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A celebration of outsiders, or a call to conform?: Decoding the message in young adult fiction

Abstract:

Marginalised characters, particularly protagonists, are a staple in young adult fiction. Unlike the traditional hero's journey described by Joseph Campbell, where the heroes return to their community changed, often to leave again when they realise they no longer fit their former roles, the journey for teenage protagonists in young adult novels is much more likely to be towards inclusion and reconciliation with their society, community, friends and / or family. They find their place within existing social values and networks, rather than outside them. This paper examines some of the more controversial novels recently published for this audience and demonstrates that even in the grittiest of tales, many authors consciously or unconsciously are promoting a fundamentally conservative ideology—conformity—while disguising it as the coming of age of the individual characters. Is this simply because of the widely-held belief that books for young readers should incorporate hope (in this case, of belonging), or could there be other reasons, and other possibilities?

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There are few novels for young adults in which the protagonists are not—in some way—at odds with the world around them. Whether the conflict at the heart of the story is against self or society (including peers and family), a key element in books for this age group is some kind of resolution of the dislocation between individuality and community, self-concept and social expectations, and past, present and future. Such a focus is not surprising; the protagonists, after all, reflect the experiences of adolescents as they increasingly perceive themselves as distinct individuals in a society with more complexities and pressures than were apparent to them in childhood. One of the consequences of this is a recognition of difference: this is a critical element in the search for subjectivity, ‘a central theme in all genres of children’s literature’ (Stephens 1992: 129), but can result in a feeling of isolation. Many commentators take for granted the need for readers to identify with characters as a means of diminishing that alienation:

the reading of narratives that literally or symbolically parallel one’s own condition can provide a language in which a child or adult may ... talk about what has previously been inchoate. ... the reading of books can provide the comfort of knowing that one is not alone, and thus function as a ‘safer’, more private version of a psychotherapy or self-help group. (Crago 2006: 187)

In this way, adolescent fiction can be seen as performing an educative and therapeutic role; through reading of others’ feelings of difference, alienation, confusion and low self-esteem, adolescents can gain comfort (Reid and Stringer 1997). They are not the only ones suffering, and often the situation that characters are in is much worse than their own. With very rare exceptions, the characters survive, stronger and more knowledgeable than at the start. If one accepts the view that readers identify directly with the characters, the lesson is one of resilience, acceptance and eventual success.

However, the form of this ‘success’ in recent years has (once again) become one of adopting and ‘fitting in’ with society’s values—conforming, in other words—rather than that of holding on to individual values that may not reflect the dominant ideology. This is not a new message, but a cyclic manifestation in children’s literature. By that, I do not mean that enculturation in hegemonic values has not always been part of children’s literature, but that exceptions to the rule of conformity appear to have disappeared: there is no alternative on offer for contemporary readers.

Social rebels in western children’s literature since its development in the 19th century have traditionally learned that in order to be accepted and rewarded they must adopt society’s values. Just as Jo in *Little Women* learns to conform to the expectations of her society in terms of accepting her domestic role, more recent protagonists are rewarded for their ability to reconcile with their society, community, friends and / or family. They find their place within existing social values and networks, rather than outside them. As Gleeson states,

... certainly all novels from the 1970s onwards ... shift to a content that looks at the individual and the family in a different way—a way that focuses on problems, on difference, on dysfunction at some level or other, *and on the way the individual might cope with that* (1998: 112) (My italics).

This ‘coping’ seems at present to take one form. The way this message is promulgated may be much less didactic than in the past, and there is far more room for

individualisation within the body of the novel, but the message is clear: by the end of the novel, the protagonist has to change by discovering and fulfilling their place in society, or suffer the consequences. The following discussion will show how this message is consistently promulgated to contemporary young adult readers, and is not restricted to a particular literary genre or place of publication. Contemporary realism, historical fiction and science fiction novels by Australian, New Zealand and English writers are all examined, with contrasting examples of how that resolution is depicted in two earlier books—Ivan Southall's *Josh* and Colin Thiele's *The Fire in the Stone*.

Kim Miller's contemporary social realism *They Told Me I Had to Write This* (2009) is set in an alternative school for troubled teenage boys. All students have psychological, emotional and / or behavioural problems, and among the issues raised in this novel are suicide, drugs, sexual abuse, loss and violence. The first-person narrator, Clem, uses letters to his dead grandmother (with whom he used to live) to describe what happens. Crago (2006) would describe such a form as an example of how the

growing popularity of psychotherapy has in turn influenced narrative fiction, which has become increasingly confessional (dealing explicitly with aspects of inner life hitherto considered entirely private), and increasingly concerned with abnormal mental and emotional states. ... The existence of such novels, dealing with potentially life-threatening, highly individualised problems... appears to be the most recent fictional manifestation of the individualisation of consciousness. (2006: 183)

Clem's mother died in childbirth, and his father blames him not only for her death but also for his grandmother's. The 'confessional' nature of the letters is clear:

Gram, did you really get sick because of me? Dad reckons you did. Well that's what he said one time, and pretty loud that night. But he was angry at me and had a lot of beer in him. Anyway, he reckons it was me that made you sick coz I was such a worry to you. (Miller 2009: 18)

There is a lot of conflict in Clem's relationship with his father. Not only are there arguments, but the father had not believed Clem's claim of sexual abuse by a teacher, thereby enabling the abuse to continue for two years. Not surprisingly, Clem is an angry and sometimes violent adolescent with little impulse control, self-esteem or hope. However, he is intelligent, articulate and thoughtful. Among other revelations he realises that his own anger has prevented the closeness he seeks with his father (not a conclusion that convinced this reader), and that Clem needs to change his attitude. Incredibly, given past behaviour, the father immediately becomes a generous and loving parent who finally believes his son, buys him an expensive bike, and accompanies him to the police so the sexual abuse can be reported and the teacher charged. The justice system has already worked: the teacher has been imprisoned for abusing other boys. Despite everything Clem had suffered in childhood, once he recognises that he must sacrifice his own (I would argue, justified) anger and trust the system that had let him down, he is reassured that society's institutions work, and is rewarded with love. Reid and Stringer (1997) argue that:

For most adolescents, feeling different is not so much feeling special as feeling out of touch and marginalized from a communal culture, which is probably more an imagined construct than a real unity in modern high schools.

Clem had felt marginalized from that 'imagined' communal culture for good reasons: his experience of neglect and abuse through society's most highly valued institutions—school and family—could easily have turned him against other values promoted by this society. However, this novel does not allow for such an option.

Bernard Beckett's science fiction novel *Genesis* (2006) uses the Socratic dialogic technique, focalised through the protagonist Anaximander (Anax), to assess the roles and relative importance of individuals and society. She is undergoing a five-hour oral examination in order to join The Academy, the ruling group in her strictly-stratified society. Her topic is the historical rebel Adam Forde, his relationship with the companion robot Art and the revolution they sparked in The Republic. Questions relating to political systems, individualism and the interests of society are central to the book:

The Republic, in the end, was a rational response to an irrational problem. To arrest change is to arrest decay. To bury the individual beneath the weight of the state, is to bury too the individual's fears. It was possible to see what they were trying to do, but easy too to see, from this distance, that no state can ever weigh that heavily. Always, the individual's fears will wriggle free. Adam had wriggled free. (Beckett 2006: 111)

Anax is sympathetic to Adam's motivations but knows her view is unorthodox and must be carefully presented if she is to pass the exam. But she has been entrapped. She, like Adam, had 'wriggled free' of the prevailing ideology; her thinking and behaviour, like his, leads to her destruction. She literally tries to change the dominant (in this case, the only) discourse, thereby inventing a new means of interpretation, but Anax's efforts lead to her execution. The individual is sacrificed to maintain political stability. The implicit 'lesson' may be that such totalitarian societies must be recognised and stopped before reaching that stage, but at the end of the day, both rebels are destroyed, and society continues unchanged and uncaring. If readers are to extrapolate this novel into decisions about individualism and conformity, which 'lesson' is stronger?

Auslander, Paul Dowswell's (2009) historical novel set in wartime Berlin, also shows a protagonist who is different from the norm. Peter is of German descent, but Polish nationality. On the deaths of his parents, his Nordic looks and German blood mean he is assessed as being a worthy candidate for adoption into a Nazi family. He looks like a poster boy for Hitler Youth, but is developing his own ideas about the Fatherland and its ideology:

All of a sudden, he felt very alone. The more he thought about it, the more it distressed him. Fleischer was right. He was always going to be an outsider—an Auslander—with these people. But in his heart Peter knew that was right. Something in him could not accept this unquestioning worship, this unsettling blind faith they had in Hitler and the Nazis. (2009: 101)

It was a chilling thought. For the first time, and with absolute clarity, Peter could see they were on the wrong side of the war. (2009: 136)

His girlfriend and her family think and act very differently from the one that had adopted him. They help Jews, they question the propaganda; they go along with the appearance of Nazi support but not the reality. They are rejecting the dominant ideology. In a nation of suspicion and informers, it is an extremely dangerous choice:

Anna had always known that she and her family were different. Finding out who else was like them was a dangerous, treacherous game. The Gestapo, they had heard, sent agent provocateurs to catch people out. ... It was impossible to tell what was true and what was false. (2009: 74)

Readers are positioned to be supportive of Peter, Anna and her family, and to applaud their courage. Although Anna's father is killed, she, her mother and Peter manage to escape to Sweden and safety.

One could argue that in this novel, it appears that *not* conforming is valued and rewarded—but that superficial assumption fails to recognise a key fact: the time in which the novel is *written*, rather than when it is set, is the determinant of which social values are being promoted. It is written 65 years after the Nazi regime was destroyed, by an author whose nation helped destroy it. It in effect operates as Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* did: it promotes post-war values, to a post-war readership. The espousal of values—whether it be anti-slavery, or anti-Nazi—out of kilter with the society in which the story is set is in fact a means of supporting the values of contemporary society. The protagonist and his friends are rewarded for conforming to *today's* values, in contrast to the values of National Socialism; they live a comfortable, safe life while the end of the war plays out: 'But now there was nothing dark on the horizon. Nothing at all. Peter felt something he hadn't felt for so long. He felt free.' (Dowswell 2009: 292) Those who support the Nazi regime or, like Peter's friend Segur, collaborate are implicitly going to suffer when the Allied troops invade Berlin. They, after all, are the characters who do not conform to 21st century values.

Crossing the Line, a contemporary social realist novel by Dianne Bates (2008), has first-person protagonist Sophie struggling with mental illness and a history of abandonment and foster care. Through her welfare officer, she is given a room in a shared house with Matt and Amy, both of whom have also had to deal with difficulties in their lives. Sophie self-harms and ends up in a psychiatric institution. Her therapist, Helen, helps her: 'Before I was fragmented: now Helen has put all the pieces together.' (Bates 2008: 105). However, the feeling of finally being understood and valued results in Sophie becoming obsessed with her therapist, including writing her poetry, standing outside Helen's house and watching her with her daughter, and being repeatedly warned off from Helen's office and property. Her new therapist (Noel), her flatmates and friends, and her now-boyfriend Matt help her to recover:

'It's so indulgent, all this analysing,' I say at last. 'I could be out with Matt, having a good time.'

'That sounds very positive.'

He glances at the wall clock and I know the session has swung to its end. ... And then I walk up the side path of his office to the front gate, where Matt is waiting for me. The day is young and shining. (2008: 214)

She has recovered and not only has found herself a community that values her, but she accordingly values herself. Important secondary characters such as Matt are static; it is Sophie who has changed. She has chosen to join society, rather than stand alone outside it. As a result, she is rewarded with hope, self-esteem, and confidence in the future.

These are just a few recent young adult novels, all written within the last few years, all of them confronting in terms of content, despite the variety of genres they represent. In every case, the protagonist is an outsider. Yet whatever situation the character is in, however bad it gets, community and the rewards of shared values (good or bad) are represented by the end of the novel. It is such a common feature that we often do not notice let alone question it.

But some earlier authors did question whether that was, in fact, the right kind of success for their protagonists. In *The Fire in the Stone* (Thiele 1987, first published 1973), set in the opal fields of South Australia, Ernie's mother has run off and his father is an alcoholic, so from the start he has had to look after himself. It is a tough community, not just in terms of environment, but also those who live there. Ernie discovers opals, but his stash and money are stolen, and his father later abandons his son. Ernie sets out to find the thief, with the help of his Aboriginal friend Willie and Greek friend Nick. They are caught in a booby trap and the mine is blown up. Although injured, Ernie manages to dig through the rubble and drag Willie to the ladder at the entrance to the shaft, then to find help. While Ernie is cared for at the local hospital for a week, Willie is flown to Adelaide, seriously injured.

[Ernie] had made up his mind. He would go to Adelaide as he had planned, to see Willie. After that he would decide about himself. ... A mile down the track Ernie found the going easy. The road was barely distinguishable, a darker corridor in the darkness, but he knew it was there—more than six hundred miles of it—stretching away ahead of him. He strode out strongly. By morning perhaps, or sometime the next day, he hoped he might be picked up by a traveller or a transport driver; but if not he wouldn't be concerned—he would walk. (1987: 226-7)

This fourteen-year-old has agency, has determined to leave the community he knew, and is prepared to walk six hundred miles before deciding 'for himself' what his future would be.

In *Josh* (Southall 1973, first published 1971), set in a country town during the Depression, the 14-year-old protagonist arrives on holiday to stay with his aunt. He is a city boy, a poet rather than an athlete, and doesn't for a moment understand the local kids or the underlying tensions in the town.

Some kids are like me and some are like them, I guess. I don't suppose they can help it either, taking things as they come, living out in the sun. But if there's got to be a sun, Aunt Clara, there's got to be a shadow. I reckon I'd rather have my kind of shadow. (1973: 83)

As the story progresses Josh gradually understands more about the situation; however the tensions increase until he finally refuses to play in an important local cricket match; he is beaten up by the players and his poetry journal is destroyed. Despite efforts by his aunt and locals to mend the bridges, Josh chooses to leave. Rather than representing failure, his refusal to compromise and join a community whose values he did not share is a celebration of nonconformity:

Blue sky and yellow stubble, golden yellow plain, singing in the sun, kicking up his heels; brother, it can even rain.

Go away, crows. Find yourself a body that's had its day. I'm walking mine to Melbourne town and living every mile. (1973: 225)

As a young reader, that was one of the most inspiring images I had ever read. He determinedly held on to his individuality, and—like Ernie—took responsibility for his own actions and future.

I had no doubt then, or now, that they were both doing the right thing. The right thing for them. But also the right thing for me, as a reader—to show that living with yourself is more important than fitting in; to encourage me to show the same kind of courage and stubbornness and independence and agency that I suspected I would need in my future. Whether I thought of it in those words at that time is most unlikely—but that I responded to that message is beyond doubt.

These were not, of course, the only books I responded to as a young reader—but they provided a balance to the rest. Where is that balance in contemporary literature? Hunt (1998: 31) argues that 'Children's literature has not lost its innocence over the years: it has never been innocent. It has always been the site of power struggles, and attempts to overtly and covertly influence its readers.' It appears that the only acceptable message in contemporary adolescent fiction is that the individual is (and should be?) subject to society's needs, that the protagonist's compromise and reconciliation with the dominant paradigm are the only means of success, and that in the battle between individual values and community requirements, it is the individual, not society, that must change—or suffer the consequences.

Where is the inspiring lone figure, choosing their own path?

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