

Popular Postmodernism for Young Adult Readers: *Walk Two Moons, Holes, and Monster*

Stephenie Yearwood

One of the ongoing debates in children's and young adult literature recently has been over the issue of whether, and how, and to what extent the literature, broadly defined, is becoming "postmodern." In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman (1996) describes children's literature as being (among other qualities) simple, action-oriented, and didactic (190). Swedish critic Maria Nikolajeva argues, in *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic* (1996) argues, to the contrary, stating that children's literature (which, for her, includes YA literature) was showing more and more postmodern qualities. She holds that although "genre" books still dominate the field, more and more "auteur" books, literary, sophisticated, and complex have been appearing (207). In 1998, Nikolajeva replied specifically to Nodelman by arguing that "an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity and metafiction" (Nikolajeva, "Exit" 222). As I examine these arguments from the point of view of 2002, it seems to me that if we focus exclusively on young adult literature, we will find that one part of the larger world of "children's literature" has now fully embraced the postmodern mode. To put it a bit differently, whereas the distinctively postmodern YA works have, until recently, been "fringe" or "auteur" books, beloved of critics, they have not been popular favorites. Now they are.

Three recent YA books that are very popular provide examples of works that fearlessly use postmodernist ideas and techniques: Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, Louis Sachar's *Holes*, and Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*. The first two are well-known Newbery Award winners of 1995 and 1998 respectively, and the third is a 1999 winner of the ALA Michael Printz Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, and a finalist for the National Book Award. Sales figures for these books indicate that they clearly are mainstream reading. Their

literary qualities move them out of the historical tradition of simplicity and didactic morality which Nodelman describes, and into the mode which Nikolajeva defines as postmodern. What's more, there are many others like them. The tide has turned, and the turn of this century also marks a turning point for YA literature.

Nikolajeva's definition of postmodernism is comprehensive and functional; however, I will refine and focus it somewhat in order to clarify the essential qualities of these three novels and to highlight some of the striking similarities between them. First, I borrow Brian McHale's proposition in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) that, whereas the central question in modernist fiction is epistemological, postmodernist

fiction is focused on ontological questions (9). Essential questions of being, McHale says, expand to include other ontological queries: "What world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (11). From Linda Hutcheon, I borrow the "important postmodern concept of the 'presence of the past'." Hutcheon explains the postmodernist use of,

and obsession with, history as being "not a nostalgic return" but "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue" (4). Finally, from the Bakhtinian tradition I take the idea of dialogics or intertextuality as central to postmodern fiction—the notion that texts or narratives set up dialogues with other texts, either other previously-written literary texts or other stories, creating new stories in the interstices and frictions and contradictions of various other stories. These three YA novels are all marked by an ontologically-impelled querying of the past within a densely intertextual narrative structure. To various degrees, they all center around gaps (vacancies, missing pieces, unknowns, uncertainties, or holes) and the questions (often unanswered questions) generated by those missing pieces. All are centrally concerned with history (either personal or political), what it is, understanding it, remaking it, and the uncertain relationship between past and present. Finally, all of them foreground issues of intertextuality or internarrativity. They create realms of intertextual reference where multiple stories affect/reflect/interact as the past is questioned, prodded, retold, recovered, or remade. Inter-

Interestingly, this postmodern "recipe" for YA literature turns out to be extraordinarily well-suited to raising and exploring some of the oldest themes of the genre: identity, self-fashioning, and self-knowledge.

estingly, this postmodern "recipe" for YA literature turns out to be extraordinarily well-suited to raising and exploring some of the oldest themes of the genre: identity, self-fashioning, and self-knowledge.

Walk Two Moons

Creech's story is marked strongly from the outset by its missing piece: Salamanca Tree Hiddle's mother. It quickly becomes obvious that the mystery in the novel is more than the epistemological issue of figuring out what happened to her. As we collect Sal's clues, we come to realize that even though we don't know yet what happened to Sal's mother, our narrator Sal surely must know. But in her present state of being, she cannot face what she knows. Sal's ontological essence, her very being, is in question as she pieces together for us and for herself a picture of the past and a self which can accept that picture. We are confused, and so is Sal. Although Sal's narration of Phoebe's story engages us, and the rambunctious grandparents add a wonderful dimension to the tale, the central story here is Sal's—she gropes to answer her ontological question of how she can continue existence in a world where her mother is dead.

Creech's narrative technique highlights the uncertain and quirky relationship between past and present through the story. The entire story of Phoebe is told by Sal to her grandparents as they travel west to see her mother. The earlier story of Sal's life with her mother and father before she met Phoebe is recounted in an even more fragmented and allusive way as events in Phoebe's tale trigger memories in Sal. It is as though the deep turmoil of that earlier history causes it to break through, push up and intrude into Phoebe's tale. Sal's own history/mystery (and that of her mother) is lost to her conscious recollection and only reassembled as it is re-experienced vicariously through Phoebe, then as that story is retold to her grandparents. Sal knows but does not know this history, and she and Phoebe both try out alternative historical hypotheses about their missing mothers. Has Phoebe's mother been kidnapped by the lunatic? Is she in Paris? Hidden in a well? Murdered by Mrs. Cadaver? Is Sal's mother alive and well and waiting for Sal in Idaho? Is she alive but disabled? Is she coming home? Is she dead? Sal's past is reconsidered, remade and retold in multiple layers here; and it can emerge fully only when she has successfully constructed a new identity for herself—an identity which can face the history.

Finally, this story is made of stories, by stories, and in between stories. Sal tells us initially that, "The story of Phoebe was like the plaster wall in our old house in Bybanks, Kentucky" (3). That wall is the one where her father chipped and chipped away at the plaster to find an old brick fireplace underneath. Sal is aware that "beneath Phoebe's story was another one. Mine" (3). But the internarrative connections in the story are even more complex than that. Other threads of embedded narrative serve as reflecting surfaces in which Sal reads her own, or a difference from her own. There

is the mini-tale of Ben's mother in a mental hospital, a woman who reminds Sal strongly of her own mother (370). There is the Blackfoot myth of Napi who created men and women; it reminds her that "People die" (150). The story of Mrs. Cadaver, whose husband was killed and mother blinded in the same car accident, makes Sal think, "It was as though I was walking in her moccasins. That's how much my heart was beating and my own hands sweating" (220). And the enigmatic "messages" which appear on slips of paper at Phoebe's front door work their way into her very being. "All those messages had invaded my brain and affected the way I looked at things" (221). In the intertextual spaces and intersections and frictions between these stories, Sal resurrects her past and simultaneously constructs herself as a different being.

Holes

Louis Sachar's *Holes* uses the elements of this recipe differently. This story is based not on complex narrative technique, but on vacancy and missing pieces, and on a magically realistic reenactment of history which focuses on the intersecting stories of three different sets of characters generations apart. Ontological issues of being and nothingness interplay

through this story in a series of negative/positive afterimages. Stanley Yelnats (whose name is a self-reflective palindrome) is at Camp Green Lake (which is not a lake, but a desert where a lake used to be) because some famous sneakers go missing; his chief occupation there is to dig holes, and he attributes it all to something his mythical grandfather failed to do. Stanley himself is nearly a missing person. He is given the nonsense nickname "Caveman," as though he were himself a vacancy, and his best friend is nicknamed Zero.

The setting raises other ontological questions such as "What world are we in?" Initially, the idea of a juvenile detention camp set in a desert ringed by mountains seems realistic enough, until we learn about the yellow-spotted lizards whose bite is slow and

always lethal. Add to that the presence of a masochistic female camp warden who wears "black cowboy boots [. . .] studded with turquoise stones" (66) and who delights in concocting her own nail polish using rattlesnake venom so that

"it's only toxic while it's wet" (90), and we have bypassed fantasy altogether and edged out into the surreal.

Finally, the ontological stakes are raised even higher by the magical realism of the plot with its three intertwined stories. Stanley's often-retold family myth is that his great-great-grandfather was perpetually in the wrong place at the wrong time because he stole a pig from a one-legged Gypsy and was cursed (8). But it turns out that other family stories are just as relevant. It seems that after a Madame Zeroni helped this great-great-grandfather, he failed to honor his promise to carry her up a mountain to a place where a stream ran uphill to let her drink from it (28). Another important story is about the next Yelnats generation and his great-grandfather's encounter with Kissin' Kate Barlow. One hundred and ten years ago, we learn, the kind schoolteacher

*Finally, this story is made of stories,
by stories, and in between stories.*

*The story steadfastly refuses to resolve
either the epistemological or the
ontological issues; hence its
contradictory and confusing accounts
of the past.*

Kate Barlow of Green Lake (when it really WAS a Green Lake) encountered racism and the murder of her lover and transformed herself into the outlaw Kissin' Kate Barlow. We learn that the lake dried up as punishment for the transgressions of the community. We also learn that Stanley's great-grandfather was robbed by Kissin' Kate, left for dead in the desert, but managed to survive, saying only that he had "found refuge on God's thumb"(93). Another interwoven story is Stanley's own tale of being hit on the head with a pair of stolen sneakers and sent off to reform camp.

These related narratives coalesce into a truly magical and surreal story at the conclusion to *Holes*. Stanley has been trying to help out his fellow inmate Zero by teaching him to read, and after Zero escapes into the desert (with no water) Stanley decides to follow him. They survive by accidentally finding, in the midst of the dry lakebed, the skeleton of the boat in which Kate Barlow and her lover tried to escape, then drinking the 110-year old spiced peaches which were in the boat when it sank. Stanley carries the sick Zero (whose real name we learn is Hector Zeroni) out of the desert and up to the top of a strange-shaped mountain where they find a most unlikely water hole and the field of onions Kate's lover tended. As they escape, Zero explains that he is the one who stole the sneakers Stanley was caught and convicted for stealing. Along the way, Stanley realizes that they are on "God's thumb" where his great-grandfather before him escaped and survived. It becomes clear to all that Stanley has satisfied his great-great-grandfather's debt to the Zeroni family, re-enacted his great-grandfather's survival, and solved the mystery of who stole those sneakers. The runaway surrealism is capped when the two boys return to camp, are cornered by yellow-spotted lizards, find that the lizards don't bite people who have been eating onions for a week, locate the lost treasure of Kissin' Kate, prove their innocence, and expose the camp as a fraud.

In the introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris point out that magical realism "creates space for the interactions of diversity. In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions" (3). Indeed, that is precisely what happens here as the plot queries whether it takes magical intervention from four generations back to deal with the problems of children growing up in poverty and with an abusive system of "justice." The marvelously mythical tying up of all these intertextual loose ends creates for Stanley what he has never had before, an identity of himself as himself.

Monster

Myers' *Monster* is a book of a different flavor—grim, gritty and realistic—without the comic elements or easy resolutions of the others. Yet even in this form we find the postmodern concerns and questions about being, about understanding the past, and about intersecting texts and versions of that past. This story focuses even more than the

others on the question of how an identity is made and whether a writer can "rewrite the text," or in other words, shape the past into a coherent story and invent himself along the way.

The central question of this book at first seems more epistemological than ontological, for initially the story focuses on the uncertain, ambiguous, contradictory issue of what Steve Harmon actually DID in connection to the robbery/murder for which he is being tried. The entire story circles and recircles around that question, presenting us contradictory evidence from witnesses, from Steve himself on the stand, and from Steve's notes. The irresolvable epistemological contradictions are heightened into a philosophical perplex by the structural design of the book. The text we read is actually a film script written by Steve Harmon about his trial, framed and accompanied by Steve's notes which appear to be "handwritten," by photographs, and by occasional "handwritten" marginalia commenting on both. Even the contradictory testimony comes to us only through Steve's film script. An unreliable narrator? Yes, and unreliably unreliable, since he reflects his own contradictions, too.

All the same, ultimately the ontological questions predominate; all of this uncertainty as to what we know and what Steve did becomes the means of raising the question of how he can continue to exist, whether he will continue to be at all, and who he is. "When I look into the [mirror] I see a

face looking back at me but I don't recognize it. It doesn't look like me" (1). "I think to get used to this I will have to give up what I think is real and take up something else" (3). "They take away your shoelaces and your belt so you can't kill yourself no matter how bad

it is" (59). "If I got out after 20 years, I'd be 36. Maybe I wouldn't live that long. Maybe I would kill myself so I wouldn't have to live that long in here" (144). "[My attorney] thinks I am guilty. I know she thinks I am guilty" (138). "What did I do?" (140). "I knew [Mama] felt that I didn't do anything wrong. It was me who wasn't sure. It was me who lay on the cot wondering if I was fooling myself" (148).

Steve's only answer to this ontological maze is his film, his act of self-fashioning a being and identity. It includes flashbacks to scenes where he meets other participants in the robbery, a fantasy/fear sequence in which he is being put to death, and action from the trial. As with *Holes*, we are confronted with the question of what world we are in. The fact/fiction line is just as blurred as Steve's face in the photo on page 188.

The story steadfastly refuses to resolve either the epistemological or the ontological issues; hence its contradictory and confusing accounts of the past. Through varying accounts, we view and review the scene of the robbery/murder from a different point of view each time. Witness Lorelle Henry testifies she did not see him in the drugstore, and he testifies that he never entered the drugstore that day. But in his notes he writes, "I walked into a drugstore to look for some mints, and then I walked out" (140). And on page 220, we find two photos of Steve which appear to have been taken by a security camera in a store, with the "handwritten" marginalia "What was I doing?" and "What was I thinking." Are these actual evidence in the trial or shots he

Young adult works in the postmodern mode may not necessarily predominate, but they are now mainstream and readily accepted by readers.

envisions as part of his film? Steve Harmon re-fashions the past, again blurring the fact/fiction line.

The intertextual interaction in this novel is a significant element in its complex relationship to the past. The graphic layout of the novel provides us layer upon layer of "text," each with its own version of the past. Some of the text is linguistic, some of it graphic: scene descriptions, descriptions of camera shots, dialogue spoken by characters, Steve's notes, photos and marginalia. Differentiated by typestyles and layout, each of these elements interacts with, confounds, comments on, and clarifies the others.

But like the other novels, these postmodernist elements conspire to create a remarkable exploration of that most central young adult issue: identity. Throughout, Steve struggles with how others see him and how he sees himself. Is he the "monster" whom the prosecutor sees? The suspicious and unknown person his father sees? The innocent boy his mother sees? The guilty boy his attorney sees? Or the "good person" he wants to see in himself? He cannot answer; thus even at the conclusion of the story, five months after he is acquitted, the ontological question is still driving Steve, and he is still filming:

I have been taking movies of myself. In the movies, I talk and tell the camera who I am, what I think I am about. Sometimes I set the camera up outside and walk up to it from different angles.

Sometimes I set the camera up in front of a mirror and film myself as a reflection. I wear different clothes and try to change my voice[. . .]I want to know who I am. I want to know the road to panic that I took. I want to look at myself a thousand times to look for one true image. When Miss O'Brien looked at me, after we had won the case, what did she see that caused her to turn away? What did she see?
(*Monster*, 281)

No answers, no easy resolutions, no insight. Just a central ontological question, obsession and uncertainty about the past, and archaeological layering of text upon text.

Certainly there is room for legitimate debate whether this three-part "recipe" of ontological perspective, historical interrogation, and intertextual multilogue is an adequate definition of the atmospheric and omnipresent concept of "postmodernism" in young adult literature. But these elements highlight issues raised in these three novels and in many others which could have been selected: Creech's *The Wanderer*, Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Paterson's *Gathering Blue*. I believe that a broader definition of postmodernism would only emphasize further the extent to which the "cultural dominant" has changed (McHale 9). Young adult works in the postmodern mode may not necessarily predominate, but they are now mainstream and readily accepted by readers.

Nor should this be any surprise since one of the common uses of the term "postmodern" is simply as a descriptive term for contemporary culture. Zipes (2001) voices reservations about how distanced criticism of children's and YA literature has become from the realities of the lives of contemporary young readers (Zipes 37). Nevertheless, it seems to me that in this case, the qualities of these three works that make them critically "postmodern" are exactly the qualities which reflect current anxieties, obsessions, and social realities. Sal's tenuous grip on an unbearable reality of loss, Stanley's near evaporation into a bizarre and corrupt juvenile justice system, and Steve Harmon's radical self-fashioning in the face of society's expectations of young black men: these are themes which invite both postmodern literary treatment and popularity with young readers in our postmodern culture.

Works Cited

- Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1994.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*. New York and London: Garland, 1996.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Exit Children's Literature?" *The Lion and the Unicorn* 22 (1998): 221-236.
- Nodelman, Perry. *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1992.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York and London: Methuen, 1987.
- Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
- Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Zipes, Jack. "Do You Know What We are Doing to Your Books?" in *Sticks and Stones: the Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

Stephanie Yearwood is Associate Professor of English, Department of English and Foreign Languages, at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. She teaches children's literature, with interests in critical theory, technology and pedagogy.