THE ALAN REVIEW

The Voices of Cultural Assimilation in Current Young Adult Novels

Ann Angel

Immigrant stories bear witness to hope but also to a history of impoverishment, persecution and misunderstanding. Memoirs and novels of those who made the journey to these shores in search of wealth, material comfort, ready acculturation and assimilation often relate the realities of personal struggles that prove stark contrast to the promise. New immigrants often found themselves laboring at menial jobs for long hours at low wages, conquering overwhelming language barriers, and beleaguered with religious and cultural disparity. The bitter truth proves that a dream of wealth and acceptance turns out, for some, to be just an illusion. For all, the journey proves to be one of self-discovery and awakening understanding of the soul of humanity.

In recent years, a few contemporary writers have focused on the struggle. In doing so, they have captured their own and imagined adolescent voices that tell of being trapped between two cultures. Over the last few years, three renowned writers have chosen from diverse genres to tell immigrant tales through memoir, contemporary vignettes, and historical fiction. Each author captures very real adolescent voices and their stories.

While Frank McCourt recaptures his own youth in *Angela's Ashes*, two other writers rely less upon personal experience and more on history and imagination. Most recently, An Na, who won the Printz Award and a National Book Honor with her first novel, *A Step from Heaven*, brought a mix of personal story and research to readers through the contemporary voice of Young Ju, a Korean pre-schooler who immigrates to the United States and grows up squarely facing immigrant challenges, into the lives and hearts of readers. Norma Fox Mazer, combining research and an imaginative interpretation of real events, weaves the story of one adolescent's extraordinary cultural and family losses in her World War II novel, *Goodnight Maman.*

With each of these narratives, the main character's individual voice personalizes the experience of loss, of crossing oceans and continents, leaving behind the familiar, losing a cultural history, and then blending into new cultures. Each narrative uses different techniques with language and time in order to capture the unique voices and experiences of its characters.

Although *Goodnight Maman* is written in past tense, Mazer rejects the notion that past tense creates distance. She says she never wants distance between the characters and the reader. "Although the story is based on distant events," she says, "I hoped that the first person voice would render it immediate, and that the letters Karen writes to her mother would allow her to speak more emotionally and intimately" (interview) Karen is very young when the book begins, but gradually, with the accumulation of experience in wartime and as a refugee, she becomes a more reflective person. Mazer explains that telling Karen's story in past tense to establish distanced time helped to create this reflective quality by using cultural references from the past as an integral part of the story:

> One day someone called me a frog.
>
> "That's what we call the Frenchies," Zooey said at lunch.
>
> "It's a dumb insult," Peggy said. "Don't feel bad, Karen."
>
> A few days later, two girls came up to me in the hall and said, "Dirty Jew."
>
> I kept a blank face and kept going down the hall. I was surprised — shocked, really. I didn't think Americans were like that. I didn't tell anyone. (*Goodnight Maman* 124)

Mazer adds that, although the historical events on which her novel is based took place almost sixty years ago, scenes like this achieve their effect through many revisions. She says she writes the story over and over, until she enters "a place where I stop feeling I'm *writing*. I'm inhabiting the character, and I know everything she knows, everything she thinks and feels. That is a magic time for me, and it also tells me that I'm very nearly finished with this story" (interview).

Alternatively, Na and McCourt create immediacy and intimacy in their works with present tense narratives. Na's character, Young Ju, remains in present tense voice throughout the narrative. And, although McCourt opens chapters with telling paragraphs written in the past tense to create a sense of the author's voice as the memoir began, he leads into present tense scenes that become immediate and compelling stories.

For example, McCourt describes his mother in an adult narrative tone: "She never saw her father, who had run off to Australia weeks before her birth." At this point, McCourt shifts into the scene as though it was the here and now: "After a night of drinking porter in the pubs of Limmerick he staggers down the lane singing his favorite song..." (*Angela's Ashes* 13).

Unlike McCourt, who passes from past tense memory into a present tense scene, from the very first page, Na captures her main character Young Ju in the moment of learning to trust a parent. The novel opens with a scene in which the reader hears a parent speaking: "Just to the edge, Young Ju.

Only your feet. Stay there" (A *Step from Heaven* 9). The scene sets the novel's pattern of vignettes shown as though they are snapshots.

Despite an interesting and initial tense shift in McCourt's work, creating a sense of moving from McCourt's adult sensibilities back to a four-year-old's voice, readers of both McCourt and Na's works will find themselves sharing captured moments with the main characters when they were very young. Those shared moments change along with understanding and language as the characters age. Both works rely upon present tense scenes that show ever more complex understanding to accomplish this.

McCourt's use of an adult voice that falls into the child-voice of Frank, indicates his work is clearly memoir, while Na's consistent use of present tense indicates her work is clearly fictitious.

McCourt said it took years to find the voice. "I kept fiddling with it," he told Jim Saah, of *Uno Mas Magazine*. "I was being literally imitative and derivative" (Saah 10). It may be that *Angela's Ashes* was a vehicle for McCourt's own voice at various ages, perhaps McCourt's return to places where he grew up jarred his memory, whatever the cause of discovering the voice McCourt says that once the voice of young Frankie came to him, the writing moved easily. "It was miraculous," he told Saah in an interview, "I just knew that I had to write that part about the playground and being on the seesaw with my brother. And I just stayed with that" (Saah 10).

Na has said the literature of personal immigration experiences such as *Angela's Ashes* is the literature that gave her own character, Young Ju, her voice. In fact, she still credits McCourt for making her connect to the voice and tone for *A Step from Heaven*. McCourt's novel helped her realize the depth of innocence of children's voices: "I had been struggling with how to create a child-like protagonist's voice without making it sound as though I was 'dumbing down' to the character. They are able to see events, people and places with an intensity and open mindedness that adults lack. Also, children have this wonderful ability to make up or imagine their own stories when there is no given explanation. Or sometimes, even when there is one, they might choose to create an alternative interpretation of what they see and hear" (Na interview).

Na chooses concrete language, the language of metaphor and simile, to mirror Young Ju's childlike sensibilities. For instance, she allows Young Ju to experience her personal heaven as something tangible by mixing up the meaning of flying to the U.S. with going to heaven. Discovering that heaven was not the suburban home Young Ju searched upon her arrival to the U.S., comes through Young Ju's experience of a large white carpeted living room where she searches the closets and corners for her dead, and presumably heaven-sent grandfather. As Na said, "It was hard to choose what Young Ju might know and might not know. For instance, I wondered about the concept of moving. Would Young Ju know what that meant? I tried to imagine her village and what words and ideas she might have been exposed to and it seemed that moving would be a whole new experience. People in her village would not be moving. Her family never moved or talked about moving so I had to treat this concept and word as completely new. As Young Ju grew up I tried to imagine the moments and ideas that might stand out in her memory. At this point, I also drew upon my own experiences and memories of learning new concepts. I distinctly remember my first taste of Coke and going to school" (Na interview).

McCourt's narrative, peppered with metaphoric connections, tends to demonstrate a four-year-old child's concrete understandings of religious experience so that when new babies arrived sometime at night in his mother's bed, it is little Frankie who explained, "We have two new babies who were brought by an angel in the middle of the night" (*Angela's Ashes* 21).

While both Na and McCourt use simile and metaphor to create textural reality, Na's use of simile and metaphor creates a textural reality that proves to be more visual and universal than McCourt's, which relies upon that Catholic understanding. For example, Young Ju describes people with "round money eyes"; her curled hair is "toy-man hair."

Unlike McCourt, whose memoir exposes the difference in cultures where multiple dialects of the same English language are spoken, Na creates a world of language and cultural differences as Young Ju learns the meaning of English words to replace her Korean language.

Na admits her own grasp of Korean is pretty limited. "I can speak it pretty well with my parents but it's at an elementary level. If I had to speak in front of a Korean audience, I would be hard pressed to sound other than a little girl." Yet Na captures much of her visual imagery through concrete metaphor and visual references she believes come from the language of children. "I think," she explains, "the language of children lends itself readily to visual and metaphoric referencing" (Na interview).

The use of Korean words in Na's novel stems from a desire to subject the reader to another language. "Just as immigrants struggle to make sense of English, I wanted English readers to struggle with the Korean," she says. "It was also a way to demonstrate Young Ju's transition from thinking predominantly in her native tongue to adopting English" (Na interview).

Mazer also crosses language barriers in her novel. In a scene where Karen, newly arrived in the US, is anxious, confused and tired, she hears a soldier demand of her brother, 'Lasname first, buddy.' Karen can't tease out the two separate words—"last name"—from 'lasname,' but she recognizes the word 'buddy, ' with relief. She learned it on board the ship Europe and knows it's "a friendly American word." "This scene," Mazer said, "was doing double duty."

She continues:

> I was addressing the language problem and also the whole tension of being in a situation where you barely understand what's going on. Karen and her brother had some foundation in English, since their mother was a language teacher, but they were far from fluent, pretty much at sea, really, when they first came to this country. As the story progressed, I needed to show Karen's growing vocabulary and understanding, but I also wanted to have a little fun in the book, a little lightness. It's a somber story basically, some horrific things happen, and dealing with the language gave me a chance for a lighter touch. In the scene where Karen and Peggy talk over the fence, Peggy is very frank, open, confident. She's a quintessential American girl. She's got a handle on things, and as a gesture of friendship, she wants to teach Karen American

teen slang, like, "You got it!" while Karen, who is coming along in the language, shows off a little for Peggy with very specific, concrete words like sneakers and sky and feet" (Mazer interview).

While these novelists use past or present tense in determining the immediacy of scenes, they each develop narrative voice and the characters' voices in ways to demonstrate growth and development through each character's literal and figurative understanding. Mazer, whose readers only glimpse the narrator in this past tense account through brief summary scenes, says, whether past or present tense, "when things begin to happen so that character is propelled forward, the effects have to change the person" (Mazer interview).

McCourt, as the earlier discussion of tense shifts demonstrates, is not a self-effaced narrator in the way he periodically inserts adult telling or authorial narrative into his writing to summarize adult understanding of experiences.

In McCourt's work, this voice creates irony, in that the reader catches on to the consequences of actions before the character Frank knows. Na also demonstrates an ironic tone, despite choosing to remain completely self-effaced as a narrator. The reader never sees the writer on the page, only the child in the moment. Yet the irony exists in the way readers are able to figure out Young Ju's world a moment before Young Ju. Even the novel's title reflects this irony through its double-meanings. Young Ju believes she is going to heaven, but ends up in the United States, a step away from heaven in that her grandfather hasn't returned, but the US offers almost heavenly promise to her parents. In the first US scene where the reader finds Young Ju looking for her deceased grandfather in her uncle's large house, the reader senses Young Ju's lack of experience in her descriptions: "There are so many rooms. All of the floors are covered with a warm white blanket that is soft on my feet" (*A Step From Heaven* 26).

In another early scene, the reader understood immediately that Young Ju's teacher was trying to communicate that it was lunch time. But Young Ju thought she was playing a game with tiny fish made of yellow crumbs.

> I make the little fish swim in the air. The teacher nods. "Yehs!" she says.
>
> "Yehs," I say and make the fish swim more. "Yehs."
>
> "Noo," the teacher says, shaking her head. She points to the fish. "Go-de-fish." (*A Step from Heaven* 34)

According to Na, it was challenging to try to let Young Ju write her own thoughts and words. In the process, Na would ask herself what Young Ju might have said and thought. "The reader, since they are older," says Na, "will understand the teacher or adult more readily, but Young Ju does not have access to that information so she has to make due with her own incorrect assumptions. I think this happens a lot not only with children but also with adults who might not know English or the customs of Americans very well. For example, Young Ju's aunt assumes that the card with the flowers that reads, 'We are sorry for your loss,' means what Young Ju wants her to think. She does not immediately know that those words are often used for someone who has passed away. Young Ju's aunt does not have access to a common phrase that would be readily understood by most Anglo-Americans."

Mazer wants to show some of these same immediate needs when she uses similar techniques to show Karen's developing understanding of her new language while in an Oswego, New York refugee camp:

> The soldier sitting behind the table said, "Whazymame?"
>
> "Pardon?" Marc said.
>
> "Wazyname, buddy?" Name. Name," he said loudly.
>
> Marc started speaking in French. "*Je m'appelle* Marc Levi—" I poked him, and he began again. "I am Marc Levi and this is my—"
>
> "Lasname first, buddy." (*Goodnight Maman* 82)

Neither Mazer nor Na worry about their main characters appearing foolish. Rather they allow irony to play into the text. Mazer makes sure to shed light on Karen's understanding so that readers see the character react with enlightenment. Na makes sure to allow Young Ju to sometimes believe her own interpretations of the world are much smarter than the ones adults and readers might have. "Of course, she is naive, but with each new experience she learns to adapt and adjust. Hopefully, readers sympathize with her because they themselves remember what it is like to be in a new situation, learn a new language, navigate a new culture" (Na interview).

All three novelists deal honestly with losses that precipitated immigration. While Mazer deals with an adolescent who had experienced the loss by death of a loved parent, Na and McCourt deal with alcoholic and dysfunctional parents.

As writers, McCourt and Na appear to share cultural parental respect in such a way that portrays alcoholic fathers sympathetically. Nevertheless, their main characters clearly deal with a parent who can't control his disease or behavior. For Na, this comes early in the novel when the little girl Young Ju watched her grandmother's reaction to her father:

> "Now, Halmoni [grandmother] can only shake her head when Apa [father] comes home late stinking like the insides of the bottles that get left on the street. Her lips pinch tight, then she hides with Uhmma [mother] and me. Because when Apa is too quiet with the squinty eye, it is better to hide until he falls asleep or else there will be breaking everywhere. Halmoni always says, That Apa of yours needs a good spanking.
> (*A Step from Heaven* 10)

McCourt's character Frankie sees the effects of alcoholism through his mother's response on payday:

> "Mam says there's no use waiting up any longer. If Dad stays at the pub till closing time there will be nothing left from his wages so we might as well go to bed. It's quiet in the lane and I can hear her crying even though she pulls an old coat over her face . . . (*Angela's Ashes* 110)

By creating a distance through childlike understanding of a parent's alcoholism, a distance created by filtering the view through other adult characters, both writers avoid judgment and blame of alcoholic parents in their narratives. McCourt says that although he doesn't absolve his father completely for walking away from his children, his father was a good father when he was sober. "He had the disease. The alcoholism," McCourt said. "Apart from the drink, he was the al-

most perfect father. That he was kind and good humored and so on. So he had every promise of being the perfect father . . ." (Saah 7).

Na's concerns about portraying the father's problems in her novel are that she wants the reader to empathize with the father's dual problems of cultural misunderstanding and the disease of alcoholism. "In many ways, he was a tragic figure, unable to cope with the complexities of adjusting to a new world. By no means are his actions excusable, but they can be understood. You see the ways in which he struggles to maintain his idea of strength and masculinity while everyday he toils in a job that demeans him. But ultimately, when a disease like alcoholism or battering takes over, one must fight back, must fight to create a life that is free from this terror" (Na interview).

Just as McCourt's memoir traces all the pain but also the joy of these cultural experiences, Na's novel, although fiction, mirrors her own birth in Korea. Na, who reads other novels to learn about her own writing, and reads many women writers and writers of color, says the novel is autobiographical in the sense that:

> I remember learning new words, trying to figure out what common things like cider, finding myself upset that my parents couldn't help me understand this new culture, that it was up to me to interpret for them as well as myself. I drew upon that feeling to help me think about what Young Ju and her family faced as they tried to adjust to their new surroundings. But Young Ju's family was not my family. She faced far more difficult trials than I ever faced. My parents like her parents both worked extremely hard and they had very traditional ideas about the role of women in the family and in society, but I was much more rebellious than Young Ju. And my parents learned to adapt much more readily than her family. (Na interview)

For each of these writers, the story seed may have come from a personal experience, but the immigration experience develops from the way individual characters evolve and grow. The ability to grow comes from each personal struggle to make a journey and then to assimilate in a foreign culture.

While Mazer admits to writing about Oswego because she was stunned to learn that such a camp had existed so close to her childhood home, she says that the journey is what she hoped to capture in *Goodnight Maman*. She wrote until she found the voice and inhabited the character, but she says, "The difficulty I had with this story were all the transitions from journey to journey, but the whole novel was a journey that required unity of story and place" (Mazer interview).

McCourt admits to making pilgrimages back to old neighborhoods, something that appears to be reflected in the way his past to present narrative feels like a pilgrimage to haunting memories.

And although Na makes honest connections to her own family's immigrant experience, she wants readers to know her work is a fiction where she strives to capture literary richness through a character's personal voice. She says this is a richness of style she's still learning from other writers: "I read when I get stuck in my writing. I don't read specifically for technique but if I've finished the novel and I find myself drawn to it again and again, then I know that there is something there that I want to learn" (Na interview).

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Guterson, David. *Snow Falling on Cedars.*

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Habibi.*

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Esperanza Rising.*

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club.*

Ann Angel is a teacher and writer of young adult literature who lives in Brookfield, Wisconsin. She is currently editing a collection of short stories by new and known writers, called* Defining Beauty. *Profits will go to the Vermont College Writing for Children and Young Adults program for a YA scholarship.