

“Making Cities and Then Making Them Crumble:”

Francesca Lia Block’s Place in the Young Adult Novel

Although Francesca Lia Block has won over [twenty awards](#) for her young adult (YA) novels, not enough scholarship has been devoted to Block’s work, possibly because of its self-claim to postmodernism and flares of the fantastical or magical. As [J. Sydney Jones](#) reports, Block began writing to make sense of her surroundings and continues writing for the same end (18). Block’s novels are her vision of “postmodern fairy tales,” and she uses magical realism to blend in the often-dark reality of her stories and culture.

Examining two of Block’s novels—*Weetzie Bat* (*WB*) and *I Was a Teenage Fairy* (*IWTF*)—reveals that place is resonant in her work. Block’s place, however, is not traditional.

In modern literature, setting (or place) furthers the author’s description of the novel’s socio-historical elements. Even if an author does not explain, for example, the Depression thoroughly, readers can conjure up images of America during the 1930s, relying solely on their knowledge of the period. “The only fitting conclusion to a study of city in *modern* novels,” Dianna Fest-McCormick offers, “is, possibly, that there is none available” (193;

emphasis added). Yet, in a very basic sense, there is a conclusion. Eventually, talk of place falls away in the analysis of the modern novel because place, like other aspects of the novel, remains stable and oftentimes becomes the grounding force of a novel. In Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, for instance, the single thread through the novel is the city in which the story takes place.

Postmodern literature, however, remains stable only limitedly, if at all, and as Block herself says, her novels are postmodern fairy tales.

In Block’s postmodern stories, fairy tales begin where most traditional fairy tales end (happily ever after), the worst monsters and witches are given human traits, magic is not omnipotent, and questions at the end are not representative of true good or true evil. Perhaps more importantly, Block’s mixture of right and wrong does not send a moral message but rather shows multiple perspectives of the same situation—alcohol, sex, conflict, neglect, and abuse—often leaving the reader to make his/her own conclusions about the outcomes. Within this context of post-modernity, one can begin to analyze the multiple ways in which place becomes central to studying

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Block's novels.

Using essays from the field of human geography and writers dealing with place, we will argue that Block molds Los Angeles and its culture in the same way she would mold a character. This molding becomes increasingly important when examining the magical realism with which she imbues her novels, making a city to which everyone theoretically has access, a unique place people can visit only through her novels.

To say that Block has merely created a place is too simple, when, in fact, she is rewriting her home through these novels, that home being Los Angeles. This essay explores this rewriting through the lens of the feminist criticism of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, both of whom purport that woman's place is a fluid and ever-changing environment, just as Block suggests with/in her writing. Additionally, this essay places Block's readers in a context of tourism because everyone who delves into Block's world is a tourist. Thus, we hope to provide a map and itinerary into Block's world. By examining these layers separately, one can ultimately see how the layers fit together to explain the themes to which Block points her readers.

Juxtaposing two of Block's books enables readers to experience fully the place that she has created for her readers. The place Block constructs is not only physical but also a series of situations involving the same (or same types of) scenarios. Both novels take place in L.A., and while *WB* does not take place during a specified era, *IWTF* is clearly set in the early to mid-1990s, as it makes frequent reference to current events, such as Kurt Cobain's suicide and Jon-Bennet Ramsey's murder. In both books, Block adopts a new language readers must translate. In *WB*, for instance, boyfriends are called "Ducks," cool is "slinkster," and surprise is expressed by saying "lanky lizards." Likewise, in *IWTF*, boyfriends are "biscuits," and monsters and other evil forces are "vile, vile crocodiles."

Within the basic plot lines are situations involving young adults' actions and reactions toward alcohol and drug abuse, sex, infidelity, and grief. None of these situations provides clear-cut answers or suggestions about what is "right" or "wrong." Rather, Block allows for interpretation(s), which ultimately makes her books a sort of "Choose Your Own Adventure." Such an approach appeals to young adults because

they are attempting to make decisions about these same issues. Her target audience also represents individuals who are deciding what to do with their lives (e.g., attending college, getting a job, moving away from home, trying to find a place or home, etc.). These themes permeate all of Block's minimalist imagery, which [Patricia Campbell](#) suggests took seed in poetry workshops (56). Both *WB* and *IWTF* can serve as initiation into Block's world of multiplicities, giving readers a clear sense of her language, images, and—most importantly—her place(s).

Human geographer [Derwent Whittlesey](#) defines absolute space as "the basic organizing concept of geographers" (qtd. in Johnston, Gregory, and Smith 574). Any area, then, is a space. Place, however, holds a different, more complex meaning: space to which someone has given value. Many novelists make cities or locations places to readers by carefully detailing them. *Huckleberry Finn* would not be the same had Mark Twain placed the story in New Jersey, even in the same era. Reading the novel, people who have never seen a river feel as though they can see Huck and Jim on the Mississippi. Had Twain placed the novel in New Jersey, every aspect of the book would have changed—not only the setting but the language, the characters' motivations, and the themes as well. Likewise, if Block's novels were stripped of L.A., every element of the novel would change. Even if her characters discussed movie productions or modeling, the scenery that makes Block's novels come to life would be lacking. Her attention to L.A. and its charm are threaded through her novels completely, making Block's L.A. a place for her readers and an element that deserves careful scholarly attention. The city that Block develops conjures up real and utopian images, not a city of which everyone can be a part.

Undeniably, visiting a new location can present both scary and exciting outcomes without a guide. With no one to recommend places to visit or paths to take, visitors may decide to return home early, decide never to visit again, or—worse yet—begin to hate the trip and memories of it altogether. Reading, writing, and traveling are often combined; travelogues, travel diaries, and scrapbooks are markers of these combinations. Yet people, whether reading or traveling, are sometimes too afraid to ask for directions or help. No one wants to look like a tourist while visiting a new place, but tourists can be spotted from afar: camera

around their necks, grinning from ear to ear as a moment is snapped into forever.

Tourists to new books and new authors have a similar distaste for asking for help. No one wants to admit that a particular novel, especially a YA novel, is difficult to read. In “The Matter of Culture: Aesthetic Experience and Corporeal Being,” Renee C. Hoogland asserts that she “approach[es] the practice of reading as, in Rosi Braidott’s words, an ‘embodied’ and ‘embedded’ practice of becoming, that is to say, an ongoing process of making and doing that is indispensable to the continual co-production of both human beings and their variously interconnected material and socio-symbolic ‘outsides’” (2). A novel, then, is not a static work but rather a dynamic act between reader and author. This act does not end merely with comprehension of the material, but it becomes a more marked change in the readers and their experience as they visit a world the author has created. Perhaps this dynamic act holds true for Block’s work more than for others’, as her work comprises self-proclaimed fairy tales.

As Vladimir Propp points out, there are critical differences between folklore (wherein fairy tales lie) and literature. Literature is static; when one finishes Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and loans it to a friend, the friend reads the same story the first person just read. As reader-response theory holds, the second reader may have a different take on the book; nonetheless, the fictional elements remain the same. Folklore—and, therefore, fairy tales—is oral and is changed from telling to telling; hence, many versions and revisions of these tales exist. Block calls her novels postmodern fairy tales, perhaps clarifying that there is not a single story, theme, or point of view, but rather multiple stories, themes, and characters,

Because YA novels are becoming more and more complex, as Michael Cart explains in “A Place of Energy, Activity, and Art,” readers must enter them just as prepared to give up comprehension at first to acclimate him/herself to the elements of the story before grappling with what an author is trying to illustrate. Block’s novels exemplify this type of complex work. Block’s language is simple, yet rich, and sometimes difficult to wade through; her characters encounter scenarios typical and atypical in their individual situations or life places. But even though she writes about young adults, Block often does not

flesh out the typical coming-of-age stories young adults are so accustomed to finding. Instead, Block works against growing up and toward other avenues—such as happiness, magic, survival, love, and friendship, all seemingly more important than being an adult. In fact, the adults presented are often the most “lost” characters, and they exhibit poor judgment and virtually no accountability, again shifting readers’ expectations.

Cart states that 1996 “marked a true turning point, a breathtaking moment when young adult literature seemed all of a sudden, to come of age” (114). This time also marked the debut of Block as a YA novelist—who, according to Cart, is “arguably the first cross-over author [. . .] whose [. . .] novels appealed to a new demographic: fifteen to twenty-five year olds, coincidentally the same demographic that MTV targets” (115). As Cart affirms, Block’s novels blur the lines between YA and adult literature, an important point to make when discussing Block on any level but especially crucial when trying to discern her place among other YA novelists. Perhaps because of her blurred readership, Block has been on the outskirts of YA literature scholarship and has been without a stable place in YA novels.

Block’s characters are oftentimes in high school but decide to stop going. They have sex but often without the typical consequences. Adults are often irresponsible and narcissistic, not the moral upstanding citizens more often found in children’s literature.

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Even when an author does not aim to be fable-like, the larger message can be gleaned from character's reactions to themselves from an objective or outside viewpoint. In *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, for example, Ann Brashares shows one young woman's reaction to her father's engagement after he and her mother have divorced. By the end of the book, the reluctant young girl decides to accept her father's decision. If Block presented a divorce scenario (as Brashares does in *Sisterhood*), she would likely present three adolescents' perspectives, and each young adult would have a different reaction to the situation. Block would not portray any of the perspectives as being best or worst, but she would indicate that the characters are in different places in their lives.

Oftentimes, if Block's books are suggested for teen reading, they are recommended only for the independent and mature reader, and this caution may be wisely founded. These books are not laced with the societal norms or messages that abound in many other books. When Block's best-known character, Weetzie Bat, decides she wants to have a baby at 18, she is upset when her boyfriend is not sure he wants to be a father; she then has sex with her gay friend and his lover. When Weetzie becomes pregnant, she is thrilled, even though she is not sure which of the two gay men is the father.

Typically, the plot described above would not reflect the kind of book teachers or parents encourage students or adolescents to read. However, Block remains in the YA canon. Why? As Cart describes, the coming-of-age for YA literature means that "writers are freer than ever to experiment, to flex their creative muscles, to employ themes, tools, and techniques that were previously considered taboo" (113). Block fits into Cart's reformed genre as a crossover, but she remains nearly untouched in literary criticism, where she is the "first crossover" (115), most likely for several reasons. Block writes about topics that are traditionally taboo not only for young adults but also for adults. These topics include drug overdoses, child abuse, gay adolescents, and parents who abandon their children to join cults. These subjects fill the pages of Block's work partly because she, too, struggles with these types of issues in her own life.

In *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Louise DeSalvo discusses the ways in which writers use writing to explore, work through, and come to terms with their

experiences. Often, when in therapy, people are encouraged to write by journaling, letter writing, and creative writing. This move toward personal accounts has led to the growing popularity of memoirs, and personal essays. Although Block's work is not what one thinks of as an example of creative nonfiction, she is writing in the genre. Block admits that she "wrote *Weetzie Bat* as a sort of valentine to Los Angeles at a time when [she] was in school in Berkeley and homesick for where [she] grew up. [. . .] It was a very personal story. A very personal love letter. [she] never expected people to respond to it the way they have. [She] never imagined [she] could reach other people from such a personal place in [herself]" (Jones 17). Block admittedly writes her novels much as a personal essayist may write to reach closure of a situation, but Block rarely, if ever, offers closure. By looking at two novels she wrote in two years, one can speculate about which life events Block struggled with while she wrote the novels. Authors often continue to write about similar struggles in several of their works. For example, Todd Strasser's *The Wave* and *Give a Boy a Gun* both address school-related problems and delve into nonfiction and current events. Yet with repeating settings and struggles come the fine line authors must walk to avoid becoming formulaic or archaic.

David King Dunaway, in "Huxley and Human Cloning: *Brave New World* in the Twenty First Century," asserts that, because Huxley maintains his detailed story in an unspecific place and time, the novel remains at the forefront of discussion (167). Dunaway then explains that novels including specific place and time have less a chance of survival (168). This trait is perhaps more influential in YA novels than any other writing because the audience YA authors try to reach is very concerned with its culture. Several YA novels that were once popular (e.g., *The Outsiders*, *The Chocolate War*, and *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*) have become less read, even though they are highly recommended, because they are so dated. Yes, adolescents still deal with these same issues, but there are more current and immediate novels that address them. Given the precedent for vague and timeless settings, one should explore the reasons Block chooses to create a definite time and cultural context for her novels. In *Image of the American City in Popular Literature*, Adrienne Siegel declares, "even if a writer did state a high-minded motivation in the

preface or text of [her] book, can one be certain that this was [her] true purpose? (9). Of course, scholars can never be sure of the motivations of authors, but perhaps there is not one reason to write about a city, just as there is not one reason to write about any topic or character.

Weetzie Bat and *Teenage Fairy* are set in recent years and in or around L.A. Block makes reference to current events and landmarks, thereby carefully drawing her setting as an important reference point so that readers can visit the same restaurants, movie theaters, towns, and cities that her characters do. In “The Poetics of Place,” Lawrence Kimmel states that time in literature “becomes more than process, it becomes culture, it becomes world, it becomes human” (147). Block’s time and space in her novels have become arguably a culture in and of themselves. This conscious, intricate drawing of L.A. allows Block’s readers to adopt ties to these same spaces, making them places and, as Kimmel suggests, cultures for her readers.

Block’s view of the city contains not only those true places—such as roads, landmarks, and restaurants—but also magic—such as genies, Mabs, voodoo, and mind-controlling powers, all of which drive her stories into the magical-realism genre. Her mixture of the real and imaginary combines into a place that cannot be reached except through Block’s novels. In their introduction to Henry Lefebvre’s *Writings on Cities*, Elenore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas discuss Lefebvre’s notion of utopia: “a place that does not yet exist” (21). Lefebvre summarizes what happens to the maker or writer of the city: “[S]he who conceives the city and urban reality as system of signs implicitly hands them over to consumption as integrally consumable: as exchange value in pure state” (113). Block’s city is a system of signs to interpret, creating a problem for new readers or visitors of/to her work. Scholars have not written about the bulk of Block’s work, so it remains unfamiliar terrain, especially with spots of magic and fantastic events. “In science fiction novels,” Lefebvre adds, “every possible and impossible variation of future urban society has been foreseen” (60). And though Block does not write science fiction, she writes about a utopia—a very real utopia for her readers wherein characters, some more realistic than others, have adventures in real and

unreal L.A., a city writers have described since its early beginnings.

David Fine, a Los Angeles writings scholar, writes that the long history between writers and L.A. started over a century ago (2). L.A. continued to grow in terms of its literary body throughout the 1930s and 1940s as writers who came to write screenplays eventually set their novels in the city springing up around them. Fine also notes that with the writing of L.A. comes the juxtaposition between the East and the West, New York and Los Angeles. This juxtaposition comes into play throughout all of literature. “Even before the thirties,” Fine writes, “this playing of East against West appears in fiction” (6). Charles L. Crow declares that “the case against Los Angeles is a litany told by hostile, bewildered tourists as a spell against seduction: the city is an alienating, mindless place, which drives its inhabitants to ‘werewolf’ freeway speeding, despair, drugs, divorce and violence” (191). Fine agrees that “the characters in the Los Angeles novel have been for the most part seekers, men and women drawn hopefully or desperately to Southern California as the place of the new beginning or of the last chance” (7). The adult characters in Block’s stories depict these types of seekers: those characters trying to reinvent themselves through the city. Mostly, they do so through their daughters. What sets Block apart from most other L.A. novelists is that she is not an outsider. She grew up in and around the places that she uses as a setting, making her perspective fresh. Coupling Fine’s “seeker” with Lefebvre’s “utopia,” one can begin to see that Block’s city is truly a city no one has ever been or can venture to without gaining access through Block’s novels.

Adults in Block’s novels tend to be passive when

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it comes to taking responsibility and care of their children. Take, for instance, Charlie and Brandy-Lynn Bat: their little girl, Weetzie, grows up in a house with her gay best friend, his lover, and her own boyfriend. Barbie Markowitz's mother basically sells Barbie to a molester, while her father ignores her in an attempt to forget his past life. Later, Block develops Weetzie Bat into a secondary mother character who lies in the background of her daughters' stories. Knowing that Block can take a primary YA character, write her story, and then place her into the background of another YA novel reveals that all parents and adults have their own stories. Examining these individuals' stories ultimately aids in the larger understanding of the young adults in Block's novels.

But just recognizing that these stories exist does not grant complexity to them; one must begin to analyze the differences in the ways that Block describes cities and, essentially, sexes. Part of exploring the adults in Block's novels means understanding their idols. According to Douglas Porpora, examining whom adults idolize can explain where adults place meaning in life, and the trends in his study show cultural disenchantment among adults. Porpora discusses that adults do not typically have heroes with whom they identify because "personal hero identification has largely developed into empty 'celebrity worship'" (210). This notion of worship is perhaps most clear in the case of Mrs. Markowitz, Barbie's mother in *IWTF*. Her idol is Barbie, the Mattel doll, who is perhaps the most empty of celebrities, a plastic doll. Obviously, the first clue to this worship is Barbie's name, which her mother chose (12). But even the first time Block describes Mrs. Markowitz, "wearing her over-sized white plastic designer sunglasses and a gold and white outfit" (5), readers imagine the woman as one imagines a Barbie: in fancy clothes and with covered eyes so that she does not have to see reality. Later, Mrs. Markowitz changes Barbie's and her last name to "Marks," much to the dismay of her husband (12), in order to give Barbie an advantage in the modeling world. Mrs. Marks lives vicariously through Barbie's accomplishments, as she "won Miss San Fernando Valley in 19 . . . well let's just say [she] was a winner" (7). Block alludes here that Mrs. Marks wishes Barbie would be empty of something. But what? Thoughts? Dreams? Motivation? Perhaps all of those are true, but I'd say something simpler: Mrs. Marks treats Barbie as

though she is a doll, a toy to be bent and controlled.

Brandy-Lynn, Weetzie Bat's mother, does not worship any celebrity but is also the type of adult that Porpora discusses: an adult detached from and disenchanting with culture. She tells Weetzie:

when I was a kid my mother brought me to Hollywood. [. . .]he left me alone all day and I went around the pool with my cute little autograph book. It said, "Autographs" on the cover in gold. [. . .]Everyone was so gorgeous. [. . .] I used to walk to Schwab's have a hamburger and a milkshake for dinner, and I'd swivel around and around on the barstool reading Wonder Woman comics and planning how it would be when I became a star. (60)

At first, "planning how it would be when I became a star" seems as though she idolizes someone specific, as does her reference to Lana Turner (discovered spinning on a barstool in Schwab's) suggests, but Brandy-Lynn really does not have a hero, which shows in her actions or, more aptly, her non-actions. Brandy-Lynn is truly disenchanting as an adult, which one can discern from her description of her childhood—"everyone was so gorgeous" (60)—implying that there was not one person she idolized or emulated. Instead, she admired everyone she saw and came into contact with. Throughout the rest of the *Weetzie Bat* series, Brandy-Lynn continues to be passive but always present in the shadows of Weetzie's story.

In a basic sense, these two mothers represent both the over-active and the over-passive parents, but neither role works in terms of helping the young adults in these novels find what they are searching for. Or do they? Had Mrs. Marks not been intent on Barbie's being a model, then Barbie never would have met Todd or Mab, both characters in her life for whom she longed. Brandy-Lynn serves as the same sort of catalyst. Weetzie had to be looking for love with Dirk; if not, their lives may not have merged, and she never would have gotten the "beautiful golden thing" (19). Instead of feeling anger at their mothers, both Weetzie and Barbie help put their mothers back together. This shifting of roles shows the different ways that they can turn into parents, making their placement on the range of YA or adult literature indefinable.

Looking at these mothers, however, does not provide the range of adult roles in Block's works. The fathers in Block's books, perhaps more than any other characters, take on real qualities from Block's own life

and her own father. Block began writing *Weetzie* while she was homesick for her sick father. In interviews, Block admits that she has not felt ready to write about him or his life. Yet, even with the limited material about Block's personal life, one can surmise that Charlie Bat's life mirrors much of Irving Block's (Block's father) life. Both were special-effects men in Hollywood—"making cities and then making them crumble, creating monsters and wounds and rains and planets in space" (Block 13)—before turning to different arts: Block to painting and Bat to penning screenplays (15). Even the occupations they choose were, in a striking sense, false: building a city instead of perhaps experiencing the city they were in. Charlie Bat is written about with more wispiness than Brandy-Lynn. Weetzie even says, "Being with Charlie was like being on a romantic date" (54), demonstrating how much Weetzie idolized her father. And when Charlie dies from a drug overdose, it seems as though it is a dream, especially for Weetzie. Block says, in an interview with Cathy from *The Grouch Café*, "I still can't write about my father's illness" (Young). Perhaps she cannot write directly about the death of her father, but she powerfully describes the loss of a father through a young woman's eyes:

Grief is not something you know if you grow up wearing feathers with a Charlie Chaplin boyfriend, a love-child papoose, a witch baby, a Dirk and a Duck, a Slinkster Dog and a movie to dance in. [. . .] grief is different. Weetzie's heart cringed in her like a dying animal. It was as if someone had stuck a needle full of poison into her heart. She moved like a sleepwalker. She was the girl in the fairy tale sleeping in a prison of thorns and roses. (59)

This passage shows again how Block uses place to illustrate Weetzie's feelings. Block goes as far as to place Weetzie in a familiar fairy tale—"Sleeping Beauty"—but before the "happily ever after" actually sticks in a lifeless limbo. When My Secret Agent Lover Man (MSALM) wakes Weetzie and tells her, "Your dad's dead. But you aren't, baby" (59), he replaces Weetzie in her own postmodern fairy tale. Loss and grief are not discussed in traditional fairy tales; even when Cinderella's or Snow White's mothers and fathers die, they do not grieve; the girls are simply pushed through the story. Explaining grief as a place where people "move [. . .] like [. . .] sleepwalker[s]" gives a tangible feeling that is possible to experience.

Charlie Bat and Mr. Marks share perhaps the most

important quality and the defining characteristic between the mothers and the fathers in the story—the fathers come from and return to New York. This juxtaposition serves not only as a comparison between the cities of L.A. and New York but also as what the fathers and mothers ultimately represent. The mothers in these two books represent tangible women, who, in spite of their faults, are available to their daughters. The fathers, on the other hand, have left—whether by choice or fate—and have moved on. Block, as she herself says, works through her own experiences in her writing, and these polar placements of available L.A. mother and unavailable or dead New York father are no exception. As Fine and others report, L.A. and New York represent polar opposites, as do mothers and fathers, especially through Block's eyes. L.A. is the present, ever-changing, lively, lighter, colorful place where all the characters—including mothers—are. New York is the darker, more stable place where the characters visit. Here, Block weaves several layers of imagery.

When Weetzie and Barbie visit their fathers for the last time, both girls are completing a job. Weetzie has to find an end for the movie she and MSALM are making, and Barbie is on her way to a modeling shoot. Each girl also visits her father for the last time. Weetzie spends time with Charlie Bat, and Block incorporates images around them of sadness and death. Weetzie even tells Charlie Bat to come back to L.A. with her, even though she knows New York is "his city" (55). He refuses but does give her an ending to the movie: "Maybe this girl tries to get back by taking drugs," he said. "And she dies" (57). Weetzie looks around her father's apartment and notices "the paint on Charlie's apartment walls had cracked and chipped and his eyes were as dark and hollow as the corners of the room" (57). Charlie, like the character in his imagination, takes too many drugs and does not wake up.

Barbie's run-in with her father is unplanned and happens on the streets of L.A. Their conversation is very stiff. Barbie remarks, "It sounded as if he were talking to a client," and he did not reach out to touch her. He walks away from Barbie after saying, "Well. It was nice seeing you. Take care" (81). As he leaves Barbie on the curb, Dr. Markowitz thinks of his new life with a new wife and new daughter (82). Placing their conversation in the street helps the reader see

that their paths will not cross again and that Barbie is left without a father.

These girls both lose their fathers, but their mothers are fluid throughout their stories. Barbie's mother forces her to do modeling shoots, to go to New York, and to come home to L.A. Her mother shifts from the foreground to the background of the novel. Brandy-Lynn stays toward the shadows of *WB*, but she

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continues to be present. As in traditional tales, the fathers leave or die but remain the desired parent. Barbie wishes so often Dr. Markowitz would speak that she creates conflict between her parents just to hear him talk, and Weetzie has rituals with her father that she and her mother do not have. Block paints two young women who love their fathers but who cannot reach them, perhaps because their mothers are their gender, that is, their selves.

Accepting that, as Cixous argues, woman must write woman (1234) to share herself and her body and that, as Kristeva maintains, daughters are a part of their mothers in the most basic and bodily of senses, Block truly writes woman through these young women's stories. It is no accident, then, that L.A. represents fluid, bodily mother and that New York represents static, phallic father. The young women are attached to their mothers because of their gender, but in order for them to become adults, they must sever themselves from their mothers—the last step of becoming women themselves. Block reveals this severance in Weetzie before her story really starts. Weetzie and Brandy-Lynn do not live together, nor is Weetzie dependent on Brandy-Lynn for anything. Barbie actually must sever herself from Mrs. Marks, and, in turn, she becomes (literally and metaphorically) a new woman. She confronts her demons and actually changes her name and identity. This transcendence becomes the true

ending of Barbie's story and the beginning of Selena Moon and happily ever after.

Though the driving force behind Block's novels may be the magic of genies and Mabs, the reality within them ties the reader to a familiar culture. "Adolescents are society's risk takers" (24), Jonathon Klein et al. point out when beginning their discussion of the risks adolescents take. In this discussion, their "objectives were (1) to understand and describe the relationship between adolescents' media use and risky behaviors, and (2) to identify the media channels most often used and thus most likely to reach adolescents who engage in multiple risky behaviors" (24). The "risky" behaviors Klein et al. studied are sexual intercourse, drinking, smoking cigarettes, smoking marijuana, cheating, stealing, cutting class, and driving a car without permission (24). Block's characters participate in several of these activities, which illustrate that, even though Block admits she is not writing directly for a YA audience (Jones 18), she draws a realistic picture of and for young adults. This realism is partly why her books have been banned: "Patrick Jones summed up [the criticism by saying] 'It is not just that sex [. . .] is explicit; it is not. It is just that Block's characters have sex lives . . . In the age of AIDS—whose ugly shadow appears—anything less than a 'safe sex or no sex' stance is bound to be controversial" (19).

And Jones is correct. The language Block employs when characters in her novels have sex is not graphic in any way, and usually sex remains a passive act. For instance, when Duck moves in with Dirk, Weetzie hears "love noise through the walls" (23). The sex Weetzie has before she meets MSALM is markedly different from the sex she has with him. When she meets Buzz and goes home with him, "she kept her eyes on the bare bulb until it blinded her," but when she and MSALM have sex, Weetzie recalls it as making love (36). Through physical place, Block's images separate the feelings between love and mediocrity, an important separation when the main theme of Block's works is the power of love.

In all of her interviews, Block maintains that the biggest difference between growing up today and when she did in the 1970s is HIV/AIDS: "they grow up knowing that if you make love with someone, you could die—not just get pregnant or a venereal disease" (Young). Perhaps, then, one reading of Block's

statement is that she writes about sex while knowing that most young adults know the risk of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS or with becoming pregnant. It could be that this attitude is part of why Block is so popular with young adults: She does not preach to them. Her novels are subtle, yet it is clear when sex is positive and when it is negative. Barbie Markowitz never has positive sex, but when she changes to Selena Moon, her body image and feelings about sex change. After Barbie has revealed Hamilton Waverly as a “crocodile pedophile” (180), she and Todd have sex. The language Selena uses to describe sex is much different from Barbie’s description: “Todd’s body inside hers was startling and tender at once, completely different and an exact extension of who she was” (165).

Although discussion of safe sex is absent from these novels, the descriptions of positive and negative sex are handled in a way that is subtle enough not to impede the flow of the story but is startling when analyzing the changes between the young women after they meet their true love. As Cart points out, Block’s novels are marketed for an audience older than the traditional YA audience, approximately ages fifteen to twenty-five. This older readership may not be looking at as many decisions about having sex, as Klein et al. indicate that over half of the fourteen- to sixteen-year-old women they surveyed had engaged in sexual intercourse. Because Block’s target audience grows over ten years over the fourteen-year-old mark, it is possible that the adolescents reading her works have already made their decisions about having sex.

Klein et al. also discuss alcohol as a risky behavior. Block’s characters’ relationship with alcohol is much more fluid and comes without consequences. Weetzie and Barbie both enjoy going to bars, going to parties, and staying home with beer, Kahlua, and champagne. Their mothers enjoy liquor, as well. Mrs. Marks has martinis, and Brandy-Lynn has vodka. This shows that women use alcohol (fluid) to cope, while the men use drugs (which are more solid) or just abandon the situation altogether. While the young adults often have drinks or are around drinks, they are less strong than those of their parents. Brandy-Lynn and Charlie Bat also pop valium and other drugs when they get the chance. This indicates that the adults in the book use drugs and alcohol to escape their lives. Mrs. Marks drinks on a plane on the way to New York,

and Brandy-Lynn drinks her vodka-valium cocktail after Charlie dies. The young adults, on the other hand, do not drink to forget but rather to enhance their moods or to become free—typical responses and reactions to alcohol, according to Klein et al., who reported that 64.7 percent of the adolescents in their study drank alcohol. Block’s representation of alcohol is not discussed in scholarship about her books, but she uses alcohol in a different way for adults than young adults because it draws yet another line between the adults and the young adults in the novels.

At the moments when Block’s characters need a push in the right direction, it seems that she fixes the problem with magic. Upon closer examination, however, the magical elements of these stories are not just catalysts for characters’ actions; instead, they become characters with their own motives and stories. Typically in fairy tales, genies and godmothers represent emptiness, damage, and wish-granting plot-pushers. In “Cinderella,” for example, the only purpose of the fairy godmother is to provide Cinderella with the elements she needs to win the prince, all of which are physical characteristics of Cinderella. Block’s magical elements do not serve the same ends. Instead, each instance wherein she utilizes magical characters to “fix” an issue, the issue actually becomes more complex, complete with new and unknown consequences. Block is not merely changing the outward appearance of the characters; she is altering the ways in which they think.

In *WB*, Grandma Fifi can truly be called Weetzie’s fairy godmother, as she gives Weetzie the chance to get what she truly wants. After giving Weetzie “the most beautiful thing [. . .] a golden thing,” Grandma

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Fifi kisses Weetzie's cheek (17). But perhaps the most significant part occurs just before Weetzie gets the "beautiful, golden thing," when Fifi explains that the canaries are "in love. But even before they were in love, they knew they were going to be happy and in love someday. They trusted. They have always loved themselves" (18). Fifi's explanation explains Weetzie and Dirk's place in their lives better than any other scene—both Dirk and Weetzie are sure they will find love and be happy, eventually. Grandma Fifi's explanation also elucidates that she believes Dirk and Weetzie are ready for what she knows Weetzie will inevitably ask for: love and all the struggles that come with love.

This scene is followed directly by the genie scene, wherein Weetzie tries to outsmart her fairytale counterparts and says for her first wish, "I wish for an infinite number of wishes!" As a kid she had vowed to wish for wishes if she ever encountered a genie or fairy or one of those things. Those people in fairy tales never thought of that" (19). Block has many features at work here in this simple scene between Weetzie and her genie. Obviously, Weetzie is preparing to make her three wishes. Everything she wants is possible and impossible simultaneously. As [Kenneth Burke](#) points out in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, the act of persuasion or desire includes three parts: "speaker, speech, and spoken to" (274). But as soon as the object of desire has been obtained, another appears. As Burke contends "biologically, it is the essence of man to desire" (275). And so Weetzie makes her three wishes: "I wish for a Duck for Dirk, and My Secret Agent Lover Man for me, and a beautiful little house for us to live in happily ever after" (19). In true fairytale fashion, she receives every item on her wish list but not without a cost. Grandma Fifi's cottage is where Weetzie, Dirk, Duck, and MSALM are happily ever after, but after Grandma Fifi dies, Weetzie feels guilty for wishing her third wish, as it killed Dirk's grandmother. More importantly, however, is where this leaves Weetzie and her makeshift family: At the end of most fairy tales, in the midst of happily ever after, where nothing is certain and where the only constant feeling is more desire. While Grandma Fifi and the genie are not dynamic characters in this novel, they do more than push the plot along. Fifi is introduced as a woman whom Weetzie admires, again shifting the traditional ideas of hero worship. Weetzie's hero is a real person, while her mother's

hero cannot be determined. Fifi is the only adult in the book who attempts to teach a moral lesson of any sort, and Fifi understands Dirk and Weetzie at their core. She knows what they want. Although the genie does not play a large role in the novel, he does serve a larger purpose beyond explaining that everyone really does wish for more wishes. The genie escapes his place; he completed his duty and disappeared in a "smelly puff of smoke" after he says, "I'm not going back into that dark, smelly, cramped lamp" (19). Even the genie suffered in his "golden thing" until he could leave.

Hamilton Waverly represents the most disturbing of characters. Like the troll or monster in traditional tales, Waverly is described as a "crocodile" and has a smile that is "long and toothy, sliding open under his nose" (35), and he is referred to as a Cyclops. Perhaps this reference to Cyclops indicates that Waverly has only one eye or one idea of Barbie, and emphasizing his mouth helps Block create a silence in Barbie. This silence is seen literally when Barbie says, "She felt like the doll she had been named for, without even a hole where her mouth was supposed to be as Hamilton Waverly came toward her" (36). Maybe the most significant issue relating to Waverly is that he also abuses Griffin, a boy Barbie first sees as he is being dragged into the modeling agency by his mother. Waverly is obviously a monster to children, making him more despicable and more like a traditional monster. The similarities end there, though, as Waverly becomes a persona with an explanation for his actions. Burke's notion of changing desire comes into play in this instance as well. Waverly begins to "long" for the children and "to comfort them" because the camera captured only the outside. Waverly wanted to "know the inside" of the children. "But then he found he could not get inside in the way he needed to. And the longing began to tear at him like a wild creature in the cage of his body. And things happened before he could stop himself" (172). Afterward, he threatened the children to convince them to keep the secret.

As Burke claims, once a desire is fulfilled, another is immediately felt, making Waverly continually search. As [Block](#) shows Waverly's unmasking as the monster in the story, he gets a glimpse of Mab and remembers when he had a Mab, when his own stepfather abused him (172). His remembering makes

him at once a victim and an assaulter. More striking, however, are the layers Block reveals about abuse. Obviously, abused young adults can take at least four routes: like Barbie, they can confront the abuser; like Griffin, they can let it destroy them; like Mrs. Marks, they can pretend the abuse never happened and refuse to recognize abuse when it happens to others; or like Waverly himself, they can become an abuser and continue the cycle. None of the characters has easy choices, and all paths are valid. More importantly, all choices lead the abused to a different place. Young adults who have been abused can see themselves in one of these roles, no matter what kind of abuse it is. Block does not make value statements about who is right or wrong; each character and choice travels side by side.

In *IWTF*, Block switches between sharing the story of Barbie, a young adult struggling with the pressures of being a model, and Mab, a spunky fairy. Mab is used as a coping tool for Barbie, Griffin, Hamilton Waverly, and Mrs. Marks. But Mab has her own agenda—to find a “biscuit” and be free. Mab, like the genie, is small and constantly searching for a place. She moves about from flowers to a birdcage to Barbie’s purse. Whenever she is flying in the open, she is scared of being smashed or hurt. Mab leaves Barbie so that Barbie can stop using Mab as a crutch and begin to confront her problems, all of which ultimately lead her to stop Hamilton Waverly from abusing other children and to fix the problems with Mrs. Marks. But unlike traditional tales, Barbie and Mab do meet again. Both of them have found love, and when they part, Mab tells the newly named Selena Moon, “Going to Ireland. Thanks for everything. And remember, do everything I would do” (185). Mab, finished with her work, goes to Ireland with her own biscuit. Though Selena and Mab will probably never meet again, Block makes it clear that Selena will always remember Mab, the only victim who can clearly recall her.

Block’s attention to place is clearly woven through her postmodern novels. But why? Why place, and why postmodern? Of course, as with all that comes with Block, the reasons are multiple and for multiple audiences: young adults, publishers, teachers, and even Block herself. As Cart points out, Block’s place on the shelves of bookstores and classrooms is not set. At Barnes and Noble, she may be found in YA fiction,

general fiction, or both. Likewise, educators, librarians, and parents do not recommend Block’s novels to all readers because they tackle controversial issues and do not give generally accepted social answers. Instead of showing Block as a model, perhaps it would be better to approach her as a window to open discussion. As Diane Davis suggests, there needs to be less deciding and more listening. Listening to the multiple perspectives Block presents can lead educators and students or parents and children into a discussion of possibilities rather than answers.

The listening also engages young adults to make their own choices about issues. Without a “right” answer, they are able to “listen” to several options and decide which route they may take for themselves, allowing the reader to more aptly experience the novel, rather than merely read it. We would argue that young adults search for opportunities to experience situations (places) in their lives without having to physically endure them. Block’s novels allow that sort of experience for readers.

Perhaps most important is where Block herself fits in this equation. The limited scholarship devoted to Block’s work has been about her rewritings of traditional fairy tales. We contend that *WB* and *IWTF* have been discussed so little because they are so unlike any other books that no one is sure how to approach them on a level that is not merely conjecture. As a writer, Block adopts her mother’s trade of poetry (Jones 18), which she meshes with her father’s first career of building places and manipulating scenes. These novels develop place so thoroughly as a

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theme that one may miss the irony Block shares with her characters. Her novels do not have a definite place in stores, and while she is an avid writer, there exists little scholarship about her work. Block is searching for a place within a literary context, and instead of fitting into a mold, she is etching out her own place.

A native of Springfield, Missouri, Leslie Ann Salley received an associate's degree in liberal arts from Cottey College as well as a bachelor's and master's degrees in English education from Missouri State University. She currently teaches high school English in rural Green Forest, Arkansas, as well as developmental writing, freshman composition, and children's literature for North Arkansas College in Harrison and Ozarks Technical Community College in Springfield, Missouri. She is happily married to her co-author, Witt, and the two reside in Springfield, with their Labrador retrievers, Mama Dog and Scholar Lee.

A native of Dermott, Arkansas, Witt Salley received his bachelor's degree in professional writing from Missouri State University and his master's degree in online teaching and learning from California State University, East Bay. He currently serves as Director of Online Teaching and Learning for Ozarks Technical Community College, where he teaches courses in composition and educational technology.

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¹ These awards include the Shroud Fiction Award, the Emily Chamberlain Cook Poetry Award, a Best Books of the Year citation from the American Library Association YASD Best Book Award, and the Best Book for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (Jones 18).

