

The Role of African Fiction in Educating about Albinism and Human Rights: Jenny Robson's *Because Pula Means Rain* (1998) and Ben Hanson's *Takadini* (1997).

Abstract

The term 'albinism' refers to a group of related inherited conditions characterized by a deficiency in the production of the pigment melanin, which results in the partial or complete absence of pigment from the skin, hair and eyes, and varying degrees of visual impairment. As well as the practical problems associated with living with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, understandings of the condition vary considerably, and many people with albinism face stigmatization and ostracism as a result of a web of beliefs and misconceptions surrounding the condition. In response to a wave of attacks against people with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa since 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in 2013 calling for the prevention of attacks and discrimination against people with albinism, and on 18 December 2014 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 13 June as International Albinism Awareness Day.

Our interest here is in how fiction contributes to understandings of albinism and raises awareness of the human rights of people with albinism in Africa. The two novels we consider here belong to a growing body of African literature which explicitly sets out to educate on a range of contemporary issues. Jenny Robson's *Because Pula Means Rain* (1998) and Ben Hanson's *Takadini* (1997) are aimed at a young adult readership. They explore the impact of albinism on their protagonists and those around them, and their struggle to define an identity for themselves. Our article will focus on the representation of albinism in these novels, considering the extent to which these fictional representations enhance understandings of albinism and raise awareness of the human rights of people with albinism.. Our article demonstrates that fiction has an important role to play in highlighting the multidimensionality of albinism, and NGOs and albinism organisations are beginning to recognise its importance in their advocacy for the human rights of people with albinism.

The Role of African Fiction in Educating about Albinism and Human Rights: Jenny Robson's *Because Pula Means Rain* (1998) and Ben Hanson's *Takadini* (1997).

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“Give us the opportunity, we can do it”.

John Chiti, “Disability is not Inability”

“There is no room in this 21st century for erroneous and harmful beliefs, or for discrimination on any grounds. People with albinism are just as deserving of dignity as every other human being. They have the right to live free from discrimination, deprivation and fear.”

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

“Albinism” refers to a range of inherited conditions which result in little or no melanin pigment being produced in the body. Oculocutaneous albinism, which is the focus here, causes the partial or complete absence of pigment from the skin, hair and eyes, and varying degrees of visual impairment. As well as the practical problems associated with living with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, understandings of the condition vary considerably between urban and rural areas, as well as between different national and cultural groups. As Baker et al. acknowledge in their study of albinism in South Africa and Zimbabwe, even when genetic explanations are accepted, they often run parallel to existing beliefs, leading to the stigmatization and ostracism of many people with albinism in the region (Baker et al. 2010: 170). The consequences for the whole extended family are profound. Advocacy groups including the Albinism Society of South Africa are calling for “public education about the condition and counselling for affected individuals and their families” (Albinism Society of South Africa website), and academics recommend that the social problems encountered by children with albinism might be alleviated by “a team (interactionist) approach including children, teachers, parents, health officials and the wider community” (Lund and Gaigher, 2002: 366). While concrete steps have been taken in parts of sub-Saharan Africa to educate communities about albinism through motivational speakers and genetic counsellors, there is a wider audience to be reached. Our interest here is in the role that fiction can play in contributing to enhancing understandings of albinism and raising awareness of the human rights of people with albinism in Africa.

The complex nature of albinism and the taboos and prejudices that surround this genetic condition have made it an inspiring subject for writers of fiction. Characters—and often protagonists—with albinism can be found in a number of works of African literature, from Chinua Achebe's *The Interpreters* (1970) to Buchi Emecheta's *The Moonlight Bride* (1983) and Patricia Schonstein's *Breakfast at Brabazan* (2010). The representation of albinism in works of literary fiction tends to be highly stereotypical, and the qualities of albinism are typically exaggerated to identify albino characters as deviant or strange. However, it is important not to generalise here. A more creative treatment of the trope of albinism can be found in African

literature. Guinean writer Williams Sassine uses the symbolic trope of albinism in *Wirriyamu* (1976) and *Mémoire d'une peau* (1998) to raise important questions about the paradigms around which the colonial and postcolonial worlds of his novels are structured and to demand a re-examination of what constitutes the postcolonial African self (Baker 2010). The Angolan author José Eduardo Agualusa explores the malleability of identity through his albino protagonist Félix Ventura in *The Book of Chameleons* (2006). In a more recently-published African novel with an albino protagonist, Meg Vandermerwe's *Zebra Crossing* (2013) portrays a young Zimbabwean girl with albinism who becomes a victim of superstitions about albinism, but also examines the complexity of the immigrant experience while offering a critique of contemporary South African society.

With an altogether different agenda, Jenny Robson's *Pula* and Ben Hanson's *Takadini* belong to a growing body of African fiction that explicitly sets out to educate on a range of contemporary issues, such as HIV AIDS and the phenomenon of child witches. One example of this type of text is Ayodele Olofintuade's children's book *Eno's Story* (2010), published in association with the non-governmental organisation Stepping Stones Nigeria. Olofintuade's short story highlights the consequences of being labelled a child witch and illustrates how an organization such as Stepping Stones Nigeria can help children in Eno's situation. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the use of drama and film to educate about HIV AIDS. For example, DramAidE uses didactic theatre as a tool for AIDS education in South Africa, and in Nigeria the nonprofit organisation 'Communicating for Change' commissioned a series of Nollywood films to convey their message about HIV AIDS to a wider audience. (Edozien 2016). Against this wider context, our article examines the ways in which the novels discussed here are distinct from literary works on albinism, consider the role of fiction in addressing sensitive issues relating to albinism in sub-Saharan Africa, and highlight the contribution that cultural production can make to advocacy for the human rights of people with albinism. Fictional narratives play a significant role in shaping wider understandings of albinism, and disability more broadly. As Nickianne Moody remarks, "Popular narrative is not trivial. It forms part of discursive practices that support inequality, influence medical and social decisions and determine interaction between non-able-bodied and non-disabled experience and identity" ("Methodological Agendas," 39).

Albinism and Human Rights

The visible physical difference of people with albinism has inspired beliefs and myths that result in their marginalisation and social exclusion. As we have discussed elsewhere, the beliefs associated with albinism have a profound effect on people with the condition from the moment of their birth until their death (Baker et al. 2010: 178). People with albinism can be killed at birth because of a lack of understanding of the genetic cause of the condition, ostracised because of unfounded fears of contagion, or denied access to education because of mistaken assumptions about their intellectual ability. As such, the beliefs surrounding albinism affect not only the family life of people with this genetic condition, but also interfere with their access to education, employment and marriage. At the other extreme, people with albinism are considered by some individuals and communities to have special abilities, to be able to communicate with the spirit world or cure HIV AIDS, for example. It is because of these beliefs and their consequences that the education of communities and individuals about albinism has become more important than ever since 2006. A widely-reported wave of attacks on people with albinism in Tanzania subsequently spread to neighbouring countries in central Africa such that albinism is now a life-threatening condition in the region (Fahy Bryceson et al. 2010). The use of the body parts of

people with albinism as ‘good luck’ charms results from the mistaken belief that these will bring good fortune and wealth. 207 killings of people with albinism were recorded between 2007 and 2013, although the number is thought to be considerably higher, as many cases go unreported (Under the Same Sun).

In response to the attacks and campaigns by human rights groups such as Under the Same Sun, in 2013 the UNHRC adopted Resolution 23/13 that calls for the prevention of attacks and discrimination against people with albinism. Importantly, the resolution reaffirms that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person, and that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”, recalls the fundamental principle of equality and non-discrimination that underlies international human rights instruments and reaffirms the right to health and education as enshrined in the UDHR. Demonstrating awareness of the need to communicate between stakeholders on albinism, this resolution also establishes the mandate of an Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism. It was followed by the adoption of a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 2014 proclaiming 13 June as International Albinism Awareness Day. The discrimination suffered by people with albinism has been highlighted by the office of the High Commissioner of the UNHR with a dedicated website entitled “People with Albinism: Not Ghosts but Human Beings”. Here the misunderstandings, prejudice and stigma experienced by those with albinism worldwide are described, accompanied by a statement that “Albinism is still profoundly misunderstood, socially and medically”.

A number of fictional texts and films about albinism have emerged in recent years that have aimed to influence understandings of albinism, published with the support of albinism associations or non-governmental organisations. Ben Hanson’s *Takadini* was the first of these, published in 1997 in association with the Zimbabwe Albino Association. *Takadini* is particularly interesting because it has had an important position in Zimbabwe’s education system as part of the literature set texts for the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (Z.J.C.) in Zimbabwe, ensuring its wide readership amongst young people. The second novel we discuss here, Jenny Robson’s *Because Pula Means Rain*, was written in association with the Albinism Society of South Africa and published in 2002. The novel was well received and was awarded the Samlam Prize for Youth Literature and the UNESCO Prize for Children’s and Youth Literature in 2003. Other examples of cultural products being used to advocate for the human rights of people with albinism include the songs of Salif Keita, an Afro-pop singer-songwriter from Mali, who is known as ‘the Golden Voice of Africa’. Zambian musician John Chiti, who is also Director of the Albinism Foundation of Zambia, uses his music as a powerful tool for advocacy. In 2015, both the children’s story *Moon, Shining Bright* (2015) by Sulaikah Theis and Anneloes Versteeg and the Swahili film ‘White Shadow’, directed by Noaz Deshe brought renewed attention to the threat faced by people with albinism in Tanzania. Deshe’s visceral film follows a young albino boy, Alias, who witnesses the killing of his albino father and is forced by his mother to seek the relative security of the city. The film has been screened throughout Europe and Africa to raise awareness of the plight of people with albinism.

Both Hanson and Robson’s novels present evidence-based and credible stories of the experiences of living with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa. Hanson’s *Takadini* tells the story of a mother fighting for acceptance of her disabled son in a traditional African society. Normally, the reader is told, children who are disabled or who have albinism are ‘sent back to the elders’ after their birth, but Sekai does not want to accept this fate for her son. The novel follows her struggles to create a secure future for Takadini. The protagonist of Robson’s *Pula* lives in Kedia

Heights in Botswana, but he has always felt different because of his albinism. Emmanuel's mother has abandoned him and the novel follows his journey towards self-understanding. Despite differences in tone and scope, the novels share a number of common themes that speak to the realities of living with albinism in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, namely social exclusion, the web of beliefs around albinism, the building of relationships, the mutability of identity, and the possibility of integration. We examine each of these briefly here before returning to the question of the status of these texts as tools for advocacy.

Exclusion and Isolation

The lack of pigmentation of the skin, hair and eyes of people with albinism marks their difference in sub-Saharan Africa. Reference is made to the colour of the two boys' albino skin throughout *Pula* and *Takadini* as Emmanuel is described as 'pig pink' (Robson 11) and Takadini portrayed as 'creamy, grub-like' (Hanson 13). As Baker observes in her study of literary representations of albinism, the striking appearance of skin is always foregrounded in fictional accounts of albinism, as if to suggest that there is no need to look beyond that skin to identify the person with albinism (Baker 2011: 31). The lack of pigmentation in their skin is depicted as an affliction, ascribed a sense of incongruity, and highlights their exclusion. The exclusion experienced by people with albinism has been acknowledged in a number of academic studies. Lund and Gaigher remark that "Children with albinism experience problems that are, on the one hand, physiological, and, on the other, social-psychological and educational in nature" (366). Indeed, the protagonists of *Pula* and *Takadini* are portrayed as outcasts because of the physical restraints imposed by their albinism, but principally because of the attitudes of other people towards them. Emmanuel's first person narration allows the reader of *Pula* to experience living with albinism vicariously, to share the protagonist's experiences and feel the pain of daily name-calling, rejection and isolation. Sixteen year old Emmanuel feels different, "an alien being" (Robson 1). His sense of rejection by the community in which he lives is constantly reinforced by name-calling as he hears himself referred to as *leswafe*, the Setswana name for a person with albinism, which Gareth Dart et al. explain "denotes a thing whose colour has been cleaned off (in Setswana the prefix '*le*' denotes an object rather than a person)" (78). Emmanuel understands the name to suggest that he is "an alien or a refugee and not a Motswana at all" (Robson 18). Emmanuel is also called a "white monkey" (Robson 19) and a freak, and the reader is invited to empathise with the anger and shame he describes on hearing these insults. It is in response to similar name calling and gossip that Takadini's mother Sekai flees the community in which she has grown up, having overheard women whispering that her baby was born to her because she "had too much milk to drink during pregnancy" (Hanson 25), as well as the more malicious accusations that she is a witch. While such accusations represent an attempt to explain the phenomenon of albinism, they also reveal a preoccupation with stigmatising people with this genetic condition as a different and deviant human, not human (Baker 2011: 68-75). Disappointed at the negative response of her husband Makwati, the accusations of adultery he levels at her, and fearing that her child will be "sent back to the ancestors" (Hanson 29), Sekai seeks exile in a neighbouring village. However, there is no escaping the name calling and judgment of others, and Takadini grows up reminded that he is *sope*, or without a skin.

Both protagonists are the targets of prejudice and name calling on the part of other children. Takadini's situation is aggravated by his physical disability that results from an injury sustained as a baby. Dart et al. comment on the challenges faced by learners who have albinism in mainstream schools, noting their isolation by other students (78). In addition to advocates

working via local and national associations to lobby for the human rights of those with albinism, the voices of ordinary people with albinism are increasingly being heard. As part of an inclusive education project in Malawi, Idrissa Kassim, a secondary school student in Malawi, describes his early education: “At primary school, my friends were giving me different names and saying bad things which I did not like, but still others, like my sisters, were encouraging me despite all this, by telling me that I must still go to school. My mother worked to pay for my school fees” (Lund et al. 2013). He goes on to describe how his teachers support his right to an education: “At secondary school many people encourage me to do my school. The teachers help me by telling me to wear a hat and also do all the organization for my school fees; they do it so that I get education...” (Lund et al. 2013).

Takadini is teased by his peers for his albinism and his physical disability, and struggles to comprehend the children’s reaction to him: “Many questions chased one another in a confused manner through his mind. [...] Why was there no one else who hopped all the time like he did? And why was there no one else who looked like him?” (Hanson 96-97). As the novel evolves chronologically, Takadini comes to a greater understanding of his albinism and his disability, as well as the reactions of those around him, and so does the reader. In *Pula*, Emmanuel also suffers at the hands of other children because of his visible difference, and their bullying leads to his isolation. At school the pupils avoid Emmanuel, do not want to sit next to or work with him, and exclude him from classroom discussions. This isolation spreads beyond the classroom to the hospital where, when he is injured in a car accident, he is aware of “the whispers and the hidden laughter among the other patients who never spoke to me” (Robson 74). It is because Emmanuel has experienced friendship in the past that this experience of isolation and exclusion is all the more profound. However, it is notable that Emmanuel’s friends are other children who find themselves on the margins, including Keshia, who has a German father, and Pearl, who is blind.

Emmanuel’s exclusion at school is compounded by one girl in particular. The articulate, charismatic pupil Naledi knows how to tell a good story. As each new pupil enters the village school they relish her dramatic rendition of the “terrible, terrible” story about albinism (Robson 116), a tale first hinted at on the first page of the book, but not revealed until the end of the narrative. Naledi recounts how a *leswafe* becomes so lonely that in his desperation he kidnaps a small child, hides the child and bring him out at night, so that he has someone to talk to, “And the child never, never gets back home to his own people” (Robson 116). As a result Emmanuel’s fellow pupils fear him, only ever knowing him as a representation of *leswafe*, their attitudes clouded by superstition.

In Hanson’s *Takadini*, the protagonist’s exclusion is similarly reinforced by the constant bullying of an older boy, Nhamo, whose cruelty is illustrated in a passage which describes his brutal treatment of a lizard:

Nhamo held the wriggling lizard firmly and looked closely at Taka. Taka looked back pleadingly and repeated, ‘Let it go’. For an answer, Nhamo shifted his grip from the sides of the lizard to its head. Then with quick jerks of his right hand, he yanked off each leg one after the other. At each loss, the unfortunate creature opened its toothless mouth in what seemed like a silent scream of pain. (105)

The horror of the act is treated unflinchingly by Hanson, echoing the cruelty that Nhamo directs at Takadini. At this moment, Takadini is forced into a painful awareness that he is different from the other children, “no one had ever before so bluntly and brutally rejected him” (Hanson 107).

Given the target age group of these novels as works of youth fiction, the focus on bullying is important. Certainly, people with albinism may encounter such negative attitudes, but it is likely that the wider young adult readership of these novels will also be aware of bullying in their own educational contexts and they will therefore be able to relate to the experiences of the protagonists.

Beliefs about albinism

The lack of physical contact with other people, which is founded on the complex web of beliefs surrounding albinism, reinforces the isolation of Emmanuel and Takadini. In the rural village in Botswana portrayed in *Pula*, faith in Christian values co-exists with belief in the mystical powers of traditional practitioners such as the *sangoma* Mama Jay, who is described as having “the strongest witchcraft” (Robson 84). In the village of Chief Masasa in the precolonial society of *Takadini*, the *n’anga* Baba Chivero plays this role. Beliefs about albinism within both communities reinforce the sense of alienation of the two young boys and are referred to explicitly by both authors. The power of touch is a central theme in *Pula* in particular. Most villagers recoil from touching Emmanuel, as if afraid that albinism is contagious and they will ‘catch’ the condition, or at least the bad luck associated with it. Pregnant women in particular avoid Emmanuel to protect their unborn babies, fearing that contact with Emmanuel will result in their child being born with albinism and in *Takadini*, “one man, whose young wife was pregnant, asked Chivero if he knew for sure what effect the sight of a *sope* child would have on an unborn child” (Hanson 67).

With Takadini’s birth, we are reminded of how rare albinism is when the midwives reveal that they have not seen a child with albinism before. Only Ambuya Tukai recalls having heard of a similar birth, and the child was taken away from its mother. When Sekai reaches Chief Masasa’s village to seek refuge, she learns from Baba Chivero that he too has never seen a child with albinism, “because our people destroy them as soon as they are born. They are different and they do not fit in” (Hanson 44). Later, as the village elders debate whether or not to allow Sekai and Takadini to stay, Ziki offers another explanation: “We all know the tradition of our forefathers throughout the land, in every clan and village. Such children must be killed; deformed children must be killed; and one of twins must be destroyed” (Hanson 57). Although the child and his mother are allowed to stay, the villagers fear that they will suffer because of this decision. Pregnant women are wary of the effect the sight of a *sope* child could have on their unborn children, and when Sekai and Takadini are attacked by bees, it is feared that the spirits are at last showing their displeasure with the elders’ decision to keep the mother and child in the village.

While it is suggested in *Takadini* that the young boy’s albinism will only bring the displeasure of the ancestors, the ambivalent attitudes towards albinism within the community in *Pula* show that someone with albinism can be viewed either as the bringer of good luck or evil. Sindiso, a young man from the village, takes Emmanuel with him when he travels to Gaborone to find his girlfriend who has left him for a job in the city. Giving an insight into the man’s attitude towards Emmanuel, the reader learns that “He had driven four hours with an albino, an alien freak, right there in the car beside him, just to make sure he had good luck with his girlfriend” (Robson 42). Sindiso finds his girlfriend with another man and turns to other forms of “magic” that co-exist in the village society of the novel for a solution: Mama Jay’s magic, Ngaka the herbalist and healer, and Brother John’s Congregation of the Living Saints. Takadini finds himself becoming a scapegoat because of the beliefs associated with his albinism. Visiting a cattle station with his father’s friend, the herders berate him for bringing “this leswafe with his

ghost-body”, fearing he will bring bad luck: “It will bring bad luck for our herd. Very bad. The milk will come out sour and rotten and green. The calves will die inside their mother’s bellies.” (Hanson 64). When there is a disaster, the communities in both novels look for someone to blame for the calamity. Such is the story of Emmanuel’s albino ancestor, accused of betraying his people. The tale is an old one, going back to the very beginnings of the village, when their ancestors broke away from their tribal group, escaping at night. They were betrayed and followed by a vengeful group of warriors loyal to the chief. The young men in the escaping group tried to divert them and were all killed. The survivors turned on the ancestor, casting the blame on him:

It was you, leswafe! It was you who betrayed us. You who gave the warriors directions. You were never truly one of us. You kept in the darker shadows when we gathered round the fire. You were always the stranger and now you are the traitor too, leswafe. (Robson 117)

Emmanuel’s ancestor had walked away alone into the bush, never to be seen again.

Even in death, people with albinism are set apart as a consequence of the widespread myth in southern Africa that people with albinism do not die a natural death, but go into the bush and disappear.¹ In a literary representation of this myth, it is suggested in *Pula* that a *leswafe* does not die but “goes out into the deep bush and slowly crumbles into dust” (Robson 24). As if to counter the myth, the importance of a ‘proper’ burial, near loved ones who will take care of the grave and cherish the memory of the deceased, is a recurring theme in Robson’s novel. Emmanuel’s church-going grandmother and her friend Mma Zacharius regularly argue about traditional cultural values as opposed to the religious ideas of the church, of burying a child beneath the family home or in a churchyard. Strange events occur in the village when a departed child’s spirit is not at rest. Emmanuel listens to the arguments, but cannot decide who is right. However, his personal salvation is bound up with the meeting of these beliefs when he finds the skull of a baby accidentally smothered by its mother many years before. Emmanuel carefully reburies the skull in the yard of Rre Pitlo, a descendent of the baby, believing that by this act he has laid the baby’s spirit to rest and brought an end to the spate of car accidents at Kotsi Corner. The certainty that he has saved his village helps him to come to terms with the young boys who verbally abuse him and spit down the front of their shirts. His newly acquired self-worth means “It would always be all right now. Their words could never hurt me again” (Robson 132).

The Possibility of Inclusion

The internal resolution of Emmanuel’s story in Robson’s *Pula* contrasts with that of Takadini, who finds community acceptance and recognition as a musician - much like the celebrated Malian singer Salif Keita or Jamaican musician, Yellowman, both of whom have albinism. Robson’s plot resolution relies on the protagonist’s own acceptance of his difference, while Hanson’s is founded on the acceptance of the wider community. While the two boys are saved from complete isolation by strong familial relationships—between Takadini and his mother, and Emmanuel and his grandmother—they are also distanced from other members of their family. Emmanuel’s black sister and brother live with their mother at the mine where she has a cleaning job, but he has been left in the care of his grandmother. Emmanuel is aware of his mother’s suffering after his birth when she was accused of having slept with a white man and of having

¹ See Kromberg 1982, Lund and Gaigher 2002, Baker et al, 2012.

drunk alcohol while pregnant. As Lund observes, the fault for the birth of a baby with albinism is often deemed to lie with the mother (2001: 5). Emmanuel's mother cannot bear the villager's mockery and leaves the community to find work, and although she sometimes visits her son, she avoids looking Emmanuel in the eye. It is significant that, when buying her son a new shirt, she chooses a colour that clashes with his pale skin, as though not able to accept that his skin is not dark. She feels tainted by association with her pale coloured son and her other children sense this negativity, responding in kind by also avoiding him.

While some members of the community reject Emmanuel, others interact with him. His grandmother's employer, Missie Patel, speaks with Emmanuel, but slowly, as if to a child: "She always spoke to me like that. Maybe she thought that because my body wasn't right it meant my mind wasn't right either" (Robson 99). This assumption that a deficit in one part of the body is necessarily linked to another is acknowledged by disability theorists including Cahill and Eggleston (1995) who describe how the wheelchair user is treated as a "non-person", incapable of speaking for him or herself. However, in *Pula*, Robson counters this idea, emphasising that Emmanuel is a keen and thoughtful observer of what is going on around him. There are a few moments in the narrative when his talent breaks through the screen of myth and superstition, when he writes a poem that is read out in class and praised by his classmates, and when he becomes a minor celebrity because his leg is in plaster after a car accident. However, these moments of reprieve are only temporary and the pattern of rejection and avoidance is quickly re-established. By contrast, because of his talent for playing the *mbira*,² Takadini eventually finds a place within the village community and a more enduring acceptance by those around him.

Conclusion: African Fiction and Advocacy

The question of the relationship between reality and fiction in works of literature has received considerable critical attention, which we will not revisit here. However, if the fictional texts of Hanson and Robson are to be used for advocacy, then the accuracy of their representation becomes as significant as the fictional space they open up for the exploration of questions that cannot easily be explored elsewhere. While both *Pula* and *Takadini* are examples of fictional youth literature, they provide objectively informed representations of the experiences of living with albinism, and the characters and situations they represent are plausible. Importantly, both novels acknowledge the genetic nature of albinism. In *Pula*, Emmanuel refers to "Mrs Turner's encyclopaedia, which says that 'albinism is genetic, [...] carried within families over generations'" (Robson 49), while in *Takadini* it is made clear that albinism is a recessive genetic condition that does not appear in every generation. However, the messages about albinism conveyed by Hanson and Robson's novels are not always clear. Robson's novel attempts to contend with a range of different issues. Several characters are "different", whether they are blind, of mixed race, a person with HIV, or have a disability. While reinforcing the message that the idea of "normality" should always be questioned, this complexity leads to some confusion between an infectious disease such as HIV AIDS and an inherited, non-contagious condition such as albinism. In *Takadini*, a similar blurring results from the protagonist's physical disability, which adds complexity to his representation as a person with albinism.

Despite this tendency, both narratives have wider resonance. Written in English rather than indigenous languages, they aim to reach a wider audience. The question of who this audience is, and whether this is indeed the intended audience is difficult to answer, for many

² The *mbira* or thumb piano is a musical instrument with rows of hand-forged, tuned, metal keys bound to a wooden soundboard.

inhabitants of Anglophone Africa do not read English and many of those who do have only limited access to literary fiction. What is certain though is that both novels are of appeal and importance to anyone growing up with a “difference” or to any young person trying to find their place in their world. While developing the reader’s knowledge of albinism, do they also set out to change the attitudes of readers? On one level, the novels transmit, somewhat unquestioningly, the beliefs and myths surrounding albinism in Botswana and Zimbabwe. However, on another level, they convey the message that people with albinism are intelligent and capable individuals who are only limited by the practical realities of living with albinism and the attitudes of others.³ Fiction also highlights the multidimensionality of albinism. Consequently, NGOs and albinism organisations are beginning to recognise their importance in advocating for the human rights of people with albinism.

In recent years, support groups for people with albinism have moved towards self-advocacy, which is less paternalistic than preceding models and more positively focused on improving the lives of people with albinism. Equally, there has been a marked move towards self-representation on the part of people with albinism, who have become protagonists of their own life stories. Examples include Lee Edwards’ *Too Black to be White and Too White to be Black: Living with Albinism* (2001), *Real Lives: Personal and Photographic Perspectives on Albinism* (2005) edited by Archie Roy and Robin Spinks, and most recently, *Looking Inside: Five South African Stories of People Living with Albinism* (2009) edited by Shirley Gunn and Zukiswa Puwana. Media such as radio and video, and internet sites such as Facebook and YouTube have been used by individuals and advocacy groups as a means by which to challenge myths and discrimination, and continue to campaign for the human rights of people with albinism. Characterised by their engagement and empowerment, the educative literary texts of Hanson and Robson sit alongside these other methods of informing young people about albinism in an African context. They offer a more nuanced opportunity to enhance understandings of albinism and raise awareness of the human rights of people with albinism in Africa.

³ A useful comparison to make is with HIV/AIDS educative literature, written as partly autobiographical accounts, from authors with direct experience of HIV infection and its consequences. By contrast, *Pula* is written by an outsider, from a neighbouring country (South Africa) working as a teacher in Botswana, the recipient of several prizes for youth literature.

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