Popular Postmodernism for Young Adult Readers: Walk Two Moons, Holes, and Monster

Stephenie Yearwood

One of the ongoing debates in children's and young adult literature recently has been over the issue of whether, and how, and to what extent the literature, broadly defined, is becoming "postmodern." In The Pleasures of Children's Literature, Perry Nodelman (1996) describes children's literature as being (among other qualities) simple, action-oriented, and didactic (190). Swedish critic Maria Nikolajeva argues, in Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic (1996) argues, to the contrary, stating that children's literature (which, for her, includes YA literature) was showing more and more postmodern qualities. She holds that although "genre" books still dominate the field, more and more "auteur" books, literary, sophisticated, and complex have been appearing (207). In 1998, Nikolajeva replied specifically to Nodelman by arguing that "an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity and metafiction" (Nikolajeva, "Exit" 222). As I examine these arguments from the point of view of 2002, it seems to me that if we focus exclusively on young adult literature, we will find that one part of the larger world of "children's literature" has now fully embraced the postmodern mode. To put it a bit differently, whereas the distinctively postmodern YA works have, until recently, been "fringe" or "auteur" books, beloved of critics, they have not been popular favorites. Now they are.

Three recent YA books that are very popular provide examples of works that fearlessly use postmodern ideas and techniques: Sharon Creech's Walk Two Moons, Louis Sachar's Holes, and Walter Dean Myers' Monster. The first two are well-known Newbery Award winners of 1995 and 1998 respectively, and the third is a 1999 winner of the ALA Michael Printz Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, and a finalist for the National Book Award. Sales figures for these books indicate that they clearly are mainstream reading. Their

Interestingly, this postmodern "recipe" for YA literature turns out to be extraordinarily well-suited to raising and exploring some of the oldest themes of the genre: identity, self-fashioning, and self-knowledge.

and obsession with, history as being "not a nostalgic return" but "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue" (4). Finally, from the Bakhtinian tradition I take the idea of dialogics or intertextuality as central to postmodern fiction—the notion that texts or narratives set up dialogues with other texts, either other previously-written literary texts or other stories, creating new stories in the interstices and frictions and contradictions of various other stories. These three YA novels are all marked by an ontologically-impelled querying of the past within a densely intertextual narrative structure. To various degrees, they all center around gaps (vacancies, missing pieces, unknowns, uncertainties, or holes) and the questions (often unanswered questions) generated by those missing pieces. All are centrally concerned with history (either personal or political), what it is, understanding it, remaking it, and the uncertain relationship between past and present. Finally, all of them foreground issues of intertextuality or internarrativity. They create realms of intertextual reference where multiple stories affect/reflect/interact as the past is questioned, prodded, retold, recovered, or remade. Inter-
Walk Two Moons

Creech's story is marked strongly from the outset by its missing piece: Salamanca Tree Hiddle's mother. It quickly becomes obvious that the mystery in the novel is more than the epistemological issue of figuring out what happened to her. As we collect Sal's clues, we come to realize that even though we don't know yet what happened to Sal's mother, our narrator Sal surely must know. But in her present state of being, she cannot face what she knows. Sal's ontological essence, her very being, is in question as she pieces together for us and for herself a picture of the past and a self which can accept that picture. We are confused, and so is Sal. Although Sal's narration of Phoebe's story engages us, and the rambunctious grandparents add a wonderful dimension to the tale, the central story here is Sal's—she grapples to answer her ontological question of how she can continue to exist in a world where her mother is dead.

Creech's narrative technique highlights the uncertain and quirky relationship between past and present through the story. The entire story of Phoebe is told by Sal to her grandparents as they travel west to see her mother. The earlier story of Sal's life with her mother and father before she met her conscious recollection and only reassembled as it is re-experienced vicariously through Phoebe, then as that story is retold to her grandparents. Sal knows but does not know this history, and she and Phoebe both try to retrieve any evidence of their mother's existence. Has Phoebe's mother been kidnapped by the lunatic? Is she in Paris? Hidden in a well? Murdered by Mrs. Cadaver? Is Sal's mother alive and well and waiting for Sal in Idaho? Is she alive but disabled? Is she coming home? Is she dead? Sal's past is reconsidered, remade and retold in multiple layers here; and it can emerge fully only when she has successfully constructed a new identity for herself—an identity which can face the history.

Finally, this story is made of stories, by stories, and in between stories. The story steadfastly refuses to resolve either the epistemological or the ontological issues; hence its contradictory and confusing accounts of the past.

The story is the mini-tale of Ben's mother in a mental hospital, a woman who reminds Sal strongly of her own mother (370). There is the Blackfoot myth of Napi who created men and women; it reminds her that "People die" (150). The story of Mrs. Cadaver, whose husband was killed and mother blinded in the same car accident, makes Sal think, "It was as though I was walking in her moccasins. That's how much my heart was beating and my own hands sweating" (220). And the enigmatic "messages" which appear on slips of paper at Phoebe's front door work their way into her very being. "All those messages had invaded my brain and affected the way I looked at things" (221). In the intertextual spaces and intersections and frictions between these stories, Sal resurrects her past and simultaneously constructs herself as a different being.

Holes

Louis Sachar's Holes uses the elements of this recipe differently. This story is based not on complex narrative technique, but on vacancy and missing pieces, and on a magically realistic reenactment of history which focuses on the intersecting stories of three different sets of characters generations apart. Ontological issues of being and nothingness interplay through this story in a series of negative/positive afterimages. Stanley Yelnats (whose name is a self-reflective palindrome) is at Camp Green Lake (which is not a lake, but a desert where a lake used to be) because some famous sneakerers go missing; his chief occupation there is to dig holes, and he attributes it all to something his mythical grandfather failed to do. Stanley himself is nearly a missing person. He is given the nonsense nickname "Caveman," as though he were himself a vacancy, and his best friend is nicknamed Zero.

The setting raises other ontological questions such as "What world are we in?" Initially, the idea of a juvenile detention camp set in a desert ringed by mountains seems realistic enough, until we learn about the yellow-spotted lizards whose bite is slow and always lethal. Add to that the presence of a masochistic female camp warden who wears "black cowboy boots [...], studded with turquoise stones" (66) and who delights in concocting her own nail polish using rattlesnake venom so that it's only toxic while it's wet" (90), and we have bypassed fantasy altogether and edged out into the surreal.

Finally, the ontological stakes are raised even higher by the magical realism of the plot with its three intertwined stories. Stanley's often- retold family myth is that his great-great-grandfather was perpetually in the wrong place at the wrong time because he stole a pig from a one-legged Gypsy. Stanley's often-retold family myth is that his great-great-grandfather was perpetually in the wrong place at the wrong time because he stole a pig from a one-legged Gypsy. Stanley himself is nearly a missing person. He is given the nonsense nickname "Caveman," as though he were himself a vacancy, and his best friend is nicknamed Zero.

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Kate Barlow of Green Lake (when it really WAS a Green Lake) encountered racism and the murder of her lover and transformed herself into the outlaw Kissin’ Kate Barlow. We learn that the lake dried up as punishment for the transgressions of the community. We also learn that Stanley’s great-grandfather was robbed by Kissin’ Kate, left for dead in the desert, but managed to survive, saying only that he had “found refuge on God’s thumb” (93). Another interwoven story is Stanley’s own tale of being hit on the head with a pair of stolen sneakers and sent off to reform camp.

These related narratives coalesce into a truly magical and surreal story at the conclusion to *Holes*. Stanley has been trying to help out his fellow inmate Zero by teaching him to read, and after Zero escapes into the desert (with no water) Stanley decides to follow him. They survive by accidentally finding, in the midst of the dry lakebed, the skeleton of the boat in which Kate Barlow and her lover tried to escape, then drinking the 110-year old spiced peaches which were in the boat when it sank. Stanley carries the sick Zero (whose real name we learn is Hector Zeroni) out of the desert and up to the top of a strange-shaped mountain where they find a most unlikely water hole and the field of onions Kate’s lover tended. As they escape, Zero explains that he is the one who stole the sneakers Stanley was caught and convicted for stealing. Along the way, Stanley realizes that they are on “God’s thumb” where his great-grandfather before him escaped and survived. It becomes clear to all that Stanley has satisfied his great-great-grandfather’s debt to the Zeroni family, re-enacted his great-grandfather’s survival, and solved the mystery of who stole those sneakers. The runaway surrealism is capped when the two boys return to camp, are cornered by yellow-spot-eyed guards, and find that the lizards don’t bite people who have been eating onions for a week, locate the lost treasure of Kissin’ Kate, prove their innocence, and expose the camp as a fraud.

In the introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris point out that magical realism “creates space for the interactions of diversity. In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions” (3). Indeed, that is precisely what happens here as the plot queries whether magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions. The marvelously mythical tying up of all these intertextual loose ends creates for Stanley what he has never had before, an identity of himself as himself.

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ments highlight issues raised in these three novels and in Young adult works in the postmodern mode may not necessarily predominate, but they are now mainstream and readily mainstream ontological question, obsession and uncertainty about which the "cultural dominant" has changed (McHale 9). No answers, no easy resolutions, no insight. Just a central ontological question, obsession and uncertainty about the past, and archaeological layering of text upon text. 

Certainly there is room for legitimate debate whether this three-part "recipe" of ontological perspective, historical intertextuality, and intertextual multilogue is an adequate definition of the atmospheric and omnipresent concept of "postmodernism" in young adult literature. But these elements highlight issues raised in these three novels and in many others which could have been selected: Creech's The Wanderer, Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy, Paterson's Gathering Blue. I believe that a broader definition of postmodernism would only emphasize further the extent to which the "cultural dominant" has changed (McHale 9).

Young adult works in the postmodern mode may not necessarily predominate, but they are now mainstream and readily accepted by readers. Nor should this be any surprise since one of the common uses of the term "postmodern" is simply as a descriptive term for contemporary culture. Zipes (2001) voices reservations about how distanced criticism of children's and YA literature has become from the realities of the lives of contemporary young readers (Zipes 37). Nevertheless, it seems to me that in this case, the qualities of these three works that make them critically "postmodern" are exactly the qualities which reflect current anxieties, obsessions, and social realities. Sam's tenuous grip on an unbearable reality of loss, Stanley's near evaporation into a bizarre and corrupt juvenile justice system, and Steve Harmon's radical self-fashioning in the face of society's expectations of young black men: these are themes which invite both postmodern literary treatment and popularity with young readers in our postmodern culture.

Works Cited

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