Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Young Adult Literature

Growing Up, In Theory

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While children's literature often plays a central role in elementary school curriculum, young adult literature journeys toward secondary schools, but rarely arrives. Here Karen Coats, literary critic and Lacanian scholar, argues that like young adults themselves caught in a liminal state, YA literature frequently experiences a failure to launch, not simply in curriculum as Lewis and Dockter argue in their chapter of this volume, but in literary criticism as well. Coats explores the reasons that books for young adults should be a "destination literature," rather than characterized as a short sidetrack before stepping into more sophisticated material designed for adults. She further analyzes the polyphonic, dialogic, culturally conditioned, ever changing, and emotionally laden qualities in current YA literature. In his Point of Departure essay, Markus Zusak, the astonishing author of The Book Thief, affirms Coats's arguments in his desire to write "the right book at the right time in that ridiculously raw period of a person's life."

As a sixth grader in a small, rural middle school, I finished my math book in six weeks. Not knowing what to do with me, the powers that be put me to work in the school library. Looking back, I realize that if they would have introduced me to a more advanced math curriculum, my professional life might have turned out very differently. Instead, I found a cache of books on a shelf in the library workroom that very likely set the course of my career. They were young adult books, they were banned, and I read every one of them.

These books full of questionable material about sex, drugs, and antiwar protests taught me what it meant to be an American teenager in the 1970s. From Nat Hentoff (1968), Judy Blume (1975), S. E. Hinton (1967), Robert Cormier (1974), and John Donovan (1969), I learned what was going on in the world outside my sheltered community, and I got some insight into the people who sat across from me at the lunch table. It wasn't until I went back to those books as an adult that I realized how much of my own everyday speech, expressions, thought patterns, and values had been influenced by their words and ideologies. Young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation, and yet we still pay more critical scholarly
attention to Antigone (Sophocles, c. 442) and The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925) than we do to the potentially life-changing books our teens read on their own. It seems to me that if we believe that literature has something to say about what it means to be human, and if we further nuance that belief with the idea that national, ethnic, and women’s literatures say something about the character and preoccupations of nations and the experience of being of a certain ethnicity or gender, then we ought to approach YA literature with the same careful scrutiny, even if it is written about and to young adults rather than by them.

It may seem, of course, that I am speaking to the choir here; after all, this Handbook is evidence that there is a group of people who take YA literature very seriously. However, this volume also contains evidence that there are different kinds of choirs who sing in different keys and with different kinds of harmonies to different audiences. I am currently in the literary theory choir, but I have some experience singing education and library sciences tunes through my history as a secondary teacher and my current work as a reviewer. Hence, what I want to address in this chapter are the various critical debates that emerge from different disciplinary standpoints.

I will begin by briefly exploring the status of YA literature in secondary and postsecondary educational settings, that is, by thinking about the ways YA literature is legitimized as appropriate reading material in high schools and as a fit subject for literary criticism. For the bulk of the chapter, however, I will look at the literature itself from a literary and cultural theory perspective by exploring some of the many tensions that can be found by analyzing the tendencies that these texts share. As a body of literature, YA fiction is organized around the same sorts of tensions that preoccupy the physical bodies and emotional lives of its intended audience: tensions between growth and stasis, between an ideal world we can imagine and the one we really inhabit, between earnestness and irony, between ordinary bodies and monstrous ones, and, perhaps most importantly, between an impulsive individualism and a generative ethics of interconnectedness. To explore these tensions, I will adopt a librarian’s approach of including many references to YA books in an attempt to demonstrate the dialogues at work in this body of literature. Unfortunately, space will not allow the extended close readings of the texts that literary critics favor and teachers encourage; instead my aim is to sow the seeds for further thinking about the many thematic dimensions at work in contemporary YA literature and the critical dialogues surrounding it.

**YA Literature in Secondary and Post-Secondary Contexts**

In her 1996 article, “Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists,” Caroline Hunt threw down a gauntlet of sorts to literary critics engaged in the teaching and study of YA literature. She called on critics to theorize their subject, to bring YA literature into the wider dialogue that had come to characterize the work of English departments, namely, literary and cultural theory. She believed that the main reason YA literature had not been considered theoretically is because courses on YA literature were usually service courses for Education and Library Science majors, and hence focused on topical lists and trends, analysis of literary elements, pedagogical applications, and issues of censorship. Indeed, the definitive textbook in the field, Donelson and Nilsen’s (2008) Literature for Today’s Young Adults, first published in 1980 and now in its eighth edition, provides exactly that material for preservice teachers and librarians. The focus in this text and these courses, as it is for most work done with literature in Education and Library Science, is on the interaction between texts and readers. Thus the academic study of young adult literature in these disciplines is primarily, and quite rightly, concerned with engagement and response.

In English Education, young adult literature is often viewed as a gateway drug used to entice readers to try the harder stuff. There is even a textbook entitled From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics (Hertz & Gallo, 2005) that champions and provides resources for this approach. For teachers as dealers, it’s not a bad scam. If I want my students to read and understand what’s at stake in Othello (1555/1969), I have to work against the foreignness of Shakespearean language, the gaps of history and culture, and the strangeness of distant characters (what the heck is a Moor anyway, or a standard-bearer for that matter?). But if I can introduce them to Tim Blake Nelson’s O (2001) first, they can immediately see the relevance of the story to their lives and the conflicts they face on a daily basis. Alternately, if I am trying to introduce a new and sometimes alienating critical vocabulary to my students, it makes good pedagogical sense to rub the theory up against literature that they can readily access.

Robert Seelinger Trites (2000) describes a technique for getting her students to understand the literary concepts of polyphony and dialogism through a role-playing exercise where students answer questions from the perspectives of Tehanu, Tenar, and Ged from Ursula K. LeGuin’s (1990) fantasy novel Tehanu. According to Bakhtin (1981), who first introduced the concepts of polyphony and dialogism, literature can sometimes be monologic, offering a single, authoritative viewpoint through flat characters who are designed as mere vehicles to express or embody that viewpoint. In children’s and YA circles, we would scorn such works as overtly didactic. Meaningful literary texts, like all meaningful cultural interactions, function polyphonically. Such “dialogic” novels create a living dialogue between a variety of voices, styles, and intertextual references and allusions that add to the richness of the reading experience by enabling readers to share in the making of meaning and encouraging them to situate themselves within the themes under consideration.
As Trites's students realize the difficulty of crafting a single answer, even from a single character's perspective, to a moral or ethical question, they begin to understand the multiple voices and contradictions that are involved in the creation of a believable, multi-faceted character. This exercise would work well for any number of complex characters that students can readily empathize with in contemporary realistic novels, such as Steve from Walter Dean Myers' (1999) *Monster* and Keir from Chris Lynch's (2005) *Inexcusable* or Violet from M. T. Anderson's (2002) dystopic science fiction novel *Feed,* and it works considerably better than taking them straight to Bakhtin and Dostoyevsky to learn the same concepts.

The goal in such exercises is that students will then be able to apply the theory they have learned to more sophisticated adult texts. Anna O. Soter (1999) has written a textbook that seeks to help teachers apply various literary theories to young adult texts, and Bushman and Haas (2006) make eloquent and compelling arguments for using young adult literature rather than adult classics in secondary English classrooms in order to engage students in the critical process through literature that they actually enjoy. Countless journal articles have appeared that offer readings of particular texts through various theoretical lenses as well as ways of using YA literature to approach social and cultural problems. Yet, despite this show of support for the value or at least the utility of the literature to teach other things, there remains a sense that YA literature is a house you pass on the way, and not a destination in and of itself.

It may be because YA literature is in fact the literature that I would prefer to read even if I didn't make a living doing so that I would argue strenuously for a shift in this perspective. That is, just as children's literature is viewed as both an entrée into more sophisticated reading for its intended audience and a viable area of academic study in and of itself, so literature aimed at young adults should be afforded the same dual valuation. Like Hunt (1996), I would like to see a more robust critical conversation emerge that treats YA literature as a destination literature, rather than an in-between phenomenon that is useful for pedagogical applications and/or diverting entertainment before readers enter into the more serious work of studying capital L literature. Instead of moving from Hinton to *Hamlet,* I would argue for a productive move from Hinton to, say, Zusak, where readers might consider, among other things, the role of physical violence in the complex rhetoric of loyalty, masculinity, and fraternal love that comprises coming of age for Ponyboy (*The Outsiders,* 1967) and Cameron Wolfe (*Fighting Ruben Wolfe,* 2001 and *Getting the Girl,* 2003). It's certainly not a question of sacrificing richness in character portrayal, beauty of the language, or depth of thematic significance. All of these things can be found in carefully chosen YA literature. The major difference seems to rest in the assignation of cultural value to certain texts and genres and not others, and the development of a critical literature than keeps texts and ideas circulating in academic contexts. To consider YA literature as a viable destination literature, the terms of traditional theoretical conversations surrounding the study of literature would need to be recast.

**YA Literature as a Destination**

Certainly, traditional methods of literary study, such as applied theoretical discussions of single texts or sets of texts using the various "isms" that have become standard fare in literary and cultural criticism, are a growing and necessary part of that critical conversation. So are historical studies that map trends in the development of the literature, such as Anne Scott Macleod's (1997) "The Journey Inward: Adolescent Literature in America, 1945–1995" and Roberta Seelinger Trites' (2007) *Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel.* Establishing a history of YA literature and even, dare we say it, a canon of significant texts, and showing those texts' ability to stand up to the rigorous of critical scrutiny are all part of the process of legitimizing a marginalized literature in the field of literary studies. What remain rare in the critical discourse are studies that seek to theorize YA fiction as a type of literature that has its own constellation of concerns that mark it as distinctive from literature for either children or adults.

Two such studies do exist, their authors having found controlling themes that act as paradigms for understanding YA literature's distinctiveness. In her definitive work *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature,* Roberta Seelinger Trites (2007) argues that while adolescent literature may seem to be about growth, that growth always takes place in the context of power—who has it, who doesn't, and what must be negotiated in order for the adolescent to gain power in his or her culture. By exploring the relationship of the teen protagonist to various institutions of cultural power as well as the biological imperatives of sex and death, Trites views adolescent literature as a staging ground for power struggles whose outcomes determine the ethics and delimit the possibilities for agency of the young adult as an actor in his or her world. Using a primarily Foucauldian paradigm, Trites expands her theoretical field to include insights from poststructural theory generally, and invites teachers of YA literature to do the same in order to empower their students to question the narratives that often, under a slick cover of cool or edgy plotlines and characters, seek to interpellate them into oppressive cultural mandates.

In *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity,* Robyn McCallum (1999) focuses on the dialogic construction and representation of the adolescent self in literature for young people. She emphasizes how the self is constructed and mediated through interaction with ideology, cultural and social forces, and other selves. Her approach is Bakhtinian,
exploring and deconstructing the conceits of a liberal humanist emphasis on individual agency that is so prevalent in young adult fiction. The cheese doesn’t stand alone after all, Mr. Cormier; the notion of the individual has been revealed in postmodern discourse and representation as a fiction, to be more precisely understood as what René Girard (1987) has called an interindividual. To counter the liberal humanist ideology of the essentialized self as agent, McCallum (1999) offers a model of reading that seeks to place “implied readers in active subject positions” (p. 259) by emphasizing the analysis of texts that employ mixed genres, multiple narrative strands, and varied modes of discourse through Bakhtinian concepts of heteroglossia, polyphony, and intertextuality.

I often teach Virginia Walter’s (1998) Making Up Megaboy in precisely those terms. In this mixed-genre, mixed media book, the main character is the decentered subject of postmodern discourse *par excellence*. He never speaks for himself, and those who would speak for him know strikingly little about him. We learn the facts: On his 13th birthday, Robbie Jones takes his father’s gun, bikes to a local liquor store, and murders the Korean shopkeeper in cold blood. The rest of the book proceeds in a documentary style, with news and police reports, interviews of friends and family members, photo montages, and finally, a comic drawn by Robbie that seems to have nothing to do with the incident, and provides no insight into who Robbie is, other than the fact that he feels alienated and alone. Readers are often frustrated and deeply disturbed by the gaps in the narrative line of this text—there is no cause and effect, no foreshadowing, no way to profile this kid as a potentially violent shooter. And although this text predates Columbine and other high profile school shootings that followed as well as 9/11, it offers an eerily prescient picture of how a criminal adolescent subject is created for mass consumption through various soundbites, documents, and retrospective profiles.

As readers, we learn about the ways characters, indeed people, are constructed through their actions and the way society views those actions, through the impressions of others which are always more than half embedded in narcissistic self-impressions, and through more nebulous and abstract cultural expectations that help us fill in gaps in our experience with prefabricated subject positions. Unpacking these last is often the most disturbing for readers, as in doing so they unearth unconscious prejudices that filter into our ways of perceiving the world.

Considering these prejudices in secondary and postsecondary classrooms through the “classics” or through works that feature adult protagonists from times past allows for the possibility that students may distance themselves from what they are reading. The experiments with narrative form in classic texts may fail to register with today’s students as new or innovative. The contexts are often alien, particularly to marginalized groups, because of the predominance of dead white male perspectives; there is the sense that that was then, this is now; those characters are the kinds of adults we will never be; it’s all different today. Contemporary YA literature, on the other hand, stages an up-to-the-minute confrontation with a mirror they can’t look away from, and thus makes moral, social, and cultural problems both accessible and urgent.

What YA Literature Teaches Us about Itself

I find it revealing that both McCallum and Trites look to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism as key to the study and pedagogy of YA literature. That they find this theory so useful suggests to me that there is something about the literature that requires a paradigm of mutual and multilayered imbrication to understand the construction of its subjects. YA texts tend to appear in thematic clusters, revealing an intertextuality that responds to the market, which in turn responds to prevailing cultural and personal fantasies. For instance, YA shelves in the early 21st century are littered with mean girl novels featuring obscenely rich protagonists doing what they can to make life hell for those outside their circles. On the other hand, ensemble friendship novels, such as *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brashares, 2001) and its sequels, feature girlfriends who make each others’ lives bearable.

While books about girls have always located their characters in relationship-intensive plotlines, gone are the days where getting the guy ends the story with a happily or tragically ever after. Girls today are generally encouraged to be more savvy in negotiating objectifying discourses, even standing against mainstream feminism in their quest to chart their own destinies. In Randa Abdel-Fattah’s (2007) *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, for instance, Amal, an Australian-born Muslim Palestinian with a passion for pop culture, must thread her way through social, political and spiritual ideals of gender in her decision to wear the hijab in a post 9/11 secular high school context. What is most interesting in her decision is the way the hijab intersects with her desires to be pretty and flirt with cute boys while asserting her commitment to sexual purity. The protagonist from E. Lockhart’s (2008) *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*, plays in a similar space of ambiguity, where she wants to be recognized as a sexual being but also as someone more substantial and deserving of recognition for her ingenuity in disrupting the masculine traditions of her school, in particular a secret society that excludes girls from membership.

In books that feature male protagonists, the idea of dialogism has emerged as a self-reflexive theme of identity construction. The 1970s myth of the lone male standing against peer pressure and shaping his own destiny has given way to an exploration and frank acknowledgement that identities are in fact shaped by our participation in groups, rather than our standing apart from them. Markus Zusak’s character Cameron Wolfe, for instance, is a working-class boy who is struggling to emerge as himself.
rather than as an indistinct shadow of his brother in Fighting Ruben Wolfe (2001) and Getting the Girl (2003). His quest is individual, but it is defined through and through by his being a member of the Wolfe family, his pack. Both he and Ruben are guided by the strong examples of their parents who have implicitly taught them to fight their way through adversity and setbacks, and Cameron knows that the key to his identity is finding meaningful connectedness with the people he loves, rather than standing alone against them. Arnold Spirit, in Sherman Alexie’s (2007) The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, is self-consciously caught in the space between life on the rez, where he is brutally bullied and his future prospects are dim, and life among White people, which his best friend Rowdy reads as the ultimate betrayal of his heritage. He works out his identity by laying claim to a number of tribes to which he belongs:

I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms. And the tribe of cartoonists. And the tribe of chronic masturbators. And the tribe of teenage boys. And the tribe of small-town kids. And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners. And the tribe of tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers. And the tribe of poverty. And the tribe of funeral-goers. And the tribe of beloved sons. And the tribe of boys who really miss their best friends. (p. 217)

Even though he is making a boldly individual choice by leaving the reservation to pursue his future, he still recognizes and needs the sense of connection to others to help him understand who he is.

Helen Frost (2003) uses poetic form to highlight this sense of connection as an ideological shift between generations. In Keesh’s House, a novel in verse, the teenagers, each with his or her own clichéd problem, speak in sestinas, while the adults use sonnets. The sestina is a fluid form that emphasizes connectedness among its six-line verses through the repetition of the last words of each line, and their reappearance in a final, three-line stanza. Frost furthers the theme of connectedness and fluidity by repeating the number six in the number of kids that end up mutually imbricated in each other’s lives, and by varying the number of syllables in the lines of her sestinas, making it a less rigid form.

The sonnets of the adults, on the other hand, are formally composed, following the rules of iambic pentameter and the rhyme schemes of either English or hybrid sonnets. These poems, like the adults who voice them, are isolated; thematically and structurally, they stand alone. The maturity that the teens gain through their experiences is signaled by a shift to the sonnet form for the final section of the book, but unlike their adult counterparts, who have problems that they feel they must face alone, the teens have formed a community of support for one another. Thus they stay connected through a crown of sonnets, acknowledging that their strength in the face of overwhelming obstacles comes from their mutual interdependence.

In David Levithan’s (2003) Boy Meets Boy the character of Infinite Darlene, who is both homecoming queen and star quarterback, stands out as exemplary of this new paradigm of the self in community:

She seems very full of herself. Which she is. It’s only after you get to know her better that you realize that somehow she’s managed to encompass all her friends within her own self-image, so that when she’s acting full of herself, she’s actually full of her close friends, too. (p. 41)

If the hallmark of the teen character has traditionally been Holden Caulfield’s narcissistic self-involvement, then Infinite Darlene represents a kind of expansive narcissism that admits of embeddedness in community as integral to the self.

Examples of the need for interconnection, multiple perspectives, and mutuality abound. Through form, content, and intertextuality, the myth of the atomistic, liberal humanist self is being satisfactorily debunked in YA literature. But the key player is still, more often than not, a figure who positions him or herself as cultural outsider. In my own work (Coats, 2004), I have used a Lacanian paradigm to identify contemporary adolescent literature as a site of working through the physical, psychic, and social abjection of the teenage body seeking meaning and value in a culture that places that body in a liminal space between childhood protection and adult responsibility. Characters who operate on the social rim situate themselves as observers not fully integrated into the culture they tend to view with equal parts longing and disdain. I have further identified a common character type in adolescent literature, the abject hero, who forces the reader to confront his or her own complicity in the creation and maintenance of those oppressive cultural and psychic systems, not as victim, critic, or mere spectator, but as someone who stands by and lets victimization occur at best, a victimizer herself at worst.

The complex relationships between characters like Jerry Renault and Archie Costello in Robert Cormier’s (1974) The Chocolate War and Tulip and Natalie in Anne Fine’s (1997) The Tulip Touch expose the coextensive, almost erotic relationship between the victim and the victimizer, and the way these perverse relationships prop up the cultural system as a whole. Archie comments that his activities with the Vigils, which amount to cruel manipulations of the teachers and the students, keep the school from being torn apart by outside forces. The tension that he holds to a slow simmer through his pranks keeps the students focused on the inner world of their school, rather than on any larger forces that may be at work in
their world. The book explicitly highlights the way Archie uses his power to manipulate and abuse Jerry, but what goes unsaid is the way Jerry needs Archie to abuse him. Jerry’s guilt over his inability to grieve his mother needs to be assuaged. He longs to be punished for his indifference to her death in order to be able to feel it properly, so he seeks physical pain to break through the emotional ice block. The pain of football doesn’t serve, because it is random and part of the game, but Archie’s campaign of oppression, in both its unfairness and Jerry’s ability to place himself in positions where it will intensify, is just what Jerry needs to work through his own issues.

Natalie, on the other hand, uses Tulip’s shocking cruelty as a way to distinguish herself as a good person; she builds her sense of self by abjecting that part of her that identifies with and is fascinated by Tulip. And yet she continues to need Tulip in her life to remind her where the lines are. These stories show a darker side to dialogism—it’s kind of a warm fuzzy to think that our subjectivities are interconnected with the others in our lives, that we are not existentially singular as liberal humanist ideology would have it, and that we are embedded in communities. But the presence of an abject hero reminds us that part of that self-construction in community depends on abjecting others that we or our communities revile while continuing to use them for our own purposes.

Each of these literary critical studies dedicated to YA literature—Trites’s, McCallum’s, and Coats’s—identify and offer descriptions of the key players in the game. They include the young adult, social others, culture and its institutions, ideology, language, narrative conventions, the body, and they insist on the importance of their dynamic interaction in the creation and study of YA literature. However, their substantive conclusions are necessarily contingent, because the nature of their subject is always changing, or more precisely, the nature of their subject is change, both personal and cultural.

For instance, if the holy trinity of the teenage years, at least since Elvis and the Beatles, has been sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll, then postmodern surveillance and Internet culture has added fame to the mix. In 1989, Peter Dickinson wrote Eva, a novel where a young girl’s brain is transplanted into the body of a chimpanzee, resulting in her development of an increased social conscience and concern for the environmental devastation caused by overpopulation. In 2008, Meg Cabot traversed similar ground in Airhead, but her protagonist’s brain is transplanted into the brain of a supermodel, whose major concerns then become how to balance multiple love interests, pick the right color lip gloss, and deal with paparazzi. Robin Benway’s (2008) Audrey, Wait details the viral and invasive nature of sudden fame in a way that both interrogates and affirms the desire to be a household name. The strange illusion of intimacy afforded by “reality” TV programs and the overexposure of celebrities has added a new space of yearning for teens, and YA publishers have exploited that space by providing an alarming number of glitzy, wish-fulfilling titles such as The Clique (Harrison, 2004) and Gossip Girls (Von Ziegessar, 2002) series that feature wildly rich and remarkably supervised teens behaving badly.

Young adult literature thus responds to and helps contextualize cultural trends for its readers. In this way, it is itself dialogic—that is, it participates in the vibrant and constantly shifting cultural dialogue regarding what we value and how our lives might be lived both responsibly and responsively in the face of increasing globalization, perspective-altering technologies, and ideological challenge and change.

To Grow or Not to Grow

It is this quality of constantly changing cultural conditions and definitions, I suspect, more than the pedagogical sites of its dissemination, that makes YA literature tricky to theorize. Julia Kristeva (1990) makes the argument that the novel form itself, at least as the classical liberal humanist novel, is by definition adolescent insofar as it is always concerned with chronicling the growth—moral, cognitive, emotional—of a character. But this definition is limited in its application. Existential and postmodern novels for adults often no longer fit this definition, as there we find stories of characters who stay the same, or even devolve or regress in their developmental path from beginning of the book to the end. YA novels, for the most part, still operate under the imperative of growth, but more and more we are seeing books, like the series book cited above, that simply tell stories.

To take an example from an emergent and as yet understudied national YA literature, critics of the recent explosion of Chinese books for young adults by young adults decry these books as unworthy of the tradition of Chinese literature because they are simply entertaining stories. Wildly popular, these books, by a group of writers dubbed the “post-80s writers” because of when they were born, show no commitment to social issues or improving moral philosophy, nor are they very original. Instead, they tend to feature kids with diagnoses such as bulimia and depression who are just struggling to get out of their teenage years alive.

The writers themselves don’t care what the critics say, however, nor do their readers. Most, however, do object to the convenient appellation of “post-80s writer,” considering it demeaning, but it is culturally significant because it means that they were all born after China implemented its one-child policy in 1979. Teddy Carey (cited in Rui & Dalby, 2007) dismisses the older critics, claiming a different purpose for his writing than literary glory: “I don’t care about things like these official writers’ congresses or associations; I don’t care if these old men accept me. Their formalism doesn’t concern me. I just use my words to record my life, and find those who understand me.” That sort of reaching out for understanding is crucial for
the one-child generation, many of whom, as these writers attest, grew up feeling lonely and isolated. It’s especially telling that the most successful writer in China today is Guo Jingming, whose editor decided to publish Guo’s first book, City of Fantasy, “because it would appeal to the lonely children of China’s one-child generation” (King, 2008, p. X). Guo and other post-80s writers, such as Han Han, Zhang Yueran, Sharon, Ming Xiaoxi, and GirfneYa (Gou Ni) are writing for a new Chinese youth culture (that looks remarkably like British, American, Canadian, Japanese, Australian, and European youth culture)—fashion and celebrity conscious, rebellious, tech savvy, and iconoclastic. They are as much pop icons as they are writers, which is another reason why the writing establishment hates them and the teens love them. They are trendy and hip, and Guo and Han are particularly yummy eye candy, a feature they self-consciously play up to attract young fans to their work.

Although the majority of novels by the post-80s writers engage adolescent problems such as eating disorders, abuse, depression, drug use, other forms of Chinese YA lit take a decidedly lighter view of contemporary culture (Martinsen, 2006). Shen Hanying, the managing editor of a new Chinese form for young adults, the “mook” or magazine-book, explains:

I want to give a dream world to girls who like to dream: a rose colored fable, a glittering crystal conservatory, an extravagantly lovely pumpkin carriage, miraculous rose magic books, candy houses overflowing with fragrance and love, a place where you can drink your afternoon tea in the sunlight while reading lucid, transparent, romantic fairy tales. (Cited in Martinsen, 2007)

Many of the post-80s writers have created or invested in mooks, which have a tremendous audience even though (or perhaps because) they are decidedly frothy. Their light-hearted approach to teen life and culture is a large and important part of their appeal, as well as the appeal of much commercially successful young adult literature.

Teenagers think differently than either child readers or adult readers. That is, it is demonstrable that they think with a different part of their brains. Recent research into brain activity during adolescence shows that, in addition to radical hormonal fluctuation, teenagers are subject to significant brain development and growth (Spinks, 2002). Their physical and mental coordination is undermined by an underdeveloped but rapidly growing cerebellum, rendering them physically clumsy and making it difficult to stabilize their emotions through cognitive processes, and their first responder to stimuli tends to be their amygdala, the emotional or gut reaction center of the brain, rather than their frontal cortex, which is responsible for calculating risk, moral considerations, and consequences. Thus, a large part of the success of these Chinese works of adolescent literature is due to the fact that they engage readers on an emotional level.

This may be particularly important for kids who have grown up without siblings to mirror and amplify, and thus validate, their emotional responses to the world, but it is a crucial factor for all teens as they develop the affective and imagistic aspects of their identity. Unfortunately, these vital components of identity are often dismissed as unimportant or even silly and distracting in institutional settings such as formal schooling, where concern for linguistic, intellectual, and cognitive growth outweighs attention to other aspects of development. Young adult fiction that considers extremes of emotion and focuses on impression management rather than challenging moral or social problems may not seem “serious” or overly invested in the project of growth toward maturity, but if viewed in light of a more complex formulation of identity, one that takes into account emotions and image perception as well as ethical and intellectual development, it clearly deserves theoretical attention, if not traditional critical acclaim.

Claiming the Popular

Chinese young adult literature, like much pop cultural production, is unapologetically not engaging deep philosophical or moral truths, but rather working at the level of identification, emotional mirroring, and fantasy, all of which we hope teens will grow out of, or at least come to view with some sort of mature perspective. A similar claim could be made for most popular YA lit produced in the United States, Britain, and Australia as well, which brings us to yet another problem in the theorization of YA literature: How does one think seriously about texts that are apt to have a short shelf life because their success depends on their responsiveness to a readership who are, by definition, in a state of flux? Should we only study those texts like Cormier’s (1974) The Chocolate War, Walter Dean Myers’s (1988) Fallen Angels, or Markus Zusak’s (2006) The Book Thief, which engage in weighty philosophical and ethical questions? Or should we find ways to think about the more ephemeral books, the ones that are widely read, but probably won’t outlast their generation? While books like Per Nilsson’s (2005) You & You & You scream symbolism! allegory! deep meaning!, others like Jennifer Lynn Barnes’ (2008) The Squad series about cheerleaders who are also highly trained government operatives are just good fun.

To be successful in a critical enterprise that makes room for both the serious literature and the merely popular means taking into account the peculiar response needs of the audience. Ethics and ideology are largely matters of emotion and image with teens, and yet as adult critics we tend to treat emotionalism, sentiment, and melodrama with disdain. Successful adult authors of YA texts, however, have no such prejudices; instead, they honor the energy of the emotions of the period through both representation and intervention, and critics may be wise to follow their lead. Indeed, developing critical frameworks that are
adequate to the range of the contemporary textual field of YA will often set YA literature critics, as feminist critics before them, against the grain of established protocols, as it will likely entail taking on some of the characteristics of adolescence itself. That is, critics, like teens, will need to rebel against established theoretical orthodoxies and adult-inflected expressions of value, to be constantly attentive to innovation, to follow cool, to take risks, to be unapologetically presentist, to reach strong but always provisional conclusions, to adapt our critical identities to the objects we study, to be fickle in our pleasures.

That said, we will need to resist other qualities of adolescence, namely, the hyper-narcissism of judging others by our own experiences, and an unreflective immersion in and advocacy for those things that please us in the moment. If these sorts of methodological commitments sound a lot like the Cultural Studies advocated by Grossberg (2006) and cited by McNeill in this volume, then I would say, yeah, it’s a Zeitgeist thing—as culture becomes more youth-oriented in its emphases, values, and entertainments, the lability that characterizes youth has become part of the way we study culture and the literature a culture produces. Such a model of critical inquiry requires a context of continual refreshment; studies like Trites’ and McCallum’s provide us with the terms we need to consider and reconsider as we build our “political histor[i]es” of the present" (Grossberg, 2006, p. 2).

The Problem of Definition

Still, a persistent obstacle to the serious study of YA literature that might be worth considering is the lack of a clear demarcation of the field. Where does children’s literature end and adolescent literature begin? Is a text like Tehanu (LeGuin, 1990) even considered by most critics to be YA, and if so, what makes the crucial distinction? Does authorial intention matter? Robert Cormier’s (1974) The Chocolate War, for example, was never intended for a young adult audience, but was rejected as an adult novel and has since become one of the most acclaimed YA books of all time. If not author intention, then what about reception? Books such as The Lovely Bones (Sebold, 2002) and The Secret Life of Bees (Kidd, 2002) were written for adults but have become staple fare for teen readers. And of course, crossover happens in the other direction as well, as with Pullman’s (1996) Dark Materials trilogy and J. K Rowling’s (1997) books about a young wizard. Many scholars simply defer the question to the marketers, but savvy marketers have tapped into the crossover phenomenon by creating alternate covers and trim sizes that correspond to consumer expectations to house the same texts, so is form what really matters? Reviewers take the marketing into consideration, but at the Bulletin for the Center for Children’s Books, for instance, publisher-indicated age ranges are sometimes modified as the team of reviewers, which includes working librarians as well as academics in the fields of English and Library Science, consider format, likely appeal, length, vocabulary, and sophistication of the subject matter as factors in deciding a recommended age range.

Pragmatic considerations also enter into the mix in academic study. For instance, at my university, we have separate courses for preadolescent and young adult literature. Hence, my colleagues and I can argue about the fine (or less fine, depending on perspective) distinctions between those two categories. While we agree that the age of the protagonist is important to making the distinction, my colleagues Anita Tarr and Roberta Trites both cite sex as a key determining factor between YA literature and preadolescent texts—if a book has sex in it, it’s YA; if it doesn’t, it’s preadolescent. My own distinctions tend to be more ideological in nature—I argue that a book that has what I call a closed moral universe, that is, a plot line that features punishment for the wicked and reward for the good, is more likely to be preadolescent, whereas a book that calls that moral universe into question, such as The Chocolate War, I am the Cheese, oh, anything by Cormier really, or Monster by Walter Dean Myers, is clearly YA. Thus, sex or no sex, I tend to follow Trites’ (2000) argument in Disturbing the Universe where she argues that YA novels tend to be more interrogative of social constructions, as well as critical of the notion of a responsive universe beyond what might be readily identified as social institutions.

My criterion rests on my belief that most contemporary literature for young people operates on the overly-simplified modernist assumption that children develop their moral judgment through a series of stages that roughly correspond to age categories, and that ambiguity in the moral fabric of represented worlds is detrimental to that development in its earlier stages but quite necessary in developing an ethical framework and a sense of moral agency in the teenage years. Most universities don’t have the opportunity to separate preadolescent and YA literature, and hence include the middle grade novel in their YA courses; McCallum (1999) also includes what I would consider middle grade fiction in her discussion of adolescent literature, so it may be that fine distinctions are more fiddly and pedantic than necessary for developing the critical conversation regarding YA literature, but it seems to me that the concerns of a sixth grader (bored library aides aside) are quite different from the concerns of a 16-year-old, and so their literature would differ in significant ways. It also seems that defining the field by its concerns is helpful in establishing the boundaries of one’s critical arguments.

Constructing Contemporary Adolescence

It is important, for instance, to think about how adolescence is constructed in YA literature, including its distinctiveness from childhood and preadolescence. This is a
strong focus in Trites’ work, but since its primary characteristic is that it is a state of change, it is a component that needs to be continually re-examined. Even 10 short years after the appearance of Trites’ and McCallum’s studies, our cultural narratives about adolescence have changed. Significantly, even though their books appeared after the Columbine shooting, because of publication cycles, the bulk of their writing and the books they include in their studies predate that watershed event, at least in an American context. More globally, the events of 9/11, a generalized fear of contagion that began with the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and continued through SARS and vague threats of chemical warfare, have left behind a legacy of fear that has seeped into YA literature in veiled ways as an increase in the exploration of the monstrous and the panopticon of surveillance culture. Additionally, personal technologies have changed the way adolescents interact and interface with their world. New rhetorics have developed around instant messaging and texting, and if we take poststructural claims about the significance of language in the creation of identity seriously, then changes in the way we use language and the way it uses us will alter who we imagine ourselves to be. If we expand the definition of language to include multiple semiotic systems, then we could say that today’s youth generate their identities and subjectivities through an increasingly visual, iconic, and virtual web of images that has largely been stripped of traditional modes of authority, including the authority of an Oedipal family structure and its contingent conflicts.

Like children’s literature, YA literature is traditionally defined by its audience, not its writers. Hence, adult writers use a combination of memory, observation, and belief to convey their sense of the world as it appears to an adolescent consciousness, as well as to craft characters who are believably adolescent in their approach to that world. Writers who are insensitive to language and semiotic system shift rarely create believable teen characters, not simply because their fictional worlds lack verisimilitude if they don’t include cell phones, brand names, and computers in their contemporary YA novels, but because teens who have instant access to images, information, and communication think differently than teens did 10 years ago. Even dystopian YA fantasies must respond to the kinds of thinking made possible by current developments, such as the extreme technologies of beauty that are the focus of Scott Westerfeld’s (2005b) Uglies series and Melvin Burgess’s (2007) Sara’s Face and changes in the human/machine interface detailed in Feed (Anderson, 2002), a text I will take up in more detail later.

While these futurist novels often act as satire, warning, and critique, contemporary realist novels tend to engage new technologies without accompanying social commentary. For instance, in her very successful novels tWLO (2004), tRNA (2006), and 18r g8r (2007), Lauren Myracle tells her story entirely through text messages. She effects character development in these books not so much through first-person introspection or third person description as through the use of online personality quizzes, font styles, and predictable responses to common scenarios. That adolescents feel an attachment to these characters suggests something about the changing nature of relationships. Communication between friends is constant but largely without substance, and it is mediated by technologies that subordinate individuality and thought to the strained rhetoric of profiles and icons. This, like the notion of abjection, can be tied to the concept of dialogism in negative ways. The voices of others, as well as the big Other of mainstream culture, that become part of the conversation through which we construct our selves have lost the qualities of truly meaningful dialogue and interaction. Instead, they have been largely replaced by a homogenized, hive-based, aesthetically and semantically bankrupt shorthand that offers little scope for meaningful innovation or self-exploration. OMG!:

Repeat Offenders

Likewise, the images teens access through their technologies are ubiquitous in their repetition—the same shots of Britney Spears, for instance, appearing on every channel and magazine cover and website over and over again, the obsessive coverage of celebrities, the white noise of commercials repeated so often that their slogans and jingles become part of our everyday lexicon. According to Freud, repetition of a trauma is part of the process of working-through the trauma’s aftereffects; the intense popularity of Lurlene McDaniel’s oeuvre with many teen readers demonstrates this nicely. As Trites (2000) points out, “… in adolescent literature, death is often depicted in terms of maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality, when s/he accepts herself as Being-towards-death” (p. 119). The trauma of facing your own mortality requires some working through, and many teens do this work by seeking out books where the characters face the death of a loved one or a sibling. By repeatedly facing this trauma in fiction, they fortify their mental defenses against its occurrence in real life. McDaniel’s texts, which include such titles as Six Months to Live (1985), Too Young to Die (1989), Sixteen and Dying (1992), and dozens more like these, also play out a more subtle drama of traumatic acceptance as well. In book after book, the character faces the terminal illness or unexpected death of his or her teen lover. Hence, she thematizes the impossibility of a perfect romance; you can only have a perfect love if one of the other party dies before everyday problems or annoying little tics can infect the romance. Not only does she repeat the trauma of death for her readers, but she repeats, on an unconscious level, the trauma of lost idealism in the realm of love.

While the kind of repetition that teens access through media may facilitate the working through of some personal and cultural traumas, it also seems to create a perceived
need for more repetition—the comforting buzz of the same. Hence, teens in the 1960s and 70s were actively looking for the new and shocking, and today’s adult librarians and reviewers come to disdain the repetition of the same themes, character types, and conflicts, looking instead for something fresh. Yet, contemporary teen readers are increasingly more likely to seek out sequels, series, parodies, and books with familiar plot lines to meet their media-saturated libidinal needs. If you liked Twilight (Meyer, 2005), here are five books just like it, and they are overtly marketed that way. In sum, because contemporary teens’ sense of identity, relationships, and libidinal needs are in many ways quite different than they were 10 or 20 years ago, writers and critics who depend on their own memories of their teenage years are unlikely to capture the concerns of their contemporary audiences.

Innovators, On the Other Hand

Those who are successful, on the other hand, tap into rich veins of ideological concerns. For instance, M. T. Anderson’s (2002) Feed is a complexly imagined vision of a time in the future when humans are wet-wired to the internet through microchips implanted in the base of the skull. Without the use of any external devices, they can “chat” with each other, shop, access information, watch TV and movies, and get high. When Titus wants a pair of pants, for instance, he simply thinks his desire, and advertising banners scroll through his head, announcing sales, product availability, and new products, all tailored to Titus’s unique sales profile, which knows his size and what he might be interested in based on what he has purchased in the past. When he has made his selection, money from his bank account is instantly transferred to the store’s account, and the pants are shipped.

This level of shared information points to a theme that is developing in response to increased technology and new forms of communication. Whereas in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, privacy was a key value in the development of the liberal humanist version of an independent, autonomous self, today’s teens have a different attitude toward the private self. While many people still experience consumer profiling as a creepy invasion of privacy, Violet and Titus experience it as a form of care. Someone is actually paying attention to what they like, and they want them to have more things they will enjoy. When Violet learns that no corporation will pony up for the cost of her health care because her consumer profile is too random (she has, in fact, sabotaged it deliberately, without anticipating this consequence), the reader is forced to consider his or her own attitude toward consumer profiling in light of Anderson’s strong rejection of it. Less subtle is Nancy Werlin’s (1998) vision of a community that regularly exchanges shopping cards so that stores can’t get a lock on consumer spending patterns in The Killer’s Cousin. It’s a small plot detail, but these two examples show that adult writers are less ambivalent about profiling than their adolescent readers may be, and seek to get their readers thinking about the practice.

Anderson does remarkable things with language in his book, inventing new slang, for instance, and depicting the degradation of precision in technical communication among the doctors: “[The doctor] said, ‘Okay. Could we like get a thingie, a reading on his limbic activity?’” (p. 57). In a world where information is available at the speed of thought without the intervention of a device, people no longer need to accumulate stores of traditional knowledge; they can simply pose a question and the answer appears in their head. This doesn’t make them smarter, however, and Anderson is careful to have his main character, Titus, be the only character besides Violet to think and talk in metaphors, rather than instructional or functional language. When Titus frets about this ability as a problem, his parents assure him that he is not stupid, merely a nontraditional learner, the new “tradition” being the unimaginative consumption of immediately pragmatic knowledge, rather than the ability to innovate, synthesize, or produce new knowledge. Furthering his not-so-parodic parody, Anderson has Titus’s parents comfort him by assuring him that he is beautiful, and by buying him a car, the ads for which they send directly into his head, taking retail therapy to a new, but very familiar, level.

Anderson also pays attention to other semiotic signs as markers of identity. The girls, for instance, follow trends slavishly, going into the bathroom to change their hairstyles the minute a new look comes across their feed. Most disturbing, though, are the presence of skin lesions, which become aestheticized body markings when they start showing up on pop stars. The lesions are vaguely linked to some sort of environmental contamination, possibly caused by the feed, but are clearly a metaphor for the tenderness (and ultimately ugliness) of body marking and piercing in contemporary culture, as well as a nod to the viral nature of trends. When I teach Feed to my students, they find themselves deeply disturbed by the analogues to their own culture that Anderson chooses to augment in his vision of the future, mostly because they know that this is how cool works: a trend or fashion is innovated, taken up by early adopters, blown out by media representation and repetition, and then more quietly adopted by all but the laggards in a progression that seems formidably inevitable—adapt or die. What disturbs them most is their desire to have the things that will ultimately lead to their destruction.

The Worst of Times

YA literature thus constructs as well as reflects an idea of adolescence, just as children’s literature does for childhood. Unlike childhood, however, adolescence is not usually remembered with fond nostalgia, nor is it imbued with mythic status as a place of idyllic stasis. Rather,
adolescence is a threshold condition, a liminal state that is fraught with angst, drama, and change anxiety. The burden of adolescent literature has always been to achieve synchronicity with the concerns of an audience that is defined by its state of flux and impermanence. Adolescence is a phase someone one goes through. It's a problem if you get stuck there, or at least, it used to be. And this is an added dimension of adolescence's provisionality—its status in culture undergoes change as well. Consider Swedish author Per Nilsson's (2007) Seventeen, which features a father talking to his unconscious son, Jonatan, in an emergency room, detailing a life that is in many ways the requiem for an age of rebellion. He tells the story of being a hippie in Sweden, of meeting a rebellious girl at a demonstration, and how the two of them attempted to live out the communal ideal of the countercultural movement. Jonatan’s mom, however, has managed to grow up, channeling her idealism into a career in law where she works for social justice, while his father became a jealous drunk, and eventually went home to live with his parents. Clearly, the inability to accept adult responsibility and negotiate a way to keep one's social commitments after the heyday of protest marches, free love, and drug experimentation ended is presented as a dead end.

Nilsson's book is a first-person memoir, an adult recounting what life was like for him as a teen; it also offers a counter-perspective as Jonatan's mother gives her impressions of her ex-husband and their life together in decidedly less romanticized terms. This makes for a strongly authentic narrative, as the voices of the characters correspond with the age, insight, and hindsight of the writer. Most narrators in YA literature, however, do not take this backward looking perspective. Mike Cadden (2000) encourages us to be suspicious of such constructions, especially when they appear in the guise of first person narration, which makes its own claims for authenticity through the pretense of immediacy. Adult writers are projecting a consciousness that has at least the wisdom of having been there done that, so any guise of naivety, of being in the moment and not knowing if and how things are going to work out, is a fiction. This can be read as a bad faith manipulation, or it can be read as a comforting reassurance that however bad the situation, it is ultimately surmountable.

For instance, rarely do teens have the perspective of Dipsy in Gordon Korman's (2003) Jake, Reinvented, who self-consciously fashions himself as a remora in a world of high school sharks. The remora, according to Dipsy, attaches itself to the underbelly of the shark and feeds off of his leftovers. Dipsy uses the metaphor to justify the way he is bullied by the football players at F. Scott Fitzgerald High School. He is the butt of all their jokes, but in return, he gets invited to all of the good parties, has a wide circle of friends, and enjoys quite a bit of high school fame. Because the shark never eats his remora, Dipsy feels protected in his role, rather than abused, and he has accepted it because it is a way of getting through the shark-infested waters of high school to something better. Adult writers know that most of the awfulness of high school is temporary, and they can offer perspectives that help readers find their own metaphors for getting through.

Another voice of the bullied comes from Tom Henderson, the protagonist of Frank Portman's (2006) King Dork. Adopting a post-Columbine ironic stance to his plight of being continually harassed by the cool people at his school, he takes to wearing military garb and publicly reading weapons magazines in order to make his enemies worry that he might go off on them at any time. Oddly, his strategy works, and he is generally left alone to complain, Holden Caulfield style, about the phoniness of the people and institutions that surround him, especially those who valorize Holden Caulfield as the spokesperson of an age. Although his self-absorbed navel-gazing is very similar to that of Holden’s, Tom has a diametrically opposed view of childhood and adolescence as a protected space that he is loath to leave. In considering Holden’s desire to protect kids from plummeting out of the childhood fields of rye over the cliff into adulthood, Tom recalls the many incidents of bullying that his youth and social position have made him powerless to fight and concludes:

I'm sorry, but I'm rooting for the kids and hoping they get out while they can. And as for you, Holden, old son: if you happen to meet my body coming through the rye, I'd really appreciate it if you'd just stand aside and get out of my fucking way. (p. 246)

Tom's perspective on childhood and adolescence is one of the most prevalent ones in contemporary YA literature; when authors go about constructing adolescence, it seems that most of them construct it as angsty and awful. Perhaps, however, it is more accurate to say that books that construct adolescence as angsty and awful are the ones that get taken most seriously by critics and educators.

In the past two decades, however, and particularly since the turn of the 21st century, YA literature has found the fun in being young, beautiful, and relatively carefree. Adult chick and Chica Lit, with their comic takes on body image, ethnicity, relationships, and shopping, have trickled into YA lit in the works of Sue Limb (2004), Louise Rennison (2000), Sherri Winston (2008), Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez (2008), and Michele Serros (2006), among others. Adolescent male humor rocks from the pages of Christopher Paul Curtis's (2004) Bucking the Sarge, Derrick Barnes’s (2006) The Making of Dr. Truelove, and Sherman Alexie's (2007) The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, where the humor augments the poignant. David Levithan (2008) and Walter Dean Myers (2007) have found both the sweet and the funny in all kinds of romantic relationships in novels and short story collections. Even books like Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) Speak, which deals with the aftermath of the rape of an eighth grade girl, treat their subject with a good deal of dark humor. In YA literature,
it would seem that the importance of being earnest in the 1970s and 80s has taken a decided turn to the importance of being ironic.

There are, of course, multiple ways to account for this shift from earnestness to irony. One would be that the issues involved require significant emotional investment: the sprouting of adolescent body parts, the management of identity in the seething cauldron of high school, the negotiation of moral agency in a complex and often hostile and unfair environment. Certainly, the emotions we invest in these things can be serious, intense, and unpleasant. Indeed, for several decades, the emotions that predominated in YA literature were quite devastating, as authors worked through problems of body image, eating disorders, failed romance, sexual and physical abuse, parental death, racial oppression. The problem is that unpleasant emotions are, well, unpleasant. For the most part, healthy people seek pleasure in their emotional states, so humor is a way to maintain an emotional investment in a difficult situation, but to keep that investment pleasant rather than unpleasant.

Another more complex way of thinking about this shift is to tie it to ideological change. It is generally accepted that we live in what is called a postmodern era, even if no one can quite agree on what that means. In literary and cultural studies, we follow the work of Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) in linking the idea of postmodernism with the demise of a belief in grand narratives; that is, the notions of transcendent, universal ideals of Truth, Beauty, Family, God, etc., that characterized modernist thinking have been supplanted by the understanding that these things are culturally determined and local in their application. What isn’t widely recognized is that vestiges of these grand narratives persist in our belief systems, and that no matter how much we raise our consciousnesses about certain things, archaic impressions from the unconscious push back against cognitive, rational determinations. As a result, dissonance, which is mostly but not quite completely cognitive, results between the fractured worlds we inhabit and the whole, ideal worlds we imagine and wish for. Humor is one way of negotiating that dissonance; making fun of our ideals and our attempts at heroism softens our disappointment at their failure.

Another way that we cope with this sort of dissonance is by engaging in the kind of fantasies that stage conflict and violence in an exaggerated way. When earnest effort fails to bring us to the place in the world we wish for, we manage our anger by imagining aggressive scenarios that lead to the vicarious release of real tension. Again, this operates at both a personal and a cultural level. In the heyday of the European Enlightenment, there was much optimism about the continued development of human society if we could simply find the right formula for social relations; advances in medicine, technology, and cultural exploration were enough to convince us of our evolution and ultimate perfectability as a species. Didn’t happen. Instead, technology devolved into more efficient means for destroying larger numbers of people, and human society fell apart on a grand scale not once, not even twice, but continually throughout the 20th and into the 21st century.

Teenagers in postmodern culture thus find themselves in a paradox of potentiality. Children’s and most young adult literature closes with a message of possibility and resilience, and this narrative is shored up by politicians who talk incessantly about hope, peace, and change while simultaneously loading the next generation down with financial, environmental, and emotional debt and continuing to engage in both violent conflict and meaningless political squabbling and gamesmanship. More unsettling, however, is the brand of violence rightly called terrorism, because it operates outside of a system of bloodless political disagreement and staged warfare. Combat troops know, to some degree, what they’ve signed on for; people killed in subway trains or in their workplaces or schools cause us to remember that there are real monsters among us. More disturbingly, these acts tend to bring to the surface our own murderous impulses, as we are more likely to contemplate revenge than compassion, understanding, or even justice for the attackers. There are monsters among us, and there are monsters within.

The late 1990s and early 21st century saw an explosion of vampire and other monster texts for young adult audiences, largely, I would argue, in response to the increasing sense that we live in a dangerous world where evil is lurking in the shadows, and where we sometimes have to become monsters ourselves in order to protect what we care about. The grand narratives of patriotism and clear poles of good and evil that dominated the public discourse of the World Wars largely dissolved in the protests of the 1960s and 70s, leaving behind a legacy of self-doubt and ambiguity regarding who is the aggressor and who is the victim. Representations of monsters in literature operate in part to stage these ambiguous positions and explore the possibilities of continued violence versus understanding and redemption.

At the level of embodiment, the figure of the monster makes for a remarkably apt image of the changing adolescent body; growth spurts, lurching clumsiness, and new oozings and protruding body parts are all things we associate with both monsters and puberty. The changes are scary, and I (Jackson, Coats, & McGillis, 2007) have argued elsewhere that girls in particular experience a Gothic moment at menarche, where the comforting narratives of becoming a woman or a medicalized understanding of what puberty means pale before the archaic fear of the issue of blood from one’s own body. Elsewhere, the figure of the vampire, with its sadistic, overwhelming need to penetrate and feed off the flesh of another, provides a powerful analogue for the adolescent body just awakening to its not-yet-under-control sexual appetites and desires, as well as many of the attendant problems of coming of age.
For instance, the traditional reading of a vampire as someone who has lost its reflection has particular resonance for the teen, for whom appearance is everything in a lookist culture. The idea of not having a reflection resonates with the loss or mutation of identity, of not seeing oneself as others do. Chris, in M. T. Anderson’s (1997) Thirst, is devastated by the idea that he is turning into a vampire; he is the Holden Caulfield of vampire world, reluctant to take up adult responsibilities especially when they require sexual activity, which he cannot separate from his predatory feelings. He much prefers his metrosexual fantasy, like Holden’s, of a sophisticated celibacy, a meeting of minds, hearts, and passions but where no actual fluids need be exchanged. Anderson goes out of his way to link Chris’s change to a recognition that he is gay: “You gonna come out of the coffin?” (p. 202) a girl vampire taunts, and Chris worries that his mother will not be able to accept his vampire identity. But his obsession with Rebecca multiplies interpretive possibilities, and the peculiar poignancy in Chris’s predicament becomes how to remain human in the grand battle between good and evil, even when every instinct you have screams for you to give in to your predatory desires.

Teens are often scripted in contemporary culture as fearsome creatures, especially when they roam in packs, like the Five in Annette Curtis Klaus’s (1997) Blood and Chocolate. But much contemporary YA literature, in keeping with the trend toward dialogism and community discussed above, sets out to redeem that image. The Scoobies in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003) are in fact a formidable pack, but they use their powers for good. Likewise the vampires in Scott Westerfeld’s (2005a) Peeps. Peeps are people who are parasite-positive; that is, they have a parasite that, when ingested, presents with the symptoms of vampirism, including a revulsion for mirrors, an enhanced sexual appetite, superhuman strength, a hatred of light, and cannibalism. If a victim is merely a carrier, or if a victim can be given a course of medication to control the more virulent and socially unacceptable symptoms, then he or she can join in the war against a horrible, ancient evil that exists underground; indeed that is why the parasites exist, to keep the creature in check so that humanity can flourish.

Melissa de la Cruz (2006) places her vampires as the first families of New York City, the Blue Bloods who shaped and still sustain the economy of a nation. They came to this country to escape persecution, but were followed by an even older order of vampires, who destroyed one of the settlements and left only a word—Crocket— as a warning. Both de la Cruz and Westerfeld offer shades of humor in their “now you know the rest of the story” explanations for the origins of vampirism, which answers to a contemporary appetite for debunking myth and legend in favor of pseudo-scientific explanations, but they also present their vampires as attractive, special, and able to save the world, which is a very affirming and redemptive message indeed for teens who feel a kinship with the monstrous.

Many contemporary vampire and monster novels, then, are deeply concerned with the ethical development of young adults. Their teen characters are cast as both the plague and its cure; their bodies are powerfully and potentially monstrous, but they have the ability and the responsibility to hold their power in check, and use it for good. They are at a threshold of possibility, and the fate of the world rests on their ability to respond ethically and with restraint in the face of profound obstacles, including their own inner demons.

The Best of Times

This kind of ethical engagement is not limited, of course, to fantasy novels. Since human society continues to persist despite its crisis of faith in itself, it has had to develop new narratives, and these narratives bear within them the history of their construction; that is, they face the lack of perfection not as an incomplete state of development, but as an impossible dream, and thus adopt an ironic or wondering stance toward it. Nevertheless, these narratives, particularly ones intended for YA audiences, tend to express the belief that progress is possible if in fact we can cultivate what Erik Erikson (1964) called the impulse of “generativity.” Erikson believed that “the fulfillment of...identity” (p. 131) manifests itself in the desire to reach out to others, to engage in the kind of selfless caring for others that we ourselves received in infancy. So central is this impulse to human identity that he asserts that “we are the teaching species” (p. 130). Don Browning (1973) elaborates further that “it is the great task of generative [people] to develop the ‘ethical potential of our older youth’—those who are so close to their own childhood, so close to full adulthood, and so intensively sensitive to the ethical and generational needs of both” (p. 207).

In other words, we might say that adolescents are at a threshold of emotionally engaged understanding that makes them particularly susceptible to the development of a generative identity, especially if that kind of identity support is found in their cultural and artistic artifacts. Markus Zusak (2005) takes this kind of generative engagement as his explicit subject in I am the Messenger by staging its lack as protagonist Ed’s central problem. In his late adolescence, Ed suffers from a failure to launch, spending his days working as a cab driver and playing cards with his equally stalled friends. It isn’t until Ed begins to take responsibility for the welfare of others, acting on mysterious messages that direct him to people who need something only he can give, that he begins to find value and direction in his life. His identity development thus depends on his enacting generativity.

Zusak’s (2006) amazing historical novel, The Book Thief, offers another such narrative that shows the
intergenerational progression of generativity. The main character, Liesel, experiences generosity and love from her adoptive parents as they enact their desire to teach her to read and encourage her to tell her story. Their love comes in various guises, and hers reaches out in equally various ways to others in her community. Her generative response comes when the family shelters Max Vandenburg, a Jew, in the basement of their home. She reads with him, writes with him, prays for him, and ultimately, loves him in a way that is clearly the fulfillment of her identity as one who had been well-loved.

The Book Thief also exemplifies a sustained version of the stance of wonder in the face of human wreckage. The narrator, Death, takes more than a passing interest in the fate of Liesel, whom he first encountered when he took her brother from her in childhood. Death has a perspective on humanity that allows him to see it at its most noble and most ignoble, and he marvels at the human capacity to sustain love in the face of crushing grief, and the power of words to hold the world’s beating heart against the relentless drive of forces that would stop it. Death’s grim humor reflects his idealist stance with regard to people; he expects them to be more or less than they are, and they continually surprise him, prompting a humorous response to the incongruity of what he sees. In his words, “I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race—that rarely do I ever simply estimate it. I wanted to ask [Liesel] how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant” (p. 550).

Like Death, young adults are faced with idealist expectations sold to them in the narratives of childhood, but must also face the incommensurability of the lives and bodies they inhabit with the representations they imagine as ideal. But Zusak’s Death provides literary critics with much to consider as well. As readers, educators, and critics, we must take care that we do not over or underestimate our teens, but rather estimate them, and work to understand the ways in which the literature they encounter provides identity support at multiple levels so that we may contextualize more fully the ugly, the glorious, the damning, and the brilliant.

Obviously, there is much more happening in the world of YA literature than can be covered in a single chapter. What I have attempted to do here is to point not only to structural necessities for the critical study of YA literature, which include attention to the distinctive emotional life and embodiment of teens, the historical, social, and cultural environments in which they live, and the prevailing metaphors for the construction of adolescence, but also to fill in some of those structures with content from contemporary YA literature. The very nature of the genre and its readership prevents the saying of any critical last word, and yet while the first critical words have been well-spoken, much remains to be articulated in this vibrant conversation.

Literature References

Hinton, S. E. (1971). That was then, this is now. New York, NY: Viking.
Academic References


