

Vampires, Changelings, and Radical Mutant Teens:

What the Demons, Freaks, and Other Abominations of Young Adult Literature Can Teach Us About Youth

“Conversations between members of different species are difficult at best.”
—from *Owl in Love* (191)

Finally understand that before introducing young adult students to new realizations of who they might be, it is important to help them understand the roles in which they have been cast by culture and society—in other words, who others expect them to be. Through a blend of modern psychological science, the Enlightenment ideal of rationality that threads throughout the history of modern education, and the traditional Protestant notion of humans as fundamentally flawed and fallen, the haunting specter of adolescents as problematic, emotionally unstable, and innately sinful has permeated societal judgments of who they are. Pathologized as deviant, ascribed with endless maladies that capitalize on societal anxieties and intolerances, and diagnosed as irrational, dependent, and non-conforming, young adults are viewed as dangerous and unpredictable aberrations that must be cured of their reckless natures. In a word, they are transgressors, who blatantly resist their assignment to “normal” cultural boxes. Such judgments of the young are often imported onto their reading habits as well as their personal characters.

Young people, just like adults, read for many different reasons. They seek to know themselves better, know their world better, and know what it

means to be a “better” person. They do not, however, look for these understandings in didactic or necessarily “reasoned” ways. In fact, it might even be argued that, because they are in the midst of an evolving intellectual and emotional impression of the world, adolescents choose not to draw absolute lines between the conflicts that plague them and the conflicts that torment the characters they read about even if those conflicts are not necessarily their own and the characters exist in another realm.

It is no accident that a novel like *Weetzie Bat* continues to be immensely popular. The world teens are experiencing is a curious place where strange and unexpected events happen; no reality is privileged because, clearly, no reality can be claimed as fixed and stable. Struggles with what is “good” exact the same price as battles with the “devil.” Because youth are not afraid to ask the same hard questions about goodness as they do evil, “good” is feared as much as it is loved. For them, the complacent answers that often come with age rarely exist; moral certainty appears just as evil as outright wickedness. Frailties of the heart and spirit are no more and no less limiting than those of the mind and body. It is only in theory, not practice, that young people are incapable of

adequately reflecting on the atrocities as well as the marvels of their lives. Books with elements of the “unreal” which draw only fine lines between reality and fiction help in their reflection of these understandings as much as any other text they encounter.

Adults who believe that adolescence is a time when the lens focused on the world must be adjusted to view life through the eyes of grown-up “truths” rather than childhood “fictions” find it difficult to take seriously teenage books that concern themselves with fantastical protagonists who are half woman, half animal; part man, part angel; or a pinch of human, and a dose of demon. Once readers move beyond age-appropriate fairy tales, they are expected to give up their child-like fears and fascinations with the strange, eerie, and unknown while disciplining themselves to “rationally recognizing the dangers of these disrupting forces that intrude on their humanity. The inclination is to dismiss stories of the supernatural, surreal, or fancy as either immature daydreams of immortality, poorly contrived romances of horror, fluff of the imagination or, even worse, as solipsistic, self-referential texts. Unfortunately, in the haste to dismiss “unrealistic” genres of books, we miss important understandings of adolescent thinking and identity construction while remaining blind to the flawed, linear nature of the developmental theories surrounding them. Instead of allowing readers to use such texts as touchstones for the sometimes tragic nature of their lives, or even as sites of inevitable loss that may never be reconciled, we condescendingly refer to them as “dumbed down” versions of “real” literature, worthless pieces of deviant trash, or sentimental fiction that is “utterly banal” (Ravitch 130).

In a need to reinforce rather than shatter myths of youth, adults frequently fail to see books such as M.T. Anderson’s *Thirsty* or Patricia Kindl’s *Owl in Love* as symbolic resistances of the socio-cultural harnesses systematically thrown across the neck of adolescence. To be sure, the fictitious vampires and changelings of these books, standing far outside the acceptable norm, can be safely reasoned away as bizarre and unusual “characters,” mere entertainment at best or identification badge of the outcast at least; however, what cannot be denied is the flesh and blood radical mutant teen counterpart seen in the reader’s mirror. It is this corporeal monster, the teen who purposefully pushes against notions of standardization, normativity, and

status quo who is most feared, not the pen and ink ghosts of some writer’s imagination. It is this recognizable, mortal being who flies in the face of custom, counsel, and the commonplace, who spits in the eye of adult claims of a predetermined sequence for adolescent development that must be stifled. The alienation is palpable; the construction complex. If adult notions of adolescence cannot be mapped onto young adults, then we must deal with teens on their own terms, a perspective that seems impossible and forbidding to some and downright immoral and unacceptable to others.

The history of literary monsters, vampires, and changelings is a long and lively one. Such characters make an appearance in both ancient and modern cultures. From *Beowulf* to *Frankenstein* to *Dracula* to *The Metamorphosis* right up to the most recent comeback of the comic book legend *Spiderman*, society has maintained a steady, if strange, attraction to the grotesque, unusual, and sometimes macabre manipulation of humanhood. Traditional fairy tales abound with stories of non-human entities being substituted for mortal babies at birth by malevolent forces. Our fascination with creatures who are so different from who we perceive ourselves to be is debated in depth by everyone from literary scholars to philosophers, and the longing to understand everything from sexual prowess to immortality to bourgeois politics is attributed to the creation of such freaks.

But perhaps the most important issue that a character like the werewolf, or, as is the case with Klaus’s *Blood and Chocolate*, a *shewolf*, forces us to confront is the one which nudges acknowledgement of the blurred lines of identity that haunt us our entire lives. It is not the Jekyll and Hyde ability to disguise our true nature that piques human interest nearly so much as it is an ability to learn to live in multiple worlds and multiple identities with an on-going consciousness of what that might mean. For young people, especially, such concerns are at the forefront of their daily experience. They do not seek to give up who they are, but rather to integrate their known sense of a developing self with the unknown self that pushes from the darkness. They are not looking for the certainty that the prudence of adulthood points them toward; they are searching for a way of negotiating the inconsistencies that living in an infinitely complex universe imposes. Half-vampires and change-

lings, shewolves and snake-boys provide an opportunity to move through these incongruities in a way that realistic fiction cannot.

The radical mutant teen as seen in contemporary young adult literature is about transfiguration not mere transformation; liberation not redemption. These are the teens who are unpredictable and multifaceted, who are a tangle of contradictions and paradoxes. They refuse the defining theories of youth that would wed them to lock-step states and conditions dependent on categories and bracketing, theories that are certain of particular phases and cycles. They deny the “Truths” that Foucault observes are “linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain” (133); like Foucault, they intend to expose those truths as biased claims set in motion by those who stand to gain the most from them. These are the outlaws who refuse to look for the answers in the socially habituated places—teens for whom piety is found in leaving the questions open rather than in accepting the culturally prescribed explanations. They are not about becoming someone else’s notion of who they should be; they are about accepting the uniqueness of their own promise and limits.

In stories, these evolving, uncommon identities answer to names like Chris, Owl, Simon, Linnet, Darren, and Althea. In stories, these identities on the margin lead to the obscure dwelling places of vampires, werewolves, cutwings, and shapeshifters. Stepping out of the cradle of childhood and into the wide berth of adulthood where questions of life and death loom large, these are the characters who in our own world are known simply as teens, enthusiastic anomalies whose only desires are to know and be known. Much like the characters they choose to read about, teens are intent on creating themselves not as predetermined immutable essences over which they have no say, but as active interpreters of their own lives whose ambiguous natures can sometimes overcome situations meant to fix them in place.

Caught up in the pursuit of self, community, and humanity; trying to balance a newfound physicalness with emotional awareness, intellectual consciousness, and moral perception; and attempting to negotiate a world strung somewhere between farce and tragedy, the teen characters in books like *Thirsty*, *Owl in Love*, *The Silver Kiss*, *The Cheerleader*, *Cirque du Freak*, and *Growing Wings* all have one thing in common: They

recognize the enigmatic necessity of their chameleon-like realities. Adapting constantly to an evolving environment, prone to change without a moment’s notice, and sensitive to whatever predicaments they happen to stumble into, the young people of these texts all realize the fragility of identity and the difficulty involved in trying to hold on to it, even as they seek to question it.

Dizzied by the obscure world whizzing round them, the radical mutant teens of these texts wrestle with the startling disparities of light and dark forces, good and bad inclinations, and autonomous and dependent feelings. These binaries confuse them because the implied hierarchies of such limiting choices do not ring true. They note the contradictions of living that consistently bring together all of the strengths and weaknesses of existence at once. For these characters, reality includes moral struggles, limitless being, and the experience of painful circumstances. They come to know that sometimes the only way to understand the ecstasy of humanity is to experience the anguish of it, anguish that frequently happens at their own hand. “I realize,” says Chris in *Thirsty*, “that the decision to be human is not one single instant, but is a thousand choices made every day. It is choices we make every second and requires constant vigilance. We have to fight to remain human” (Anderson 248).

The radical mutant teen is a category buster. It is the dreaded octopus appendage of young people that adults anxiously scramble to restrain, only to discover it popping out from yet another site. Radical mutant teens do not always march to the drumbeat of rationality that the linear theories of adolescence would have them heed. Where they will travel and to what they will attend cannot always be foretold. In an effort to release their unique potentiality, these teens often defy convention, even at the risk of being misunderstood and seen as developmentally inappropriate, off track, or just plain weird.

Yet, I contend it is not the teens themselves who are wayward, but rather the system that attempts to contain them. Because of a growing desire to pigeon-hole personality development as character education and dictate preferred behavior according to defined standards, the fixed and parochial stages of “normal” development continually erode the space teens need to discover who they might become. In an effort to make

the world small, adult theories about adolescents have disregarded youth's right to self-determination and have failed to validate the indeterminable awakenings of self-definition. "One thing [is] for sure," Linnet of *Growing Wings* thinks to herself, "she [is] not going to let anyone bind her wings or cut them off" (Winter 3). In *The Silver Kiss*, Simon echoes a similar feeling: "Call me nobody? he whisper[s], and his fangs slid[e] from their sheaths. Call me nobody? he scream[s] as if in pain. . . . I AM" (Krause 40).

Teen readers are drawn to figures such as the winged changelings Linnet and Owl and the understandable vampires Chris and Simon, not only because they are resolute in their desire to be themselves, but because they stand as representative of the "lust for life" and the yearning for freedom that youth also feel. "How brave was his mind and spirit; what a longing for life, for life, for his own true nature, he had" is how Owl of *Owl in Love* describes the desires of the fellow wereowl she works to save (Kindl 189). Likewise, Chris, the vampire teen in *Thirsty*, cannot ignore his own "unnamed feelings that percolate until they feel like a dam about to burst" (Anderson 26). "I am thirsty," he says, "[t]hirsty for life," and in the course of events that follow, Chris comes to define more clearly what that actually means (249). But this lust can also be a curse; uninvited but ever present, it is a hunger that cannot be ignored, it torments the characters of these novels as much as it compels them. They learn that controlling it can sometimes be a difficult, if not impossible burden.

"Beneath the itch [of the wing] is an ache," reveals Linnet (Winter 2); an ache, we can assume, that is both titillating and frightening at once. Forcing her into physical and emotional discomfort, the "[w]ings. Forming beneath the surface of her skin. Unfolding. Emerging" morph Linnet beyond her will and cause her much distress (11). There appears no room for the wings to stretch and grow. She has no choice but to accept the changes taking place, yet insists on doing so under her own conditions. Dealing with a body that seems to have betrayed her, Linnet knows she will be altered by the changes, knows her new appearance makes her a freak, but refuses to conform to the implied imposition of those changes. Though she realizes that to "try flying with wings in the real world" is an almost impossible feat, she understands, too, that she is determined to soar in the

undertaking (40). "Why walk?" she asks, "with the whole world watching, she was going to fly" (195). Linnet resolves to be courageous about her transfiguring self, but she will never be compliant. She is prepared to mobilize her autonomous nature and will not give way to the fears and prejudices that the world assumes will subdue her.

The breast and crown of the Linnet, a well-known songbird, become a brilliant crimson in the summer, but only if it is left in the wild and not tamed. And, indeed, Laurel Winter's story of Linnet is that of a fledgling young girl, determined to fly. She will not allow her wings to be bound and, therefore, will not be symbolically caged. For her, wings represent a divine freedom. She is determined she will never be a "cutwing," a sign that she accepts her own mortality as a part of her existence that cannot be controlled. Though Linnet must, in the end, escape, at least temporarily, to the safety of a group of other creatures like herself, she does not do so because she seeks isolation but because there are those who would persecute her and her kind for that which they cannot help being. Linnet does this willingly and becomes stronger for it, but recognizes, too, that someday she and others like her will be a visible force in the world.

Owl, the protagonist of Patricia Kindl's story, would seem to have little in common with Winter's Linnet. Physically and metaphorically these two changelings are very different. Owl's unusual appearance does not torture her in the same way that Linnet's does. In fact, she often "long[s] to transform" to her physical owl self (181). Though she attempts to "fit in" by doing things like trying to eat her mice between two slices of bread, she is more concerned with how awful the bread is than with the fact she prefers to eat mice. She continually "long[s] for [her] own humanity" (170). Still, even Owl has moments when she realizes that "[s]ometimes [she] would like not to be what [she] is" (6). But while "[l]ife is a strange and sometimes terrible thing" for Owl, it is also a thing of possibility (4). It is an experience to be welcomed, not avoided or ignored.

Owl stands in her story very much as a symbol of the unclouded vision that sometimes only youth can have. Traditionally associated with Athene, goddess of wisdom, an owl, with its sharp eyes, is able to penetrate the darkness in ways that others cannot. Kindl's Owl wisely observes many things that the

adults around her are unable to detect. She is a bridge between the mortal, grown-up world of day, whose harsh and brilliant light can blind people to each other, and the nocturnal, transitional world of night, where the softness of light allows for more hallowed understandings of the nature of things. Owl, who can transform only at night, is a kindred spirit of the moon, which stands for change and growth. She is associated with rebirth, helping another werewolf come into his own: "He began to transform slowly, painfully. He clearly still found it difficult," notes Owl (199). It is a discernment familiar to her, because, despite a growing acceptance of her condition, she, too, is mostly alone, often estranged, and restless in her need to live fully. "Why should I be ashamed of a need that ought to be [. . .] simple," she asks, though she knows the answer is a complex and difficult one (14).

The "lust for life" that imposes itself on the vampire characters of young adult fiction is a more difficult one to concede, but no more difficult to understand. Theirs is a yearning, it seems, that will never be satisfied. In its passion and desire, this appetite has the capacity to be all consuming, and, if not equalized, lead to a moral self-destruction, as well as to the corruption of those who come in contact with it. Who among us has not struggled with such passion and desire? Obsessive love, compulsive habits, dogmatic beliefs, manic moods, and uncontained energies are disturbing behaviors that turn on us, destroying the very things we mean to create, including ourselves. For the vampire character, the wonder of living can turn quickly into a hideous nightmare, a nightmare that represents many of the "monster"-like issues of becoming human, first and foremost being how to deal with the knowledge of the finite self. But there are other adolescent issues that stem from this frightening passion and desire, as well: what it means to have and use power over others; how to deal with profound feelings of alienation and loneliness; how to keep life energies from becoming excesses that ravage life itself; and, finally, how to work through the other enduring existential questions that confront all humans, but are arriving for teens for the first time.

Vampire stories generally represent two ways of thinking: they either bring out the best or the worst of what it means to be human, though this is not to say they do so in stark black and white terms. In Klaus's

The Silver Kiss, the vampire Simon is able to help Zoe cope with the impending loss of her mother by helping her recognize she is paralyzed from living her own life in the denial of her mother's death. "It's death," he tells her, "[d]eath that frightens you so" (56). As Zoe searches for "some magic [to] perform to stop her mother dying" (74), Simon helps them both realize that death is only horrible if we make it so. In freeing Zoe, Simon also frees himself. In the end of the novel, as he sits facing the rising sun, he understands, finally, that he has had the ability to be released from his three hundred years of insatiable lust by simply letting go of the desire that has bound him. "I think I'm free," he whispers incredulously, "All I had to do was go willingly" (198). For the young, the lesson inherent in Simon's choice is ultimately an enabling and important one.

"Personal meaningfulness should be recognized as at least one of the possible criteria to be applied by a reader assessing the reading event," according to Louise Rosenblatt (157). In the case of Zoe and Simon, there is much for the teenage reader to find personally meaningful. Both of the characters feel the terrible pain of aloneness and separateness felt also by both Linnet and Owl of the changeling stories. "I'm so alone," thinks Simon, "I'll be alone forever. There is no one to share my burden and make it lighter" (88). But he is wrong; he meets Zoe and is able to see a way out of the darkness that has engulfed him. "Because you talked to me," he tells Zoe, "I felt like a person again" (95). Likewise, Zoe, in trying to deal with her mother's terminal illness, feels she can no longer function in the world her friends inhabit, and that if she loses Simon, she will be utterly alone. But in an act that comes full-cycle, Simon, at the moment that he sets himself free, also releases Zoe: "[. . .] you have yourself," he tells her, "A good, kind, strong, brave self, it was you who gave me courage" (196). In the loving faith of each other, both characters find the courage to face their individual destinies.

The realization of their own mortality is important for all of the characters of these stories. Contrary to adult theory which would see teens as in denial of life's finitude, these YAL protagonists, vampires included, are able to recognize it with an emotional honesty that many adults fear: "And a voice says to me again and again this one chilling fact I know is true: that I came into this world from a warm place

within someone else; but that I will leave it completely alone" (*Thirsty* 176). While *Thirsty* is a story full to some degree of all the typical fearless vampire camp—sex, beautiful girls, violence, and humor—it is also a story of questioning and struggling. It is a story that recognizes its own limits and the sometimes inadvertently insidious nature of evil. "I can't wait to have burned out of me this stupid thirst, this hunger that lies coiled and miserable in my throat and stomach like a tapeworm," anguishes Chris (59). His cry is not lost on those who know the pain of being captured by their own passions and desires.

Rosenblatt also understands this transference of understanding and meaning as it pertains to readers: "[. . .] in a literary work there is no one else for whom we are substituting. We are not vicarious or substitute Juliets or Leopold Blooms. We are living in the world of the work which we have created under guidance of the text and are entering into new potentialities of our own natures" (68). Teens who read books like *Thirsty* know exactly what it means to prove themselves against the forces of evil and destruction; they understand the moral tests they will be required to engage in time and time again. And in their struggle to articulate the true nature of the darkneses that shadow the world, they question the dark that parades itself as light and recognize that in times of deepest conflict and uncertainty, those most willing to identify themselves as skeptics may often be the ones most persecuted.

Anderson's character Chris is a teen who lives in the vague borderlands between adulthood and childhood. In the midst of all the wonder and mystery of life, he is thrown into the most frightening, unknown aspects of it which he approaches with humility and reverence. In the end, he knows he has no choice but to journey forward. Chris becomes a dangerous shapeshifter, not because he fears death, but because he embraces life. Through his ordeal, though, he comes to understand that life can be incredibly deceptive and self-serving. In his attempt to save what he believes is a spark of greatness and light in the world, he unknowingly releases a darkness that will not be contained; in his attempt to save the world, he himself will be destroyed, and those who set him up for that destruction consider him nothing more than a pawn. Chris learns that the forces of evil are never really controlled, not always apparent, and more

easily imagined than we might think: "[. . .] what dark god must struggle somewhere, writhing back and forth to escape" (73). Though he fears that at some point he will be brought to the level of the very beast he seeks to kill, Chris also knows that when the time arrives, he may be helpless against it. So it happens that sometimes the dark forces of our lives cannot be escaped, that they wait in secret and in silence to take us down with them.

Vampires like writer Caroline B. Cooney's are different. In the case of her stories and those that are more traditionally like hers, the aim is always to see the collective evil that befalls those who give into a malevolent longing. While there is no denying that Cooney's vampires are themselves detestable, it is how their evil attributes are imposed on the other characters Cooney develops that is most important. For example, in Cooney's novel *The Cheerleader*, the main character, Althea, becomes a victim of her own desire to be popular. While the vampire in the story preys on Althea's weakness of character, it is Althea whom the reader ultimately holds responsible for the despicable act of turning friends over to the vampire.

Much like the fabled Althea, the Queen of Calydon who seeks vengeance on her son for acts committed against her brothers, Cooney's Althea cannot control her conflicted feelings, commits ugly acts of betrayal, and, in the end, turns on herself in self-loathing. When this Althea realizes that she has emotionally and spiritually resigned herself to the evil the vampire represents, she physically commits herself to him, becoming in the end the very thing she despises. Unlike Simon of *The Silver Kiss* and Chris of *Thirsty*, two unwilling vampires who resist the curse inflicted on them and struggle against a forced identity toward their own independence, Althea becomes a vampire because she allows socially imposed structures to shape her; in doing so, she forgoes all indicators of moral responsibility and perception and succumbs to an eternity of hunger that will never be satiated, no matter the power she has achieved.

The list of fictitious vampires and changelings seems endless. In addition to the vampires, half-vampires, and weremen found in countless other stories, books like the popular *Cirque du Freak* series by Darren Shan introduce readers to characters who only somewhat resemble bizarre humans: Mr. Tall, Gertha Teeth, Alexander Ribs, Cormac Limbs, Rhamus

Twobellies, Hans Hands, Bradley Stretch, a bearded lady, the blue-hooded Little People led by Mr. Destiny, and Evra Von, the snake-boy. "There are always openings at the Cirque du Freak" for those who are different, alien, and misfit (Shan 59). Perhaps what texts like *Cirque du Freak* do best is let these insurgent Others tell their own stories instead of having the same old stories told about them. Though it may not be a particularly pleasant experience to be a freak of nature, an ability to claim and own one's difference is vastly preferable to having another simply pass judgment on it. Teens know this as well as anyone. Beyond the relics of capes, crucifixes, graveyards, bats, and coffins, beyond the bloody fangs, unreflected images, full moons, spider webs, and howling wolves of the "undead" lie issues of identity, morality, and power that young people are not blind to as they confront the world. There is a "hunger inside us," says Darren of *Cirque du Freak*, "that must be fed to be controlled" (20). It is a hunger that is both a power and a curse, an appetite that these texts make plain is never as easily satisfied as it appears on the surface.

Adults who see texts such as the ones discussed here only as catalysts for defiant behavior are missing the point of why teens read them. The young do not need characters like Owl, Linnet, Simon, Chris, Althea, and Darren to give them permission to resist socialized roles; they live in a world that abounds in those messages. They need these characters and the stories they tell as safe houses where the paradoxical questions of emotional and moral struggle as well as the contradictory issues of humanity may be asked and thought about without cynicism or deprecation. "There are those," says Louise Rosenblatt, "who, far from thinking of the reader's activity as free, speak of the domination of the text, the submergence of the

reader in what sounds in their phrasing almost like a brainwashing dictated by the text" (71). Teens should be given more credit than this. They are not mindless believers to be molded into our own or even some writer's image, but are fresh, and, yes, slightly irreverent beings to be called upon and heard. It behooves us to allow them their voice and their vision, their pleasure and their appetite "[b]ecause there can be no doubt that they are on the move, and that they are stalking through forests and slipping across lawns" (*Thirsty* 12). Let us meet them at the bend and welcome them to a world we know is unpredictable, but nonetheless as magical and wondrous as they hope it is. Understanding and affirmation will serve everyone much better than an arsenal of pointed stakes, a show of braided garlic, and a draconian insistence on who they not only are, but who we expect them to become.

Works Cited

- Anderson, M.T. *Thirsty*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2003.
- Block, Francesca Lia. *Weetzie Bat*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
- Cooney, Caroline B. *The Cheerleader*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1991.
- Foucault, Michael. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Random House, 1980.
- Kindl, Patricia. *Owl in Love*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Klause, Annette Curtis. *The Silver Kiss*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Language Police*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.
- Shan, Darren. *Cirque Du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2001.
- Winter, Laurel. *Growing Wings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.