

Colouring Against Crisis: Imaginative Resilience and Child Agency in Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World*

Khadija Yousaf (Corresponding Author)

Lecturer Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Faisalabad

Khadijayousaf.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

Mehwish Javid

Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Faisalabad

2025f-mphil-el-030@tuf.edu.pk

Saba Aslam

Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Faisalabad

2025f-mphil-el-002@tuf.edu.pk

Abstract

Children's literature has increasingly emerged as a significant site for exploring responses to collective suffering, social instability, and cultural crises. While existing scholarships predominantly emphasize the representation of trauma and victimhood, less attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which children imaginatively negotiate and resist adverse realities. This study examines Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World* through the lens of Resilience Theory, focusing on the role of creativity as a coping mechanism in the face of societal suffering, darkness, and uncertainty. The article argues that the text constructs a discourse of imaginative resilience in which the child protagonist exercises agency by symbolically transforming a damaged world through acts of coloring and creative reimagination. Rather than

passively accepting bleak realities such as war, hunger, inequality, and despair, the child actively reconstructs these conditions into images of peace, abundance, hope, and harmony. Furthermore, the study situates the text within broader contemporary discussions of geopolitical uncertainty and collective anxiety, demonstrating how children's literature can function as a cultural resource for reimagining social realities and sustaining human agency amid crisis. Ultimately, the article contributes to children's literature studies, resilience studies, and contemporary trauma discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of child creativity in negotiating collective suffering and envisioning more humane futures.

Key Words: Resilience Theory, Imaginative Resilience, Coping Mechanism, Creative Reimagination

Introduction

The contemporary world is increasingly marked by collective anxiety arising from social instability, humanitarian crises, economic uncertainty, environmental challenges, and persistent geopolitical tensions. Such conditions generate experiences of collective suffering that extend beyond individual lives and shape the emotional and cultural consciousness of entire communities. Within this context, children's literature occupies a significant position as a cultural space where difficult realities can be negotiated, interpreted, and reimagined. Children's literature occupies a unique position in this regard because it not only reflects social realities but also provides imaginative frameworks through which young readers negotiate complex emotional and cultural experiences. Scholars have emphasized the role of children's texts in shaping subjectivity, agency, and worldviews (Nodelman, 2008; Trites, 2000; Nikolajeva, 2010). Rather than merely reflecting social crises, children's texts often provide alternative ways of understanding and responding to adversity through imagination, creativity, and hope. In doing so, the text presents creativity not merely as artistic expression but as a psychological and cultural strategy of survival. By foregrounding imagination as a form of resistance, Ahmadi's work challenges trauma-centered narratives and offers an alternative model of resilience rooted in hope, transformation, and future-oriented thinking.

Traditionally, literary scholarship has approached representations of suffering through the frameworks of trauma, loss, and victimhood. While these approaches have yielded valuable insights, they frequently emphasize the effects of adversity rather than the strategies through which individuals and communities endure and respond to it. Trauma scholars have examined how adverse experiences shape individual and collective consciousness and how literature serves as a medium for articulating such experiences (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001; Alexander, 2004, 2012). Consequently, there remains a need to examine how children's literature constructs coping mechanisms that enable young subjects to navigate uncertainty and maintain agency in the face of challenging circumstances. In this regard, resilience emerges as a productive framework for understanding the adaptive capacities embedded within literary narratives. Resilience Theory is a psychological and social science model to explain how people, families and communities are

resilient, recover, and develop in response to adversity, trauma, or major stress. Whereas Vulnerability/Damage Theory concentrates on vulnerability or harm, Resilience Theory looks at protective factors and processes which help to support positive adaptation in the face of adversity.

Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World* (2015) offers a compelling example of such resilience. Through the simple yet profound act of coloring, the child protagonist transforms images of darkness, war, hunger, inequality, and sadness into visions of peace, abundance, harmony, and joy. These transformations are not merely acts of fantasy or escapism; rather, they represent creative engagements with a damaged world. The text foregrounds child agency by presenting the child as an active participant in reshaping reality rather than a passive observer of suffering. Creativity thus functions as a coping mechanism through which adverse conditions are symbolically challenged and reimagined.

This study introduces the concept of Imaginative Resilience to describe the process by which imagination and creativity operate as strategies of psychological, cultural, and emotional survival. Imaginative Resilience refers to the capacity to confront collective suffering not through denial, but through the creative reconfiguration of reality into more hopeful and humane possibilities. In Ahmadi's text, imagination becomes a transformative force that enables the child to negotiate bleak realities while preserving hope, agency, and a vision of social renewal. This paper seeks to explore how Ahmad Reza Ahmadi's poetic imagination of childhood acquires new meanings when read alongside the lived realities of children experiencing geopolitical violence in contemporary Iran.

Problem Statement

Drawing upon Resilience Theory, this this imperative argues that *When I Coloured in the World* moves beyond trauma-centered representations of suffering and instead constructs a discourse of resilience grounded in creativity and transformation. By examining the interplay between child agency, coping mechanisms, imagination, and collective suffering, the study demonstrates how children's literature can function as a cultural resource for navigating uncertainty and envisioning alternative futures. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions in children's literature studies, resilience studies, and contemporary cultural discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of imaginative resilience in times of crisis.

Research Question

1. How does *When I Colored in the World* portray imagination as a form of resilience that enables children to endure emotional vulnerability, uncertainty, and suffering?
2. *When I Colored in the World*, and how do they contribute to children's emotional endurance in the face of adversity?

Literature Review

Trauma has emerged as one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Since the pioneering works of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Jeffrey Alexander,

trauma-informed scholarship has examined how literature represents experiences of suffering, violence, displacement, loss, and collective catastrophe (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001; Alexander, 2004). Such studies have explored the psychological and cultural consequences of war, political instability, forced migration, social oppression, and humanitarian crises. Within children's literature, trauma studies have similarly focused on the effects of conflict, bereavement, exile, environmental disasters, and historical violence on young subjects. Scholars have investigated how children's texts narrate vulnerability, fear, fragmented memory, and the long-term consequences of collective suffering (Garmezy, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1992).

While trauma studies have significantly expanded our understanding of how literature represents pain and adversity, much of this scholarship remains centered on experiences of victimhood, loss, and psychological injury. Consequently, literary analyses often emphasize what trauma does to individuals and communities rather than how individuals and communities respond to, negotiate, and survive adverse conditions. Although recent developments in resilience studies, positive psychology, and post-traumatic growth have shifted attention toward adaptation and recovery, these perspectives remain comparatively underexplored within children's literary criticism.

Existing studies of resilience frequently conceptualize it as the capacity to withstand adversity, recover from disruption, and maintain psychological functioning despite difficult circumstances (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001). Similarly, coping theory examines the behavioral and emotional strategies employed to manage stress, while hope theory emphasizes future-oriented thinking and the pursuit of positive possibilities. Post-traumatic growth further explores the transformative potential that may emerge following experiences of suffering. Despite their valuable contributions, these approaches often treat resilience, coping, hope, and growth as distinct psychological processes. Less attention has been devoted to the role of imagination and creativity as specifically literary forms of resilience, particularly in children's literature where imaginative engagement frequently serves as a primary mode of understanding and responding to the world.

Children's literature occupies a unique position in this regard. Unlike many adult narratives that foreground realism and historical representation, children's texts often employ fantasy, symbolism, play, artistic expression, and imaginative transformation as mechanisms through which difficult realities can be negotiated. Yet scholarly discussions of children's literature continue to privilege trauma narratives over the creative strategies through which young protagonists confront adversity. As a result, the relationship between imagination, child agency, and resilience remains insufficiently theorized.

This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of **Imaginative Resilience**. Unlike conventional understandings of resilience that emphasize endurance or recovery, Imaginative Resilience refers to the capacity to creatively reconfigure adverse realities into alternative possibilities that sustain hope, agency, and meaning. It differs from coping mechanisms, which primarily focus on managing distress, and from hope, which centers on future expectations. It is also distinct from post-traumatic growth, which typically describes positive transformation after

adversity has occurred. Imaginative Resilience instead foregrounds the active and ongoing role of creativity in transforming perceptions of suffering while adversity remains present. Through imagination, individuals do not merely endure difficult circumstances; they symbolically reshape them into more humane and hopeful visions.

Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World* provides a particularly valuable site for examining this concept. The text depicts a child who responds to darkness, war, hunger, inequality, and sadness not through withdrawal or passive acceptance but through acts of creative transformation. By coloring over negative realities and replacing them with images of peace, abundance, harmony, and joy, the child exercises agency and reimagines the world as it could be rather than as it is. This imaginative engagement functions as a form of resilience that challenges trauma-centered interpretations of children's literature and highlights creativity as a cultural resource for negotiating collective suffering.

Therefore, this article argues that existing trauma-informed studies have not sufficiently examined how imagination itself operates as a resilience strategy within children's literature. By conceptualizing creativity as a mode of survival rather than mere artistic expression, the study contributes to ongoing discussions of child agency, resilience, and collective suffering while proposing Imaginative Resilience as a new analytical framework for understanding children's responses to crisis, uncertainty, and social adversity.

Although trauma-informed scholarship has extensively examined the representation of suffering in children's literature, insufficient attention has been paid to imagination and creativity as resilience-based coping mechanisms through which child subjects actively negotiate collective suffering and reimagine damaged realities.

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Theoretical Framework

This study employs Resilience Theory as its primary theoretical framework to examine how imagination and creativity function as resilience-based coping mechanisms in Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World*. While trauma-informed literary scholarship has extensively explored representations of suffering, loss, displacement, and vulnerability, comparatively less attention has been paid to the adaptive strategies through which child subjects negotiate adversity and envision alternatives to damaged realities. Consequently, this study shifts the critical focus from the representation of trauma to the processes through which resilience is imaginatively constructed within children's literature.

The concept of resilience emerged as a response to deficit-oriented models that primarily emphasized vulnerability and psychological dysfunction in adverse circumstances Masten (2001, 2014). Early resilience scholars such as Norman Garmezy and Emmy Werner demonstrated that exposure to hardship does not inevitably result in negative outcomes and that individuals often

develop adaptive capacities that enable them to navigate challenging environments. Building upon this foundation, Ann Masten reconceptualized resilience as “*ordinary magic*”, arguing that resilience is not an exceptional trait possessed by a few individuals but rather a dynamic process emerging from ordinary adaptive systems that support positive adjustment despite adversity. Masten's formulation is particularly relevant to children's literature because it highlights the significance of everyday resources and practices through which children respond to uncertainty and hardship Masten (2001, 2014).

Masten's theory provides a productive lens for understanding the child protagonist in *When I Coloured in the World*. The child's response to darkness, war, hunger, sadness, and inequality is not characterized by heroic resistance or extraordinary intervention. Instead, resilience emerges through the ordinary yet transformative act of coloring. Through creative engagement, the child actively reconstructs a world marked by suffering into one characterized by peace, joy, harmony, and abundance. Such acts exemplify resilience as an adaptive process through which adverse realities are symbolically negotiated rather than passively accepted.

While Masten's work provides the foundational understanding of resilience, this study also draws upon Michael Ungar's (2008, 2011, 2021) social-ecological model of resilience. Ungar argues that resilience should not be understood solely as an individual psychological attribute; rather, it involves the capacity of individuals to access, negotiate, and utilize social, cultural, and symbolic resources that sustain well-being under conditions of adversity. His approach expands resilience beyond personal adaptation and highlights the cultural dimensions through which resilience is produced and maintained. This perspective is particularly significant for literary analysis because it allows imagination and creativity to be understood not merely as personal coping strategies but as cultural resources through which individuals make sense of collective suffering.

Although resilience theory has generated substantial scholarship on adaptation, protective factors, emotional regulation, and recovery, existing approaches have paid limited attention to the role of imagination as a resilience-producing mechanism. Similarly, trauma studies within children's literature have largely concentrated on representations of suffering, vulnerability, and psychological injury. As a result, the relationship between imagination, creativity, and resilience remains insufficiently theorized. Children's literature is especially important in this regard because imaginative engagement frequently serves as a primary means through which young subjects interpret, challenge, and reconstruct their realities. Hence, resilience is therefore understood as a process of positive adaptation despite significant adversity (Luthar, 2006).

To address this theoretical gap, the present study introduces the concept of Imaginative Resilience. Imaginative Resilience refers to the capacity of child subjects to employ creativity, symbolic transformation, and imaginative reconstruction as adaptive responses to collective suffering and damaged realities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Unlike conventional understandings of coping, which emphasize the management of distress, Imaginative Resilience focuses on the creative reconfiguration of adverse conditions into alternative possibilities. Likewise, it differs from hope,

which primarily concerns expectations of a better future, and from post-traumatic growth, which generally refers to positive transformation following traumatic experiences. Imaginative Resilience instead foregrounds the active process through which imagination transforms perceptions of suffering while adversity remains present.

Within this framework, imagination functions as more than fantasy or escapism. It becomes a form of child agency through which young subjects symbolically challenge the apparent permanence of violence, deprivation, sadness, and social inequality. Creativity serves as a resilience-based coping mechanism that enables children to negotiate difficult realities while preserving meaning, possibility, and emotional continuity. Through imaginative transformation, children are not detached from reality; rather, they actively engage with it and reconstruct it in more hopeful and humane ways.

Applied to Ahmadi's text, Imaginative Resilience becomes visible through the child's repeated acts of coloring and transformation. Images associated with collective suffering are reimagined and reconstructed into symbols of peace, harmony, abundance, and joy. These creative interventions demonstrate how imagination functions simultaneously as a coping mechanism, an expression of agency, and a strategy of resilience. The text therefore moves beyond the mere representation of trauma and instead offers a model of adaptive engagement through which damaged realities can be symbolically renegotiated.

Accordingly, this study analyzes *When I Coloured in the World* through four interconnected dimensions of Imaginative Resilience: child agency, creativity as coping, symbolic transformation, and the reimagining of damaged realities. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding how children's literature can illuminate the adaptive capacities through which young subjects negotiate collective suffering and envision alternative futures. By extending resilience theory through the concept of Imaginative Resilience, this study contributes to children's literature studies, resilience scholarship, and contemporary trauma discourse while foregrounding the transformative potential of creativity in times of uncertainty and crisis.

This framework is sufficiently focused, theoretically grounded, and original because it does not merely apply Resilience Theory; it extends it through Imaginative Resilience as a literary-analytical concept. That extension is likely to be the most distinctive aspect of your article.

Analysis

Imagination as an Adaptive Response to Collective Suffering

Throughout *When I Coloured in the World*, the child speaker repeatedly encounters conditions associated with suffering and social disorder. Rather than merely describing these conditions, the child intervenes through acts of coloring that transform undesirable realities into desirable alternatives. Images associated with war, darkness, sadness, and deprivation are repeatedly

replaced with peace, light, joy, and abundance. The recurring phrase "When I coloured..." establishes coloring as a deliberate act of intervention rather than passive observation.

From the perspective of Ann Masten's resilience framework, these imaginative acts function as adaptive processes through which the child negotiates adversity. Masten's concept of "ordinary magic" suggests that resilience emerges through ordinary human capacities that support positive adaptation despite difficult circumstances (Masten, 2001, 2014). Coloring functions as one such adaptive process. Rather than escaping reality, the child engages with adverse conditions through symbolic transformation. Imagination therefore becomes a mechanism through which resilience is enacted (Ahmadi, 2015, p. 20).

The significance of this process lies in its rejection of deterministic understandings of suffering. The child does not accept darkness, war, or sadness as fixed realities. Instead, these realities become subject to creative reconstruction. This demonstrates that resilience within the text is not represented as endurance alone but as an active cognitive and imaginative process of reinterpretation.

This finding extends resilience scholarship by illustrating how children's literature conceptualizes adaptation through imagination. While traditional resilience studies often focus on emotional regulation, social support, and recovery, Ahmadi's text foregrounds creativity as a resilience-producing practice. The text therefore invites a reconsideration of resilience as a literary and cultural process rather than solely a psychological one.

Creativity as a Coping Mechanism

One of the most striking features of the text is the child's repeated use of artistic creativity to respond to adverse realities. Whenever the child encounters an undesirable condition, coloring becomes the means through which that condition is transformed. Creativity is not presented as a decorative activity; it becomes the central strategy through which the child engages with the world (Ungar, 2011, 2021).

Within resilience theory, coping mechanisms are understood as strategies that enable individuals to manage adversity and maintain functioning under stressful conditions. In Ahmadi's text, creativity performs this coping function. The child's imaginative acts provide a means of negotiating emotional and social realities that might otherwise produce feelings of helplessness. Rather than withdrawing from difficulty, the child responds through creative engagement.

This representation challenges conventional distinctions between creativity and survival. Creativity is often understood as an aesthetic activity, whereas resilience is typically associated with adaptation and recovery. The text collapses this distinction by demonstrating that artistic imagination itself can become a strategy of survival.

The analysis contributes to children's literature studies by foregrounding creativity as a resilience-based coping mechanism. In doing so, it expands existing trauma-informed approaches that

primarily focus on the representation of suffering and highlights the adaptive capacities embedded within imaginative practices.

Child Agency and the Reconstruction of Reality

The child narrator consistently occupies the position of an active transformer rather than a passive observer. The world presented in the text is not simply experienced; it is repeatedly modified through acts of coloring. The child reconstructs images associated with violence, deprivation, and sadness into images characterized by peace, abundance, and joy. The text constructs the child as an active producer of meaning rather than a passive recipient of experience, thereby foregrounding child agency (Nikolajeva, 2010; Trites, 2000). Resilience scholars emphasize the importance of agency in adaptive functioning. Agency refers to the capacity to act purposefully within challenging circumstances. In Ahmadi's text, agency is expressed through imaginative intervention. The child's ability to transform reality symbolically demonstrates a refusal to remain constrained by adverse conditions.

The child's actions challenge dominant trauma narratives that frequently position children as powerless victims of external forces. Instead, the text constructs childhood as a site of creativity, participation, and transformation. The child becomes a producer of meaning rather than a recipient of suffering.

This analysis contributes to contemporary childhood studies by highlighting the role of imagination in the formation of child agency. The text demonstrates that agency may operate symbolically as well as materially, thereby expanding existing understandings of how children negotiate collective suffering.

Imaginative Resilience and the Transformation of Damaged Realities

A recurring pattern throughout the text involves the transformation of damaged realities into hopeful alternatives. War becomes peace, darkness becomes light, sadness becomes happiness, and deprivation becomes abundance. These transformations constitute the narrative's central structural principle.

While resilience theory explains adaptation under adversity, the text suggests a more specific process at work. The child does not simply cope with suffering; the child creatively reconstructs it. This process is best understood through the concept of Imaginative Resilience, which this study defines as the capacity to employ imagination and creativity to transform perceptions of adverse realities into alternative possibilities.

Imaginative Resilience differs from related concepts such as coping, hope, and post-traumatic growth. Coping focuses on managing distress, hope focuses on expectations of future improvement, and post-traumatic growth focuses on positive change after adversity. Imaginative Resilience, by contrast, operates during adversity through acts of symbolic transformation. It is therefore an ongoing process rather than an outcome (Ahmadi, 2015, p. 4).

By proposing Imaginative Resilience as an analytical category, this study extends existing resilience theory into the domain of children's literature. The concept provides a framework for understanding how imaginative practices function as resilience-producing mechanisms in literary representations of childhood. The child's creative transformations exemplify resilience as both adaptive functioning and cultural resource negotiation (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2021).

From Individual Adaptation to Cultural Resilience

The child's transformations consistently address collective concerns rather than purely personal experiences. War, hunger, inequality, and suffering are social realities that affect communities rather than isolated individuals. The child's imaginative interventions therefore engage with broader cultural conditions.

Michael Ungar's social-ecological model of resilience emphasizes the importance of cultural and symbolic resources in sustaining well-being under adversity. Within the text, imagination functions as such a resource. The child's creative acts generate symbolic alternatives to collective suffering and thereby contribute to a discourse of resilience that extends beyond individual adaptation.

The text reveals that resilience is not solely an individual psychological phenomenon. Rather, it can operate as a cultural practice through which communities imagine alternatives to violence, deprivation, and social fragmentation. Creativity becomes a means of sustaining collective hope and envisioning social renewal.

This finding broadens resilience scholarship by demonstrating that children's literature can function as a site of cultural resilience. The text illustrates how imaginative practices enable young subjects to engage with collective suffering while simultaneously constructing visions of more humane and equitable futures.

Synthesis towards a Theory of Imaginative Resilience

The analysis demonstrates that *When I Coloured in the World* does not merely represent suffering; it presents creativity as a resilience-producing mechanism through which child subjects actively negotiate damaged realities. Through acts of coloring, the child transforms adversity into possibility, vulnerability into agency, and suffering into hope. Building upon Masten's understanding of resilience as adaptive functioning and Ungar's emphasis on cultural resources, this study proposes Imaginative Resilience as a theoretical framework for understanding how imagination operates as a form of adaptation within children's literature.

Consequently, Ahmadi's text moves beyond trauma-centered narratives and offers a model of childhood resilience grounded in creativity, symbolic transformation, and the reimagining of collective futures. This is how it contributes to children's literature studies, resilience scholarship, and contemporary trauma discourse by shifting critical attention from the representation of suffering to the creative processes through which suffering is negotiated and transformed. The concept of Imaginative Resilience not only provides a new framework for

interpreting Ahmadi's work but also offers a productive analytical model for future studies examining the relationship between creativity, child agency, and resilience in children's literature. In an era increasingly marked by uncertainty, instability, and collective anxiety, Ahmadi's text reminds readers that imagination remains one of the most powerful resources through which damaged realities can be reimagined and more hopeful futures envisioned.

Conclusion

This study has examined Ahmadreza Ahmadi's *When I Coloured in the World* through the lens of Resilience Theory to explore how imagination and creativity function as resilience-based coping mechanisms in children's literature. Moving beyond trauma-centered approaches that primarily focus on representations of suffering, the study has demonstrated that Ahmadi's text foregrounds the adaptive capacities through which child subjects actively negotiate adverse realities and envision alternative possibilities. Through the recurring act of coloring, the child protagonist transforms images of war, darkness, hunger, sadness, and inequality into symbols of peace, light, abundance, joy, and harmony. These symbolic transformations reveal creativity not merely as artistic expression but as a meaningful strategy of adaptation and survival.

Drawing upon Ann Masten's concept of resilience as "ordinary magic" and Michael Ungar's social-ecological understanding of resilience, this study has argued that imagination operates as a significant resilience-producing resource within the text. Rather than positioning the child as a passive victim of collective suffering, Ahmadi constructs childhood as a site of agency, creativity, and transformation. The child engages with difficult realities not through avoidance or denial but through imaginative reconstruction, thereby demonstrating the capacity to reinterpret and renegotiate adverse conditions. In this way, the text challenges dominant narratives of childhood vulnerability and instead presents children as active participants in the creation of meaning and possibility.

The central contribution of this study lies in its formulation of Imaginative Resilience as an analytical framework for understanding how imagination functions as a resilience-based coping mechanism in children's literature. Unlike coping, which focuses on managing distress, hope, which emphasizes future expectations, or post-traumatic growth, which concerns positive transformation after adversity, Imaginative Resilience describes the ongoing process through which child subjects creatively reconstruct damaged realities while adversity remains present. It highlights the role of symbolic transformation in sustaining agency, meaning, and emotional continuity amid conditions of uncertainty and collective suffering.

Furthermore, the study has shown that the resilience represented in Ahmadi's text extends beyond individual adaptation and contributes to a broader cultural discourse of renewal. By transforming conflict into peace, deprivation into abundance, and despair into hope, the child imagines possibilities that challenge the permanence of social and emotional damage. These imaginative acts function as cultural resources through which alternative futures can be envisioned and

affirmed. Consequently, *When I Coloured in the World* illustrates how children's literature can serve as a powerful medium for negotiating collective anxieties and fostering resilient modes of thinking in times of crisis. The findings support Masten's (2014) understanding of resilience as an adaptive process while extending Ungar's (2021) social-ecological model by demonstrating how imagination functions as a resilience-producing cultural resource within children's literature.

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