

# The Politically Incorrect and Its Limits in Late Twentieth-Century Youth Literature

## *Rome, l'Enfer* by Malika Ferdjoukh

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**Abstract** This article reflects on the contours and limits of the extremely complex and unstable notion of 'politically correctness' in contemporary youth literature, based on the study of Malika Ferdjoukh's French novel *Rome, l'Enfer*. This novel for adolescents, which was published in 1995 by L'Ecole des Loisirs (Medium collection) and which shocked many readers at the time, is in many ways politically incorrect – in terms of the themes addressed (social violence, drugs, etc.), the structure of the story (a descent into hell ending with the death of the young protagonist), and the highly critical discourse on literature, which is allegedly incapable of preparing young people to face the 'real' world. Nevertheless, the article will show that this book, which in many ways is 'politically incorrect', does not give up its educational purpose.

**Keywords** Political correctness. Children's literature. Malika Ferdjoukh. French youth literature. Immoralism and amoralism.

**Summary** 1 Political Correctness and Youth Literature: Definitions and Problems. – 2 *Rome, l'Enfer*: A 'Politically Incorrect' Novel? – 2.1 A Pessimistic Novel. – 2.2 The Discovery of a Violent and Unjust World. – 2.3 Is Literature Useless? – 3 Lessons from the Novel.



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## 1 Political Correctness and Youth Literature: Definitions and Problems

The concept of 'political correctness', though widespread, and often overused, is nevertheless extremely problematic: generally used in a pejorative sense to discredit a certain conformism, or dogmatism, it has gradually become (since its appearance in American conservative circles in the 1980s, and especially in France) the prerogative of those, often on the right or the extreme right of the political spectrum, who criticise the so-called 'soft' consensus, which is believed to be characteristic of democratic and liberal societies – or even the naivety or dogmatism of pro-human rights or anti-racist discourses. 'Political correctness' is therefore a politically connoted expression, which is often exploited in public debate and must therefore be used with care (Capozzi 2018).

It should also be noted that 'political correctness' is closely related to the question of language (Hugues 2011): political correctness is first and foremost a way of refraining from talking about something or someone. Talking about political correctness means delimiting the legitimate scope of the utterable, defining what can or cannot be the subject of public discussion. Those who defend it do so in order to reaffirm what they consider to be fundamental values (dignity of the person, respect for differences, etc.) that may have been violated in the past (in which case it is a question of remedying a past injustice) or that risk being violated in the future (in which case it is a question of a duty of care). On the contrary, those who criticise political correctness by associating it with a barely disguised form of 'moralism' see it as an unbearable limitation of other fundamental values, such as freedom of expression and freedom of thought, which are moreover closely linked to one another. As Kant said: no freedom of thought without freedom of expression. It is worth stressing, however, that both supporters and opponents of political correctness agree on a precise point: the common defence of a performative conception of language, according to which saying something means making it exist in the world. *Les mots sont des pistolets chargés* (words are loaded guns), wrote Brice Parain,<sup>1</sup> and it is well known that normative representations are also, and perhaps first and foremost, embedded in speech, language and grammar. Reinhart Koselleck, in a different perspective and to justify his method in the field of conceptual history, said that semantic struggles are often driven by social and political struggles (Koselleck 1979).

It is therefore easy to see what issues are at stake if we apply the concept of political correctness to the literary fact that, by its very na-

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<sup>1</sup> These words attributed to Brice Parain are quoted by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).

ture, is an operator of representations. However, political correctness has, in the literary field perhaps more than elsewhere, a bad reputation (Talon-Hugon 2019): to introduce political correctness into literature would mean violating the writer's freedom of creation, imposing on him or her not only an ideology but also a certain use of words and language. It would mean making the literary text into a simple duplicate of the dominant discourse, and in short, calling into question the very essence of literature, at least if we adhere to a modern conception of literature based on the notion of the *écart* (gap) – the gap between literature and society and the (especially political, ideological) discourses that circulate within it; the gap between literary language and ordinary language; the gap between *l'écrivain* and he whom Roland Barthes called *l'écrivain* (Barthes 1981), etc.

But what about when the discourse on political correctness is set in the more specific framework of children's literature?<sup>2</sup> Certainly things become more complicated, precisely because of the status of children's literature, a literature by definition addressed to a young audience and which from the very beginning has found itself caught in a tension between *placere et docere* (please and teach), that is, entertaining and educating to the values prescribed by society. However, the didactic or moral purpose of youth literature should not be confused with political correctness. In fact, when we talk about politically-correct children's literature today, it is not so much the moral character of the works that is highlighted, but their moralising character, i.e. the expected and highly predictable way in which values are upheld that conform to consensual values that few are willing to challenge – at least publicly: altruism, tolerance, respect for differences, rejection of ethnic and social stereotypes, gender equality or, more recently, environmental protection.

However, the phrase has another connotation, linked to the very evolution of the conception of the addressee of children's literature: since the child is no longer considered as a "soft wax" (as Locke said)<sup>3</sup> on which to print 'good values', but a real individual, endowed with a sensitivity and a mode of understanding inherent to his degree of

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**2** This question is part of a broader reflection on moral issues pertaining to children's literature. The subject is an old one – as old as children's literature itself! – but there has been an evolution over the last fifty years. With the rise of realistic and sometimes crude stories in the tradition of American 'problem novels' during the 1970s and 80s, children's literature has been accused sometimes of immorality or amorality (see, in France, the pamphlet *Écrits pour nuire: Littérature enfantine et subversion* by Marie-Claude Monchaux, 1985). Now it is more often issues of political correctness that writers consider as problems. It is the position adopted for example by the writer Marie-Aude Murail. In an Op-Ed published in 2019, she deplores a new censorship, based on "a fundamentalist reading of texts, decontextualised, without hindsight, without humour" (2019).

**3** John Locke describes the child's mind as a "white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases" (1968, 325, sect. 216).

maturity, it is no longer a question of writing *for* him/her, but *in respect of* him/her, taking care not to hurt or shock him/her. This concern for the protection of children, which is absolutely necessary, can however, as we know, turn into paternalism – paternalism in which I see a specific form of political correctness. Under the pretext of respecting the specificity of children, certain topics, which have become more or less taboo, should not be addressed. This is, moreover, one of the reasons why fairy tales, told to generations of children even if originally intended for them, are not politically correct in the current sense of the term – incest, rape, child abandonment, murderous jealousies between siblings are countless: which explains their rewritings, literary or cinematographic, which are also countless<sup>4</sup> (Connan-Pintado, Thauveron 2014).

Of course, one can only deplore the development of a literature that echoes and supports the moods, fashions and clichés of the moment and that, by sacrificing form and substance, would only provide children with ready-made thinking, taking them back to a passive state that was thought to have passed. But at this point, one might ask: if we do not want to be politically correct, what does that mean? That we are ready to promote ‘politically incorrect’ book for young people? Is it not right to want our children, the actors of tomorrow’s society, to share principles of justice, to respect others and their differences – principles that are unfortunately often trampled on in our contemporary societies, despite the supposed prevalence of political correctness in the public sphere? Is it not right to want to protect them as long as possible from the horrors of the world – is this not our responsibility as adults (O’Neill 1988; Mesure 2001)?

Of course, I am pushing the argument a bit far. But the question of what the alternative to political correctness might be for a children’s literature that is concerned with transmitting a certain number of values to its young readers, values that serve as reference points for our societies and which they cannot renounce without contradicting themselves, is not easily answered.

However, I will try to find one such answer, starting with an analysis of a novel for children, *Rome, l’enfer* by Malika Ferdjoukh, which, in my opinion, deals with this issue in an exemplary way: by showing a clear rejection of political correctness, this book, which in many ways is also politically incorrect, does not give up its educational purpose. The question then is what meaning exactly the novel intends to convey.

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<sup>4</sup> We can mention *My Correct Bedtime Stories: Modern Tales for Our Life and Times*, written by the American writer James Finn Garner (1994). Garner satirizes in his book, with an emphasis on humour and parody, the trend toward political correctness and censorship of children’s literature. Garner wrote two follow-up books in 1995: *Once upon a More Enlightened Time: More Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* and *Politically Correct Holiday Stories: For an Enlightened Yuletide Season*.

## 2 **Rome, l'enfer: A 'Politically Incorrect' Novel?**

Published in 1995 by L'École des Loisirs, in a series for readers aged between eleven and thirteen, *Rome l'Enfer* is a novel written by Malika Ferdjoukh, author of numerous books for children. Some of Ferdjoukh's books have even been included in the lists of books recommended by the Ministry of National Education for Junior High School students (*Quatre sœurs*, 2003). However, it would be wrong to see Malika Ferdjoukh as a politically correct writer, especially if one looks at *Rome l'Enfer*, which provoked strong reactions when it was first published.<sup>5</sup> In many respects, it is indeed legitimate to speak of a politically incorrect novel, in the sense that it goes against a number of expectations of the reader of juvenile novels. I would identify three of them: first of all, the novel is characterised by a rare pessimism, which departs from the often implicit rule, but sometimes claimed by the authors themselves (I think of Susie Morgensten, for example),<sup>6</sup> of 'optimism despite everything' which prevails in youth literature. Secondly, the novel offers a particularly gloomy description of contemporary French society; finally, the novel seems to contradict a discourse that has become predominant in "politically correct" literature: that is, the praise of reading and literature, in which much of the edifying vocation of children's literature has found shelter.

### 2.1 A Pessimistic Novel

"Men take no path, neither the path of life nor the path of death. They are driven like straw into the storm" (Ferdjoukh 1995, 6). The book's epigraph, taken from Gustav Meyrink's fantastic novel *The Golem* (1915), brings into focus the symbolic dimension of Malika Ferdjoukh's story: behind the singular trajectory of the protagonist, it is about the human condition in its entirety. The young protagonist, Henri, a "straw in a storm" will be caught up in a whirlwind of events that he does not control and that will bring him a terrible fate.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Laurin 1995: "Malika Ferdjoukh has written a hyper-realistic novel for informed adolescents... or those who wish they were. A shocking novel, bordering on the zany, a hard-hitting novel and a cry from the heart that is frightening. Too crude, *Rome L'Enfer*?"

<sup>6</sup> Susie Morgensten (born in 1945) is an American and French author of children's literature. She has received numerous awards for her books (all written in French): the Grand prix du livre pour la jeunesse for *C'est pas juste!*, the Prix loisirs jeunes lecteurs for *Un anniversaire en pomme de terre*, the Prix 1000 jeunes lecteurs for *Oùkélé la télé* and *Les deux moitiés de l'amitié*. As an author for young people, she makes a point of being optimistic: "I make it my duty to be optimistic, to always say that we'll get through this and that life is good anyway. And even if hope is a liar!" (in Lartet-Geffard 2005, 92).

The novel, written in the first person, opens when the 14-year-old boy finds himself in bed one Saturday night in December, with a fever and a sore throat. His parents go to the theatre and a babysitter takes care of his little brother Juju, 7 years old. The reader is quickly informed that Henri's mother is not his real mother: five years earlier, the boy overheard a conversation between his parents in which the woman complained of having to take care of a child who was not her own. Henri has never spoken to his parents about his discovery, so they do not know how much he knows. While Henri was looking for a pillow in his parents' wardrobe, he dropped his father's jacket and discovered a photograph of an unknown woman, with the inscription on the back: *Pour Jean, Anna qui t'aime* ('For Jean [is the name of Henri's father] Anna who loves you', p. 21). It was then, Henri says with a nod to Lewis Carroll, that "I passed through the mirror" (21). Convinced that Anna is his mother, the boy looks up her address in his father's diary and finds it: "rue de Florence" in Paris, station "Rome". Henri lives on Boulevard Henri-IV, near the Bastille, on the other side of the city. But it does not matter: he rushes out of his house, in secret, dressed only in a T-shirt and jeans, with the photo in his pocket. Thus begins a hellish journey through Paris by night, which will be the occasion for a violent confrontation with a world that this young man from a good family -  *fils à papa* (daddy's boy) as he says - never imagined existed. After a number of vicissitudes, which I will describe later, Henri finally manages to reach Anna's house. But chilled - it is snowing and his expensive clothes have been stolen - , disappointed by Anna whom he sees and hears from afar when she returns to her house,<sup>7</sup> Henri ends up taking refuge in the building's rubbish dump. He falls asleep for a few hours, half-naked, before waking up to vomit blood, and falls back to sleep (a sleep full of dreams and hallucinations, which will also be the occasion for a last imaginary dialogue with Juju). He eventually dies in his sleep like the little girl in the story of Andersen's *Little Match Girl*, to which Henri himself refers.<sup>8</sup>

The death of the protagonist is certainly not uncommon in fairy tales (and especially in Andersen's stories), but it is not common in the current production for young readers. In fact, Ferdjoukh's novel contravenes the politically-correct happy ending that dominates the field. But I would say that what is most striking, apart from Henri's death, is the fact that there is nothing at all in the novel to compensate for this tragic outcome, the fact that no light, be it even the

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<sup>7</sup> She is a woman wrapped up in her clothes, complaining of having had too much dinner, slandering the hosts and other guests.

<sup>8</sup> In his delirium, Henri imagines his brother Juju telling him he wants to hear the story of *Little Match Girl* (214).

faintest, comes to illuminate, in retrospect, the boy's gloomy destiny: the novel ends with an epilogue, in the third person, staging first the discovery, at dawn, of the boy's corpse by the garbage collectors and then the announcement of his death by a policeman to his distraught parents. Beyond the unfortunate outcome, it is thus the novel's very structure, that of a doubly failed search (the object of the search, Anna, does not live up to Henri's expectations, and the hero, in his search for the person who gave him life, encounters death) that places the novel in a fundamentally pessimistic perspective, announced by the epigraph.

## 2.2 The Discovery of a Violent and Unjust World

Before arriving in rue de Florence, Henri crosses a Paris unknown to him, characterised by violence – physical, but above all social and economic. This very dark depiction of the world in which the young reader is called upon to grow up is not very politically correct – and was probably even less so in 1995 than it is today, at the time of trashy realism. Moreover, one might find the accumulation of misfortunes that befalls Henri excessive, even improbable: as soon as he enters the underground, he finds himself in the middle of a crowd trying to escape the tear gas thrown by the police; he loses consciousness and is saved by a young outcast, Waldo, whom, like Dante walking behind Virgil, Henri then decides to follow on his nocturnal journeys, discovering the world of drugs, prostitution, delinquency. A young pizza delivery boy, seeing Henri alone and lost in the middle of the night, takes pity on him and offers to drive him to the rue de Florence, where the boy says he lives. On the threshold of the door, convinced that the boy has arrived at his home, the young man robs him of his clothes, without imagining the terrible consequences of his action: in fact, Henri waits, in his underwear, in the snow, for hours for Anna.

These are undoubtedly bad encounters, but above all encounters with a world, the world of the slums, to which the corridors of the underground symbolically refer, which the character travels, just as Victor Hugo's characters in *Les Misérables* travelled through the sewers in their day. This world is the reverse of the bourgeois *pépère* (comfortable) world in which Henri has always lived. It is precisely the injustice of a profoundly unequal society, where the rich, the one *comme moi* (like me), says Henri, live side by side without ever mixing with the others, *les sans* (the without: 'without sleep', 'without a home', 'without a family', 'without love', 'without a penny', p. 71), that the adolescent discovers. Going through the mirror thus means suddenly finding oneself '*with them*', and seeing the world if not with their eyes, at least on their level. The change of perspective is brutal: "[w]hat is this world in which you watch someone eat

death while laughing at hooligans' tricks?" wonders Henri (100). Undoubtedly, the humour of the narrator, as well as the poetry of certain situations (the climb up to the roofs of Paris with Mélo, another brat met in the street, the snow falling on the city) or of certain characters (the beautiful Angela in particular) alleviate the tension in which the reader is immersed as he follows the character's journey into hell. But the fact remains that Malika Ferdjoukh depicts a fundamentally bleak, stupid and cruel world from which Henri cannot escape unscathed.

### 2.3 Is Literature Useless?

In fact, the narrator seems particularly ill-equipped to deal with what he discovers: not only because he comes from a privileged social background – his father is a gynaecologist, his mother is “a very *chic* lady” (Ferdjoukh 1995, 13) – but also because he sees and experiences the world through books. Henri is in fact part of this category of characters, very common in contemporary children's novels, of ‘great readers’ who devour books – often classical literature by the way – like others devour candies. The multiplication of this type of character, as well as of stories that give a central role to the book or to the act of reading, should be understood in the context of a promotion of reading and literature as a value to be defended in itself, conducted in the name of the fight against illiteracy or against the decline of the book in favour of screens and new digital tools that attract adolescents in particular.

If it is possible to see the celebration of reading as a form of political correctness in the field of contemporary children's literature, it should be noted that Malika Ferdjoukh's novel takes the opposite view. In fact, Henri's bookish culture is of no use to him in deciphering the world and its language: on several occasions Henri does not understand the slang expressions used by Waldo and his friends, which often gives rise to amusing misunderstandings. This culture is even more an obstacle to the success of his enterprise, as it blinds him to his own abilities: beautiful intelligence, ready wit, sarcastic irony, these things do not work outside the closed world of Henri's flat or school. In order to live or survive in the urban jungle that unfolds before his eyes, other qualities are needed. It is precisely his naivety, the reverse of overconfidence, that is his undoing: neither parents nor books have prepared him for the experience he will have – or, more simply, for the experience of life.

In short, because it refuses to be optimistic, because it chooses to describe a bleak and violent social reality, and because it strives to counter the discourse that celebrates reading as a key to understanding the world and a factor in integration, Malika Ferdjoukh's



novel can be seen as politically incorrect. However, it seems to me that one cannot stop at these observations.

### 3      **Lessons from the Novel**

Firstly, in addition to the elements mentioned, there are other, albeit minor, elements which could be defined as politically correct: the fact, for example, that the writer seems to have taken care to diversify the ethnic origins of the negative characters and even to concentrate the most negative elements on the white characters; or the caricatured dimension of the representation of the 'bourgeoisie', which corresponds to a relatively well-exploited vein in current children's literature. We can mention Henri's stepmother, a lady seen as very 'chic' by those who do not know her and who, in her house, only swears and mistreats the *petit personnel* (baby sitter, gardener). We can mention also Henri's friends: these well-to-do youngsters enjoy making fun of the mispronunciation of the Algerian gardener Ahmed and show a frightening indifference when the latter tells them that his wife and two daughters have died in a car accident. This criticism is part of a relatively conventional discourse that seeks to morally disqualify those in economic and cultural power in order to better promote the selfless values of love, friendship and solidarity - but which, in this case, the group of outcasts does not embody, thus saving the novel from politically correct Manichaeism.

Secondly, the rejection of political correctness - at least in its most massive aspects - does not mean that the writer relinquishes a normative discourse or transmitting positive values to her reader. In fact, like many contemporary authors of realist novels such as Melvin Burgess, Malika Ferjouk justifies the dark character of her novel with a concern to show the young reader the world as it is, and not just how we would like to see it or how we would like our children to see it.

My books are not testimonies, but observations. What I recount in *Rome, l'Enfer* never happened to me. But you just have to sit on an underground bench at eight o'clock in the evening, and observe, listen, that's all. (Laurin 1995)

The writer uses a similar argument to justify the death of the protagonist:

Before I started this book, I knew it would end like this. It's an itinerary, Henri dies from knowing too much about the world. I would have been dishonest if I had written another ending. (Laurin 1995)

The term 'honesty' is important: her intellectual honesty leads her to refuse to sugarcoat the state of the world by inventing a happy ending. It is thus in the name of a positive demand for truth that Malika Ferdjoukh rejects the politically correct happy ending.

It is again this need that explains, in my opinion, the inversion of the *topos* of the child-reader I mentioned earlier. If Henri's reading was of no use to him, it is not because, like Flaubert's Emma Bovary, he read bad novels that deluded him. It is rather that he did not know how to make use of his readings, or more precisely find the right use for them. For this boy, embarrassed by his physical appearance and victim of the secret of his birth, books are a refuge, a way of escaping from the real world. It is no coincidence that from the very first pages of the novel books are compared to sleeping pills, which plunge the adolescent into a state of blissful unconsciousness: "Books I dream without sleeping, where I die awake. Silence and sleep. Better than Prince Valium or Angel Gardénal. [...] I forget. I read" (Ferdjoukh 1995, 14). It is obviously not this kind of use of books that Malika Ferdjoukh calls for: against the conception of reading as a withdrawal into oneself, she promotes a conception of reading as an open window on the world, which helps one to live instead of dispensing with living. Henri undoubtedly dies from violently and unpreparedly discovering the world as it is – or at least as it can also be. But in doing so, he shows the reader exactly what he should not do: close his eyes, shut himself up in an imaginary world, and keep the 'written world' and the 'lived world' radically separate.

However, Henri – his naivety and his misuse of books – cannot be blamed for everything. In fact, it seems to me that the boy dies less from the social horror he discovers than from the inability of adults to tell him the truth: the adults who should protect him have instead exposed him to the greatest danger by building his existence on a secret they cannot even keep. It is not by chance that the novel ends with the tears of Henri's father, to whom the policeman has just given the photo of Anna found in the boy's hand: "She is... the mother of my son, my first wife, how did you know? I... never told him..." (Ferdjoukh 1995, 223). The father's silence killed his son.

The message is therefore clear: in life as in novels, it is always necessary to tell children the truth. Not just any way, of course, as Bruno Bettelheim showed in his analysis of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976). But according to a perspective that is obvious from the analysis of the novel: by reflecting on the place and function of values in children's literature and questioning the legitimacy of the poetic means to mobilise, to guide, simplify and circumscribe their reception. It is a question of recognising – and constructing – the autonomy of judgement of young readers: the responsibility of adults and literature is not to impose ends, but to prepare an access to truth that allows judgement to be exercised. This is tantamount to making truth

an ethical value and, as Malika Ferdjoukh offers, bringing it into play through a plot. On this condition, and only on this condition, can literature prepare us for life. In this sense, this novel written against a Manichaeic and simplifying form of political correctness is also a work that embodies a reflexive form of political correctness for the protection and emancipation of young readers.

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