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## Goldie Roth unchained: risk and its management in Lian Tanner's *Museum of Thieves*

*Abstract: In her children's action adventure novel Museum of Thieves, Lian Tanner overtly critiques adult risk-aversion and the over-protection of children. The protagonist is Goldie, an unruly child who escapes the oppressive regime of the City of Jewel where children up to the age of 12 are chained, for their own safety, to adult companions. Goldie escapes Jewel's power structures and enters a mysterious museum housing the city's unwanted wildness and danger. In its opening chapter Museum of Thieves establishes a subversive schema that problematises concepts of safety and order and glorifies chaos and risk, but this paper argues that as the novel progresses the author finds the schema increasingly difficult to control. It is tempting to read the museum as a "time out" zone such as C.S. Lewis's Narnia, L. Frank Baum's Oz, and Maurice Sendak's "place where the wild things are": a space in which child characters can gain self-knowledge and skills before returning to an adult-dominated order. However, because of the degree to which Jewel and its structures are pathologised, Tanner finds she cannot bring Goldie back from "time out". But rather than being a transgressive text, Museum of Thieves ends in a much less subversive place than it sets out to reach; the museum is revealed as a tightly controlled space and Goldie is well-protected, both within the diegesis by the museum's special features, and beyond the diegesis by the author and the author's cognisance of contemporary publishing industry expectations about the depiction of risk in children's fiction.*

**Keywords:** bubble-wrap, order, chaos, unruly, safety, risk, "time out", Australian children's fiction

“Something wild took hold of Goldie then. She didn’t want to be safe. She wanted to be free.” (*Museum of Thieves*, 30)

In a 2008 *New York Sun* column, Lenore Skenazy described how she left her 9-year-old son in a New York city department store and challenged him to find his way home by himself on public transport. She then dared her readers to be as scandalised by her actions as “half the people” to whom she had already related her story. “They now want to turn me in for child abuse” she wrote. “As if keeping kids under lock and key and helmet and cell phone and nanny and surveillance is the right way to rear kids. It’s not. It’s debilitating” (n.p.). What people supposedly found so shocking was that Skenazy willingly and deliberately placed her son into a zone that was literally “out of control”, ie. not in the physical presence of a parent or other adult authority figure, and also beyond the protective reach of a mobile phone, or any of the mobile phone tracking systems that have been designed to make sure “out of control” children can be located, traced and recovered. Skenazy’s *New York Sun* provocation, and the divided international response it predictably ignited, provided a peak moment within an ongoing debate that—in Australia—fixed in the public imagination the term “bubble-wrap kids” to describe a generation of mollycoddled children being deprived of their freedom by overprotective adults. On one side of the debate were those Skenazy characterized as irrationally fearful of children being allowed to take risks, but on the other side were the commentators who had for some time been raising concerns about the welfare of children kept perpetually *in* control. It was argued that by restricting children to a circuit of home, car interior and school-yard, overprotective parents were corroding their children’s resilience and denying them opportunities to learn through experience how to be safe in their environment (Malone, 513).

Australian children’s fiction writer Lian Tanner has consistently identified this debate as a key source of inspiration for her 2010 action adventure novel *Museum of Thieves*, the first book of The Keepers trilogy. In a *Children’s Book Review* interview, Tanner said she had at the time of writing *Museum of Thieves* been “following a discussion in the Australian media about ‘bubble-wrap children’” (n.p.), and in an interview with *Readings*, she described her intention to “push” the issue of overprotection “a bit further” (n.p.) by setting her story in a community beset by irrational fear. From this conception was born the City of Jewel, a place in which children—“our most precious pos-

session" (*Museum of Thieves*, 29)— are supposed never to be "out of control". In Jewel, there may be no mobile phone tracking systems, but there are other ways of being perpetually vigilant:

Every child in the city of Jewel wore a silver guardchain on their left wrist from the moment they learned to walk until their Separation Day. Whenever they were outside the house, the guardchain linked them to their parents, or to one of the Blessed Guardians. At night it was fastened to the bedhead, so that no one could break into the house and carry them off while their parents were sleeping (5).

Escaping this oppressive regime is 12-year-old Goldie Roth, whose "boldness" makes her temperamentally unsuited to constant restriction and surveillance. Goldie is regarded by the Blessed Guardians as "unnatural" (28) for her lack of the diffuse and pervasive fear that afflicts most residents of Jewel, and she marks herself out through her choice to wear a small symbol of defiance and freedom: a bluebird brooch that had belonged to her long-disappeared Auntie Praise whose undisclosed fate is presumably linked to her own "boldness" and lack of fear.

In her early depictions of Jewel, Tanner establishes order, control and fear as the central problems of the novel. The fates by which adults terrify their children (and themselves) into unthinking obedience to the rules include: abduction by slave traders, disease and illness, drowning in the city's many canals, and—perhaps most terrifying of all—getting lost. Murder is also mentioned, although Tanner has, presumably in consideration of the age of her target audience (children aged 9–12), cleansed her fictional world of those other dangers (sexual molestation, rape, etc.) that are feared by "real world" protectionist parents. Tanner has been thorough in her underscoring of the link between the notion of protection and the oppressive structures of the state: Jewel is described both as a city and a "Protectorate" and the city's most powerful individual is the "Grand Protector". It's important to note that Jewel's Grand Protector does not use her tightly controlling approach to safety for any nefarious means, but like an overprotective parent, simply wants to ensure that the citizens of her city remain unharmed. Holding a mirror to real world debates about children's independent mobility, the novel proposes that paranoia, fear and overprotection are themselves damaging forces, leading to weakness, cowardice and an unhealthy dependence on the institutions of the state.

In order to unbind Goldie from this status quo and set her free to change her world, *Museum of Thieves* first neutralizes the power of the home and the nuclear family, those traditional bulwarks of children's literature. Tanner has not, like a Roald Dahl, Astrid Lindgren or Lemony Snickett, felt the need to do away with Goldie's parents in order to give the child protagonist a clear run at her adventures. Rather, Tanner wipes Ma and Pa virtually out of existence by characterizing them as insipid, weak and conforming. Goldie is never shown in her family home, and although her Ma and Pa do appear with her in the opening and closing sequences of the novel, they have insufficient emotional or imaginative presence to retain much of a hold over their daughter, or any hold over the reader. When Goldie sees an opportunity to escape from bondage, she takes it, even in the presence of her apparently loving parents, and despite her knowledge that they will be punished and incarcerated in the House of Repentance for the crime of raising such a "bold" and "foolhardy" child.

This is not, then, a domestic novel, but rather, a political one. In pushing the issue of overprotection beyond a trend adopted or rejected by individual nuclear families and into an inescapable aspect of society at large, Tanner has produced a novel that, like the books of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, imports into children's fiction some of the concerns more usually seen in YA novels. Roberta Seelinger Trites notes that while children's books are more commonly focused on "one child who learns to feel more secure in her or his immediate environment", the protagonists of adolescent novels must "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions in which they must function, including family; school; the church; government" (3). What *Museum of Thieves* requires of Goldie, once she escapes the regime, is nothing less than that she understands and masters the adult political machinations of Jewel and then dismantles its systems of control.

Tanner assumes an audience of quite sophisticated child readers. In *Museum of Thieves*, adult political machinations have consequences for the child characters, and Tanner employs variable focalisation to fully dramatise the relevant adult actions (and thoughts) that are concealed from the view of the child protagonist. While the majority of the novel is focalized through Goldie, Tanner makes brief excursions into the interior viewpoints of adult characters, including the benevolent, if somewhat timid, Grand Protector. Unusually, the novel's villains – including Guardian Blessed Hope and The Fugelman – also briefly become focalisers for the narrative.

*Museum of Thieves* is a didactic work of fiction and like Lenore Ske-nazy, it has an agenda to prosecute: that children ought be allowed to run wild and free, learning from experience the courage and skills they need to exist in a world full of dangers and trials. And prosecute its agenda it does, but not without also providing a fascinating test case for what happens when a novel is predicated on a seemingly topsy-turvy schematic in which order and control *in and of themselves* comprise the central problem of the novel, and risk and chaos are the answer. By positioning order and control as “wrong” in the novel, Tanner forecloses on the possibility that the novel’s conclusion can straightforwardly reside in their restoration. Rather, the ending must—by the book’s own terms—take all the citizens of restricted, overprotected Jewel “out of control”. But where, exactly, is that?

“Time out” from home and from restrictive socializing practices (Stephens, 132) is a common feature of children’s literature and countless children’s novels feature “out of control” zones in which child characters are free from the oppressive interference of adults. These spaces might be alternative realities like Narnia, Neverland, Oz, or—to cite a more contemporary example—Catherynne M. Valente’s *Fairyland*, or they might simply be forgotten spaces beyond the adult gaze, such as the walled garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. Alternatively, as is the case of adventure stories such as Enid Blyton’s Famous Five and Secret Seven series, the boundaries of the “out of control” zone might be concocted from nothing more than the secure limitations of genre conventions and the happy ending. The classic carnivalesque structure in such narratives is the tripartite “home-away-home” (Nikolajeva, 235), or, to use Waddey’s classificatory system, it is an “Odyssean” (13) pattern in which the child character occupies the alternative reality for long enough to gain, through adventure, trial and tribulation, the skills necessary to thrive back at home.

The “out of control” zone in *Museum of Thieves* is the Museum of Dunt, a small building in which Goldie takes refuge after making her escape. An apparent descendant of Doctor Who’s Tardis, the museum is much larger on the inside than its exterior dimensions would allow. It is also a shape-shifter: its rooms grow and shrink, its staircases twist and warp, its corridors lead somewhere today that they did not lead yesterday. The museum is therefore beyond the laws of gravity and architecture, but it is also beyond the laws of the land. In the statute books of the Protectorate of Jewel, there is an obscure law specifying that the Museum of Dunt be exempted from the invigilation of the Blessed Guardians, and although the Grand

Protector has only a shadowy knowledge of this law's origins or purposes, she obeys it without question. Tanner is at pains to point out to us the special status of the museum. It is not, Goldie is informed, "in Jewel" (84) but somehow adjunct to it, and also, beyond it. Gradually Goldie comes to understand that the museum houses everything the City of Jewel has willfully forgotten, discarded or repressed. One of the museum's Keepers, Olga Ciavolga, says it is "a refuge for all the wild things...[a]ll the things the city did not want", and another of the Keepers, Herro Dan, explicates: "you can't hold wild things in one place...they won't be tied down. That's why the rooms shift like they do" (129).

A combination of rubbish dump, beast, and collective unconscious, the Museum of Dunt literally houses war and pestilence and disease. There are war rooms in which armies are in tense stand-offs, and plague rooms full of rats. In her survey of contemporary Australian literature for young people, Heather Scutter observes an anxiety about children "getting out of hand, going out of bounds, moving beyond control" and into spaces "inscribed as feral, wild, chaotic, corrupt, evil" (251), and at first, it seems that Museum of Dunt will turn out to be precisely this kind of place. But once Goldie is inside the museum, Tanner slams her "characterisation" of the space into reverse, decreasing the magnitude of its apparent dangers, and designing safety nets in the very fabric of the building (ie. the "Dirty Gate", described more fully below). The author has come face to face with the uncomfortable nuances of her treatise on children and risk. For how, exactly, do you advise children to get "out of control" without being seen to encourage them to behave dangerously or irresponsibly? Just like Lenore Skenazy, who was at pains to insist in her *New York Sun* column that she equipped her son well for his Bloomingdales adventure (providing him with a subway map, a Metro card, quarters for a pay phone, \$20 for contingencies – but not a mobile phone, which he would likely lose), Tanner also feels the need to reassure her audience.

Perhaps Olga's assertion that the museum is a "refuge for all the wild things" begins this process of reassurance, potentially reminding the reader of Maurice Sendak's influential, and ultimately comforting, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Like Goldie, Max the "wild thing" (n.p.) escapes the frustrations of adult-imposed order and control and enters a new world, populated by strange creatures, in which he experiences unprecedented autonomy. But while Sendak's picture book is a classic of carnivalesque children's literature, a perfect model of the home-away-home structure, *Museum of Thieves* has pro-

blematised “home” – the City of Jewel – so profoundly, that Tanner must come up with an alternative strategy for her novel’s conclusion.

With its entirely dismissive treatment of Goldie’s birth family and place of origin, *Museum of Thieves* could be seen to follow Wadley’s “Promethean” narrative pattern (14), which begins with “no representation of home at all, but with the protagonist as a kind of exile”. The Promethean protagonist’s journey involves the creation of a new home and family, one that reflects and represents a more authentic identity. And indeed, inside the museum, Goldie finds her true home, ready made with a family in the form of the museum’s eclectic coterie of Keepers. The Keepers are a rag-tag collection of unruly individuals who have slipped the net of conventional society. The adults Sinew, Olga Ciavolga and Herro Dan, are as vivid and exciting as Goldie’s birth parents are bland and dull, and the runaway boy Toadspit provides Goldie with all the benefits and disadvantages of a sibling. Supplementing this nuclear family are two animals: a “brizzlehound” and a “slaughterbird”. Once Goldie has found this new family in the museum, she is at the “crisis point for the carnivalesque hero” where one of the options open to her is to “attempt to transform ‘time out’ into permanence” (Stephens, 13).

The ways in which Tanner makes this type of ending possible for Goldie are manifold and one of the central strategies is the emphasis on the similarities between the museum building and Goldie herself. The museum is shown to resemble Goldie: it is described as a small “stubborn” (57) building that seems overshadowed and overpowered by its larger neighbors. Later, Goldie experiences a moment of expansive epiphany when, laying her hands on the museum’s walls, she suddenly understands that “it wasn’t just the dog and the museum that were bigger and wilder inside than anyone could imagine” (173), but herself as well; she recognizes her own untapped depths and reserves. In taking refuge in the museum, then, Goldie has in one sense taken refuge within her own psyche, within her own uncontrollable, uncontainable and unruly omnipotentiality. “I wish – Oh I *wish* Ma and Pa could come and live here” (174), Goldie says, echoing the desire of every child who ever wished they were better understood by the adults in their lives.

Indeed the adults in the museum *do* understand her, but their very presence is yet another of the factors effectively downgrading the level of risk Goldie faces within the museum. Maria Nikolajeva observes that this kind of mitigation is at play within the Harry Potter books, where the magical “time out” of Hogwarts (framed in each installment of Rowlings’ series by Harry’s Muggle-bound life at the

Dursleys' house) is ultimately protected and overseen by adult wizards and witches (235). In the Museum, Goldie undergoes a period of apprenticeship and training during which Olga Ciavolga, Herro Dan and Sinew each impart to her their particular skills. Each of these adults, acting *in loco parentis*, encourages her and praises her for the wildness and boldness that have been her downfall in Jewel. But there is, nevertheless, an authorial high-wire act going on. What Goldie is really being taught is how to skirt danger by taking just the right amount of the right kinds of risks, and certainly no "*unnecessary*" (106) ones. Sinew, mounting a spying expedition into the City of Jewel, finds himself having to promise to be careful, "[b]ut not *too* careful" (106).

Goldie's "out of control" zone is, then, both a physical manifestation of the self, and a home with loving, sensible and protective parent figures. It is also, importantly, a *museum*. Although Tanner reiterates the live and present danger posed by the contents of the building, our cultural knowledge of such institutions — places where remnants of the past are safely observed behind glass — cannot be so easily undone, and nor does *Museum of Thieves* entirely wish to undo it. For example, one of the museum's strange creatures, the slaughterbird Morg, is not a stuffed exhibit, but in almost every way it resembles one. The wars and pestilence in the museum are not free-ranging: they are in secure storage. The museum has a two-part structure and the worst of its dangers are conveniently contained within an inner sanctum — the Id? — that is protected by a fortified barrier known as the "Dirty Gate". The museum building grumbles and shifts and groans, its level of disturbance fluctuates in response to external stress, and there are times when the security of the "Dirty Gate" is in doubt. Nevertheless, the museum can be soothed by the ministrations of the Keepers, who stroke it, and sing to it a particular kind of wild music that both they, and it, instinctively understand. The museum might be unruly, but it is not uncontrollable.

The most potent threat to the safety of Goldie's "out of control" zone comes when the Blessed Guardians breach the museum with the intent to accurately measure its shifting dimensions and to fix in place its malleable rooms. The Guardians bring in lengths of wood and nail them to the walls in an attempt to restrict the museum's movements and make the space predictable and stable. Perhaps the Blessed Guardians efforts are echoed in Tanner's own attempts to nail down the language that she needs in order to (safely) argue for children to be allowed to experience danger. Where convenient for her purposes, Tanner will redefine terms — a "thief", according to Olga and Dan is an honorable person who would never rob a coin



from a grandmother, but would know when to steal in the name of love and courage, snatching “freedom from the hands of the tyrant”, hiding sacred places from would-be vandals, and spirited away “innocent lives before they are destroyed” (132). There are also attempts to reconfigure binaries. In Goldie’s mind, the opposite of “safe” is not “unsafe”, but “free” (30) and Tanner works hard to convince us that the converse of “order” might not be “chaos” or “anarchy”, but “wildness”, a high-frequency word in *Museum of Thieves*.

Stephens observes the “separation” (126) of a carnivalesque hero from prevailing authority as a potential marker of a transgressive interrogative text, but while Goldie does separate herself from Jewel, *Museum of Thieves* does not fit this category. As I have described, the museum has been effectively made safe, and not just for Goldie, but for all the inhabitants of the City of Jewel. Tanner’s solution to the problem of how to conclude *Museum of Thieves* is dramatic: Jewel and its power structures are utterly destroyed and Goldie rescues (almost) all of its inhabitants and brings them to the museum. Thanks to its flexible dimensions, the museum can house the entire community within its expansiveness, and the novel ends with the people of Jewel feasting together in a large room, learning to come to terms with the presence of a Brizzlehound. “Time out” has wholly supplanted the frame.

There is a tendency for children’s fiction, argues Scutter, to act as “a kind of speculative fiction in fast reverse, which re-tracks mistaken adult roads” and, in so doing, leads to a writing that “while appearing to subvert, is often radically reactionary” (224). While “radically reactionary” is a step too far in the case of *Museum of Thieves*, the novel certainly does end up in a much less subversive place than it sets out to reach. It starts boldly with an apparent argument for the unruly, natural wildness of children and ends by arguing, much less ambitiously, not that children can do without taming, domestication and confinement, but that children need training and guidance of strictly the right sort. When Olga Ciavolga and Herro Dan talk, in the closing pages of *Museum of Thieves* about “letting some of the wildness back into the city”, they are quick to point out that they don’t mean “wars and famine and plague”. They only mean “vacant blocks and dogs and cats and birds [a]nd secret places for children to hide when they want to escape from the eyes of adults” (215), which exposes nothing more radical than the author’s nostalgia for an earlier, different version of childhood than the contemporary, sometimes overprotected version still being debated in the international media.

The bubble-wrap kid debate was revived this year with a lengthy article in *The Atlantic* titled “The Overprotected Kid”. The focus of the piece is a real world “time out” zone called “The Land”, an ex-

perimental playground in North Wales which resembles a rubbish dump, in which children are encouraged to enjoy risky play, such as lighting fires. But when the manager of "The Land" is pressed by the interviewer, she admits that a "playworker" is never far from the children undertaking such activities, and that the playground's very existence is undergirded by folder upon folder of risk assessment paperwork. The agency and freedom of children playing in "The Land" is really quite limited, as is Goldie's in the Museum of Dunt.

Goldie Roth may safely take risks in the purportedly chaotic environment of the Museum of Dunt because she is ultimately protected: within the diegesis by the special features of the museum, including the resident adults and the Dirty Gate, but also beyond the diegesis by her author, and in turn by the controlling power of the contemporary children's publishing industry. What Goldie Roth finds in the Museum of Dunt is not actually an "out of control" zone, but a zone of the sort named by astronomers after her literary namesake, Goldilocks. In astronomy, the "Goldilocks zone" is the interplanetary equivalent of Little Bear's porridge: not too hot, not too cold (for sustaining life, that is). In *Museum of Thieves*, Goldie's new home in the Museum of Dunt might be described in much the same way: "not too risky, not too safe".

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