

YA by Generation Y:

New Writers for New Readers

The variable, unstable nature of technology is intricately connected to today's youth. Often called Generation Y, those born after 1980 have lived a distinct way of knowing the world because of their connection to technology—a very different experience than those in the generations that preceded them. Because of this state of being, traditional literary relationships, adult author to adolescent reader, are troubled.

In his article “The Irony of Narration,” Mike Cadden reminds us that because YA novels are almost always written on behalf of adolescent readers, there always exists a fundamental inauthenticity. With an adult author writing from the perspective of a young person, the result can be “an artless depiction of artlessness,” an adult writer writing as an unsophisticated thinker in order to appeal to unsophisticated thinkers. Thus, when the protagonist shares with the reader the lesson she learned, for example, the text becomes an apparatus of a top-down power relationship (Cadden 146), where the adult comes first, as author, maker, and giver, and the young reader comes after, as the object of the adult's speech (Rose 2).

This already ironic situation is further complicated by the paradigmatic changes fostered by Generation Y's connection to technology, growing increasingly perceptible

because of the fundamental differences between authors (non-Generation Y) and readers (Generation Y), that were arguably less intense in years past. The changes technology has wrought in sensibility have exacerbated the already notable disparity between adult authors and teen readers to the point where a new type of literature has begun to flourish: literature for young adults by young adults, YA literature for, by, and about Generation Y. At least in theory, Generation Y-aged authors, who are still under 30, are more attuned to the technical considerations and ways of knowing and thinking that Generation Y members seem to exhibit.

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narrate their own relationship to technology may shed some light on how technology can affect the way people see the world. Furthermore, in order to more clearly see the irony of narration always present in YA literature, we might compare literature written for adolescents by adults to literature written for young people by their same-aged peers to help expose the disconnect between adult writers and their young readers. To note the perhaps minor, perhaps unconscious, differences in how technology is

treated in stories by Generation Y authors helps in analysis of both the evolution of the field and the ideal readers of YA fiction, too.

Many psychoanalysts report that a result of growing up in a multi-media, wired climate is a psychological sensibility that allows fictional and nonfictional space to resist the binary of diametric opposition, instead coexisting as “belief and knowledge, sliding and slipping over one another”

(jagodzinski 144). That is not to say that Generation Y cannot make the distinction between reality and fantasy; rather, Generation Y seems most psychically invested in media and technology and conditioned, more than other generations, to respond to virtual and mediated reality in intense, personal, and specific ways, reactions that older generations can only begin to understand. Using Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek’s psychoanalytic theories to define the phenomenon, psychoanalyst jan jagodzinski explains that as a result of the psychic investment in technology and media, members of Generation Y seem to exhibit “split”

selves, creating and projecting alter egos that they can perform (2).

In novels like *Be More Chill*, written by 23-year-old Ned Vizzini; *Doormat*, written by 15-year-old Kelly McWilliams; and finally *Never Mind the Goldbergs*, by 26-year-old Matthue Roth, all published in 2004, we see the very tendencies jagodzinski articulates played out in interesting ways. But where jagodzinski and others see this as an ultimately limiting sensibility, common in Generation Y is a sense that fragmentation and the performance of self—or many selves—are empowering abilities. In all three novels, an embedded story of a theatre production, or in the case of *Never*

Mind the Goldbergs, a TV sitcom, seems to metaphorize the young protagonists’ ability to perform a variety of identities. Their intimate and often-contradictory relationship to media and technology is also apparent in these novels. Above all, though, the young protagonists’ awareness of the spectacle that constitutes the reality that surrounds them, and their power to manipulate it through performance and textual manipulation, is played out in a recurring metaphor of theatricality. In all three texts, the protagonists’ performances are not just on a literal stage. Instead, all three stories evolve as the characters become increasingly aware of the performative nature of their reality and the importance of being active within the spectacle of reality.

Doormat is a novel about 14-year-old Jaime and her best friend Melissa, also 14, who has just discovered she is pregnant. Not wanting to tell her parents, Melissa draws Jaime into her drama by making Jaime promise that she will help Melissa without telling any adults. Although Jaime is uncomfortable with this situation, she attempts to help Melissa solve her problem by staying level-headed and rationally exploring all of Melissa’s choices. Melissa, however, makes it very difficult for Jaime to help. Although Melissa does know how far along she is in her pregnancy, she is unwilling to acknowledge the very rigid timeline that they are on if she really wants to consider her options. While Melissa becomes more and more difficult to help, Jaime struggles to find a balance between loyalty and personal growth, learning finally to attend to her own life instead of just Melissa’s.

Running parallel to the drama of Jaime and Melissa’s real lives is a literal drama, the high school production of *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, in which both Jaime and Melissa have parts. Appropriately cast, Jaime is Tillie, the younger daughter who finds comfort in scientific fact. Melissa, of course, is Beatrice, Tillie’s mother, an alcoholic who is plagued with regret and in one scene tragically kills her daughter’s pet rabbit. The parallels to real life are overplayed. Melodramatic Beatrice (Melissa) takes account of her life and comes up with nothing, reflecting how Jaime sees Melissa’s future. Serious Tillie (Jaime), though, does not hate the world as “Beatrice the Loon” does and seems to be on her way to having it all figured out.

It is through the characters in the play that Jaime makes sense of her own life, which reflects back to Jagodzinski's point about contemporary teens' reality and unreality slipping and sliding over one another through mediation. Likewise, the very performative nature of McWilliams' novel also reflects the connection to mediation. For instance, when she first mentions that her best friend might be pregnant, Jaime admits that her friend's situation is very stereotypical of the images of teens on TV, and thus is probably not true. She says, "Personally, I think Melissa is wrong, but it's not my body. Teen pregnancy is so melodramatic: lonely, living off the streets and welfare . . . No, fourteen-year-olds don't get pregnant anywhere except in the newspaper and on TV" (1). Jaime feels conflicted because she is so aware of the media image of her peer group as constantly in trouble. But her failure to believe the reality of it suggests that she knows the difference between reality and media narratives, and her reality so far has not been at all like it is on TV. However, she also refers to her knowledge of TV to find the answer to the pregnancy scare once and for all. Jaime tells Melissa, "We don't know you're pregnant yet . . . We need to get one of those tests. Like you see on TV" (7).

In the last scene of the novel, Melissa has had her baby and is doing well, though Jaime is quick to point out how very unglamorous it all is. She says, "I will help Melissa whenever I can—she has it hard, really, the media don't exaggerate" (131). Jaime is also an aspiring playwright and dreams of conquering the silver screen (113), which demonstrates her duplicitous relationship to popular media. She is wary of it, but believes it at different moments, looks to it for answers, and even wants to join it.

The novel ends with the words "Lights, camera, action" (131). Throughout the novel, the very performative nature of Jaime's story is evident. When Melissa verifies that she is pregnant, it is as if she goes from being a generic teen in the suburb in the middle of nowhere, starved for attention (she wants to be a model because she wants to be beautiful [2]), to attracting unwanted attention because she is a pregnant teen, a statistic (37). As such, the spotlight seems to be trained on Melissa—and Jaime because of her involvement in Melissa's drama—because she is fulfilling the role that media has created for teens, making her actions a part of someone else's script. It

stands to reason that Jaime decides that she wants to be a playwright, to write her own roles, since her experience has always been playing the roles that other people have written for her and her friends who have not always been empowered. Quite literally, teen "drama" is a performance that has an audience.

Knowing this, perhaps, propels McWilliams to include monologues every few chapters where Jaime talks about herself, appealing directly to the audience, an aside to the drama that is unfolding around her. She also speaks directly to the audience in anticipation of the audience's likely response. In one instance she says, "Disclaimer: If you're at all cynical about my description of that encounter, and were rude enough to say anything about it, then I'm sorry, but I couldn't hear you . . .

There was sunshine in my ears" (107). After Jaime has made the decision to be a playwright, McWilliams depicts certain dialogues in the form of a play manuscript, complete with stage direction as if making more visual her story. McWilliams utilizes other visual elements to tell her story, as well as visual cues designating different rhetorical situations, from story to play, focusing again on the visual, performative nature of a text in the digital age. For McWilliams, it means separating sections within a chapter with dots or giant periods, the absence of which (Melissa is pregnant, after all) is the main antagonist in the novel. It may be a stretch, but McWilliams also uses thick, phallic, vertically placed chapter titles that seem to be about to penetrate the very chapter itself.

Ned Vizzini offers a similar narrative structure in *Be More Chill*. In this sci-fi-lite novel, Vizzini creates a possibility that is slightly reminiscent of *Feed* but in the much nearer future, where a person can buy a pill-sized super computer, called a "squip," swallow it, and have the computer help him or her do any

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number of things, such as “memorize information for tests, smooth out occupational challenges or help people with stuttering problems” (108). The squip quickly reasons that what Jeremy, the protagonist, needs, is “a complete behavioral overhaul”; he needs to be “more chill” (108). At first, the squip does good work, making Jeremy “more chill” by helping him dress better, act cool, and attract females. In turn, Jeremy gets attention from people he would never have before, gets invited to some parties, and isn’t paralyzed by his shyness. In fact, he is able to stop keeping track of his daily humiliations on his pre-printed Humiliation Sheets.

But Jeremy soon realizes the problems inherent in the squip, most disastrously that the squip becomes outdated and begins to malfunction. Because the computer relies on a finite realm of possibility, it cannot compute the unexpected. After it encourages Jeremy to break character during his performance in

the middle of the school play and declare his love for Christine, also acting in the play, ultimately ruining any chance Jeremy has of building a relationship with Christine, as well as ruining the play, Jeremy makes the decision to disable the squip.

The squip tells him how to do this, then reminds Jeremy, “There are better versions of me, Jeremy. It’s not like with

people. With people you can argue and have tests and music reviews and wars to decide who’s better, but with software it’s pretty clear. I get evolved beyond my version number, and then I’m useless” (283). In other words, the unstable nature of the squip reminds Jeremy that in our chaotic world human unpredictability will always trump the assumed predictability of computers. That is not to say that computers can’t help us out in certain situations, but there are always limits to the finite reasoning that computers promise, that x will always equal x .

Douglas Rushkoff addresses these very issues in *Playing the Future*. It is his contention that as a part of nature, human society has now evolved to a global

culture that is hardwired together through technology (7). He argues, “We invented most of our systems of thought and technological devices to shield us from the harsher realities of nature, but now, ironically, they appear to be forcing us to reckon with them once again” (7). Thus, Jeremy’s desire to erase variability by living his life according to the formulaic approach to “cool” that his supercomputer designates suggests his rather old-fashioned belief that there is order to the universe, that computers help maintain that order, and that it is logical to believe that for a mere \$600 one can tap into this knowledge and exploit it. Of course, by the end of the novel, Jeremy understands the limits of his computer and the limits of thinking that something as human as physical attraction can be coded into a computer program. Jeremy’s story could be read as a metaphor for the human evolution that Rushkoff explains in *Playing the Future*. Rushkoff believes that it is this new generation of young people (whom he calls “screenager” and I call Generation Y, but whom both of us define as being “the child born into a culture mediated by the television and computer” [3]) who lead the way in understanding how we can learn to adapt to and even thrive amidst unpredictability when it is accepted to be an example of something other than evidence of decline, decay, and death (2). The evolution toward this way of thinking can culminate with Generation Y, which is metaphorized by Jeremy’s coming to understand a new model of reality.

But as Rushkoff discusses, to everyone else older than Generation Y, coming to this new model of reality is difficult when we have been so thoroughly socialized to believe in beginnings, middles, and ends (11). Rushkoff relates, “One of the most common questions I’m asked about computer culture and the increasing complexity of our media is, ‘Where will it end?’ I can only think to respond, ‘Why does it have to?’” (12). To re-see the world in this way is an often-uncomfortable revision. The way screenagers, Generation Y, can embrace this new way of knowing is rough to watch, and indeed we are always watching it. On film, in commercials, on TV, screenageriness is not just a stage, but it is on stage for the rest of the world to look at and, as Rushkoff would hope, learn from.

Be More Chill is constructed as a performance in itself. In an effort to be cool, Jeremy performs cool, in costumes and settings, and with characters and lines

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that the squip, often misidentified throughout the novel as a “script,” told him to use. Throughout the novel, Jeremy is performing the squip for an unsuspecting audience of his peers. Add to this another layer: at the end, readers come to understand that the novel was written to Christine to explain why Jeremy acted the way he did. The physical novel was the result of a brain dump after the computer started to malfunction but before Jeremy dissolved it for good. Jeremy had a choice of formats and decided a novel rather than a movie was best. Jeremy says, “‘Write her a book. Write it from my head. Make sure everything’s in there. She likes text. Letters from her dad’” (281). The last chapter reads, “So here you go, Christine. It’s not a letter; it’s a whole book. I hope you like it” (287). Thus, the self-referentiality of the novel as a novel serves to reinforce the real readers’ awareness of it as such.

Furthermore, running parallel to Jeremy’s personal story in *Be More Chill* is the progress of a school play, a production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a traditional text, a typical high school performance, but one that equally expresses madness and mayhem, due to “magic”—juice or computer—unpredictability. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is also a play in which there is a play. The novel itself as well as the play within the novel are all aware of an audience, which seems characteristic of Generation Y sensibilities in general. This response of the real audience who is reading this novel is of course impossible to gauge during the writing process. However, as a novel that metaphorizes a journey from logic to chaos, and the ultimate acceptance of chaos, the reaction of the audience to the performance of Generation Y is addressed in one particular scene in the novel as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is being performed.

In this remarkable scene, the scene that ultimately results in the squip’s demise, the very fragmented response of the world watching Generation Y is exemplified. In this novel, Jeremy has planned to break character, and the fourth wall, to appeal directly to the audience and announce his love for Christine. In the scene where Lysander (played by Jeremy) is supposed to be asleep while Puck mischievously places the love juice in his eyes instead of Demetrius’ eyes, Jeremy instead stands up and addresses the audience. He says:

Ah, ‘scuse me . . . Sorry to interrupt and all . . . But my name is Jeremy Heere and I’m an actor in this play and . . . One of the many things that has really inspired me to be my best in this play is the work of the very, uh, lovely Christine Caniglia, who’s playing Puck . . . I’ve really liked Christine for a long time, but you know, never really been able to do something about it . . . So, Christine, I’m asking you here and now: would you like to, uh, go out with me? (266)

Throughout Jeremy’s ill-timed speech, reactions are scattered. At first he has the audience’s rapt attention. Many even smile thinking that it is a planned aside, then only scattered applause, exclamations of confusion (“What are you *doing*, Jeremy? [267]), and soon Jeremy realizes that Christine and everyone else is angry. When he continues with the scene after being rejected (though Christine attempts to make it all seem to be a part of the play) Jeremy hears programs shuffling as people try to figure out who the “skinny weirdo is who almost ruined the play,” gossipy whispers, and cell phone buzzers as people start calling each other to discuss what just happened (270). Jeremy quickly realizes that doing what isn’t on the script—or even being aware of it as such—can easily distress the audience who has come to expect a certain type of performance from young people.

Exposing the text, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as a text by breaking character and audience expectations could be seen as a metaphor for who Generation Y is and what Generation Y texts can do for the field of young adult literature. Rushkoff argues, “It is our children who are most actively looking for ways to cope with the “increasing complexity, discontinuity, and parentlessness [post-Oedipalization] of the modern experience” (255). As their audience, we watch with mixed reaction to their exploits, understandings, and brutal awareness of the spectacle and their boldness to manipulate it. Furthermore, for Vizzini to create a novel so sophisticated in nature, to constantly work to defamiliarize the reader from the very text that s/he is reading, attests to Generation Y’s perceived comfort with chaos and disorderliness, and asks readers of YA texts to resist the invisible interpellative qualities of YA literature, especially. It is not to say that non-Generation Y adults shouldn’t or can’t write good YA texts; rather, all writers need to be attuned to the paradigmatic shifts of ontology and epistemology that Generation Y represents and not try to hide it or visually commodify it, but work to both

understand it and be aware of their own relationship to the nature of it, even if the true nature is one of undefinability.

In my third and final example of fiction by a Generation Y writer, *Never Mind the Goldbergs* by Matthue Roth, literal and metaphoric performance is once again at the foundation of the narrative. In this story, 17-year-old Hava Aaronson is an Orthodox Jew from New York who is hired to play an Orthodox teen on a family sitcom called *The Goldbergs*. She is whisked away to LA to live a teenager's fairy tale: a limo is waiting for her at the airport, an apartment is furnished for her, and her new "family" is a collection of popular movie and TV stars. However, Hava quickly realizes that she is the only one of her TV family who has no acting experience—except for an experimental off-Broadway play—and that she is the only Jew. It is also difficult for her to respect Shabbos, stay Kosher, and remain true to the Orthodox no-touching rules (negiah), especially when the script calls for her to

hug her TV father and also as a veritable parade of interesting men cross her path. From her private Orthodox high school and neighborhood in New York City to LA where all sects of Jews are lumped together, the most famous Jewish deli isn't Kosher, and people in the business tend to keep quiet about their Jewishness, Hava's story is about being

independent and Orthodox and for the first time having to work at both.

Once again, with *Never Mind the Goldbergs* we find a novel that is very much aware of the audience. In fact, the last chapter of the book is called "Cast & Crew"; after acknowledging a large number of individuals, this chapter lists the director (editor David Levithan), director of photography (Harbeer Sandhu, author photo), producer, grip, wardrobe, etc., as if the novel were more a TV show, a visual production rather than a traditional novel where the material conditions of its existence stay rather inconspicuous. Roth's novel connects with the trend of the other

books mentioned, a trend that I believe to be indicative of Generation Y in general.

The novel *Never Mind the Goldbergs*, then, is a performance in and of itself. Roth offers the story to an audience and anticipates the audience's response. The awareness of the audience as such is also addressed through the trope of a play-within-a-play. In this case, the internal play is both a TV sitcom, in which our protagonist is starring, as well as a real time movie Hava's friend Moish is making throughout the novel. In both cases, what is real, and what isn't, what mundane events become fascinating through mediation, and how mediation affects the very way we know the world and ourselves, are all fundamental concerns of the novel.

On the first page Hava states:

I'd spent my whole life watching people through a screen, an invisible cellophane coating on the world. Talking to my friends was like reading from a script. I always knew what they were about to say, what tone of voice they would use, and how they wanted me to react. (1)

Of course, in the one line of the novel that precedes this sentiment, Hava has already admitted, "The last day of school was when I really lost it" (1), and immediately following her insight, Hava admits, "Of course, if you'd asked my friends, they wouldn't have known what you were talking about. They would've told you I wasn't capable of holding *anything* in" (1). Her narrative unreliability is immediately established, and we start to realize how it is through mediation that Hava knows the world, a performance in which she is a player. She claims she doesn't believe in people, only G-d (2), so she takes on her duties as a performer with gusto, even before she is put onto a literal stage.

Hava is a self-proclaimed punk Orthodox. Although she stays Orthodox in one way by wearing long, modest skirts, they are ripped and denim. Her hair is striped and her shirts are vintage Death Metal Ts (2). She has a nose ring, loves punk music, gets kicked out of stores, drinks, and throws herself into mosh pits, but she stays Kosher and never misses prayers or Shabbos. She performs "punk rebel" and seems to visibly mock the modesty of Orthodoxy, but that is her performance only. Her faith is authentic. She outwardly represents a rule breaker, but internally she abides by the most important rules, her religion.

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Hava, a true Generation Y at heart, is comfortable seeing the surface, the spectacle, and understanding that that isn't necessarily the real. Of her off-Broadway gig she says, "The show was professional and all, but when you got down to basics, it was one big joke. Who knows what John Cage's life was like, anyway? Not the scriptwriter, that's for sure. And not the West African dancers. I learned just how far you could go by faking it" (31). While it may seem hypocritical, "faking it" is her entry into the spectacle that she understands will go on with or without her performance. In the absence of a literal audience, Hava performs for her community, an audience just the same.

By the time Hava is hired to be a professional actress, without any formal training, she has a strong grasp of what audiences will respond to and effortlessly holds her own among the professional actors in her TV family. In fact, a veteran actor, who plays her father on the sitcom, tells her that she is "The New," which Hava only partly understands. Her friend Moish explains,

Hollywood's changing, Hava . . . Everything's commodifying. You can't just be a star anymore. You always have to be mysterious and evasive. Once the public has labeled and pinned you down, your career's got a shelf life. You're like the next phase of that, though. So different that no one can touch you. Unlabelable. (151)

Some contemporary discourse about the general nature of Generation Y makes similar points. Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of *Millennials Rising*, report that a 1997 *World News Tonight* online poll suggests that the name most of the generation I call Generation Y would prefer to be called, if they have to be called something, is Millennials. However, coming in a close second was "Don't Label Us," reflecting a generation of Havas, at all times aware of and performing with the spectacle but cynical of it just the same. The knowledge of performance as a game is not the same as performing unconsciously.

Moish's real-time video also reflects a very Generation Y sensibility, the belief that real life can be as interesting as fiction. In the novel, Moish records himself for three months—except during Shabbos when electricity is not allowed—and finds a distributor who will project the movie in its entirety, selling tickets to people so that they can drop in and see the movie as it plays anytime during its three-month run.

The very unpredictable nature of members of Generation Y makes even their ordinariness entertainment, as it seems they are always performing. Furthermore, Hava, as do many Generation Y-ers, maintains a weblog or online journal where her fingers can get "kinetic, spilling my secrets in a haze of fake names and places" (241). Although it is a very small part of the novel, Hava's journal has significance if one considers that her whole existence is on stage, watched as a punk Orthodox, watched as a celebrity, and watched on TV. Now, even her secrets are made public in a weblog. When she feels particularly out of control, Hava's fingers twitch, and she longs to find "the nearest all-night Internet café, and write the longest f[**]king journal ever" (312). In her online journal, even her secrets can be made public. As her own narrative, she has control over the script, what people will know, and who they will believe. In the end, that is what screenagers know how to do best: manipulate the spectacle.

Psychologist Jan Jagodzinski reminds us that "youth has its own differentiations and struggles for recognition. It is a complex phenomenon, and for us to pretend that we have somehow 'captured' it is the worst kind of arrogance" (1). Thus, it seems important not only to notice the narratives others tell about Generation Y but also to pay attention to the stories Generation Yers tell about themselves, especially in regard to their relationship to technology, the media, and the spectacle. To better understand the irony embedded within even the most contemporary adult-authored pieces of the YA genre means to see the ways Generation Yers represent themselves interacting with the media with which they are most commonly associated.

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Examination of texts written by Generation Y authors for a Generation Y audience suggests that Generation Y should be appealed to not just in format or copying the format of a computer screen, but at a fundamental level of understanding that begins to get at the nuanced ways of seeing and knowing the world that Generation Y, a mediated metaculture, performs. Instead of making it invisible, these texts make apparent the appeal process and work toward including young people in their own ideologies and critique of their place in the world instead of telling it to them. The technological sensibility of Generation Y becomes clear as something more than simply their explicit use of technology and more about the distinct convergence of their selves and technology as a combined, inextricable thing. How Generation Y uses technology is interesting, but noticing how Generation Y-ers often see themselves as a part of technology, a mediated entity, is how more significant study and understanding can occur.

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