitarian trek. When Grennan realizes they only have two tangerines left to eat, he gives them to his guides.²⁷

As he begins the first chapter, however, he paints himself as ignorant and even privileged. He admits that he is “volunteering in a Third World orphanage at the outset of [his] trip” to impress women in bars and validate his round-the-globe trip to friends and family.²⁸ He describes his boredom during his Nepali cultural orientation and brassy misuse of *Namaste*. In a painful anecdote, Grennan tells how he copied Nepali words spoken from his host sister for over a week, only to later learn that she is deaf and cannot speak the language.²⁹ Depending on the reader, these traits could appear comical, naïve, relatable, or offensive; regardless, they are not laudable. The dichotomy between the heroic Grennan of the prologue and the objectionable Grennan of the first chapter make it impossible for the reader to fully know ‘the real’ Grennan, enticing the reader to learn more. As the book goes on, it is Grennan-the-writer’s mission to redeem his character self, which underpins the plot.

The humanitarian narrative Hero’s ability to balance his exceptionality and flaws relies on his posture of humility. Unlike the white saviors and missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, the 21st-century humanitarian narrative Hero does not desire to appear too comfortable or elite in comparison to the local community. In fact, they attempt to become a part of it and, as a result, a member of the local community. An intrinsic part of

²⁷ Grennan, Conor. *Little Princes: One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*. New York City, New York: William Morrow, 2010. 1-2.

²⁸ Ibid, 7.

²⁹ Ibid, 13.

their adventurous, heroic nature is their self-selection to share and address the pain of others (a product of Heroes' convoluted empathy and sympathy for the people suffering, discussed at length in Chapter Five). Prominent examples include Farmer's return to Haiti despite political violence in order to be with his Haitian community in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and Grennan's choice to live at the orphanage for an extended period of time in *Little Princes*, though he eventually buys a more comfortable apartment.

In order to appear humble, the humanitarian Hero also emphasizes his partnerships with local peoples, though he maintains centrality in the narrative. The titles of several humanitarian narratives and the names of organizations in them demonstrate this. Paul Farmer's organization, Partners In Health, represents a conscious focus to include communities in name and, to some extent, practice. Kidder emphasizes inclusion in the *Mountains Beyond Mountains* afterword, "Often [international aid organizations] rely almost entirely on professionals from the world's wealthy countries, and they fail to make their projects indigenous...PIH is different."³⁰ *I Am Because You Are* by Lief and Thompson (2015) also highlights the aspiring compatriotic nature of humanitarian narratives, claiming connection and sameness between the Hero (white, college graduate Jacob Lief) and the poor, South African students. Similarly, the Hero also emphasizes his relationships with local individuals, which often read as forced and tokenizing. In *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, Wood's conversations with Dawa Sherpa, his guide and supposedly close friend, are filled with seemingly overstated details that suggest implausible closeness. He describes Sherpa's love of English-colloquiums and

³⁰ Kidder, 307.

love of laughter, but fails to convey any real depth to the reader.³¹ As a result, the Hero's attempt to be part of the community results in primarily symbolic gestures.

Worth mentioning are two other conventional characters who often accompany the Exceptional Hero. Most humanitarian narratives include a good-hearted, beautiful love interest, usually a wealthy and well-educated white woman, and a sidekick best friend, typically a guide or local employee. These characters play important roles in moving the plot, making the Hero seem relatable and human, and acknowledging the admirable parts of the Hero that he cannot describe himself. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, for example, Paul Farmer is loved, admired, and challenged by Ophelia Dahl. She ultimately turns his marriage proposal down, but provides the reader with an intimate reason to fascinate with Farmer. In a letter to Farmer, Dahl writes, “the qualities I love in you—that drew me to you—also cause me to resent you: namely your unswerving commitment to the poor, your limitless schedule and your massive compassion for others...as your wife, I would place my own emotional needs in the way of your important vision.”³² In that moment, Dahl's character allows the reader to experience Farmer from her perspective, making him human and even more exceptional simultaneously.

It is also important to note that while the humanitarian narrative Hero is usually male, embodying masculine-gendered traits such as strong leadership, humanitarian narratives written by and about women are increasing in number. Prominent examples include Angelina Jolie's memoir *Notes From My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador* (2003), Tanya Shaffer's *Somebody's Heart is*

³¹ Wood, 15-6.

³² Kidder, 66.

Burning: A Woman Wanderer in Africa (2003), and Melissa Fay Greene's *There is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Africa's Children* (2006).

While these woman-driven narratives and Heroes share many traits with their humanitarian narrative male counterparts, gendered differences do appear, such as an emphasis on maternal strength and some of the more problematic aspects of aid. Both Tanya Shaffer in *Somebody's Heart is Burning: A Woman Wanderer in Africa* (2006) and Jessica Alexander in *Chasing Chaos: My Decade In and Out of Humanitarian Aid* (2013) narrate their grapples with their own privilege and weaknesses as outsiders in communities. Expressing frustration with the short-term nature of many aid ventures, Alexander writes, ““Doing good aid required a time commitment—not a week, not a month, but years.”³³ These vulnerabilities do not appear or appear with less frequency in books like *The Promise of a Pencil* or *Little Princes*, in which doubts are temporary. The women of humanitarian narratives also seem less likely to start their own organizations as a result of their humanitarian venture. Angelina Jolie comes the closest to achieving this level of independent leadership as a prominent UN Goodwill Ambassador.

'Exotic' Setting

The humanitarian narrative must unfold in an “exotic” setting.³⁴ This is usually in the developing world in close proximity to poverty or conflict. These settings are also often significant geopolitical locations to the Hero's home country (usually the U.S.),

³³ Alexander, Jessica. *Chasing Chaos: My Decade in and out of Humanitarian Aid*. New York City: Broadway Books, 2013. 203.

³⁴ The descriptor exotic is placed in quotes due to the fact that it is a problematic result of Orientalism and exoticizing. It is used almost ironically to demonstrate the way in which these locations would appear to their intended readership.

such as Afghanistan or Haiti.³⁵ In order to be exceptional, the Hero must go to a place where he stands out in almost every way: ability, appearance, background, etc. In *I Am Because You Are: How the Spirit of Ubuntu Inspired an Unlikely Friendship and Transformed a Community*, protagonist Jacob Lief travels to South Africa first as a student tourist before deciding to stay there to volunteer. Lief writes, “And, with hardly a second thought, I’d decided to spend the next three months in a South African township defined by intense poverty and crippling violence, where my white skin symbolized oppression, with a guy I’d just met over a beer.”³⁶ He is noticeably eager, seeming to find

his desire to go to South Africa noteworthy and even self-sacrificial, seemingly oblivious to the fact that many people live in South Africa without praise.

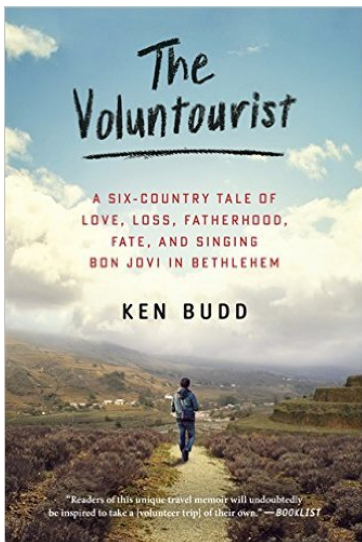


Figure 1: cover design of *The Voluntourist* by Ken Budd

In *Wide-Open World: How Volunteering Around the Globe Changed One Family's Lives Forever*, narrator and Hero John Marshall and his wife begin their narrative discussing their much-anticipated “trip around the world.”³⁷

Their desire to do good work began with a desire to make a yearlong global trip sustainable, which they believed a

“year of service” would accomplish.³⁸ Over the course of

their journey, they visited many “far-flung locales,” including Costa Rica and Thailand.³⁹

³⁵ Certain narratives, such as *The Blind Side*, are humanitarian narratives in every aspect but take place closer to the Hero’s home. Though closely related to humanitarian narratives, these particularly texts will not be included in this analysis.

³⁶ Lief, Jacob, and Andrea Thompson. *I Am Because You Are: How the Spirit of Ubuntu Inspired an Unlikely Friendship and Transformed a Community*. Rodale Press, 2015. 21.

³⁷ Marshall, John. *Wide-open World: How Volunteering around the Globe Changed One Family's Lives Forever*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2015. 3.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

Another prominent example of the role of the exotic setting in the humanitarian narrative is the text *The Voluntourist: A Six-Country Tale of Love, Loss, Fatherhood Fate, and Singing Bon Jovi in Bethlehem* by Ken Budd (2012). Like many humanitarian narratives, the cover of *The Voluntourist* features Budd walking in an unspecified, but clearly ‘foreign’ locale (at least to those in the U.S. or Britain) (see *figure 1*).⁴⁰ His lone figure suggests to the reader the intensity of his journey and the setting. He stays in each of the six countries, including Palestine, Kenya, Ecuador, and China, for no more than two weeks at a time to both tour and volunteer (a dual purpose shared by many humanitarian narrative Heroes). As a result, his descriptions of the places he ‘voluntours’ only capture the superficial.

Narrative Structure: Biographical or Autobiographical Adventure Story

The humanitarian narrative’s plot structure is closely linked to its exotic setting. The structure resembles that of two genres: the autobiography or biography and an adventure story. Most humanitarian narratives are autobiographical, such as the 2014 book *The Promise of a Pencil: How an Ordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change* by Adam Braun, *Little Princes: One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal* by Conor Grennan (2011), and *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace Through Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan* by Greg Mortenson (2009). Others, like Kidder’s 2003 text *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, are told biographically. Biographical humanitarian narratives can be told in either the first person or third, but do not vary

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Budd, Ken. *The Voluntourist: A Six-country Tale of Love, Loss, Fatherhood, Fate, and Singing Bon Jovi in Bethlehem*. New York: William Morrow, 2012.

significantly from autobiographical humanitarian narratives in the extent to which they center and praise the Hero. Both biographical and autobiographical humanitarian narratives also read very similarly overall as adventure stories, though geared more towards do-gooders with college degrees than curious youths.

The typical humanitarian narrative plot has three key components. First, early in the text, the narrator travels to the ‘exotic location’ in order to begin their humanitarian work (in order to go on an adventure, one must go somewhere the average middle-class white person wouldn’t go). Here they experience ‘real-life’ suffering for the first time. This often includes discussion of the quality of living in their new environment. In a chapter titled “A White Boy Walks into a *Shebeen*” in *I am Because You Are: How the Spirit of Ubuntu Inspired an Unlikely Friendship and Transformed a Community*, 21-year-old American university student and aspiring humanitarian-adventurer Jacob Lief describes his first impression of a South African bar, called a *shebeen*. “The *shebeen* didn’t look particularly promising...If I hadn’t been twenty-one and up for adventure, I might have turned around.”⁴¹ He expresses surprise and discomfort at poverty, being the only white person, and the realities of his new environment.

After some time, the Hero experiences a moment of humbling success. Small moments of humility occur frequently in humanitarian narratives. They are essential parts of experiencing new places, people, and suffering without seeming inhuman. A key turning point in most humanitarian narratives, however, is a large moment of almost crippling humility. This often manifests as overcoming a failure or considerable challenge. By this point, the Hero is familiar in the environment and adept with its

⁴¹ Lief and Thompson, 9.

challenges and people. The moment allows the Hero to demonstrate (even prove) that their exceptionalism extends beyond having the “courage” to embark on their adventure. Often, they attribute their success to others, though it is clear in the narrative that they were the driving force. In *Little Princes*, despite Grennan’s self-described inability to work with children (he struggles to even remember their names), he discovers that he is, in fact, more capable than he believed after successfully handling a crisis at the orphanage. Afterwards, he describes increased comfort, “The more time I spent with the children, the more I got a sense of how I was going to survive these months.”⁴²

By the last chapters of the book, the humanitarian narrative’s Hero has likely achieved tremendous success, a crowning glory achievement. This breakthrough can take many forms, and often leads to further successes. Many humanitarian narrative Heroes found their own organizations, such as *The Promise of a Pencil* author Adam Braun (founder of Pencils of Promise) and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* subject Paul Farmer (founder of Partners in Health). In *The Promise of a Pencil: How an Extraordinary Person Can Create Extraordinary Change*, Adam Braun describes with great detail for his reader his accumulating successes. He describes a room of wealthy investors after one of his speeches, “Hands started going up with pledges, and the room willed itself forward.”⁴³

They likely also enjoy other forms of recognition, such as global awards, speaking opportunities, bestselling books, and increased donations to their causes. Greg Mortenson, founder of the Central Asia Institute, which claimed to bring education to thousands of Afghani girls, and co-author of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*,

⁴² Grennan, 37.

⁴³ Braun and Adler, 208.

is one such example (before his fall from grace). *The Washington Post* reported, “Mortenson won fame as a humanitarian who built hundreds of schools in Afghanistan. Four-star U.S. generals sought his advice on Afghan tribal dynamics. President Obama donated \$100,000 of his Nobel Prize winnings to Mortenson’s charity. Former president Bill Clinton praised him. Four million people bought his book.”⁴⁴

Besides these traits of the humanitarian narrative genre, other secondary traits appear frequently, but are not definitive. These include a series of photographs placed in the middle of the text (usually the Hero with his heroism’s recipients), nuggets of wisdom for the reader, and relatable humor. For example, Adam Braun writes in *The Promise of a Pencil* this quotable line, “Rather than thinking of ourselves as *nonprofit*, we would begin to refer to our work as *for-purpose*.”⁴⁵ In the same chapter he includes a list of keys to his success for the reader, which includes moments of wit and wisdom, “We started spending less time focusing on how good we felt and much more energy measuring the positive impact we could create with every dollar.”⁴⁶

Varying Traits within the Humanitarian Narrative

One of the most difficult aspects of studying an emerging genre is establishing which texts to include. In the humanitarian narrative, though all share most overarching traits, two subcategories emerge. First, the largest category of humanitarian narratives is primarily autobiographical and tells the story of self-identified humanitarians. These individuals, such as Conor Grennan, John Marshall, and John Wood, often leave

⁴⁴ Sieff, Kevin. "Greg Mortenson Returns to Afghanistan, Seeking a Comeback after His 'Three Cups of Tea' Disgrace." *the Washington Post*. October 12, 2014. Accessed February 09, 2016.

⁴⁵ Braun and Adler, 196.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 198.

prominent jobs or opportunities back home to do good elsewhere in the world for personal reasons.

The next category, while still primarily autobiographical, documents the experiences of aid workers and humanitarians by trade. This includes texts like *Chasing Chaos: My Decade In and Out of Humanitarian Aid* by Jessica Alexander (2013), *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action for the Twenty-First Century* by James Orbinksi, M.D. (2008), and *Emergency Sex (And Other Desperate Measures): a True Story of Hell on Earth* by aid workers Kenneth Cain, Heidi Postlewait, and Andrew Thompson (2004). To a certain extent, Paul Farmer and Angelina Jolie, as a UN Goodwill Ambassador, also fit into this category.

While no clear rule decides when a group of similar texts become a genre, there are observable conventions, such as reaching a recognizable number of texts and gaining press and academic coverage. Eventually, an emerging genre develops a name and is sought out, recognized, and marketed as its own entity. Early signs indicate this could be happening with the humanitarian narrative, though there is not yet a specific section in bookstores for them. Popular book review website Goodreads has a list of “Popular Humanitarian Books,” and another of “Popular Humanitarian Aid Books.”⁴⁷ Book recommendation software, like those on Kindles and Nooks, also recognize the similarity between these books and will recommend other humanitarian narratives after completing one. As the genre continues to take shape, a key question arises: with the humanitarian narrative’s conventions defined, how is it distinguished from the genres from which it arose? The next section will address this question, using Frow’s language of

⁴⁷ "Popular Humanitarian Books." Goodreads. (Accessed February 09, 2016).

“discrimination and taxonomy” to uncover the strengthening boundaries between the humanitarian narrative the genres with which it is most closely related.

2.3 “Discrimination and Taxonomy”

Frow argues that a genre is defined principally through its relationships with other genres. As hinted in the previous chapter, biography, autobiography, memoir, and adventure stories are closely related generic forms to the humanitarian narrative. The humanitarian narrative’s antecedent genres and the context that cultivated its development will be further explored in the next chapter. However, it is important to discern the burgeoning group of humanitarian narratives from the current pool of genres. How is the humanitarian narrative different, to the point that it no longer fits in existing categories and must be given its own? The questions of how and why it evolved into its own entity will be addressed in the next chapter

The humanitarian narrative has four current genres with which it is most closely related, in style, plot, conventions, and shelving: biography, autobiography, memoir, and non-fiction adventure. Its similarity to the first two of these is primarily in form. As has been noted, most humanitarian narratives are told from the first person and the remainder from the perspective of an admirer, as is the case in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. The autobiography and humanitarian narrative are also similar in their primary purpose; both describe the accomplishments of an exceptional individual (the Hero). Given these two likenesses, it is unsurprising they are still grouped together.

Two notable differences separate the two, however. The humanitarian narrative has other preoccupations besides memorializing an individual’s notable life works,

including taking the reader to a different setting to bare witness (however problematically) to suffering. Many include difficult, graphic examples of human suffering. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, for example, includes descriptions of starvation, deadly illness, murder, and death. The humanitarian narrative also makes moral and political claims to a degree not necessarily found in an autobiography. Themes central to the humanitarian narrative are human goodness, the importance of charity, and the obligation of privileged minorities to help the suffering majority are central. The Hero's accomplishments are linked to achieving these, not just goals they set for themselves (such as being an accomplished athlete or successful businessperson). Humanitarian narratives present these objectives in a positive light, posturing the Hero as exceptional and his works successful and admirable. In this way, humanitarian narratives are also political, representing global inequalities, trauma, and the effects of colonialism and imperialism. They employ narratives of the White Savior, humanitarian intervention, and the un-nuanced "good guys versus bad guys," even if the bad guy is an infectious disease, poverty, or history of conflict.

The second generic form to which humanitarian narrative is most closely related is memoir. Memoir is also associated with autobiography; the two are often conflated, sharing physical spaces in bookstores and book clubs. There are important differences between the two, however, which *The Guardian* columnist Ian Jack describes:

An autobiography is usually a record of accomplishment. All kinds of people, more or less famous, can write them or be helped to write them: footballers, politicians, newsreaders. [...] The memoir's ambition is to be interesting in itself, as a novel might be, about intimate, personal experience. It often aspires to be thought of as "literary", and for that

reason borrows many of literature's tricks - the tricks of the novel, of fiction - because it wants to do more than record the past; it wants to re-create it.⁴⁸

The memoir's desire to recreate the past distinguishes it from the autobiography and creates a different link to the humanitarian narrative. As in memoir, the humanitarian narrative attempts to bring the reader into the fold. The reader shares and experiences the Hero's accomplishments concurrently. What is different from the memoir, however, is that in addition to recreating past events (such as the Hero's exceptional accomplishments), the humanitarian narrative is engaging in a process of recreating and even inventing Otherness. This includes the humanitarian narrative's focus on the suffering, events, homes, and cultures that belong to people otherwise unaffiliated with its protagonist. This is an essential part of the humanitarian narrative, running even deeper than the autobiographically styled listing of the Hero's accomplishments. This Otherizing process "discriminates" the humanitarian narrative from memoir. Whereas memoir is only interested in an individual past, the humanitarian narrative interested in a collective past to which it does not belong.

The final generic form to which the humanitarian narrative closely relates is the non-fiction story of adventure and exploration. This genre is fluid and crosscutting; it can be historical or current, evidence-based or embellished. What is common is compelling, mostly-true stories of incredible human achievement. Like the humanitarian narrative, this large category of non-fiction work captivates audiences with stories of exceptionalism; Heroes who go beyond what others can imagine. Both the humanitarian narrative and adventure stories also take readers to places they would likely never visit,

⁴⁸ Jack, Ian. "When Autobiography Becomes Memoir." *The Guardian*. February 08, 2003. (Accessed February 10, 2016).

using their conventions to create believable (if not totally realistic) worlds. Unlike the humanitarian narrative, however, in this genre the Hero's achievement and focal point of the narrative does not need to be directly related to curbing human suffering. Due to the centrality of human suffering and need to the humanitarian narrative's plot—its absence would quite literally make a Hero without a cause—it makes categorical sense to separate the two forms.

In total, the growing body of texts that align with the humanitarian narrative's conventions do not fit neatly into the existing categories of autobiography and biography, memoir, and non-fiction adventure.⁴⁹ Despite their similarities, even overlaps, as more and more books published follow the conventions specific to the humanitarian narrative, a new genre continues to take form. As Frow describes, genres are constantly changing and emerging in response to the contexts of the time.⁵⁰ He also argues that they are self-replicating.⁵¹ The existing humanitarian narratives, especially given their market success, have adapted from existing genres and will subsequently lead to more texts like them. The significance of this growth will be addressed in the subsequent section, which examines the final criterion of establishing a genre: its production of meaning, and again in Chapter Five.

⁴⁹ It is important to note that these genres also overlap with each other. Many texts do not fit squarely within one or another. Rather, some texts are memoirs but also very similar to a non-fiction adventure story. Choosing the genre with which to read it will have an impact on its interpretation.

⁵⁰ Frow, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid, 9-10.

2.4 Making Meaning

The final quality of a genre to be evaluated in respect to the humanitarian narrative is its ability to produce meaning. Frow describes genres as being comprised of conventions, which have already been discussed in this chapter, and that these conventions create worlds. He gives the example of a tabloid newspaper heading. The genre of the tabloid heading gives the reader expectations and signals as to how to read it. Frow also makes the related argument that there are implicit decisions made when a text is read as part of a genre, determining how it will be interpreted, who will read it, and the kind of messages it will signal. As a result, Frow argues that genre lies at the heart of “human meaning-making and the social struggle over meanings.”⁵²

Written narratives in general, not just in the form of genres, have long been understood as producing meaning for societies. Plato’s theory of imitation states that literature reflects—“imitates”—society. In the twentieth century, literary critic Kenneth Burke argued, “literature provides a shorthand for things that everyone already knows, giving a name to common sense and experience.”⁵³ Several decades later, in “The Relationship of Literature and Society,” Milton Albrecht conceives literature not only as society’s mirror (as Plato did), but argues that literature also manifests a society’s values, reveals its hypocrisies and anxieties, and provides “a record of social experience.”⁵⁴ Through the creation of a shared cultural mentality, literature both reflects and affects society. This establishes common experience and interpretation, producing meaning.

⁵² Ibid, 10.

⁵³ Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York City, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. 10.

⁵⁴ Albrecht, Milton C. “The Relationship of Literature and Society.” *American Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 3 (1954): 426.

Genre's specific role comes as a result of its conventions and that it requires classification. To describe this phenomenon, David Palumbo-Liu, author of *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*, writes, "in sorting out the world into similar and dissimilar phenomena, we tend to shape our world to fit our needs...Choice is riddled with fictions we tell ourselves."⁵⁵ Using structural elements and conventions, genres utilize assumptions and prior knowledge while simultaneously creating new knowledge; this process can easily redirect and even corrupt perceptions. To demonstrate this principle, Frow cites the example of "conversational **implicatures**," which allow native speakers who are "in" on their own genre, so to speak, to understand meaning based on their colloquialisms' conventional form.⁵⁶ This process of genre recognition affects the ways in which a comment by a neighbor or, as is the case in literary genres, a book, is interpreted. *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, for example, would read very differently if it had instead been written as a non-fiction love story.

Like all other genres, the humanitarian narrative has the capacity to influence meaning and perceptions of reality. They are recognizable, using antecedent and concurrent genres with which we familiarize. The humanitarian narrative also satiates Western and Anglo-American curiosity to know about the Other. Palumbo-Liu argues:

At some point in literary history we were instructed to read the lives of those different from us in order to obtain a broader, richer, and more real and indeed more global sense of life, and to increase our human capacities. Yet that has been coupled with a political and ethical question: how much otherness is required for this lesson to be learned, for value to be added, and how much "excessive" otherness has to be jettisoned?⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid, 33-4.

⁵⁶ Frow, 85.

⁵⁷ Palumbo-Liu, 97.

Palumbo-Liu's question strikes at the heart of the growing selection of humanitarian narratives, which center stories that place a humanitarian Hero in a context of cultural, geographical, and experiential otherness. Beyond their conventions, humanitarian narratives rely on emotional appeals of shared humanity and a desire to consume narratives of otherness, resulting in profitable—if problematic—texts.

The conventions of the humanitarian narrative, notably its exotic setting and emphasis on the Hero's exceptionalism, tell a powerful story grounded in Western audiences' desire not only read about (and thereby experience), but also improve the life of the Other. The humanitarian narrative depicts for readers people they will never meet and places they will never visit, providing a dominant narrative that is molded by a genre's conventions. The humanitarian narrative also satiates the guilt and helplessness a Western reader may feel while reading about the suffering of others. Consider, for example, the effect of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* on a reader who never visited Haiti, met a Haitian, or worked in aid. Paul Farmer would loom large, capable and admirable (despite his flaws), amid descriptions of Haitian suffering. His heroic actions have the ability to console the concerned reader, ensuring for them that the suffering are in safe hands. The new meanings produced for this reader would likely include new conceptions of Haiti and Haitians, and an affirmation of white people's ability to help those in need, particularly in the Global South. Because a genre's conventions create believable worlds, these new understandings of the world would feel like truth to the reader, rather than something they interpreted.

Many of these texts are *New York Times* bestsellers, their authors are highly sought out interviewees and graduation speakers, and their readers are new donors to the

protagonists' organizations. Frow suggests that understanding genres is key to explaining "the universe of **discourse**."⁵⁸ If this is the case, exploration of the humanitarian narrative's ability to produce meaning, shape narratives, and influence readers is crucial. Later in this project in Chapter Five, the impact of the humanitarian narrative will be explored at great length including its economic, social, and political footprints. Before that analysis, however, it is important to first evaluate the context that produced and fuels the humanitarian narrative in the next chapter.

⁵⁸ Frow, 10.

Chapter Three: The Socio-Political Context of the Humanitarian Narrative

As Frow says, genres have been around since classical times, constantly shaped and changed by evolving society. Meaning is produced through this process, as are new genres. Frow argues, “for every genre there is one or more antecedent genres which are transformed as new occasions and purposes (new framing conditions) arise.”⁵⁹ Section 2.3 of this thesis discussed the humanitarian narrative’s relationship with four generic forms: autobiography, biography, memoir, and the adventure story. This chapter continues to answer this thesis’ second main question: from where and how did the humanitarian narrative emerge? Rather than continue to explore its literary context, this chapter examines the socio-political context in which the humanitarian narrative emerged, highlighting the role of strengthening of human rights norms, humanitarian intervention, and development aid.

Section 3.1 begins by tracing the connection between human rights’ development and literature, using the works of scholars Joseph Slaughter and Lynn Hunt. Section 3.2 continues discussing of human rights, describing the ways in which human rights influenced and strengthened in the 20th century. Section 3.3 explores humanitarianism, humanitarian intervention, and development, including key debates. The context provided in these three sections is essential to understanding and then critiquing the humanitarian narrative for several reasons. First, the historical, social, and political developments described in this chapter have a direct effect on the authors, characters, plots, and audience of the humanitarian narrative. Second, because the humanitarian narrative is a

⁵⁹ Frow, 150.

product of and therefore embodies many attributes of its context, there is considerable overlap between the critiques of the humanitarian narrative genre's context and the texts themselves.

3.1 Literature and the Rise of Human Rights

In *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, human rights scholar Lynn Hunt argues that the West's movement to call for, write, and then adopt human rights began in the 18th century.⁶⁰ This, Hunt argues, is a result of the novel's emergence in this era, which revolutionized the ways in which people thought about one another and themselves. She argues, "selfhood meant something different in the tenth century from what it means today," and it was the novel facilitated the development of the self into its current iteration.⁶¹ In 18th century Europe and the American Colonies (soon to be the United States), Hunt contends that the experience of reading early novels "reinforced the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their individual families, religious affiliation, or even nations to greater universal values."⁶² Never before had individuals across society all read and bonded over the intimate experiences and feelings of a fictional character.

People reacted strongly and empathetically. Hunt cites examples of men and women who sobbed for weeks after reading *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson (one of the earliest popular novels). She argues that the intense empathy created for the heroes and

⁶⁰ It is important to note that while Hunt traces this history to this point, conceptions of human rights broadly can be traced back far further and are not only from Western societies.

⁶¹ Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York City, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 33.

⁶² Ibid, 32.

heroines of these early novels helped instill the value for fellow human lives. This newfound empathy, along with increased individualism, fueled the growing movement to declare rights for all men (women, of course, would be excluded for several more centuries) embodied in the Declaration of Independence (1776) in America and The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) in France. Without the development of the novel, it would have been impossible for many, both noble and lower class, to imagine themselves in the position of someone else within their society.

The increased ability to empathize with the hero of stories aided the expansion of rights and enfranchisement during this period, which human rights scholar Joseph Slaughter describes as the “story of modernization...depicted as the course of human emancipation.”⁶³ The intertwining histories of literature and human rights still exist, including with the humanitarian narrative. Empathy is central to the humanitarian narrative and a major part of its appeal, as it is the vehicle for the audience to connect with the Hero, his mission, and the unfamiliar setting and people the Hero encounters.

In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Slaughter also argues that the link between human rights values and literature emerged during this period. He argues, however, that beyond early novels, the subsequent popularity of the *bildungsroman* created the empathy necessary to fundamentally change the ways in which people understood each other at the time. A *bildungsroman* is a coming of age story, first appearing in late seventeenth century Germany—many consider Goethe the father of the genre—and quickly rose to popularity in Europe and the

⁶³ Slaughter, 9.

United States. Prominent examples include *Emma* by Jane Austen, *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, and *Emile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The protagonist of the *bildungsroman* undergoes a process in which they discover how to be civil and social, according to Slaughter.⁶⁴ This process of entering the social sphere, while to some it seems simply as the normal progression of adolescence to adulthood, is in reality far more complex and involves a considerable amount of idealism (such as the ideals of youth, love, and nature) interacting with reality (class, the evils of the world, and mortality). Slaughter argues that this tension within the *bildungsroman* (a reflection of the society in which it was produced) demonstrates the creation of a new public sphere—society—that would eventually allow for the rise of human rights.

The public sphere, Slaughter argues, is the primary space in which one's rights are enjoyed and protected. It is also the place the character of the *bildungsroman* enters throughout their character and plot developments. Thus, the "liberal public sphere's centrality to both human rights and the *bildungsroman*" allows for the production and dissemination of "collective common sense."⁶⁵ This common sense then provides the sociopolitical building blocks—assumptions of shared traits, empathy, and rights—necessary for the development of more inclusive human rights. Slaughter writes, "The idealist *Bildungsroman* gave narrative structure and voice to certain assumptions about the emergence of a social order constituted on a particular vision of rights."⁶⁶ Thus, the narrative and literary tools provided by the *bildungsroman* played a critical role in the progressive adaptation of rights frameworks by society.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 177.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 149.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 177.

Slaughter's assertion that the *bildungsroman* created "collective common sense" through its form and conventions demonstrates the powerful ability of genres to create meaning. Both Slaughter and Hunt provide examples of genres antecedent to the humanitarian narrative (the epistolary and the *bildungsroman*) that influenced and responded to society, contributing to the development of new human rights norms in their society. The humanitarian narrative is a product of this. Not only would the humanitarian narrative not exist without past human rights and literary developments, as they form the conventional and contextual backbone of the genre, but they produce meaning in a similar fashion. By creating empathy through character and other conventions, the humanitarian narrative influences its readership. This crucial phenomenon will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

3.2 Development of Modern Human Rights Frameworks

While this chapter has already discussed the early roots of the connection between human rights and literature, it is important to also briefly discuss the development of human rights frameworks that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century. It is in this context that the humanitarian narrative emerged, and with which it is in conversation. This allows for a greater understanding of the genre as a whole, including its more problematic aspects, which align with many critiques of the human rights and humanitarian frameworks.

The human rights framework in existence today was initiated with the end of World War II. The United Nations was created in 1946 (just one year after the end of WWII), establishing the global platform for the creation of international standards,

agreements, and documents. Soon thereafter, a group of seventeen delegates from across the globe gathered for to create the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which would elaborate upon and extend the standards listed in the United Nation Charter (ratified in 1946). The UDHR was completed and adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Human rights for all people (not just men or white people), for the first time, were enumerated in an international document. As described in the UDHR Preamble:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ... keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.⁶⁷

Unlike the rights outlined in early documents like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which—while radical at the time—are exclusive and discriminatory by today’s standards, the rights in the UDHR were written to be universal, unalienable, and non-derogable “for all members of the human family.”⁶⁸

As Lynn Hunt argues in her book’s title, *Inventing Human Rights*, human rights were conceived. This invention took place over time largely as a result of changes in Western society, many of which were aided by or reflected in literature. Human rights creators also had the intention of changing society, as was the case with the UN’s

⁶⁷ "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." UN News Center. Accessed October 25, 2015.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

adoption of the UDHR. Nevertheless, it took concerted efforts in the twentieth century to turn abstract societal values and changes into specific, written laws and standards in the UDHR.

Moreover, despite the promise of the UDHR, human rights would not take hold as powerful, international norms for several more decades. The geopolitical and theoretical conflicts of the Cold War took the UN and the world's human rights conversation in two different directions. The democratic, capitalist United States led the charge advancing and prioritizing civil and political rights, while the communist Soviet Union championed economic, social and cultural rights. The UN elaborated upon these two categories of rights, both of which are found in the UDHR, in two separate documents: the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966 and entered into force 1973 and 1976 respectively.⁶⁹

Many more UN documents elaborating on specific types of rights or groups of people followed, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). As the UN definition and commitment to human rights strengthened throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, human rights became forceful normative values in international circles. Groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, both founded in the 1970's, led the charge as human rights watchdogs and promoters. Indeed,

⁶⁹ It is interesting to note, however, that the United States has still not ratified the ICESCR and Russia has not ratified the ICCPR, demonstrating one of the many remaining tensions in the world of human rights promotion and compliance.

many human rights scholars consider the 1970's the real start of human rights as legitimate, normative laws and standards (Keys 2014; Eckel and Moyn 2013; Hill 2014).

Since then, human rights have become powerful tools in international politics, humanitarianism, and advocacy. They have been adopted into the laws of individual states, influenced or been used to defend decisions to go to war (as was the case for the U.S.'s invasion of Afghanistan) and become central parts of the ways in which the West understands itself. This is the humanitarian narrative's context; human rights had become a powerful normative force in society and international relations.

At the same time in which human rights became normalized, they also become the subject of several critiques, including that they can be used as tools of the West to control, criticize, or even oppress other states, cultures, and communities. Human rights scholar Kate Schick argues:

Human rights are strongly linked with a problematic liberalism that is easily co-opted by states for their own ends. Worse, the perception of a consensus amongst the international community and the knowledge that 'something is being done' encourages complacency where complacency has no place.⁷⁰

While human rights have gained strength as norms, Schick argues that there has been too strong a focus on "codification" of human rights rather than effective adoption and implementation. The result is uneven implementation and the use of human rights as yet another tool for states to control each other. The fact that many of the main promoters of human rights are Western, wealthy, former—or current—colonizing powers contributes to this phenomenon.

⁷⁰ Schick, Kate. "Beyond Rules: A Critique of the Liberal Human Rights Regime." *International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2006): 324.

These values are a driving force behind the humanitarian narrative—especially the Hero and his motivations for embarking on his journey. Humanitarian narratives and their Heroes regularly employ the normative power and language of human rights. For example, in *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, John Wood emphasizes children’s right to education regardless of their where they call home.⁷¹ In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Farmer fights and defends the universality of peoples’ right to access healthcare, rich or poor. At the clinic in Haiti, for example, regardless of their ability to pay, “no one—Farmer’s rule—could be turned away.”⁷²

3.3 Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Intervention, and Development

In addition to human rights, also crucial to the humanitarian narrative are humanitarianism, the rise of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s, and development. This section introduces each of these movements, as they pertain to understanding the humanitarian narrative’s context.

The birth of Western, institutionalized humanitarianism can be traced to a specific moment in the life of one man. Henry Dunant, a Swiss citizen, witnessed the horrific aftermath of a battle in Solferino, Italy in 1859.⁷³ Mortified by the sight of suffering wounded and dying soldiers and civilians, he identified the need for a neutral party to provide basic aid to those wounded or innocent in war or other disasters. He established the Red Cross with several others in 1863, making it the oldest humanitarian organization. This pattern is replicated the humanitarian narrative, in which the Hero is a

⁷¹ Wood, 19.

⁷² Kidder, 21.

⁷³ "History." International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (Accessed October 24, 2015).

bystander to suffering and is compelled to take action, which often results in them founding an organization. Adam Braun, for example, founds *The Promise of a Pencil* after witnessing a dismal education system in India.

After Dunant founded the Red Cross, other organizations followed, including Doctors Without Borders, Oxfam, and CARE International. Unlike the human rights organizations of the 1970's, these humanitarian organizations were and continue to be (in principle) neutral in all conflicts. They were and still are also intended for short-term aid, unlike today's development organizations.⁷⁴

It is important, however, to note the increased similarity between humanitarianism and development work. While humanitarianism is still typically conceived as triage interventions made by neutral players (mainly being Doctors Without Borders and the International Committee of the Red Cross), the nature of conflicts has changed. Unlike the large-scale battlefronts of the World Wars, conflicts today are complex, longer, and have more players, including non-state actors. As a result, humanitarian aid to the areas and populations affected by modern conflicts must stretch far further than its original parameters allow.

A major example of this is change in the way refugee camps are organized. While camps had formerly been short-term solutions, the average refugee today spends years in a camp. UNHCR estimates that a refugee's average stay in a camp increased from nine

⁷⁴ Both the neutrality and short-term nature of humanitarian work and organizations has become increasingly complex in recent years. As human rights norms strengthen, the politics of intervening in a situation with impartiality is worthy of critique. For more information on this phenomenon, turn to David Rieff's book *A Bed for the Night* and Fiona Terry's *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*.

years in 1993 to 17 years by 2003.⁷⁵ Many people are born and live their entire lives in refugee camps. As a result, refugee camps now can have schools, entrepreneurial programs, more permanent housing, and more holistic health care programs, all of which fall more neatly under development work's description. Conversely, as terrorism and other forms of violent extremism increase worldwide, development work is occurring in areas near violence, further blurring the line between the two. In the case of the humanitarian narrative, the term humanitarian is used over development because it is the way in which the Heroes and texts most often self-identify themselves, though the work they are doing often falls under a broader umbrella of aid-giving that includes development, human rights promotion, and humanitarianism.

Humanitarianism reached a new epoch in its existence in the 1990s, which is often characterized as the decade of humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian intervention centers on the concept of the "responsibility to protect," commonly notated as R2P, and relies on the international community to intervene in unjust, violent situations of crimes against humanity, flagrant rights abuses, conflict, and disasters. In the 1990s, many of these interventions were marred by failure. First in Somalia in 1992, then Rwanda in 1994, and then in Bosnia in 1995, world powers (primarily Western countries) had numerous opportunities to attempt to apply this principle. As Catherine Lu suggests in her article "Humanitarian Intervention: Moral Ambition and Political Constraints," after the Cold War humanitarian intervention seemed like a means enforce world order from

⁷⁵ "Protracted Refugee Situations." U.S. Department of State. Accessed February 25, 2016. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/policyissues/issues/protracted/>.

universal humanitarian values.⁷⁶ In practice, however, it was nearly impossible to translate these goals into legitimate political or military strategies, as demonstrated by the failed interventions in Somalia and Rwanda.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, the ability to intervene for the better in the affairs of other states through humanitarianism affects Western states' perception of self and their own power, as is the case with human rights. With humanitarianism and especially in today's world of R2P and humanitarian intervention, there are those states that provide aid—the “good” states—and those needing aid—the “bad,” “weak,” and “failed” states. Often without exception, the “good,” stable, wealthy, and former colonial powers of the West (those former colonizers) who, through humanitarianism, aid poorer formerly colonized countries. Scholar Keith Tester even argues that humanitarianism for postcolonial Great Britain is a “theme in popular culture,” represented in film and other storytelling, as a means to cope with their colonial history.⁷⁸

With both human rights' increase of normative power and the popularization of humanitarian intervention as a means to right colonial wrongs, the humanitarian narrative can be contextualized. Rather than existing on a state-to-state level, as is the case in human rights frameworks and humanitarian intervention, the humanitarian narrative Hero enacts these values and norms on a person-to-person or person-to-community level. The same driving forces inform his actions, however. Thus, the humanitarian narrative is a

⁷⁶ Lu, Catherine. "Humanitarian Intervention: Moral Ambition and Political Constraints." *International Journal* 62, no. 4 (2007): 943.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 943-4.

⁷⁸ Tester, Keith. "Humanitarianism: The Group Charisma of Postcolonial Britain." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 375.

product of the genre conventions and socio-political changes that developed over centuries, culminating an empathetic and interventionist Western ethos.

Chapter Four: Case Studies of the Humanitarian Narrative

In order to explore the humanitarian narrative genre, I have chosen three case studies in this chapter to illuminate its conventions, critiques, and the humanitarian intervention context to which they are responding. This addresses the first and third key questions of this thesis: what the humanitarian narrative genre is and why it matters. Each of these texts has its differences, which provides a useful scope of the humanitarian narrative, especially its more problematic characteristics. Each case study will explore the book's iteration of the humanitarian narrative genre conventions in a more classic literary analysis. This is supplemented by an analysis of the wider context of the books using both textual and outside support, including the ways in which the texts' problematic aspects connect to outside debates of aid work.

The first case study in this chapter is a popular autobiographical book published in 2010 by Conor Grennan, mentioned earlier in this project, titled *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*. This case study explores the ways in which a quintessential humanitarian narrative adheres to the genre's conventions, revealing problematic aspects with the humanitarian narrative linked to critiques of humanitarianism. The second is the infamous *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations...One School at a Time*, published in 2006 by since-disgraced Greg Mortenson and his co-author David Oliver Relin. Like the first, this case study explores the ways in which a humanitarian narrative's conventions function in the text. This text also exposes the ways in which some of the most problematic aspects of humanitarianism can manifest in humanitarian narratives, such as propagating nation-

building rhetoric and lying about one's impact. Third and last is the 2003 *New York Times* bestseller *Mountains Beyond Mountains: the Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man who would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder. While the first two cases suggest humanitarian narratives are problematic by reinforcing and idolizing harmful aspects of humanitarianism, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* complicates these assertions. Kidder's substantiated account of Farmer's work demonstrates more responsible and qualified aid.

4.1 *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*

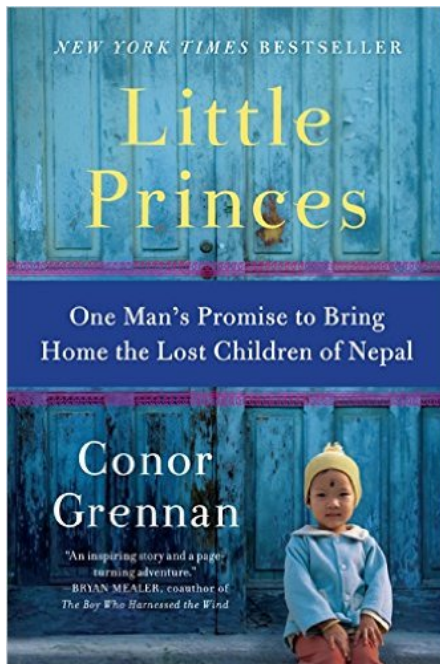


Figure 2: First edition cover of *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*

Beginning with the title and cover of the book, Grennan establishes himself as a conventional humanitarian narrative Hero. The main title, *Little Princes*, is succinct and endearing. The reader does not need to conjure an image; a small, Nepali boy sits on a step in the bottom right corner of the cover (see *figure 2*). His posture is regal and his clothing modest. One might assume Grennan took

Grennan published his autobiographical account of his humanitarian contributions in Nepal in 2010, just six years after he left his job in the United States to travel the world and volunteer. Grennan's book adheres to the humanitarian narrative conventions without exception: his text is autobiographical, he is a well-educated and resourced white man, he has a love interest, and he eventually starts his own organization as a result of his successful work in Nepal.

Beginning with the title and cover of the

the photo himself—perhaps it is a boy from the orphanage. It is also a reference to the famous French novella *Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, familiar to many of the readers in Grennan’s targeted audience (read: white, well-educated persons who read in the English language).

With the subtitle, *One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*, Grennan accomplishes three important things for the humanitarian narrative and his own identity as its Hero. First, describes himself as “one man.” This aligns with the humanitarian narrative Hero’s conventional humility. He is just “one man,” not “the incredible humanitarian, Conor Grennan.” He also establishes his masculinity; the phrase “one woman’s promise to bring home the lost children of Nepal” reads differently, if only slightly. It connotes maternal instinct and kindness rather than the masculinized heroism typical in humanitarian narratives. There is no ambiguity in Grennan’s subtitle in this respect.

The subtitle also establishes the mission of the Hero. It is not remarkable that a subtitle would describe the plot or objective of the text. Rather, it is significant in the language used to do so. The word “promise” and phrase “bring home” are powerful and reflect positively on the Hero. His mission is noble, especially given the choice to describe the children as “lost,” perhaps referencing another classic children’s story, *Peter Pan*. The homecoming trope, especially for lost children, is familiar and emotional for Grennan’s readers. While usually residing in fiction for young adults or children, it is still potent in a non-fiction form for adult readers. If the text read instead, “Grennan’s work to identify trafficked Nepali children,” which is perhaps more accurate, it would be

emotionally distant and unable to trigger the familiar homecoming trope for his readership.

Finally, the combined title and cover design is a dramatic entry-point to the text for readers. Grennan's phrasing echoes typical movie trailer voiceovers. In describing the contents of the narrative as "one man's promise to bring home the lost children of Nepal," Grennan establishes himself as exceptional. His mission is out of the ordinary and the reader picking up the text understands this. Before even reaching the first page, the Hero is already masculine and exceptional and the plot is a moral adventure to the far-off land of Nepal.

Moving beyond the title and into the text, *Little Princes* continues to exemplify humanitarian narrative genre conventions. As described briefly in Chapter Two, Grennan is upfront—sometimes painfully so—about his own ignorance towards Nepal, including its people, culture, and current political situation. He makes sweeping statements and judgments. At one point he writes, "Trash in Nepal, like in all Third World Countries, is a constant problem."⁷⁹ While garbage is an issue in Nepal and many other places, he broadly categorizes all "Third World Countries." As he describes children's inability to grasp the concept of sorting trash, he sounds condescending. "Sandra explained [the trash cans'] fairly straightforward functions. She was rewarded with eighteen blank stares...Farid took a stab at explaining the concept of protecting Mother Earth, but the children still struggled to understand."⁸⁰

It is only after Grennan steps in (adding in a bit of humor) that the children begin to understand the new trash and recycling system, despite the supposedly enormous

⁷⁹ Grennan, 20.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 20.

obstacles. He begins, “I steeled myself for this interaction. Fact: I knew I could talk to people. Fact: Children were little people. Little, scary people.” He encourages a five-year old boy to recycle a piece of crumpled up paper, “‘C’mon, buddy,” I urged him, “It’s not tough—throw the trash in the right bin.”⁸¹ Grennan soon discovers that the paper he crumpled was that child’s drawing. Recycling was not too hard a concept; Grennan had insulted the child’s artwork. Moreover, struggling to help a five-year old understand the importance of recycling is likely not a “Third World” child phenomenon, especially given the language barrier. Schoolchildren in the U.S. and many other places also learn from their teachers how to recycle and why it is important.

While the garbage misunderstanding is a perfect opportunity to showcase Grennan’s willingness to work, sense of humor, relatable ignorance, and humility, it indicates a larger trend throughout the text: Grennan attempts to solve problems before he understands them. As referenced earlier, he describes freely his disregard for his cultural and linguistic orientation to Nepal.⁸² He is also going to volunteer at an orphanage, for example, with no interest or experience in working with children. He writes, “I had never interacted with children before in this way; I had no nieces, no nephews, no close friends with children, no baby cousins.”⁸³ He has difficulty telling them apart for a long while as well, falling into the cliché struggle of white people to differentiate people of color, especially Asians.⁸⁴ He eventually becomes adept with the children, even getting one who had refused to speak to giggle. Here, Grennan is the perfect Hero; he has relatable flaws, but overcomes them beyond the average person’s ability.

⁸¹ Ibid, 21.

⁸² Ibid, 21.

⁸³ Ibid, 20.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 18.

Little Princes also embodies the humanitarian narrative in its centering Grennan's adventure in the text. He describes himself several times as a tourist, traveler, or adventurer, including detailed descriptions of the natural and cultural sites he's visited.⁸⁵ He even describes his volunteer work as something that would make his travels sound more reputable to friends, family, and colleagues.⁸⁶ Reviews of the book emphasize this trait. *USA Today* wrote, "With a light touch and refreshing candor, Grennan in *Little Princes* tells the story of how a good-looking University of Virginia grad with wanderlust ending up risking his life to find, then reunite, children with their families in Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world."⁸⁷ Not only is Grennan both relatable ("University of Virginia graduate with wanderlust") and exceptional ("good-looking" guy who risked his life") in this description, he demonstrates this by traveling to a distant, "exotic" location, in this case "one of the poorest countries in the world." This aligns with the humanitarian narrative conventions.

Another reviewer described *Little Princes* as "both an inspiring story of service and a page-turning adventure."⁸⁸ While this is not false, it shows a tremendous disregard for the fact that real humans are suffering in the context that gave rise to Grennan's adventure. These are not fellow adventurers, rather non-consenting people from the community whose plights provide a backdrop for Grennan's heroism. Their experiences and role in Grennan's success are neglected by the narrative, reviewers, and, as a result, readers.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 148.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Another central part of the humanitarian narrative is showing the Hero's ability to solve a problem, usually related to human suffering. His capacity to do this connects directly to the extent to which this is a problematic venture. If one is capable of easing human suffering, they are obligated to do so, especially in the current social context of normative human rights. However, it is not always the case that volunteers or even trained humanitarians from outside of the context of suffering are best equipped to make those changes.

According to William Easterly, author of *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest of the World Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, a growing critique of humanitarian and development work is that organizations and individuals from the aid groups remain the primary planners and implementers of aid projects, instead of empowering local communities.⁸⁹ This approach is often less effective and even destructive. Connor Grennan's case supports and also complicates this critique. While it is assumed that the parents of the children in Little Princes Children's Home would have wanted to come find their children, they were unable to due to violence, the power of traffickers, and political unrest. Grennan, on the other hand, as a white man with both U.S. and Irish passports was able to pass checkpoints and utilize other resources that the children's parents could not hope to access. Moreover, his mission required embarking on a difficult journey through the Himalayas, which required extreme physical strength and the resources to hire local guides, buy provisions, and be away from work and family for an extended period of time. It is likely that someone without his physical, political clout, and economic capacity would never have succeeded.

⁸⁹ Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and so Little Good*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006. 195.

Moreover, Grennan did endure great hardship in order to reunite the orphanage's children with their families. It is far too simple to say Grennan is bad or ignorant for his privileged intervention, it just as it is too simple to say he is uncomplicatedly good.

A related critique of humanitarianism and human rights work is the way in which other actors often profit more than the communities receiving assistance. Fiona Terry argues in her critique of modern humanitarianism, *Condemned to Repeat: the Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, that aid can have many negative side effects, including profiting those who should not benefit.⁹⁰ She cites the example of tyrannical warlords who preside in areas in which humanitarian organizations are providing aid. Though the aid is administered by outside organizations, by reducing their pain, the community is less likely to act out against the oppression causing their suffering. In this scenario, the community profits in that they receive immediate aid, the organization profits in that they can provide results to donors, and the warlords also profit; their duty as leaders to protect and provide for their people is completed without them spending any resources.

The question of who most profits is crucial in the humanitarian narrative. In *Little Princes*, though many children are reunited with their families, Grennan profits greatly from his humanitarian intervention. He has an adventure, gains international renown, and is able to move back to the United States and run his own organization from afar. He even falls in love, marries his wife, and rediscovers his faith as a result of his humanitarian work. None of these things are condemnable or malicious—most are worthy of celebration—but it is important to measure Grennan's profits compared to those of the people he is supposed to have aided. It is unrealistic to assume that the life of

⁹⁰ Terry, Fiona. *Condemned to Repeat?: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

each person Grennan aided would be completely changed. However, Grennan's journey falls under the scope of 'voluntourism,' in which otherwise unqualified people (often young people) embark on service-adventures in to have a more fulfilling or resume-building vacation. Many claim that these trips are self-serving and are not designed with the community at the center, but rather the individual (Kushner 2016; Mohamud 2013; Pastran 2014). At the start, Grennan's trip is undoubtedly voluntourism. While he stayed in Nepal longer, took greater risks, and impacted the community more than most voluntourists, he brought no expertise to his work and took away significant benefits.

From the title to its reviews, *Little Princes* is a staple example of the humanitarian narrative, embodying both its main conventions and main problematic aspects. The Hero, Grennan, is exceptional but relatable. He travels to a far off place, Nepal, for his service-adventure and has both humbling and admirable moments. By the end of his journey, he overcame a great challenge, gained rapport, found love, and started his own organization. A featured review from the *Los Angeles Times* in the introductory pages of *Little Princes* describes it as following in the footsteps of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, proving the "value of volunteer work."⁹¹ These two works will be analyzed next, each addressing the complex problematic nature of the humanitarian narrative, which is grounded in its relationship with humanitarianism.

4.2 Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations...One School at a Time

In 2006, five years after the 9/11 attack by al Qaeda on the Twin Towers in New York City, Greg Mortenson and co-writer David Oliver Relin published *Three Cups of*

⁹¹ Grennan.

Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations... One School at a Time.

The book made international headlines and gained powerful fans, including President Obama and General David Petraeus, who former commander of coalition troops in Afghanistan.⁹² This is because Mortenson's mission (proclaimed in the title) and embodies the distinctly American geopolitical context of the time: the fight against terrorism, a recent foreign policy history marked by "nation-building" interventions, and the political need to adhere in these projects (at least outwardly) to normative human rights values. The title and subtitle demonstrate this. Mortenson is not just building nations; he is building schools, which more easily appears to be a good and noble mission.

Separate from the problematic aspects of the humanitarian narrative, the project of nation building is much critiqued. Given its role in providing the context of the book and Mortenson's motivation in the text, it is important to discuss. Scholar Benedict Anderson defines nations as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."⁹³ Anderson proposes that a nation has cultural roots, religious and political dimensions, and does not fit neatly into linear historical conceptions of time.⁹⁴ It is improbable that an outside force, such as Greg Mortenson or even the U.S.

Government, could create something as abstract and personal as a nation. As argued in *the Atlantic*, what is often called nation-building is more accurately described as state-building, "creating or strengthening such government institutions as armies, police forces,

⁹² Burke, Jason, and Dominic Rushe. "Three Cups of Tea Author Greg Mortenson in Schools Fraud Row." *The Guardian*. April 18, 2011. (Accessed February 27, 2016).

⁹³ Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

judiciaries, central banks, tax-collection agencies, health and education systems.”⁹⁵

Mortenson’s accomplishment, building schools, falls under this category. While schools are places in which communities, traditions, and languages are learned, it gives Mortenson, a complete outsider, too much credit to say he was capable of building a nation.

In fact, *Three Cups of Tea* strongly emphasizes Mortenson’s exceptionalism and his ability to do in Afghan and Pakistani communities what it would seem from the narrative that locals could not. In the introduction, Relin epitomizes Mortenson’s leadership. Despite being an “objective” journalist, he describes his awe in watching Mortenson work, “The more time I spent watching Mortenson work, the more convinced I became that I was in the presence of someone extraordinary.”⁹⁶ He even argues that Mortenson is the voice all Americans should listen to in the fight against terrorism. In the U.S. at the time, the only intervention perceived as viable in that region was large-scale military operations. Mortenson’s mission of ‘humanitarianism’ to accomplish the same ends would have been a welcomed, if somewhat radical, narrative. “We need to listen to Greg Mortenson,” Relin writes, “I did, and it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”⁹⁷ He raves, establishing Mortenson’s credibility and marking him as the ideal humanitarian narrative Hero: exceptional yet relatable. Relin writes, “During the last decade, since a series of failures and accidents transformed him from a mountaineer to a humanitarian, Mortenson has attracted what has to be one of the most

⁹⁵ Burke and Rushe.

⁹⁶ Mortenson and Relin, 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 5.

underqualified and overachieving staffs of any charitable organization on earth.”⁹⁸ Before the events of the story even begin, the reader sees only Relin’s Mortenson, the mountaineer turned humanitarian, and an impossible mixture of underdog and god.

This depiction of Mortenson continues throughout the text, which was written by Relin in the third person, with strong collaborative input from Mortenson himself. This writing style allows Mortenson’s heroism to come off even more strongly, as he is not bound by expected humility one has when describing his own accomplishments. The adventurous component of the humanitarian narrative appears on almost every page. Relin describes, “Feeling a finger of panic probing beneath his altitude-induced stupor, Mortenson sat to take stock.” In every moment, Mortenson impresses. A page later Relin writes, “He’d have to spend all the night and search for the trail in daylight. Though it had already dropped well below zero, he wouldn’t die of exposure, he thought.”⁹⁹

This depiction relied heavily on *Three Cups of Tea*’s ‘exotic’ setting, one of the humanitarian narrative’s most striking conventions. The narrative relies heavily on vivid descriptions of the Pakistan, especially the mountains, and its peoples. One description of the town of Korphe reads, “The tightly packed warren of square three-story stone homes, built without adornment, would have been almost indistinguishable from the canyon walls but for the riot of apricots, onions, and wheat piled colorfully on their flat roofs.”¹⁰⁰ He describes Haji Ali, chief of Korphe, with similar luster, “standing on the other side of the gate, wearing a *topi*, a lambswool pillbox cap the same distinguished shade of gray as his beard, a wizened old man, with features so strong they might have been carved out of

⁹⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁹ Mortenson and Relin, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 25.

the canyon walls.”¹⁰¹ The text even caricatures accents, such as this interpretation of a Pakistani accent, “ ‘Mr. Gireg, Mr. Gireg,’ he shouted, dropping the pack and wrapping Mortenson in a bear hug. “*Allah Akbhar!* Blessings to Allah you’re alive!’ ”¹⁰² The descriptions of *Three Cups of Tea*’s setting, including its people, are designed to transport an unfamiliar reader to a new and exciting place they would never visit, especially given the Anglo-American fear of terrorism, which was very powerful at the time *Three Cups of Tea* was published.

The book’s ambitious and enthusiastic title, presentation of Mortenson, and descriptions setting demonstrate a buy-in to the strengths and problematic aspects of the humanitarian narrative genre, which stem from humanitarianism’s flaws. Though these conventions create a compelling story, it proves too good to be true in Mortenson’s case. Relin’s obliviousness (or complicity) to the dubiousness of Mortenson and his mission demonstrates a wider, self-inflicted ignorance in the humanitarian narrative’s audience. *Three Cups of Tea* is a story for its time, fixating on fighting terror and building states, swooping in to impoverished and war-torn places to improve lives. If Mortenson’s story—the heroic acts, schools built, lives changed—is unbelievable, what then must American audiences make of the parent narrative coming from the U.S. government and military?

Several years after *Three Cups of Tea*’s release, several parties stepped forward to dispute Mortenson’s credibility. A 2011 documentary by CBS News that found most schools Mortenson supposedly established were empty or built by other parties or

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 24.

¹⁰² Ibid, 24-5.

empty.¹⁰³ It also alleged that Mortenson had used his charity organization, the Central Asia Institute (CAI), has a “private ATM.”¹⁰⁴ Bestselling non-fiction author Jon Krakauer also released a brief and brutal takedown of Mortenson and CAI, titled *Three Cups of Deceit: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost his Way*. Krakauer contends that not only are the first eight chapters of *Three Cups of Tea* complete fiction, but that Mortenson himself is a complete fraud:

The image of Mortenson that has been created for public consumption is an artifact born of fantasy, audacity, and an apparently insatiable hunger for esteem. Mortenson has lied about the noble deeds he has done, the risks he has taken, the people he has met, the number of schools he has built.¹⁰⁵

As described to Krakauer by one of Mortenson’s early mentors, Erica Stone, director of the American Himalayan Foundation, Mortenson returned from his climb in the Himalayas and “wanted kind of vaguely to do something good.”¹⁰⁶ This is a feeling shared by many who witness suffering but do not suffer themselves, including *Little Princes’* Conor Grennan. His worldwide adventure, beginning in Nepal, soon became a personal project of doing ‘good.’

Unlike Grennan, however, Mortenson’s desire to do something good stretched beyond what he was capable of accomplishing. His books is rife with falsehoods, including one particularly elaborate chapter in which he claims to have been kidnapped by the Taliban for eight days, reading only a 1970s *Time* magazine, and then thrown a raucous party by them in gratitude for his school-building work (though if they’d known

¹⁰³ Burke and Rushe.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Krakauer, Jon. *Three Cups of Deceit: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost His Way*. New York: Anchor Books, 2011. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 8.

Mortenson was “nation-building” business, they likely would have felt differently). In addition to many witness accounts claiming that this is untrue, Krakauer includes a photo of Mortenson, in which he poses smiling with a gun and the men he would later accuse of kidnapping him.¹⁰⁷

The falsehoods of Mortenson’s book, persona, and public appearances call into question the plumped and prodded heroism of the humanitarian narrative. While all narratives based on truth take some leeway, Mortenson takes enormous liberties in retelling his story. The humanitarian narrative is particularly susceptible to this, as it combines aspects of adventures stories, the long tradition of Hero narratives, and the premise of nonfiction. For Mortenson and Relin, it was too easy to utilize humanitarian narrative conventions to blur truth and fiction. The book jacket of *Three Cups of Tea*, for example describes the book as “the astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his remarkable humanitarian campaign in the Taliban’s backyard.”¹⁰⁸ As proven by Krakauer, CBS News, and others who exposed Mortenson, there is no such thing as a “real-life Indiana Jones,” just as there is no easy, one-man solution to easing the world’s suffering. While Hero narratives demand great triumphs, a reality of humanitarian and development work is that progress is slow and small. Mortenson and *Three Cups of Tea* attempt to subvert this fact, failing miserably.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Mortenson and Relin.

4.3 Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man who would Cure the World

Acclaimed author Tracy Kidder published *Mountains Beyond Mountains* in 2003, documenting the life and achievements of Dr. Paul Farmer, with whom he'd traveled for an extended period of time. As in previous texts analyzed in this chapter, Kidder establishes Farmer as a true exceptional and flawed Hero from the beginning. The reader experiences his brilliance and overconfidence while being introduced to Farmer's work. Kidder's story begins in Haiti, when Farmer was still splitting his time between there and Massachusetts, working a tiny, understaffed, and under-resourced clinic. It is a classic introduction to the humanitarian narrative. Farmer is the perfect Hero, working in Haiti, the perfect 'exotic' location, at a modest community clinic.

As the story progresses, however, the intensity of Farmer and his accomplishments increases. He starts his organization, Partners in Health, and almost singlehandedly creates the international movement to fight tuberculosis. While his temper and arrogance also seem to increase during this time, which Kidder finds frustrating, Farmer remains the untouchable, exceptional Hero:

It still seemed to me that he took a stance all to conveniently impregnable. He embodied a preferential option for the poor. Therefore, any criticism of him amounted to an assault on the already downtrodden people he served. But I knew by now he wasn't simply posing...Farmer wasn't put on the earth to make anyone feel comfortable, except for those lucky enough to be his patients.¹⁰⁹

As Kidder demonstrates in this quote, which takes place after Kidder and Farmer have had a heated discussion, Farmer transcends the critiques of normal people. His goodness, the humanitarian nature of his person, prevents Kidder from challenging him. This

¹⁰⁹ Kidder, 210.

exemplifies the humanitarian narrative Hero's capacity to be both imperfect and exceptional. Farmer's admirable flaw is best captured after the birth of his daughter, in a scene in which one of his patients gives birth to a stillborn daughter: "He went on: "I thought I was the king of empathy for these poor kids, but if I was the king of empathy, why this big shift because of my daughter? It was a failure of empathy, the inability to love other children as much as yours."¹¹⁰ As Farmer criticizes himself for loving his daughter more than other children, the reader is offered a vivid glimpse into the intensity and sacrifices necessary to be the humanitarian Hero.

Unlike Mortenson and Grennan, however, both of who stumbled unqualified into humanitarian work, Dr. Paul Farmer is exceptional in ways measureable beyond a strong desire to do good in the world. He is a Harvard-educated, multi-lingual doctor who came from a poor family. Also, where Mortenson seemed to be trying too hard to do something good and be the noble, impossible Hero impacting millions, Farmer started small, practicing medicine in a small clinic, before becoming internationally renowned over the course of years. This would not be possible without his legitimate abilities, acceptance by the communities he serves in Haiti, and complete dedication to his work. He even marries a Haitian woman, demonstrating that his heart is in Haiti in a way other humanitarian Heroes cannot. Paul Farmer, it would seem, is the humanitarian Hero other aspiring Heroes wish they could be.

Also unlike the previous two texts analyzed in this chapter, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* was written biographically and from Kidder's first person perspective. It was also published earlier and had tremendous success. Its influences, such as the title-subtitle

¹¹⁰ Kidder, 213.

similarity between *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and *Little Princes*, can be seen on humanitarian narratives since published. Both begin with a catchy—yet significant—phrase (*Mountains Beyond Mountains* is a Haitian proverb), and then continue to describe the Hero and his journey. All three texts use a synonym of “quest,” as in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, in their title. They also share grandiose claims to the Heroes’ capabilities, whether it is to cure the world, build nations, or bring home the lost children of Nepal. Kidder, however, provides small nuance in his subtitle. By saying Farmer “would” cure the world, rather than “can” or “will,” Kidder emphasizes Farmer’s intention, rather than exaggerating his capabilities.

Kidder’s portrayal of Farmer does not let him fall into the same humanitarian narrative traps as Grennan, whose ignorance preceded him, or Mortenson, who fabricated lies in order to appear larger than life. Farmer’s expertise as a doctor working in high-poverty areas is undeniable, and Kidder’s account is widely considered reputable and fair. This exceptionality connects to a larger critique in humanitarian and development work, a central part of the book’s context: the ways in which aid creates dependency. In *Development and Dependency in Latin America*, scholars Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto argue that development work (which, as previously noted, overlaps increasingly with humanitarianism) interacts complicatedly with economics, politics, social movements, and geopolitical relationships.¹¹¹ Aid is always given in a political context, which has raised serious questions about its ability to do harm, including limiting a community’s ability to provide for itself, summarized in the adage “give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he is fed for a lifetime.”

¹¹¹ Cardoso, Fernando Henrique, and Enzo Faletto. *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. 232.

In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Farmer, as an exceptional Hero, often does what others (even several others) could not. His skill and level of dedication set him apart. He frequently sacrifices important parts of his life in order to administer to his patients, including a past love and spending time with his wife and daughter. At one point, Kidder writes:

I imagine that many people would like to construct a life like Farmer's, to wake up knowing what they ought to do and feeling that they were doing it. But I can't think that many would willingly take on the difficulties, giving up their comforts and time with family.¹¹²

While he may perceive that his presence is needed more than it really is, Farmer is a limited resource. As if predicting this criticism, Kidder addresses Farmer's own work to ensure his work is sustainable. He acknowledges that aid organizations often weaken the societies they hope to help by relying on talented professionals from wealthy states, but that Partners in Health is different. "The organization now has on the order of 6,500 employees. The overwhelming majority comes from the impoverished countries where PIH is working."¹¹³ While this is true, it is not that unusual in among international non-profits, and the potential side effects of Farmer's centrality to their work is worth considering.

Of the three texts analyzed in this chapter, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is the most complex. Much of this is due to Kidder's presentation of Farmer and his work. While Kidder often praises him, he also concludes by saying he does not "idolize him, but I am grateful that he is living on the planet." Farmer's humanitarian narrative offers inspiration and warnings to the aspiring humanitarian in wealthy, Western countries.

¹¹² Kidder, 213.

¹¹³ Ibid, 307.

Chapter Five: Why the Humanitarian Narrative Matters

One of Frow's main arguments about genres and their significance is that genres produce meaning, influencing their audiences and the societies that primarily consume them (discussed in section 2.4). If this is true, genres like the humanitarian narrative are not only products of the past and present, but they also help shape the future. From generic conventions and forms, readers gain expectations, develop opinions, and interact with otherness. This chapter addresses the final main question of this thesis: why does the humanitarian narrative matter? To accomplish this, the following three sections discuss several interrelated aspects of humanitarian narratives: the tension between fact and falsehood; empathy and sympathy; and audiences and their consumption of and responses to the texts, such as affecting the organizations and causes to which they donate. The final section explores the ways in which the humanitarian narrative exists and appears to be expanding to mediums beyond books, such as in documentaries, news stories, blogs, and radio programs.

5.1 Facts, Falsehoods, and Fiction

Before entering this analysis, it is important to first acknowledge that although fact is often conflated with truth, they are not necessarily synonymous in all literature. A fictional text, for example, it is not necessarily 'untrue,' and could represent a variety of great human truths, collective or individual. Many writers see this type of truth as one of the main functions of fiction. In *On Writing*, King describes, "Fiction is a lie, and good

fiction is the truth inside the lie.”¹¹⁴ Thus, a fictional text such as *Huckleberry Finn* or even *the Lord of the Rings* is not false simply because it was imagined by an author. Even non-fiction texts based on ‘true stories’ that stray from absolute day-to-day facts can still contain truths, such as long histories or biographies. A text is false, however, if it claims to be fact but is all or partially fabricated. This section addresses texts claiming to convey absolute fact—‘this *is* what happened’—versus a truth—‘this *represents* what happened’—which could happen in fiction or non-fiction.

One of the most challenging and problematic attributes of the humanitarian narrative is the tension between fact, falsehood, and fiction. Humanitarian narratives are normally based on real people and events and claim a high degree of objective knowledge about any given place, people, event, or historical-political-cultural context. While all non-fiction texts take liberty through omissions, elaborations, or white lies, the frequent presentation of the narrator and/or Hero’s experience as near omnipotent is problematic in the humanitarian narrative. Many scholars argue that the familiar expectations established by the frequent repetition of genre’s conventions “create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility,” which make stories believable.¹¹⁵ This, in addition to several conventions of the humanitarian narrative, makes it difficult to distinguish between what is fact, artistic liberty, and—in some cases—false. Two of these conventions will be discussed in the upcoming section: first, the Hero’s need to be exceptional and second, the fact that the setting is ‘exotic’ and likely unfamiliar to the reader.

¹¹⁴ Popova, Maria. "From Mark Twain to Ray Bradbury, Iconic Writers on Truth vs. Fiction." *Brain Pickings*. 2012. (Accessed March 16, 2016).

¹¹⁵ Frow, 2.

The first aspect of the humanitarian narrative that makes it difficult to discern factuality is the ways in which the genre's conventions set a high bar for the aspiring humanitarian Hero. The ideal Hero is exceptional, first and foremost, and also masculine, both of which provide ample motivation to exaggerate or frame the Hero in a way that makes them appear more impressive than they really are. This often manifests when the Hero retells historical, cultural, or political events. For example, in Greg Mortenson's second book, *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace Through Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (written alone in 2009), he describes the Taliban, the aftermath of Pakistan's devastating 2005 earthquake, and other large and difficult topics with himself as a capable, exceptional Hero at the center. While discussing these topics is not necessarily problematic, the genre's conventions—the exceptional Hero in this case—lead to events being portrayed as suits the Hero. At the time of the earthquake, Mortenson was eating dinner out in the United States, yet the narrative makes it seem as if he were on the ground moments after, vital to the recovery plan.¹¹⁶ The humanitarian narrative Hero's exceptionality relies on this framing's assumed objectivity. As a humanitarian Hero, his accomplishments are measured by 'real' impact on human lives. To be truly exceptional, the Hero must this must seem measurable and unaffected by the narrative process.

The second fact-troubling characteristic of the humanitarian narrative is the way in which the setting is described. Because the setting must be 'exotic,' as described in Chapter Two, the humanitarian narrative genre incentivizes exoticizing geographic areas and communities. Humanitarian narrative descriptions tend to emphasize natural beauty

¹¹⁶ Mortenson, Greg. *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. New York: Viking, 2009. 154.

and the ugliness of human suffering. While this may be true in some instances, it is improbable that one-sided, uncomplicated presentations of people and places are truthful or factual. I contend that humanitarian narratives de-emphasize certain parts of their story's setting in order to make the setting adhere to the genre's conventional 'exotic' setting. While the settings described may be true and accurate to the humanitarian narrative Heroes, it is channeled on through the narrator's (often the Hero, otherwise a close friend) reliance on genre-created perspectives. The reader rarely hears perspectives from other parties, notably the local community, about the setting. Instead, the texts' narrators present their descriptions as not just personal truths, but informed facts about the setting. Once again, the humanitarian narrative makes claims of fact beyond what its conventions allow.

5.2 Empathy and Sympathy

Empathy functions as the backbone of the humanitarian narrative text. It drives the Hero's actions, fuels the most touching moments of the plot, and draws in the reader. The politics and power dynamics of empathy are more complex, however, than the feel-good human-to-human, man-to-man narrative at the surface of these texts leads one to believe. Beneath empathy, there is also guilt and judgments, and people functioning in roles that echo colonial relationships. Often, both the Hero and audience exhibit sympathy while appearing to claim empathy. This section will explore and problematize these dynamics.

This exploration leads to the classic and critical question of empathy and sympathy. First, it is important to distinguish between the two. Sympathy is based on

difference. The person sympathizing has not experienced the same hurt, but they feel sorry for those suffering. Empathy, on the other hand, necessitates claims of sameness. The empathizer has feelings because they can relate closely to the experiences of others. An illustrative example of the difference between empathy and sympathy is the case of two individuals interacting with their friend who as recently lost a parent. Though they care for their friend, the first friend has never suffered the loss of a family member and cannot imagine their suffering. This is sympathy. The second friend, however, has also lost a parent. They understand much more acutely what their friend is experiencing, therefore feeling empathetic.

This dynamic between sympathy and empathy plays out on three levels in the humanitarian narrative genre: (1) between the Hero and the local community; (2) between the reader (audience) and the community; and (3) between the reader and the Hero. The next three subsections will address these complex and interrelated relationships.

The Hero and the Community

The first and most obvious of these is the relationship between the Hero and the local community. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Hero attempts to appear humble and collaborative with local communities. In these gestures, he both distances himself from the White Saviors of the 19th and 20th centuries and makes claims of sameness or ‘shared humanity’ with the local community. These claims of sameness empower the Hero assert empathy as the inspiration for their humanitarian actions. However, one of the most problematic aspects in the humanitarian narratives relationship with communities, already discussed in previous chapters, is that the Hero remains exceptional and an outsider. This

takes many forms, including the ways in which the Hero acts before understanding the problem and is often unqualified or not suited for the work. Heroes may live among communities, learn languages, and try to immerse themselves in new cultures, but they remain outsiders by way of the power inequalities between themselves and the communities. Moreover, the Heroes believe themselves to have information, ability, and resources to enact change the local communities do not, which is part of what spurs their desire start new organizations. While the Hero may emphasize sameness and, as a result, empathy in their narrative, the differences in privilege, power, and experience between Heroes and communities reveal sympathy (not empathy) at the Heroes' hearts. The result is an 'empathic-sympathy,' or sympathy wearing a mask of empathy, driving the Heroes' actions. This problematic emotion occurs in humanitarian narratives, but it happens necessarily in the real world to the actual Western humanitarians on which the books are based.

This progression of empathetic-sympathy to action is evident in the beginning of *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, in which John Wood takes a detour from his vacation in Nepal to visit a struggling school and its schoolmaster. After the schoolmaster describes his struggle to get materials, Wood asks to see his collection of books, which is kept in a locked cabinet. He muses, "I wondered how a book could impart knowledge if it was locked up, but kept that thought to myself."¹¹⁷ While he mentions his own love of books, drawing empathic connections between himself and the Nepali school community, he is also convinced that he has a better way to address the problem. This sparks his idea to create his organization Room to Read. In this interaction, the schoolmaster is as well

¹¹⁷ Wood, 9.

intentioned but incapable. Later in their conversation, the schoolmaster impresses Wood with his vocabulary. This interaction not only reemphasizes the unequal power dynamic between the two, in which the Nepali schoolmaster must prove himself to Wood, but also exhibits Wood's presumptuousness; if Wood is so taken with the schoolmaster's intelligence, why does he not ask him for his thoughts on how to address the school?

This instance between Wood and the schoolmaster captures a critical nuance in the humanitarian narrative, and, more importantly, the real people on which they are based, pertaining to empathy. It is not necessarily wrong for the humanitarian Heroes to act upon their feelings of empathic-sympathy. Both empathy and sympathy are (generally) constructive feelings, and many humanitarian narrative Heroes have the capacity to make a positive impact. What is problematic is that the Hero's empathy for others cannot compensate for the fact that he still sees himself as more knowledgeable and capable than the Other. This reinforces power inequalities between the Heroes from the West, usually the U.S. or U.K., and the communities they serve, typically in former colonies.

The empathy and sympathy-masked power inequality, embodied in the humanitarian narrative, speaks to a larger critique of aid and postcolonial relationships. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire warns his comrades against those coming from the West:

And do not know whether personally these [Western] gentleman are in good or bad faith, whether personally they have good or bad intentions...because the essential thing is that their highly problematical subjective good faith is entirely irrelevant to the objective social implications of the evil work they perform as watchdogs of colonialism.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. New York: MR, 2000. 55.

While *Discourse on Colonialism* was published in 1955 when the world was still in the beginning processes of decolonization, Césaire’s message is still pertinent to the relationship between aid-givers and aid-receivers today, which echoes the past colonist-colonizer relationship. Césaire contends that, in the colonial relationship and in the colonial context, the Western visitor’s intentions are irrelevant; they will reinforce the inequality and suffering instigated and perpetuated by colonialism anyways.

The same message can be extrapolated to the overwhelmingly positive way in which the humanitarian narrative presents the Hero’s relationship with those he seeks to serve. Even though he may have good intentions and the resources to make changes, he has them because he is the product of a global system that privileges him and hurts others—the same population he is trying to now help—the humanitarian narrative does not acknowledge this crucial difference in power. Moreover, his actions may bring about positive changes, such as more books in the school or better health care, but he is also yet another white man from a powerful, Western state bringing his ideology and methodology. Though he works to appear modest and include local partners, unlike his 19th and 20th century forbears, the Hero remains at the center of the narrative. In favor of extoling the Hero, his mission, and accomplishments, the humanitarian narrative cannot and even precludes deep analysis of the problematic questions of power and privilege occurring in the story or reality it echoes. Though he may not intend or want to be, the humanitarian narrative Hero is a protector and relic of a postcolonial system in which he profits greatly. Novelist Teju Cole summarized this predicament in a single tweet, “The

white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.”¹¹⁹

This is most salient when the humanitarian narrative Hero enjoys great success and fulfillment after feeling ‘empathy’ and then taking action. Conor Grennan (*Little Princes*), Adam Braun (*The Promise of a Pencil*), John Wood (*Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*), and Doc Henley (*Wine to Water*) all conclude their narratives, as characters and autobiographers, positively. It is interesting, however, that Paul Farmer, one of the most qualified and successful (if measured on global impact), is the least satisfied with his contributions throughout *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, such as the case mentioned earlier in this thesis in which he feels inadequate for loving his own daughter more than other children.

In a 2012 article in *the Atlantic* titled “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” Teju Cole discusses the role of well-meaning individuals, such as the humanitarian narrative Heroes (both the real person and characters), in perpetuating global systems of oppression, especially those tied to post-colonialism. He argues, “The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” In the humanitarian narrative, the Hero’s emotional experience lies at the heart of the genre, in which Heroes set off to an exotic land to have their lives changed. Perceived empathy is a crucial part of that “emotional experience.” Some texts are more explicit about this than others. *Wide-Open World: How Volunteering Around the World Changed One Family’s Lives Forever*, for example, describes this experience in the title.

¹¹⁹ Cole, Teju. “The White Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*. March 21, 2012. Accessed March 04, 2016.

Cole argues that this desire is deeply problematic, but he does not deny that there is a place for Americans and others with privilege to help people in need. He stresses instead that it must be done in the right way:

How, for example, could a well-meaning American "help" a place like Uganda today? It begins, I believe, with some humility with regards to the people in those places. It begins with some respect for the agency of the people of Uganda in their own lives. A great deal of work had been done, and continues to be done, by Ugandans to improve their own country, and ignorant comments (I've seen many) about how "we have to save them because they can't save themselves" can't change that fact.¹²⁰

While some humanitarian narratives adhere to Cole's guidelines better than others, by nature of their conventions, they all reinforce the notion that individuals from the West, particularly the U.S., can and should intervene to help communities in need. Given this claim, they should model respectful and responsible ways to do this. This rarely happens, however, with most texts focusing instead on the Hero's own struggles or the logistics of managing organizations and attracting investors, as is the case in *The Promise of a Pencil*, *Three Cups of Tea*, and *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*. As Cole writes, "If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement."¹²¹

In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, Schaffer and Smith take this argument further, critiquing the retelling stories about human suffering, such as humanitarian narratives, in a wider global political context. They argue, "Storytelling has become a potent and yet highly problematic form of cultural production, critical to the international order of human rights and movements on behalf of social

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

change.”¹²² This assertion is based on the premise that those hearing the story will sympathize and be motivated to take action. The next subsection addresses this concern, expanding upon the nature of the relationship between the reader and the community in humanitarian narratives.

The Reader and the Community

As is the case between the Hero and the local community, the reader also feels for the community in humanitarian narratives. Through the perspective of the Hero, the audience hears the story of suffering through the humanitarian narrative, sympathizes, and may decide to take action. This could take a variety of forms, including donating to the charity described in the book or recommending the book to a friend. As a result, the initial story of suffering is removed from control of those who experienced it directly.

Schaffer and Smith assert:

...those who publish their stories of oppression, abuse, trauma, degradation and loss can neither know nor control how that story will be received and interpreted. A story can generate recognition, empathy, critical awareness, advocacy, and activism elsewhere that helps empower people struggling to extend their campaigns for human rights. The same story can become a commodity...[or] a scandal.¹²³

While Schaffer and Smith are talking about stories of suffering published by those who experienced it, a similar principle can be extrapolated to the humanitarian narrative, with the added degree of separation between the one who experienced the suffering and

¹²² Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 31.

¹²³ Ibid, 31.

control over the narrative, as the humanitarian narrative is always written by an outsider from the community suffering, whether it is the Hero himself or a biographer.

As a result, despite the central claims of empathy and sympathy, the humanitarian narrative embodies complex postcolonial relationships and power dynamics that are deeply problematic. Césaire and Cole, though from very different worlds, critique the ability of those profiting from global systems of oppression to combat it. The adoption of human rights by Western society, both legally and normatively, assert that those with resources should intervene to create equity and equality, but it not clear how this can or should occur. This problem of acting without full understanding of a community and situation is driven by empathetic-sympathy. Sympathy necessitates difference and distance, but the Heroes' claims (adopted by readers) of sameness and empathy lead them to act confidently as authorities. Can people from outside, such as Grennan, Farmer, or any reader, really know what needs to be done?

The Reader and the Hero

The next level empathy and sympathy function in the humanitarian narrative is the relationship between the reader (audience) and the Hero. Because the next section in this chapter discusses the role of the audience at length, this relationship will be discussed briefly here. The most significant aspect of the relationship between the reader and the Hero as it pertains to empathy and sympathy is the way in which the reader is meant to relate to the Hero and then take similar humanitarian action. In ways that will be enumerated at length, the Hero and the reader share many similar identities, thus establishing the foundation of sameness required to feel empathy more than sympathy.

The readers and the Heroes are far more similar to each other than either is to the local communities. As a result, the primary emotions evoked in humanitarian narratives center the shared experiences of white and educated members of the Anglo-American community, rather than the communities experiencing the suffering. This prioritized empathy for the Hero can also spur powerful reactions from readers, as discussed in the previous subsection. The reader may, for example, feel empathy for the Hero and adopt his empathetic-sympathy for the local community or cause, leading them to donate or engage in voluntourism.

These three empathic and sympathetic relationships in humanitarian narratives (Hero-community, reader-community, and Hero-reader) are complex but crucial to understanding the ways in which the humanitarian narratives produce meanings for individuals and the societies that primarily consume them. It is also important to note that these are complex and nuanced with the genre; Paul Farmer, for example, makes much greater efforts to live among the communities he serves than John Wood. The next section expands upon and problematizes the relationship between the humanitarian narrative's audience and the genre, including the Hero and community.

5.3 Audiences and Consumption

As discussed earlier in this thesis, Frow and other genre scholars argue that genre is shaped by and reflects the society that primarily consumes it. The humanitarian narrative genre's audience represents an influential segment of the population. The genre's audience is also a result of the symbiotic market between those who create the texts and those who consume them, which in this case is a problematic relationship. The

audience of the humanitarian narrative genre has been an implicit part of this thesis' discussion in every chapter thus far. Chapters Two (what makes the humanitarian narrative a genre) and Three (its history) suggest various assumptions about the genre's audience, such as that they are Anglo-American and come from a Western literary tradition and historical-political context. Chapter Four's case studies of three humanitarian narrative texts also hint at the identities of the audience(s) by discussing in-depth various stylistic and narrative choices, exoticizing language, and the prominence of the Hero in the texts. As is the case in Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Four's critiques connect to assumptions about the audience, including their nationality, race, economic and education backgrounds, and even interests and personality. Using both textual and outside support, this section explores who the humanitarian narrative's intended audience is, what its average reader looks like, and the nature of the market in which texts and audience interact.

First and foremost, the conventions of the humanitarian narrative circumscribe the possible identities of the audience. The central role of the Hero is the most obvious example. While heroes or protagonists of a narrative need not resemble their intended audience, they often have shared characteristics in order to better communicate the story to their readers. The humanitarian narrative Hero is almost always white, American, and is the both main character and narrator in most texts. The humanitarian narrative's problematically described exotic setting also demonstrate that the genre is meant for those unfamiliar with the setting's context and people.

The readers themselves corroborate this inference in their own reviews and comments about various humanitarian narrative texts. Most humanitarian narratives

books are widely reviewed and discussed on Goodreads. One Goodreads reviewer of *Little Princes* writes, “I think the author did a great job conveying the scenery and sense of adventure, the strong personalities of the volunteers and the people he interacted with, the hardship and poverty in Nepal, and the politics and the way the government is run in Nepal.”¹²⁴ Multiple Goodreads reviews of *The Promise of a Pencil* describe Adam Braun and his work as “inspirational,” which suggest a certain distance between his mission to bring education to the world’s poor and themselves, relating more to Braun’s deep desire to perform charitable work. Another reviewer, ‘Megan,’ wrote on *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, “Some of us see injustice and feel sad about it, and some of us see injustice and decide to create multimillion dollar organizations to address it. There are few people in the world like this guy - he is a true visionary.”¹²⁵ Megan is most impressed with the scale of Wood’s organization, giving him the label of ‘visionary.’ While it is true that Wood is very accomplished, he is hardly the first person to see suffering and start his own aid organization, making the label ‘visionary’ an exaggeration.

Some reviews do reflect criticisms of the problematic aspect of the humanitarian texts, including the emphasis on the Hero’s journey and development over the community he serves, such as ‘Rachel,’ who called *The Promise of a Pencil* “immensely self-congratulatory.”¹²⁶ Others link the texts to broader issues in the fields of humanitarianism, human rights, and development, similar to the work of this thesis. In

¹²⁴ "Little Princes." Goodreads. Accessed March 08, 2016.

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8564644-little-princes>.

¹²⁵ "Leaving Microsoft to Change the World." Goodreads. Accessed March 08, 2016.

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/95429.Leaving_Microsoft_to_Change_the_World?from_search=true.

¹²⁶ "The Promise of a Pencil." Goodreads. Accessed March 08, 2016.

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/19598139-the-promise-of-a-pencil?from_search=true.

Goodreads review of *Little Princes*, for example, ‘Sara’ expresses disappointment over the fact that Grennan created his own organization:

I was surprised that he felt the need to create his own organization in a country already over-saturated with Non-Governmental Organizations, several already working in this area. While this may seem trivial, I have seen first-hand how too many organizations with good intentions can get nowhere, when all those people working together could have been very powerful, impactful, and less wasteful of resources.¹²⁷

This review reveals several things about ‘Sara.’ First, she uses the phrase “over-saturated” in association with Non-Governmental Organizations. This is jargon often used in humanitarianism and development circles, which suggests ‘Sara’ is somewhat informed about these issues. She also describes her own personal experience witnessing this phenomenon, implying that she shares Grennan’s desire to make an impact in communities that are not her own, despite faulting his method.

In determining for what audience a book is intended, another key indicator is the way in which the physical text is marketed. Marketing is a central part of an enormous publishing industry and, of course, choices in how a book is marketed relate directly to the text’s intended audience. For example, Chapter Four’s case study of Conor Grennan’s autobiographical text, *Little Princes*, discusses the book’s cover illustration (see figure 2). The analysis contends that, from the title, which references a popular Western children’s book, to the image of a small Nepali boy, the cover contains touchstones that would catch the eye of a specific kind of reader: someone who is likely American (certainly Western), educated, and from a economic background with the means to purchase books about other peoples’ poverty.

¹²⁷ "Little Princes." Goodreads. Accessed March 08, 2016.

The title of *Promise of a Pencil* by Adam Braun is another strong example of the ways in which the humanitarian narrative's promotion indicates the intended audience. The subtitle advertises the book accordingly: "how an ordinary person can create extraordinary change." The title does not truly mean any ordinary person, however. They imply someone who would be interested and have the resources to create change through Braun's method, which is to create a non-profit. True to its subtitle, *Promise of a Pencil* focuses on how to brand a non-profit and gain investors more than the specifics of doing good development work. In fact, local people and on-the-ground humanitarianism play a minor role. Braun's autobiographical text reads more like a self-help guide for the aspiring humanitarian narrative Hero and CEO. It is clear from this emphasis that the subtitle's "ordinary person," means someone with education, resources, and access to investors. This person has a choice to engage with humanitarian problems and the communities affected—they are not from or experiencing them. This exposes Braun's limited audience.

Beyond being white, probably from the U.S., educated, and of comfortable economic background, the humanitarian narrative audience can be specified even further. Many indicators help narrow this field. For example, most of these books and/or their Heroes have been reviewed or featured in left-leaning and intellectual publications, such as *the Guardian*, *the Washington Post*, and *the New Yorker*. Many also appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list, which targets the liberal, "intelligent, general-interest adult reader," and use this as promotion on the physical text, including *The Promise of a*

Pencil, Three Cups of Tea, and Mountains Beyond Mountains.¹²⁸ This coverage confirms what had been implied; that the reader of the humanitarian narrative is probably liberal (but not radical) and well into adulthood, in addition to being white, educated, Anglo-American, and from a comfortable economic background.

Given that genres produce meaning at individual and social levels through influencing the beliefs and action of its consumers, understanding the humanitarian narrative genre's audience is essential to dissecting and problematizing its impact. The audience's demographics are far removed from the realities of the people and struggles about which they read, like the humanitarian narrative Hero. As a result, for many in the audience, introductions to unfamiliar places, people, events, and cultures in the humanitarian narrative will be some of the few they ever receive, giving great power to the narratives. If a reader has only read one book on Afghanistan and Pakistan and it is *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson and Relin's presentation of the place and people dominate when compared to a reader who has read extensively about the region. Because these presentations are often deeply problematic, as described in earlier sections of this chapter, a well-intentioned, sympathetic audience (like the Hero) receives and perpetuates these problems.

Discussing the nature of the humanitarian narrative audience is important for two main reasons: first, their impact on society, and second, the way their shared identities with the Hero whitewash stories of the Other's suffering. First, as discussed throughout this thesis, one of genre's most significant aspects is its ability to influence society.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ "The New York Times Bestseller List." Wikipedia. Accessed March 08, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times_Best_Seller_list.

¹²⁹ Palumbo-Liu, 34.

This can manifest more abstractly through shifting beliefs and values, but it can also be concrete. As already discussed in this section, the humanitarian narrative has great power to influence its audience's beliefs about the Other. This likely includes evoking feelings of sympathy, as testified by many Goodreads reviewers. For some readers, generating newfound sympathy for the Other and introducing a culture and place could be the end of the genre's impact. Other readers may be moved, like humanitarian narrative Heroes, to take further action. This could include donating to the humanitarian Heroes' organizations or other NGOs, encouraging their friends to read the books and also donate, and embarking on their own voluntourist adventures. As a result, the genre's impact on the audience and corresponding societies is not just emotional, but also economic and political.

The humanitarian narrative audience's similarity to and relationship with the humanitarian Hero (and narrator) is also problematic. All are privileged in multiple identities, unlike those suffering in the texts. This makes the conversation between reader and Hero also primarily white, educated, and Western. Voices of local communities are excluded from retelling their own trauma and suffering. Schaffer and Smith propose that personal narrative evokes the most effective responses to demands of recognition and justice.¹³⁰ While the humanitarian narrative is often a personal narrative, it is from the perspective of the Hero or a close friend, both of whom are outsiders to the community in need of aid, recognition, and justice. In this respect, the Hero/narrator function as middlemen between the narratives of those who most need recognition and the audience with the capacity to take action.

¹³⁰ Schaffer and Smith, 233-4.

5.4 Humanitarian Narratives in Other Mediums

While the humanitarian narrative genre continues to grow in size and impact, it remains in its emergent stage. Up until this point, this thesis has focused exclusively on the humanitarian narratives printed in books. Despite being at an early stage in its development, the humanitarian narrative is already appearing in other venues beyond books, such as newspapers, blogs, radio programming, documentaries and magazines. This presence can be discreet or apparent, and based on genre conventions, humanitarian narrative books' influence on its readership, or a combination of the two. This section highlights several examples in which the humanitarian narrative appears in forms beyond books.

The first of these is the discrete and powerful presence of humanitarian narratives in different human rights media. In their chapter "Venues of Storytelling," Schaffer and Smith list a variety of mediums in which storytelling about human suffering occurs, such as handbooks and websites, reports, testimony collections, and legal contexts. While providing a nuanced critique of each venue, they argue that many of these forms are problematic, as they "address their audience through emotive conformation, setting in motion affective appeals that have a "feel good effect" for their far-flung advocates, but may not further recognition ethical judgment or redress."¹³¹ This is very similar to the function of humanitarian narrative's production of empathy and the role of the humanitarian narrative Hero in this process. Though intended for slightly different audiences and having different purposes, the humanitarian narrative's reliance on

¹³¹ Schaffer and Smith, 51.

sympathy and Heroes to transmit messages of suffering and hope is observable in other forms of human rights narratives.

Schaffer and Smith also discuss the impact of having privileged individuals testifying about others, in a variety of formats; “Implicitly, this positioning makes professional activists the objective arbiters of a rights claim and the claimant a victim and object of fact-finding.” They call these individuals “judges of narratives.”¹³² The humanitarian narrative Hero functions similarly. In observing suffering and deciding how it should be addressed, the humanitarian narrative Hero makes underlying judgments about the need and community that echo those made by other aid-workers collecting stories of suffering.

Echoes of the humanitarian narrative have also appeared in radio programs, magazine features, and newspaper articles. *The Huffington Post*, for example, periodically covers humanitarian narrative stories on their Impact page. Adam Braun, author of *The Promise of a Pencil*, has been featured several times, including a lengthy blog post praising his courage, vision, and organization.¹³³ Different humanitarian organizations’ websites also publish sections with stories containing elements of the humanitarian narrative-type stories, such as RedR and the Australian Red Cross.¹³⁴ The same is true in magazines. An article on Angelina Jolie in *Vogue* relies heavily on humanitarian narrative conventions to establish her exceptionality, calling her “a

¹³² Ibid, 36.

¹³³ Serle, Rebecca. "The New Nonprofit: Pencils of Promise." *The Huffington Post*. November 28, 2010. Accessed March 21, 2016.

¹³⁴ "Young Humanitarian Stories." Australian Red Cross. Accessed March 21, 2016. <http://www.redcross.org.au/young-humanitarian-stories.aspx>.

"Real Stories from Real Aid Workers." RedR UK. Accessed March 21, 2016. <http://www.redr.org.uk/en/News/aid-worker-stories.cfm>.

Florence Nightingale” who “travels constantly to countries in crisis, supports, negotiates, and interacts one-on-one.”¹³⁵ Several documentaries on topics relating to humanitarian narratives have also appeared or are in production, such as *The Aid Worker’s Story* by Journeyman Pictures and *Free the Children* from Forest Creatures Entertainment, which tells the story of the self-described humanitarian Craig Kielburger and his non-profit organization. This expansion of the humanitarian narrative into different forms beyond books is significant, as it represents not only the increasing size of the emerging humanitarian narrative genre, but also its growing influence. Given the critiques of the genre outlined throughout this thesis, the humanitarian narrative’s growth in both size and influence is deeply concerning.

Aspects of the humanitarian narrative can also be found in interactive websites. The Inside the Haiti Earthquake website, for example, allows participants to experience the crisis as an aid worker, journalist, or survivor.¹³⁶ According to their description, the website was “designed to challenge assumptions about relief work in disaster situations.”¹³⁷ While the experience of Inside the Haiti Earthquake is less-than glamorous, it retains several of the humanitarian narrative genre’s key problems. First, it allows the consumer (in this case the computer-user rather than a reader) to play the role of an exceptional aid worker who goes above and beyond what the indicated reality suggests they should. It does not adequately address the distance between consumer and

¹³⁵ Rubin, Elizabeth, and Annie Leibovitz. "Angelina Jolie Pitt on Her Most Personal Project With Brad Pitt and Why She’s Looking Forward to 50." *Vogue*. October 16, 2015. Accessed March 21, 2016.

¹³⁶ "Inside the Haiti Earthquake." Experience the Haiti Earthquake as a Survivor, Aid Worker, or Journalist. Accessed March 08, 2016.
<http://www.insidedisaster.com/experience/>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

the community suffering, this time by computer simulation instead of page. This expansion of the humanitarian narrative to the web further demonstrates the expansion of the humanitarian narrative, as well as the variety of forms it could take. This is especially important because new forms of the humanitarian narrative are likely expanding the genre's audience. Those who are interested in interactive websites do not overlap completely with those reading non-fiction books.

These similarities between the humanitarian narrative books and other narrative mediums speak not only to the genre's emerging prominence, but also the power of the context in which it exists; especially the impact of human rights and humanitarianism on individuals and societies worldwide. It is impossible to tell if the humanitarian narrative genre will continue to expand to include major motion pictures, full-length documentaries, or other mainstream appearances, but it seems likely. Given the current Anglo-American conversations surrounding aid and privilege, it seems likely. Moreover, the genre's growth indicates continued strengthening of human rights norms and humanitarian values in Anglo-American society. This makes studying and questioning the humanitarian narrative even more essential, as its impact can only continue to grow.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The humanitarian narrative is a complex, emerging literary genre born from Anglo-American literary and political traditions and histories, embodying a humanitarian interventionist value system. To explore the nature and implications of the genre's emergence, I asked three questions in the introduction of this thesis: (1) what is the humanitarian narrative genre? (2) From where and how did it emerge? (3) Why does the humanitarian narrative matter?

To answer the first question and define the nature of the humanitarian genre, Chapter Two used Frow's theoretical framework to evaluate genre, which is comprised of three parts: shared, key conventions among the genre's texts; determining that a process of "discrimination and taxonomy" from other texts has taken place; and that the genre produces new meaning by impacting its readers. The chapter then lists several key conventions of the humanitarian narrative, citing textual examples. These conventions include the prominent role of a white and well-educated Hero, an exotic setting, using an adventure story narrative, and the autobiographical or friendly biographical nature of the genre's texts. These primary conventions, along with many others, create the identifiable, replicable nature of the humanitarian narrative texts necessary to establish it as a genre under Frow's framework. Through this evaluation, I argue the humanitarian narrative is a non-fiction, Anglo-American emerging genre that documents stories of the aspiring humanitarian Hero from a first or friendly third person perspective.

Chapter Three addresses the second key question of this thesis: from when and how did the humanitarian narrative emerge? The chapter traces two interconnected, yet

distinct, histories. First, I examine the symbiotic development of human rights and literature, using the works of scholars Joseph Slaughter and Lynn Hunt. I follow them in identifying literature as essential in creating the Anglo-American socio-political context in which human rights emerged, demonstrating the ways literature and genre can affect the belief systems of individuals and societies. Chapter Three also traces the political history of the interlinked rise of human rights norms, humanitarianism, humanitarian intervention, and development. Not only do these socio-political developments depend upon and reflect the impact of literature on human rights progress discussed in the first part of the chapter, they also comprise the context in which the humanitarian narrative emerged.

In order to concretize and extend this investigation into the humanitarian narrative, Chapter Four explored three case studies of humanitarian narratives: *Little Princes* by Conor Grennan; *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin; and *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder. Each case exemplifies many of the problematic aspects of the humanitarian narrative's convention, such as the uncritical admiring of the humanitarian narrative Hero and exoticizing descriptions of the books' settings.

While each section of the thesis addresses the final question—why the humanitarian narrative matters—to a certain extent, Chapter Five explored several of its main implications. These implications, rooted in Frow's contention that genres produce meaning, are significant. First, humanitarian narratives often fail to distinguish claims of fact from fiction. The fictionality of humanitarian narratives overstates the Hero's exceptionalism, exotic setting, and human suffering in ways that reinforce colonial power

relationships. This problem is reinforced with the subsequent analysis of the humanitarian narrative's audience, which is primarily white, well educated, at least in their early adulthood, and liberal. I argue that because many of the histories, cultures, and places discussed in the humanitarian narrative would be unfamiliar to this audience, the genre's problematic presentation of the Other is amplified. Moreover, conversations in the humanitarian narrative about suffering in the Global South are limited to white, Western, and educated Heroes and their similar audience. This systematically silences voices.

As discussed in Chapter Five, the humanitarian narrative genre also appears to be expanding beyond books and into other forms of media, broadening its audience and impact. Given the problematic nature of the genre, it is imperative that authors, publishers, and consumers address its neocolonial power relationships, overstated claims of fact, and other harmful aspects. This could mean addressing critiques of humanitarianism and voluntourism in the narratives or making greater efforts to center local voices. Academics should also take greater interest in the humanitarian narrative. Future studies could illuminate the impact of humanitarian narrative Heroes and their organizations on local communities and the extent to which humanitarian narrative lead to their readers donating to certain causes.

To conclude, I contend that the humanitarian narrative is an emerging, Anglo-American literary genre that is a product of (and thus embodies) its late 20th and early 21st century socio-political context, including the normalization of human rights, the rise humanitarian intervention, and spread of development work. I also argue that the humanitarian narrative is deeply problematic, as it uses misplaced empathy and sympathy to reinforce global systems of oppression, propagate the consumption of suffering, and

perpetuate the White Savior Complex and other harmful colonial and postcolonial power inequalities. Moreover, the genre's audience and impact are both growing. Authors, publishers, consumers, and academics should all take greater responsibility in understanding and addressing the harmful aspects of the humanitarian narrative.

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