

The Death of Genre:

Why the Best YA Fiction Often Defies Classification

A few years ago, I received a phone call from a desperate sixth grade reading teacher. “Help!” she cried, “I have a literary mutiny on my hands. I need your help now!!” I immediately raced upstairs.

Our sixth graders read Louis Sachar’s *Holes* as a required novel. The teacher uses *Holes* as part of her unit on fantasy. In a time where many middle schoolers are steeped in Harry Potter and Paolini, *Holes* just did not seem to fit into that the same category of fantasy.

“Mr. Smith,” they argued, “It can’t be fantasy. It’s too real.”

What followed was a long discussion about the different types of fantasy. We debated over the effects of rattlesnake nail polish, the existence of yellow spotted lizards, the role of coincidence, Sachar’s use of the legend of Kissin’ Kate, the folktale qualities of Madame Zeroni’s curse, and the quest for treasure. We even delved into the archetype of the “hero” as we analyzed Stanley’s character. Most students remained unconvinced of the classification of *Holes* as a work of fantasy.

Sixth graders are not the only ones who struggle with the standard conventions of genre. As I revise my genre lists each year for my graduate level Young Adult Literature class, I find myself shifting books from fantasy to historical fiction and realistic fiction to fantasy. I have even considered

adding a list called genre-busters, novels which do not easily fit into a single category. The more I think about my YA favorite titles of the past few years, the more bewildered I become. Zusak’s *The Book Thief*—historical fiction or fantasy? Anderson’s *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing*—historical fiction or science fiction? Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*?—realistic fiction or science fiction? Shusterman’s *The Schwa Was Here*—realistic fiction or fantasy? I have come to the realization that genre might be dead, that many of recently published YA novels no longer fit into the predictable categories we typically designate for books. Is it time to despair? I think not. Rather, let us celebrate the innovative fashion in which today’s YA authors are bending the traditional definitions of genre. An exploration of early genre benders may provide some illumination, as well as an investigation of how many of today’s best YA novels are further blurring the lines between genres.

Young Adult literature has a long tradition of authors whose works defy genre classifications. Francesca Lia Block represents a genre unto herself with the fractured fairy tales that surround her quirky protagonist Weetzie Bat. Patrice Kindl’s *Owl in Love* mixes myth, fantasy, humor, and modern realism in her critically acclaimed novel. With innovative stories like *The Mind’s Eye*, *Whirligig*, and *Seek*, Paul Fleischman has long challenged the conventions of style,

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format, and genre. Elements of the supernatural run through the mysteries and suspense stories of Robert Cormier, Lois Duncan, Joan Lowery Nixon, and—more recently—Nancy Werlin and Kevin Brooks.

For the genre enthusiast, historical novels offer a variety of complex issues. The kingdom-and-the-castle story found in works like Megan Whelan Turner's *The Thief*, Gerald Morris' *The Squire Tales*, and Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Seeing Stone* blend medieval

settings with magic and legend. Donna Jo Napoli's retold fairy tales (*Beast*, *Bound*, *Breath*) borrow much from traditional literature but abound with rich historical details. Napoli's novels are clearly fantasy titles; they also have much to offer to readers of historical fiction. Time-slip and time-travel novels present a similar dilemma—historical fiction or fantasy/science fiction? Jane Yolen's *The Devil's*

Arithmetic, Susan Cooper's *The King of Shadows*, Susan Price's *The Sterkarm Handshake*, and Edward Bloor's *London Calling* are filled with history yet are based on the premise of traveling back in time. One would be remiss to classify Philip Pullman's trilogy about Sally Lockhart and Eleanor Updale's Montmorency series as simple Victorian mysteries. One cannot deny the historical qualities found in these novels. What about speculative fiction, those historical novels that ask the difficult question of what if? In *The Year of the Hangman*, Gary Blackwood proposes the dilemma of what if the British had won the Revolutionary War. Finally, in which genre does one place Aiden Chambers' *Postcards from No Man's Land*? Chambers masterfully intertwines two narratives—one set in the 1990s and the other set during WWII—into his award-winning novel. Historical fiction or modern realistic? Neither or both?

Since the publication of his critically acclaimed *Skellig* and *Kit's Wilderness*, David Almond has blurred the lines between fantasy and reality in a genre that is often called magical realism. He has

returned to that successful formula with his newest novel *Clay*. In the best works of magical realism, one cannot easily determine where reality ends and fantasy begins. Popular chick-lit titles like Sarah Weeks' *So B. It*, Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries*, and Ann Brashares' *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* can hardly be considered completely "realistic." In *So B. It*, Heidi has developed a special touch with the slot machines; she always wins. Only after she has completed her quest to uncover the secrets of her past does her luck return to normal. The fairy tale quality of Mia's rise from social outcast to crown princess is a far cry from probable. The same can be said for those magical jeans in the Sisterhood series. Magical realism also plays a major role in numerous novels for tweens. From Hiaasen's *Hoot* to Hannigan's *Ida B.*, from many of the novels of Sharon Creech to the allegorical works of Jerry Spinelli, elements of the fantastic add a sense of mystery and wonderment to many novels categorized as middle grade fiction. The mixture of fantasy (the call of the sea, the seemingly supernatural powers of Mullet Fingers and Maniac Magee, the talking trees, anthropomorphic pigeons and owls) with realistic stories appeals greatly to readers on the verge of adolescence.

Numerous librarians and teachers have encountered the adolescent reader who devours one fantasy novel after the next but refuses to touch science fiction. On the other hand, there is the passionate sci-fi reader who dismisses every fantasy with the statement "I don't really like those types of books." Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* provides one blueprint for a genre now labeled as science fantasy. Following in L'Engle's innovative footsteps are authors like Philip Pullman, Kenneth Oppel, and Joshua Mowll. In his masterfully plotted novels *Airborn* and *Skybreaker*, Oppel begins with the premise of what if the airplane had not been invented. The adventures that follow take readers into a world of airships, sky pirates, flying felines, bat-copters, intricate diagrams, and high altitude monsters. Mowll's *Operation Red Jericho* and *Operation Typhoon Shore* are frequently classified as adventure fantasies. However, the detailed diagrams will indubitably please even the most devoted science fiction reader. Acclaimed science writers John and Mary Gribbin tackle the difficult concepts of string theory, the space-time continuum, and quantum physics in *The Science of Philip*

Pullman's His Dark Materials. After reading the Gribbins' book, teens (and adults) will begin to appreciate the theoretical physics that provides part of the foundation of Pullman's exceptional trilogy. Then there is the difficult question of Anthony Horowitz's Alex Rider series. These wildly popular novels touch many genres—spy novel, adventure story, mystery, and—because of the abundance of high tech gadgets Alex employs in times of peril—science fiction.

Having suggested that the lines between genres have been blurred in Young Adult literature, I will now look more closely at three distinct categories and the recently published novels which exemplify them: (1) historical fantasy as it moves away from the traditional medieval setting to different historical periods; (2) historical fantasy with magical realism and particularly the trend of narrators and characters “from beyond the grave;” and finally (3), science fantasy. I will conclude with an analysis of why, in today's world of YA literature, some novels make any discussion of genre irrelevant and how this “death of genre” liberates teen readers from the stereotypes associated with genre fiction.

History and Fantasy

The Middle Ages provide the perfect opportunity to blend history with fantasy. After all, witches were burned at the stake and medieval legend has knights hunting dragons and questing for treasure. From this combination of the historical and the fantastic comes that sub-genre known as the kingdom-and-the-castle. While Gerald Morris, Tamora Pierce, and Shannon Hale are still writing in this tradition, many authors are exploring different periods of history with fascinating results. Celia Rees, Julie Hearn, and Sally Gardner have written three haunting historical novels with *Witch Child*, *The Minister's Daughter*, and *I, Coriander*. Rees' *Witch Child* differs from traditional Witch Trial novels in that her protagonist—fourteen year-old Mary Newbury—is actually a witch, not merely a young girl accused of being one. Mary flees England after her grandmother is executed for practicing witchcraft and comes to America where she again falls under suspicion for her pagan ways. Rees writes *Witch Child* as if it is Mary's own journal, thereby producing a fiction-as-fact effect on the reader. Hearn's *The Minister's Daughter* expertly intertwines two narratives into one,

with an entertaining dose of fairies and pixies to help move the narrative along. Set during the Civil War between the Puritans and the Royalists, Nell is accused by the minister's unwed pregnant daughter of being a witch, an agent of the Devil. Hysteria reigns as Nell's grandmother is dunked, and Nell finds herself condemned to hang. As the novel alternates between two voices and two settings, the reader comes to understand the conflicts that led to the Salem Witch Trials and the deaths of innocent women who were healers and midwives. *I, Coriander* is much closer to traditional fantasy than *Witch Child* and *The Minister's Daughter*. Nonetheless, London at the time of Oliver Cromwell springs to life in this award-winning story. Coriander is the only daughter of a successful merchant and a fairy-princess whom the locals consider a witch. When her mother dies and her father's finances fall into ruin because of the Civil War, Coriander finds herself at odds with her evil step-mother and a Puritan minister. After her father flees persecution from the Roundheads, Coriander's life in London rapidly spirals downward until she is able to cross over into Fairyland where still more peril awaits in the form of the wicked Fairy Queen. Eventually, characters from the two worlds collide in a suspenseful conclusion.

During the past few years, Victorian England has become the setting for several noteworthy historical novels. As with the novels set during the 17th century, these Victorian novels obscure the lines between history and fantasy. Libba Bray's gothic novels *A Great and Terrible Beauty* and *Rebel Angels* plunge readers into the social conventions of Victorian England. Of particular interest are the arranged marriages of the young ladies at the Spence Academy. Bray explores the limited roles of women during this time of history. She also skillfully adds a haunted house, mysterious gypsies, visions of and trips into another realm, a

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gorgon, and an abundance of magic. Eleanor Updale's Montmorency series also portrays Victorian society. More mystery than fantasy, these fast-paced novels introduce readers to a career criminal named Montmorency. After a particularly horrific fall, the thief is "reconstructed" through a variety of experimental surgeries. After his recovery, he assumes two identities—the gentleman Montmorency and Scarper, a lowly thief with a special knowledge of London's new sewer system. As the series progresses, Montmorency becomes less of a thief and more of an amateur detective. While the books have no significant adolescent characters, they appeal to teen readers with their well-constructed plots, strong characters, and fascinating setting. If Dickens, Conan Doyle, and Poe were to collaborate on a project, the outcome might not be too far removed from Updale's successful series. Mystery? Historical fiction? Fantasy? A little of all three?

Two of 2006's most acclaimed novels could be simply placed into the category of historical fiction. However, there is no simplicity in either Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* or M.T. Anderson's *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing*. In Zusak's multilayered novel, a young German girl named Liesel rebuilds life with a foster family before and during World War II. After the arrest of her father and the death of her younger brother, she is abandoned by her mother at the home of the Hubermans. Life on Himmel Street is certainly not heavenly. In this

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working-class suburb, Liesel finds herself surrounded by angry neighbors intoxicated by the rise of Nazism, vicious bullies, and a spiteful foster mother. She finds solace first with her accordion playing foster father, her best friend Rudy and their neighborhood games of soccer, and Max, a Jewish refugee whom her family hides in the basement. Ultimately, her love for books—the first picked up beside her brother's grave, another taken from a bonfire, others stolen from the mayor's wife—transforms the young Liesel. By learning to read, she learns to live. As she reads to others, she transforms their lives, too. Inspired by words and stories, she begins to write her own story, a

process which literally saves her life. Nothing fantastic so far, correct? I have deliberately failed to mention the novel's narrator, none other than Death. The brilliance of *The Book Thief* comes not only from Zusak's adept characterization and his delicate balancing of themes but also from the thoughtful comments Death interjects throughout the narrative. Death is no antagonist in this story. Rather, he portrays a sympathetic character physically and emotionally exhausted by man's inhumanity toward man. His observations about the tragic circumstances of the human condition and the horrors of war and the Holocaust are profound but are they the stuff of historical fiction?

From the title of *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume 1: The Pox Party* alone, the reader already knows that he/she is about to encounter a book like none other. Anderson does not disappoint in this National Book Award winner. Octavian and his mother, an African princess, live on the estate of the Novanglian College of Lucidity with a group of radical philosophers. The young boy receives a classical education. As he grows older, Octavian comes to understand that his lessons are part of an experiment to determine the intellectual capabilities of Africans. He also realizes that he and his mother are not free; they are slaves in Boston during the turbulent times before the Revolution. After a physical altercation with the College's benefactor, the boy and his mother are stripped and beaten. When the financial woes befall the college, Octavian's fortunes take a further turn for the worse. Like Liesel, he possesses a great love of reading, especially the Classics. His new master forbids him from reading his favorites and forces him to translate dull and difficult passages from meaningless texts. His mother dies after a failed experiment with small pox inoculation, and Octavian runs away. He is eventually captured, imprisoned in a wooden mask, and brought back to the College. The first book ends with the protagonist's fate unknown. As with *The Book Thief*, this novel is as much about style as it is about narrative. Anderson has written the story in a language much like the American English used at the time of the Revolution. That language helps to transport the reader back in time but did that "time" really exist? Could there have been a Novanglian College of Lucidity? Were such experiments actually conducted on Africans? *The Astonish-*

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Realism and Fantasy

If the narrator is dead but tells the story from beyond the grave, then is the novel realistic fiction or it is fantasy? Perhaps the trend of the dead narrator started with Alice Sebold's cross-over bestseller *The Lovely Bones*, but there is little doubt that many YA authors have used a deceased character to relate their stories. On the second page of Gary Soto's *The Afterlife*, Chuy is stabbed to death in a restroom. Ghost-like, Chuy floats around town checking on his family and his friends from school; he also spies on his killer. Before he dissipates, he begins to fall in love with the "spirit" of another teenager. Jeremiah's is but one of numerous voices in Jacqueline Woodson's *Behind You*. Miah witnesses and comments on the struggles of his friends and family as they try to deal with his tragic death, but he views them from above as his spirit floats over them.

In 2005, Adele Griffin received a National Book Award nomination for *Where I Want to Be*. Narrated with two voices in alternating chapters, this novel explores the difficult relationship between two sisters, Jane and Lily. The reader immediately realizes that Jane is telling her story "from the other side." Griffin's novel is a powerful coming-of-age story about a grieving family coping with death and mental illness. Chris Crutcher also employs a dead narrator in *The Sledding Hill*. Billy dies early in the narrative but continues to relate the events as they unfold. When a minister/English teacher launches a crusade against Crutcher's novels, the small community becomes embroiled in heated debate over free speech and censorship. Crutcher even interjects himself into the story. Dougie, the protagonist in Pete Hautman's *Invisible*, is alive for most of the novel but readers immediately have questions about his best friend Andy. An unreliable narrator if ever one existed, Dougie is a social outcast compulsively obsessed with his model train set and the bridge he is building for it. Andy is a popular football player and a talented actor. The two talk together each evening from their bedroom windows. As Dougie spirals deeper into mental illness, one is asked to question whether or not Andy is alive or if he represents another voice from the

grave. Hautman's suspenseful conclusion leaves that question unanswered for even the most observant of readers.

A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb and *Elsewhere* by Gabrielle Zevin are farther removed from "reality" but still deserve consideration in this category. Although Whitcomb's protagonist Helen has been dead for over a century, she has been able to "live" by attaching herself to a human host. Her most recent host is a high school English teacher. She travels unseen and unheard, a mere observer in an always shifting world.

That changes one day when she notices a boy staring at her. James, too, is a ghost but one who has learned to inhabit the living body of a human whose spirit has died. His host is Billy, an abused, drug-addicted teenager.

Helen learns from James and finds a host in the spiritless Jenny, the troubled only child of fundamentalist parents. James-Billy and Helen-Jenny fall in love, have sex, and experience tragedy together. The ghost story might be fantasy, but the joy and pain felt by the characters are as real as it gets in YA fiction. In *Elsewhere*, Zevin depicts the life and death of sixteen-old Liz whose life on Earth is cut short by a hit-and-run accident. When Liz awakens in *Elsewhere*, she longs for her old life—her dreams of the prom, a steady boyfriend, her driver's license, college. From *Elsewhere*, she jealously observes her family and friends, wishing she could be with them. Slowly, she comes to terms with her new existence and begins to let go of her old dreams. Reality or fantasy? Fantasy or reality?

The voice from beyond the grave is but one way in which YA authors blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Neal Shusterman's humorous novel *The Schwa Was Here* features the character of Calvin Schwa. While he cannot disappear completely, Calvin is so normal, so run-of-the-mill average that he goes unnoticed as if he were invisible. He is the ultimate wallflower, someone who simply fades away into background. Teachers count him absent and ignore his raised hand during class discussions. Classmates look

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directly at him and never see him. His best friend Antsy conducts “invisibility tests” to prove the “Schwa Factor.” Calvin’s mission to be noticed often meets with humorous results. The most hilarious of these occurs when he uses his savings to rent a billboard with his photo on it only to discover that the Expressway has been closed for repairs and no one will see his picture. Calvin is also on a quest to discover what happened to his mother. Did she just dissipate into thin air one evening at the grocery store? Or did she merely abandon Calvin? *The Schwa Was Here*, winner of the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, provides that perfect mix of reality and fantasy that provokes younger teens to think about themselves and their peers.

Marcus Zusak’s *I Am the Messenger* provides a similar theme but for a much older audience. At nineteen, Ed Kennedy is going nowhere fast. He drives a cab, drinks and plays cards with underachieving

friends, and hangs out with his dog. Although he is not invisible like Calvin Schwa, life is certainly passing him by, and he does not seem to care. His “going-nowhere-fast” existence quickly changes after he thwarts a bungled bank robbery. He then starts to receive mysterious playing cards at home, all with coded messages. Once he deciphers the code, Ed realizes that he is being asked to help (and in a few cases, even hurt) total strangers. Some tasks are innocent and uncomplicated—buying an ice cream for a harried mother. Others are more

perilous and challenging—stopping a drunken, abusive husband from raping his wife each and every night. Eventually, the cards lead him to his friends and family. As he changes the lives of others, Ed himself changes. Is he a pawn in an elaborate “practice random acts of kindness” scheme? A puppet on a string of a “pay it forward” scheme? The fact that he

has no clue who sends him messages propels the plot and moves the novel away from the purely realistic toward the magically realistic. The novel’s “deus ex machina” conclusion is even more improbable. In a less successful novel, the implausibility of the climax might undermine the author’s intentions. Only because he had previously established the premise of magical realism could Zusak have successfully accomplished the finale of *I Am the Messenger*.

Science Fiction and Fantasy

Many students will ask me how far back in the past a novel has to be set for it to be considered historical fiction. Few ever ask how far into the future does a novel has to be set for it considered science fiction. That is, however, precisely the dilemma one has with classifying Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*. Her Printz-winning novel takes place in England in the not so distant future. There are no aliens, space ships, robots, medical miracles, or alternative communities. After Daisy leaves New York to visit her aunt and cousins in the English countryside, she realizes that her relatives share an almost supernatural bond. Soon after she arrives, England is attacked by an unknown enemy, and the country is thrown into war. Her aunt is trapped outside the country, and the children are left to fend for themselves. As she and her cousin Edmond fall in love, Daisy begins to subconsciously connect with her cousins. As the characters adapt the crisis around them, they themselves seem farther removed from the real world. Indeed, they seem transformed by the inhumanity which engulfs them and their country. After Edmond and Daisy are separated, they develop telepathic capabilities; they are able to communicate with each other even though they are miles apart. Isaac and Piper display a psychic link with animals. After the war, Edmond is seen tending an elaborate garden; we are left to wonder if he possesses mystic powers with plants. As with Stephanie S. Tolan’s *Welcome to the Ark* and *Flight of the Raven*, *How I Live Now* forces us to question if the human psyche is capable of rapid evolution in response to a catastrophic future.

In her first novel for younger readers, Jeanette Winterson also explores the possibilities that might lie ahead in her time-bending adventure story *Tanglewreck*. The fabric of Time is literally coming

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apart at the seams. Time tornadoes are ripping through London, transporting people to and from different points of history. A young orphan named Silver may hold the key to saving the world, provided that she can find a clock called the Timekeeper and keep it out of the hands of a malevolent alchemist and a mysterious sorceress. Fans of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and L'Engle's *Time Quartet* will recognize the similarities and relish the differences. References to quantum mechanics, parallel realities, time travel, and even Schrodinger's Cat—sometimes alive, sometimes dead—are plentiful. Is it science fiction or fantasy? Like Herbie Brennan's *Faerie Wars* and many of the works of Eoin Colfer, the line between fantasy and science fiction in *Tanglewreck* is indeed an arbitrary one.

Can We Declare Genre Dead?

While numerous outstanding works of YA fiction fit nicely into the traditional definitions of genre, many defy those same conventions. If award-winning titles like *How I Live Now*, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, I, Coriander*, and *The Schwa Was Here* cannot be conveniently placed into standard categories, should we declare the death of genre or merely redefine genres to include titles like these? Classification by subgenre is an option but not a very appealing one. Fiction should not become subject to the rules of nomenclature; classification by genre cannot be reduced to a science.

If we announce of the death of genre, what are the implications for our students? For us as teachers, librarians, and educators? For teens, I hope that liberation, freedom from the familiar, would be one positive outcome. We have each seen a student (or adult) who reads one genre and one genre only. "I would rather die than read a book that isn't a mystery," "Do you have any sports fiction?," and "I am looking for a book with dragons" are the typical comments I hear every day. I receive similar comments from graduate students, some of whom fear reading outside their comfort zone. By denouncing genre, we may perhaps begin to expand the horizons of our adolescents.

Skim the reviews of *The Book Thief*, *I Am the Messenger*, *Where I Want to Be*, and other genre-bending novels and note that phrases like "for sophis-

ticated readers," "mature and complex," "groundbreaking," "thought-provoking," "rich and fresh," and "advanced" are commonly used. As we stand on the cusp of a new era in Young Adult literature, I say move forward and challenge every reader with fiction so magnificent it makes genre irrelevant.

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