

## Chapter Twelve: The limits of childhood: young adult and crossover fiction.

### 12.1 Introduction:

U.C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers (1997: vii) argue that all works of fiction written for young readers by adults are inherently dialogic because they 'create a colloquy between past and present selves'. This chapter will, however, confine itself to a review of critical approaches to fiction for Young Adults (YAs) which has been perceived by gatekeepers to have challenged the limits of acceptability in terms of subject matter and style (Beckett ed. 1999; Trites 2000), and/or which has attracted an adult readership (Falconer 2009). While Rachel Falconer suggests that cross-reading (defined by her as adults reading books aimed at young readers) is a relatively new phenomenon which emerged in the decade leading up to the millennium, recent anthologies of essays that focus on the work of pioneering writers of YA fiction from the mid-twentieth century onwards, most notably that of the controversial American writer Robert Cormier (Gavin ed. 2012), lend support to the view that YA fiction has from its inception blurred boundaries in terms of readership, subject matter and style.

### 12.2 The origins and development of YA fiction:

According to Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000: 9), 'Literature specifically written and marketed to adolescents came into its own in America when World War II changed the country's economy nearly forty years after [G. Stanley] Hall's<sup>1</sup> work called attention to adolescence as a psychological phenomenon'. The emergence of adolescents as autonomous consumers thus created a market for literature that reflected their perceived concerns and invited them to question dominant adult values. Blurred boundaries regarding intended readership are, however, evident in the fact that J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which has come to be seen by many literary historians as *the* seminal YA novel<sup>2</sup>, was not written *for* adolescent readers, but came to be appropriated *by* them. Indeed, the novel encapsulates two of the characteristic aspects of early YA fiction: the presence of a disaffected first

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<sup>1</sup> G. Stanley Hall (1905) *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Anthropology, Sociology, Sex Crime, Religion and Education*. 2 vols.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Geraldine de Luca (1978: 89), Rebecca Lukens and Ruth Cline (1995: 171), and Maria Nikolajeva (1996: 66).

person adolescent narrator (in this instance, Holden Caulfield), and the portrayal of the majority of adults as weak and ineffectual (Holden's term for them is 'phonies'). Its unflinching treatment of the themes of premature death and grief, and above all its subversive attitude towards adult authority led to the claim made as late as 1978 by a Washington school board that the novel was part of 'an overall communist plot'.<sup>3</sup>

S.E. Hinton was seventeen when *The Outsiders* (1967) was published, an early instance of a teenager writing a controversial novel for her peers. With its graphic depiction of class-based gang warfare narrated from the point of view of a young adolescent male protagonist, Hinton's gender-crossing novel is said to have initiated a tradition of 'New Realism' (Heaney 2005) in YA fiction. As one of the first novels for YAs to tackle the then taboo subject of teenage sexuality, Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) continued this tradition. A flavour of the negative criticism the novel attracted is evident in Michele Landsberg's (1988:192) rhetorical question: 'How is it possible to devote an entire novel to teenage love without conveying one tremor of rapture, joy, delight, intensity, sadness, dread, anxiety or tenderness? Blume's "love" is all fumbling and bra hooks, semen and birth control pamphlets'. While the latter comment does not do justice to the novel's ironic tone and refreshingly non-punitive portrayal of a sexually active teen heroine, it reflects an anxiety shared by many critics that such issues-led books for YAs are in danger of sliding from imaginative fiction into mere social didacticism. Yet, Nicholas Tucker (1994: 180) comes close to the mark when he says of the controversy generated by Blume's novel:

there is...a deeper rejection of the whole concept of childhood as a time for intense sexual curiosity...It remains a side...of childhood that we do not much want to think about, and children's writers who meet such interests at least half-way have to accept the aggressive critical consequences.

All three of the aforementioned books were subject to censorship as potentially harmful to the sensibilities of YA readers (West 1996), but none more so than Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), one of the most banned books in the USA for any age group (Beckman 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> Raychel Haugrud Reiff (2008) *J.D. Salinger: The Catcher in the Rye and Other Works*, Tarrytown: NY: Marshal Cavendish Corporation, p. 80.

### 12.3 YA New Realism and postmodern aesthetics:

Peter Hunt (2001: 51) has described Robert Cormier (1925-2000) as 'in the top ten writers who are essential reading for an understanding of the development of children's literature in the twentieth century'. Yet, Cormier's first and most well-known novel *The Chocolate War* (1974) was initially written with an adult readership in mind until his publisher shrewdly recognised its potential appeal to YAs. In an early critique, the liberal humanist critic Fred Inglis (1981: 226) judged the pessimistic closure of this novel as having transgressed an unwritten rule that, however bleak the events portrayed in the course of a work of fiction aimed at young readers, they should ultimately be left with a sense of hope:

Hero-victim and reader are left with the pains and the clichés of concussion. The crude lesson is threefold: that all institutions systematise violence; that violence upholds power without reason; that individuals cannot hope to change these facts. These are the sentimentalities of disenchantment

Inglis' potent phrase 'the sentimentalities of disenchantment' points to the danger of equating literary 'realism' with unrelenting bleakness. In a subsequent critical essay, Perry Nodelman (1992) likewise suggests that part of the appeal of *The Chocolate War* can be explained precisely by the fact that Cormier panders to the narcissistic pleasure adolescent readers are likely to take in the atmosphere of paranoia that pervades the novel. This seems paradoxical given the use of the narrative device of shifting focalization employed throughout which ought to provide multiple viewpoints on the events depicted. Robyn McCallum (1999: 32) argues that this, in turn, can be explained by the fact that the novel is a monologic text masquerading as a polyphonic one: 'there is on the one hand a sameness in the world view these characters represent and on the other hand an inability on the part of the characters to engage with and enter into dialogue with each other'. Indeed, in their shared disdain for their parents' lives and their voyeuristic attitude to the opposite sex, the novel's cast of thirteen adolescent focalizing characters sound suspiciously like Holden Caulfield.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these negative criticisms, a recent anthology of essays on Cormier's work edited by Adrienne Gavin (2012) pays tribute to the long and varied contribution the

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<sup>4</sup> Cormier admitted that Salinger's novel had 'a definite influence on me', quoted in Jennifer Keeley (2001: 28) *Understanding I Am the Cheese*, San Diego, CA: Lucent.

author has made, especially in terms of the ambition of the themes he explores in his writing and the complexity of his narrative style, both of which have undoubtedly helped to elevate the literary status of this relatively young and seemingly ephemeral genre. For instance, Gavin (ibid: 7) suggests that Cormier is unusual amongst writers for YAs in tackling contemporaneous political themes, themes which continue to remain topical:

He was...influenced by the period in which he began writing his teen fiction: a time of terrorist attacks and hijackings, the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War, questioning of political authority and systems, and the collapse of old cultural norms.

The essay by Pat Pinsent (ibid: 48-63), which explores the influence of Graham Greene on Cormier's work, foregrounds his sustained use of Catholic-inflected religious iconography in order to probe the nature of human evil and counters the charge of nihilism by arguing that many of his novels hold out the possibility of redeeming grace. Holly Blackford's (ibid: 96-112) queer reading of *The Chocolate War* and its sequel *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985) opens up an alternative perspective on these novels based upon an implicit analogy between Trinity school and the repressive homophobic ideology of the Hitler Youth movement. In the final essay in the collection Dimitrios Politis (ibid: 145-159) applies Wolfgang Iser's Theory Of Aesthetic Response to argue that the experimental narrative techniques Cormier employs encourage active, and potentially resistant, rather than passive readers. This accords with the view of a number of critics that Cormier was one of the first YA novelists to employ postmodern techniques in terms of both form and content.<sup>5</sup>

The most comprehensive and theoretically informed study of YA fiction to date is by Trites (2000) who adopts a Foucauldian<sup>6</sup> approach in her analysis of the workings of power in a wide range of novels by American and British writers. She argues that their writing should be viewed as an outgrowth of postmodernism on the grounds that they share an impulse to interrogate the social and discursive constructions of the identities of their adolescent protagonists. This, in turn, creates what she terms a

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<sup>5</sup> See especially Robert Le Blanc's *Postmodernist Elements in the Work of Robert Cormier*, Saarsbrücken: Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Relating to the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault.

paradox of authority:

...characters created by adult writers test the limits of their power within the context of multiple institutions for the benefit of adolescent readers who supposedly gain some benefit from experiencing this dynamic vicariously.

Thus Trites stresses the complex negotiations these young protagonists make with repressive institutional power structures, including the family, church, government and school, claiming that it is the 'recognition that institutions are bigger and more powerful than individuals' (ibid: 97) that sets YA fiction apart from fiction aimed at younger readers. Her overall thesis is that a power/repression dynamic lies at the heart of YA fiction, but following Foucault<sup>7</sup> she emphasises that power can be productive, as well as repressive, in that the oppositional identities it creates are attractive to teenage readers. This, she suggests, accounts for the predominance of rebel-heroes in many YA novels. Furthermore, she notes that in 'Anglophone cultures separation from parents is a prerequisite for growth' (ibid: 55). Yet, earlier she claims that YA novels '*indoctrinate* adolescents into a measure of acceptance' (ibid: 27, my italics), a determinist view that appears to be at odds with the poststructuralist stance that she adopts elsewhere.

Trites' argument is at its strongest when she discusses the discursive construction of sexuality and death in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. She argues persuasively that sexuality is both a site of power *and* repression in many YA novels in that it is portrayed as 'a rite of passage into adulthood' (ibid: 84), but also as a problem in need of regulation. She cites with approval Aidan Chambers' metafictional novel *Breaktime* (1978) as a rare instance of a text in which both heterosexual protagonists are 'empowered by their sexuality' (ibid: 97). She contrasts this with his equally metafictional novel *Dance on My Grave* (1982) which centres on a homosexual relationship and which she views as 'more repressive than liberating' (ibid: 105), but this ignores the fact that the novel is only incidentally about sexuality, and is primarily about coming to terms with the death of a lover. In fact, Chambers' depiction of gender as performative and of (bi)sexuality as radically contingent in this novel anticipates the work of the poststructuralist feminist theorist Judith Butler in her

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<sup>7</sup> See Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, 1978/1990: 36-49; *Discipline and Punish*, 1979: 195-22. A highly accessible account of Foucault's work is the book by Sara Mills in the Routledge Critical Thinkers' series, 2004.

influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990, see Chapter X for a more detailed discussion of queer theory).

In Chapter 5, Trites attempts to account for the preoccupation with death in the YA novels she analyses, something that at first seems surprising given the remoteness of death and dying to the majority of adolescents. She identifies three recurring patterns in the way death is represented: it occurs onstage, it is often violent and untimely and it leads to a tragic loss of innocence (ibid: 120). She contrasts this unflinching treatment of death as 'a threat, a finality' with the cyclical imagery associated with death in texts for younger readers (ibid: 118). Trites concludes by advocating the need to employ poststructuralist methodologies when analyzing YA fiction in order to foreground the kind of contradictory subject positions she claims these novels offer their young readers (ibid: 144).

#### 12.4 Cross-writing:

The collection of essays on cross-writing edited by Sandra Beckett (1999) grew out of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSL) Congress in 1995. She argues persuasively that cross-writing needs to be seen as an international phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> Thus a strength of the collection is that it comprises essays by fourteen scholars from eight different countries discussing the work of contemporary authors writing in a wide range of sub-genres. In the Introduction, Beckett (ibid: xviii) makes the contentious claim that: 'More and more books illustrate the limitations of audience age as a defining category and refuse to be confined by any such arbitrary boundary constraints'. Yet, the first essay by Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer (ibid: 3-12) implies that *authors*, unlike books, continue to be categorized in terms of the average age of their primary readership. She discusses three kinds of what she refers to as 'border crossing': writers, such as Roald Dahl, who begin as writers for adults and then become successful children's writers; writers for children, such as Russell Hoban, who shift to writing for adults, but find it more difficult to be taken seriously in this role, and 'polygraphs', such as A.A. Milne, who write for both audiences (ibid: 4). Lierop-Debrauwer goes on to argue that such boundary blurring should be welcomed as a means of emancipating children's and YA literature from

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, the term used to refer to this phenomenon in Norwegian is *allalderslitteratur*, which translates as 'literature for all ages' (Beckett 1999: xiv).

its inferior status relative to literary fiction for adults. This explains Zohar Shavit's (ibid: 89) observation that many children's authors claim to adopt an 'open' address in a thinly disguised attempt to side-step the lowly status that continues to be accorded to writing for children and YAs. It would appear, then, that for all their arbitrariness, the boundary constraints referred to by Beckett remain peculiarly persistent.

This view is challenged by the French author Michel Tournier whose cross-writing is the subject of Beckett's own essay. He claims that the quality of adult fiction should be measured by the accessibility of its style to child readers, thereby inverting the traditional status hierarchy referred to above by Lierop-Debrauwer and Shavit. For instance, Tournier regards his own abridged version of his adult novel *Friday* (1967), written in 1971 and subsequently published in 1977 under a children's imprint, as the superior version: 'The first *Vendredi* is the first draft, the second is the good copy' (ibid: 39). What is interesting is that Tournier bases this judgement on aesthetic criteria, viewing the novel published for children as 'purer, less cluttered and more chiselled' (ibid: 40) than the original adult novel. Yet, as Beckett observes, even Tournier had to admit that his adult novel *The Erl-King* (1970), about Nazi Germany, was too sombre in subject matter to be re-written in a form that was suitable for children (ibid: 40).

This calls into question the thesis put forward by Maria Nikolajeva (ibid: 63-80) that no meaningful boundary exists any more between books written for adults and children. In order to support her claim, she undertakes a close reading of three novels, one ostensibly published for a child readership (although I would suggest the implied addressee is, in fact, a YA), one for a dual audience, and one for an adult readership,<sup>9</sup> all of which explore the theme of adult exploitation of children for dubious scientific purposes. By comparing their respective treatment of plot, setting, characterisation, narrative perspective, temporality and genre, Nikolajeva concludes that there are few discernible differences between them. What this comparative analysis does indicate is the increasingly permeable boundary between fiction for

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<sup>9</sup> The three novels in question are *Skriket fra jungelen* (*A cry from the jungle*, 1989) by Norwegian Andersen Medal winner Tormod Haugen; *Northern Lights* (1995), by British author Philip Pullman, and *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (*Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, 1992), by the Danish author Peter Høeg respectively.

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adults and YAs, rather than between fiction for *children* and adults, although the age at which children attain the status of young adulthood will, no doubt, remain a source of critical debate.<sup>10</sup>

Chapters 8 and 9 provide case studies of repressive cultural contexts, Russia during the Soviet era and the American South in the late nineteenth century respectively, in which fictions for children functioned as innocent 'screens' (ibid: 130) for political and social satire. These would seem to constitute examples of what Barbara Wall (1991) refers to as 'double address' texts in that only the knowing adult reader is likely to have realized their full allegorical meaning. Even more challenging is the urge many Holocaust survivors have experienced to bear witness to the terrible events they lived through for a post-memory generation of young readers. In her essay, Adrienne Kertzer (ibid: 167-182) argues that Isabella Leitner's sanitizing for a child readership of the more traumatic aspects of her Holocaust memoir, although well-meaning, strips it of its moral force. According to Kertzer, the protectionist maternal narrative stance Leitner adopts paradoxically leads her to suppress the memory of her own mother's voice expressing her faith in the future without which 'there is no lesson; survival makes no sense' (ibid: 169). Kertzer acknowledges the dilemma of communicating the events of the Holocaust to young readers: 'if we tell our children what we know, do we run the risk of burdening them too, making them inheritors of our nightmares?' (ibid: 171). Yet, she suggests that this needs to be balanced against the danger of erasing 'the anger, fury and grief of the daughter-survivor' (ibid: 172). The Afterword to Leitner's book attempts to historicise the Holocaust for young readers (ibid: 179), but Kertzer views this as too little, too late.

John Stephens (ibid: 183-198) begins his essay by defending a clear demarcation between fiction aimed at preteen readers, on the one hand, and adults, on the other, with reference to the work of a number of Australian authors who write for both. However, he then goes on to locate young adult fiction mid-way along a continuum between the two on the basis of 'a bundle of narrative elements' (ibid: 184). Such fiction is, he argues, more likely than fiction aimed at adult readers to take the form

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<sup>10</sup> Different critics delimit young adulthood in different ways. For instance, Trites (2000) regards YA readers as between 11-15. Stephens (1999: 183; 184), on the other hand, distinguishes between preteen readers as those between 11 and 14, and adolescent readers who are over 14. It is rare for any rationale to be provided for these somewhat arbitrary age boundaries.

of a quest for an essential selfhood but, unlike in fiction for younger readers, the attainment of this goal is likely to be severely constrained by hostile social and institutional forces (ibid: 194-195). He relates this quest narrative to three interrelated concerns: a search for a place/purpose in the physical and social world; a move from solipsism to intersubjectivity, and a quest for the other, often realised through the trope of romantic love (ibid). Stephens' approach offers a useful antidote to the tendency amongst some critics to homogenise early, middle and late adolescent readers. By contrast, the final essay in the collection by Lisa Paul (ibid: 239-254) welcomes the blurring, rather than refining, of age-related boundaries. She anticipates the advent of what she terms 'a new aesthetic of cultural clashes' (241) which relies less on a reader's age and more on her/his experiential knowledge and when children and YAs begin 'writing and talking back' (249).

#### 12.5 Cross-reading:

Rachel Falconer defines the phenomenon of cross-reading as one in which adults choose to read books for children 'not (or not only) for a child's sake, but for her- or himself' (2007: 7). She dates the genesis of this practice very precisely to the publication by Bloomsbury in 1998 of the first *adult* edition of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (ibid: 1). Her aim is to investigate why this turn to children's fiction by adult readers should have coincided with the approach of the millennium. She challenges the negative view promulgated by the tabloid press that it should be seen as symptomatic of a more general culture of dumbing down, in this instance reflected in the emergence of the pejorative term 'kiddult' to refer to irresponsible adults who allegedly refuse to grow up (ibid: 3). Instead, she interprets cross-reading as a testament to the increasing sophistication of contemporary writing for children and YAs, due, in other words, to a scaling up in quality, rather than a dumbing down.

Nor does Falconer accept the idea that cross-reading should be dismissed as a mere market-driven ploy by publishers to maximize the sale of books in what is undoubtedly an over-crowded marketplace in which books have to compete with an increasingly wide range of multimedia texts. To counter this view, she quotes Philip Pullman's suggestion that adult readers have sought refuge in children's books in order to escape from 'artistic posturing' (ibid: 5) by writers of postmodern fiction. More positively, Pullman claims that adult readers find in children's fiction the

pleasures of 'pure story', combined with the kind of ambitious themes that are rarely explored in contemporary literary fiction for adults due to its tone of sustained irony. Falconer (ibid: 29) also refutes the idea that 'crossover' fiction heralds the end of children's fiction, instead welcoming it as a bridging device with the potential to foster inter-generational understanding (ibid: 29). This contrasts with Deborah Thacker's more jaundiced view that it is one more manifestation of the colonization by adults of children's culture (cited in ibid: 31).

In her analysis of the appeal of the Harry Potter septology to adult readers, Falconer draws a distinction between the first three books, which she claims are informed by an aesthetics of 'lightness', and the final four books, which are much darker in tone and which are infused by an obsession with mortality, marking a shift in tone from the playful to the pessimistic (ibid: 71). By contrast, she argues that Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy adopts a dual address from the outset which encourages a postmodern scepticism about theocratic absolutism (ibid: 73), but does so by inviting its adult readers to share the child's imaginative capacity to think 'as if', thus 'releas[ing] them from entrenched attitudes and modes of being' (ibid: 85-6). Somewhat surprisingly, Falconer downplays the dense intertextuality of the trilogy which seems likely to be a rich source of pleasure for knowing adult readers, but she stresses that the ecocritical theme introduced in the second book, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), offers a timely wakeup call to child and adult readers alike (ibid: 94).

The discussion of Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) in this context is rendered somewhat problematic by the fact that the author has made clear in interviews that he wrote the book with an implied adult readership in mind in an attempt to escape from the 'ghetto' of writing for children.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Falconer's observations about the 'split perspective' (ibid: 101) that occurs when an adult is required to see the world through the eyes of a young first person narrator with Asperger's remain pertinent. She describes this as a three-stage process which involves shrinking the world to a child's point of view; perceiving it as enlarged, and then accepting the critical force of the curious child's gaze as it is turned on to the world of adults (ibid: 111). Like *Curious Incident*, Geraldine

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Haddon, cited in D. Welch (2003) 'The curiously irresistible literary debut of Mark Haddon'. URL: [www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html](http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html).

McCaughrean's YA novel *The White Darkness* (2005) constitutes a kind of metafictional comment on the whole process of adults writing novels for young readers. It involves an intergenerational pairing of narrators, but the voice of the adult, the nineteenth century polar explorer Titus Oates, is a projection of the imagination of the fourteen-year-old contemporary protagonist Sym Wates, thereby stressing the 'fluidity of temporal perspective' (ibid: 122). The journey to the Antarctic that Sym and Titus undergo is a grueling one involving extremes of physical suffering, betrayal and death which leads Falconer to pose an interesting question about why adult readers should 'choose to experience abjection from the point of view of a child or teenager' (ibid: 114). Her response is the convincing one that perceptions are heightened when filtered through the perspective of 'a young, more naïve witness' (ibid: 117), rendering them both revelatory and liberating, as well as morally abhorrent and sublimely terrifying.

The penultimate chapter focuses on David Almond's YA novel *Clay* (2005) which Falconer points out is reminiscent of Haddon's novel in that it combines a spare style with complex themes (ibid: 132), but which is similar to McCaughrean's novel in that it uses a magic realist mode to plumb the depths of adolescent psychic abjection. She argues that, like Pullman's trilogy, *Clay* involves a quest for latent spiritualism in a post-religious age and thus figures the transition from childhood to adolescence as an Edenic Fall (ibid: 140). Yet, unlike Pullman's co-protagonists Lyra and Will, Davie and Stephen in *Clay* go on an apparently regressive psychic journey back to early childhood which serves to debunk the myth of childhood innocence (ibid: 152). Falconer's final essay examines C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair* (1953) as a case study of the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of adults re-reading their childhood selves through books. She suggests that such temporal achronology can lead to 'a kind of advance retrospection' (ibid: 168). Thus she interprets Lewis' novel as a work of metafiction which justifies the re-reading of children's literature by adults (ibid: 178). This leads her to argue, somewhat counter-intuitively, that Prince Rilian is the subject of the novel whose role it is to act as a surrogate for the adult reader, a reader who is initially unenchanted, but who ultimately becomes free (ibid: 188). Falconer concludes that the re-reading of classic works of children's fiction by adults, while it may be literally backward-looking, is often potentially redemptive, rather than reactionary.

### 12.6 Transgressing boundaries in contemporary young adult fiction:

The work of the contemporary British writer Melvin Burgess crystalizes many of the issues touched upon throughout this chapter. He has openly acknowledged his debt to Robert Cormier and seems to relish his own notoriety as an author who is prepared to push back the boundaries of acceptability in his work for both children and YAs. By exploring taboo areas of experience, including drug culture, incest, violence, swearing, sexuality, and sexual abuse, amongst others, his writing has undoubtedly contributed to what Neil Postman (1995: 125) refers to as the 'adultification' of children's literature and culture. Yet, a recent anthology of essays in the New Casebook series edited by Alison Waller (2013) evaluates his work in largely positive terms. While Waller (ibid: 6) detects a somewhat uneasy blend of sentimentality and social realism in *Nicholas Dane* (2009), a novel which graphically depicts the physical and sexual abuse of its eponymous hero/victim in a children's home in Britain in the 1980s, she points out that it was based on actual interviews Burgess conducted with child abuse victims (ibid: 8). This leads him to describe it as a work of 'found fiction' (ibid: 12; 191), a generic category that Waller accepts somewhat uncritically, despite the fact that it is at best misleading, and at worst mystificatory. While, as Waller suggests (ibid: 8), Burgess' aim to give a voice to the socially marginalized is a laudable one, the idea that he simply 'found', rather than elicited and then actively shaped, these stories can give them a somewhat spurious veneer of authenticity and can make it difficult to argue that the novel's treatment of violence may be voyeuristic or even gratuitous.

Two essays in the collection defend Burgess's novel *Doing It* (2003) against the author Anne Fine's criticism that it is 'filth' fit only for a prurient adult readership (*Guardian*, 29 February 2003). In a thought-provoking essay, Chris Richards (ibid: 32) suggests that both Fine and Burgess are guilty of 'a kind of gender essentialism', Fine in relation to a homogenizing view of young female readers' likely reaction to the novel, and Burgess in his:

...representation of a monolithic, undifferentiated view of such male culture, projecting into the construction of the male characters and the relations between them one kind of white, lower middle-class, heterosexual and homosocial conviviality.

Both Richards and Michelle Gill (ibid: 50) argue persuasively that the novel should be viewed as a comic, not an erotic one, with the male protagonists, for all their predatory rhetoric, being 'handled' by the girls and with the tone throughout being 'playful, humorous, non-judgemental'. Two other essays take as their focus Burgess' highly metafictional novel *Sara's Face* (2006) which explores the topical theme of contemporary celebrity culture. Joel Gwynne (ibid: 64) stresses that the position of the eponymous (anti-)heroine is an ambivalent one from the outset. Drawing on Anita Harris' (2004) terms, Gwynne argues that it remains unclear whether Sara is a 'can do' girl, or an 'at risk' girl (ibid: 65). Likewise, Kay Samball (ibid: 87) suggests that there are textual clues that Sara 'may be performing victimhood'. Like the legendary rockstar, Jonathan Heat, she uses 'excess, bad taste and offensiveness as tricks to gain publicity' (ibid: 88). It could be argued that Burgess is making a sly comment here about his own status as an author-celebrity who invites media speculation about just how far he will be prepared to go in challenging the limits of YA fiction. The controversial nature of his work is calculated to appeal to his target YA readers, especially since books their parents do not want them to read (the advertising slogan for *Lady*) are likely to be relatively rare.

Perhaps because of the ambivalent tone of his writing, his tendency to employ multiple first-person narrators and the open-endedness of the closure of many of his novels, Burgess' writing evokes very different responses from critics. For instance, *Lady, My Life as a Bitch* (2001) has been hailed as 'comic allegory about adolescent sexuality' (Reynolds 2007: 114), and condemned as a punitive moral fable which 'literalises [the central protagonist's] selfish and promiscuous nature' (Walsh 2004: 144-5). Likewise, the ending of the novel has been interpreted variously as nihilistic (McGillis 2009: 268), and as moralistic and life-affirming (Hollindale 2013: 150). This raises the question of whether Burgess has abdicated his responsibility to guide the responses of his young readers, or whether he credits them with the ability to make up their own minds about the ethical issues his novels address. McCallum and Stephens (ibid: 113) endorse the latter view, arguing that his dystopian novel *Bloodtide* (1999) 'constructs ethical dilemmas which prompt readers to posit solutions other than those reached in the text'. The fact that Burgess' work gives rise to very different critical readings is in itself a testament to the moral and stylistic complexity of his writing.

### 12.7 Conclusions:

Given the 'adult' in YA fiction, it is perhaps not surprising that the boundary between it and fiction aimed at, and read by, adults is a permeable one. It seems likely that many young readers pass over this in-between stage and, like Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, go straight from children's fiction to reading fiction for adults. Indeed, as discussed above, a number of the books now regarded as classics of YA fiction were initially written with an adult readership in mind. A more recent phenomenon is the movement in the opposite direction, with adults increasingly being drawn to books aimed at young readers, including books written by successful young writers (Falconer 2009: 36). This would seem to be due in part to the enhanced quality of such fiction in terms of its narrative complexity, its exploration of serious themes, and its intertextual allusions to a wide range of stories, from Norse myths, through biblical epics, to urban folktales. It is somewhat ironic, however, that just as adults have sought refuge in YA fiction, many writers of literary fiction for this age group have embraced postmodern modes of story-telling. No doubt many adult readers experience illicit pleasure when venturing into the stormy world of adolescence and literary affect<sup>12</sup> can be heightened by confronting existential problems through the fresh but probing perspective of the adolescent gaze. Transmedia adaptations have further opened up the audience for such texts. In truth, there appear to be few limits to the themes that can be explored in YA fiction, especially since censorship is difficult to countenance in the Internet age. It may not be long before texts written for children and YAs comprise so many cultural reference points to new technologies that they will be almost entirely opaque to less technologically aware adults. It is at this point that YA fiction can truly be said to have come of age.

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, in an essay titled 'Approaching Abjection', defines the 'abject' as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (2004: 232). Adolescence, by virtue of the fact that it is a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, is a period marked by abjection.

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