Title: YA Novels – Adolescent Needs, Adult Responsibilities

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Are there definable boundaries between a children's novel, a YA novel and an adult novel? This paper suggests that combining two approaches to literary criticism, Reader Theory and Narratology, can create a practical framework for teacher librarians to use in assessing whether a novel meets the needs, interests and literacy skills of their students.

Guardian or Censor?

The first Professor of Children's Literature in the United Kingdom, Peter Hunt, described children's literature as a texture of paradoxes reflecting the opposing desires of the adults who control it, somewhere between 'benevolent control and fearful repression' (1997, p. 103). Peter Hollindale, another eminent British critic, described the tension differently: as adults we are caught between celebrating childhood, protecting and prolonging it; and acknowledging that it is merely one stage in a process, and we should encourage the developing reader to move forward (1997). Novels for adolescents test the boundaries of children's literature and adult literature. Hollindale (1995) coined the term pre-adult to describe the adolescent reader and it is useful phrase because of its emphasis on adolescents as a group of readers who are in a fluid state of becoming. As a group they fall between the protection society accords a child and the freedom society accords an adult.

This paper proposes an analytical framework for assessing novels in terms of their implied reader, focusing on how the author has positioned the reader. YA novels (novels for adolescent readers) are a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1948 the first list of *Adult Books for Young People* was published by the American Library Association; and in 1958 the ALA formed a Young Adult Services Division. Since its inception the genre has always attracted controversy. In 1961 Marjorie Fisher, a British critic, asked the question that still troubles us today,

> 'The problem of realism is more complicated, naturally, when we come to books for older children, between thirteen and fifteen. What is the writer to give them? How is he to make sure that they still want to read what he writes? How is he to satisfy their craving for experience without hustling them away from the last tentative years of childhood? They must, now, have books that will tax and stimulate them.' (p. 299)

In Australia the debate over YA novels peaked in 1996 when *Sleeping Dogs* was the inaugural winner of the Victorian Premier's Award for Young Adult Fiction. This was the very first Australian award for a novel for adolescent readers. The literary merits of this novel are considerable but as it incorporates the themes of incest and filicide, many adults,

including many school librarians, questioned its suitability for adolescent readers. The debate about YA novels continues to simmer, driven by adult desires to protect adolescent readers rather than any desire to act as censor.

YA Novels – A Troublesome Genre for Troublesome Teens?

If a novel is marketed as a Young Adult novel there is an implicit expectation that it is suitable for all adolescents. This expectation infers that there is an agreed definition for the readership of YA novels; and these readers are uniform in their needs, wants and abilities. There is no common definition for the readership of YA fiction. Chronological definitions seem simple. They commonly begin at age twelve or thirteen, but their upper age limit is problematic. Definitions of that limit range between fifteen, eighteen and twenty four (a young adult reader rather than an adolescent reader). It is obvious that a novel that appeals to a sixteen year old could have content that makes it unsuitable for a twelve year old. The assumption that a YA novel will suit all adolescents is patently absurd. Even if we managed to agreed on a common definition for YA novels, when we reflect upon the individuals who use our libraries it becomes obvious that adolescent readers are a very diverse group of readers and this diversity is reflected in their needs, wants and abilities.

The socio-cultural significance that society ascribes to novels for adolescents further complicates the issue. This significance may be quite independent of the author's intentions. Jerri Kroll, Australian critic and author of YA novels, writes of the 'burden of worrying constantly about non-literary matters' (1996, p. 345). Her concerns support Madeleine Norst's remarks about the role of books in passing on cultural mores to children and adolescents,

> 'The pedagogical element is always present, not only as didacticism and puritanical censorship but as a commitment to certain values and knowledge that the individual or community feel needs to be handed on.' (1989, p.748).

Authors of novels for adolescents have an implied reader who is an older child. The author is poised between the dilemma of preserving the innocence of youth; or confronting their implied readers with a more challenging narrative. Is their primary task to protect the adolescent reader, Swedish critic Maria Nikolajeva's 'dear child', from the anxiety which she suggests is the dominant emotion of novels for adolescence (2000, p. 205)?

British critic Terry Eagleton (2001) noted a view that the function of Literature goes beyond the task of delighting and instructing the reader to saving their soul and promoting a national identity. He argued that the act of reading literature exposed the reader to the values and beliefs of the dominant class, perhaps not an aristocracy but certainly a literate middle class. This stance is based on three beliefs. The first is a belief in the special quality and power of literature to delight and instruct. Reading literature engages the reader in an activity is both entertaining and improving, it enlarges the mind of the reader in more ways than the development of their literacy skills. The second is a belief that literature intrinsically embodies moral values that are inevitably imparted to the reader through their engagement with the novel. The third is that literature promotes the formation of a distinct cultural identity by exposing the reader to the ideas and beliefs of educated groups within their society.

The voices of adult critics reflect a range of opinions about YA novels, but the vehemence of their opinions supports Eagleton. Stephen Matthews, an Australian critic and

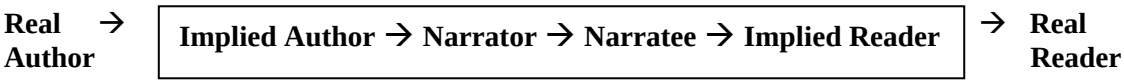
journalist, noted that parents are more anxious about books than any other form of media. Matthews argues that this is a tacit acceptance of the belief that 'books can change lives in a way that individual television programs don't' (1997, p. 60). Cathrine Harboe-Ree, a child psychologist, concurs. She is concerned about excessive liberalism in YA novels, arguing that writers of novels for adolescents have a particular duty of care to their adolescent readers. By contrast, Agnes Niewenhuizen, an Australian critic, supports a more liberal attitude towards YA novels. She warns that restricting the scope of novels for adolescents will result in the repression of adolescent readers (1996).

Narratology – A Frame of Reference

Narratology is a structuralist approach to literary criticism that relies on a critique of the narrative. Put simply, this means that the critic looks very closely at the elements of the novel. It can be argued that it is appropriate approach to YA novels as traditionally they have had a particular narrative style. American critic Chris Lynch described popular perceptions of YA novels thus, 'YA fiction employs characterization that is less deep, subject matter that is less challenging, and language and images that are less strong' (1994, p.37). The label 'YA' has been used in a derogatory sense, as a lesser genre, reflecting a patronising attitude to the novel, the adolescent reader and its author. American author Eileen Charbonneau argues strongly that YA fiction is a genre which has its own particular discipline.

> 'In a YA novel of 40,000 to 70,000 words, every scene must be essential to illuminating character, moving plot, or working on a symbolic level. To do two of these at once is good, to do all three is impressive.' (1995, p.18)

Charbonneau's vigorous defense of YA fiction is a defense of the author's skill. YA novels are carefully crafted to suit a particular audience. Narratology gives us a framework for thinking about that novel, that narrative, in a way that sheds light on the relationship between the reader and the author. The model of narrative communication created by Barbara Wall (1991, p.4) helps us to distinguish the actual world and the fictional world of the novel. It also highlights the fact that when we talk about 'the reader' or 'the author' of a novel we most probably mean our impressions of that reader or author.



This is a useful framework, but it positions the adolescent reader in a passive role, subject to the author's intentions.

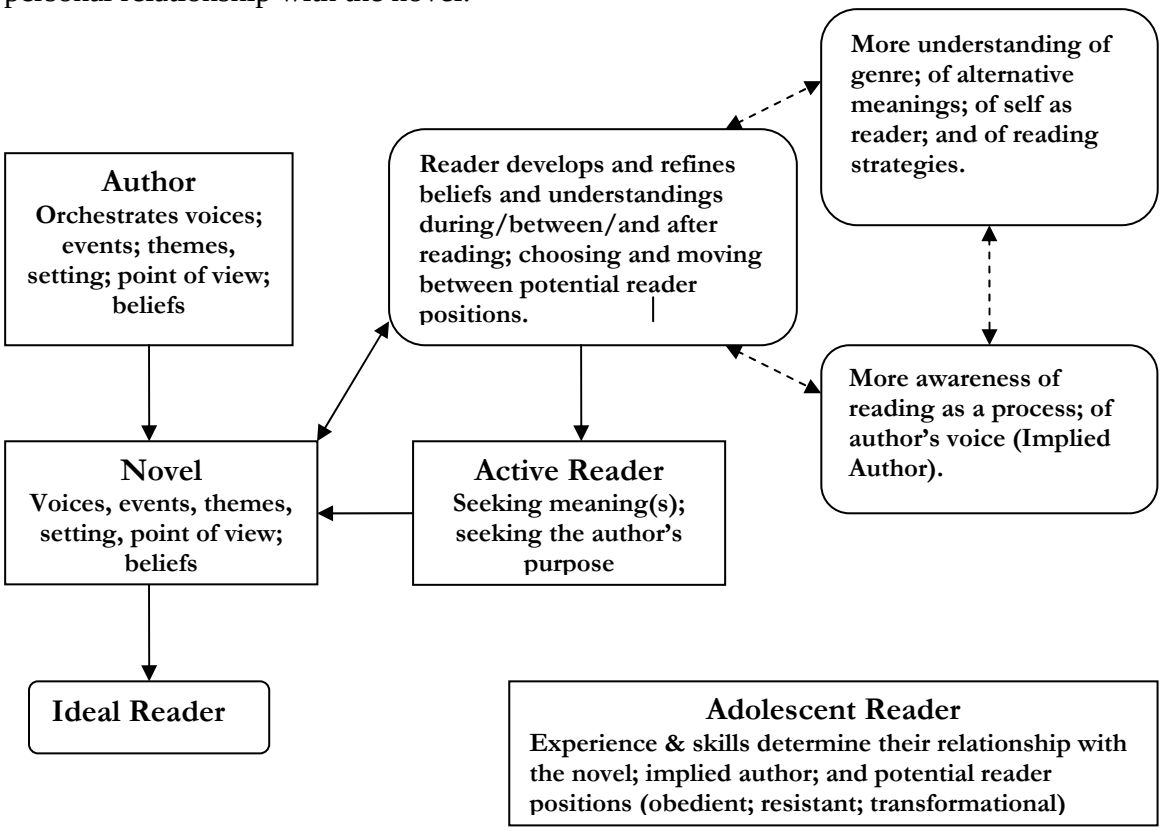
Reader Theory

As the name suggests, this form of literary analysis is centred upon the reader. This makes it particularly useful when the novel being analysed is defined by its readership. As has been discussed earlier, concerns about YA novels imply both a belief in the power of the novel to mould the adolescent reader and a belief in the cultural significance of novels for adolescents. The concept of a social contract between author and reader is one which fits well within the framework of Reader Theory. Sonya Hartnett responded to these concerns when she described *Sleeping Dogs* as a non-traditional young adult novel. She wrote,

> 'I write for people I consider to be on my reading level. I tend to look at people like my siblings and my friends mostly. All of them are good readers. I have no intention of writing for anyone who needs a more simplistic set or plot or who gets frightened by the idea of incest and violence.' (1995, p. 5).

Hartnett's comments highlight the fact that the author writes their novel for an ideal reader rather then an actual reader. This concept is illustrated below.

The perspective of Reader Theory allows us to consider the reader as an active reader who makes choices. The actual reader may not address the techniques of the author's craft and may instead phrase their interrogation of a novel much more informally: What sort of book is this? Will I like it? Who is it meant for? Who wrote it? Why? Answers to these questions determine the reader's decision to select the novel and are often based on a response to the cover of the text or the publisher's blurb on the back. An author's popularity or public reputation may also recommend them to the reader. In that case the reader will commence reading the text with a fairly set of expectations and concept of the implied author. The reader's assumptions about the author's purpose for writing the text may also be shaped by the genre in which it has been placed by the bookshop or the library; or by the context in which they engage it, the classroom or the supermarket. The reader's belief about whether they are included in what they perceive to be the intended audience for the text establishes a personal relationship with the novel.



The first page of a novel, where the author's focus is on interesting the actual reader and persuading them to continue reading, is also a guide as to how the author would like their novel to be read. In writing the novel the author addresses an imaginary reader, an ideal reader, who perfectly understands their meaning and responds to the text in exactly the way they intended. The author tries to guide or position the actual reader to approximate the understanding and response of their ideal reader.

A progressive refinement of the reader's perception of the implied author is implicit in the act of reading. That the novel is a literary artefact deliberately constructed and crafted by an author, is a concept that is tacitly understood by the adolescent reader. During the

process of reading the reader has the opportunity to refine and modify their perceptions of: What sort of book is this? Will I like it? Who is it meant for? Who wrote it? Why? First impressions help to shape their initial response. This is refined as the reader continues reading the text. Initial impressions are nebulous, they affect the reader's experience of the text, but they are notions that can be contradicted or confirmed as the reader reads on.

The relationship between the author and the reader can be viewed as a form of social contract. Social Contract theory is based on the work of the philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jacques Rousseau. It argues that individuals agree to cede power to a state in return for protection. The state then has the right to rule; and the individual the obligation to obey. The individual willingly subjugates their independence for the sake of the advantages provided by civil society (Mautner, 1997). In the context of a novel, the reader cedes some of their freedoms to the author in order to experience the fictional world they have created. The reader cedes some of their potential to imagine and accepts the authority and guidance of the author; but the author's right to rule and the reader's obligation to obey are not absolutes. The author seeks to engage the reader's interest and imagination and tries to guide their response to the novel; the author cannot determine the reader's response. The reader determines a balance between interpreting the author's intentions and their own creative response. The author tries to guide the reader through the text according to their purposes for writing the text, to communicate the ideas that were the genesis of the work. The obedient reader willingly engages with the author and responds accordingly but the experience of reading the text will also nurture resistant readers and transformational readers who have decided not to subjugate their independence.

Meek (1980) suggested a sequence of rhetorical questions to address the problem of being an adult critic reading books written for child readers. She qualifies her sequence by stressing that her questions are relevant to a specific time and place, but she acknowledges a belief that highly literate readers have additional choices available to them. Meek prefaced her sequence with statement that many articles about the act of reading apply to very few (child) readers. Most child readers do not have heightened literacy skills and therefore have a limited ability to determine how they will read a text. Meek concludes that for the imagined child reader the surface level of a text is very important as this may well be the only level available to them. The adolescent, or older child, reader has access to more levels as they become more experienced readers. French theorist Michel Pecheux suggested that there are three types of reader position: an obedient reader, a resistant reader and a transformational reader (Seldon 1993, p. 166). They are not mutually exclusive. The reader, depending on their literacy skills, moves between them at will. An adolescent reader may adopt the stance of an obedient reader by default, earnestly examining the novel for its meaning. Or, forced to engage with a novel they don't want to read, they may adopt the stance of a resistant reader. They may cease to read resistantly if their mood changes, or the author manages to engage their interest. The transformational reader, is one who transforms the subject reader position by seeing significances in a novel that the author may never have intended. This response to the novel is neither a deliberate distortion of the text nor an arbitrary misreading. It is a reader position that only becomes available when the reader is an experienced reader, able to perceive and acknowledge alternative perspectives.

Meek describes the reader's bond with the author as a quasi-social relationship (1980, p. 30). In the first page of a novel the author, using the power of the storyteller, signals to the reader how they wish the novel to be read. As Meek reminds us, the reader may rush through this section, anxious to get on with the story, regarding the text as an experience to be

consumed for immediate gratification rather than one to be savoured through reflection. However an examination of the first few pages of a text, or the first chapter, can illuminate the author's desires and expectations of the implied reader. The expectation of the teacher librarian then is that they can then evaluate these expectations against the needs, interests and literacy skills of their students.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

This novel is a children's book rather than a YA novel, but it has established a wide readership. In the first chapter Rowling establishes a complex fantasy world. Her world is set in a world where magic is real yet it is also a world much like ours. Muggles, ordinary people like us, go about their daily lives oblivious to the powerful creatures with whom they share their world. Their/Our lack of awareness is a consequence of the self-discipline these powerful creatures habitually practice (p. 13). Muggle children can however discover that they have a gift for magic so a child is potentially superior to a muggle adult. It is an obvious hook for the child reader, magic, power and a superior status. Rowling's chief protagonist is an orphaned baby, a move calculated to arouse the sympathies of the reader. As a baby, Harry has no dialogue in Chapter One, although his cousin Dudley does. The reader has to imagine their own feelings in that situation and attribute them to Harry. Rowling chooses to introduce Harry through his awful relatives and three adults from Hogwartz, his future school. However well-intentioned the Professors and Hagrid seem to be, Rowling has firmly established Harry's position as the underdog, albeit one with possibly impressive magical powers. Rowling intends that the reader's concern will ensure that they read further.

Rowling began her novel with two pages of description, unusual in that conventional wisdom argues that children prefer action and dialogue to pages of description. Her skill allows her to flaunt convention. Her first paragraph establishes a link between the world of the implied reader and the fictional world of the novel. Mr and Mrs Dursley live in suburbia, they are proudly 'normal'. Rowling is creating a fantasy world, where strange and mysterious things happen, which is directly linked to the suburban world familiar to her reader. She entices her reader to speculate, to make connections, to see links between her fictional world and their own. In the first paragraph Rowling establishes questions: firstly who is Harry and what is his relationship with the dull Dursleys; and secondly when will the 'mysterious and strange' events start happening? Rowling engages her reader to look for clues to answer these questions in the pages of description that follow.

Rowling positions her reader as an ally, a friend with whom she can share jokes made at the expense of the adult muggles. The second paragraph establishes the Dursleys as caricatures, figures of fun. The implied reader feels comfortably superior as they smile at the images Rowling creates. Mr Dursley is a ' big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a large moustache' and Mrs Dursley is 'thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbours' (1997, p. 7). Rowling doesn't write down for her reader, 'craning' rather than peering or looking. She uses alliteration, Dudley Dursley; and plays with language, as well as 'muggle' she invents the term 'put-outer' (p. 12). Her sentences are long, demanding the reader's attention to details as they search for clues. The 'normal' world in which the Dursleys live is a world Rowling encourages her reader to reject. It is a world of conformity, where secrets and unsuitable family members have to be hidden. Rowling both piques her reader's curiosity further and encourages her reader to sympathise

with the Potters' son, by representing him as the undesirable boy who must be kept away from Dudley.

Rowling constructs a powerful lure for her reader by offering them a chance to rebel by reading more about the Potters and their son. She promises much by opposing a reference to 'dark and mysterious things' with the image of Mr Dursley happily picking out his 'most boring' tie to wear to work. The image of Mr Dursley's stupidity is reinforced by his indulgent attitude to Dudley's tantrum. He refuses to believe the clues that Rowling introduces: the cat reading the map; the cat reading the street sign; the large numbers of strangely dressed people; owls flying in broad daylight. Rowling uses Mr Dursley's stupidity as a device to highlight the clues for her reader and to position the reader outside of the 'normal' world. The clever reader sees the signs, recognizes them as portents, and is not blinded by adult stupidity. The reader is comfortingly superior and ready to empathise, if not identify, with Harry Potter. The fear that Mr Dursley experiences does not make him sympathetic to the reader, Rowling has firmly established him as an insecure bully who enjoys shouting at people (p. 9). She consolidates the distance between Mr Dursley by stating his disapproval of imagination (p. 10) and by inference his disapproval of the reader.

Rowling portrays wizards and witches in a manner that makes them appealing. When magic arrives in Privet Drive it comes in the guise of a cat, the familiar domestic pet which is a traditionally linked with witchcraft. The cat reveals herself to be Professor McGonagall. Rawlings depicts her mourning the loss of Harry's parents, making her the first character in the novel to display compassion. The reader is thus positioned to regard her favorably. Rowling enhances the appeal of Professor Dumbledore to the child reader by describing his fondness for sherbet lemon sweets (p. 13). Rawlings uses the discussion between Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore to tell her reader that although living with the Dursleys will not be a good option for Harry, it is the best option available. Rawlings uses the image of Hagrid's noisy grief whilst the two Professors standing silent and sad to consolidate the sympathies of the reader. Rawlings ends her first chapter with her baby protagonist abandoned on the doorstep of the awful Dursleys; but this image is tempered by a statement of the paradox of Harry Potter. He is 'the boy who lived', simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. The reader's expectation is that Harry will prevail but his vulnerability encourages the reader to sympathise with Harry rather than envying him.

Sleeping Dogs

The title of this text alludes to traditional wisdom that one should not disturb sleeping dogs, to do so inevitably disturbs the peace. In first line of this novel Hartnett's external narrator tells the implied reader that 'The dogs do not ever really sleep' (p. 1), this novel is set in a world which has no peace. Hartnett's reader could also infer that this will be a novel that will disturb their peace. Hartnett and her publishers certainly disturbed the world of YA literature when 'Sleeping Dogs' was first published and it continues to be a contentious text. The novel's literary merit was not disputed, objections to the text focussed on its content and ideology. This text challenges its reader, it tests the boundaries between the pre-adult reader and the adult reader. Hartnett's explicit intention is to force the reader to confront troubling issues rather than to shield them from their sight. Later in the novel Hartnett explicitly extends her image of the pack of dogs to represent the Willow family. Hartnett first declares a connection between dog and master, Creed shares his master's mood and snarls at Jordan's dog Applegrit (p. 3). Later the reader is told that

> '… the entire Willow family has in them an incurable, lifelong insomnia. Two or three of them are always awake, no matter what the time, sentinels watching over nothing, waiting for nothing to happen.' (pp. 22-23)

If the Willow family can be likened to the pack of dogs Hartnett described in her opening paragraph, we disturb them at our peril. The obedient reader wonders what chains keep the three elder Willow children on the farm.

Hartnett signals to her reader from the outset that this is a literary text by using multiple narrators. Hartnett does not invite her implied reader to immerse themselves in the novel, rather she invites them to observe the characters and events of the text from different perspectives, at a safe distance. She draws their attention to the author's craft by constructing an overtly literary text. The extended description of the dogs, the simile of the music created by their chains, demands that the reader be patient. There is no direct dialogue; no action to grab the reader's attention. Hartnett invites her reader to enter her fictional world with an opening paragraph that is oddly interesting; a clear inference that the novel that follows will also be odd but interesting. Hartnett's ideal reader is a mature reader who is willing to accept her challenge and engage with a text that starts slowly rather than a reader who requires a 'swift and snarling collision to relieve the boredom' (p. 1).

Jordan, the third child of the Willow family, bears both physical and emotional scars, 'a vague smile and a scar under his left eye' (p. 3). The narrator does not accord Jordan an extended passage of introspection to introduce him, as she does with the other Willow children. The reader sees him through the eyes of other members of the Willow family, thus representing him as an object. Jordan is the runt of the litter, the odd one out, the only child to inherit Grace's fair hair (p. 11). This makes Jordan 'a favourite with his mother and attracts his father's evil eye' (p. 12). Jordan cannot escape his father's control. When he did strike out to defend himself against Griffin his actions alienated Michelle and she threatened to withdraw her love. She argued convincingly that Griffin's beatings were justified, the punishment they deserved. She ignores the facts: firstly that only Jordan is being punished; and secondly that Griffin is unaware of their sexual relationship. When Jordan challenges her argument she rises to Griffin's defence,

> "Never, **ever**, hit him back," she hissed. "That was horrible, seeing him fall over. He's our **father**, remember. I couldn't look at you if you always did that to Dad. I hate it when he hurts you, but don't you see that it makes things **better**?" (p. 18)

Jordan is Michelle's sacrificial lamb, sacrificed to her pleasure. Jordan's response is to smile and acquiesce. It may seem an odd response but the reader knows that Jordan has been a battered child for all of his twenty years. The scar under his left eye is only one of the many wounds his father has inflicted upon him. Jordan's experience of life, the basis of his expectations of life, has been that his mother cannot protect him, Michelle will say nothing and Edward will look away (p. 13). The narrator does not question their responses, but simply presents them to the reader.

Hartnett switches to Michelle as her narrator and what follows is an extended description of Michelle and Jordan enjoying a moment of intimacy. Hartnett conveys the relationship between Michelle and Jordan subtly. He slips 'uninvited' into her bed; wearing overalls 'and nothing else'; he is a man not a boy 'up and working early'; he is tender, kissing her and touching 'her closed eyes' (pp. 1-2). There is no explicit sex scene but the ideal reader would infer that Jordan is a regular visitor and the two have an intimate relationship. Only then does Hartnett reveal that this is an incestuous relationship with the phrase, 'any other brother or sister' (p. 2). Michelle is a willing participant,

> '… she curls her hand around his, lets his hair tickle her face without becoming cross for it.' (p. 2)

Hartnett builds an image of the Willow family as one for whom conventions are irrelevant. They exist outside conventional morality. When Michelle wears her second-hand clothes to town, she hopes that they are the clothes of recently deceased townspeople; she is irritated when her actions do not cause distress (p. 11).

Hartnett sets her second scene in a shed on the Willow Farm and incorporates into the narrative a detailed description of the slaughter of a sheep and the dismemberment of its carcass. The sheep is a docile creature, it shows no fear when confronted by the sight of the knife and hammer. Hartnett signals to the reader not to be docile. They have been shown the signs of incest, they will not be spared any detail of its consequences, however bloody. Outside the shed the farmyard is 'cracked and peeling like something archaic' (p. 5). This is not an idyllic pastoral scene this text is grounded in death, blood and drought. Within this environment there is order: the sheep was slaughtered for the spit, the runty pup is needed as a prize, but the reader is yet to be told who is controlling this dysfunctional family. The awful images Hartnett has created suggest that this character will be someone to be feared. Edward Willow, the oldest son, experiences irrational attacks of rage,

> '… starting in his stomach and flowing quickly into his limbs, making him twitch the stick he holds with jerky irritation and impatience.' (p. 2)

He is able to conceal them from his brother Jordan, but the reader may wonder how long this control will last.

Hartnett discourages her reader from identifying with Oliver and Speck, the adolescent protagonists. The pretty sight of the ponies frolicking in the paddock is negated when Oliver's toes slip through the rotten floorboards and 'brush the damp body of a dead newborn kitten' (p. 6). Hartnett tells her reader how closely Oliver is chained to his family,

> 'He sometimes wishes he could go to university one day, but these are idle thoughts and he know the unlikeliness of it. He knows he is clever and understands that ignoring this is something of a crime, but he fears the isolation that leaving the farm would bring, the loss of what is familiar to him.' (p. 7)

Oliver's fear negates his potential and makes him vulnerable. Hartnett urges her reader to feel compassion for the loneliness of 'quiet and unobtrusive' Oliver. Yet she also challenges her reader with the statement,

> 'Although he loves his siblings dearly, he is not yet old enough to consider them friends. He is no loner, and would call himself lonely.' (p. 7)

Jordan and Michelle's incestuous love is not friendship. There is no evidence of friendship between Jordan and Edward; or Edward and Michelle. The reader may not question Oliver's love for his siblings but they must question his assumption that, with the passage of time, his siblings will become his friends.

Hartnett challenges her obedient reader with yet another protagonist exhibiting dysfunctional behaviour in her description of Jennifer Willow, Speck. If the reader accepts Oliver's belief that his youngest sibling may be a future friend, Hartnett uses her as a device to emphasise his loneliness. Speck is a loner by choice, secluding herself within the family to such an extent that she has been 'known to forget her real name' (p. 9). Her nickname suggests an insignificant creature, a speck of humanity; an image that is reinforced the narrator tells the reader of her pleasure when 'her mother remembers anything about her existence at all' (p. 9). Speck stalks the children of the guests in the caravan park, shaking with laughter when she witnesses the pain and fear two small children experience after

touching the electrified fence (p. 11). The narrator tells the reader that Speck ‘cannot stand the sight’ but nonetheless ‘her gaunt body shakes with laughter’ (p. 11). Her laughter suggests that it is not revulsion that causes Speck to bury her face in the earth, but rather the exquisite pain of extreme pleasure.

Conclusion

These novels share superficial similarities: both novels have protagonists who are scarred though battle with the character who represents evil; both novels begin with lengthy passages of description; and both have protagonists who are neglected. More importantly, both novelists challenge and extend their implied readers. We are all familiar with the ‘Harry Potter’ phenomenon and the controversy over the impact of Rowling’s portrayal of witchcraft and magic on child readers. This controversy mirrors that surrounding ‘Sleeping Dogs’. The significant difference between these novels lies in way their authors have positioned their readers to enter their fictional worlds. Rowling invites her reader to identify with Harry and enter his world. In that world Harry Potter not only proves his power in his confrontation with his enemy, he demonstrates his strength of character. Hartnett encourages her reader to stand outside the fictional world of the Willow family and compassionately observe them. We know that Jordan, and the Willow family, are doomed. ‘Sleeping Dogs’ is not suitable for every adolescent reader, Hartnett does not address every reader, it was never her intention to do so; her opening chapter signals this. It may however be an appropriate challenge for some of your students, one that will tax and stimulate them.

Rowling explicitly states that it is bad to seek magic solutions to our problems (p. 51), we must rely on our own efforts. We may try to enter the world of the text in the guise of a child or adolescent reader, but we cannot suspend our adult perspective. Nor should we. The reader position that a teacher librarian assumes when they read a children’s or YA novel is that of a transformational reader. We read for a different purpose, seeking out those novels that best meet the needs, interests and literacy skills of our students. Blending Reader Theory with a close study of the opening chapter of a novel is an analytical tool that focuses on the reader and your perceptions of the implied reader. It is not a magic solution, but it can be a useful tool in dealing with the dilemma of YA novels.

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