

# FINDING A VOICE

First Person Narration in Young Adult Literature and Coming-of-Age Adult  
Fiction

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## Introduction

A couple of years ago, I noticed the music section of my local Borders bookstore was being dismantled—not a startling development given that with technological advances, like the MP3 player and digital downloads, C.D.s seem doomed to go the way of the cassette tape. When I looked into what would be occupying the space, the answer caught me by surprise: a new Young Adult (YA) books section. I wondered what—besides J.K Rowling’s wildly successful Harry Potter series or Stephanie Meyer’s vampire books—would populate those empty shelves. Back when I was a teenager in the 1990’s, the most popular YA series were *Sweet Valley High* or *Babysitter’s Club*, and having lost my father at the age of ten-years-old to cancer, I could never quite find myself in these books with their idyllic worlds where the biggest drama in a young character’s life was often breaking up with a boyfriend or not making the cheerleading squad. I’ve since come to learn that the YA sections in the bookstore are no longer dominated by novels of the *Sweet Valley High* variety. With regards both to content and style, it seems that, in the last two decades, while I was busy growing up, Young Adult literature was, too.

In this paper, I will explore the changed landscape of contemporary Young Adult literature in order to illustrate how the boundary between adult coming-of-age fiction and YA has grown more porous in recent years. I will also argue that what makes for a believable young narrator in literary fiction is less about label and more about craft. To that end, I will focus on the techniques used by both YA and adult coming-of-age fiction writers to craft convincing adolescent voices. Fiction writers, like David Mitchell and

Margo Rabb, use informal diction, kid-sized figurative language, invented words, and slang to help capture the spirit of teen speech on the page. The term “informal diction,” for the purposes of this paper, will refer to the more casual lexicon used by teens, who may prefer “what’s up” over the more formal “how are you.” Finally, I will look at how a confessional tone and the use of humor can help to reproduce adolescent sensibilities in both YA and coming-of-age adult fiction.

I believe that when the preceding techniques are combined in capable hands by a writer who considers the influence of other factors—such as socioeconomic status—on voice, an authentic young first person narrator can emerge on the page. Despite a lack of distance from events or the benefit of additional life experience and knowledge, teen narrators can make perceptive observations and startling claims about the world around them. Regardless of whether a novel is categorized as YA or coming-of-age adult fiction, the reader will buy the adolescent’s understanding of adult concepts and accept mature realizations only when the diction and tone are age-appropriate.

### **Young Adult Literature’s Growth Spurt**

Any discussion of how to go about crafting a teen narrator’s voice needs to begin with a look at Young Adult literature and the dramatic changes it has experienced over a short span of time. Thanks to “crossover books,” like the Harry Potter series, which appeal to adult and adolescent readers alike, there seems to be a renewed interest in YA. And while writing for young adults may still be stigmatized in some literary circles, some would argue that YA authors are taking some of the biggest risks with subject matter, voice, and style in contemporary fiction.

Today's YA novels tackle suicide, addiction, homosexuality, rape and other topics that may have been considered taboo or been subjected to tighter censorship only two decades ago. And while it is still possible to find moralizing novels that talk down to young readers with the one dimensional characters and predictable plots, Margo Rabb, YA author of *Cures for Heartbreak*, believes that "many adults don't realize how much the Y.A. genre has changed since their days of reading teenage romances and formulaic novels" (Rabb, "I'm Y.A." 1). In fact, a *Washington Post* article notes the trend towards more serious subjects among recent Newberry award winners: "Of the 25 winners and runners-up chosen from 2000 to 2005, four of the books deal with death, six with the absence of one or both parents and four with such mental challenges as autism. Most of the rest deal with tough social issues" (Strauss 1). To be fair, early YA pioneers, like J.D. Salinger and Beverly Cleary, certainly paved the way for contemporary writers to take on controversial subjects by openly discussing topics like sex and mental illness. As a result of this fearless trailblazing, today's YA authors can cover more terrain, probing the unsavory facets of modern life, pushing boundaries, and adding to public discourse on stigmatized issues that affect youth.

Lately, the trend towards more mature subject matter has trickled down, expanding the emotional landscape of even middle grade fiction. In *The Higher Power of Lucky*, Susan Patron mentions subjects that I assumed might be off limits or even censored in a book intended for nine to eleven-year-old readers. Patron's protagonist, ten-year-old Lucky Trimble, regularly eavesdrops on Twelve-Step meetings: "Short Sammy's story, of all the rock-bottom stories Lucky had heard at twelve-step anonymous meetings—alcoholics, gamblers, smokers, and overeaters—was still her

favorite...Sammy told of the day when he had drunk half a gallon of rum...(1).”

Addiction is a heavy topic for nine to eleven-year-old readers. But who is to say that it is inappropriate for this age group? The sad reality is that all too often, children and teens must grapple with a parent or loved one who struggles to overcome substance abuse issues. Fictionalizing painful subjects gives young readers a refuge where, for a brief while, they might recognize their own situation in the pages of a book and feel less alone. That said, if I consider that in 1982, the same age group that has access to Susan Patron’s novel might have been reading about a motorcycle riding mouse that befriends a lonely boy in Beverly Cleary’s *Ralph S. Mouse*, it is easy to see why censorship of YA and middle grade literature is still alive and well. Some librarians, teachers, parents and other “gatekeepers” believe adult issues have no business spilling over into the protected world of childhood. But for many young people, including those who lost a parent early as I did, grief and other adult-sized problems are a part of everyday life. Luckily, more of today’s YA (and even middle grade) authors are expressing this truth.

While the newest generation of YA fiction often takes on heavy, realistic subjects, there is still a marked departure from the “problem novels” that focused on truthfully portraying issues, like death or drug addiction, often at the expense of craft in the 1970s, 1980s, and even 1990s (Going 26). Instead, contemporary Young Adult fiction performs literary gymnastics—melding genres and leaping through narrative hoops. From book length works of fiction written in verse to graphic novels, YA writers are experimenting with style to create new hybrid forms (Cart n.pag.). In *Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie tells the story of thirteen-year-old Junior through a combination of

cartoons and witty prose. Walter Dean Meyer also uses a unique structure for his novel *Monster*; parts of the story are written as a screenplay.

Innovative new voices and narrative styles are emerging as well. In his YA novel *Thirteen Reason's Why*, Jay Asher braids the voice of the late Hannah Baker, who has committed suicide and left her reasons why on tape, with that of her classmate, Clay Jensen. And perhaps one of the most memorable new voices in literature is Death, who narrates Marcus Zusaks's *The Book Thief* and tells of life during World War II in Germany.

Still, even with these literary innovations, writing for young adults is stigmatized in some circles as subpar. It seems "...for many literary theorists, children's concerns are never as weighty as those of adults. High literature is at one pole of a continuum and the other pole is occupied not so much by *bad* literature as by *children's* literature" (Morris 3). Indeed, adults believe their taste to be far more sophisticated and mature than kids', contributing to the bias against Young Adult literature. In April 2006, Malcolm Gladwell unleashed a fire storm when he painted the whole of YA with too broad a brush: "This is teen-literature. It's genre fiction. These are novels based on novels based on novels, in which every convention of character and plot has been trotted out a thousand times before." Gladwell later recanted his remarks, apologizing publicly on his blog. And yet, condescension towards Young Adult literature remains widespread.

Perhaps some of YA's bad reputation is earned. There are still individual books and entire series that amount to little more than fluff, reinforcing the belief that YA lacks the sophistication of adult literary fiction. In the *New York Times*, for example, Naomi Wolf harshly criticizes the serials *Gossip Girl*, *A-List*, and *Clique* for promoting

materialism, gratuitous sex, and popularity. Entertainment value and product placement seem to trump craft and Wolf remarks: “The narratives offer the perks of the adult world not as escapist fantasy but in a creepily photorealistic way, just as the book jackets show real girls polished to an unreal gloss” (1). According to Wolf, the books push certain brands and *Gossip Girl* even goes so far as to credit the clothing that was worn by the model on the cover on the copyright page. It seems to Wolf that in these three series: “Sex and shopping take their places on a barren stage, as though, even for teenagers, these are the only dramas left” (1). Perhaps not surprisingly, the *Gossip Girl* series was distributed by the same company that released *Sweet Valley High* (Nussbaum n. pag.), the very same series that I had trouble identifying with as grieving pre-teen. There is no doubt that histrionic teen dramas still circulate today, and yet, artless YA writing is becoming more of the exception and less of the rule.

What’s interesting is that YA’s harshest critics are often not readers but writers. In her article, “I’m Y.A. and I’m Okay,” Margo Rabb admits to being worried about her novel’s designation as YA, mentioning “the averted gazes and unabashed disinterest of literary acquaintances whenever I mentioned my novel was young adult” (1). Martha Southgate, who followed her YA novel with two adult books, said she was encouraged to leave the YA novel off her biography and “Mark Haddon, who wrote numerous novels for children before *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, said...that he recalled ‘a number of people looking down their noses at me when I explained what I did for a living, as if I painted watercolors of cats or performed as a clown at parties’” (qtd. in Rabb, “I’m YA” 1). Sherman Alexie echoes his peers’ sentiments. Alexie, author of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, believes that:

“A lot of people have no idea that right now Y.A. is the Garden of Eden of literature...Some acquaintances felt I was dumbing down...One person asked me, ‘Wouldn’t you have rather won the National Book Award for an adult, serious work?’ I thought I’d been condescended to as an Indian — that was nothing compared to the condescension for writing Y.A.” (qtd. in Rabb, “I’m YA,” 1)

Since it seems that much of the disdain towards YA literature comes from writers, I can’t help but wonder whether the condescension may function as a protective mechanism of sorts. After all, YA book sales tend to outpace adult book sales these days and “...have richly drawn characters and plots without the pretension that some adult literary offerings can overdo” (Aguilar 2). Add to that that many YA titles are cross-listed as adult fiction, fueling the already tense competition for readers’ dollars, and it is easy to see why writers of adult fiction might feel territorial.

Still, thanks to novels, like Marcus Zusaks’s *The Book Thief* that appeal to adult and adolescent readers alike, it is not uncommon to see a lawyer commuting to work and a child riding to school on the same public bus—both reading the same title. As YA novelists push the boundaries of literary fiction, tackling new subjects, voices, and forms, it is hardly any wonder that adults are reading these books, too. After all, it sometimes seems that the categorization of a book as YA is largely arbitrary, a marketing decision made by publishing houses. And now, “[i]t’s becoming increasingly common for books to be published for the adult audience in one country and marketed for the teen audience in another” (Going 16). Take Mark Haddon, whose *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* was billed as YA in Australia and adult fiction here in the U.S. Or Margo



Rabb, author of *Cures for Heartbreak*. Various versions of her chapters were printed in prestigious literary magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Shenandoah*, *Glimmer Train*, and *One Story*, but the resulting novel was YA. There is no doubt that many YA writers, like Rabb and Haddon, produce work that manages to straddle adult and adolescent worlds, netting a diverse readership. But now, even established adult fiction writers, including Joyce Carol Oates, Nick Hornsby, Carl Hiassen, have ventured in the YA, bringing their fan bases with them (Aguilar 2). The expanding YA audience is perhaps best illustrated by a Goodreads blog posting that has this to say about Stephanie Meyer's *Breaking Dawn*:

Despite being the fourth installment in the Twilight series, 26.59% of teens on Goodreads have read it. We also found that 14.98% of 20-somethings and 14.32% of 30-somethings on Goodreads have read the book. Certainly teenagers are most likely to have read the saga of Bella and Edward, but there is a secondary peak in popularity at the ripe old age of 32. (Donaghy n. pag.)

Goodreads's data confirms the popularity of YA among readers as old as forty.

From Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* to Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, it seems that there has always been a universal appeal to the coming-of-age story, whether it is marketed as YA or adult fiction. In fact, the similarities between the adult coming-of-age fiction and YA fiction, especially when the narrator is a teen, beg the question: what, if anything, really distinguishes the two?

## **Identity Problems: Defining Young Adult Literature and Adult Coming-of-Age Fiction**

If we could define YA literature, then it would be easier to point out the ways in which it is different from adult fiction narrated by an adolescent character. The problem is that YA, much like teenagers themselves, is hard to nail down. Imbedded in the difficulty of defining YA literature is the ambiguity that surrounds what it means to be a “young adult” today. To begin with, there are differing ideas of how long the transitional period between childhood and adulthood lasts. According to K.L. Going, “Erik Erikson, known for his research into the development of identity, defined a young adult as a person who is between the ages of nineteen and forty (Childhood and Society, 1950)” (22). Another definition of “young adult” includes children as young as ten years old, a group commonly referred to as “tweens,” and— perhaps because of boomerang phenomenon where adult kids return to live with their parents after college— people as old as twenty five (Cart n.pag.). This inconsistency surrounding what exactly it means to be a “young adult” necessarily extends to literature for that age group (Going 22-23). Intended audience is one of the largest the differences between YA and adult fiction, but the various definitions of what it means to be “young adult” makes it difficult to determine exactly who these readers are.

It is just as difficult to pin down what is meant by coming-of-age adult fiction. According to Kenneth Millard, author of *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, coming-of-age fiction shares literary conventions that include the “early emotional development and moral education of its protagonist” (2). Bildungsroman, the German term commonly used to describe coming-of-age fiction, literally means

“formation novel” (Millard 3). But Millard says that coming-of-age fiction is not so easily defined because,

The term also carries an imprecision and cultural relativity that needs to be taken into account. When exactly does a character come of age and what experiences are deemed to be integral to it? Is it possible for fictional characters to come of age at any point, for example in their twenties? [...]

(4)

Millard notes that defining what is meant by “coming-of-age” is increasingly difficult in our modern times where adolescence often extends into adulthood, encompassing the second and sometimes third decades of life (5). Because of this, the specific age of the narrator, at least according to Millard, is not a clear marker that a story falls into the category of coming-of-age fiction.

And yet, an often cited difference between YA and coming-of-age adult fiction is the age of the narrator and the distance s/he has from the major events of the story. In the YA novel, the narrator is typically young and experiencing trials and milestones in real time. The world view of such a narrator is necessarily limited, and this, combined with the use of present tense lends the narration a feeling of immediacy. In adult coming-of-age fiction, the narrator is sometimes grown, an adult with a larger well of experiences to draw from as s/he reflects on past. The use of past tense indicates that the narrator has some distance from the story’s events and may be trying to make meaning of what happened. In her introduction to the anthology *I Know Some Things: Stories about Childhood by Contemporary Writers*, Lorrie Moore explains the difference in narrative distance as a matter of improvisation versus revision; “the young child improvises a

response. The grown child revises” (xii). The narrator’s age—child or adult child—at the time of the telling provides the filter through which s/he views a life-changing experience.

Young narrators offer real time, “improvised” reactions to problems. Toni Cade Bambera’s “Gorilla, My Love” is the first person, present tense story that captures the stream of consciousness thoughts of a young girl, Hazel. When the movie Hazel pays to see is about Jesus instead of gorillas, she declares that “grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow” (Bambera 22). Soon after, Hazel learns that her cousin Hunca Bubba’s promise to marry her was just for fun. The reader experiences Hazel’s response to adult deceit in real time:

“You a lyin dawg,” I say, when I meant to say treacherous dog, but just couldn’t get hold of the word...And I losin my bearings and don’t even know where to look on the map cause I can’t see for cryin. And Baby Jason cryin too. Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grownups playing change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don’t even say they sorry. (Bambera 26)

Bambera shows Hazel’s emotions unfolding in the moment that she learns of her Hunca Bubba’s “change-up.” The narrator’s response is improvised on the spot, with no time for reflection or distance from the event. Hazel understands that adults don’t always shoot straight or “say sorry.” And her immediate reaction is that she and her younger brother should band together to navigate the sometimes unfair and fraudulent adult world.

The narrative style in Bambera's story gives immediacy to the story that is more typical of young adult fiction.

Sometimes, adult fiction features grown children that have had time to ponder childhood events and make new meaning through revision. In Margaret Atwood's story "Betty," the adult narrator looks back her interactions with Betty, a neighbor whose husband Fred was unfaithful. At the time of Fred's infidelity, the narrator believes that there must be something wrong with Betty, maybe a quality that she possesses, that causes her husband to stray. The narrator relates to Betty's niceness and how she once worried that she would share her fate:

I opened the high-school yearbook and my own face, in pageboy haircut and tentative, appeasing smile, stared back at me, it was Betty's eyes I superimposed on mine. She had been kind to me when I was a child and with the callousness of children towards those who are kind but not enchanting, I had preferred Fred. In my future I saw myself being abandoned by a succession of Freds who were running down the beach chased by a crowd of vivacious girls...(Atwood 20)

At the time, the narrator wants to distance herself from Betty and deny any part of Betty that she sees in herself. But now as an adult, the narrator revisits her childhood memories of Betty and revises her feelings towards her. With age and wisdom, she better understands Betty's situation and draws new significance from what she witnessed as a child: "Fred, on the other hand, no longer intrigues me. The Freds of this world make themselves explicit by what they do and choose. It is the Bettys who are mysterious" (Atwood 20). Atwood's adult narrator goes beyond blaming Betty or identifying with

her to realizing that she doesn't know Betty (or her situation) as well as she thought. The adult modifies her feelings about the childhood events, discovering new layers of meaning from that time in her life.

However, the age of the narrator at the telling is not always so clear cut. Amy Tan's short story "Rules of the Game" is told in past tense and the narrator recalls events from her childhood as an immigrant. But Tan never mentions the narrator's age at the time of the telling, and though the diction is closer to a child's, the narrator may be a few days or a few years removed from the event. Often, in coming-of-age fiction, the narrator has not yet entered adulthood yet, and instead, is teetering on the cusp.

To further complicate things, just because a young narrator is telling his or her story in present tense (and without adult inflection) does not mean that the story is YA. Indeed, Toni Bambara's first person, present tense story, "Gorilla, My Love," appears in a collection meant for adults. Like Bambara, Z.Z. Packer also tells stories using a child narrator. In Packer's "Brownies," the young narrator comes to the revelation that there is "something mean in the world that [she] could not stop" (28). The reader knows that this "meanness" has to do with prejudice. The young narrator does, too, on some level. Still, Packer maintains the young girl's language in the revelation, allowing it to reflect her age and maturity level. Most of the stories in Packer's collection feature young adults making sense of the world around them in present tense and real time. The voices might sound similar to those in a YA novel, but Packer is writing adult literary fiction. Similarly, Jim Lynch's novel *The Highest Tide* is a present tense account of the discoveries made by a precocious thirteen-year-old who knows more about marine life than most scientists. This, too, is adult coming-of-age fiction, not YA. From Toni

Bamberra to Z.Z. Packer to Karen Russell to Sandra Cisneros, many adult short story writers and novelists have taken on teen narrators, who are coming of age and improvising their responses to challenges in present tense.

Interestingly, the pendulum swings both ways. Young Adult literature is also populated with older narrators reflecting on a childhood experiences. For example, in Margo Rabb's *Cures for Heartbreak*, past tense signals a narrator who is an older and wiser version of the Mia Pearlman in the story. Mia, who is Jewish, identifies with a picture of concentration camp prisoners in her World History textbook. And she becomes repulsed by the neatly presented, factual nature of horrific events in the book:

This book was about one about a one-event history, the kind of disaster that begins and ends, with no after effects, no reverberations. Not the kind of history that seeps in slowly and colors everything, like a quiet, daily kind of war, the war that my mother and my family lived through, which lived through them, which never ended. (Rabb, *Cures* 391-98)

The realization that this event in Mia's life—her mother's death— is something that she will live with every day, her own “quiet, daily kind of war,” can only be reached by someone who has already lived with the grief for some time. While we don't know Mia's age at the time of the telling, only an older narrator, who has distance from the immediacy of the tragedy, could provide this perspective. It is as though “there is a weight and resonance in events that come only because the author is no longer the character: she knows where the shadow she is casting ends, and we adults sense that along with her” (Aronson 21). Clearly, the age of the narrator at the time of the telling is not always a clear indicator of whether fiction is YA or adult.

Other distinctions between YA and adult fiction stand on even shakier ground.

In her book *Writing & Selling the YA Novel*, Going asks,

Do YA books always feature teen protagonists? Most of the time, but when you look at books like Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* and Markus Zusaks's *The Book Thief*, you'll find lead characters of all ages...Aren't books for teens shorter, with few descriptive passages than adult books? Not always. Just look at Stephenie Meyer's rich and haunting *Twilight* series. (15)

Going's points only validate that there is no easy way to separate Young Adult literature from its adult counterpart. Even differences in endings of YA and coming-of-age adult fiction can be debated. Traditionally, fiction for young people has been marked by its moralistic endings, the "happily ever after." But in today's YA, the fairy tale ending is going the way of extinction according to YA publisher and author Marc Aronson, who cites Dean Meyers's *Monster* and Paul Fleischman's *Mind's Eye* as examples of this change (120). Aronson believes that there "is something very contemporary and very true in the way both books recognize the depth of darkness within teenagers and yet also assume readers have the intelligence and imagination to deal with ambiguity" (120). Furthermore, he argues that in YA "...moral messages and happy endings... [are] precisely what artists have told us is unreal, a saccharine coating meant to disguise unsettling truths..." (81). Still not convinced? Consider the last line in *The Book Thief* where the narrator Death speaks: "A LAST NOTE FROM YOUR NARRATOR...I am haunted by humans" (Zusaks 550). This is the sort of heavy, ambiguous ending, implying an unsettling truth, typifies adult literary fiction. And yet, *The Book Thief* is



often categorized as YA literature. Clearly, endings cannot be used to distinguish YA from adult coming-of-age fiction.

Could it be that YA and adult coming-of-age fiction are of the same literary breed? In the following passage, it is hard to determine whether Marc Aronson is discussing YA or adult coming-of-age fiction:

... [these] novels describe a great crossing, where a person whose values and character have been formed in the smaller world of family, school, and native social environment enters a wider world...As characters measure the public world by values of the family and reexamine the family in light of new truths found in the world, they begin to work out their individual sense of identity; they “come of age.” (20)

Though Aronson is actually speaking about YA in this passage, he could have just as easily have been describing the coming-of-age adult novel. Like me, Aronson argues that high quality young adult literature is virtually indistinguishable from coming-of-age adult fiction:

...we run into the difficult boundary between coming-of-age literature published as YA and similar books that are considered adult fare. Adolescence is the only nonadult time of life that is the subject of an extensive adult literature. Many adult novels and memoirs begin in childhood, but only as the initial stage of a long journey. A book that never leaves teenage can be fully adult. This seriously blurs the question of the nature of YA literature... (21)

Aronson further states that "...considered as a literary term young adult literature contains two distinct categories: the 'true YA' genre of books in which teenagers can easily recognize themselves and the adult-inflected literature of coming-of-age." (23) Here, Aronson makes the case that both the novel that stars a present-focused teen narrator and the one with an older, more reflective young adult narrator looking at his or her childhood should both be included under the umbrella that is contemporary YA fiction. Michael Cart, the former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, agrees, stating that "The line between Y.A. and adult has become almost transparent" (qtd. in Rabb, "I'm YA" 1). Indeed, it seems that the boundary between the YA and adult coming-of-age fiction—especially in cases where the narrator has not yet entered adulthood— is blurred at best. For the remainder of the paper, I will illustrate the similarities between YA and adult coming-of-age fiction, focusing on voice in two novels—David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (adult fiction) and Margo Rabb's *Cures for Heartbreak* (YA fiction).

British writer David Mitchell's composite novel *Black Swan Green* chronicles a year in the life of thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor, an English teen living in 1982. The chapters—any one of which could be considered a self-contained short story—extend beyond teenage angst, revealing a young protagonist dealing with a speech impediment, changing technology, war, divorce, racism, bullying, and death. The novel would most likely be categorized as coming-of-age adult fiction. And while the majority of the story is written in past tense, the narration's lack of adult-inflection can be explained by the last few sentences of the novel, which are written in present tense and lead the reader to believe that Jason is only a few days away from his fourteenth birthday as he narrates the

entire story. In this final exchange with his sister, Julia, Jason explains how his parents' divorce makes him feel:

I haven't cried about the divorce once. I'm not going to now.

No *bloody* way am I crying. I'll be fourteen in a few days.

"It'll be all right." Julia's gentleness makes it worse. "In the end, Jace."

"It doesn't feel very all right."

"That's because it's not the end" (Mitchell 6687-96)

Jason's age as he narrates the story explains his limited world view ("it doesn't feel alright") and the lack of adult inflection in his voice ("no *bloody* way am I crying"). Also, the ending ("That's because it's not the end") opens outward, offering equal measures of hope and dread for the future. This ambiguity is very much in keeping with literary fiction's tradition of the messy ending. At the same time, the ending is simple, unadorned, and stays true to the age and maturity level of the characters.

Margo Rabb's debut YA novel *Cures for Heartbreak* details fifteen-year-old Mia Pearlman's struggle to deal with mother's death and father's subsequent health problems. Like Mitchell, Rabb writes in past tense and tackles difficult topics, including parental loss, grief and chronic illness. But unlike in the narrator in *Black Swan Green*, the reader is unsure of how old Mia Pearlman is at the time of the story's telling. There is a sense that Mia is not an adult, and yet she seems to have more distance from events than Jason Taylor does. The novel's ending is every bit as literary as *Black Swan Green*. As Mia and her boyfriend stand on the porch looking up at the night sky, Mia thinks about her late mother: "If grief had permanence, then didn't also love? We [Mia and her boyfriend]

stood on the roof, under the starless sky, standing still” (Rabb, *Cures* 2382-87). The story remains unresolved, suggesting that time freezes or “stills” certain moments, like a first love or loss of a parent, into our memories so that they stay with us forever. The complicated ending touches on the enduring power of love and also grief. Taken together, there is nothing readily identifiable in the narrative distance or ending that intimates that Rabb’s work is YA.

By focusing on these two novels, I will look specifically at how fiction writers use diction and tone to shape believable young first person voices. Since the sample size is small, I will bring in additional excerpts from short stories or other novels when appropriate. Collectively, I believe that these examples indicate a larger pattern—one that makes the distinction between adult coming-of-age fiction and YA fiction somewhat arbitrary and the border between the two elastic.

### **Getting the Words Right: Language’s Role in Shaping the Young Voice**

YA and adult coming-of-age fiction speak a similar language. In part, this is because creating an authentic young voice requires that writers pay particularly close attention to diction. Besides social economic status, ethnicity, educational background, culture, and gender, the teenage voice is also shaped by limited life experience and the influence of peers. These factors combine to affect narration in both David Mitchell’s *Black Swan Green: A Novel* (coming-of-age adult fiction) and Margo Rabb’s *Cures for Heartbreak* (YA). For the adolescent narrator, it seems to be what is said can communicate just as much as how it is said. To create convincing young voices, Rabb,

Mitchell, and other fiction writers employ informal diction, kid-sized comparisons, invented words, and slang.

Teen narrators claim a lexicon that is casual and conversational. The following passage from the YA novel *Cures for Heartbreak* illustrates the differences in how adults and teens communicate:

I still wasn't used to saying the word *dead* out loud. I felt half disgusted and half fascinated by the word, as if it was a new, forbidden curse: dead, the real and unreal sound of it, absorbing and repelling, like a horror movie. *Night of the Living Dead. The Dead Return.* My father used the euphemisms—*she's gone, she passed away*—which my sister pointed out with her usual delicacy sounded like *Excuse me, I just passed wind.* “Say *fart, Dad,*” she'd demand. (Rabb 459-66)

The diction here helps to indicate the ages of the characters. Generally speaking, adults, like Mia's father, tend to be more formal, employing polite euphemisms to deal with unpleasant situations (“she's gone” or “passing wind”). Teens are informal, from their style of dress to their speech. They are also intrigued by the grotesque and its shock value, explaining Mia's preference for “dead” over “passing away” or her sister's inclination to use “fart” instead of “passing wind.” As the example illustrates, some words simply belong to adult vocabulary while their less formal synonyms are used by kids. This probably also explains why Jason Taylor, narrator in *Black Swan Green*, won't say the word “melancholy” in front of his peers. Jason says “...If I was speaking to another thirteen-year-old and said the word ‘melancholy’ to avoid stammering on

‘sad,’ for example, I’d be a laughing stock ‘cause kids aren’t supposed to use adult words like ‘melancholy.’ Not at Upton-on-Severn Comprehensive, anyway” (Mitchell 549-57). Word choice is always important to consider when crafting voice. But I would argue that it is even more important with a young narrator—nothing smells of authorial intrusion more than the adolescent who tells a story with the formality and vocabulary of an adult.

In addition to more informality of speech, the believable adolescent narrator makes different observations than an adult character would which influences figurative language. Mitchell maintains an adolescent’s limited world view by creating kid-sized comparisons in his novel. When describing an old woman, thirteen-year-old Jason draws from his own life experience: “Her knuckles were ridged as Toblerone” (Mitchell 3197-3205) and “...she’s an unnumbered dot-to-dot” (3363-70). Instead of watering down the writing, these age appropriate metaphors actually provide a departure from tired clichés and offer a fresh look at what it means to have arthritic knuckles or be a mysterious woman. The young narrator describes the world in terms of what he knows: “She said it flat as a glass of Coke left out...” (Mitchell 3523-20) and “...the sticky afternoon was as turquoise as Head and Shoulders shampoo” (3749-57). Instead of reaching for heady poetic images, Mitchell opts for uncomplicated figurative language rooted in the landscape of childhood and popular culture (Toblerone candy, dot-to-dot puzzles, Coke, and Head and Shoulders Shampoo). Six hundred pounds might mean jewelry, furniture, or a down payment on a house for a British adult. But six hundred pounds translates differently for a British kid: “Six hundred pounds. Six thousand Mars bars. One hundred and ten L.P.s. Twelve hundred paperbacks... Three Atari Home Entertainment Systems. Clothes that’ll make Dawn Madden dance with me at the

Christmas Village Hall Disco...” (Mitchell 5775-85). Kids have different priorities, responsibilities, and life experiences than adults. And accordingly, Mitchell filters the world through Jason’s eyes, incorporating pop culture in a way that manages to both authenticate the voice and elevate the writing.

Margo Rabb also mines childhood to find comparisons befitting of her sixteen year old narrator, Mia Pearlman. Given that the YA novel is set in the media age (Long Island in the 1990’s), it makes sense that much of the figurative language references television or film. When Mia has to go shopping for a dress to wear to her mother’s funeral, for example, she notes that her “entire life had become a CBS Sunday Movie” (Rabb, *Cures* 92-99). As she grieves, Mia experiences the kind of heartache that once seemed glamorous to her on television: “When I used to watch after-school specials, I’d wanted to be that girl—the one the special was about, the girl with some terrible disease or the sufferer of some noble catastrophe. Pitied and loved. Of course in real life the pity, or whatever it was, was nothing like the way it seemed on the show”...(Rabb, *Cures* 245-52). Mia is a product of a culture where reality and virtual reality are almost indistinguishable. Her life is at once a CBS movie and “nothing like the way it seemed on the show.” Media is one of the largest influences on contemporary teens, who often favor screen time over face time. Any adult knows that movies are heavily scripted and real life often leaves us without the right words or proper stage directions. But the teen protagonist, Mia, still wishes for her life to imitate what she sees television: “Sometimes I wanted to edit my life, run it all on a film monitor and instruct, ‘Cut this, cut that,’ and it would all piece together so much more smoothly” (Rabb, *Cures* 1333-40). Meeting a young cancer patient in the hospital, Mia is reminded of “the whole soap opera traffic-

accident scene of the young guy dying. But in a soap opera he'd get up at the end and walk away and live. If he died, it would be because he was a dispensable character, unimportant to the show" (Rabb, *Cures* 953-60). Reality is harsher, more disturbing, than anything Mia has watched on T.V. To create a truly convincing young voice, fiction writers must describe life from a developmentally appropriate context, without allowing their adult knowledge or experiences to intrude. Like Mitchell, Rabb does not seem constrained by this challenge. Similes and metaphors rise organically out of Mia's world.

Sandra Cisneros employs child-sized comparisons in much of her work as well. In Cisneros's short story, "Eleven," her young narrator describes aging: "Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or the rings on a tree or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one" (*Woman Hollering* 7). The young narrator's philosophy is developmentally appropriate because the simile is based on everyday household objects (onion, tree, her own set of wooden dolls) that a child would notice and understand. At the end of "Eleven," the child narrator comments on aging with another simile: "I wish I was anything but eleven because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it" (Cisneros, *Woman Hollering* 9). The runaway balloon, familiar to any child, proves a brilliant comparison to distance (and years) the little girl wishes to add to her current age. Careful word choices from the landscape of childhood help build comparisons that compliment a young perspective and tell us something about what kind of narrator he or she is.

The young narrator is still acquiring language, and this can result in words being misheard or even invented. In *Black Swan Green*, Jason makes up his own words by



combining two verbs or making a noun into a verb, as in the following example: “Dewey cobwebs snaptwanged cross my face” and “The crows hang-glided” (emphasis mine) (Mitchell 1789-97). These nonsense words often imitate sounds like when Jason calls the noise from the town hall debate “yackering yacker” (Mitchell 5127). Similarly, Mia creates new words by turning proper nouns into adjectives. She explains her caring gestures as “Florence Nightingale-esque” (Rabb, *Cures* 1086) and a doctor’s sweater as having a “Liberace-ness about it” (1173-80). This sort of word play is believable as adolescents often defy convention and experiment in other areas of their lives. Language is, and should be, no different.

Slang also helps authenticate the young voice. According to YA author Scott Westerfield, “One of the most important things you need to know is that YA is voice and a voice is good when you get the feeling of being inside a world and being inside someone’s head. When you are a kid, there is less caution about verbal hygiene than in adult literature” (Gournay n. pag.). I would argue that Scott’s advice applies just as much to coming-of-age adult fiction. Just listen to how Jason talks about listening to music in the coming of age novel *Black Swan Green*: “Next, in Julia’s bedroom I put on her Roxy Music L.P. Julia’d go *ape*. I turned up the volume, *dead* loud. Dad’d go so *mental* his head’d blow up” (Mitchell 1462-70). Slang is a language of exclusion and makes the world of adolescence inaccessible to certain groups, like adults or outsiders. As the reader learns slang terms (“ape,” “dead,” “mental”), she becomes more immersed in Jason’s world. The reader then feels as though she can decode what the young characters in *Black Swan Green* say, even if the adults in the novel can’t.

Slang also signals a teen's social status or group. When Jason uses the word "epic" to describe a television show, he is informed by a school bully: "Only total space cadets...say 'epic' anymore..." (Mitchell 4674-81). Despite his best efforts to stay relevant and learn about fads, Jason continually struggles to fit in with the popular crowd, resulting in isolation and rejection. Part of the problem is that Jason is not fluent in the language of his peers. He says "that stuff about shaking your dong's a craze at the moment. There's no one I can trust to ask what it means" (Mitchell 184-91). Adults wouldn't know what the craze was all about, and asking another kid would be humiliating for Jason, who is already self-conscious. It is hard for Jason to gain acceptance from his peers when he is unable to communicate effectively with them. Teens pick up slang from one another and, like any language, it serves both to bind and divide.

While slang can make a young voice sound more believable, most writers know that what is fashionable today will be unfashionable tomorrow. Because slang becomes outdated so quickly, writers who want to invoke a convincing young voice might shy away from using it. But there are creative ways to make slang timeless. Classics like "awesome" or "cool" can be substituted for more current slang (Gournay n. pag.). Some writers even invent their own slang and use it consistently throughout the story as a sort of alternative language as Margo Rabb does in *Cures for Heartbreak* (Gournay n. pag.). One boy that Mia has a crush on in the hospital becomes known "...as the cancer guy. As in: *Be quiet, the cancer guy is sleeping. And: I saw the cancer guy in the hallway, he's looking better. And in my diary: I think the cancer guy is kind of cute*" (Rabb, *Cures*

958-65). This nickname becomes the way that Mia can talk about the boy without him knowing.

Indeed, language is paramount to making a young voice believable in both YA and coming-of-age adult fiction. Rabb, Mitchell, and other expert craftsmen create beautiful art using informal diction, kid-sized comparisons, invented words, and slang. Teen narrators, like Mia Pearlman and Jason Taylor, are memorable not because their experiences of adolescence are unique but because they express their experiences in such a way that the reader revisits and rediscovers what it means to be a teenager.

### **“Dear Diary”: Inflecting Voice with a Confessional Tone**

Any discussion of the young voice would be incomplete without mentioning tone. In fact, tone is often what readers recognize as different about young narrators—the “attitude” that results from humor (or sarcasm) and reduced narrative distance. With a young first person narrator, the tone tends to be confessional— “the character is talking directly to the reader, so right from the start the reader and the character have an implied relationship. This relationship might be one where the reader takes on the role of the confidant...” (Going 101). First person narration helps fuel the reader’s interest in the character and his or her fate.

Perhaps the inspiration for this narrative intimacy in coming-of-age fiction is the diary. Since the diary is ubiquitous during adolescence, it’s probably no surprise that it shows up in literature about that time in life, too. Sherman Alexie’s YA novel is literally fourteen-year-old Junior’s diary and includes the narrator’s doodles and cartoons along

with the narrator's thoughts. Similarly, *Cures for Heartbreak* protagonist Mia Pearlman also keeps a diary to help make sense of her feelings after her mother's illness and death:

For almost two weeks now I'd recorded everything that happened in the pink journal my mom had given me for my fifteenth birthday, as if writing it down was the only way to make it real, to figure out how I felt and what to do. (Rabb 142-49)

Even in Mitchell's coming-of-age adult novel, there are graphics inserted in the text, including a log Jason keeps detailing incidents of his speech impediment for his therapist. Perhaps more telling than Jason's entries, which are terse and factual, is his confession that the log is really a bunch of "truths I made up" (Mitchell 619-27). In every case, the diary allows these teen narrators space to share very personal aspects of their lives, including the unsavory and unflattering.

The confessional tone seems to draw on the diary as inspiration and can be used to craft convincing first person voices in YA and coming-of-age adult fiction. This tone lends an intimacy to narration and demonstrates the character's active inner life. For example, in Sandra Cisneros's adult coming-of-age novel *Caramelo*, the young narrator confides "What I've never told anyone is this—I've wanted nothing more my whole life than to get out of here" (301), and "I'm a virgin. I'm fourteen years old. I've never kissed a boy, and nobody's kissed me" (325).

I use the term "confessional tone" to describe this aspect of voice because it reflects the cross-hybridization between the genres of fiction and poetry. The narrative choices in Sylvia Plath's 1965 classic coming-of-age novel *The Bell Jar* must have been influenced by her poetry. And like her contemporaries Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton,

Plath's poetry is often categorized as "confessional" because of its psychological depth and personal subject matter. Plath's novel utilizes the same tone employed in her poetry to chronicle the young narrator's descent into depression. Esther, the narrator, thinks about committing suicide, but says, "the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I want to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (Plath 147). In this passage, the reader is a voyeur, a witness to the most private of struggles—mental illness. Even as Esther locks the bathroom door to cut herself, publicly shutting out others, the reader remains inside with her, experiencing the psychological pain that comes from "somewhere else, deeper, more secret." The narrator is startlingly forthcoming about her emotional state, as troubling as it may be, and confides in the reader.

The confessional tone seen in Plath's poetry and later her novel also appears in first person coming-of-age stories, whether adult or YA. Like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Jason Taylor in *Black Swan Green* contemplates suicide and his voice possesses a similar nakedness:

Friday'd come round, sure. But the moment I get home, the weekend'll begin to die and Monday'll creep nearer, minute by minute. Then it'll be back to five more days like today, worse than today, far worse than today.

*Hang yourself.*

(Mitchell 4787-96)

Here, interior monologue offers direct access to Jason's thoughts: "hang yourself." There is no distance separating the narrator and reader, and, as a result, Jason's most private

feelings are public. In *Cures for Heartbreak*, a similar tonal mode prevails. Mia Pearlman admits to crushing on a young patient because he has cancer: “To think that I found his cancer appealing, that I felt attracted to his horrifying tragedy like a gnat to a light...I’d been so mad at Melody Bly and those who’d wanted to crash my own grief party, and now I was doing the exact same thing” (Rabb *Cures* 1075-81). Mia reveals that “the thing I liked was his cancer” (Rabb *Cures* 1067-75) and her honesty and vulnerability regarding her unflattering behavior draws the reader nearer. In her brokenness, Mia becomes more human, more real. She can relate to the teenage patient in a way that she can’t relate to any of her peers because both she and the boy have both experienced unthinkable tragedy: cancer. Like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Jason and Mia dare to divulge their most personal feelings and thoughts, however ugly.

While first person narration always invites a reader close, a teen voice draws us even closer because s/he shares her interior life so candidly— working out personal and psychological issues on the page the same way s/he would in her diary. As a result, the reader experiences what the character experiences. In Sherman Alexie’s YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the confessional tone of the narration means that the reader learns about everything that goes through Junior’s mind— from masturbation to girls to his interest in books. There is a sort of impulsivity to Junior’s reactions to situations, the sort of “right here, right now” mentality common to teens. Alexie shows how Junior comes to believe that recent deaths in the family, including his sister’s, were caused by his decision to leave the reservation:

I blamed myself for all of the deaths.

I had cursed my family. I had left the tribe, and had broken something

inside all of us, and I was now being punished for that.

No, my family was being punished.

I was healthy and alive. (Alexie 173)

The mind of a teenager moves from one idea to the next quickly, with little room for reflection. Alexie imitates the teenage brain in real-time, documenting Junior's reasoning and then his corrections to that reasoning ("...I was being punished for that. No, my family was being punished"). Since most teens are the center of their own worlds, it makes sense that Junior would feel he somehow had a role in the deaths of his family members. Junior's vulnerability is believable, which adds legitimacy to the voice.

To even further reduce narrative distance, the first person teen narrator sometimes directly addresses the reader, using second person "you." This sets up a relationship between the narrator and reader where the reader plays the role of confidant. In Melina Marchetta's YA novel *Saving Francesca*, for instance, the narrator says: "I want so much not to do the teenage angst thing, but I have to tell you that I hate the life that, according to my mother, I'm not actually having" (48-56). There is a sense that the narrator is compelled to speak to the reader ("I have to tell you") to confess what she feels inside. Similarly, in Sandra Cisneros's adult coming-of-age novel *Caramelo*, the narrator sneaks away with the boyfriend: "There is only one bed in the entire Hotel Majestic that isn't a single. Can you believe it?" (381). In this example, it is almost as though Cisneros's narrator wants to enter into dialogue and expects the reader to respond. The use of direct address in YA and coming-of-age adult fiction makes the reader feel more invested in the story. In a way, the direct address removes the last

boundary between the reader and narrator, inviting the reader to enter into a relationship with the narrator

The strategic use of interior monologue also contributes to the confessional tone that often accompanies first person coming-of-age stories. When the reader hears a narrator's thoughts, s/he is better able to identify with that narrator. Through interior monologue, the reader is privy to the adolescent narrator's truest self as well. Since teens are still forming their identities, this sometimes means that the various sides of a narrator's personality may clash or a narrator may act and speak in a way that contradicts what s/he really thinks and feels.

In the adult coming of age novel *Black Swan Green*, Mitchell reveals Jason's identity confusion using interior monologue. There is "Unborn Twin," Jason's confident, adventurous self, "Maggot," the wimpy, critical part of Jason, and "Hangman," the cause of his stuttering. These competing sides of Jason's personality sound off at different times in the novel. In the following passage, Jason wonders if the boy he sees skating on the pond nearby is the ghost of a drowned kid:

*Go home, urged the nervy Maggot in me. What if he's a ghost?*

*My Unborn Twin can't stand Maggot. What if he is ghost?*

(Mitchell 369-78)

Unborn Twin and Maggot represent the strong and weak sides of Jason's personality, and here, we see Unborn Twin mocking Maggot by repeating what he said. Through interior monologue, the reader gets a sense of how the narrator, like all adolescents, is still trying on possible identities and deciding which one fits him best.



By allowing internal thoughts to interrupt lines of dialogue, Mitchell also infuses impulsivity into his young narrator's voice and also reveals the active interior life. When Jason's parents divorce, there is little time for reflection, only reaction. Little lines of interior monologue interject the spontaneous feelings of the young narrator as he tries to make sense of what is happening:

“The weirdest thing,” I said, my fingers drumming the Oxo tin, “is leaving the house without Dad. I mean, he ought to be running around now, turning off the boiler, the water, the gas...” This divorce's like in a disaster film when a crack zigzags along the street and a chasm opens up under someone's feet. I'm that someone... If I don't jump one way or the other I'm going to fall into the bottomless blackness. “Checking windows, one last time... Like when we went on holidays up to Oban or the Peak District or somewhere.” (Mitchell 6690-96)

In this passage, the reader experiences the narrator's reaction in real time with no chance for self-censorship. The rush of sudden emotion in the interrupting lines of interior monologue (“this divorce's like a disaster film...”) imitates the impulsivity of adolescent thought and feeling. Jason's whole world has cracked open, and he does not have the benefit of viewing the events from a distance and putting the divorce into perspective. The interior monologue in this scene also reveals the raw ache Jason feels (“I'm going to fall into the bottomless blackness...”), which contrasts with the controlled dialogue. The reader has access to feelings that Jason would never say aloud, feelings that he'd just as soon closet away. In fact, Jason probably remembers exactly where he went with his father on every holiday, but what Jason says aloud belies that such information is even

important to him (“like when we went on holidays... somewhere”). It is only through interior monologue that Jason’s private hurt is fully exposed.

Similarly, in *Cures for Heartbreak*, Mia’s thoughts often contrast with her censored response to a well meaning comment. In the following passage, Mia returns from a concert with Jay, her crush, just days after her mother died:

He [Jay] smiled and turned to go, then stopped. “Hey, I wanted to tell you, I’m really sorry you’re so sad.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Sad? I wanted to tear my skin off or run screaming down the street.

I stared at the red concrete of our stoop. “I just want someone to tell me what to do.”

“What?” he asked.

I meant that I wanted to know how you dealt with this, with the worst thing. “I mean...Forget it. See you in school,” I said. (Rabb *Cures* 249-56)

There is an internal struggle (“I wanted to know how you dealt with this, with the worst thing”), but Mia’s spoken words show no indication of suffering (“see you in school”). The brave front seems manufactured to save others, like Jay, from the discomfort of talking about death. But it also arises, in part, out of the fear of stigmatization. Mia, a typical teenager, just wants to fit in with her peers and feels “ashamed of her [my] family for having such bad luck” (Rabb *Cures* 247-55). By exposing these thoughts, Rabb makes Mia’s interior visible to the reader, which adds depth and dimension to the

character. Mia's words, which are often the opposite of what she feels, are much more poignant when coupled with telling interior monologue.

As mentioned previously, fear of peer rejection keeps the young narrator from truly expressing herself. This is why interior monologue becomes so important; it helps the reader get to know the teen narrator in a way that dialogue alone never would. In Melina Marchetta's YA novel, *Saving Francesca*, the young narrator is coping with her mother's depression, but doesn't let on to her friend, Javier, that it is affecting her:

“You shy, Francesca?” Javier asks me later on.

I shake my head. “Not really.” I'm just sad, I want to say. And I'm lonely. (687-95)

Through the interior monologue, the reader comes to know Francesca more deeply than even her friends. Francesca's loneliness and sadness is something that only she and the reader share.

Regardless of a book's categorization as YA or adult coming-of-age fiction, voice is often what draws the reader into the story. The confessional tone further reduces narrative distance, allowing the reader to better identify with the narrator's experiences. With words like “truth is” (Mitchell, 68) or “I had to admit” (Rabb, *Cures* 1662) or “to tell the truth” (Cisneros, *Caramelo* 315), young first person narrators bear their souls, which raises the stakes quickly, making the reader quickly become invested in the fate of the adolescent narrator. As a result, the kind of naked writing that we would expect to find in the teen narrator's diary is often exactly what we find on the page.

### **LOL: The Use of Humor in Authenticating the Young Voice**

In addition to the confessional tone, adolescent voices in coming of age adult fiction and YA are often inflected with humor, counterbalancing emotionally intense moments where young narrators are experiencing “growing pains.” Humor is another tonal mode, helping young narrators to make sense of complicated situations with limited tools and knowledge. Anne Beattie believes that in fiction, “laughter tempers things” and functions as “a way of detaching ourselves from the overly serious, or even from the mildly serious.” Avoiding melodrama or sentimentality in writing about angst-filled adolescence is hard and often requires a large dose of humor. As Josip Novakovich suggests, “using humor as a contrast will then deepen the tragic impact of your story” (179).

In the opening chapter of Margo Rabb’s Y.A. novel, *Cures for Heartbreak*, fifteen year old Mia Pearlman is assisting her father with making funeral arrangements for her mother. But Rabb moderates the tone, keeping the writing from getting weighed down with emotion by introducing comic relief in the form of Manny Musico, the slick funeral director whose “voice boomed like a Broadway star’s” (38-45). Mia says that she wouldn’t be surprised if “spotlights had flicked on, coffins opened up, dancing corpses emerged, and Manny led us all in the opening number of *Funeral!* the musical” (Rabb, *Cures* 45-51). This funny minor character leads Mia and her family into a room where they pick from caskets with names like Abraham, Eleazar, and Moses. Humor is essential throughout the novel, but especially in this opening scene. Treating the subject of parental loss with a more serious tone would only exaggerate and intensify the emotion, leaving the story feeling affected. To reign in the potential for over-the-top

drama in the opening scene, Rabb doesn't offer much in the way of Mia's feelings. Instead, Rabb directs the reader's attention to the slapstick funeral director, who could be mistaken for a Broadway star.

David Mitchell also peppers his coming-of-age adult novel *Black Swan Green* with humor. A self-conscious teenage narrator, Jason is embarrassed by his stammer. When he gets called on at school and can't say the answer because it is a stammer word, Jason says, "...no matter how shocked, scared, breathless, ashamed I was, no matter how much of a total flid I looked, no matter how much I *hated* myself for not being able to say a simple word in my own language, I *couldn't* say 'nightingale'" (Mitchell 530-97). The stammer (and its ability to make Jason seem different than his peers) causes him considerable anguish and later leads to bullying that almost drives Jason to commit suicide. But the tone isn't always so somber. Mitchell seems to know just when to offset serious moments with humor. In the following excerpt, Jason imagines his stammer as a hangman: "...my stammer took on the appearance of a hangman...I imagine him in the baby room at Preston Hospital playing *eeny, meeny, miney, mo*. I imagine him tapping my koochy lips, murmuring down at me, *Mine*" (Mitchell 537-45). While it is politically incorrect to poke fun at a child with a speech impediment, personifying the stammer as a Hangman is just ridiculous enough to be funny. And this, according to Ann Beattie, is the point: "we find humorous that which scandalizes us, whether it's based in an ostensibly far-fetched idea, or on politically incorrect stereotypes, or about something one is simply not *supposed* to laugh at, such as cripples, or hairy ladies." Humor mediates the embarrassment and self-hate that Jason feels as a result of his speech impediment and wards off sentimentality.

Miriam Toews incorporates humor in her coming-of-age adult novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, as well. Sixteen-year-old Nomi, the narrator, dreams of escaping from the Mennonite town she was raised in. She realizes: “my personal yearning to be in New York City, wandering around with Lou Reed in Greenwich Village or whatever, is for me a painful, serious, all-consuming kind of thing and is for the rest of the world a joke. When you’re a Mennonite you can’t even yearn properly for the world because the world turns that yearning into a comedy” (Toews 135). Nomi’s yearning to break away is “painful, serious, all-consuming” because she longs to reconnect with her mother and sister, who have left the Mennonite community. And yet, ironically, Toews offsets Nomi’s desperation and heartbreak by, at times, turning her “yearning into a comedy.” When Nomi talks about her religion, and specifically the Mennonites’ founder Simmons Menno, the reader can’t help but laugh:

Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock’n’roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewelry, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o’clock. That was Menno all over. Thanks a lot, Menno.

(Toews 5)

Comparing Simmons Menno to the “least well-adjusted kid in your school” is funny. Nomi’s truth—that her religion is “an oppressive patriarchal regime” (8)—rises to the surface in the passage above but it is couched in sarcasm (“Thanks, Menno”). The reader can stomach Nomi’s troubles (“ban on media, dancing, temperate climates,” etc., etc.)

easier and longer because of the humor. Toews treats religion, which has the potential for sentimentality, in a “reductive manner” with a hearty dose of cynicism (Novakovich 181).

Humor also offers breathing room in coming of age fiction. In Sherman Alexie’s Young Adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of A Part-Time Indian*, Junior, the quirky protagonist, is a budding cartoonist, and some of the most difficult moments in Junior’s life are illustrated in comics that are included within the pages of the novel. Since the novel covers death, alcoholism, bullying and racism, these cartoons, along with Alexie’s witty prose, temper the tone of the novel. When Junior decides to attend Reardon, a mostly white school that is better academically than the one on the reservation, he feels like an outsider. Junior is acutely aware of his race and poverty, but Alexie mixes humor into Junior’s realization that he may not be welcome at Reardon: “Those white kids couldn’t believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was a Bigfoot or UFO. What was I doing at Reardon, whose mascot was an Indian, making me the only *other* Indian in town?” (Alexie 56) In addition to the prose, there is a cartoon of Reardon’s Indian mascot with an arrow pointing to his skin that says “bright red.” Alexie filters the racism that Junior experiences through the mind of an adolescent boy. There is brutal, crushing honesty (“they stared at me like I was a Bigfoot or UFO”) mixed with humor (“making me the only *other* Indian in town”). Alexie perfectly captures both the sensitive and sarcastic sides of an adolescent boy. At the same time, the cartoons and witty prose serve as a pause in the storm. Indeed, Ann Beattie believes: “Jokes, and humor in any form, exist in fiction for breathing room...They’re there to tacitly admit that you know that what the reader is considering is artifice, but also to create a bond between writer and

reader over the issue of how to best proceed through complexity (n.p.).” As in life, humor can also be a coping mechanism on the page, helping the reader and writer navigate difficult issues like racism.

Humor also comes from inexperience with adult concepts and life in general. Take sex, for instance. Jason says, “A diagram in a textbook of an erect penis in a vagina is one thing, but actually *doing* it, that’s another. The only actual vagina I’ve seen was on a greasy photo Neal Brose charged us 5p to look at. It was a baby kangaroo-prawn in its mother’s hairy pouch” (Mitchell 1913-19). Curiosity about sex is a rite of passage and it is comical that the first nude picture Jason sees is not of a naked woman but a kangaroo. Teens fed one another misinformation about sex, alcohol, and other adult activities. Jason wants to know about the facts of life but says: “You can’t ask adults ‘cause you can’t ask adults. You can’t ask kids ‘cause it’d be all round school by first break. So either everybody knows everything but nobody’s saying anything, or else nobody knows anything...” (Mitchell 3868-75). As adolescents are initiated into the adulthood, they experiment with many “firsts” that are often awkward and humorous at the same time. For instance, Jason forgets to breathe during his first kiss and starts panting. He also vomits after his first cigarette instead of inhaling like the other boys. A self-deprecating and honest teen narrator like Jason invites the reader to find humor in the clumsiest moments of adolescence.

If diction is about what the narrator says then tone is about how it is said. While tone can modulate over the course of a novel, there is a general trend towards the confessional voice and humor in young first person narrators. These choices make sense in the context of adolescence where identity formation is still occurring—a mostly



internal process that suits the “confessional tone”— and where humor can sometimes help navigate complexity.

### **Conclusion**

Using the examples from *Cures from Heartbreak*, *Black Swan Green* and the various other stories and novels in this paper, I aimed to prove that the most successful coming-of-age fiction features narrators whose voices echo in our heads long after we close the pages of the book. Writers of both YA and coming-of-age fiction use similar techniques to craft diction and tone in a way that accurately reflects a narrator’s age.

And yet, if it is true that first person narrators in adult coming-of-age fiction and Young Adult literature share more in common than not, why is it that YA is considered less literary? In his article “You’re Only Young Twice: Adults, Children, Power and Culture,” Tom Morris gives one explanation:

The juvenilizing tendency in literary theory preserves the realm of adult texts as one of high and serious culture. As Peter Hollindale argues, ‘(The) practice of devaluing childhood and children’s literature when we are really protecting our concept of adulthood (and exposing our unease about it) is extremely common in the derogatory estimates of children’s books.’ (n.pag.)

Morris argues that to call a book “childish” or link it in any way to childhood is to demean it and strip it of potential literary merit. Could it be this “juvenilizing tendency” may also be the reasons that YA books are not reviewed as frequently as adult books, leading some critics believe that YA fiction is not serious or deserving of their time?

Slowly, and in large part thanks to the big commercial success of series written by J.K. Rowling and Stephanie Meyers, YA is starting to get the recognition it deserves. Several prizes have been developed to recognize work of outstanding literary merit, including the prestigious Michael L. Printz award. Additionally, critics are starting to take notice of YA. Cindy Lou Daniels argues that as they begin to “discover” Young Adult literature, critics should hold it to the same standards as adult fiction:

Clearly, Harry Potter has inspired many a critic to jump on the YA literary bandwagon, so why not examine other contemporary YA texts in the same way? After all, it's not just J. K. Rowling's work that is worthy of study. “Serious writers don't condescend in terms of style or any other way. They try to perceive human life as deeply and clearly as they can every time they tell a story, and every time they tell a story they try to present their perceptions in the best-the most vivid-prose they can craft. That's why we call it art and that's why serious writers deserve to be called artists" (Davis 7). And there are many YA authors out there who are literary artists. (Daniels 79)

Like Daniels, I believe that YA deserves the opportunity to be looked at as critically as any work of literary fiction. Such review will only legitimate Young Adult literature in academic circles and improve the overall quality of writing for youth.

Still, regardless of whether a book is labeled as YA or coming-of-age adult fiction, the success of its adolescent narrator relies heavily the appropriate diction and tone. When artfully crafted, the young voice can appeal to a broad audience—both to those going through adolescence and those who have come out on the other side as

adults. Some of the most memorable and celebrated narrators in literary fiction—from J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield to Sandra Cisneros’s Esperanza Cordero—aren’t even old enough to vote. But we listen.

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