

Rethinking Ugliness:

Lynda Barry in the Classroom

“I know I shouldn’t just come out and say it,” my student announced to the class, “but I really don’t like this book.” It was the third week of my undergraduate adolescent literature course, and we were talking about Lynda Barry’s illustrated novel *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988). I had told them on the first day of the semester that the words “like” and “dislike” often curtail productive conversation, and, mindful of this, my student was trying to find another way to convey her thoughts. “Okay,” she continued, “What I mean is, well, it’s just that the pictures are . . . ugly. Plus the book seems sort of unfocused. It meanders.” “And it’s so depressing,” a woman on the other side of the room chimed in. A few others in the class nodded their heads in agreement. As someone who loves this book, I felt a small pang. Ugly? Meandering? Depressing? How could they use such harsh words? Then the more reasonable part of me took over. Although these were not the descriptors I would have chosen, my students had a point. Yet the very qualities they considered flaws were the same qualities that made the book such a vital part of our classroom experience.

Lynda Barry’s books are not explicitly written as YA novels,¹ but many, including *Good Times*, are well suited for both college students who hope to work with teenagers and teens themselves. *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988) and Barry’s graphic narrative *What It Is* (2008) were both Booklist Young

Adult Choices, and *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), also a graphic narrative, won an Alex Award in 2003. The crossover appeal of these books brings her work to a demographic that may be especially primed to gain something from it, if not always immediately *like* it.

All of Barry’s illustrated novels, graphic narratives, and comics offer startling insight into childhood and adolescent fear and loneliness. As fellow comics artist and Eisner winner² Chris Ware says, “Lynda was the first cartoonist to write fiction from the inside out—she trusted herself to close her eyes and dive down within herself and see what she had come up with” (Borrelli, 2009). While many books describe the messiness and awkwardness of adolescence, Barry’s work seems to “dive down” deeper than most. Through darkly perceptive illustrations, an unusual sense of humor, and simple, yet striking prose, Barry enacts adolescence on the page. Lynda Barry’s books are never comfortable, but neither is being an adolescent.

The Good Times Are Killing Me (1988) is the book

I use to introduce Barry to students.

³ Told in 41 short vignettes, it is the story of Edna Arkins, a girl growing up in the 1960s who must deal with apathetic or cruel teachers, vengeful relatives, her parents’ divorce, and bigotry. My students’ initial responses to this book—that its illustrations are ugly, that it meanders, and that it is depressing—can, with a little prodding, become

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productive questions: How might a book's illustrations frame our reactions to it? How do texts without conventional narrative arcs expand our understanding of storytelling? How might we interrogate our romantic expectations for growth in adolescent literature? I want to explore these questions in greater detail here in order to make the case that Lynda Barry deserves to be a part of a widely read, discussed, and debated group of writers who are invested in the adolescent experience, particularly the experience of the deeply troubled adolescent. By reading Barry in the classroom, and by putting her in the hands of teenagers, we emphasize that the offbeat and the seemingly ugly can productively shape our thinking about literature and the worlds it both describes and critiques.

"Ugly" Illustrations

When we first discuss *Good Times* in my class, we begin with the book itself—that is, with its material existence. Students mention the Sasquatch paperback's unusual size (small and somewhat squat); its orange, black, and green cover; its illustrations; its hand-lettered chapter headings. We talk about the conventions of comics and the way that Barry reinterprets them. For example, comics artists typically lay out their images within panels of various sizes that have sharp, clear lines. Barry's illustrations in *Good*

Times, like her comics, are "boxed in" but not rigidly so. Her frame lines are drawn or painted without a ruler and appear uneven and wobbly. In a typical comic, the borders of a frame may not register with the reader, but Barry's work calls attention to them, foregrounding rather than denying imperfection and reminding us of the process of creation itself. Each short chapter begins with a decorated initial inside a small, cramped rectangular box that is hand painted with these wobbly lines. In with that first letter of the chapter's first word are illustrations of Edna, her family, or her teachers. Sometimes, it seems these people are posing for a camera. At other times, it is as if they are caught unaware, in an angry outburst or in a moment of unexpected joy.

There are a few larger illustrations at the beginning, and these cause the most consternation. They are unusually ugly, my students maintain, and they set the tone for the rest of the book. One illustration depicts Edna huddled in the right hand corner, looking out over her street (see Fig. 1). It has a heavy feeling, not just because it is, like the other images in the book, in shades of gloomy gray, but also because it fills just the bottom two-thirds of the page. Edna seems trapped by the railing of a balcony, which slices diagonally across the page, and by the vertical bars that make it resemble a prison. The picture on the next page (see Fig. 2) is, to some students, not only "ugly" but also "scary." In it, Edna holds her older cousin Ellen's unwanted baby. Her head lolls to the side, her mouth is open, and her nose appears triangular and shaded, almost clown-like. The illustration simultaneously evokes a Madonna and Child and a messy, awkward adolescent holding a baby. All of its lines, from Edna's stringy hair, to her shirt, to the swaddled infant cradled in her arms, are thick and frantic, conveying a sense—despite the fact that many lines are also gently curved—of tension.

Some students, when pressed to explain what they mean by "ugly," highlight the drawings' aesthetic immaturity, maintaining that, with their flattened or skewed perspective and their clumsy contour lines, they "look like something a kid would do." It is worth noting that this accusation has been levied at many artists who don't work squarely within a realist mode, but it's not inaccurate. Barry—channeling the manic intensity of Don Martin (who drew for *Mad* magazine), the lurid cartooning of R. Crumb, and the



Figure 1. Barry's heavy, dreary illustrations often trouble her readers.



Figure 2. Barry’s technique creates tension while appearing almost child-like.

off-kilter and kinetic illustrations of Dr. Seuss⁴—seems to relish the deliberately puerile. This provokes some readers, who have been known to send her “livid letters” about how much they are bothered by her work (qtd. in Grossman, 1999).

Such a strong reaction may seem surprising since, compared to something like Phoebe Gloeckner’s graphic narrative *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002), with its explicit depictions of sex and its hyper-realistic drawings of human anatomy, *Good Times* seems pretty tame, even gentle. Still, as I tell my students, the first time I came across one of Lynda Barry’s comics I was bothered, too. This strip featured two of her most beloved characters, Marlys and her little sister Maybonne. As usual, they both were depicted with spots on their faces, stringy hair, and large lips and teeth. Their bodies were little more than lumpy shapes with long, rubbery limbs, and their glasses obscured their eyes. The frenetic crosshatching and the amount of text crammed into each panel—so much so that characters sometimes seem forced off the page—made

the piece feel chaotic. I picked up the book, stared at it for a while, and put it down. For someone who was used to the goofy comics in the Sunday paper, the piece hit me almost physically, like a slap in the face. It wasn’t just ugly: it seemed almost an affront.

Eventually, I came to appreciate this visceral quality in Barry’s work for its insights into adolescent—and human—anxiety. In *Good Times*, adult figures are grotesque caricatures with enormous, wolfish teeth and faces so filled with anger that they collapse into themselves. Children and teenagers stand aloof or flash sickly, condescending smiles. In many of the pictures, Edna is by herself, slumped against the radio or sitting on the stoop. These images are palpable reminders of the fear, rage, and powerlessness of children and adolescents. They call to mind a kind of ugliness that words themselves cannot. And yet there are also moments of quiet joy in some these pictures, when Edna is dancing by herself or singing a song to her cousin’s baby. The absence of easy prettiness in these pictures can make the emotions being expressed seem all the more tender, fragile, and complex. Ugliness, in this sense, has the ability to plumb the beautiful.

“It . . . Meanders”

As an increasing number of students are exposed to illustrated and graphic narrative (in classrooms or on their own), they will likely be less taken aback by “strange” or “ugly” drawings such as these. They themselves will have more to say about the extraordinary variety of tones and textures that the medium of comics has to offer. Yet despite comics’ growing popularity and despite the fact that many of my students are avid readers, I find that students who have encountered them before they arrive in my class are surprisingly rare. Some have read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) in high school or in an early college course, but for the most part they have not encountered a wide variety of narrative forms or even a wide variety of genres. They prefer to stick with what they know: straightforward novels with linear narratives and conflicts that offer at least a partial resolution in the final chapter. Even students who appreciate unusual protagonists in unusual circumstances—the characters in Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* (1989), for example—still yearn for the comforts of normative narrative structures.

And, although it has chapters and seems to resemble a conventional novel, *Good Times* doesn't give its readers that. It is, however, a useful text for thinking about form: in particular, it leads us to ask questions about how chapters might function, what purpose plot serves, and to what extent voice might create a sense of continuity. For, instead of writing in a conventional mode, Barry flourishes in a *conversational* mode, creating books that value specific speech patterns. She has, as a reviewer for *The New York*

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Times Book Review says on the back cover of *Good Times*, “an impeccable ear,” and it is her ability to recreate the sound of one young adolescent’s voice with its peculiar cadences, word choices, and syntactical structures that make her novel memorable. Instead of capitulating to ideas about proper form, she lets the rhythms of Edna’s voice carry the book.

Good Times is certainly not the only book about children and adolescents to experiment with form in this way. It resonates with Sandra Cisneros’s lyrical 1984/1991 novella *House on Mango Street*⁵ in its portrayal of harsh realities, in the compelling voice of its young protagonist, and in its use of short, nuanced chapters that function as stand-alone vignettes. Both texts are episodic rather than epic, emphasizing circular patterns and recurring motifs rather than forward movement. In this mode, digressions are valuable, even integral to the experience of the text (Tensuan, 2006, p. 950).

In her autobiographical prose poem, *My Life*, Lyn Hejinian (1991) also values the circular and the discursive, insisting that “what follows a strict chronology has no memory” (p. 13). Memory itself isn’t chronological: it darts ahead, loops back, and misses important facts. But Hejinian also seems to suggest that in following a strict chronology, such genres as a conventional novel, a tale, or a poem also have no memory. They fail to convey the permeability of the past and the way that our minds make connections. Likewise, not only is memory an important

theme of *Good Times*, it is also a part of the episodic book’s shape. By swerving from subject to subject, backwards and forwards in time, *Good Times* feels less like a novel and more like a series of tales told to us by Edna as they occur to her. We see that Edna’s cousin Ellen has become a teen mother before we hear about her junior high school days, and we learn that Edna’s father has left the family before we hear about a game she played with him when she was little, aptly called “Get Lost.” Thus there is not a sense of moving forward to an unexpected conclusion: the sad denouement (in particular, the unraveling of Edna’s friendship with her African American friend Bonna) is already intimated in the early pages of the book.

While many adolescent novels use flashback and many characters reminisce about their childhoods, the fluctuations in this narrative signal a stronger departure from traditional story structure. This departure feels organic—it doesn’t have the stagey flourishes of postmodern experimentation—but it nonetheless helps us think about the way stories are told and what we expect from endings. Like her illustrations, Barry’s narrative is also messy. If we go into it expecting tidiness, we’ll miss the very real pleasure of hearing the insights Edna offers.

“It’s So Depressing”

Similarly, if we go into the book expecting a typically hopeful YA ending, in which the adolescent protagonists learn from difficult circumstances and emerge as stronger, more capable people, we will also miss learning important, less familiar lessons. My students tolerate (and even relish) trauma in YA literature—eating disorders, suicide, abuse—if they feel that the protagonist has begun to resolve his or her dilemmas by the final pages. They like to feel the vicarious catharsis that such endings offer. Many of the books that we read in class or that they have read on their own follow this pattern. In Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) *Speak*, for example, the protagonist Melinda takes an important step toward healing after her rape, saying, on the book’s final page, “I’m not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (p. 198). *Fat Kid Rules the World* by K. L. Going (2004) ends with Troy (a suicidal, obese teenager) on the road to self-actualization, thanks to the influence of a skinny addict who encourages him to play the drums. Even *Thirteen Reasons Why*

by Jay Asher (2007) concludes with the protagonist Clay, who has learned from his failure to connect with his classmate Hannah before she committed suicide, reaching out to another girl he has been afraid to talk to.

Most striking, particularly in the context of *Good Times*, is the ending of *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984/1991), which offers a sense of hopeful growth. Even though Cisneros is careful to avoid an ending that might seem unduly optimistic, her protagonist Esperanza (whose name means hope), is already planning her escape. Like Edna, Esperanza has endured poverty and witnessed abuse, but she vows to leave her street, which she renders female: “I am too strong for her to keep me here forever” (p. 110). She also promises, in this poignant ending, to “go away to come back” for the “ones I left behind” (p. 110). This conclusion offers readers two types of comfort: the knowledge that Esperanza will leave behind her sorrows *and* do something to ameliorate the sorrows of her community. The book thus indicates that personal satisfaction and communal connection both may be possible, and by putting down her story on paper, Esperanza has begun her healing process.

Good Times does not offer the reader such comfort. Rather than emphasizing transformation or escape, this book, and the ending in particular, depicts Edna’s interpellation as a subject, as an adolescent who recognizes her place in a power structure. In the final chapter, Edna’s friendship with Bonna is pushed to its breaking point. For years they have been close, despite the fact that when they first met, Edna, who is white, was forbidden to allow “Negro kids” into her house (p. 48). Now, in junior high, everything has changed. Egged on by other African American girls, Bonna slaps Edna for being rude to her. Instead of blaming her former friend, Edna says, simply: “Bonna didn’t have a choice” (p. 130). When Bonna is faced with rigid expectations concerning race, power, and pride, it’s not that she *won’t* choose the right thing, it’s that she *can’t*. She can’t choose to acknowledge her friendship with Edna, even though Edna, through her tears, tries desperately to make Bonna remember their friendship by “naming everything in [Bonna’s] house—the lamps, the chairs, the TV, the color of the walls, the couch, the rug” (p. 130). Both girls have stock roles to play in the tragedy that is junior high during a time and place scarred by racism and pov-

erty. These roles are so powerful that everything else is washed away:

In the vice principal’s office we acted like we had never met. Like all it was was any black girl slapping any white girl who had mouthed off to her, something that happened every single day and would just keep on happening world without end. When he called my mother to tell her, she never knew the girl was Bonna, just like Bonna’s father never knew the other girl was me. (p. 131)

In these final words of the novel, Edna recognizes that her falling out with Bonna, so uniquely painful to her, is part of an age-old struggle, one that shows no sign (at least in the late 1960s) of getting better. While many teenagers in adolescent novels gain the ability to see their way out, Edna cannot seem to envision a real life different from the one she is living, and the ending doesn’t offer hope that Edna’s situation will improve. She won’t, unlike Troy, grow closer to her father, nor will she tell an art teacher her problems, as Melinda does, nor will she use writing as a means for escape, like Esperanza. Even though she has come to a new understanding of the world, it is not a particularly hopeful one.

In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) observes that many readers and critics object to adolescent novels that appear to be too bleak. For example, Anne Scott MacLeod argues that Robert Cormier’s novels “violate the unwritten rule that fiction for the young, however sternly realistic the narrative material, must offer some portion of hope, must end at least with some affirmative message” (qtd. in Trites, p. 15). Trites, however, suggests that, while Cormier’s now-canonical *The Chocolate War* (1974) may not be read as meeting “romantic expectations about growth,” it does provide at least one character with the opportunity to grow at the end and, through that, offers redemption (p. 15). She asserts, “All but the bleakest of YA novels [. . .] affirm the adolescent’s ability to grow at least a little” (p. 14).

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Like *The Chocolate War*, *Good Times* may not seem to meet romantic expectations or provide a hopeful epiphany at the end. This, in itself, is important. As I tell my students, contrary to what many YA books would have us believe, not every teenager will find solace in art (or music or new friends),

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and fiction should reflect this.⁶ However, it seems equally important that *Good Times* does offer at least a modicum of hope in its final chapter. It does so by providing us with a sympathetic final image of Bonna. Although Bonna has remained mute throughout her fight with Edna, speaking only with her fists, afterwards Edna observes "wet streaks on her face" (p. 131). It may be a small consolation, but

it suggests that Bonna regrets her actions and wishes that their world were different.

There are other ways that Barry continues to provide "a portion of hope" amidst hopelessness throughout *Good Times*. For much of the novel, music is a way for those in positions of power to assert and maintain control. Edna's malicious cousin Ellen mocks Edna for having the "wrong" kind of records, and Edna is heartbroken to learn that "it doesn't matter if you like the records you have because there are only certain songs that are good to listen to" (p. 64). Even more distressing is the way that Edna's piano teacher and, later, her flute teacher, whom she calls "the most prejudiced person I ever met" (p. 90), use music as a weapon. They literally pound music into Edna, yelling at her to keep time and smacking her with their hands or their batons. Although her biting comments show that she has not fully internalized her teachers' warped perspectives, she becomes a body to be acted on, rather than an active agent. Playing music in these circumstances, it is clear, will not help Edna achieve emotional stability.

At its best, however, music allows Edna to imagine a more radiant world, where Elvis Presley sings plaintively in the moonlight and Julie Andrews twirls around on mountaintops. It allows her to connect

to Ellen's fretful baby, whom she must watch after school every day. Most important, perhaps, memories of music remind her that adults can nurture rather than oppress the children that they encounter. Mrs. Espere, Edna's second- and third-grade music teacher, acts as a kind of savior, one who literally helped her find her voice. Edna describes classes with her:

[I]t would suddenly be just your voice in the room, you singing a part alone and then the sound of the whole class singing back to you, and the feeling you would get from looking at Mrs. Espere, singing all by yourself, the way she would tilt her head back and smile, like she was holding you up in the air with her eyes, like you were the absolute best thing she had ever seen in her whole life, well, it made you just feel like you could take off flying. For that, even the shyest ones would raise their hands for a turn. (p. 80)

This teacher, whose name (like Cisneros's protagonist) means hope, provides Edna with the affirmation she craves. Her way of looking at Edna is not censorious, frustrated, or hateful, like so many others in the book. She feels buoyed by Mrs. Espere's belief in her and by the pure joy of singing. Significantly, this moment of empowerment is not just between teacher and student; instead, it involves all students singing a kind of call and response. They feel supported by the look of pride in their teacher's eyes and by the rest of the class singing back to them.

This could be a saccharine moment if it were sustained a moment longer, but Barry never capitulates to clichéd notions of the power of music to help us overcome adversity. Her book demonstrates that with every respite from childhood and adolescent woe comes a new fear or source of frustration. This sense of balance, far from diminishing the hopeful moments, makes them resonate all the more. *Good Times* becomes, then, a complex register of the way that hope and hopelessness may be entwined throughout the course of a character's, or a person's, life.

An Invitation

With any text that seems so heartbreakingly personal, the specter of autobiography always looms. As they become more invested in the narrative, my students want to know how much of the novel is based on Barry's own life story. Did Barry have a music teacher who hit her? A teacher like Mrs. Espere who made her feel like she could sing? Such questions are not out of place, given that Barry's work, particularly her more

recent books, foreground ideas of fact and fiction. Using the term “autobifictionalography,” she writes herself into and out of her work, calling attention to the slippery nature of truth telling as well as genre.

But while it may be fascinating to speculate about which aspects of her writing are “true,” what is more important about Barry’s books are not how much they resemble her own life, but what they ask readers to do with their own. Ozge Samanci (2006) refers to Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* as an example of “invitational rhetoric,” in which the speaker (or, in this case, writer/artist) invites the audience into her world (p. 192). It establishes a nonhierarchical framework for understanding issues and insists on the possibility of change. In *Demons*, Barry (2002) describes the tools she used to create her book and literally invites readers to paint their own demons (moments that have caused them grief), coaxing them with the words, “Come on! Don’t you want to try it?” (p. 219).

Barry’s other works also act as an invitation. *Good Times* begins with an open question, addressed to the reader: “*Do you ever wonder what is music? Who invented it and what for and all that? And why hearing a certain song can make a whole entire time of your life suddenly just rise up and stick in your brain?*” (front matter). There are no other words on the page, and these italicized sentences act as a kind of epigraph for the whole book. They invite us, as readers, to become a part of Edna’s story as we read it, and to think about our own experiences with music as we listen to hers. In addition to tapping into our aural awareness, Edna also invites readers to become visually involved in the novel, asking us to “[c]ome over here and look out this window” (p. 1) before she describes her neighborhood. By having Edna address the reader directly, Barry establishes an informal, intimate tone that works to break down the hierarchy of author/reader.

Throughout her books, Barry indicates how much she values the strange, isolated, off-beat experiences of children and adolescents, and she doesn’t paint them with a romantic gloss. Yet while Barry certainly doesn’t ask us to look at childhood through the scrim of nostalgia, she also believes that becoming an adult means reclaiming childish things in a way that is productive. In her book *What It Is* (2008), Barry asks readers to remember the pure pleasure they took in drawing as young children and to try to recapture the “strange floating feeling of being there and not being

there,” of letting one line lead to another without being consumed by self-doubt. Her last line in this chapter is almost a plea: “To all the kids who quit drawing . . . come back!” (p. 135). Her invitation to “come back” suggests a way of growing up that resists the forward thrust of many narratives of development. “Learning is not,” Barry writes, “a trajectory, but a slowly ascending spiral” (p. 156). We have to circle back in order to go (or grow) up.

This is what Barry’s narratives can bring to the classroom. Books like *Good Times*, as well as *What It Is* and *One! Hundred! Demons!*, not only validate the experiences of marginalized children and adolescents, they also provide a new way of learning and of thinking about learning itself. By emphasizing both the verbal and the visual, her work complicates our ideas about genre and what it means to read. And because Barry values mistakes, digressions, and the beautiful within the ugly, she can help us learn to appreciate these things, too. Through her very messiness, she helps us see beyond product to the process that led to it, a way of seeing that is valuable to the teacher—and the student—in all of us.

And because Barry values mistakes, digressions, and the beautiful within the ugly, she can help us learn to appreciate these things, too.

Notes

1. In using the term *YA* (or *Young Adult*) novel, I refer to “Books Written Specifically for Adolescents,” in keeping with Roberta Seelinger Trites’s (2000) definition (p. 7). I use *adolescent literature* to refer to “Books Written for General Trade Market which Have Adolescent Heroes and Heroines” and/or “General Books of Interest to Young Adults” (p. 7).
2. The Will Eisner Comic Industry Award is a prize given for creative excellence in American comic books.
3. *Good Times* was also made into an off-Broadway play in 1991.
4. Barry cites these illustrators as influences on her work; she also mentions other eclectic points of reference, including Mrs. Piggie Wiggle, Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, and the Broadway Musical *Hair* (Garden, 1999).
5. Theresa Tensuan (2006) suggests that *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *Mango* share certain features, although I would argue that *Good Times* has more in common with *Mango* than *Demons* does.

6. This connects to Barry's own life. In an interview with *Salon*, Barry has said that while her "struggles as a kid were a little like Edna and Bonna's," she "was much more troubled than they are" (Grossman, 1999).

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