

# The Epistolary in Young Adult Literature

Emily Wasserman

In the span of years that constitutes the period of adolescence, it is common for young men and women to be immersed in self-created worlds of conflicting emotions. As they attempt to become adults, they often experience doubt and despair at the same time that they feel and reflect a sense of hope. Thus, as a form, the personal thinking and private worlds of letter writing are well-suited to the reflection and construction of identity which takes place in young adult literature. In both Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* (2001) and Steven Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), young adult characters engage in letter writing activity as they experience the tumult of adolescence. In the novels, the epistolary form, with its limitations, is used in different ways. Each novel, however, utilizes it as a vital tool that allows readers to enter the minds of two young adults for an intimate view of their struggles for identity and self in a confusing and often frightening world.

Although many may dismiss the literature written for young adults, there are an equal number of proponents who realize its value for adolescents. Author Peter Hollindale writes, "the fact remains that over the years since 1970 a highly intelligent and demanding literature has emerged which speaks with particular directness to the young adult mind – the mind which is freshly mature and intellectually confident, mentally supple and relatively free of ideological harness" (86). In examining the research done on today's adolescents, it becomes clear that the reality of life for young adults today is neither easy nor ideal. In fact, many young adults are never even exposed to literature. One proponent of YA books laments, "Since the 1980s the gulf between kids and books, especially books as sources of pleasure and entertainment, has been expanding. Kids today have grown up with Nintendo, VCRs, cable TV, and computer games... Their lives are fast paced and ever changing; their schools are crowded and increasingly dangerous" (Crowe 114). Yet, as works written for those in adolescence, young adult literature can clearly be a constructive tool for allowing readers to read, think about, and discuss experiences which may be familiar to them in either positive or negative, exciting or frightening ways.

In *Conflict and Connection: The Psychology of Young Adult Literature*, Sharon A. Stringer writes, "In literature and life, adolescents cope with additional crises such as parents' psychological abandonment, loss through death, disillusionment, defeat, exposure, and resistance to corruption or to intimidation. These stressful experiences may swallow some individuals and stimulate identity achievements in others"

(3). The literature written for young adults can be a helpful coping mechanism for adolescents who experience traumatic difficulties or for ones who are dealing with the normal, but painful, everyday experiences associated with a changing mind and body. One researcher notes, "Young adult books frequently show young teens that they are not the only ones who experience problems and even turmoil when dealing with their new bodies and sexuality, with changing relationships with parents and friends, with more philosophically advanced ways of thinking about themselves, the world, and their place in it" (Carroll 25). The literature written for people of this age often depicts characters embroiled in the types of controversies and concerns which are also occupying the minds of readers themselves.

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form. Although its conventions have infrequently been related to young adult literature, the epistolary form has been discussed as a genre for many years. And, although there seem to be more works written by, for, or about young adults in diary form, such as Anne Frank's seminal *The Di-*

*ary of a Young Girl*, there are many examples of adolescent fiction that utilize the epistolary style. For instance, such books as Chris Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* (1996), Jaclyn Moriarty's *Feeling Sorry for Celia* (2001), Gary Crew and Libby Hathorn's *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron* (2000), and John Marsden's *Letters from the Inside* (1994) all use the epistolary form in writing for and about young adults.

Many authors have extensively analyzed and commented upon this form. In one discussion of the epistolary, Elizabeth Campbell defines this type of novel as "a novel written in the form of letters, either an exchange of letters between two or more correspondents, or a single letter, or number of letters from one correspondent to one or more recipients" (333). Another scholar expands the definition, arguing that the epistolary "speaks to the deeper truth that people are locked in their own skins, in their own consciousnesses" (Perry 107). Both of these statements are true of McCafferty and Chbosky's novels, as in each, the protagonists, Jess and Charlie, write letters to others that stem from feelings buried deep within themselves. Through their letters, the extent to which each is trapped within his or her own world and within his or her own skin becomes increasingly clear. The rocky nature of adolescence makes the epistolary well suited to adolescent literature, for "[y]oung adult literature describes how the interior monologue can lead to constructive change" (Stringer 42). In these epistolary novels, the "interior monologue" is

expressed through letter writing, which ultimately leads to increased understanding and transformation.

### The Epistolary in *Sloppy Firsts*

As a form, the epistolary is clearly vital to Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* in a multitude of ways. It has been written that, "in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death" (Trites 3). In McCafferty's novel, protagonist Jessica Darling must learn to face many of these institutions and come to terms with the role she is playing and will play within them. It is often institutions such as family, school, and constructions of gender which cause her confusion and pain.

In the novel, Jess is a high school student who feels bereft and betrayed by the loss of her best friend Hope, whose family has moved to another state. Thus, Jess is left without the one person in the world whom she feels knows her best, and must face the trials of high school and adolescence in her own way, without the support of a best friend. Throughout the novel, she attempts to deal with the problems she sees in high school culture, such as conformist attitudes, cliques, and issues of sex and sexuality. And, at the same time, she must confront issues within her own family, such as her relationships with her parents, whom she feels do not see the true Jess, and her older sister Bethany, who has always been the "perfect daughter".

In an attempt to deal with these issues, Jess writes monthly letters to Hope in which she expresses her hopes, fears, and emotions. Yet, in this novel, the letters which Jess writes to her best friend Hope are also interspersed with more frequent diary entries written for only her eyes. When contrasted with the diary, the letters become even more significant. Throughout the novel, as we move back and forth between the two forms, we are able to view Jess's process of self-discovery. Although the diary is crucial for what it contains, the letters ultimately reveal more about Jessica's growth through what they refuse to acknowledge to her best friend as time progresses.

At the time of her first letter to Hope, Jess feels alone and separate from both her family and supposed friends. In her view, since Hope's departure, almost nothing has been right in the world. Her letters consistently express this sadness and anger. One scholar's words, "when women are writing to other women especially, they are about both despair and revolt" (Campbell 337) certainly ring true in Jess's case. In her letters to Hope, Jess writes either ironically or angrily about her dislike of school, the phoniness of her friends, and the injustice of her family life. At the same time, in her diary, Jess continually writes of her faith in Hope and of Hope's knowledge of her. She feels only Hope would ever be able to write the speech, "The Jessica You Never Knew" (McCafferty 20). She values Hope's friendship in such a way that she even writes in her diary, "I need my boyfriend to be

the male equivalent of Hope" (McCafferty 33). Clearly, at the start of the novel, Jess idealizes Hope as the perfect confidant and friend.

However, as more days pass with Hope's absence, Jess begins to experience more and more of life itself. Rather than merely sit back and angrily continue to watch life, events force her to become more actively engaged in her own existence for both good and bad. The tone of her letters to Hope initially remains the same even as her life begins to change. Thus, at this point, her diary reveals more about the actual changes which are taking place in her daily life. At the same time, by their absence, the thoughts and feelings which are not present in her letters to Hope more clearly elucidate her emotional growth.

Campbell writes of the epistolary, "Women send themselves in letters, feel the presence of the addressee in letters they both write and receive, and, in contemporary novels especially,

see the letter as a mirror in which they examine themselves" (Campbell 336). In young adult literature as well, the idea of the mirror "is also used to address the question of 'who am I' for the teenage girl" (Crew 63). The concept of the mirror may play a role in the importance of the letters to the novel. Throughout the book, Jess is fascinated by the wonder of mirror images and the fact

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that what one sees in the mirror is not how one truly appears. She writes in her diary, "I never realized that what I see in the mirror is my *reverse* image. Bethany positioned me in front of a set of mirrors that bounced off each other in a way that let me see the *reverse* of my reverse image – which is what I *really* look like" (McCafferty 34). This concept confuses her whole sense of self, as the image which she had been accepting for so long turns out not to be her true image. In a way, one could view the letters which Jess writes as another type of mirror. As she starts to see the words that are reflected back at her from within her letters and the words that she leaves out, she may be at the threshold of a new sense of self. Her image of Jess Darling cannot remain constant while she sees herself reflected in these letters because she is slowly beginning to change, despite what she writes to Hope.

The letters, therefore, become increasingly out of sync with the diary. For, in her letters, she seems to be constantly aware of her audience and the feelings and observations expected from her by Hope. Yet, in the diary, her thoughts are less ironic and witty and more honest about her true feelings concerning the current state of her life and her prospects for the future. For instance, although she feels rejected by the "Clueless Crew", her supposed group of friends, her letters to Hope continue to trash them. Although in one letter she writes to Hope, "This is my new hobby. I watch my life depart minute by minute" (McCafferty 49), in reality, she begins to live her life, however awkwardly, in a manner that leaves Hope behind in a small way. Her observer status, and the observations which she relays to Hope, lessens by the moment as she becomes more involved in what is going on around her. Ultimately, however, it is the issue of Marcus Flutie, a boy who fascinates her and a boy with whom she becomes

involved, which complicates her situation the most. Despite the fact that she feels connected to Marcus in a way in which she has not felt connected to anyone but Hope, she cannot describe her feelings to her best friend, who hates Marcus for personal reasons. She writes in her diary, "How can I possibly tell her that I helped one of the people she hates most in the world get away with one of the sins she hates most in the world?" (McCafferty 122).

As Jess breaks out of the mold which she and others have created for her, the letters allow for reflection on her thoughts and actions. Although we cannot know the feelings of others around her because we are confined to only her letters, this limitation serves to thrust readers more deeply into her story. We cannot see these events through the eyes of others in the same way that Jess is limited to her own viewpoint. Yet, while she feels lonely and continues to miss Hope, it is almost as if she resolves, through her letters, to experience some of life's electricity once again. Without the letters and with only a diary, it would have been impossible for her to see the contradictions and complications which arise from living life rather than merely critiquing it. She needs the reflection she finds in the mirror of the letters in order to truly change and grow.

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By the end of the novel, despite the fact that her attempts at being "normal" falter, she seems to be more able to readily accept the trials of life. In her last letter to Hope she writes, "Obviously our friendship will never be the way it was before you moved. And if we try to force it to be that way, we'll fail. But for the first time I can remember, I'm optimistic about both our friendship and the future in general" (McCafferty 280). It is clearly difficult to argue about the importance of the epistolary to the novel. Stringer notes, "Young adult literature also demonstrates the beauty and power of friendships to help people change and grow in positive ways..." (32). Indeed, Jess's letters to her best friend allow for a type of reflection that is vital to both the novel and to young adult literature in general. Despite Jessica's scorn for her mother's notion of "perspective", this perspective appears to be exactly what she begins to gain through these letters.

#### The Epistolary in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Similar to *Sloppy Firsts*, the protagonist in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also writes letters. Here, however, the letters are employed in a different way to achieve a discovery of the self. In the novel, main character Charlie is a high school freshman dealing with a jumble of problems and emotions. As a newcomer to a new school, Charlie must deal with feeling like an outsider who remains outside of the crowd. In adolescent literature, it can be particularly true that characters may "feel as if some experience sets them apart from others. They may search for ways that they can become like everybody else and not feel so different" (Stringer 42). Here, Charlie certainly feels separate and alone, as if he is totally isolated from all those around him. Yet, he cannot truly understand why this is. Because of these feelings of difference, he has trouble fitting in with the larger school culture, and he often observes others in an at-

tempt to see what they are doing differently from him or to see what makes them "normal". In addition to these problems, Charlie must also confront family issues at home, such as the legacy of his deceased aunt's sexual abuse of him during his early childhood. Because of these conflicting issues and emotions, Charlie uses letter writing to reflect on his own and others' lives, as well as to recognize and come to terms with his past and its implications for his future.

Charlie's letters, unlike those of Jess, are sent to an unnamed individual, but one who Charlie specifies "didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have" (Chbosky 2). This clarification is essential because it informs readers from the start that Charlie is searching for someone he can trust with his most private reflections. At times, the story is limited by the fact that the receiver never writes back. Yet, as one scholar notes, even if the writer does not expect a reply, "Once the letters are begun, the writers seem to be speaking to themselves, and, though the reader is

ever-present, the writer becomes immersed in a discovery of herself" (Campbell 336). Although, like Jess, we only see Charlie's singular view of the world, we do become privy to secret thoughts, fears, and desires.

As a forum for Charlie to speak his mind and to record his observations, the epistolary form is essential to the novel. Stringer writes, "The protagonists of young adult literature often learn by confronting the most disturbing images and fears inside their heads and hearts" (92). Here, Charlie's letters provide him with a space in which he can reflect and construct his own way of thinking, a space necessary for human development. It is in these letters where he confronts his particular demons. Charlie seems to recognize the importance of his writing and comments at one point, "Also, when I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters" (Chbosky 28). In addition, the letters do not allow Charlie to repossess anything he has written because he cannot reclaim his words after they have been sent. This fact becomes crucial for him as he begins to remember painful events. During one situation, he writes, "I knew that if I didn't put it in a mailbox that I couldn't get it back from, I would never mail the letter" (Chbosky 98). Charlie needs to feel as though someone is listening to him, and these letters are his chosen medium for being heard.

At the time of his first letter, Charlie feels frightened and lonely at the thought of beginning high school. According to Ruth Perry, this feeling of aloneness is necessary for one to write letters, "for these stories are about *reactions* to separation and isolation" (94). Furthermore, "In this state of heightened consciousness, there are pleasures of intense awareness" (Perry 113). Charlie senses this awareness and allows himself to use it in order to begin to claim a sense of himself as a person with his own wants and needs.

Throughout his letters, Charlie is intensely honest about what he sees and experiences. Unlike most adolescent boys, he verbalizes his sensitivities and is not afraid to admit he cries. However, for the most part, he begins high school as an observer of the human behavior of others. He writes, "At the school dances, I sit in the background, and I tap my toe, and I wonder how many couples will dance to 'their song'"

(Chbosky 23). It is not until he meets people with whom he can connect that he feels at all engaged in life. He writes of his new friends, "Patrick and Sam didn't just throw around inside jokes and make me struggle to keep up. Not at all. They asked me questions" (Chbosky 19). As he writes letters, Charlie reflects on his growing participation in life and shares increasing feelings of acceptance with the recipient of his letters.

It is also in the letters where he begins to remember blurry details concerning his relationship with his deceased Aunt Helen. As he reflects on his new relationships, he is able to loosen the hold Aunt Helen has had over him in memory because he now receives positive feelings from others, such as his new friend Sam. When Sam tells Charlie she loves him, he writes, "it was the third time since my Aunt Helen died that I heard it from anyone" (Chbosky 69). One writer, in a discussion of adolescent victims of sexual abuse, notes, "victims learn they have power over their own voice: they can overcome their victimization only by talking about it" (Trites 96). Because he no longer feels as though his aunt was the only one to love him, he can begin to see the truth of their relationship. By writing about his feelings of pain and fear, he gains a new perspective on his life, and later, on his victimization at the hands of his aunt.

As Charlie's letters continue, he still remains in the role of observer, letting others mold him into what they wish him to be. He knows he is unlike other people his age but wants others to fix him. At one time in the novel he declares, "I just wish that God or my parents or Sam or my sister or someone would just tell me what's wrong with me. Just tell me how to be different in a way that makes sense" (Chbosky 139). It is through the reflection in his letters, however, that Charlie finally comes to recognize that no one can live his life for him. He writes of one of the book's he's reading, "I think the idea is that every person has to live for his or her own life and then make the choice to share it with other people" (Chbosky 169). In a way, his letters are his initial way of sharing himself with the world. Finally, as he reflects further and engages more and more in life, he realizes that no matter what has happened or will happen to him, his experiences are *his*. In a final letter, he comes to some kind of closure, much like Jess does in *Sloppy Firsts*. He writes, "So I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we'll never know most of them. But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there" (Chbosky 211). When Charlie, at the end of the novel, triumphantly stands up in his friend Patrick's car in a way that he had only before watched others do, it is almost as if he gains his very own sense of self.

Clearly, the epistolary form is a near perfect fit with adolescent literature, particularly in the novels of McCafferty and Chbosky. Each novel contains a character in a precarious time of adolescence who needs to grab hold of his or her

life in some way. Each is attempting to make better sense of the world around him or her. And, in each case, the protagonist needs to establish his or her own perspective in order to live in the present. Through their letters, Jess and Charlie are able to examine their lives in an articulate manner in order to strike a balance between participation and observation. They discover a balance between allowing others to act upon them or for them and acting for themselves and their own interests. Ultimately, both use letters to engage in a process of honest self-reflection, a process in which the adolescents who read these novels are also involved.

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*Emily Wasserman is an English major at George Washington University.*