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DICK AND JANE GROW UP:  
TRENDS IN FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

BY

NANCY VEGLAHN

A thesis submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree Master of Arts, Major in  
English, South Dakota  
State University  
1977

DICK AND JANE GROW UP:  
TRENDS IN FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Head English Dept/ \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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## Chapter One

## Introduction

Here is Dick. Look at Dick worry.  
Jane is big! Jane cleans house.  
Look at Jane cook. Look at Dick eat.  
Dick and Jane are all alone.  
Father has left. Mother has left.<sup>1</sup>  
See Father go? Run, Father, run.

This dialogue between two fictional characters is more than a parody. It illustrates the predicament of adolescence and of the Young Adult novel.

The Dick and Jane in the dialogue are modern teenagers. They are no longer pretty children in a safe, predictable world dominated by omniscient parents. Although their world was never as bland as it was sometimes portrayed in elementary readers, it was at least one in which they felt some sense of belonging. They fit a pattern, and they found their own identity through relationships with others--family, school cliques, teams, clubs.

Adolescence is a time of breaking out of old patterns, and this sudden freedom is both exhilarating and terrifying. Actions have consequences. Decisions must be made. It becomes impossible to hide in the family or the peer group, and each individual begins to feel alone and exposed.

Like the readers for whom it is intended, the YA novel is changing as it breaks out of old patterns and enjoys a new freedom. Most of the taboos which seemed unchallengeable only a dozen years ago are disappearing. More complex situations are portrayed, increasingly varied styles are used, and more demanding themes are explored by the writers of YA books. As these books move away from the rigid demands of formula and moralism, they offer a valuable literary treatment of the maturing process experienced by all persons.

Margaret Edwards has defined "young adults" as people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, for whom there is no better terminology.<sup>2</sup> "Teenagers" sounds slangy; "young people" is stiff and patronizing; "adolescents" has the flavor of psychological jargon. "Young adults" may be no better, but at least it recognizes the fact that persons in this age group are beyond childhood. They are mentally capable of reading the same books that adults read. Most surveys of the reading habits of junior high and high school students show that a majority of the favorite books come from the mainstream of American popular literature. And yet, each year four or five hundred novels are published with the specific label, "Young Adult."<sup>3</sup>

It is these books which will be considered in this paper. The YA novel may be defined, then, as a work of

fiction intended and published especially for readers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen.

The distinction is to some degree an artificial one created by the realities of publishing. If a book is purchased by the juvenile division of a publishing company, it is presented as a YA novel. The same book might conceivably have been bought and published by the adult division of the same company, in which case it would be considered an adult book. There is some crossing back and forth across these artificial barriers. In 1974, Viking Press moved three of its titles from the YA list and released them as adult books. Watership Down was moved to Macmillan's adult list after it had already been advertised in the children's catalogue.<sup>4</sup> Nina Bawden's Devil By The Sea was published as an adult book in 1958 and rereleased as a YA book by Lippincott in 1976.<sup>5</sup> Books like A Separate Peace and Catcher In The Rye are standards on the YA shelves in most libraries, although they were originally published on adult lists.

The question of justifications for a separate category known as the YA novel will be discussed later. For purposes of definition, it is sufficient to say that this paper will be limited to a consideration of American books of fiction published specifically for adolescent readers.

YA novels referred to in the following study were chosen on the basis of several criteria. Some were selected as representative of a particular period in the development of the YA novel. Most of the books from the past decade were chosen because of favorable reviews in nationally-known publications such as the New York Times and Horn Book Magazine, inclusion on lists of outstanding YA books, and recognition through awards such as the Newbery Prize and the National Book Award.

An attempt has also been made to include books that have been popular with the readers for whom they are intended. One indication of popularity is reprinting in paperback editions. Paperbacks are relatively new in the YA field, and those chosen for reissue are usually the top sellers from the hardback lists. A number of surveys also point to acceptance by young adult readers. Lists of this type include the English Journal "YA Book Poll" (which covers books selected by juniors and seniors in high schools across the nation), the American Library Association list of "Best Books for Young Adults," and two surveys by Ken Donelson of Arizona State University (1972 and 1976).

Thirty-eight YA novels chosen according to these criteria were read as a basis for the conclusions presented in this paper. Not all of them will be mentioned by title in the body of the paper, but a list is included.



## Chapter One: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Hope Campbell, No More Trains to Tottenville, (New York: McCall, 1971), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Edwards, The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts, The Library and Young Adults, (New York: Hawthorn, 1969), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Webster Scott, "What Do YA's Read?", New York Times Book Review, Section Seven, Part II, 7 May 1972, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Mercier, "Breaking Down the Age Barriers Around Young Adult Books," Publishers' Weekly, 25 February 1974, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>Kirkus Reviews, 1 August 1976, p. 847.

## Chapter Two

### Faith, Hope and Formula: A Historical Sketch

"Paradoxically, the century that discovered adolescents appears to have the most difficulty raising them."<sup>1</sup> This observation by Lou Stanek is a reminder of the fact that until relatively modern times, persons went directly from childhood to adulthood. For most pre-twentieth century Americans, education and dependence ended in the early teens. Boys married and found jobs or went to work with their fathers. Girls married and became mothers. This is still the pattern in most of the world.<sup>2</sup>

When the Industrial Revolution freed the economy from the need for armies of unskilled and semiskilled workers, young people were no longer launched so abruptly into the adult world. They stayed in school for years after they had become physically mature, married later, and had more time to cut home ties gradually. The teenager is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and as Mrs. Stanek points out, we have not been uniformly successful in coping with this "in between" period of life. One of the reasons often advanced in defense of a special literature for adolescents is the difficulty of the long passage through the teens in our time.

Like the teenagers for whom they are written, YA novels have only recently been considered a distinct category. There was no such thing as the adolescent novel a hundred years ago, because no one thought of adolescence as a stage of development. But the period between childhood and adulthood is not just a product of economic necessity or psychological jargon. The complexity and rate of change in our society have made it vastly more difficult to grow up than in simpler times when young persons merely stepped into the traditional roles modeled by their parents, for: "Adolescence is conceived as a distinct stage of life in societies so complicated and differentiated that each individual's social role and function takes years to define and learn."<sup>3</sup>

The growth of a special literature designed for adolescents coincides with the development of the United States and other Western nations into modern industrial states. In the second half of the nineteenth century, children's literature in America, which still consisted mostly of fairy tales and condescending moralistic fables, produced a number of remarkable books told from the viewpoint of older children or adolescents. Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) were undoubtedly the most important.

Books like Hans Brinker (1865) by Mary Mapes Dodge and Little Women (1868) by Louisa May Alcott also demonstrated that fiction for "older children" (there was still no commonly accepted term for the adolescent) could be challenging, realistic and competently written as well as entertaining.<sup>4</sup>

Another development in the late nineteenth century was the appearance of series books for young readers, especially the so-called dime novels. These were not considered "children's books," and they certainly had no great literary significance. They were, however, important as part of the history of fiction for adolescents. Often depicting the adventures of a hero in his early teens, they were sold for a dime or even a nickel to appeal especially to readers between twelve and eighteen.

Dime novels emphasized continuous suspense, a great deal of action, some violence, and the inevitable triumph of virtue. The style was far from polished, partly because they were written so quickly. (Prentiss Ingraham, author of many dime novels, once dashed off a 35,000 word story in twenty-four hours.) In their heyday, these short novels sold hundreds of thousands of copies. They featured characters like Deadwood Dick, Frank Reade, Frank Merriwell and Jack Harkaway. Some stories were set in the exotic

West, others in the newly developing urban areas. By 1910 the dime novels were being replaced in popularity by magazines containing the same sort of fiction.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of series novels in cheap editions for young readers was well established, however, and new ones kept appearing through the first quarter of this century. There was the Chicken Little Jane series, about "a Western prairie girl who lives a happy, outdoor life;" the Boys of Business series; the Khaki Girls series (depicting girl Motor Pool drivers in the Great War); the Meadow-Brook Girls series (The Meadow-Brook Girls Under Canvas; Or, Fun and Frolic in the Summer Camp--one shudders to think what would be made of such a title today!); the Boys of the Army series.<sup>6</sup> Descendants of the series novels of this period continue to be popular up to the present. Few young readers escape a period of fascination with the Boxcar Children, the Borrowers, Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys.

Series books had no high literary pretensions, and their value as serious literature was negligible. Young people who aspired to higher education might delve into them briefly but soon moved on to the classics; most Americans who read widely went directly from the fairy tales and fantasies of children's books into adult material.

And yet, the series books did have one unique characteristic, and perhaps it was this that accounted for their great popularity. They dealt with some of the particular concerns of the adolescent.

Crude as they were, these books did show teenagers making significant decisions and having some effect on the world in which they lived. Moralistic as they were, they recognized the need for the individual to develop a set of values that is his own. Violent as they often were, they could speak to people who were just beginning to realize the frightening and yet exciting potential for violence in their own emotions.

As the gap between childhood and full adulthood stretched out to cover more years, the gap between children's books and adult books became more evident. The series books were simply not of high enough quality to satisfy the hunger of a maturing reader, and yet many of the classics and modern novels dealt with issues and experiences that are not of primary importance to adolescents. At the same time, the novel itself was undergoing great change. Works by authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were bewildering to many adults; teenagers were likely to find them incomprehensible.

It was this growing void that the Junior Novel attempted to fill. More carefully written than the series

books, it used the same sort of optimistic, fast-moving and youth oriented approach. Like the series, the Junior Novels featured young heroes and heroines who coped with a variety of problems of the sort that are encountered in growing up.

The first such novel published in this country was Let the Hurricane Roar by Rose Wilder Lane (1933). Written at about the same time as her mother's famous "Little House" books and based on the same material, Let the Hurricane Roar tells of pioneer life in the Dakotas. Although the protagonist, Caroline, is a teenager, she is already married when the story begins, and the novel tells of the birth of her first child. The closing reference to this baby is typical of the optimistic outlook that became standard in Junior Novels: "Somehow, without quite thinking it, she felt that a light from the future was shining in the baby's face. The big white house was waiting for him and the acres of wheat fields, the fast driving teams and swift buggies. If he remembered at all this life in the dugout, he would think of it only as a brief prelude to more spacious times."<sup>7</sup>

The problems of the present would be forgotten in the "more spacious times" ahead. The happy ending was sometimes subtle, sometimes preachy, often sentimental-- but it was always there on the last pages of the Junior Novel, to reassure the reader that everything always turns

out well. This relentless hopefulness which was one of the earliest conventions of the YA book also became one of the longest-lived. Only in the late sixties did a few authors dare flout this imperative. In the romantic novel, the happy ending meant getting the desired male, either as a "steady" or a husband. In sports books, the optimistic ending involved winning or learning to be a "good sport," preferably both. Usually, the future happiness promised at the conclusion of Junior Novels was identified with conformity, acceptance by others, and morality.<sup>8</sup>

Other common traits appeared as more and more Junior Novels were published in the 1930's and 1940's. The protagonist was a young person from a middle class American family, trying to solve some sort of personal problem in a typical setting: home, school, or the high school hangout. The plot might involve a mystery or threat, but there was little real violence. Most of the other important characters were teenagers; any adults were pictured as "wise and benevolent but rather remote."<sup>9</sup> Sex was limited to romantic daydreams in the "girls' books," and was absent in "boys' books."

There were other distinctions between books intended mostly for boys and those written for girls. Boys were



supposed to want stories about sports, outdoor adventure, action and mystery. Girls would read almost any sort of fiction but especially liked stories about dating and romance. Though more girls than boys read Junior Novels, the male protagonist was preferred by publishers because it was believed that girls would read books about boys but boys would not read novels about girls.

When a girl was the protagonist, she was likely to be more passive than the male heroes.<sup>10</sup> In Elizabeth Low's Hold Fast the Dream, Blithe Moreland goes to Paris to study sculpture. She falls in love with a fellow student, Jim McGill. When he proposes on the next-to-last page, her own career aspirations conveniently merge into Jim's plans. The novel ends, not with Blithe's growing skill in sculpture emphasized, but with a syrupy scene in which she anticipates the joys of marriage.<sup>11</sup>

Jane Purdy, heroine of Beverly Cleary's popular novel Fifteen, solves her problems in a similarly single-minded way: "She was Stan's girl. That was all that really mattered."<sup>12</sup>

A male protagonist, however, had interests other than romance, and often more serious problems. Bud Crayne of Henry Gregor Felsen's Hot Rod is car-crazy. The novel is full of jargon about manifolds, camshafts, hose connections and exhaust headers. Bud is pictured as a basically good

but reckless youth who has a reputation as a wild driver. Then two younger boys, admirers of his, steal a car and are killed in a bloody crash as they run from the police. Bud has some bad moments as he faces his own responsibility, but the novel ends on a positive note. By imitating a more safety-minded friend, Bud finds salvation: "I automatically did the courteous and thoughtful thing, and that was the right thing. That's all there is to good driving."<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the 1950's the conventions of the Junior Novel had become a formula that applied to books for boys or girls and to a wide variety of subject matter:

1. The protagonist is introduced and the problem is dramatized by a brief episode; frequently it is also restated by an intrusion of the omniscient author.
2. Some event precipitates a crisis.
3. The protagonist reacts with frustration and seems to move away from, rather than toward, a solution.
4. At a point of absolute hopelessness an accident, coincidence or intervention by a "transcendent" character provides new insight.
5. The problem is solved by the protagonist.<sup>14</sup>

Or the Junior Novel formula could be stated even more simply: A youthful protagonist solves a personal problem in a positive way without the aid of an adult. There were no real villains in these books, only mildly

antagonistic enemies (usually other teenagers) who often became friends in the end. Unhappiness and immaturity were equated with isolation from the group. Happiness, on the other hand, was seen as being accepted by the group and yet somehow being able to retain one's own identity.<sup>15</sup>

In the novels of the 1930's and 1940's the central problem often involved personal conflicts like jealousy, shyness, or the desire for recognition. These subjects continued in the 1950's, and a few more historical and topical themes were added. Post World War II America was in a conservative and conforming state of mind; the Junior Novels showed middle class Dicks and Janes moving obediently toward college and preparing to "take their places in Society."

It was in the turbulent '60's that the term Young Adult book began to be used instead of Junior Novel, and this change in terminology signaled a change in subject matter. Relevance became the imperative for the YA book. The Generation Gap was discovered, teenagers' older brothers and sisters rioted on college campuses, and a succession of causes competed for the allegiance of the young. YA books began to explore situations involving race prejudice, alcoholism, drug addiction, social conflict, divorce, war and peace, the preservation of the environment, and

even (though still very cautiously) sex. Many of the taboos which had been unquestioned and which had prevented consideration of such topics in Junior Novels were now violated.

As YA books broke away from the rigid demands of the formula and the taboos, some fiction of high quality was published for teenaged readers. Books like Scott O'Dell's Island of the Blue Dolphins (1961), Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time (1963), and William Armstrong's Sounder (1969) showed that the range of emotion and theme that could be explored in YA books did not need to be limited by any arbitrary boundaries.

However, the removal of restraints never automatically insures corresponding maturity. In literature as in life, growing up requires more than a lack of limitations. Some of the YA books published in the '60's merely substituted current issues for the old formula, stereotyped adults for stereotyped teenagers, and cynicism for the optimism of the Junior Novel. At times the demand for relevance was carried to absurd lengths: author Richard Peck tells of being approached by a librarian who wanted him to write a novel about a "black adolescent unwed father on a Honda."<sup>16</sup>

Three books published toward the end of the decade had an especially strong impact on the YA novel and revealed the direction in which fiction for teenagers

was moving. Two were by the same author, Paul Zindel (who also wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds): The Pigman (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) and My Darling, My Hamburger (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). The third is unique in that it was written by a teenager, seventeen-year-old S. E. Hinton. The Outsiders (New York: Viking Press, 1967) has enjoyed phenomenal success and popularity, perhaps because it is the first YA book with an author who understands the pains of growing up from the "inside" and not through the hazy images of memory.

The "outsiders" of the title of Hinton's book are "greasers"--teenagers who live in urban slums and are in constant conflict with the "socs," their peers from more privileged homes. This book deals with a subject that had been largely ignored in YA books: class distinctions in America.

Pony, the fourteen-year-old narrator, lives with his two older brothers; their parents have been killed in a car accident. The three boys inhabit a world where shoplifting, vandalism and street fights are accepted as normal. They smoke, get drunk, and on occasion, steal. Their attitude toward the girls in the neighborhood ("greaser broads") is crude: "I don't know how to explain it," says Pony. "We try to be nice to the girls we see once in

awhile, like cousins or girls in the class; but we still watch a girl go by on a street corner and say all kinds of lousy stuff about her."<sup>17</sup>

Violence is commonplace in Pony's life. He is beaten up by a gang of socs early in the novel; later he is involved in another fight when one of the socs is stabbed to death. He runs away with a friend and hides for days in an abandoned church. Then, in a somewhat melodramatic climax, the two greasers risk their own lives to save some children who are trapped in the church when it catches fire.

There are few adults in The Outsiders; the parents of Pony's friends are indifferent to the problems of their children. The teenagers are isolated, alienated and suspicious. Their slang reflects the attitudes and the language of the '60's; for example, they refer to the police as "the fuzz." Even the conflicts over hair styles place the novel in the era of hippies and Woodstock. Yet the continued popularity of The Outsiders indicates that it has a strong appeal for the readers for whom it was intended.

Zindel's My Darling, My Hamburger deals with another subject that had previously been avoided in YA novels: premarital sex. Like The Outsiders, it presents young characters who are, or at least feel, alone and quite

cut off from the world of their parents. Maggie Kazinski, the girl from whose viewpoint much of the novel is told, is overweight, insecure, and unsophisticated. She wears a perfume her date describes as "Evening in Bayonne." Her best friend, Liz, is a hard and selfish girl who is also refreshingly honest. The two of them begin double dating with two boys: Dennis, a vulnerable, shy young man, and Sean, who is as angry and frightened as Liz.

The parents in this novel have not been accidentally destroyed, as in The Outsiders, but they are of no help to their children. Liz is almost driven into a sexual involvement with Sean by her mother's indifference and her stepfather's distrust. One night when Liz calls home to report that they've had car trouble and will be late, her stepfather implies that she's lying and calls her a tramp. Sean's father is even more repulsive. A man whose interests seem limited to money, liquor and sex, he brags to friends about the imagined exploits of his son: "He's going at it hot and heavy with that Carstensen girl!"<sup>18</sup> The title of the novel comes from an incident in a health class, when a teacher is asked how a girl can handle pressure to have sex. The teacher replies that she might suggest going out for a hamburger instead.

Surrounded by such cloddish adults, the teenagers are depicted as people who simply don't know how to deal

with the strong new emotions and desires of the teens. The boys make passes at the girls without being sure what response they want or can expect. The girls desperately want their dates to like them and yet fear ending up with the sort of reputation earned by the legendary, quiet Barbara Johnson, who "entertained eleven seniors in the parking lot behind the Hollywood diner."<sup>19</sup>

Finally Liz yields to Sean's demands and becomes pregnant. At first he offers to marry her; after a conference with his father, the offer changes to money for an abortion. The abortion is botched, Liz has to be hospitalized, and the whole story comes out. The novel ends with the two couples broken up and also the friendship between Maggie and Liz destroyed.

Like The Outsiders and My Darling, My Hamburger, Zindel's The Pigman is related from the viewpoint of alienated and rebellious teenagers. John Conlan expresses his hatred for school by setting off bombs in the boys' bathroom, and habitually refers to his father as Bore. Lorraine Jensen is the insecure victim of an overcritical mother. As John and Lorraine become friends, their favorite leisure activity is going to the Moravian Cemetery to drink beer. They also like to play practical jokes.

One of these involves a telephone call in which they pretend to represent an imaginary organization that is



collecting money. Mr. Pignati, a lonely old man, responds to their call by offering to contribute to their "cause," and they go to his house to collect. This is the beginning of an unusual relationship between the two teenagers and the widower. He entertains them at his house, takes them to the zoo to show them a baboon he enjoys watching, buys them presents, and in reaching out to them breaks through the shell of cynicism that they've been using for protection.

Then Mr. Pignati has a heart attack. He gives John and Lorraine the keys to his house, and while he is in the hospital they decide to have a small party there. The party gets out of hand; a rather nasty boy named Norton arrives with some of his friends, everyone gets drunk, Mr. Pignati's treasured glass pigs (a collection which he related to his name) are broken. Lorraine and John try halfheartedly to calm things down, but they don't get far. In the midst of this chaos "The Pigman," who has been dismissed from the hospital, arrives by taxi and walks in through the front door.

There is no way for John and Lorraine to undo what has been done. They apologize, clean up the mess, offer to pay for the damages, try to repair the friendship. A few weeks later they take Mr. Pignati to the zoo again, hoping to recapture the pleasures they'd had before on

such excursions. Mr. Pignati collapses in front of the baboon cage and dies of a second heart attack.

Lorraine attempts to confide in her mother, only to be quizzed as to whether the old man "tried anything sexual." John is left with some very dark thoughts about responsibility: "There was no one else to blame anymore. No Bores or Old Ladies or Nortons, or assassins waiting at the bridge. And there was no place to hide--our life would be what we made of it--nothing more, nothing less. Baboons, baboons. They build their own cages, we could almost hear the Pigman whisper, as he took his children with him."<sup>20</sup>

These three novels illustrate the basic changes that took place in the YA novel at the end of the 1960's:

1. The old taboos were challenged or abandoned. The teenagers in these novels drink, smoke, swear, have sex (or at least want to), and speak disrespectfully of their parents. They inhabit a world that is confusing, changing, and occasionally violent. Friends may be hurt or even die. Home is no longer the secure place of refuge pictured in the Junior Novels; divorce is a commonplace occurrence.

2. With the end of taboos came the demise of the happy ending or "positive outlook" that had been mandatory. A decided swing toward pessimism or even cynicism

can be seen in the YA novels of the late '60's.

3. One of the most obvious indicators of the "new realism" in YA books was the negative view of adults in many of these novels. In place of the remote but benevolent parents of Junior Novels came a parade of incompetent, apathetic or destructive mothers, fathers, stepmothers and stepfathers who sometimes provided a convenient excuse on which teenaged protagonists (and readers?) could blame their troubles. After a few years of books featuring these very unsympathetic adults, the trend changed again to a more realistic blend of good and bad in all characters. This more recent trend will be discussed in a later chapter.

4. Finally, and perhaps most important, there was a shift of emphasis from problem-solving to growing in understanding and awareness. The simplistic answers of the Junior Novels (be friendly; be honest; help others; find the right boyfriend) began to be replaced by consideration of questions that have no easy answers. Like John Conlan in The Pigman, young protagonists discovered that "they build their own cages" and that some problems cannot be solved like mathematical formulations; they can only be experienced.

The evolution of the YA novel parallels the evolution of adolescence as a distinct period in the lives of Americans. Before considering some of the novels of the '70's,

it is important to ask another question which is being raised by a number of critics today. Why a separate category of books published for teenagers? If these novels are becoming more complex and more like adult books, and if teenagers are growing up faster than they did fifty years ago, why not simply direct them to the many excellent adult books which they are perfectly capable of reading?

## Chapter Two: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lou Willet Stanek, "Adults and Adolescents: Ambivalence and Ambiguity," Library Journal, 15 February 1974, p. 531.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Z. Friedenberg, The Vanishing Adolescent, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Friedenberg, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Hill Arbuthnot and Zena Sutherland, Children and Books, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1972), p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Andrews, ed., Concise Dictionary of American History, (New York: Scribner's, 1962), p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Donelson, "Books You Possibly Missed in your Youth," Arizona English Bulletin, 18 (April 1976), p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Rose Wilder Lane, Let the Hurricane Roar, (New York: Longmans, Green, 1933), p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Martinec, "Popular--But Not Just a Part of the Crowd: Implications of Formula Fiction for Teenagers," English Journal, March, 1971, p. 344.

<sup>9</sup> Martinec, p. 343.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Stein, "From Happiness to Hopelessness: A Decade of Adolescent Girls," Arizona English Bulletin, 18 (April 1976), p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Low, Hold Fast the Dream, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), pp. 244-245.

<sup>12</sup> Beverly Cleary, Fifteen, (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1956), p. 254.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Gregor Felsen, Hot Rod, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> Martinec, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> Martinec, p. 343.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Peck, "In The Country of Teenage Fiction," American Libraries, April, 1973, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup>S. E. Hinton, The Outsiders, (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 36.

<sup>19</sup>Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Zindel, The Pigman, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 181-182.

## Chapter Three

### Why YA Novels?

A recent poll of high school students' reading preferences listed Blatty's The Exorcist as the title mentioned most often. Among the top ten books on the list, seven were published as adult books. The teenagers were reading shockers like Jaws and The Godfather, popular fantasies such as The Hobbit and Jonathon Livingston Seagull, and standard works like The Great Gatsby, Gone With The Wind, Of Mice and Men, and Brave New World, in addition to the YA books written specifically with them in mind.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the increasing sophistication of American adolescents and the availability of almost unlimited amounts and varieties of reading material, it is important to consider whether there is any justification for a special category of literature known as the YA novel. Some critics believe that there is no justification, that a high quality YA novel might just as well be published as an adult book and that the others shouldn't be published at all. J. Donald Adams wrote in the New York Times in 1965 (before most of the recent changes in style and content): "If I were asked for a list of symptoms pointing to what is wrong with American education and American culture, or

to the causes for the prolongation of American adolescence, I should place high on the list the multiplication of books designed for readers in their teens. . . . The teen-age book, it seems to me, is a phenomenon which belongs properly only to a society of morons."<sup>2</sup>

In the past, a variety of reasons has been presented to validate the existence of the adolescent novel. A main justification has been their didactic purpose, and, from the "dime novels" on, the emphasis on didacticism is evident. Young readers were supposed to learn from their reading, and that learning was to be both factual and moral. Of course, the notion that books should improve the mind or the character has not been limited to adolescent literature, but for many years it was especially important in books for teenagers. Perhaps this is because adolescence is a time when parental and educational authorities are losing their grip on rapidly maturing teenagers, and books are seen as potentially "good influences."

In the early days of the Junior Novel, didacticism was heavy-handed and obvious. Young protagonists always learned something as they weathered whatever personal crisis the book dramatized. Virtue was triumphant in the end, and the adolescent became a Better Person who was ready to Take His Place In Society. One critic called these didactic books for teenagers "tendentious, sentimental,



gutless, and even nauseous."<sup>3</sup>

Though didacticism is much less obtrusive in today's YA novels, the urge to teach has not been completely left behind. Some teach in the sense that they present an inside view of another culture or another time in history. Some deal with a social issue in such a way that the desired conclusion of the reader is obvious: racism is wrong, homosexuals should not be persecuted, premarital pregnancy should be avoided, alcoholism is a serious problem. Some simply indicate an affirmative attitude toward life.

There are commentators who condemn even the mild sort of teaching found in modern YA novels. For example, Jane Abrahamson feels that there is a disguised didacticism in some recent YA books which is worse than that of older books because the modern version is dishonest. Pretending to be realistic explorations of different life-styles, some of these novels are actually moralistic stories which confirm traditional values, according to Abrahamson. She observes that such books talk about the pain and uncertainty of maturing only to conclude with "weak testimonies to life's essential goodness."<sup>4</sup>

It might be argued that testimonies to life's essential goodness are not necessarily weak, and that the affirmation of traditional values does not destroy the value of a

literary work. It would be impossible to escape all moral shadings in YA novels, just as it is impossible for authors of adult novels to remain totally objective.

An example of the sort of approach deplored by Abrahamson is the philosophy of Madeline L'Engle, author of the Newbery Prize-winning A Wrinkle In Time: "In the book . . . there is one thing I may not do: I may not despair. I may show a great deal that is wrong in the world; my protagonist may have to hurt a great deal in order to grow and deepen; but there is below all that happens a yes to the fact of existence, and an affirmation of an underlying 'all-rightness' despite immediate 'all-wrongness.'"<sup>5</sup>

The difference between L'Engle's "yes" and the traditional didacticism of books for adolescents is one of purpose. L'Engle's affirmation is not imposed on her books because of a desire to improve the reader; it is an outgrowth of her personal philosophy. Any writer may be permitted her personal vision. If that vision is artistically incorporated into the literary work, it may be a "testimony to life's essential goodness" without being didactic. What has been left behind by most writers of YA books of the '70's is the assumption that the value of fiction for teenagers lies in its potentially uplifting or educational effect.

away from didacticism, YA novels may be moving more toward the best children's literature than toward current trends in publishing for adults.

Some have argued that any sort of reading will be good for the teenager. This general belief in the value of reading might be called the "bridge to good literature theory," and it is another traditional justification for the YA novel. Expressed crudely, it is the idea that teenagers are not quite bright enough to comprehend the classics, but they should be kept reading until they are ready for fiction of lasting value. YA novels thus become a second-class literature, books of simplified ideas and watered-down prose for the immature.

In 1964 Cecilia Magaliff studied a number of books for teenagers. She concluded in her book, The Junior Novel, that of the books she considered, "none is a bridge to good literature."<sup>7</sup> As long as books for adolescents were viewed as less challenging versions of "good literature," they could not very well aspire to being taken seriously as a legitimate and separate genre. A literary genre is not a bridge to anything; it must stand on its own merits.

More than a hundred and thirty years ago an unsigned article on children's books (supposedly written by a woman named Elizabeth Rigby) pointed out the fallacy in the "bridge" philosophy: "Children are distinguished

from ourselves less by an inferiority than by a difference in capacity . . . A mere weaker decoction of the same ideas and subjects that suit us will be very unsuitable to them. A genuine child's book is as little like a book for grown people cut down, as the child himself is like a little old man."<sup>8</sup>

What, then, are the distinguishing qualities of the modern YA novel? If it is not to be seen as a teaching device or a sop to the immature reader, how is it unique? Perhaps the same distinction Rigby made between the children's book and the adult book can be made here. The teenager is not so much inferior as different, and it is when the YA novel takes those differences into account that it justifies its own existence.

Subject matter is one obvious distinction. There are certain concerns which are particularly strong in the teen years: personal identity, learning to make moral choices, the relatively new pressures of sexuality without socially acceptable outlets, the need to break free from the controls of parents and institutions. It is easy enough to think of some well-known adult novels which also touch on these topics. However, adult books tend to look back on the particular experiences of adolescence from a later perspective or to integrate them into the

viewpoint of adulthood.

Critic John Rowe Townsend has written that adult books "don't deal, or don't deal adequately, with a great many topics that are highly interesting to adolescents." He describes the plot of My Darling, My Hamburger, as an example, and comments: "It's about the predicament--funny, bitter and nervewracking--of men and women who are also children."<sup>9</sup>

YA novels center particularly on this predicament, and on the pains and changes that accompany the journey through the passage from childhood to adulthood. They do, then, have a rather narrow and specialized emotional subject matter. However, the emotional stress of the teens can be related to a wide variety of settings, historical periods, personal and social problems. It can be conveyed through infinite variations of character, for all persons must pass through adolescence. It may be revealed in realistic novels, mysteries, fantasies, science fiction tales, or westerns; in comedy, tragedy, and all the shades between; in fast-moving adventure stories or satires or quiet, thoughtful novels.

One difference, then, is in the emotional focus of the YA book. Author M. E. Kerr (Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, Is That You, Miss Blue?) says simply that the adult world has different

pains. "The material in the adult novels is less basic, from my point of view, perhaps more cynical." Kerr, who has published both adult and YA novels, notes that what the adolescent lacks is not intelligence or education so much as years of experience of the subtleties of human interactions.<sup>10</sup>

In order to sustain the emotional focus on the concerns of adolescence, YA novels almost without exception use the viewpoint of a teenaged protagonist. Only one of the novels read in preparation of this paper was written from the viewpoint of an adult. That one, Scott O'Dell's Child of Fire, depicted a rebellious Chicano youth from the viewpoint of a sympathetic probation officer, but the protagonist was clearly the young man and not the narrator.

Sylvia Engdahl, another author of YA books, cites two basic distinctions between YA and adult novels. One is the difference in viewpoint or emotional focus which has already been discussed. The other is the matter of complexity. Interrelationships in the YA novel are not as subtle or involved as in most adult fiction, according to Engdahl. "This is not because they are 'too young' for adult material; it is because they have had too little time to develop background."<sup>11</sup>

It is important to define this second distinction carefully, because it could easily be confused with the

idea that YA novels are merely watered-down adult books. To say that books for adolescents are less complex does not mean that they are shallow or trivial. As juvenile editor Jean Karl has pointed out: "A book with good unity can have limitless depth. Only the circumference need be limited."<sup>12</sup>

There is no predetermined length for the YA novel, but the usual range is from 150 to 250 pages. The YA novel usually covers only a short time period, a single setting, a few characters, and a basic conflict. But within these limitations, as Karl says, the novel may have great depth and may suggest much more than it presents on the surface. The issues dealt with in these novels are often extremely intricate, and simplistic answers are no longer acceptable. The distinction in complexity refers more to form than to content.

This second difference is a limitation, in a way, but it may also be a virtue in the hands of a skilled writer. Adolescent readers are less willing to put up with wordiness than their elders, and the better YA novels demonstrate a refreshing economy of language. All the bewildering ironies of human conflict are packed into a sentence in Collier's My Brother Sam Is Dead: "In war the dead pay the debts of the living."<sup>13</sup> An author of adult books might have poured out pages of philosophy while trying to make the same point.

In summary, the Young Adult novel of recent years has differed from general fiction in two basic ways. Its subject matter relates somehow to the special concerns of the teens: usually this subject matter is presented through an inside view of a teenaged protagonist. In form, it is less complex than the typical adult book.

This description still does not make a case for the YA novel as a legitimate literary genre. Certainly it would be absurd to suggest that teenagers should read nothing but YA books. As was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, young adults can and do read a great variety of material that appeals to all ages. And as YA novels leave the formula behind and become increasingly diverse, the line between YA and adult books becomes fainter. Often it is only an accident of publishing that places a book in one category or the other. There is already a good deal of crossing back and forth from one category to the other; there should be more. YA novels and adult books have more in common than they have differences, just as teenagers are more like adults than not. Readers on both sides are cheated of some exceptional reading experiences when they limit themselves to one category of fiction.

If YA novels are to be considered a legitimate literary form, they must be subjected to the same standards that



are applied to all good literature. Of course, libraries are filled with books for all ages which would not qualify as "literature" by any very demanding standard. But to say that fiction written for teenagers does not need to be judged according to the criteria applied to adult books is to keep the YA book permanently in an irresponsible and immature world of its own.

It seems evident that the same qualities that mark good fiction for adults must be present in the outstanding YA book. A compelling plot, a skillful use of setting and mood, a fresh and appropriate style, an imaginative depth and meaningful theme are essential in any memorable literary work. But if any one attribute might be singled out as essential to the YA novel, it would be the presentation of believable, many-faceted and original characters.

The central task of adolescence is the achieving of a sense of personal identity apart from the family, institutions, and even the peer group. This task involves the struggle for independence and the acceptance of responsibility, the need for self-confidence, and the creation of one's own system of values. Adolescence is the time when we begin to be ourselves, our own persons. As Edgar Friedenberg puts it: "Personalization is the metier of adolescence. Of all persons, adolescents are the most intensely personal; their intensity is often uncomfortable

to adults."<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, if there is any justification for a separate category of literature known as the YA novel, it is the opportunity for the young reader to experience universal human situations (loneliness, love, grief, sex, guilt, death, freedom) through adequately drawn fictional adolescents. All of us go to literature because we are not satisfied to live only one life. We know the sensation of "losing ourselves" in novels, of sharing the fortunes and misfortunes of characters who we know are the creations of their authors, and who yet seem more "real" than our next-door neighbors. We finish a memorable novel with the feeling that we are richer in experience than we were before; not that we have learned anything so much as that we have lived more.

The teenaged reader is capable of appreciating books that deal with more than his own particular world, of course. He can identify for a while with a well-drawn elderly character, just as a seventy-year-old reader can be Huckleberry Finn for a few days. There is one difference, though: the seventy-year-old has been fourteen, however dim his memory; the fourteen-year-old has not yet been seventy.

Author Richard Peck (Representing Superdoll) sees the YA novel as a solace and a joy for pressured teenagers.

He speaks without apology of the need for "good yarns;" like Singer, he feels that adult novels have become too cynical and utilitarian. The best YA books, says Peck, "allow a little liberating laughter . . . raise human questions without giving pat solutions and stock scapegoats . . . recognize and salute youth as a part of the continuum of life."<sup>15</sup>

It may seem trivial to suggest that enjoyment might be a justification for the existence of the YA novel, but it is exactly the pleasure of living another life through fiction that seems to be the special gift of this form to its readers. If the novel is well crafted, that pleasure will be greater; if the author is a person of exceptional imaginative power, the pleasure will be lasting as well. This sort of enjoyment is more than the momentary pleasure of the comic book or the movie magazine, but rather the sort defined by critic John Rowe Townsend as "enjoyment not only in the shallow sense of easy pleasure, but enjoyment of a profounder kind; enjoyment of the shaping by art of the raw material of life, and enjoyment, too, of the skill with which that shaping is performed; enjoyment in the stretching of one's imagination, the deepening of one's experience, and the heightening of one's awareness; an enjoyment which may be intense even if the material of the literature is sad or painful."<sup>16</sup>

That sort of enjoyment is the legacy of all good literature. If adolescents can find it in the particular experiences of teenaged characters in YA novels, that would seem to be justification enough. The balance of this study will consider trends in YA novels of the 1970's, and the ways in which certain of these novels may provide such literary delight.

Although teenagers may learn facts from their reading and will surely be confronted with some sort of values in books, the didactic justification for the genre is no longer valid, if it ever was. Obvious preaching will be rejected by young readers just as it is resisted by adults. As YA novels have moved away from the moralistic approach, they have tended to present life situations as realistically as possible and have allowed the reader to make his own judgments. Aesthetic considerations have replaced the utilitarian concern that some particular learning take place.

Oddly enough, one well-known critic has asserted that today it is adult books which are becoming more and more didactic and children's books which remain as a bastion of traditional literary values. Isaac Bashevis Singer stated in a New York Times article that adult literature "aspires more and more to be didactic and utilitarian. It doesn't seem to matter what lesson it teaches--a sociological, psychological or humanistic one--as long as it teaches." Singer believes that the art of storytelling is being lost, that adult novelists tend to deal with types and groups rather than individuals, and that adult books today are afraid to look back, afraid of folklore and fantasy. Younger readers, he says, are "still selfish enough to demand an interesting story."<sup>6</sup> As they move

## Chapter Three: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joanna V. McKenzie, "A Survey of Leisure Time Reading of Adolescents," Arizona English Bulletin, 18 (April 1976), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> J. Donald Adams, Speaking of Books and Life, (New York: Holt, 1965), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> Martinec, p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Abrahamson, "Still Playing It Safe: Restricted Realism in Teen Novels," School Library Journal, May, 1976, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Madeline L'Engle, "Books That Say 'Yes,'" The Writer, 89 (June 1976), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, "I See the Child as a Last Refuge," New York Times Book Review, Section Seven, Part Two, 9 November 1969, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Magaliff, The Junior Novel, (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1964), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> "Children's Books," Quarterly Review, 74 (June-October 1844), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> John Rowe Townsend, "It Takes More Than Pot and the Pill," New York Times Book Review, Section Seven, Part Two, 9 November 1969, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Janeczko, "An Interview With M. E. Kerr," English Journal, December, 1975, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Engdahl, "Do Teenage Novels Fill a Need?" English Journal, February, 1975, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Karl, From Childhood to Childhood: Children's Books and their Creators, (New York: John Day Co., 1970), p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, My Brother Sam Is Dead, (New York: Four Winds Press, 1974), p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> Friedenber, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Peck, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup>John Rowe Townsend, "Stands of Criticism," Top of the News, June, 1971, p. 354.

## Chapter Four

## Goodbye, South High: Setting

The locker room was noisy with the bubbling high spirits of the players . . .<sup>1</sup>

In the high-school auditorium intense quiet was followed by a stir of interest, most vocal among the older boys. Across the center aisle from where she sat, Rette could see Jeff Chandler leaning forward, his eyes on the speaker, his lips slightly parted, as though he were hanging on every word . . .<sup>2</sup>

The rink was crowded, echoing with voices and the rumble of skates on the wood flooring. Lively, sweeping waltz music blared . . .<sup>3</sup>

Andy, Rette and Peg, the viewpoint characters in these three Junior Novels, attend South High, Avondale High, and Willow Park High, respectively. They live in stable, suburban communities untroubled by crime or pollution. Their fathers are professional men, their mothers cheerful housewives, their friends white middle-class teenagers. Their world centers in the high school auditorium, the locker room, the skating rink, the malt shop. The boys hang out with "the fellows" and worry about winning Saturday's game. The girls call each other on the telephone and worry about getting the boys' attention.

When Junior Novels did move away from the suburban high school setting, it was usually to place the same



WASPish characters in exotic places, either through a summer job or a glamorous career. Nursing was especially popular as a subject for career books; there were dude ranch nurses, navy nurses, mountaineer nurses, and cruise ship nurses. Male characters went to West Point, learned to fly, or served as apprentice game wardens. But the setting, however unusual, served only as a proving ground for the hero or heroine in the mastering of whatever task or problem was presented. Historical novels emphasized the virtues of pioneers and the triumph of Right; here again, the setting was merely a backdrop or an obstacle to be overcome.

YA novels of the late 1960's and 1970's have explored a much wider variety of settings and have begun to use the sense of "place" in more imaginative ways. The Junior Novels were written with the assumption that teenagers wanted to read about themselves, and about familiar places or places that they might visit. More recent YA novels recognize that not all readers are alike, and that young readers are also interested in unfamiliar settings and cultures.

William Armstrong's Sounder (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), a Newbery Prize winner, is set in the rural South during the Depression. The story could not be told in any other setting; the poverty, loneliness and fear in

which the characters live seem to rise out of the flat, dry farmland on which they struggle to survive from day to day. Sounder, the family hunting dog, is no pampered pet. The black family whose story is told in this novel lives through the winter on what they earn hunting: fifty cents for a possum, two dollars for a coon hide. The only additional income is provided by the walnuts the mother picks and sells.

It is more than a sentimental scene when Sounder is shot and horribly wounded by a white sheriff. This novel captures the ugliness of rural poverty. The boy through whose eyes it is seen drags himself out of bed before dawn, trying to be the "man" of the house and still somehow get the education that he knows is the only way out. He walks eight miles to school, only to be berated by the teacher and ridiculed by the other students for being late. He walks over many more miles of dusty roads, searching for the chain gang where his father is working after being arrested for poaching.

The sense of an individual at the mercy of his environment is heightened by the fact that the protagonist is not named in the novel; he is a black boy growing up in a harsh world which has no ready-made place for him. Yet the themes of sorrow, love and endurance which are woven into this book transform what might have been a hopeless story into one that is oddly triumphant. The impression is left

that the boy will survive and somehow carve a life for himself.

The world of Sounder is a long way from the locker room at South High. So is the locale of Deathwatch, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), Robb White's thriller about a young man being hunted in an unnamed southwestern desert by a madman with a .358 Magnum rifle.

This suspense novel has only two characters until the last few chapters: Ben, a college student who works as a hunting guide when he is not in school, and Madec, a wealthy businessman who has hired Ben to help him find and kill a bighorn sheep. When they discover that Madec's first shot has killed, not a sheep, but an old prospector, a grim struggle begins. Madec does not want the bad publicity and the legal entanglements that will result; Ben assumes that the incident must be reported. So Madec strips Ben, takes over the hunting camp and sends the guide out into the desert. All Madec has to do is wait and make sure Ben does not get back to civilization alive.

As Ben struggles to survive, the desert becomes almost a third character in the novel. It is "a trap, an enormous bowl, the bottom of it open, rough desert, the sides mountains. Like a little pile of lettuce in the center of a salad bowl were the stubby little mountains where

he stood."<sup>4</sup>

Ben knows the desert well enough to use the few aids it offers a trapped and naked human. He digs woodpecker nests out of the inside of a giant saguaro plant, and wears them on his feet to protect them from the rocks. Later, he makes himself a pair of sandals by weaving together the tough leaves of a sotol, a yucca-like plant. He escapes the killing heat by squirming through a crack in a volcanic cone, and manages to fashion a crude sling-shot with which he can kill a small bird for food.

Finally Ben tricks Madec, sneaks into the camp, gets the gun, wounds the older man and drives back to civilization with him. The novel does not end on this note of victory, however; the authorities in the small town near the desert believe Madec's version of what has happened. Until Madec is finally caught in a lie, it appears that it will be Ben who will end up in jail.

Deathwatch is doubly frightening because the protagonist is threatened both by Madec, the human killer, and by the killer-desert. Another YA novel which uses its setting as a sort of adversary is Dust of the Earth (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), written by Vera and Bill Cleaver.

The locale this time is western South Dakota. Like Souder, Dust of the Earth centers on the trials of the rural poor during the Depression. The Drawn family is

white, and they live by herding sheep in Chokecherry, South Dakota, but their creed is similar to the determination of the southern blacks in Sounder. Fern Drawn, the narrator, expresses it simply: "We will persist."<sup>5</sup>

Persistence is required as they cope with droughts, blizzards, wolves, and the idiosyncracies of sheep. A new baby is born during a winter storm; the mother simply locks herself in the bedroom and stuffs a rag in the keyhole. There are no kindly neighbors boiling water, no doctor or midwife appearing at the last minute. The father, who has so far been able to stretch their meager income with a job in town, is fired the same night.

Fern Drawn quits school for a year to herd the sheep. She assists in the birthing of lambs, (a "bitter mystery"),<sup>6</sup> and later in the docking and castration and sheering of the animals. The life is not described sentimentally, and it is not one that would appeal to many modern readers. Yet Fern does communicate an appealing toughness that seems connected with the hard land in which she lives:

"I was prairie, my roots in the roots of pioneer, and the pioneer has always known there is no easy deliverance."<sup>7</sup>

Nor is there an "easy deliverance" for the young of urban ghettos. In Sharon Bell Mathis's Teacup Full of Roses (New York: Viking, 1972), the young black protagonist, Joey Brooks, does all the "right" things to win his way out of the self-defeating patterns of poverty. He learns

to take care of himself in fights, but stays out of jail. He finishes his high school education, holds down a job, puts money in the bank, gets engaged.

But Joey has a family. His older brother, Paul, a talented artist, is a heroin addict who will steal anything, betray anyone, to support his habit. Their mother loves only Paul, and in her concern for him ignores the rest of the family. The younger brother is a brilliant boy named Davey who depends on Joe. When Davey needs glasses, for instance, it is Joe and not the parents who supplies the money. Determined to get Davey out of the destructive life of the ghetto, Joe joins the Navy and gives all his savings to Davey. The money is stolen by Paul. In a fight with the pusher to whom Paul has turned over the money, Davey is shot and killed.

Like the inhospitable land of Sounder, Deathwatch and Dust of the Earth, the city streets trap and torment the people of Teacup Full of Roses. All their talents, dreams and efforts leak away in the brick-and-neon jungle that contains their lives. Joe escapes by making up stories. He invents a magic place "where trouble never comes. In a teacup. A teacup full of roses."<sup>8</sup> He describes the place to his dying brother: "Everything is real good there, Davey--good like you. Nobody got to worry and fight and stuff like that. The people are together, and trouble

never comes. All the mothers love you and tell you, Davey. I swear, man. And all the fathers are strong. The sisters are pretty. And the brothers help each other. It's a love place. A real black love place."<sup>9</sup>

This imaginary place, contrasted with the reality of life on the streets, only sharpens the sense of waste and despair that permeates Teacup Full of Roses. Like American fiction in general, YA novels of recent years have emphasized the powerlessness of the individual caught in circumstances he cannot control. The young people in the four novels discussed above manage to survive, but not to achieve their objectives and certainly not to triumph over their environments.

And they are shaped by the struggle. All of them emerge scarred, physically and mentally, by their environments. Their problems have not been solved so much as they have been lived through. No date to the prom, no victory in a basketball game, no scholarship to Yale or proposal of marriage will certify their success. They do not win; they endure.

As YA novels move away from the middle-class suburban settings of the past, they are also departing from the emphasis on problem-solving and winning. Books set in the Chicano culture of the Southwest (Scott O'Dell's Child of Fire) or the violence of the French and Indian

wars (Robert Peck's Fawn) described "problems" that were far too big to be "solved" by an enterprising teenager. A novel about the horrors of the slave trade (Fox's Slave Dancer) could not very well celebrate the rewards of conformity. Books about juvenile delinquents from broken homes (Hinton's That Was Then, This Is Now; Rumblefish) could not portray the sort of problems that are solved by a word of advice from a kindly, pipe-smoking father with a briefcase.

Some of the YA fiction of the '70's does deal with teenagers who could be considered middle class and who live in more or less familiar settings. But even in these books, there are changes. The characters may have names like Frankie Rollo, Maggie Kazinski, Tucker Woolf, or Emile Janza, giving a sort of "ethnic" flavor to the novels.

Whatever the setting, it is likely to be an integral part of the recent YA novel rather than just a backdrop for the predictable tale of teenage trials and triumphs. The young characters in these newer books have become what they are in particular places; it is this sense of place that is one sign of maturation in YA fiction.

None of the books read for this paper has a stronger sense of place than Jean George's Newbery Prize-winning Julie of the Wolves (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). The place is modern Alaska, and the viewpoint character is an



Eskimo girl who has two names.

Her school name is Julie; her Eskimo name, Miyax. Throughout the book she is caught between these two names and the two worlds they represent. With her mother dead and her father drafted by the military, she has the choice of boarding school or marriage. She chooses marriage to the son of a friend of her father's. The marriage quickly withers, and the girl leaves her young husband and strikes out across the North Slope of Alaska with the vague intention of going to San Francisco, where she has a friend.

Most of the novel is an epic of survival. Here again, the setting is almost a character in the story. Lost in the wilderness, Julie knows enough to use the cold and barren landscape rather than fighting it. With her few precious possessions--sewing needles, a knife, boots, matches--she is able to find food and shelter. She attaches herself to a wolf pack, and through amazing patience she gains their acceptance. They share their food with her and save her from the deadliest enemy of all--loneliness. She names the wolves and learns to know their personalities. All of this is portrayed without once making the animals seem cute or humanoid.

Toward the end of the novel they near civilization. Now it is the wolves that are in danger. There is a bounty on wolves, and the whites ("gusaks") hunt them

from airplanes. When the leader of the wolf pack, Amaroq, is killed by a hunter who does not even bother to land and pick up his body, Julie is so embittered that she is not sure she wants to live with humans again.

The reader needs a strong stomach in some parts of Julie of the Wolves. Julie eats meat that has been regurgitated by a wolf, then the raw viscera of a baby owl and raw caribou liver taken right out of the carcass. This is not a book for the squeamish, but it does have the sound of authentic information about life in the Arctic. Jean George is a professional naturalist, and her descriptions of the wolves are based upon long observation.

When Julie finally does make it back to civilization, she finds her father, Kapugen. She has remembered him as a proud Eskimo, a practitioner of the old ways, a keeper of Eskimo culture. Now she finds that he has married a white woman and is one of those who hunt wolves from airplanes. His house is full of the marks of the white man's way of life.

Julie/Miyax realizes now that there is no choice; events have chosen for her. She writes a poignant song about her discovery:

The seals are scarce and the whales are almost gone.  
The spirits of the animals are passing away.  
Amaroq, Amaroq, you are my adopted father.

My feet dance because of you.  
My eyes see because of you.  
My mind thinks because of you.  
And it thinks, on this thundering night,  
That the hour of the wolf and the Eskimo  
is over. 10

## Chapter Four: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lawrence Keating, Junior Miler, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Betty Cavanna, A Girl Can Dream, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Nancy Titus, The Right One, (New York: Lippincott, 1958), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>Robb White, Deathwatch, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup>Vera and Bill Cleaver, Dust of the Earth, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), p. 158.

<sup>6</sup>Cleaver, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup>Cleaver, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup>Sharon Bell Mathis, Teacup Full of Roses, (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup>Mathis, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup>Jean George, Julie of the Wolves, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 170.

## Chapter Five

## Almost Anything Goes: Subject Matter

Mrs. Hoffmeister, the mother of a teenaged girl, is described as an "assisted redhead" who "lives on alimony and anticipation."<sup>1</sup> One day her daughter and a friend come home from school early and find the house locked. The mother comes to the door and lets them in after a long wait. The friend takes her coat upstairs, makes a wrong turn and sees a man in Mrs. Hoffmeister's bed. Later, the same man turns up on a date with the daughter.

A situation like this one from Richard Peck's Representing Superdoll (New York: Viking, 1974) would have been unthinkable in a Junior Novel. Mothers did not even dye their hair, let alone get divorced or spend their afternoons in bed with visiting males. The only remaining taboo observed in the books read for this paper was a refusal to describe sexual activity explicitly and in detail. Sex is usually treated in the old movie style: the fade to the fireplace or a discreet skipping to the next morning.

Undoubtedly this restriction, too, will soon be tested by a YA novel (though it is questionable how much literary value, if any, has been added to adult novels by their interminable descriptions of the sex act). Alan Bennett, the narrator of M. E. Kerr's If I Love You, Am I

Trapped Forever? (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) provides an example of the way modern YA novels often side-step the question of explicit description. He informs the reader that he is not going to include any details about what goes on between him and his girlfriend, Leah: "I'm not writing this book for a bunch of voyeurs. I'm tired of books written for voyeurs. Go out and get your own experience, any of you voyeurs who happen to be reading this."<sup>2</sup>

However, as the taboos have fallen away, publishers have rushed to come out with more and more "bold" and "shocking" YA books. A few of these have been similar to the exploitative novels of the adult field. Sandra Scoppettone's Trying Hard to Hear You (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) examines the reactions of some teenagers to the discovery that two boys in their group are homosexuals. The treatment of the "goddamn queers" by their former friends is so exaggerated as to seem ludicrous. They gag one of the "faggots," strip him to his underwear, stake him out on the beach and talk about tar and feathering him.

Trying Hard to Hear You tries hard to touch all the formerly forbidden subjects: racism, heterosexual love, homosexuality, death. In a convenient and melodramatic conclusion, Phil, one of the homosexual boys, is killed in a car accident. Everyone is sobered, and there is an

emotional funeral scene. With all its pretensions of realism, Trying Hard to Hear You is pervaded by a feeling of unreality. The characters are so poorly developed as to seem almost interchangeable, and their dealings with each other never seem motivated by any sort of inner life.

The danger of the new realism in YA novels is that this sort of superficial daring will be substituted for skilled writing. John Rowe Townsend has observed that "you can't turn a bad novel into a good one by filling it with pregnancy, pot and the pill."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the new freedom does allow authors of YA books to explore topics that had formerly been ignored, neglected or treated very superficially.

What sort of subject matter interests young adult readers? Almost anything could be of interest if it were treated in a fresh and imaginative way. However, G. Robert Carlsen has suggested four areas that seem to be of special interest to teenagers:

1. "The Search"--in which a character is looking for direction or struggling to make value decisions.
2. Problems of the social order.
3. The bizarre, the offbeat, the unusual.
4. "The Transition"--dealing with "rites of passage" into adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

Four recent YA novels illustrate these interests.

They differ in focus, style, setting and characterization as well as in area of interest, and yet each deals in some way with a subject that was previously taboo in YA books: death.

The first, an example of "The Search," is Paige Dixon's May I Cross Your Golden River? (New York: Atheneum, 1975). The novel begins on the morning of Jordan Phillips's eighteenth birthday. Jordan, a bright, likable young man, is just starting college, with plans to study law. On this particular morning he notices a very slight muscular weakness, a lack of coordination that is unusual for him. The symptoms grow worse, and finally his baffled family doctor sends him to the Mayo Clinic. The diagnosis: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, often known as "Lou Gehrig's disease." The prospects: gradual weakening, a slow decline, death.

The novel chronicles Jordan's search for understanding, or at least acceptance, of his fate. The author refuses to save Jordan with an easy miracle or to descend into melodrama. The honesty with which Jordan's hopeless struggle is presented makes this a painful but very moving book. Jordan has moments of anger and self-pity; his well-meaning friends and relatives do not know what to say to him, how to help.

Jordan's eventual acceptance of death is connected



with his belief in the "on-goingness" of life, symbolized by his last ceremonial acts: serving as best man at his brother's wedding, and as godfather to his sister's newborn baby. "Life seems to have turned into a series of ceremonies," he comments.<sup>5</sup> The title of the book is taken from the ritual questioning of a children's game: "Crocodile, crocodile, may I cross your golden river?"<sup>6</sup>

As Jordan's death approaches, the novel is sad without being maudlin. It portrays the inevitable isolation of the dying person; increasingly weak, Jordan begins letting go of the concerns of the living. Still, there is no stoical acquiescence or phony courage. Jordan's last thought is one that a young adult--or anyone--can easily imagine thinking at such a moment: "Wait! I'm not ready!"<sup>7</sup>

Death wears the mask of war in My Brother Sam Is Dead by James and Christopher Collier (New York: Four Winds Press, 1974). This was an ALA Notable Book in 1974 and was nominated for a National Book Award in 1975. The novel concerns a Tory family in Connecticut during the Revolutionary War. It begins with a sort of eighteenth century generation gap; Sam, the oldest son, sides with the rebels and goes off to join the American forces under Benedict Arnold. The story is seen from the viewpoint of Tim, a younger brother. Confused by the arguments between Sam and their father, Tim observes that this war is so compli-

cated it has not one or two sides but five or six.

The troubles of civilians caught between two armies are shown as Tim's family struggles to keep a small tavern open. On a cattle-selling trip the father is captured by foragers; he eventually dies of cholera on a prison ship. At the age of fourteen, Tim is left to run the tavern with his mother. He tries to persuade Sam to come home and help, but Sam refuses. Tim sees his admired older brother clearly for the first time and realizes that Sam will not come home because he likes the excitement of war.

Finally, in December of 1778, Sam does return. Shortly after he comes home, he is falsely accused of stealing cattle. Since he is still a member of the American army, he is court martialed and sentenced to hang. General Putnam needs an example to stop looting, and a sympathetic officer explains to Tim that it doesn't matter very much whether Sam is guilty or not. So many men have died in the war that one more death is not important, except as a deterrent.

There is no glamour or high-flown patriotism in My Brother Sam Is Dead. The brutality and waste of war are portrayed in scene after scene. When all Tim's efforts fail and he goes to his brother's execution, he forces himself to watch as Sam is shot at close range. Sam's clothes catch fire, and his body jerks until someone

shoots him again. Although the family in the novel is fictional, the incident is based on actual descriptions of the execution of a seventeen-year-old soldier at the end of the Revolution.

This provocative book raises the question of whether this war was necessary, and whether any war achieves ends that cannot be reached in other ways. The father, who has previous experience in battle, forces his sons to consider what war can be like: "Have you ever seen a dear friend lying on the grass with the top of his skull off and his brains sliding out like wet oats? Have you ever looked into the eyes of a man with his throat cut and the blood pouring out between his fingers, knowing that there was nothing he could do, in five minutes he would be dead, yet still trying to beg for grace and not being able because his windpipe was cut in two?"<sup>8</sup>

Such ugly and explicit descriptions of death, like candid sex scenes, would have been considered too strong for "young readers" not long ago. Even more grim is the solitary existence of the protagonist in John Donovan's Wild in the World (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). This novel also deals with many deaths, not in war but in the harsh struggle with the elements in rural New Hampshire. It was controversial enough to rate two reviews in the New York Times, one extremely negative ("a horror story

told in monotone"<sup>9</sup>) and the other full of praise ("very close to being noble . . . more suited to contemporary children than any kind of literature I can think of"<sup>10</sup>). Its appeal is related to the third type of subject matter that is of special interest to young adults, the unusual or bizzare.

The Gridley family has lived an isolated existence on Rattlesnake Mountain for generations. As the novel opens, John Gridley is living with two older brothers, Abraham and Amos. In the first pages a series of deaths is related in a curiously detached tone. John's mother died when he was born, his father shot himself on her grave several years later (his suicide is John's first memory), a sister burned to death in a fire, two others died of scarlet fever, a brother was fatally bitten by a rattlesnake. Then, in the first chapter of Wild in the World, Abraham catches his hand on a fishhook and dies of infection; the two remaining brothers bury him, telling no one. Soon after that, Amos is kicked by a cow: "He was dead in a day or so. This left John."<sup>11</sup>

John adopts a stray dog that wanders to the isolated farm. His name for the dog--Son--indicates the loneliness that haunts this novel. John replaces human companionship with his love for this animal. When Son is bitten by a rattlesnake, John carries the dog into the house, nurses it for days, and paces through the empty rooms saying

"God!" over and over: "Nothing strange about death to me, John thought. Stop calling out 'God!' over this dog, here. God takes just as easy as gives, he thought. Hell, all those brothers and sisters, and the mother and father. Everyone dead. . . ."12

Son recovers, but then John catches pneumonia. The rest of the novel tells of his slow dying. He becomes delirious, talks with his dead brothers, imagines he is training Son to jump through hoops so he can be in the circus. In a lucid moment, John wonders who will bury him. His death is related in the same understated style as the rest of the book: "It may have been the next morning, or possibly it was three or four days later. Whenever it was, John died sitting outside the kitchen looking up at the sun breaking through the colored leaves of the great tree."13

The reviewers who praised Wild in the World spoke of its examination of love and of the isolation that is the fate of all persons, though not usually in such an extreme form. Those who disliked it felt that most readers would not make such connections and that the novel was exaggerated to the point of unbelievability in its relentless series of deaths.

The "initiation" theme is exemplified in Robert Newton Peck's A Day No Pigs Would Die (New York: Knopf,

1972). From the first episode, in which the protagonist, Rob, assists in the birth of a calf, to the conclusion, when Rob has to make arrangements for his father's funeral, this novel depicts a journey from childhood to manhood. As in the traditional initiation rites in primitive societies, there are tests to be passed. Courage and maturity must be demonstrated by the young initiate as he proves his right to be considered an adult.

Rob is the son of a man who earns his living slaughtering hogs in rural Vermont. Rob's first test comes when he makes a trip to the Rutland Fair to show his pet pig, Pinky. This section of the novel is light and entertaining. Rob sees his first public restrooms and does not know what they are. He comments: "There wasn't much to do inside except take a leak, which I did."<sup>14</sup> This first venture outside the secluded world of Shaker farmers which is all Rob has ever known prepares him for his passage to manhood.

The next test comes in a harrowing episode when Rob and his father try to "weasel" a dog. The idea is to shut a young dog up with a weasel in order to teach the dog the excitement of the kill and make it a fierce hunter. However, this puppy is so badly injured by the weasel that they are forced to shoot it. Both Rob and his father are sickened by the incident, and Rob learns to question the conventional wisdom of tradition.

A boar is borrowed in an attempt to mate Pinky, but she proves to be barren. Since she eats too much to be kept as a pet, Rob's father decides that she must be killed, and he insists that Rob help. This test is even harder, and Rob cries when he sees his father bash in his pet's skull. The initiation theme is made explicit by the father, who tells Rob: "That's what being a man is all about, boy. It's just doing what's got to be done."<sup>15</sup>

The evidence that Rob has passed the tests is given when he must deal with the death of his father. Rob does what has to be done. He makes funeral arrangements, notifies the neighbors, even digs the grave himself. G. Melvin Hipps, who has done a study of A Day No Pigs Would Die as an example of male initiation rites, comments that "He has thus returned to the tribe in his new status as a man."<sup>16</sup>

With the end of taboos in YA novels, books like those described in this chapter are exploring subjects of interest to young adults in a wide variety of ways. A Day No Pigs Would Die, Wild in the World, My Brother Sam Is Dead and May I Cross Your Golden River? all deal with the previously forbidden subject of death, but they are very different. Each one finds its approach to the subject in a particular setting, an individual style of writing, a special set of characters, and in a series of events that builds to a

climax of some sort. Like other aspects of the YA novel, plot has undergone dramatic changes in the '70's. Some of these changes will be considered in the next chapter.



## Chapter Five: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Richard Peck, Representing Superdoll, (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>M. E. Kerr, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>John Rowe Townsend, "It Takes More Than Pot and the Pill," p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>G. Robert Carlsen, "For Everything There Is A Season," Top of the News, January, 1965, pp. 103-110.

<sup>5</sup>Paige Dixon, May I Cross Your Golden River?, (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 240.

<sup>6</sup>Dixon, p. 223.

<sup>7</sup>Dixon, p. 262.

<sup>8</sup>James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier, My Brother Sam Is Dead, (New York: Four Winds Press, 1974), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>June Jordan, New York Times Book Review, 12 September 1971, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Barbara Wersha, New York Times Book Review, 12 September 1971, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>John Donovan, Wild in the World, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Donovan, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>Donovan, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Newton Peck, A Day No Pigs Would Die, (New York: Knopf, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup>Peck, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup>G. Melvin Hipps, "Male Initiation Rites In A Day No Pigs Would Die," Arizona English Bulletin, 18 (April 1976), p. 163.

## Chapter Six

### The Shape of YA Fiction: Plot

An appealing teenager faces a seemingly unsolvable problem; his troubles become worse and worse, finally leading to a crisis; then there is some kind of intervention or internal change; the protagonist eventually solves his problem and there is an optimistic conclusion.

"The Formula" began with the dime novels, served as the structure of innumerable Junior Novels and series books, and survived even the advent of the Young Adult book. Like the "sin, suffer and repent" formula of the confession magazines, the formula of the adolescent novel endured partly because it was predictable and dependable. Young readers knew what to expect from these novels; they knew that Nancy Drew would always catch the criminal in the last few pages of the series mysteries and that the sports hero would either win the big game or turn into an inspiring model of good sportsmanship. The formula plot owed much of its appeal to the inevitable happy ending.

Even after the traditional taboos began to disappear in the 1960's, the basic formula remained more or less intact. The problem facing the hero or heroine might be one that could not have been discussed ten years earlier

in a Junior Novel, but there was still the crisis followed by the solution. As Lou Willett Staneck has pointed out: "A book dealing with premarital pregnancy can be as old fashioned as the cliché how-to-get-a-date-for-the-prom story."<sup>1</sup>

It was only as authors of YA novels began to get away from the compulsory happy ending that they also discarded the formula. This is not to say that all non-formula YA novels end with downbeat or ambiguous conclusions, but the trend toward more complex plotting and the trend away from the optimistic ending seem to have developed at about the same time. With the removal of taboos, YA novels became more and more realistic; eventually, this led to what has been criticized as "the grim trend." Betty Bacon is one of the critics who deplores the change, commenting that "this is no more honest realism than the too-too wholesome books of a bygone era, in which adults were all-knowing and close to perfection, and children learned to be good."<sup>2</sup>

Grim or not, YA books in the '70's have begun to break away from the formula and to explore much more varied forms. Instead of confronting the protagonist with one overwhelming problem, the author may interweave many different problems, questions, changes and encounters. Or the single protagonist may be replaced by several strong characters, with viewpoint shifting among them. The plot

may lead to a conclusion that is guardedly optimistic, ambiguous, or openly pessimistic. Four recent YA novels illustrate these changes in the shaping of material.

Closest to the traditional formula is Hope Campbell's No More Trains to Tottenville (New York: McCall, 1971). The viewpoint character is an adolescent, Jane, who also happens to have a brother named Dick. There appears to be an easily identifiable problem; the novel begins when Jane's mother announces that she has "had it" and goes to India to join an ashram. Jane struggles to cope with the feeling that her mother has deserted her and with the practical problems of housekeeping and cooking. At the end, the mother returns as unexpectedly as she left.

From this synopsis it would appear that No More Trains to Tottenville is another formula YA novel with a sort of reverse generation gap twist. However, the plot becomes much more complicated than the "bones" indicate. The central problem, which at first seems to be an external event, moves inside Jane and connects with many other kinds of conflicts and needs. Jane's problem is also linked with the struggles of the others in her family. This deepening and branching out of the basic conflict gives the novel a shape that is neither predictable nor simple.

Each member of the family takes flight in his or her own way. Dick drops out of college, goes to California,

smokes marijuana, calls home only when he needs money. Their father is likely to disappear for a weekend when the mood strikes him, traveling and eating gourmet food which he charges on his American Express Card. Wanda, the mother, who up to this point has been the conventional one, breezes off to India (using her American Express Card), leaving behind a note on the kitchen table: "Need a little rest and will be gone for awhile. Am sure you can manage. I'll be in touch later. Wanda."<sup>3</sup>

Jane reacts with shock, the shock of thinking of her mother as a separate person for the first time. She realizes that she has counted on her mother to "hold things together. So we'll be free to leave when it's time."<sup>4</sup> Now it occurs to her that her mother has also yearned for freedom. As Jane steps into the responsibilities her mother abandoned, she becomes aware of the grinding routine that has provided a stable home base for the family. At one point she notices for the first time that women are always carrying things--groceries, purses, babies--and wonders whether her mother might have gone to India just to get her hands free. "Was I going to turn into my own mother?" she asks. "When did you ever get a day off? You didn't!"<sup>5</sup>

Jane's flight is into the past. She takes the Staten Island Ferry one day, and then a train to a little town called Tottenville. There she finds a bar which has

nothing but 1940's music on the juke box, and meets a young man she calls Scorpio. Scorpio is also in flight; he wants to believe in America but cannot accept the horrors of Viet Nam and is trying to decide whether or not to evade the draft.

The two of them get drunk together and sink into a nostalgic vision of the secure life they associate with the past. They believe that "in World War Two everything was crystal clear."<sup>6</sup> Jane arrives home after being away for most of a day and a night to find that her father has called the police. Dick returns from California and their father walks out in disgust, leaving them alone.

Dick and Jane hold a "wake" for their absent parents, and for the security which they sense is slipping away. They put on old records, go through their parents' picture albums and relive the erosion of the wealthy, secure world both parents were born to. Travelling in imagination through the expansive twenties, the Depression, and World War II, they begin to sense that their own loss of security is not as new as they had believed.

Campbell expands the plot of her novel still more through her use of symbolism. The American Express Cards both parents use in their escapes are as plastic and easily abused as the modern technology which makes escape so tempting. When Jane tries to run into the past she takes

a train, not a jet or a car. The conductor is an old man she thinks of as Santa Claus, and he seems to represent the kindly and dependable authority on which she wants to base her life. It is to him that she finally confides the insight she has reached: there is no generation gap. His response is unexpected but exactly right; he offers his sympathy. If there is no generation gap there is no one to blame, and that brings the issue back around to the acceptance of responsibility.

Though the mother does return in the end, there is no pat solution to the dilemma raised in the novel. The possibility of flight remains. Scorpio disappears without a word of goodbye. Both parents frame their American Express cards and hang them on the bedroom wall with a small hammer between and a sign: "Break in case of emergency."

Robert O'Brien's Z For Zachariah (New York: Atheneum, 1975) moves further from the tradition of the happy ending with a powerful vision of life after a nuclear holocaust. There can be no satisfying resolution of "the problem," no miraculous rescue or clever escape, no return home after a journey. Home is gone, and it will never be there again.

The novel is written in the form of a diary. Its author is a girl, Ann Burden, who believes herself to be the last person alive on earth. She exists on the remains of her family's farm in a remote valley which by some

trick of topography has escaped the radioactive clouds which killed those who survived the bombs. Ann's family had driven off one day to look for other survivors while she stayed behind to take care of the animals; they never returned.

Listening to a last few radio broadcasts from distant parts of the dying earth, she has realized that the survivors were fighting over food or going crazy, and in spite of her terrible loneliness she understands that "there are worse things than being alone."<sup>7</sup> The title of the book comes from her memory of a childhood Sunday School book that began "A is for Adam" and ended "Z is for Zachariah." As a child, she had assumed that since Adam was the first man, Zachariah must be the last.

After a year of total isolation, Ann discovers that she is not the last living person. A man arrives in her valley, swathed in a plastic suit that has somehow protected him from the deadly radiation outside. Realizing that she would be totally at his mercy, she hides and watches him. As he becomes aware that the valley is not contaminated like the rest of the world, he takes off the special suit and bathes joyfully in Burden Creek--a dead stream that Ann knows is contaminated, because it flows into the valley from outside.

When she realizes that he is ill with radiation



sickness, Ann's loneliness gets the best of her and she comes out of hiding to nurse him. She learns that his name is John R. Loomis, and that he is a chemist who had invented a magnetic plastic that can repel radiation. As the nuclear war broke out he had already made the "safe-suit" and a tent with filters for water and air. He has been travelling since then, looking for other survivors.

The novel might have taken a Swiss family Robinson turn here, centering on techniques of survival and the building of a new society. For awhile Ann indulges in such dreams as Loomis recovers and they work together to reactivate the farm machinery, plant more crops, and rebuild a livable environment. She even imagines their marrying and rearing children together, children who could assure the continuation of the human race.

Loomis has similar ideas, but in his mind there is no element of partnership. He begins to dominate the relationship, ordering Ann around and making all decisions. One night, with no discussion or previous agreement, he comes to Ann's bedroom and attempts to force himself on her sexually. Unwilling to be taken over as a possession, she runs away and hides in a cave.

The struggle between them is similar to that between Madec and Ben in Deathwatch. Loomis locks the house and the general store where they have gone for supplies, and

waits for hunger to drive her back to him. Finally she manages to trick him and steal the safe-suit. She leaves the valley, hoping to find another place where it is possible to live. The conclusion is ambiguous, but not totally pessimistic. The last entry in Ann's diary is: "I am hopeful."<sup>8</sup>

Many issues are raised in Z For Zachariah: survival versus freedom, the balancing of kindness with the need for self-defense, the question of whether any sort of human relationship is better than being alone. The plot appears to be simple because it is shaped by a conflict between two people. However, it is also formed by Ann's inner struggle. The ambiguity of the ending (will she survive? is there anyone else alive on earth?) is heightened by the suspense O'Brien has created throughout the novel. This suspense results from the departure from formula that opens the way for the unexpected.

An even more complete departure from the "happily ever after" tradition is found in Robert Cormier's controversial novel, The Chocolate War (New York: Pantheon, 1974). Hailed by some reviewers as the most important YA novel of the '70's, it was attacked by others as an ugly, depressing and unnecessarily negative picture of life.<sup>9</sup>

Here the formula has been almost completely left behind. Jerry Renault, a student at a Catholic high

school, appears to be the protagonist, but the viewpoint shifts from him to other characters and back again. There seems to be a central problem--whether or not Jerry will sell chocolates to raise money for the school--but this issue is obviously a superficial one, hiding much deeper conflicts. There is a crisis, but instead of emerging triumphant or at least as a better person, Jerry is crushed by it.

Trinity High School is dominated by a sarcastic, cruel headmaster, Brother Leon, and by a gang of bullies called The Vigils who carry out his orders. When the yearly sale of chocolates begins, Brother Leon makes sure that each student promises to sell his quota of boxes. Jerry Renault decides that he doesn't want to take part, and the sale is supposed to be voluntary. The novel tells of the pressures applied to him and of his eventual capitulation. The book's title calls attention both to the trivial nature of the issue and to the fact that the conflict does, in fact, become a sort of war.

Jerry has a poster in his locker which asks the question: "Do I dare disturb the universe?" The answer suggested in The Chocolate War is no. Violence, brutality and power are the realities against which Jerry is finally helpless. The theme is repeated more than once: "The world was made up of two kinds of people--those who were victims and those who were victimized."<sup>10</sup> "People are two

things: greedy and cruel."<sup>11</sup> "And he did see--that life was rotten, that there were no heroes, really, and that you couldn't trust anybody, not even yourself."<sup>12</sup>

Adolescent sexuality is presented matter-of-factly, with the boys at Trinity sneaking looks at Playboy on the newsstands, masturbating, and practicing "eyeball rape" as girls walk by. Violence is also portrayed as a common experience. In a football practice, Jerry is hurt so badly that he vomits afterwards. The climactic scene of the novel shows Jerry being beaten senseless while a crowd of schoolmates yells for blood. The Chocolate War is a modern version of Tom Brown's School Days--as it might have been written by Norman Mailer. It leaves the impression that the young male in America grows up in a world of sadistically enforced conformity, and that the price of resisting is too high to be worth the struggle.

A few elements of the traditional YA plot remain even in the grim world of The Chocolate War. Most of the characters are adolescents. There is a central conflict in a limited time span, and a definite resolution, though it is negative. Adults are portrayed as distant and unaware of the teenagers' problems. One criticism of the book has been that it is unrealistic in this regard; neither Jerry's father nor any other parents nor the other teachers at the school are of any help at all. Only Brother Leon

knows what is going on, and he is a full-fledged villain.

M. E. Kerr's Is That You, Miss Blue? (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) departs even further from the formula. The main character is really Miss Blue, an eccentric teacher in an Episcopal girls' school. Instead of one central conflict, a number of personal and social issues are interwoven. Most of the novel takes place in one year, but the conclusion opens out to a later vantage point. The novel ends with neither a positive resolution nor a defeat, but with a scene which is as ambiguous as the book's title.

The adolescent characters are three students at Charles School. Flanders Brown has been sent there after her parents' divorce. Carolyn Cardmaker is a minister's daughter whose bitterness toward the church has made her decide she is an atheist. Agness Thatcher is a beautiful deaf mute.

"Cardmaker" contends that they are all at Charles School because they are unwanted. "Don't you know by now we're all peculiar?" she asks Flanders. "Unwanted people are always peculiar."<sup>13</sup>

No one at Charles is more peculiar than Miss Blue. A middle-aged lady who is cheerfully oblivious to the way she appears to others, she wears a huge cross around her neck, claims to have religious visions, and hangs a

picture of Jesus in the bathroom. Yet she is an inspired teacher. In the classroom she communicates the intricacies of science so interestingly that the most unscientific students are excited.

Hearing a chance remark about Miss Blue as a popular young girl, Flanders is puzzled by the contradictions in the teacher's character. She joins her friends in laughing at Miss Blue, and yet she is uncomfortable about it: "I could not help remembering that Miss Blue was only around forty, not old and strange from living too long, but strange for some other reason; pretty once, with all the boys after her, and now living in a cleared-out closet of a girls' boarding school without any friends. I had the feeling if I laughed any longer I'd have some terrible punishment inflicted on me, because I had the feeling what I was doing was cruel."<sup>14</sup>

There is cruelty in Is That You, Miss Blue?, but not the overpowering, irresistible cruelty of The Chocolate War. When the staff of Charles School finally decides that Miss Blue is too unusual for them and she is fired, Carolyn, Flanders and Agnes steal Miss Blue's favorite painting and give it to her as a going-away present. This leads to more trouble; Miss Blue accepts it, thinking it comes from the school officials, and leaves a thank-you note. Carolyn, the ringleader, is expelled, and she leaves

after asking the headmistress "what kind of a religious school was it that believed communication with Jesus Christ was a sign of mental instability?"<sup>15</sup>

Woven through the controversy over Miss Blue are other conflicts. The girls wrestle with religious beliefs. Flanders is humiliated when her father, a sort of pseudo-psychologist, appears on television and is made to appear like "some kind of professional sex maniac."<sup>16</sup> Agnes is frustrated and angry as she tries to make herself understood through notes or scarcely intelligible speech. All the characters, in their own individual ways, must come to terms with the fact that they are somehow "different," and that no one else will ever completely understand them.

The novel ends in a sort of afterword, with Flanders telling about her life after leaving Charles School, her contacts with the other girls, and the anxiety she feels whenever she thinks of her former teacher: "I never forgot Miss Blue. I'm not sure why. I think of her every time I walk the streets of New York City. I try to imagine her way back that Christmas season, a tiny figure wearing a large cross, carrying a large picture, enveloped by the tall skyscrapers and the onrushing crowds, trying to make her way along somehow. Then I have to stop imagining, for the city is too cruel to the likes of Miss Blue. . . ." <sup>17</sup>

Is That You, Miss Blue? concludes on this poignant note, not with the harsh pessimism of The Chocolate War, but certainly far from the dependable happy endings of Junior Novels and early YA books. The authors of these recent books have taken away that element of dependability. The reader of a YA novel can no longer be sure that right will triumph, Dick and Jane will solve their problems, and the world will remain a safe and stable place. Instead, recent YA novels offer the possibility of surprise and a much closer link with real experience. Plot patterns may be varied with almost unlimited combinations, and this diversity allows for novels that are as unpredictable as the people who read them.



## Chapter Six: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lou Willett Staneck, "The Maturation of the Junior Novel: From Gestation to the Pill," Library Journal, 15 December 1972, p. 4051.

<sup>2</sup>Betty Bacon, "From Now to 1984," Wilson Library Bulletin, October 1970, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>Hope Campbell, No More Trains to Tottenville, (New York: McCall, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Campbell, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup>Campbell, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup>Campbell, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup>Robert O'Brien, Z For Zachariah, (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>O'Brien, p. 249.

<sup>9</sup>Theodore Weesner, rev. of The Chocolate War, New York Times Book Reviews, 5 May, 1974, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Cormier, The Chocolate War, (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup>Cormier, p. 231.

<sup>12</sup>Cormier, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup>M. E. Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue? (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup>Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue?, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup>Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue?, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup>Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue?, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup>Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue?, p. 171.

## Chapter Seven

## Special People: Character

"Once upon a time, in a house by the sea, lay an old woman, a special old woman. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The beginning of Lois Duncan's A Gift of Magic (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971) combines the timeless spell of storytelling with the fascination of a very particular, "special" person. It is this combination of story and person, plot and character, that gives the best of the new YA novels their appeal--an appeal which is not necessarily limited to adolescent readers. The enjoyment of a well crafted plot involving believable characters is basic to all good fiction. However, the element of characterization is especially important in YA novels because the teens is a time of seeking personal identity separate from family and peer group.

As has been shown, the departure from formula novels and the end of taboos freed YA fiction to explore much greater varieties of character. YA novels are no longer limited to middle-class teenagers living in nuclear families and attending suburban high schools. Neither are they confined to the superficial treatment of character required by the moralistic limitations of the Junior Novels.

Because first person narratives make it possible to go deeper into a character and reveal more about him or her, there has been a trend toward this form of narration. More than half of the YA novels read in preparation of this paper were told in first person. Most of the others featured a strong single viewpoint or a shifting personal viewpoint rather than an omniscient author.

Another trend has been the creation of more believable and interesting adults who interact with the teenaged characters. Adults in Junior Novels were usually remote, kindly figures who were alien to the world of the teenagers. As the first changes of the '60's hit YA novels, adults were portrayed as indifferent or even malevolent. Often teachers, parents and other authority figures were blamed for the troubles of the adolescent protagonist. For instance, in John Neufeld's Lisa, Bright and Dark (New York: S. G. Phillips, 1969) a group of high school girls are the only ones who sense the problem of a mentally ill friend and try to do something about it. The girl's parents deny that there is any cause for concern, even when she deliberately walks into a glass door and cuts herself badly; teachers and school psychiatrists are of no help at all. There is an implication that Lisa's troubles stem at least in part from her parents' lack of understanding.

Author Richard Peck has criticized this tendency to blame adults: "I hope I will never be guilty of writing a novel in which the parent is a villain outright. We have had enough of that. That feeds the paranoia of the young . . . We are all responsible for the consequences of our actions."<sup>2</sup>

Peck and others have begun to replace the remote or irresponsible adults of older novels for teenagers with complex, unique and interesting adult characters. They are not perfect, sometimes not even good in the conventional sense. Like the adolescent characters, they are simply struggling to cope and to make some kind of sense out of their personal experiences.

Peter Smith, the stepfather of the adolescent protagonist, Meg, in Isabelle Holland's Of Love and Death and Other Journeys (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), is a frustrated scholar who writes "borderline pornography" but really wants to write the definitive book on canon law in the twelfth century. He seems to move in a dream-like world of his own, and others respond by taking care of him. He even has trouble writing the sort of stuff that is demanded in his present occupation. At one point he gets stuck after the first line of his current pornographic novel: "They took off all their clothes." A friend suggests that he start farther back in the story,

so he substitutes: "He helped her off with her coat."<sup>3</sup>

Yet this ineffectual and befuddled individual seems to have a genius for personal relations. His wife remarks that she has been searching all her life for freedom, and has finally found a kind of peace in her marriage to Peter. "I don't think even in his own mind he's ever tried to make anybody do anything. Probably that's why he's so unsuccessful--except in loving people."<sup>4</sup>

Another unusual and memorable adult character is Mrs. Fortune in Zilpha Snyder's The Witches of Worm (New York: Atheneum, 1973). Mrs. Fortune is the elderly neighbor of a mentally disturbed girl named Jessica. When Jessica finds an abandoned baby kitten, Mrs. Fortune, who keeps a large number of cats in her apartment, shows the girl how to care for the animal.

Jessica names the kitten Worm, because her mother says it looks like a blind worm. After reading a book about witchcraft, Jessica begins to imagine that Worm is talking to her and telling her to do things. She performs several malicious and destructive acts, believing that Worm has put a spell on her and caused her to do them. Terrified by the things she has done and by her recurring nightmares, Jessica finally confides in Mrs. Fortune.

Mrs. Fortune neither condemns Jessica nor tries to reason with her. She takes the story as it is given,

explaining that to her "belief in mysteries--all manner of mysteries--is the only lasting luxury in life."<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Fortune understands that the spell is real in Jessica's mind and must be dealt with there. She gives the girl a ritual of exorcism to use on the cat, telling Jessica that only the power of ceremony can deal with her situation, for "we all invite our own devils, and we must exorcise our own."<sup>6</sup>

At this point a reader may wonder if the old lady is not being extremely irresponsible. Surely such a serious problem should be reported to Jessica's mother, and the girl should be given psychiatric treatment. However, Jessica has been going to a counselor and has been able to fool him completely. In the context of the story, Mrs. Fortune's action has a rightness that goes beyond conventional reactions. The exorcism works for Jessica, and she is able to get in touch with reality again--at least for the time being.

Adult characters like Mrs. Fortune and Peter Smith have helped the YA novel to move beyond the days of the so-called generation gap. These fictional adults are as individual and unique as the teenaged characters who interact with them. But of course it is those adolescent characters who remain crucial to the success of any YA novel, for without them there would be no reason for the desig-

nation "young adult book." Teenagers must also be shown as special individuals. Young readers quickly react to the stereotyped, acne-ridden and lovelorn high school student in fiction, sensing a putdown. Fictional teenagers may have similar problems, but each one must speak and think in his own way.

One method of presenting an adolescent protagonist is the use of a first-person narrative. Alan Bennett, the narrator of M. E. Kerr's If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever? (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), comments frankly on the limitations of the technique: "My grandfather tells me that writing in the first person is like painting with watercolors; only small children and geniuses can do it well."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Alan narrates his own story and stops the action from time to time to comment on it from a later vantage point. After a rather conceited-sounding description of his own popularity and talents, he tells the reader: "I'm going to get what's coming to me."<sup>8</sup> And he does.

Alan's troubles begin when a new student arrives at his high school, a boy named Duncan Stein whom Alan immediately nicknames "Doomed." Duncan refuses to join any of the traditional school activities. Instead, he puts out a newspaper called Remote, which glorifies the idea of romantic, star-crossed lovers. The paper includes

want ads like this one: "Wanted: A Date for the Discovery Dance. She must be redheaded. It will be our one and only date. After that evening, there will never be any communication between us again. For an interview, call Duncan Stein, 486-6243, any evening between seven and nine."<sup>9</sup>

The uniqueness of this approach appeals to teenagers who are bored with steady dating, and Duncan is launched. Alan loses his girlfriend, Leah, when he tries to prevent her from taking part in the new fad. The title of the novel is taken from her question to him: "Love shouldn't be a prison. If I love you, am I trapped forever?"<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Alan has to deal with his resentment toward his father, an alcoholic who had obtained a divorce to marry another woman. Alan also suffers through a brief attraction to an older, married woman. The many entanglements, contradictions and pains of love are depicted as Alan tells his own story with just enough humor to keep the whole thing from sinking into melodrama.

In contrast with the intimate, first person technique which Kerr uses to create Alan Bennett, Scott O'Dell depicts a memorable adolescent character without ever taking an inside view in Child of Fire (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). The character, Manuel Castillo, is seen entirely from the viewpoint of Delaney, a sympathetic



probation officer. O'Dell, who also wrote the Newbery Prize-winning Island of the Blue Dolphins, was raised among the Chicanos of the southwestern United States; he was close enough to their culture to be aware of its uniqueness. An inside view of Manuel might have produced a superficial brothers-under-the-skin "understanding," but looking at Manuel through Delaney's eyes preserves a feeling of mystery and respect for differences.

Delaney's first encounter with Manuel comes at a bullfight. As the crowd waits for the next bull to run out into the ring, a sixteen-year-old boy suddenly leaps over the fence and kneels in front of the bull's tunnel, holding a red muleta. This very dangerous action appears to be both brave and foolhardy. Delaney is curious about the boy's motives, and has a chance to interview him at the police station while the local police are grilling him. Delaney learns that Manuel is a member of a Chicano gang in Mar Vista, Delaney's territory. He offers to take the boy home and be responsible for him.

The encounters between the two that follow involve gang fights, drug smuggling, the bloody sports of bullfighting and cock fighting, and above all the cult of machismo: male daring, bravery and toughness. Once when Manuel has done something that seems utterly senseless to Delaney, Manuel's grandfather articulates the macho

code: "He stands where he is. He has taken a stand. That is where he is now, standing."<sup>11</sup>

This novel covers a longer timespan than most YA novels. Manuel survives the battles of adolescence, at one point scrapes up three hundred dollars so his girlfriend can get an abortion, ships out on a rusty tuna boat, serves time in a South American jail. He finally returns and goes to work picking grapes near Mar Vista. Delaney next encounters Manuel when the young man emerges as one of the organizers of a strike protesting the purchase of a mechanical grape-picker which will throw many people out of work. In a gruesome but powerful conclusion, O'Dell has Manuel kneel before the huge red machine on the first day it is used in the vineyard--just as the boy had knelt before the charging bull years before: "The steel fingers reached out and, as if it was harvesting grapes, picked flesh from bone and gathered him in."<sup>12</sup>

What did he die for? No easy answers are given. His sacrifice will not stop technological changes or help his people find different employment. Delaney does not fully understand, nor does the reader. But Manuel's life and death do have a unity, a consistency, an integrity that make him hard to forget.

Somewhere between the first-person intimacy of If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever? and the detached, distant

perspective of Child of Fire is the method of Mary Stolz in Leap Before You Look (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Jimmie Gavin, a girl who feels betrayed and insecure because of her parents' divorce, never addresses the reader directly like Alan Bennett. Stolz talks about her in the third person, but Jimmie's feelings and perceptions are the center and focus of the novel.

There are no epic scenes in this book, no heroics or high drama. Jimmie simply struggles to understand why her parents no longer want to live together. In order to understand this, she must see them as separate people and perceive the fact that they are very different and do not even like each other, though they care very much for the two children they have in common. Leap Before You Look is a novel in which characterization is extremely important, because it is about the interactions of a few people and their impact on each other.

Jimmie's mother is an intelligent but cynical and withdrawn woman. She never goes anywhere except to the library, has no social life and no patience with the methods by which others entertain themselves. Jimmie compares her to a sponge, "a sessile creature--one that is permanently fixed."<sup>13</sup> Her father, on the other hand, is a gregarious and cheerful person. It is he who has initiated the divorce after becoming romantically involved

with another woman.

In Jimmie's conversations with her parents, her friends and her two grandmothers, she keeps trying to understand what has happened to the dependable world she grew up in. Like Dick and Jane in No More Trains to Tottenville, she is forced to accept the fact that the security of childhood is gone forever; it has been replaced by ambiguity, uncertainty and responsibility.

Jimmie spends some time staying with her grandmother on her mother's side. They discuss religion; Grandmother Prior is a regular churchgoer who calls herself a pantheist. Jimmie has never believed in any kind of a God, but now she is searching for some kind of order. She begins attending church with her grandmother, who explains her own reasons for going: "I go to church . . . because I find the ritual, and the music, in some way soothing to my spirit. And because I think many of the congregation are trying, at least during that hour, during the service, to know what good is. I go because our minister, Dr. Mears, is a good kind man and needs attendance."<sup>14</sup>

The lack of dogmatism regarding religion underscores the sense of ambiguity which pervades this novel. Jimmie's struggle is more than an adolescent's growing pains; it involves the whole human experience. Her relationship with her grandmother helps to lift the story beyond the

conflicts of the teen years. At one point, realizing that she has wounded her mother deeply without intending to, Jimmie bursts out: "How we hurt each other, when we don't want to . . . We hurt each other when because of what went before there is nothing we can do but hurt each other. Oh, it is too hard, living . . . It's too hard on people, and how do they ever get through it?"<sup>15</sup>

And yet Jimmie does get through it, at least through the worst of the reaction to her parents' divorce. She is able to get through the first Christmas afterwards, able finally to call her father, who has remarried, and begin a process of reconciliation. It is this endurance, the sheer courage to go on, that is celebrated in Leap Before You Look.

YA novels have moved far from the mildly anxious middle-class teenagers of the '40's and '50's. The teen years are no longer portrayed as a passage from the security of childhood to the security of a predictable, conformist adulthood. The process of growing up appears more as a gradual erosion of old certainties and an opening out into the complexities of a lifelong search for integrity (Child of Fire), for love (If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?), for understanding (Leap Before You Look).

The impact of this change comes largely from the sharpening of characterization in YA novels. As many different techniques are used as in adult fiction. Some-

times the intimate, first-person method is most appropriate to the story; sometimes distancing is more effective; often the character of an adolescent protagonist is developed through an inside view in the third person or a shifting viewpoint. Whatever the technique, both adult and teenaged characters must be shown as unique individuals, special people, if their stories are to connect in a lasting way with the experience of the reader.

## Chapter Seven: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lois Duncan, A Gift of Magic, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Janeczko, "An Interview With Richard Peck," English Journal, February, 1976, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup>Isabelle Holland, Of Love and Death and Other Journeys, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>Holland, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup>Zilpha Snyder, The Witches of Worm, (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 116.

<sup>6</sup>Snyder, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup>M. E. Kerr, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Kerr, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Kerr, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>Kerr, If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever?, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup>Scott O'Dell, Child of Fire, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 136.

<sup>12</sup>O'Dell, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Stolz, Leap Before You Look, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup>Stolz, p. 190.

<sup>15</sup>Stolz, p. 201.

## Chapter Eight

## Adolescence As Naming: Conclusion

Young Adult novels have changed substantially since the late 1960's. In subject matter, style, theme and tone, they have moved far from the formula-patterned books of earlier years. It is unlikely that any librarian today would suggest, as Marie Blanche McDonald did in 1958, that "we [librarians] should save them [teenagers] despite themselves. The average adolescents will understand when we shall tell them that they are not quite ready for the stories of adult experiences presented in serious fiction and will be content to wait. As to the other ones, the so-called precocious ones, who crave greater excitement and more emotionalism than that which they find in the BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE--deny, restrain."<sup>1</sup>

Today's Young Adult novels are "serious fiction." They may be distinguished from other novels only because of the adolescent point of view and a characteristically limited focus, not by any lack of excitement or emotion. More and more novels are crossing the somewhat arbitrary line between YA and adult fiction, and this trend is likely to continue. As YA novels explore more deeply the particular experiences of maturing, they touch on concerns which, though especially strong in the teen years, continue to apply long past twenty.



The improved quality of books for teenagers over the past several decades may be traced to a number of possible causes. With the passage of time, the adolescent novel has had the opportunity to evolve. The obvious plots and themes have worn thin. Even television may have contributed to the process by providing the mental pabulum that once passed for entertainment in books for teenagers. In order to lure young people of the '70's away from "the tube," fiction must offer something richer, more imaginative, more significant than the situation comedies and detective yarns of television. Critics, too, have helped to raise the standards of the YA novel. Reviewers today "judge the junior book as literature first," and they do not hesitate to pan books of poor quality.<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter Three, I suggested that Young Adult novels deserve to be considered a legitimate genre because, at their best, they provide for the teenaged reader the opportunity to experience universal human situations through fictional adolescents, and in this way to enjoy the lasting pleasure of well-crafted literature. Although the lines between YA and adult books no longer need to be so sharply drawn, and although the maturing process continues throughout life, there is a place for books which center on adolescence. The uniqueness of the YA novel lies in its emphasis on the concerns and interests of young people.

G. Robert Carlsen, in his Books and the Teen-Age Reader, called the adolescent novel "a book written by a serious writer for the teen-age reader." The writer tries to evoke through his use of words the feelings and emotions, the triumphs and failures, the tensions and releases, that people in the age group of twelve to twenty normally experience. . . . In the last fifty or so years, it has become recognized as a distinct type of literature. . . ."3

Madeline L'Engle's A Wind in the Door (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1973) uses science fiction to embody the task which is central to the teens: finding a concept of self as a particular, separate, unique individual, and seeing others as equally separate and unique, the process of naming.

A Wind in the Door takes place at some future time when the earth is threatened by a "rip in the universe," and behind that rip is "no-thingness." Evil beings called the echthroi are trying to annihilate everything that exists by "X-ing" or "un-naming." Struggling against the echthroi are the cherubim, the heavenly beings mentioned in the Bible. Neither the appearance nor the personalities of the cherubim are what might be expected from these Biblical creatures, however. The cherub Proginoskes comments early in the novel that "It is a great wonder to me that so many earthling artists paint cherubim to resemble baby pigs."<sup>4</sup>

Caught between the echthroi and the cherubim are four humans: Meg Murray, a high school girl; Charles Wallace Murray, her younger brother; Calvin O'Keefe, Meg's boyfriend; and Mr. Jenkins, the principal of Charles Wallace's school. Meg and Charles Wallace are the precocious children of two scientists. When Charles Wallace comes down with a mysterious illness, Prognoskes appears in the form of a dragon and explains that the illness is related to the rip in the sky and the cosmic machinations of the echthroi.

"Progo" is a Namer. His job as a young cherub was to memorize the names of all the stars in the universe, for: "If he calls for one of them, someone has to know which one he means. Anyhow, they like it; there aren't many who know them all by name, and if your name isn't known, then it's a very lonely feeling."<sup>5</sup>

Meg wonders why she and the other humans have become involved with the battle between the cherubim and the echthroi, and Proginoskes suggests an answer: "When I was memorizing the names of the stars, part of the purpose was to help them each to be more particularly the particular star each one was supposed to be. That's basically a Namer's job. Maybe you're supposed to make earthlings more human."<sup>6</sup>

As the four humans are kidnapped through the cosmic rip and plunged into unknown terrors, they must ask themselves again and again--what is real? The echthroi confuse

them with all sorts of illusions and terrors, but the greatest fear of all is the threat of being X-ed, of becoming a no-thing. There is one remedy for this. Every being is supposed to "deepen," and "sing the song of the Universe." Refusal to do this turns power over to the echthroi. Deepening means becoming rooted in the reality which connects everything, and the song of the Universe celebrates that reality, from the orderly movement of the stars to the promises kept by people.

The plot of A Wind in the Door involves much more, but it is this theme of deepening and becoming more particularly what one is that seems to symbolize the maturing process. The adolescent is busy "naming" himself and others, discovering all the similarities and varieties of human nature. The best of the Young Adult novels will not tell readers who they are. But these books can aid in the exploration of all the possibilities, so that the individual reader can get on with the business of finding his own name, and in the process learn to sing his particular version of the song of the Universe.

## Chapter Eight: Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Marie Blanche McDonald, "Shake Hands With Mrs. Grundy," Wilson Library Bulletin, October, 1958, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Dunning and Alan B. Howes, Literature for Adolescents, (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1975), p. 199.

<sup>3</sup>G. Robert Carlsen, Books and the Teen-Age Reader, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Madeline L'Engle, A Wind in the Door, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), p. 58.

<sup>5</sup>L'Engle, A Wind in the Door, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup>L'Engle, A Wind in the Door, p. 79.

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