



Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century:

Moving Beyond Traditional Constraints and Conventions

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, young adult literature looks very different than it did fifty years ago. Indeed, fifty years ago, we were just getting started with the likes of Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye* (1951), with Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968), and Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) still a gleam in the eye of their literary creators. We have come a long way since then, and I suppose, that is why our humble, yet groundbreaking beginnings have yielded a bountiful harvest of literary works. Today, we face a plethora of young adult books that represent every conceivable genre and literary style. To be sure, we are on the precipice of re-inventing ourselves because our young adult books are constantly in search of the new and revealing so that more and more young people will find their way to the delectable hallways of good and engaging reads.

Thus, it is intriguing to look at the spate of recent articles on the nature of young adult fiction in the twenty-first century. Indeed, as the authors of many articles say, the world of young adult literature is

being transformed by topics and themes that years ago would have never ever been conceived without someone labeling them 'daft' or at least, a little far-fetched and out-of-touch with everyday reality. Furthermore, writers and scholars alike are challenging the whole concept of what young adult literature is. Some think the genre

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is too limiting for even the most experienced readers for it delegates good works to a category few, if any, scholars can easily define. And others regard young adult literature as something that once was, but is

on the cusp of becoming something totally new and unique. Such are the articles presented in this research column: a solemn look at the changing face of young adult literature and where it is going from here. Enjoy the ride.

Young Adult Science Fiction in the Post-human Age

In "Is He Still Human? Are You?": Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," researcher Elaine Ostry analyzes science fiction texts, written for young adults, which deal with the tenets of our new biotechnology age: cloning, genetic engineering, prolongation of life, and neuropharmacology. She discusses how texts—young adult literature concerned with bioethics—use the possibility of biotechnology as metaphors for adolescence. Specifically, these new engaging reads for young adults discuss in vivid and clarifying detail the ethics implied in the study and practice of biotechnology—such as the creation of a super class of human beings and the delicate crossing of the boundaries between human

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and animal, and that age-old fascination, human and machine. Ostry raises a number of startling questions and propositions in regard to the promulgation of young adult literature which examines in full glory the outlines of a new and ever stranger adult world and concludes that most of these contemporary adolescent fictional texts place “nurture above nature” and promote a safe and traditional vision of humanity.

Still, danger lurks. As Ostry writes, the potential of biotechnology to change human form is ever present in young adult literature that recently has seen science fiction come to life. What their parents and grandparents had always thought of as science fiction, says Ostry, are now realities or possible

realities. The once time honored “stuff of science fiction novels”—cloning, genetic engineering, etc.—is now the everyday realities of young people’s lives. Everything from artificially created limbs to designer babies is very real for today’s adolescents, bringing into question the eternal question, “what does it mean to be human?” After all, if biotechnology can change the human form and mind, and machines can become a reasonable part of the human body, then the term post-human body or “techno-body” is a distinct entity. And with the lines crossed between organic and inorganic, Ostry asserts, the word “human” may never be more challenged, manipulated or questioned.

Clearly, scientific advances have changed the map of young adult literature. Young people on a quest to define their identity, Ostry writes, have never become more soul-searching and desperate. After all, if we as a society are altering our definition of what it means to be human, we can only begin to understand the relevance of our desire to truly understand ourselves in light of our newfound technology. Today, thanks to advances in DNA labeling, we can determine much of a person before he or she is even born, or created by other means. And most science fiction for young adults attempts to mediate the post-human age to young audiences. What are the pros and cons of cloning? Of what value is the human versus the new, “improved” human? And how can young people really know what it means to be fully alive if all they know are people who have been genetically engineered? As Ostry

insists, these are all intriguing questions and all indicative of how much young adult literature has changed dramatically in the last twenty years.

The trope that all young adult literature has in common is the search for identity. The dilemma, though, is that in our new post-human age, young people are often questioning not only their emotional identity, but also their biological identity or just “what does it mean to be conventionally human?” As Ostry points out, in the *Replica* series by Marilyn Kaye, the young protagonist Amy is assigned to write her autobiography in her high school English class. Gradually, Amy begins to realize, though,

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how little she knows about herself and her family. With little help from absent parents, she sends off for a birth certificate and, to her surprise, finds that there is no record of her birth. Moreover, her file at school is empty. Only the discovery of a baby bracelet that reads “Amy #7” provides her with a clue about her odd birth: she is a clone. Amy is stunned, and the ramifications are many in her desperate search to find her true identity. Likewise, teenagers Mike and Angel team up in Nicole Luiken’s *Violet Eyes* to figure out why they have so much in common. To their horror, they discover that what they think to be true is not. They are living in the year 2098, not 1987 as they suspect. Moreover, they are a new subspecies of human, *Homo sapiens renascentia*, thanks to the injection of “Renaissance” genes that make them exceptional.

Other examples of young adults finding their true identities in a post-human age abound in young adult literature. As Ostry indicates, in Neal Shusterman’s *The Dark Side of Nowhere*, Jason’s father tells him that they are actually aliens who have taken over the genetic structure of previous inhabitants of the town. In the *Regeneration* series by L. J. Singleton, young Allison, a genetically designed baby, blames her distant relationship with her parents on her origins—she wonders was there something genetic in her clone DNA that made her troubled and distant from her family and friends? Or, as her fellow experimentee Varina says, am I a troubled kid because “I wasn’t the product of two loving parents, but the result of experi-

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mental science” (*Regeneration*, p. 140). And in Carol Matas’ *Cloning Miranda*, young Miranda learns not only that she is a clone of a dead sister, but also her parents have had another clone made so that she would always have perfect matches for her transplants. Understandably, Miranda is angry with her parents for their implicit deceptiveness and does not forgive them easily.

To be sure, these stories are wild and fanciful in design, but they all, according to Ostry, have one primary element in common; the young adults in these books feel estranged not just from their parents and from the society that would likely shun them, but from themselves as well. They feel that they are not real because they are clones—or otherwise, genetically engineered. “To find out your that your life is a lie is one thing, but to find out that your own face doesn’t even belong to you,” says Jason angrily in Shusterman’s *The Dark Side of Nowhere*, is to realize that you are living a disguise, “down to

every single cell of my counterfeit body” (Shusterman, pg. 61).

Fears about the new biotechnology generated world permeate new young adult literature. As Ostry writes, the linkage between human being and machine is always called into question. Inevitably, the question arises: Are we developing a race of super humans? There is a striking example of genetics creating a class system of super humans in *The Last Book in the Universe* by Rodman Philbrick. In this provocative read, the world is divided into “normals” and “proovs” The proovs are genetically improved people, who live in Eden, the only place where blue sky and green grass are found. The normals live in the Urbs, concrete jungles of violence and poverty. The narrator, Spaz, is even less than a normal; as an epileptic, he is a “Deef,” or defective. Philbrick’s work is the inevitable conflict that arises when two human beings compete for superior status. In the end, no one wins.

If being human means feeling emotion, continues Ostry, then losing control over one’s emotions or having them controlled for you, puts one’s humanity in direct confrontation with the concept of human freedom. Books using neuropharmacology, as Ostry writes, exploit this idea. Upon reaching puberty, the young adults in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* must take a pill that suppresses sexual desires. Jonas, the story’s protagonist, is uncomfortable with this ruling, and secretly stops taking this pill. Suddenly, Jonas discovers that all emotions become heightened. Similarly, the female leaders in Kathryn Lasky’s *Star Split* stop

taking the substance that calms their emotions. In Peter Dickinson's *Eva*, a mother's concern for her daughter's happiness is answered by a doctor's order for a "microshot of endorphin" (Dickinson, p. 10), as if mere chemicals could alter happiness. And in Philbrick's *The Last Book in the Universe*, the human mind is completely mediated by chemically induced sights and emotions.

This new reality, Ostry insists, is becoming more and more real to young adults as the world outside their classroom door becomes more science fact than science fiction. And this new reality lends a new breadth and depth to young adult literature that heretofore, has only existed in the realm of fantasy. Most of the characters in these post-human science fiction books for young adults, writes Ostry, face choices that determines the level of their humanity. The young protagonists display a considerable energy and wit in their defense of humanity. They label themselves as human, using the standards of morality set by the liberal humanist model. They recognize the humanity of others, tolerating others' weaknesses and rejecting the supremacy of the post-human body.

In these books, Ostry underscores, scientists are seen as fallible. In Marilyn Kaye's *Amy*, young Amy's adoptive mother Nancy says that she thought that by engaging in scientific experimentation with her daughter that she was doing something pure and noble and good. Instead, they learned how dangerous playing with human life forms could really be. In Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Turnabout*, the unaging drug is sup-

posed to be arrested by another drug at the age desired, but, unfortunately, the first person to try this medical wonder pill crumbles into dust. Only the young protagonists Melly and Anny Beth ultimately survive the experiment as all others choose suicide or dwell in severe depression. Similarly, in

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Frank Bonham's *The Forever Formula* the aged "gummies" or old people without teeth and wit, suffer from malaise and beg to play "suicide bingo." And the positive characters in Nancy Farmer's *The House of Scorpion* are disgusted by the old men who prolong their lives past the age of 150 years by means of continual implants from clones.

The message that these books give to young readers, Ostry concludes, is a reassuring one:

human values and human nature will prevail no matter what changes the human body endures. These values are what literature—and the adult world in general—attempt to inculcate in young people. Still, Ostry insists, for the most part young adult writers are playing it safe because inevitably, the real world is highly more complicated. The future of science and the body is much less certain, Ostry asserts, than most young adult novels would have you believe. No one knows for sure what the personality of a clone would be like. Free will itself may be a combination of genetic factors, yet these possibilities, writes Ostry, are too complicated and radical for the typical writer for young adults today. They stray from the perceived notion in young adult literature of the need to provide a clear moral structure and a hopeful, if not happy, ending. For, as Ostry finishes, although these post modern writers may push the envelope in young adult literature in the subject matter and grotesque imagery, most of these writers play it very safe by showing the post-human body as comfortingly familiar—something which may be as far from the truth as can possibly be imagined. This is the world Ostry dares to paint.

Stretching the Boundaries and Blurring the Lines of Young Adult Genre

In "Stretching the Boundaries and Blurring the Lines of Genre," authors Lester Laminack and Barbara Bell focus on the confusion regarding the term "genre" and attempt to define and stretch its boundaries. According to Laminack

and Bell, genre is typically defined as a way of organizing or categorizing literature, “a way to group books with similar style, form, or content “ (Laminack and Bell, p. 248). Yet, in today’s diversified and multicultural world of varied dimensions and rationalities, the lines, as said, between and among genres often become blurred, calling for a re-examination of what is meant by the young adult genre. In particular, Laminack and Bell point to the continued popularity of memoir as a popular genre in books for children and adults. But, can it really be called memoir?

Memoir books, typically, tell of a specific moment or brief span of time in the writer’s life. Many times, Laminack and Bell stress, these books are written in the first person, and the matter recounts the events by reflecting on what has long passed. Stories written as first-person narratives, Laminack and Bell continue, can share these qualities, allowing them to assume a “memoir-like” feel. And unless, as the authors note, the author of the memoir specifically says that the book is a “memoir of real life events,” the reader may not be able to determine whether or not the events actually occurred in the life of the writer.

This confusing dilemma manifests itself in a few recent works, most notably, Claire Ewart’s *The Giant*, Ann Rinaldi’s *Or Give Me Death: A Novel of Patrick Henry’s Family*, and Maria Testa’s *Almost Forever*. Each book illustrates how blurred the distinction between true-to-life memoir and creative fictional license can become distinctly and unintentionally blurred.

In Claire Ewart’s *The Giant*, a young girl tells in a first-person narrative about the loss of her beloved mother. Though she and her father have the farm chores to keep them busy, the young girl continues to look for the “giants” that her mother told her daughter would always look after her. All through the seasons, from planting to harvest, she searches for evidence of her giant—only to discover him in the face of her father. Illustrated handsomely by the author, the reader is left with a vivid portrait of an endearing loss and love, but still confused if the story is an account of her real life loss or a beautiful fantasy of what might be. Again, is this poetry, narrative, memoir, or just a lush and rich children’s bedtime story?

Ann Rinaldi is known for historical fiction. This, in and of itself, is a mixed bag—because the reader is left wondering—did this really happen, or is the author inventing this for pure dramatic effect? In one of her latest works, *Or Give Me Death: A Novel of Patrick Henry’s Family*, Rinaldi asks the central question, “when do you tell the truth and when do you lie?” Do you lie to protect someone? Is it wrong to keep a secret, when, if you tell, someone gets hurt?

These profound and eternal questions are at the heart of this historical novel about the family members of Revolutionary War hero, Patrick Henry, who must wrestle with a host of family problems—each of whom must face a test in her young life as they struggle to bring a new nation to the birthplace of freedom. With a mother prone to madness and an absentee father, Patrick Henry’s

family must cope with larger-than-life questions as their father faces the impending American revolutionary war and they must decide what actions they should take in his absence and in his defense. Central to the novel is the potential strength of the human spirit to conquer all odds. Yet, although this biography-like novel is actually historical fiction, it is based on true information and reads like the biography of the family of Patrick Henry. Clearly, this can only confuse the uninformed reader.

Finally, Maria Testa’s *Almost Forever* is beautifully written lyrical novel told from the six-year-old daughter’s perspective. It is the moving story of one family’s experience when the father is sent to Vietnam for a year during the Vietnam War. The young girl believes her father shouldn’t have gone to war because he is a doctor and doctors don’t fight, they heal. She fears that her father will simply disappear from her life, especially when the letters stop coming. Told in haunting poetic language, the author evokes a mood that is both real and dreamy. The reader experiences the emotions of the child, yet simultaneously, longs to know how much is the author’s life, how much is written to evoke a mood, and how much is simply a well-constructed poem? Granted, the effect is the same, but again, the work becomes difficult to classify.

These examples, write Laminack and Bell, are but a few of the many works designed for young adults where the genres are blurred, the distinctions many, and the story painfully true—on many levels. And as Laminack and Bell contend, in a day and age where young

people are becoming more and more sophisticated about the ways of the world, they increasingly need to know what is fiction and what is fact. No longer content to accept the world as it is, young people hunger for readily identifiable markers so they can explore and define their ever-changing and cyber-reaching universe. Truly, the lines are blurred as we enter the 21st century.

Exploring Identity Construction in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

Finally, in “Developing Students’ Critical Literacy: Exploring Identity Construction in Young Adult Fiction,” authors Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni challenge how young adult literature is traditionally read and taught in most secondary classrooms. As Bean and Moni state, most adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teenagers. At the center of all these themes are questions of character and identity and values. They argue that an alternative way of looking at these novels, and perhaps, a more engaging technique in a postmodern world, is an exploration through a critical literacy framework. Bean and Moni argue that a critical stance in the classroom empowers students to consider “what choices have been made in the creation of the text” (Janks and Ivanic, 1992, p. 316). Their argument is that, through discussion of such choices, young adults may also better understand how they, as teenagers, are being constructed as adolescents in the

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texts they are reading, and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities.

The apparent need to shape a different critical look at young adult literature, insist Bean and Moni, is driven by, of all things, dramatic world changes. The world globalization of markets, they underscore, has resulted in the challenging of long-established ideologies and values related to the traditional ideals of work and family. In a world of constant movement and flow, media images of advertising and commerce seep into our lives and strongly influence identity development. Hence, young adult literature and our interpretation of it as a genre of literary study have been profoundly altered as a result

of this dramatic shift in world affairs.

Bean and Moni begin their intriguing look at the changing nature of critical theory and young adult literature by first examining the many theories of identity development prevalent in literary circles. Enlightened views of identity development, as Bean and Moni write, are based on the somewhat fixed social structures and actions of class differences. The “enlightened myth” of the rugged individualist struggling to get ahead in society has been the predominant social and literary theory of the modern age. Bean and Moni, however, conclude that in recent years, this rugged individualist stance has been challenged by a postmodern view, almost Marxist in its orientation, that says that power is the driving force in shaping identity. Furthermore, Bean and Moni argue, even this proposition has been somewhat challenged by cultural theorists who argue that the quest for power has been successfully supplanted by consumerism. “We now live in a world dominated by consumer, multinational or global capitalism, and the older theoretical models that we relied on to critique established systems no longer apply” (Mansfield, p. 163).

Urban teens navigate through shopping malls, train stations, airports, freeways, and the Internet. As Bean and Moni write, these fluid spaces are disorienting, dehumanizing any fixed sense of place, and subsequently, this feeling of emptiness and displacement spills over into adolescents’ interior worlds. Institutions like family, schools, and communities are being replaced by malls, tele-

vision, and cyberspace. Identity in these contemporary worlds, writes Bean and Moni, is constructed through the consumption of goods with selfhood vested in things. And because these worlds are ephemeral and ethereal, feelings of panic and anxiety flow into teens' lives.

The question for Bean and Moni is that, given this postmodern world of convenience and transience, how do young people find themselves? For if traditional avenues of self-expression are no longer valid—home, school, church, etc.—how do young people find who they are if they live in seemingly rootless social world? In essence, write Bean and Moni, youths no longer live life as a journey toward the future but as a condition. Young people today live in two different worlds—the world of home and school and the world of culture and commerce. Although in America this has been always been true, today, Bean and Moni insist, this chasm between conformity and modernity is ever more present due to the conflicting social arena in which most teenagers live.

Bean and Moni focus in on life for the urban Australian teenager in their discussion of the aimlessness of today's youth, but their observation can apply most anywhere. Young people face a world where unskilled laborers rarely can find meaningful work. Instead, in a postmodern world where the stability of life as a factory worker as experienced by their working class parents or life in a town where everybody grows up and nobody leaves, has been replaced by a life of constant change and uncertainty. Much of contemporary teenagers day, write Bean and

Moni, is spent in “non-places,”—like the mall and cyberspace.

Moreover, assert Bean and Moni, the places in which teenagers dwell are sanitized and kept free of the poor. Thus, for many young people, their displacement as marginalized members of society is only aggravated by the increasingly complex and global world of market-driven consumerism. This, as Bean and Moni insist, might seem miles away from the world of young adult literature, but they conclude, its influence cannot be denied. Literacy, they write, especially through multicultural young adult novels, provides a forum upon which teenagers can build cosmopolitan worldviews and identities.

In today's times, teenagers do everything on the run. Hence, this new dynamic—true, always present in the lives of young adults since the end of the second World War, but now ever heightened by modern technology—governs their lives. So, this new life-force of power shaped by social forces beyond traditional boundaries, as Bean and Moni underscore, demands a new language to interpret what students are reading, and more importantly, how they interpret what they read. The language is embedded in a new dialogue for literary interpretation called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

CDA asks the reader to look at the novel as a novel, and not just a work in which to identify with the lead characters. In a new postmodern age, where cyberspace is often more important than “real” space, readers are asked to look at a novel in much the same way that a contemporary teen would look at a computer—not as a living, breath-

ing thing, but as a machine with moving parts capable of transforming their temporary world into an ever-engaging ethereal world. The novel becomes, thus, a vehicle for transformative change, and not just a search for identity.

True, there is nothing dramatically new here. As Bean and Moni assert, critical analysis of novels has long been a staple of literary critics. Yet, what makes Critical Discourse Analysis so vital to today's young adults is that the context in which they live their lives—electronically, globally, and instantly—makes this an even more imperative approach to understanding who they are in their search for personal and spiritual identity. Asking questions about the novel itself—where does the novel come from? What social function does the novel serve? How does the adult author construct the world of adolescence in the novel? Who is the ideal reader of the novel? Who gets to speak and have a voice in this novel—and who doesn't? How else might these characters' stories be told? And these characters inhabit certain places and spaces where they construct their identities. What alternative places and spaces could be sites for constructing identity?

These intriguing questions are different from the standard fare of asking students if they identify with the characters in the story and why. They presuppose that students are sophisticated enough to look at a novel as an object in a given time and place, filled with all settings and vagaries of the particular time frame in which the novel occurs. They also assume that young people can examine a work of art

as both a thing of feeling and a thing of context. To be sure, this is no easy task, but as Bean and Moni assert, in today's contemporary world of ever changing dynamics and global constructs, of technological marvels and instantaneous gratification, and of changing lifestyles and alternative world views, perhaps, it is time that the young adult novel be analyzed in a new light. Perhaps, young people can see art for what it is—a reflection of the times in which we live.

Conclusion

These three articles all have something in common. They underscore that the outside world in which young people spend most of their waking hours is different from the world inhabited by most protagonists in young adult novels. Yes, the dilemmas, as these researchers insist, are the same, but the dynamics of their own lives—the lives of the teenagers who are reading these good works—have dramatically changed. Today's young people are the generation who live truly in a new and alternative universe. Technology has made it possible for them to communicate with people around the world in the blink of an eye, and to gratify their every wish—from musical taste to hidden desire—with the flick of a switch or the move of a mouse.

This new normal, the world of cyberspace and cloning, of blurred genres and conventions, and of critical discourse and contextual analysis, is what drives young adult literature in a new and specialized arena of complex thought and ideas. What this portends is that

the young adult novel is still growing and becoming, and that the teenage angst expressed so well in *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Outsiders*, *The Pigman* and *The Chocolate War* is still present, but just manifested in a world these authors could never imagine. For imagine, if you will, would Holden Caulfield have been a different person with a computer? I wonder.

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