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# Young Adult Novels with Multiple Narrative Perspectives:

## The Changing Nature of YA Literature

**M**any of today's adolescents are on the cutting edge of technology. They are becoming more competent with and reliant upon aspects of technology in all areas of their lives. The reality is that our teenagers are living in a technology-filled world, and many of them engage with technology every day. By using these new media, today's students learn about the world and communicate with each other in new and different ways (Bruce, 2004). They are experiencing the multifaceted nature of information and knowledge alluded to in position statements on adolescent literacy published by organizations such as the International Reading Association (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999), and the Carnegie Corporation (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The IRA and Carnegie documents conceptualize how adolescent literacy practices have grown to encompass a wider range of texts, including magazines, books, websites, and digital communication tools (e.g., email, text messaging, instant messaging [IM], and blogs). Adolescents have cell phones, iPods, cable TV, MySpace®, and YouTube® that keep them "connected." Our students employ the Internet, cable television, text messages, and other communications from friends to provide them with information, and they have become accustomed to dynamic information that changes with each new entry on Wikipedia. In short, their lives revolve more around multiple and ever-changing perspectives than previous generations.

These new literacies and digital communication technologies often impact adolescents' reading and writing practices. However, such practices do not always translate into what is valued in school settings—the reading and writing of print text (Boerman-Cornell, 2006; Lewis & Fabbos, 2005). It behooves secondary teachers, then, to become aware of and familiar with all of the varieties of text available to and read by teens. This would assist them in focusing instruction on developing students' competencies in comprehending and reading these diverse texts.

Traditional print novels, such as the classics and other commonly accepted literary genres, remain important in today's classroom and are not disappearing from society; however, they are being joined by newer genres and text types, as well as new forms of literature found on the Internet. Adolescent literature, which continues to be a typical and valued print text in today's classroom, increasingly reflects the changes taking place in society, adolescence, and adolescent literacy. One area of print text published specifically for teens has grown and evolved in recent years—young adult literature.

In the last decade, young adult literature has grown extensively, with significant numbers of books being published for the teen audience, ages 12–18 (Bean & Moni, 2003; Horning, Lingren, Rudiger, & Schlicsman, 2006; Owen, 2003). Given this growth spurt, it seemed important to examine changes taking place within this expanding body of literature. Are authors taking risks and experimenting with their writing, pushing the boundaries of the traditionally accepted format of young adult literature, and play-

ing with new forms of voice and structure? A content analysis of current YA novels (Koss, 2006) identified a trend away from the typical first person point of view, usually embodied by a teenage narrator. Today's multiple narrative perspective novels are characterized by multiple voices, narrators, points of view, structures, and perspectives (Aronson, 2001; Koss, 2006; Koss, 2008).

These books challenge the traditional linear, chronological, and single-voiced nature of narrative fiction, which (a) is typically told from the first-person point of view of the main character, or (b) focuses on a main character but is written in third person. Issues of form, voice, and structure are breaking new ground, and publishing trends are emerging.

Current young adult novels appear to be changing in form and structure, and mirror both the different ways information is accessed and the forms of new literacies appearing in contemporary society. "There is no doubt that the rapid pace of technological change in the way information is presented and received will continue to have a significant influence on the YA novel of the future" (Owen, 2003, para. 38). This suggests that something is occurring in today's social and cultural environment that is changing how YA narratives are being told and accommodating experimentation in how they are being written.

## The Study: Rationale and Context

### Purpose
The purpose of this study was to explore systematically the growing body of young adult novels using multiple narrative perspectives within the context of evolving contemporary changes to society, technology, adolescents, adolescent literacy, literary genres, and young adult literature. Young adult novels mirror the changing nature of society; in turn, changes in

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society alter aspects of the way young adult novels are written. A study of one type of novel that is becoming more prevalent in contemporary society can illuminate the interconnectedness of literary and societal change, as well as provide insights into the nature of adolescents and adolescent literacy today and suggest directions for future research into teenagers and their reading.

With support from the ALAN Foundation Research Grant, this study (1) explicated a growing corpus of novels written with multiple narrative perspectives in order to usefully define and categorize them; and (2) explored the sociocultural phenomenon related to the growing numbers of texts that are written and published from the perspectives of different populations and people. Guiding questions for the study were: 1) How can books that use multiple narrative perspectives usefully be described and defined? 2) What do teens and adults who work with young adult literature think as to why so many of these novels are being published today? 3) Why do editors and marketing directors of major publishing houses think more of these novels are being published, what features do they look for, and what challenges are involved in working with these novels?

### Literary Analysis
In order to describe systematically the different forms these novels take, a textual analysis of YA novels written with multiple narrative perspectives was undertaken. A list of 205 novels was compiled between 1999 through the end of 2007 (including 2008 advanced reading copies (ARCs) in order to find the most current examples of this trend. The time frame of 1999 to the present day was selected in order to represent books written and recognized in the early part of the 21st century. The novels were read in order to create an overall umbrella definition of novels written using multiple narrative perspectives. Five features emerged that define this type of novel and identify the different writing conventions commonly found in them (see Table 1). These features are not exclusive to books written with multiple narrative perspectives; they are features that can be found in all types of literature. However, they are included in this analysis because they are employed by authors in unique ways in books with multiple narrative perspectives, and thus add to the distinctive nature of this type of novel. In

addition, five distinct categories emerged inductively over the reading process (see Table 2). The novels mentioned in the tables were found to be exemplars of each category and feature; that is to say, they clearly and concisely represent all of the elements included in the category's definition. Also, novels were selected for discussion based on how well they exemplified their category rather than their literary quality.

**Exploration of Sociocultural Phenomenon**
Once an understanding of multiple perspective young adult novels emerged from the literary analysis, the reasons why more of these novels are being published in recent years was explored. This phenomenon was examined from the perspectives of three different populations—teens; professionals who work in the field of young adult literature (including professors, librarians, teachers, consultants, and booksellers); and professionals who work in the field of young adult publishing (including editors and marketing directors). The perspectives of three different populations that engage with young adult literature on a regular basis were obtained in order to develop a more complete picture of why more of these books are being published. Data were obtained through questionnaires completed by and discussed with teen book club participants, questionnaires completed by academics and practitioners in the field of YA literature, and interviews held with editors and publishers who work with YA novels at major publishing houses. A combination of information gathered from all three groups identified three overarching themes that may explain why so

**Table 1:** Features Found in Multiple Narrative Perspective Novels

| Category | Definition | Number (Percentage of Novels) Overall | Exemplar Novels |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sequence** | The nature of the events as they take place in alternating sections or chapters. May be linear, non-linear, or simultaneous. | 112 titles (55%) | • *Breakout* (Fleischman, 2003)<br>• *What Happened to Cass McBride?* (Giles, 2006)<br>• *Rainbow Party* (Ruditis, 2005) |
| **Structure/ Organization** | Markers that delineate the voice or time period being represented through the use of font changes, characters' names, or the listing of times, dates, and places. | 181 titles (88%) | • *Sweetgrass Basket* (Carvell, 2005)<br>• *Heart on My Sleeve* (Wittlinger, 2004)<br>• *Shooter* (Myers, 2004) |
| **Point of View** | The alternating either between narrators and/or between first and third person. | 41 titles (use a combination) (21%) | • *The Amulet of Samarkand* (Stroud, 2003)<br>• *The Missing Girl (*Mazer, 2008)<br>• *Mistik Lake* (Brooks, 2007) |
| **Tense** | The switching between past and present tenses. | 76 titles (use a combination) (37%) | • *How to Build a House* (Reinhardt, 2008)<br>• *Where I Want to Be* (Griffin, 2005)<br>• *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006) |
| **Text Type** | The use of different types of text as a writing style, including epistolary novels, graphic novels, and novels in verse. | 97 titles (47%) | • *Impulse* by Ellen Hopkins (2007)<br>• *The Brimstone Journals* (Koertge, 2001)<br>• *The Realm of Possibility* (Levithan, 2004) |

**Table 2:** Categories of Multiple Narrative Perspective Novels

| Category | Definition | Number (Percentage of Novels) Overall | Exemplar Novels |
|---|---|---|---|
| **One Event, Multiple Perspectives** | Novels that tell a story that focuses on one major event, which is told from the point of view of a number of different participants involved with the event. | 25 titles (12%) | • *Real Time* (Kass, 2004) <br> • *Holdup* (Fields, 2007) <br> • *Poison Ivy* (Koss, 2006) |
| **One Story, Multiple Perspectives** | Novels that tell one story, but the tale is told via alternating narrators or perspectives. | 59 titles (29%) | • *A Fast and Brutal Wing* (Johnson, 2004) <br> • *The Year of Secret Assignments* (Moriarty, 2004) <br> • *Not the End of the World* (McCaughrean, 2004) |
| **Multiple Stories, Multiple Perspectives, Intertwined** | Novels that tell multiple stories told by multiple characters, whose lives become somehow intertwined. | 50 titles (24%) | • *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002) <br> • *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) <br> •*The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brashares, 2001) |
| **Then and Now** | Novels in which the main character or a number of characters tell their individual stories at different points in time through the use of flashbacks and flash forwards. | 42 titles (21%) | • *The First Part Last* (Johnson, 2003) <br> • *Day of Tears* (Lester, 2005) <br> • *Turnabout* (Haddix, 2000) |
| **Parallel Stories** | Novels in which two parallel stories are told, each of which typically takes place in a different time period, often through the use of a journal or as an older character telling a younger character stories of his or her youth. | 29 titles (14%) | • *The Diary of Pelly D.* (Adlington, 2005) <br> • *Endymion Spring* (Skelton, 2006) <br> •*Tamar* (Peet, 2007) |

many books written with multiple narrative perspectives are being published in contemporary society: a) textual changes; b) teen changes; and c) technological changes. The fact that the themes were consistent across the populations is interesting and significant, as each population interacts with and relates to young adult literature in different ways.

### Textual Changes

All three populations—teens, professionals who work with young adult literature, and professionals who work in YA literature publishing—felt that changes in literature overall are impacting the publishing of more books with multiple narrative perspectives. In contemporary society, the way young adult novels are being written is changing, and one reflection of this change is the increase in novels with multiple voices and points of view. Several factors were identified as influencing this change, but all groups seemed to focus on how this literature reflects the changing nature of literature in general and the changing nature of society, which is becoming more accepting of diverse populations and multiple perspectives on single events. It was also pointed out that publication of all types of YA novels is on the rise, so multiple narrative perspective novels are following that pattern, giving them a stronger chance of being published and reaching teen audiences. Other reasons given were that multiple narrators are traditional and that these books represent a high quality of writing.

### Teen Changes

The second major theme that emerged across all three populations was that teens in society today are

different than the teens of previous generations. The issues they deal with on a day-to-day basis tend to be harsher, which can cause adolescents to develop and grow up faster. Owing to issues such as sexual advancement, teen pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse, among others, teens are growing in awareness and sophistication at an earlier age. Books with multiple narrative perspectives may be written as a form of bibliotherapy, or to provide teens with a picture of other teens who may be going through similar life events. These books also present different perspectives on and reactions to such events. Teens interact with others in a variety of ways, and are expected to act in certain ways in certain situations. Novels written in different voices and with different perspectives can provide teens with ideas of how to act in different circumstances, as well as allow them to experiment with different ideas of identity.

### Technological Changes

The increase in and changing nature of technology in contemporary society is a third reason the teens and adults who interact with young adult literature felt novels are being written with multiple narrative perspectives. Access to constantly evolving technology impacts how teens read and write. They are now much more accustomed to writing and reading on the Internet and using other forms of digital communication technologies. They gather information from a myriad of sources and synthesize it to make sense of a concept or event. The media are also changing, now using sound bites and fragmented television shows and movies to present their stories. Linear, chronological sitcoms and movies no longer dominate. All three populations queried thought these technological changes were impacting the ways young adult books are being written. Since teens are used to getting fragmented snippets of information in their daily lives, books are being written to reflect this phenomenon.

## Implications

This research also identified three primary reasons an abundance of these books is being published in the beginning of the 21st century. These results revealed that changes in narrative and literature, changes in teen development and teen experiences, and changes in technologies have all impacted the way young

adult books are currently being written. The changing nature of these books also reflects the changes taking place in society. By examining one specific body of literature, connections were made to the greater changes taking place in technology, adolescents, adolescent literacy, literature, and young adult literature itself.

The results of this study provided a system and a language for talking about the issues surrounding books with multiple narrative perspectives. As this study has shown, these evolving texts are being published with increasing frequency, adolescents interact with them, and, according to the teen respondents in this study, they are intriguing, interesting, and a welcome change from the traditional, linear text format. They are also complex, pushing readers to follow several different strands, sometimes out of chronological/linear order; readers must also adjust to different voices and/or narrators, sometimes through the switching of tenses, and occasionally juggle conflicting information from unreliable narrators. Readers need to be able to sort through, analyze, and organize what they read in order to construct a coherent whole. By their nature, the reading of these types of texts is a complex process and creates challenges for teen readers (Capan, 1992; Klinker, 1999), challenges that must be identified and explored.

The nature of these books, specifically their metafictive characteristics—such as intertextuality, multiple narratives, and non-linearity—require readers to think critically in order to achieve comprehension. They also need to think critically about which sources or voices in the novels are credible and reliable. As Lesesne (2007) says:

> Because these characters, and indeed all characters who have a part in telling the story, do so from their unique perspectives, these books can provide an opportunity for students to distinguish—or at least attempt to distinguish–between what is true or accurate and what is untrue or distorted. (70)

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Although critical thinking is a purposeful activity, the presence of these literary devices often requires alternative ways of navigating text, and there is a lack of understanding about how readers approach and understand these types of texts. Teachers must be aware of these changing characteristics in order to help their students navigate these texts.

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As YA books become more common in high school English classes (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Donelson & Nilsen, 2005) and in outside literacy practices, this knowledge of how the texts are changing in light of trends, teens, and technology has implications that trickle down into the classroom. Looking at the types and features of texts being written at the beginning of the 21st century, as well as the sociocultural phenomena that are impacting the ways these texts are written, informed our exploration of how these texts can impact both teen readers and adolescent literacy practices.

The findings of this study may have implications for educators by helping them to recognize the diverse types of texts published for adolescents, and suggesting ways they can effectively use these books in the study of literature in middle school and high school English classrooms. The literary analysis was structured so that a variety of practical applications and methods could be used in a classroom setting. An assortment of thematic units and lessons on literary elements and critical analysis could also be developed using these books, relying on social constructivist and sociocultural learning theories that emphasize the value of students working together to form meaning, on reader response, and on engaging students with alternative perspectives portrayed in literature.

Two examples of thematic unit ideas are provided here—"Character Development and Perspective Taking" and "Synthesizing Information"—each with a discussion of why the topic is important and which books can be used with it most effectively. In addition to the books and themes suggested here, books with multiple narrative perspectives can be used equally effectively in classrooms for other units of study, including point of view, narrative structure, sequence, pacing, text type, and elements of time.

## Character Development and Perspective Taking

One thematic unit that relates to this research is the study of different characters within a book. Character development includes analyzing characters' actions and formulating reasons or motives for each of their story events. In books with multiple narrative perspectives, especially books in which there is more than one narrator, each character will have a different set of beliefs, traits, and goals that impact his or her decisions over the course of the story.

When we examine alternative perspectives, we explore the viewpoints of different characters in a story. These characters perceive or react to events differently from other characters. In studying character development, students can select a novel and identify the different characters whose stories are told within it. They can look at each character and determine backgrounds, including gender, sexual preference, race, etc. Once they have an understanding of who the characters are, they can examine their different story events or perspectives. Students can identify what beliefs or motives each character may have had in taking specific actions and/or the ways those beliefs influenced how the story was presented to the reader. Books from these categories are good choices for the unit: One Event, Multiple Perspectives; One Story, Multiple Perspectives; Multiple Stories, Multiple Perspectives, Intertwined.

Some questions for students to consider include:

- What are the characters' different perspectives?
- Are the narrators reliable and telling the truth about the events?
- Do they report the story events in the same way, or are there discrepancies in their tellings? What might have caused those discrepancies?
- Do students think one character is right over another character?
- Why do they think the characters acted as they did?
- How do the characters' actions and beliefs compare with how students see the world?

Possible novels for use in studying character development and perspective taking include: *Inexcusable*

(Lynch); *Fade to Black* (Flinn); *The Night My Sister Went Missing* (Plum-Ucci); *A Fast and Brutal Wing* (Johnson); *Not the End of the World* (McCaughrean); *The Pull of the Ocean* (Mourlevat); *Breathing Underwater* (Flinn).

## Synthesizing Information

Texts with multiple narrative perspectives often present information from a variety of narrators and perspectives. As with analyzing the perspectives of characters in novels, students need to learn how to synthesize all of the information presented in a novel and put it together into one overall story. They must collect and organize information presented from a variety of perspectives and sources, identify what is accurate and what is biased, and come up with a coherent whole. This process of comprehension is similar to techniques and strategies that students must use when reading and writing using digital communication technologies and the Internet. A useful thematic unit is for students to apply the strategies they have learned when interacting with an electronic text to synthesizing and discussing information from a traditional paper print text, such as a multiple narrative perspective novel.

As the use of digital communication technologies and the Internet increases, it is important for students to become familiar with the unique characteristics of electronic texts in order to navigate them effectively and efficiently. Novels that incorporate multiple voices, perspectives, and time sequences can help teach students about how they synthesize information online. Students can identify titles that either incorporate multiple perspectives that cause them to synthesize the story into one coherent whole, or choose texts that incorporate digital technology. After analyzing their chosen text, they can compare it to electronic or digital texts. Books from any of the five categories would work for this unit.

Some questions for students to consider include:

- What characteristics were found in the novels analyzed?
- How do these characteristics compare to digital texts?
- How does reading text on the Internet differ from reading a traditional print novel?

Possible novels for synthesizing information include: *Names Will Never Hurt Me* (Adoff); *Real Time* (Kass); *Give a Boy a Gun* (Strasser); *Confessions of a Boyfriend Stealer: A Blog* (Clairday); *The Year of Secret Assignments* (Moriarty); *ttyl* (Myracle); *Harmless* (Reinhardt).

## Concluding Thoughts

Literacy in the 21st century means thinking critically, making sense of a bombardment of media and information sources, and making choices about what to read and how to read it. Books with multiple narrative perspectives have great educational potential to nurture growth in these areas. As these texts grow in number and popularity, it is critical that educators examine the ways in which adolescents comprehend and make sense of these texts. The results of this study may help teachers work toward understanding the ways in which students approach and make sense of books written with multiple narrative perspectives so that

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they may, in turn, provide students with the tools and skills necessary to adequately comprehend and make sense of these complex texts.

This study has opened the door to further research on young adult novels with multiple narrative perspectives. It has provided a language that scholars can use to begin talking about and exploring these novels and their implications for adolescent literacy and the changing nature of young adult literature.

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