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## *Other Choices in Other Worlds: Pierre Bottero's Ewilan Cycle*

### *Autres Choix dans d'Autres Mondes: le cycle d'Ewilan de Pierre Bottero*

**Mots clés:** Pierre Bottero, la fantasy, autres mondes, Ewilan, Gwendalavir, liberté, choix, adolescents, jeunes adultes, chemins

#### **Résumé:**

Le cycle d'*Ewilan* (deux trilogies: *La Quête d'Ewilan* et *Les Mondes d'Ewilan*) de l'auteur-jeunesse français Pierre Bottero offre aux lecteurs adolescents l'occasion de réfléchir sur leur liberté et leurs choix. L'héroïne Ewilan, en faisant son « pas sur le côté » magique, est transportée de la France moderne à son monde originaire de Gwendalavir, que l'héroïne doit sauver des forces du Mal. Pour Ewilan, la quête de ses propres origines et la lutte pour sa propre liberté au-delà du destin qu'on lui impose constituent une métaphore de la quête intérieure de l'adolescence. En effet, la popularité du cycle d'*Ewilan* est due au fait que le jeune lecteur se retrouve dans les personnages; le texte évoque les obstacles que l'adolescent doit surmonter, à son tour, lorsqu'il faut choisir sa place et trouver son identité dans le monde hors de la lecture.

Fictional, “other” worlds have always held a powerful grip on readers' imaginations. In literature for children and young adults, worlds like Neverland, Wonderland, Narnia, Middle Earth, and Hogwarts are marvelously “other” because they do not conform to our sense of the normal or expected. These fictional worlds can be idealized utopias existing “no where” that accomplish a kind of fantastic escape or wish-fulfillment. Alternatively, these same worlds also work as dystopias, worlds whose precarious existence and imminent destruction remind us of what our world could become, lest we cease to care for the one in which live. By creating fantastic, dangerous multiverses for protagonists and readers to explore, authors of young adult fantasy have firmly established the genre as what comparatist Sandra Beckett calls “the darling of the literary marketplace” (161). In France, where writing for children has traditionally been grounded in instructional strategy<sup>1</sup>, André-François Ruaud writes that *la fantasy* is no longer a *sous-littérature*, but is instead « la figure de proue de l'imaginaire en notre début du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle » (161). Although they are less well-known to readers of Anglophone

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Brown argues that “the history of French children's literature has been inseparable for many centuries from a pedagogical agenda” (4) an opinion also supported by Ganna Ottevaere-van Praag and Jean Perrot, who agree that the success of fantasy as a literary genre has to do with its marked departure from pedagogy. Ottevaere-van Praag explains, “[l]a finalité pédagogique ne freine plus comme dans les siècles passés le libre épanouissement de la création artistique” (348). For Perrot, fantasy's attraction resides in its deliberate departure from overt didacticism: “il représente pour certains auteurs contemporains un extraordinaire libération de l'imagination, une issue hors d'un réalisme moralisant qui commençait à devenir pesant” (274).

fantasy, French authors like Fabrice Colin, Léa Sihol, Mathieu Gaborit, Erik L'Homme, and Pierre Bottero have all created fantastic other worlds that offer readers an imaginative context in which to explore the responsibilities and consequences of growing up.

Pierre Bottero's alternate world of Gwendalavir has achieved enormous popularity among French young adults. In *Lecture Jeune*, a student named Émilie reported her enchantment: « j'étais intriguée par l'histoire de cette fille propulsée dans un monde parallèle » while another enjoyed Bottero's fictional universe: « Ce qui m'a plu, c'est le pays imaginaire. C'est un univers totalement différent du nôtre » (« Nous sommes éveillés! » 12-13). These young adults are not alone. Gilles Béhotéguy of l'Université Montesquieu-Bordeaux IV writes that the success of Bottero's *Ewilan* trilogies *La Quête d'Ewilan* and *Les Mondes d'Ewilan* "ont imposé Pierre Bottero comme écrivain français de fantasy pour la jeunesse" (21).

Bottero's *Ewilan* cycle takes place in the semi-medieval empire of Gwendalavir, which exists in a mysterious 'other' world known simply as L'Autre Monde. These new worlds are only accessible to his protagonist Ewilan via the Imagination, a mystical, tertiary dimension much like *the force* in George Lucas's *Star Wars* or *l'Önd* of Erik L'Homme's apprentice-sorcerer Guillemot in *Le Livre des Étoiles*. In creating such fantasy worlds, Bottero explains the writer's task is one of discovery: "Écrire la *fantasy*, c'est avancer avec son personnage, lui faire emprunter un chemin et découvrir qu'il peut aller toujours au-delà" ("Rencontre" 9). Discovering new paths or *chemins* through other worlds works in tandem with the inner journey toward self-awareness, confirming Deidre Baker's remark that "[f]antasy journeys take place in a landscape, whether physical or emotional, literal or figurative – or most likely all four" (238). In both *Ewilan* trilogies, the dual "landscapes" of the characters' physical surroundings and their emotional spaces are important components of the narrative. The wild and treacherous terrain of L'Autre Monde, with its monsters and ferocious animals provides a marvelous backdrop in the tradition of *Dungeons and Dragons*.<sup>1</sup> *Ewilan's* interior, emotional spaces remind readers that even as the story is fantastic, her thoughts and reactions remain psychologically plausible.

The multiple quests of Bottero's heroine Ewilan are consonant with the basic structure of the young adult fantasy narrative: Ewilan escapes the fictional version of the "real" world and miraculously finds herself in her original, magical world of Gwendalavir. She discovers her powerful talent of Imagination that allows her to rescue her true parents and to save her new world from the evil that threatens it. Even as Ewilan journeys through a world full of supernatural monsters and befriends equally marvelous companions, the choices she makes highlight the ways in which she constructs her identity and freedom, confirming Bottero's assertion

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<sup>1</sup> Bottero cites the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* as having a seminal effect on his stories: "Étudiant, j'ai découvert les jeux de rôles, dont *Donjons et Dragons*, et cela a contribué à ma 'formation' d'écrivain. En effet, en tant que maître du jeu, je dirigeais les joueurs, prenant plaisir à les mettre en scène. Tout reposait sur mon imagination" (8).

that “[m]on personnage a autant de possibilités qu’il y a des chemins qui se présentent à lui. Par conséquent, une multitude d’émotions ou d’actions s’offrent à lui” (“Rencontre” 10). As Bottero’s repetition of *chemins* suggests, choosing between multiple paths whose endpoints are unknown is the work of his protagonist as well as his readers, who also live in the complex cognitive, psychological, and emotional ‘territory’ of adolescence itself.

Bottero focalizes the narrative through the eyes of his heroine, an ordinary French teenager, Camille Duciel, whose thoughts and reactions frequently mirror readers’ own. Because readers discover Gwendalavir, L’Autre Monde, and the Imagination at the same time that Camille does, adolescent readers find that they have a protagonist with whom they can identify. Paths, choices, and possibilities expand for Ewilan just as they do for Bottero’s readers. Bottero’s fictional version of modern-day France (where his heroine is initially known as Camille) negates choice, and requires evasion. Camille’s boredom and isolation suggests that this “real” world is a physical and emotional prison, a dystopia from which she must escape. Camille’s home, “une des plus belles demeures, au cœur d’un jardin ceint de hauts murs” (*D’un monde à l’autre* 27) combines wealth with isolation. Like the walls that surround her home, Camille feels as invisible and as cut-off from her adoptive parents, the Duciels, as many adolescent readers may feel from their own families. Camille’s lack of choice confirms Anne Besson’s argument that young adult protagonists in fantasy “se savent étrangers au terne quotidien dans lequel ils ont vu le jour” (132). As Camille tells her friend, “du moment où je rapporte de bons bulletins et je me tiens bien à table, [mes parents] se fichent complètement de ce que je fais!” (*D’un monde à l’autre* 20). Camille’s assessment of the Duciels may indeed ring true for adolescent readers who feel that their own parents are more concerned with their schoolwork and behavior than with their inner struggles. Like Camille, Bottero’s young adult readers recognize the difference between appearance and lived experience. Camille’s life in France may have material advantages, but the absence of empathy and emotional connection there renders it bland and dystopic.

As its title implies, Bottero’s first volume, *D’un monde à l’autre*, quickly posits an alternative parallel world to which Camille travels. Thanks to her supernatural ability to perform a “un pas sur le côté,” Camille suddenly finds herself in Gwendalavir, in which she and her real family have their origins. Her arrival gives her a sense of place and belonging that were absent from her previous existence. “Camille avait accepté le fait que ce monde était le sien. Elle le percevait dans toutes les fibres de son corps” (*D’un monde à l’autre* 137). Camille has a new name, Ewilan, and a new destiny. Her powers of Imagination open up an astonishing number of spaces and paths through this new territory. Ewilan’s knowledge that she is at last in her original world, even as it remains threatened and imperiled, responds to her deeply-held desire for a place of her own, a desire with which Bottero’s young adult readers also identify.

Moreover, it is in Gwendalavir that Ewilan discovers her ability to enter the alternate dimension of the Imagination and to modify reality in ways that are

unavailable to her companions.<sup>1</sup> If the boundaries of L'Autre Monde and Gwendalavir are geographically stable, the Imagination is an alternate, infinite dimension, whose fluid boundaries require mental elasticity and complex thought and reflection. Ewilan learns that "L'Imagination est une dimension, un univers, si tu préfères, mais immatériel... Il y a une infinité de chemins, une infinité de possibles, qu'ouvre le pouvoir du dessinateur" (*D'un monde à l'autre* 113). The myriad possibilities of this unseen realm allow Ewilan not only to modify reality, but also to engage her own creativity in service of this new world. Ewilan's quest to save Gwendalavir and the Imagination is especially empowering to Bottero's adolescent readers, who see her fantastic battles against monstrous enemies as metaphors for their own desire for psychological autonomy and choice in the world outside the text – a world which can be as hostile to readers as Bottero's L'Autre Monde is to Ewilan and her companions.

Just as the other fantasy protagonists (Rowling's Harry, Tolkien's Frodo) are solely responsible for the defeat of evil, Ewilan learns that she alone possesses the talent to rescue Gwendalavir from Éléa Ril' Morierval, an evil enchantress whose power threatens to engulf all worlds in the cycle. From the adults around her, Ewilan learns that she "représente sans doute la dernière chance de l'Empire" (*D'un monde à l'autre* 163), just as her mentor Duom Nil'Erg tells her that "[l]a survie de Gwendalavir passe par toi..." (*Les Frontières de Glace* 84). Yet even as she shoulders such a heavy responsibility, Ewilan is not alone. In her movement through the dangerous and forbidding spaces of Gwendalavir's forests and mountains, Ewilan depends on a group of loyal companions who help her survive. Philippe Clermont writes that Bottero's group of fellow travelers follows Tolkien's model from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which Bottero himself has described as foundational to his sense of story (195).<sup>2</sup> Like Tolkien's Fellowship or Guillemot's band of friends in L'Homme's trilogy *Le Livre des Étoiles*, Ewilan's group forms a surrogate family within which she is protected: "des amis loyaux tenaient désormais le rôle que les Duciel avaient toujours refusé" (*L'Île du Destin* 153). Each member is tied to each other not by blood relation, but by their repeated choices to continue their journey despite their other duties. These choices are a sign of the group's collective sense of responsibility and the importance of friends to

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Clermont notes that Bottero's system of magic is elaborate: "'Volonté, créativité et pouvoir' sont les trois composantes de ce don qu'on imagine sans peine être une métaphore de la création artistique. Formule prononcée, signe tracé, 'dessin' mental esquissé, ces trois systèmes ont en commun d'avoir un rapport au langage, oral ou écrit, rappelant implicitement que ces fictions sont avant tout des univers des mots" (194).

<sup>2</sup> Bottero described reading Tolkien's trilogy as "une révolution....À partir de ce moment je me suis passionné pour la littérature fantastique alors que j'avais beaucoup de réticences vis-à-vis les romans proposés à l'école. J'associais ces derniers à l'idée d'une lecture obligatoire, douloureuse" ("Rencontre"8). See also Clermont's comment: "La communauté qui se constitue autour d'Ewilan dans son périple, avec guerriers, mage, voleurs et Elfe, tient à la fois de la Communauté de l'Anneau et d'une équipe de personnages de jeux de rôles" (195).

Bottero's adolescent and young adult readers. Caroline Westberg, Bottero's editor at Rageot explains that "[l]es ados sont à un âge où l'on se structure énormément, en group, en bande" ("Rencontre avec Rageot Editeur" Question 12). Ewilan's diverse group of companions is a reminder that ordinary qualities like humor, wisdom, courage, creativity and strength – qualities which adolescent readers can identify and possess – are more important than magical or supernatural gifts.

If Ewilan's happiness and sense of purpose suggest a movement from a dystopic "real" world to a utopic dreamscape, Bottero complicates his heroine's new life with a world that is destabilized and threatened by the rise of powerful destructive forces. In *Gwendalavir*, survival requires deadly combat similar to the battles in role-playing games that inform Bottero's narrative. Brushes with monstrous enemy creatures, death, and mortal wounds are common for members of Ewilan's coterie and confirm *L'Autre Monde* as a dystopic space. Charged with saving this multiverse, Ewilan acts with urgency despite the pain that her best efforts to choose the right path cause. Her journey in *Les Frontières de Glace* leads to the death her protector, Hans, just as her later insistence on traveling to the imperiled city at Valingaï results in the violent deaths of her companions, Erylis, Artis, and Maniel. The more she travels in *L'Autre Monde*, the more Ewilan realizes that her choices and her paths put her new surrogate family at risk.

Nor is Ewilan immune to suffering. She learns that failure of her quest will bring about irrevocable violence in the worlds she knows. Ironically, pursuing it will enact psychic violence on herself. In *La Forêt des Captifs* and *L'Œil d'Otolep*, Ewilan chooses to continue her quest in the face of debilitating physical agony that leaves her near death. One of her guides tells her: "*Si tu échoues, les mondes tels que tu les connais...n'existeront plus.....Tu seras seule et certaines décisions que tu prendras seront des blessures qui ne se guériront jamais...*" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 24; ital. orig.). Such is the lesson Bottero's fantastic narrative transmits to adolescent readers: growing up is a painful, difficult journey, but readers' emotional growth depends upon their courage to accept pain and loss no less than *Gwendalavir* and *L'Autre Monde* depend upon Ewilan.

Ewilan, however, does not accept such edicts without a fight. Like most adolescents, she possesses a rebellious desire for liberty and freedom. Informed that only her death will save all worlds from extinction, Ewilan's furious refusal communicates her desire to make her own decisions: "*ne me fais pas la leçon maintenant, ne me dis pas comment je dois agir et ne me parle pas de mon avenir. Il m'appartient. À moi et à moi seule!*" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 192). Even as she knows that *Gwendalavir* and all worlds beyond it depend upon her decisions, Ewilan's outburst indicates the degree to which she values the freedom to make her own choices, which is only possible if she remains alive. Ewilan's "irrepressible besoin d'espace et de mouvement" (*L'Œil d'Otolep* 45) makes her all the more determined to defy her elders' predictions and to live on her own terms. Ewilan's desire for autonomy and her refusal to be defined by the destiny that adults in *Gwendalavir* impose upon her is familiar to adolescent readers who are also coming to terms with their own maturity and constructing lives independently of their parents' control.

Despite her declaration of independence, Ewilan's choices and paths take her beyond the established boundaries of L'Autre Monde. In *Les Tentacules du Mal*, Ewilan and her companions discover a demonic power, whose name L'Ahmour, metonymically signals a demand for destructive self-love that obliterates everything in its path. Trapped in the doomed city Valingai, Ewilan and her companions are imprisoned and slated to die in mortal combat. At issue in this final battle is the choice that space offers. The arena in which they fight negates choice and freedom, as Ewilan and her companions are surrounded by a crowd roaring for their blood. Conversely, having chosen to accompany Ewilan thus far on her quest, her companions' battle against the evil they find there is a collective reiteration of Ewilan's attempt to stop Ahmour's violence from engulfing all worlds. Even as some of Ewilan's friends die, they accept their deaths as necessary moments to teach those whose lives they spare. Ewilan's liege-man Maniel tells her: "On a toujours le choix. Toujours. Il suffit de faire la bonne (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 329). Accepting the responsibility to make good choices is the lesson Ewilan and her companions learn in the midst of a world that ironically appears to cancel that possibility.

Despite this vicious final battle, the most brutal damage occurs in Ewilan's family, where the carnage is psychological rather than physical. Even as she rescues her long-lost parents, Ewilan learns that her real father's past amorous liaison with her arch-nemesis, Éléa Ril' Morienva – the very villain Ewilan and her companions have pursued – has led to her family's separation and to the instability of the empire she saves at such personal cost. As a result, Ewilan can scarcely put into words her sense of profound shock, evidenced by her hesitation: "Mon père...mon père s'est comporté... en salaud" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 268). Where she expected to find a heroic resistant to evil, Ewilan instead learns the difficult truth that her father is human and fallible. Ewilan experiences her father's admission of infidelity as a wrenching, destructive tear: "Entendre son père reconnaître les faits était une déchirure" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 380). Ewilan's sense of inner desolation is achingly real and points to similar grief that Bottero's readers know firsthand. For readers who have experienced their own parents' separations, divorces, and extramarital affairs, Ewilan's disequilibrium and anger reveal the psychological trauma many adolescents face in their daily lives. Even as Bottero's series is set in a fantastic other world, his heroine must still face all the real difficulties and ricocheting emotions with which his readers must also contend.

Thus, Ewilan's return to her original parents' home in Gwendalavir at the series' end is problematic. Her long independence and the heavy responsibility that she has shouldered alone make being a dutiful daughter difficult. Ewilan recognizes that her parents' original act of hiding her with the Duciels in France was intended as a gesture of love and protection. She nevertheless resents her involuntary exile, as she tells her real mother: "Sais-tu, parmi les milliers de souvenirs qui se bousculent sous mon crâne, une poignée à peine vous concerne?" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 382). Even as she admits the difficulty of her parents' past choices, Ewilan realizes that she has earned the right to make decisions of her own. Having spent three years determining her own survival, Ewilan can see more paths and options

than those her parents are willing to consider. Remembering Maniel's words that "Il suffit de faire la bonne" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 329), Ewilan knows that making good choices will determine the worlds that remain open to her, just as those same choices will also close off other possibilities. Ewilan realizes that choosing her own path requires as much courage as any battle she has faced throughout the series. Nor is it surprising that Bottero's readers see their choices as paramount to the kinds of adults they will become. One young adult reader explains that: "Je pense que Bottero parvient à mettre des mots sur ce qu'on a toujours ressenti" (13), and another concurs: "Quand on est adolescent, on se cherche et Bottero a mis des mots sur ce que nous sommes" ("Nous sommes éveillés!" 14). As the verb *se chercher* indicates, readers in search of themselves find that Ewilan's journey toward freedom and independence parallels the choices, sacrifices and compromises that mark their own lives.

Ewilan's discovery that she can always move beyond the paths others have set for her is a marker of her maturity. Together with her friends, she embarks on a journey to *Les Plaines Souffle*. These Plains are an idyllic world of freedom and peace, as emphasized by the prairie's ephemeral, constantly shifting nature: "Un vent chaud balayait l'immensité des plaines Souffle, sculptant les hautes herbes comme il aurait sculpté des vagues sur l'océan, dessinant dans leur vert profond des formes magiques et éphémères. Marquant ainsi son éternelle toute-puissance" (*Les Tentacules du Mal* 397). Unlike the restrictive fortress at Valingaï and the seclusion of the Duciels' house, the power of *Les Plaines Souffle* derives from its integration with the forces of nature. Whereas exertion of human control leads to violence and isolation, the Plains are stable precisely because of their flexibility and capacity for movement. The narrative leaves Ewilan and her friends as they enter this vast prairie, in a new quest to live harmoniously rather than to die courageously.

This shift from death to new life is evident when Ewilan's mentor Edwin declares, "Nous avons la vie devant nous" (398). The freedom to choose one's own life and one's own path constitutes the hopeful promise of the fantasy narrative. This hope informs Ewilan that she has made the good choice, as Maniel foresaw. It is also perhaps the reason one of Bottero's readers has said: "J'ai aimé d'autres livres, mais ceux de Bottero m'ont aidé à vivre" ("Nous sommes éveillés!" 14) We all need books that help us live. We all need stories that open new vistas and that remind us to carry those spaces with us as we move back into the world that awaits us at the story's end.

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