

## The Art of the Young Adult Novel

Keynote Address: ALAN Workshop, Indianapolis, Indiana, November 20, 2004

The young adult novel has no Henry James, no E.M. Forster, no Milan Kundera. That is, no young adult novelist has written a treatise on the art of the young adult novel, as James, Forster, and Kundera did on the novel. The young adult novel has no great practitioner spokesperson. However, it does have more than its fair share of commentators. Most recently in September Frances FitzGerald published an article in *Harper's Magazine* entitled, "The Influence of Anxiety: What's the problem with young adult novels?" FitzGerald presents an accurate, albeit cursory overview of the field. Her insights are not ground-breaking. For example, she asserts that for many YA critics and historians, young adult literature is by definition the notorious problem novel. Unfortunately, it's true, and it has been for most of the thirty-plus years since S.E.Hinton, Robert Cormier, Paul Zindel, Judy Blume and others wrote books that revolutionized the business of publishing for young readers. As you all know the "problem novels" of the '80s morphed into the "edgy" books of the late '90s. Based on her sources, FitzGerald characterizes this strand of the young adult novel as therapeutic. She acknowledges the current "trend toward publishing more complex narratives in a more sophisticated style for older teens," but in a quote FitzGerald attributes to our esteemed colleague, Roger Sutton of the *Horn Book*, "the kids won't read them, because they say 'I'm literature and I'm good for you.'"



FitzGerald ends with a summary assessment of kids' observations about books and concludes on the basis of sales that "kids chose adventure tales, chick lit, and fantasy over problem novels and exemplary dystopias." As I said, none of these observations are new, and I'm not inclined to dispute them.

However, it seems to me that after thirty years of reading and discussing young adult novels, we aren't getting very far. Critically speaking, we are spinning our wheels. I've been asked to speak about the art of the young adult novel; I take that to mean the books that say "I'm literature, and I'm good for you." The books kids won't read. Okay. That works for me. I don't want to talk about what kids will or won't read. Or about what is good for them or what they think about them. I'm not going to talk about young adults at all. I'm going to talk to you about the young adult *novel*.

Historically the designation "young adult" is based on audience. Isn't that odd? We define no other art form that I can think of by its primary audience. Paintings? No. Sculpture? No. Music? No. Audience is a *moving* target. We can't even agree on what a young adult is, let alone what the literature is.

It is often observed that young adult novels present the point-of-view of an adolescent. This is obviously true, but it raises more questions than it answers. We all know that *Catcher in the Rye* wasn't published as a young adult novel. Nor was *A Portrait*

of the Artist as a Young Man, or Robinson Crusoe. All three are told, in whole or in part, from the perspective of a young adult. In fact, many, many books being published for adults today—for example, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*—are told from a young adult’s perspective.

Most observations about the subject matter and the age of the protagonist and the point of view from which a story is told only describe the young adult novel; they do not define it. I think we need to move past these discussions, not because they are wrong, but because they don’t get us anywhere we haven’t already been. We need to move the discussion from superficial to essential aspects of the art of the young adult novel.

There is no difference between the young adult novel and the adult novel. There are distinctions to be made between them, but they are not different art forms. *Don Quixote* and *Marius the Epicurean* and *To the Lighthouse* represent different stands of the tradition of the novel, as do *Treasure Island* and *Charlotte’s Web* and *The Facts Speak for Themselves*. Are there artistic criteria that apply to the novel that shed light on the young adult novel? Yes, there are.

I am going to discuss the art of the novel in terms of a craft—editing—that I have practiced for three decades. In that time I have edited maybe a hundred and fifty novels. A few of them you all know, some I suspect only the author and I remember. Be that as it may, I have discovered a handful of principles—rules of thumb—that I apply again and again. Through long use I can articulate them simply. The language I use to do so comes from diverse sources, none of which are esoteric or hard to find. All of them have proven useful in the organic process of helping writers shape their work. So, consider this a journeyman’s take on the art of the novel.

The *sine qua non* of fiction is narrative. Most people call this “story” or “plot,” but E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, makes a useful distinction between “story” and “plot.” His example of a story is “The king died and then the queen died.” This is a basic sequence of events. His example of a plot is “The king died and then the queen died *of grief*.” This is the same sequence of events, but now we know the cause, at least, of the queen’s death.

I have three guidelines that help me think about

plot. The first is from Aristotle. In the *Poetics* he discusses drama. In fact, prose fiction as we know it didn’t exist when Aristotle lived. His discussion, nonetheless, applies. He writes, and I’m paraphrasing—but only slightly—that a story must have a beginning, middle, and end. This sounds obvious: it is, and it isn’t. How Aristotle defined these terms is the crux of the matter.

The beginning is that which nothing needs to come before but something *must* follow. The middle is that which something *must* come before and something *must* follow. The end is that which something *must* come before but nothing *must* follow. I keep emphasizing *must* because Aristotle is talking, finally, about necessary causality.

In the beginning, something happens and because it happens, something else must happen. King Lear banishes Cordelia for telling the truth. This was a fundamental injustice and a big mistake. Things must happen. In the middle, because things happened, something else happens and because that something else happened, yet another something happens. With Cordelia out of the picture, Lear’s other daughters begin to connive and contrive. Lear’s world begins to disintegrate. He loses control. Finally, because those other things happened, a final thing happens and nothing more needs to happen. With his power broken, his empire gone, and Cordelia dead, Lear is blinded and lost. His blindness to the truth Cordelia stated caused him to

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lose her which, in time, led to *his* blinding, *his* loss of everything, and his death. This is essential justice. Necessary justice. The circle is complete. The chain of causality had a beginning, middle, and end.

Often stories lack one or more of these elements. In many stories they are improperly related; that is, they are accidentally or coincidentally related rather than causally and necessarily. Many stories start but have no beginning. Many stories stop, but have no ending. Many are just great, mushy middles. The chain of causality and necessity is the first thing I look for because without it, there is no coherent plot.

Aristotle posited three kinds of plots: a plot of character, a plot of action, and a plot of thought.

In terms of the mainstream adult novel, virtually any of the novels of Henry James and Virginia Wolfe and their literary progeny are the first kind. *The Portrait of a Lady* is a quintessential plot of character. So is *Madame Bovary*. This is the “great tradition” ranging from Jane Austen through Joseph Conrad defined by the legendary literary critic, F.R. Leavis. Many contemporary young adult novels are plots of character; the quintessential *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is a plot of character.

The plot of action is best represented in the works of such writers as Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling, a lesser tradition, perhaps, but the one my heart marches to the beat of. In plots of action, characters don’t so much change as survive. Think of Jim Hawkins’ adventures in *Treasure Island*, or Kipling’s *Kim*. But plots of action are not restricted to books now relegated to children. Fielding’s *Tom*

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**Very often when I read a published book or a manuscript I see extraneous action in what is essentially a plot of character. That is, there are incidents, sometimes very well written, that contribute nothing to the delineation or development of the character. They are gratuitous and often distract or confuse the reader. The same is true of characters that don’t serve any necessary function in a plot. And the same is true of exposition that tells us how to think about the character. A writer needs to strip off and discard the layers that obscure the essential plot.**

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*Jones* and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* are very much about the change in fortune of the protagonist and not so much about their change in character. Academic critics like to refer to these books as “picaresque” novels. I know a plot of action when I see one. Stevenson describes it best in his essay “A Gossip on Romance”:

Eloquence and thought, character and conversation, [are] but obstacles to brush aside as we [dig] blithely after a certain sort of incident, [i.e. action.]

Stevenson distinguishes between “poetry of conduct” and “poetry of circumstance.” These are simply other words for plot of character and plot of action.

Aristotle’s plot of thought is a rare bird; there aren’t many examples in the genre. William Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (or *The Tailor Retailored*) and Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, which I mentioned earlier, are examples of plots of thought in the novel. Neither is a book that I suggest you rush out and read. (In fact, the former is long out of print but is available in digital form at Project Gutenberg, as is the Pater.) We think of prose written solely to change our way of thinking as didactic and polemical and don’t usually associate it with narrative fiction except, ironically, in books for children.

Incidentally, Aristotle also

proposed three manners or modes of representation: i.e. ways to present reality or, perhaps better, realities to present. Reality can be presented as it is; we might say “realistically.” It can be presented as better than it is, i.e. a Utopian vision. Finally, it can be presented as worse than it is, i.e., a dystopian vision. I find it useful to think of stories as being cast primarily in one or the

other of these three modes. However, in my editorial work I have found that plots and modes of representation tend not to come in one of three flavors, but rather, like Neapolitan ice cream, with a layer of each.

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What does this have to do with young adult novels? Nothing *per se*, but it has everything to do with the art of the novel. Each principle I have articulated applies to every work of fiction I have ever read and some seem to apply particularly to young adult novels.

For example, the elements that most often dominate in the narratives we include in the young adult category are, as I suggested above:

1) they are plots of character; 2) the characters tend to be adolescent; and (3) the point of view is often first person.

The first thing one wants and needs to ascertain about first-person narrators is their reliability. If the point of view is limited, all you see of the world is filtered through the eyes of the narrator. You need to know if you can believe what the narrator tells you, if you can rely on the narrator's account of what is happening. The narrator's perception of reality transforms reality. If you cannot rely on the narrator, you need to factor that in to your response to events

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**The first person limited point of view in the young adult novel is worth discussing in other terms. As opposed, let's say, to a character in a theatrical performance or a movie, character in many young adult novels is revealed not so much through action or through appearance or through description, as through direct or indirect discourse. Character is made manifest in and by the protagonist's voice. The constituent elements of voice are diction and syntax, word choice and word order.**

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and, indeed, to the narrator.

Unreliable narrators are rampant in the novel. In my opinion they are much more interesting than reliable narrators. Think about the self-effacing narrator of *Wuthering Heights* whose perspective transforms Heathcliffe and Katherine into romantic archetypes. And the narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita*, the incomparable Humbert Humbert. More recently Dave Egger's memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*—which is non-fiction—raises all sorts of questions about the reliability of the narrator. Again, what does this have to do with the art of the young adult novel?

The first person narrator in a coming-of-age story—a plot of character—is almost always unreliable. They are innocent and/or ignorant. Life experience is about to change that, but the protagonist is unaware. Initially the reader can almost never rely on the main character's assessment of reality. As the narrator grows and changes, often through trauma, experience leads to self-knowledge and a new perception of reality. In other words, the narrator becomes reliable, or, at least, more reliable. Typically in

the young adult novel, the narrator transforms from unreliable to reliable.

I'll give you a singularly dramatic example: Patricia McCormick's *Cut*. The protagonist, 15-year-old Callie, is a self-abuser: she cuts herself. When the story begins Callie does not speak, even to her therapist. We only hear her thoughts. She is not a reliable narrator. In the course of the novel, she learns things about herself and others that enable her to better understand what has happened and her role in the events of her life, and, subsequently, she begins to heal. This is a common plot in the young adult novel.

What is uncommon is the way McCormick dramatizes her protagonist's change. Callie is a selective mute. When she's locked in her own thoughts, she is an unreliable narrator. As she becomes involved, passively, with other patients in the hospital, she begins to see things differently. When she finally begins to speak, literally finds her voice, she has a truer sense of reality.

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She becomes a reliable narrator. This is a remarkable instance of the change I'm referring to; the transformation from unreliable to reliable is seldom rendered so dramatically.

A more complex variation on this is Brock Cole's *The Facts Speak for Themselves*. Thirteen-year-old Linda is in protective custody after being involved in the murder of one man and the suicide of another. The police think they know what happened and her social worker writes up a report, which Linda reads. Linda doesn't agree with what she reads and decides to tell her own story. The reader immediately sees that Linda's version of reality is warped by her experience and yet by the end we see that she is

telling the truth, she is neither a victim nor a fool. Once again, an unreliable narrator becomes reliable, but this time because the narrator alters the reader's perception of reality.

I choose these two books because I know them intimately. If you think about it, you will come up with your own examples. In young adult literature you often see this transformation: it is an organic, inherent manifestation of the change the protagonist is undergoing. It is not at all typical of the adult novel where the reliability of the narrator tends to remain consistent. If I am right about this, then might it be a

possible criterion for defining the art or strand of the young adult novel?

The first person limited point of view in the young adult novel is worth discussing in other terms. As opposed, let's say, to a character in a theatrical performance or a movie, character in many young adult novels is revealed not so much through action or through appearance or through description, as through direct or indirect discourse. Character is made manifest in and by the protagonist's voice. The constituent elements of voice are diction and syntax, word choice and word order.

These are elements, along with meter and rhyme, which we associate most often with poetry. I can think of no other category of fiction in which poetic elements contribute more strongly to characterization than in the young adult novel. Think of the "voice" of any protagonist in Adam Rapp's novels: here's Whensday from *The Copper Elephant*.

They're burning tires in the Pits again. I can't see them cause I'm hidid, but I can smell them all thick and hot and fiery like pepper and smoke and wet thunderhorses mixed together. Tick Burrowman says the tires look like little haloes floating in the dark, like some angels is lost in all that blackness. Tick Burrowman says burning tires keeps the fishflies away.

The Digit Kids is down there busting rocks. You can hear their splittingpicks going ballistic like little blasterguns popping off far far away, like in some place you read about in a story. . .

Rapp's character speaks in an invented language. This device is not exclusive to the young adult novel—think of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, and Hoban's *Pilgerman*, among others. Still, the language of adolescence is eccentric and constantly changing, hardly Standard English. Here's a less extreme example, Sura from Rapp's *The Buffalo Tree*.

. . . We are playing floor hockey in the basement of Spalding Cottage. The light cage keeps getting hit and that bulb is about to bust. When it swings you can see those long shadows creeping on the wall.

There are fifteen juvies and most of us ain't sporting shirts. When a bunch of juvies get to playing some floor hockey in the basement of Spalding you get that thick, cooked smell.

Both voices are immediately distinct: I've read you the first 100 words of *The Copper Elephant* and the first 75 words of *The Buffalo Tree*. The only way to understand

how those voices are that distinct in so few words is by a close scrutiny of diction, syntax, and rhythm. Study their poetry.

We see what I will call the “poetry of voice” in its fullest form in novels in verse. Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, Robert Cormier’s *Frenchtown Summer*, and Virginia Euwer Wolf’s *True Believer*, among others, represent a strand of young adult novels that deserves a great deal of attention. Again, the form is not unique to the young adult novel; Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* is one classic example. However, I believe the novel in verse is uniquely appropriate for the young adult novel precisely because it incorporates the lyric impulse. In the words of Walt Whitman, “I weave the song of myself.” Voice *is* character *is* plot. *This* is the very essence of the young adult novel.

The lines of inquiry I’ve just proposed are theoretical. I haven’t given them the rigorous attention that would validate or invalidate them. I offer them not as guidelines but only as hypotheses. And, more importantly, I offer them as a context for a broader critical scrutiny of the art form.

There is a final, most important principle that I want to discuss. Like all my other rules, it derives from a variety of sources. I think I got it originally from Strunk and White’s, *The Elements of Style*, but it could just as well have been George Orwell’s essay *Politics and the English Language*. Both are seminal. The rule: Never use two words when one word will do. By extension, less is more. By analogy, every element—be it a word, a phrase, a sentence, a character, an action, a setting, a scene, a sequence of scenes—must serve a purpose. It must be appropriate, adequate, and accurate. No more, no less. In the words of T.S. Eliot, taken from “Little Gidding” the last of his *Four Quartets*:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from. And every phrase  
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,  
Taking its place to support the others,  
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
An easy commerce of the old and the new,  
The common word exact without vulgarity,  
The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
The complete consort dancing together)  
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a  
beginning.

The closer a novel gets to this, the higher the art of that novel regardless of any other consideration.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the art of the young adult novel is not limited to the English language. We are myopic when it comes to literature in translation. We do pay attention to other English-language writers—Melvin Burgess and David Almond come to mind—for the obvious reason. But think of writers such as Per Nilsson from Sweden, Mette Newth from Norway, Anne Provost from the Netherlands, Bart Moeyaert from Belgium, Miriam Pressler from Germany, and Uri Orlev from Israel. These writers aren’t alone. Unfortunately, too few translations are being published these days—but that’s another subject. My point is that the young adult novel is a part of world literature.

I’ve tried to enumerate some of the principles I use to assess the art of the young adult novels I read and edit. I haven’t attempted to be comprehensive. And my approach is not definitive. It’s not even original. Anyone with an academic background will recognize the critical posture I assume as one that dominated English departments back in the early seventies when I was a graduate student. It was a way of looking at literature that was known generally as New Criticism. Basically it dictated that you consider the work of art only in relationship to itself, ignoring biographical, social, historical—in a word, contextual considerations. I am still prone to that approach, not because I’m stuck in a critical time warp but because I work in publishing. It is a world in which many people—authors, agents, and booksellers, as well as publishers—are often concerned about things that have nothing to do with art. Indeed, in publishing today books are often the proverbial elephant surrounded by hordes of blind men.

For my generation the young adult novel was an innovation. For many of you, it has always been there. It is not an aberration, or a fad, a marketing gimmick.

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The art form may still be in its infancy, but it's a very healthy baby. A substantial body of young adult literature exists. There may even be enough to begin to form a canon. To do so, we need to articulate criteria, establish critical standards, by which to assess that literature. We need a *Poetics*. I beseech and challenge all of you—authors, teachers, librarians, and critics—to move past the accidental and incidental issues that are all-too-often rehashed. We *can* do better, and it's time that we did.

Thank you.

**Stephen Roxburgh** has been involved with children's books and publishing for more than twenty-five years; first as an academic, then as senior vice president and publisher of *Books for Young Readers*, at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and, now, as the president and publisher of *Front Street Books*, a small independent press he incorporated on April 1, 1994. He has worked with such authors and artists as Felicia Bond, Nancy Eckholm Burkert, Brock Cole, Carolyn Coman, Roald Dahl, Madeleine L'Engle, An Na, Marilyn Nelson, Adam Rapp, Alvin Schwartz, George Selden, Uri Shulevitz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Garth Williams and Margot Zemach.

## Our Apologies

Our apologies to the following authors of recent articles in *The ALAN Review* for whom we credited the articles' authorship but failed to give biographical information.

### **Jeanne McGlinn, "Rags to Riches." 31. 3 (2004): 11-15**

Jeanne McGlinn is an associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Asheville where she is the Coordinator Language Arts and English programs and teaches courses in adolescent literature, educational research and methods of teaching English. Dr. McGlinn is the editor of the Classroom Materials column for the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and the author of *Ann Rinaldi* Rowman & Littlefield, 2000)

### **Elaine J. O'Quinn, "Vampires, Changelings, and Radical Mutant Teens." 31. 3 (2004): 50-56.**

Elaine O'Quinn is a past contributor to the ALAN Review and has published numerous articles on the teaching of literature and composition. She is a faculty member in the Department of English at Appalachian State University where she teaches courses in Adolescent Literature, Issues in English Studies, and Secondary Composition Methods.

### **Susan Carlile, "Challenges Give Meaning to Our Lives: Francisco Jiménez and Social Justice." 32.1 (2004): 41-49**

Susan Carlile is co-coordinator of the English Single Subject program and teaches Eighteenth-Century British Literature, British Literature Survey, and numerous courses in the English Single Subject program at California State University at Long Beach. She has published articles and reviews in *The Yale University Library Gazette*, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, and *The Journal for Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

### **John H. Bushman and Shelley McNerney. "Moral Choices: Building a Bridge between YA Literature and Life." 32.1 (2004): 61-67**

John H. Bushman is Professor Emeritus at the University of Kansas where he has had an illustrious career, including the 2000 Ned A. Fleming Trust Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the 1998 Edwin M. Hopkins award from the *English Journal*. Dr. Bushman is the author of several books about English education, including *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* (soon in its fourth edition from Prentice Hall). Shelley McNerney is a doctoral student at the University of Kansas and the editor of *Writer's Slate* magazine (The Writing Conference, Inc.)