

Creating Imaginative Worlds: Unique Detail and Structure in Norma Fox Mazer's Young Adult Fiction

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W e turn the page of a novel because, from the very first word, we're drawn into a world that fills our senses, reflecting the emotions and values in our culture. It doesn't matter whether the world on those pages reflects the reality of our own world or the magic of fantasy, science fiction, history or a magic reality somewhere in between. We continue to read because the world within a book's covers becomes imaginatively ours, so much ours that we take the subtleties of that world's culture with us long after we've turned the last page. Writer Norma Fox Mazer has helped many readers make this leap between reality and imagination simply in the way she handles details in the lives of her characters.

Mazer, who writes in classic realistic style, admits she writes about teen stereotypes to allow unique character traits to rise to the surface and encourage sympathy and emotional bonding between her characters and readers. "When I write," she says, "one of the things I want to do is make the strange knowable and the knowable strange" ("Breathing Life Into Your Story" 1998). Indeed, Mazer draws from middle class stereotypes that mirror contemporary culture. And she uses traditional novel-writing strategies to organize stories that rely upon traditional problems.

Mazer says that despite relying on stereotypes to begin, "I don't EVER think of myself as writing 'problem novels,' and I don't believe I do." She defines the problem novel as one that concentrates "on story and plot ... to the detriment of character" (Letter 1998). To Mazer, "The best YA novels are individual, unique." She defines the complex nature of character and story in her own writing when she says, "Developing and probing character is key to writing a satisfying novel, although I don't believe that character can exist in isolation, i.e., without story. Story and character are intertwined to an extent that probably defies separation" (Letter).

Two of Mazer's works, *After the Rain*, a Newbery Honor book, and *When She Was Good*, a National Book Award nominee, contain multi-dimensional characters who face real problems, characters who change and grow as they see their way through these problems. Unlike many young adult problem novels, Mazer allows parents or authority figures to remain a focus in her teen characters' lives, and she allows her teens to deal with parent issues.

Mazer says that when she wrote *After the Rain*, she "was seeing a girl sitting at a table seeing herself sitting at a table writing about her parents" ("Breathing..."). With that scene, she wrote a novel which immediately captured the voice and tone of an insightful, introspective young woman who makes sense of her world by studying its details. The novel opens at home, where the protagonist, Rachel, is responding to her mother's worry that Izzy, Rachel's grandfather, has had blood drawn for tests. Rachel is currently unconcerned about this development; instead, she is focused on her relationship with her mother. Rachel's feelings are told through detailed observations of her own life in this third person, limited point of view novel. Rachel writes in her journal, "Shirley [her mother] is wearing her at-home clothes: baggy, faded blue sweatshirt, rumped denim jeans. Her behind is enormousShe snorts through her long, thin nostrils" (*After the Rain* 6). She continues her journal writing exercise with a description of her father, and concludes with an editorializing comment: "if her father is in the whale family, then her mother is in the moose family" (*Rain* 6-7). Rachel's embarrassment is tempered by her need to almost-parent her own mother.

True to the character Mazer has developed, Rachel is no less critical of her own looks: "In the mirror she sees the merciless truth. She sees a pair of large, slightly bulging green eyes; a peaky little face; and wiry, impossible hair, which this morning she had braided six times. Now she has six ratty-looking plaits, leaking wires of hair in every direction" (*Rain* 25-26).

Mazer tells Rachel's innermost feelings through the devices of Rachel's writing. Rachel keeps a journal and writes letters to a brother. In letters to Jeremy and in the journal, she tries, but has never succeeded, to complete short stories about her family, although she openly vents her feelings. These devices allow Mazer to show the reader a protagonist who analyzes things constantly, and one who looks at the world with a slightly cynical view. But we are also allowed to feel sympathy for Rachel. We see that although she states her views honestly, she feels slightly guilty about her jaundiced attitude. "I don't want to be this way," she writes to her brother about her parents, whom she has just snapped at and made to feel bad, "Only sometimes they seem to get so much under my skin....Sometimes, I think — oh God, I hate saying it, but it's true — *If only they weren't so old*" (*Rain* 11).

Making Everygirl Unique

Clearly Rachel is the stereotype of Everygirl at fifteen — she's self-absorbed, worried about typical teen things like how to survive the embarrassment of parents, boyfriends, best friends, school — but she's also uniquely Rachel. One of the devices Mazer uses to allow Rachel her unique characteristics is to give Rachel the clarity of insight to see the contrasts in her world. Rachel therefore can describe big and little things in her life the way they are and the way she wishes they were. For instance, in an early scene, as Rachel is trying once again to write, she notices a boy staring at her. She writes a character sketch of the librarian who also serves as study hall monitor: "She glances keenly at each subject who enters her domain. But Rachel's concentration is ruined. Lewis Olswanger has ruined it" (*Rain* 25).

Rachel, who helps out her mother by walking daily with her sick grandfather Izzy, confronts physical proof of her grandfather's cancer. The contrasts she sees help readers feel the impact of the reality Rachel must face: "There, on those lungs, are the spots that will destroy his life. Life and death lying side by side, as close as two kittens in a litter" (*Rain* 66).

Although it would be easy to center on the cancer and its effects on Rachel's life, Mazer never lets this story become a stereotypical problem novel. She allows her character to grow and develop, to unfold in a steady, well-paced manner, as Rachel shares the little details that make up a full and individual personality. Early on we learn that nervousness makes Rachel "talk too much" (*Rain* 30). We learn she's not an athlete. In fact, "She has never really understood people who do all these healthy, beneficial, cold things" (*Rain* 31). The same pace is used to reveal Rachel's love interest, Lewis, and to uncover the novel's overwhelming problem. Rachel's grandfather is dying; the family has been told, but he's been led to believe he has a simple virus. And Rachel will make choices to help him even when they interfere with her relationship with him.

Mazer says "much of my writing isn't planned, but a kind of instinctive response to the character I'm inhabiting — or who is inhabiting me," so that she doesn't recall consciously planning the balance between light and dark or happiness and sadness in her novels. About composing *After the Rain*, she says, "I had to deal with intertwining dual stories in which Rachel is involved. It wasn't just a matter of picking up one strand, dropping it, and picking up the other, and then doing it again. I had to be conscious all the time of the emotional effects that were being created, and conscious of the reader, of keeping the reader's interest" (Letter).

Mazer explains that she needs to "pick out the details" that make a story and character rise above a stereotype and become unique. "Details," she says, "are not a thing in themselves; they are a tool to use and they do work....everywhere in your story.... they work with the elements to create mood, to reflect the sensibility of the scene, they can reflect the tone" ("Details" 1997).

Through the use of detail in *After The Rain*, Mazer masterfully allows the reader to see the inherent irony of the way Rachel's mind works. Though Rachel is not always con-

sciously ironic, the reader sees the paradox in her thinking and how it helps Rachel develop self-protection in relationships. For example, when she learns that her best friend, Helena, has been encouraging the staring Lewis to take an interest in Rachel, Rachel tries to make this less of a big deal by thinking, "Oh forget it.... Lewis Olswanger is nothing to her [Rachel]. Less than nothing" (*Rain* 35). Surely she protests enough so that the reader knows Lewis is much more than she admits to herself.

The ironic tone of Lewis and Rachel's relationship continues in high form when they literally run into each other in the school hall. Rachel's inner voice agonizes over how this is as romantic as the best novels, but she's not feeling that love spark. Finally she feels something. "But it's not the wave of electricity she feels smashing into her belly like a fist, it's a wave of nausea" (*Rain* 45).

In the most intense moments, Mazer combines irony and contrasting details in order to portray the depth of relationships between characters. Perhaps the most compelling juxtaposition of these devices occurs in a two-chapter section in

which Rachel's emotions are pitched one against the other as she considers how she sways between thinking about the sadness of Izzy's plight and the sweetness of anticipating her first kiss. Mazer uses Rachel's own keen observations to move her readers "away from the thoughts of

him [Izzy]. Slipping and sliding away from sickness thoughts and death thoughts to Lewis thoughts" (*Rain* 83). Irony is again employed shortly after this scene to develop the relationship between Rachel and Izzy when she discovers that her grandfather still has the same kinds of feelings in the presence of an attractive older woman. "Rachel looks at her grandfather in astonishment. Unless she's very mistaken, Izzy is flirting" (*Rain* 92). Recognition of this response helps Rachel to build a true relationship with her grandfather, one in which she can hear each subtle change in his voice and know the true meaning of what lies behind his words.

In spite of the fact that she can't always see the irony in her life, Rachel's attentive way of analyzing the details of life gives her insight about the people around her. And not only do these abilities allow growth in her relationships, but ultimately they help her to recognize that Izzy knows more about his terminal diagnosis than others have told him. Still Rachel doesn't recognize the significance of what is quickly evident to the reader. So when the narrator says, "If she didn't know Izzy better, she might almost think he's afraid" (*Rain* 48), the reader knows that although Rachel never denies that her grandfather is dying, she chooses not to recognize that Izzy knows how sick he is, even when the evidence is before her.

Meanwhile, Rachel's mother, whom she loves despite her embarrassment, can't seem to cope with her own father's impending death. Again, Rachel's understanding of her mother's difficulty is told in simple detail. When Shirley takes off her glasses, Rachel sees, "Her eyes look naked" (*Rain* 61). Rachel takes her first steps toward change and growth when she makes the adult decision to help out. When Shirley exhibits fear and hesitation about talking to the doctor, Rachel takes off an afternoon of school to go along with her mother.

This complex response to her surroundings keeps Rachel

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guessing and alert and the reader interested. And her ability to almost guess at what's going on inside Izzy initially gives Rachel the compassion and desire to help him, in spite of both his ornery nature and the fact that her own friends want her to hang out with them after school. Mazer's protagonists consistently demonstrate complex personalities, and it is evident that the characters' problems will change them in the end.

For Rachel, these changes come when she begins to wonder about Izzy even when she isn't just walking with him, and she becomes angered by his constant refusal to allow her to help more than go with him on his daily walks. At first, she thinks, "She hates *this*. If he were healthy, she wouldn't choose to walk with him — she *wouldn't* walk with him" (*Rain* 108). A single paragraph shortly after this scene clarifies the give and take of their relationship. Rachel stands at the elevator and says, "I'll go with you." Izzy responds, "No, you won't." The elevator creaks open. He steps in. The door closes and he's gone. Maybe he's a dying man, but he's still Izzy" (*Rain* 119).

Shortly after this scene, Rachel angrily races up the stairs to tell her grandfather that she's sick of being treated as if the only thing she can do for him is take a walk. When she finds him at his apartment door, puffing and panting, congratulating himself that he made it on another walk, encouraging himself to keep trying, she leaves before he can see her.

Communicating With Detail

Communication seems to be a key theme in all of Mazer's work. This is evident in *After the Rain*, which requires communication as well as understanding of what Rachel and Izzy don't say in order for the relationships between Izzy and Rachel and Rachel and Lewis to take root. *When She Was Good*, which explores the aftershock of an abusive relationship between a young girl named Em and her mentally ill, older sister Pamela, also investigates the role communication plays to rise past despair. Contrasting almost insignificant glimpses of Em's hope against the stark and ugly reality of her bruised body and shattered ego, Mazer creates a novel that demonstrates the value of communication for survival. The central theme of communication helps readers to understand how someone can stay in an abusive situation and even love the abuser. But it is, first, a moment of communicated joy that bonds these two sisters as Em shows Pamela a sunrise: "I pointed to show her where the sun was going to come up, and as I stretched out my arm, the red rim slid up from the earth." Pamela responds with awe and readers glimpse a moment of rare beauty, one that all appreciate. "'Hey!' Pamela said. 'Hey!' I held my hand steady, finger pointing, claiming the magic, and the sun obediently slid up and up and up. 'Hey,' she breathed again, and tucked her arm around my waist" (*Good* 46).

The novel, written in first person from Em's point of view, opens at a time when Em's sister, who beat her and insulted her constantly, has died. We learn quickly that the two sisters had only each other, and had relied upon each other, for four years. Em explains how she has survived her bleak existence so far:

As a little girl, I would often chant and sing two words, which I had decided were magic words. These words were *happy home*, and how I came by them I don't know, but I believed if I said and sang them often enough, it would change things —

take away Mother's sadness and make Pamela nice and even turn Father cheerful. And then I would be happy. (*Good* 4)

As the novel unfolds, the reader discovers that when Mother died, her father remarried, and his new wife doesn't want the girls around. Em and Pamela left their trailer home and found an apartment in the city; there, their lives became even bleaker. Pamela became more abusive and paranoid. She took her fears out by hitting and controlling Em. When she discovered Em keeping a journal, she told Em to stop and screamed, "I hate crap like this. All this secret writing stuff. You shouldn't have secrets from me. I'm your sister." Pamela destroyed the journal, effectively censoring even Em's thoughts. Life becomes so unmanageable that the two finally relied upon Pamela's disability to survive because Pamela became fearful of letting Em out of her sight.

Just as *happy home* gives Em a point on which to focus hope, her journal symbolizes the power that communicating beyond her isolated existence will have to save her. Em, whose voice was censored by Pamela, has internalized Pamela's voice — which drowns out her own. But Em must break out of her isolation and communicate with *others* in order to ascend beyond the desperate lifestyle that was created while Pamela lived and continues beyond Pamela's death because of the fear she has instilled in Em. As Em says, "Thoughts were always a problem. There were too many times she walked into my head and stood there and saw what I was thinking. My solution was not to think anything, if possible" (*Good* 10). Em's conflict is that her mother made her believe that she was being a good girl when she protected Pamela.

Em is left with the contrast between moments of hope and moments of despair. Mazer uses the technique of allowing the reader to see the world through Em's eyes to help the reader see these contrasts. Em helps us see the despair of Pamela's illness: "Without Mother, she was Pamela intensified, the rocketing planet, the exploding star in free fall" (*Good* 94). Mentally ill, abusive and angry, Pamela takes out her rage and frustration on Em, who realistically knows what's coming but holds out hope by focusing on the good:

The nights she laughed were the good nights. The nights that weren't so good were when she chewed hard on her food and nothing I said was funny.

There was no way to know how those nights would end. No way to know if, in the morning, I would move slowly and carefully, and cover myself with long sleeves, makeup, and sunglasses. (*Good*122)

Just as in *After The Rain*, Mazer uses contrasting detail on several levels not only to help readers see the reality of Em's existence but also to help readers understand the tenuous hold Em maintains on her hope. Further contrasting details serve to delineate these complex characters as they try to deal with a complex and all too real situation. Em, as the protagonist, remains believable because she trusts in the magic of words to recall the memory of singular moments of happiness and dreams that connect Em to her sister and to earlier happy times with her mother. She dreams of her mother, a device which Mazer uses to make the relationship between Em and her mother feel real to the reader while playing on the threads of human connection that make Em believe in the magic of hope. Em absorbs the beauty of her mother in dreams and the memory of her mother's love. "Look how pretty all this is!" Em says in her dream as she and her mother

relax in a railroad dining car, and she observes “a pink cloth,” “a small vase with a frilled pink flower in the middle of the table” (*Good* 85). The memories of love that the dream ignites give Em enough hope to avoid falling into total despair, and in the end, they help her to connect to community.

In *When She Was Good*, Mazer again uses detail to allow us into Em’s mind. But in this novel, she also incorporates other language devices such as personification and simile, extended metaphor. We see how strong Pamela’s power over Em has become when we see Em reacts to a cloth Monica doll that Pamela has made. “She [Pamela] talked about it as if it were alive. She perched her [the doll] on the back of the couch and warned me not to pick her up. ‘She doesn’t like anyone but me to touch her.’” (*Good* 118). Mazer doesn’t just rely on personification to have Em believe in the power of the dolls; she gives her character, Pamela, the ability to make the dolls appear as if they are alive.

Mazer uses simile and dream imagery to create an aura of fear for Em. After Pamela’s death, Em dreams of mislaying her sister (*Good* 144), and seeing “rotting bodies of giant mice heaped in a room. The smell is disgusting” (*Good* 145). Em recalls her sister’s physical characteristics — “A hand like meat” (*Good* 145), “heavy arms crossed over her chest” (*Good* 210) and, finally, toward the end of the novel, Mazer allows the reader to glimpse Pamela as the queen of terror:

She sits forward on her chair, tapping her fingers against the iron frying pan, the one in which I’ll make her an omelette as soon as I get the TV working. *Bitch you’re trying to make me feel crazy get it fixed or I don’t what I’ll do I’m telling you my head* — she bites her lip, moans. Blood runs down her chin.

I’m doing it, Pamela, doing it, honestly, hold on. *Don’t tell me to hold on don’t say that to me not me damn damn.* She sobs and slams the pan against her leg.

Pamela, don’t do that —

She throws the pan at me. (*Good* 224)

Experimenting with Structure

Mazer relies upon a traditional novel format for *After The Rain*, but enjoys a complex format for *When She Was Good*. Here, she breaks the novel up into chapters that are actually small vignettes, each able to stand alone and, at the same time, serve to tell the story of a moment in Em’s life. Like beads strung together, these combine a life of pain and hope. Mazer also divides *When She Was Good* into three sections: part I, called “Earthly Comfort,” deals with Em’s immediate responses to Pamela’s death; part II, called “In the Reign of Terror,” told completely in flashbacks, tells the tales of Pamela’s growing insanity and control over Em; and Part III, “The Doubled Moon,” tells the stories of Em’s healing. Here, the doubled moon, an image that Em once saw as she stood beside a lake, symbolizes Em’s ability to find hope and salvation in simple beauty. She calls it “a sight so pure I almost staggered.” This vision helps her to find what has been miss-

ing in her life, and she thinks, “I wondered how I had lived without knowing such calm was possible, that such pure peace existed” (*Good* 162).

Mazer says she arrived at the decision to create the complex novel structure for *When She Was Good* after considering structure “over a long period of time.... I didn’t have the structure of the three parts for a long time, although I knew I had to deal with the present and the past, but somehow it never felt right to start with the past and go forward chronologically. She adds, “It was only when I got the first line of the book that I understood the whole structure.... And when I hit it, it was a result of a lot of things, of thinking, musing, being in the story for such a long time, of knowing the story and the bits and parts of it inside out” (Letter).

Although Mazer refuses to rely on the traditional problem novel format, which as described by Marion Dane Bauer, consists of establishing the

problem, and having the character work to overcome it by surviving three obstacles (*What’s Your Story...* 48-56), Mazer comes close to this format in *After The Rain*. In fact, she says of traditional structure, “I am very much committed to the classic *story* form, that which divides into three basic parts: the beginning, the middle, the ending. And I believe in the character working out her/his own destiny and working for it, as part of the classic story form” (Letter). Yet even here, Mazer, perhaps because she tends toward writing character-driven novels, deviates from this classic form toward the end of *After the Rain* by refusing to give Rachel an easy out. She doesn’t solve the problem of Izzy’s impending death; rather, he dies. More important, Rachel doesn’t resolve her problems with her cantankerous grandfather. She simply admits that she loves him despite his faults. In stating this realization, she makes a connection to her brother Jeremy, who points out, “Time has run out for me and Grandpa” (*Rain* 239). But even here, Mazer maintains her dedication to realism, for she refuses to force the issue of hope by allowing Rachel and Jeremy’s connection to unrealistically become more than has been promised. Rachel tells Jeremy that she’ll continue to write and hopes that he will offer to write back to her. He doesn’t. And Mazer says of this complex resolution, “If you did find the expected ending, I would feel that I had failed” (Letter).

Mazer also deviates from a straight traditional novel format in *After the Rain* when she varies point of view between chapters. By alternating first person journal entries and letters to Rachel’s brother, she compresses periods of time, time in which little happens but feelings are analyzed. The letters and journals are spliced between chapters that are set in real time and, using a third person, limited point of view, show us the world through Rachel’s eyes.

Playing with Time in Crucial Scenes

Mazer slows down language in order to stop time in crucial scenes. She relies upon her exceptional ability to draw out expansive detail and couple the detail with her main character’s inner dialogue. This is especially apparent in the

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second elevator scene between Rachel and Izzy, in which Rachel races angrily up the stairs to confront Izzy with what she perceives to be rudeness:

She runs up the stairs, making a speech in her head.

Would it be too much to ask that you at least say good-bye to me? It's rude not to, but it's more than that. I have this weird unfinished feeling when you leave me like that. And tell me this, why didn't you let me help you carry the groceries? And what's wrong with my going up in the elevator with you?

She discovers then, in a slowed time moment, the strength of Izzy's character, his fierce pride and independence:

She arrives on the third floor just as Izzy is getting out of the elevator. He doesn't see her coming from the stairs. He's talking — she thinks to someone in one of the apartments, but there's no one around, no one else in the hall. He's talking to himself.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, that's good, Izzy....Good...good.... You did it." He laughs briefly, "Passed the test."

From the stairs, she watches him unlock his door, go inside. Then she goes back down the stairs. (Rain 136-137)

The device that slows time is also used when Rachel blurts out the question, "Are you afraid to die?" Rather than cutting right to Izzy's response, Mazer lingers on Rachel's own reaction: "Her stomach dives. She didn't know she was going to say that. Why did she say it. *Are you afraid of dying?* There's no taking back the words — they're out, they won't go away, they lie there between her and Izzy, like blocks of wood she's thrown down with a careless thump" (Rain 136-137).

Mazer also compresses time by using chapters of brief journal entries that focus on important but brief moments pinpointing Izzy's declining health. The short entries comment on how Izzy's ability to walk hills is diminishing. He's getting tired more quickly, needs to sit more frequently.

These brief chapters are followed by happier chapters set in real time. Contrasts between Rachel's life with her friends and her life with Izzy are presented in traditional format. These chapters also allow readers to see into Rachel's mind where they can observe Rachel's reactions to Izzy's friendship with Alice Farnum, an elderly woman who found Izzy when he fell walking alone, and Rachel's responses to her own growing relationship with Lewis. Throughout the entire book, Mazer makes sure that her characters always come back to the underlying issue of Izzy's impending death and Rachel's response to it.

Conclusion

Many of the contrasting details, especially in the novel *After the Rain*, are in the personalities of the characters themselves. But as Mazer points out when she discusses the contrasts to be found in *When She Was Good*, "It would be unbearable to read only of despair and abuse. The heart of the reader couldn't take it, nor could the heart of the writer. So there must be something better, sweeter, more tender, even if only in memory" (Letter). So Em, who has had a life that could make the heartiest soul despair, remembers making elderberry jam with her mother, and, as Mazer explains, "this is meant both as a literal memory, a sugar sweet memory, and as a metaphor for life. Elderberry without sugar is mouth puckering; add a little sugar and everything changes..." (Letter).

In *After the Rain*, it is the juxtaposition of the grandfather and granddaughter's evolving relationships that makes it logically acceptable that Izzy asks Rachel what is really wrong with him. The reader accepts that Rachel respects him enough to tell him that he is dying. And we're not surprised when Rachel tells him, "she sits there and cries, and he pats her hand" (Rain 152).

As Mazer says, "Character is revealed through action and contrast.... Detail can reflect and open up and heighten the tensions and conflict of a scene" (Letter). It is that detail and the ways in which detail unfolds that makes the story imaginatively ours, because through structuring detail each character becomes intimately known to us.

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