

Mind Games:

Mind Control in YA literature

There are many reasons S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, first published in 1967, is often cited as the pivotal novel in young adult (YA) literature. A great deal of what Hinton accomplished in the first great YA book was new, but the novel was built on something very old. When teachers introduce fiction to students, they often explain the basic conflicts that are the foundation of story, such as "individual vs. society." The title *The Outsiders* alone announces Hinton's intent to explore this theme within the work as she pits Pony Boy (and the other greasers) in conflict with Socs (who represent "polite" society). Perhaps the reason this theme of "individual vs. society" resonates throughout young adult literature is that it speaks directly to the essence of the adolescent experience. Fiction's "individual versus society" mirrors the question taking places in homes and schools, that of freedom versus responsibility.

One of the major developmental tasks of adolescence is for the teen to develop independence from his or her parents. At home, in school, and in society at large, teens seek freedom, while adults seek to limit that freedom. A great deal of young adult literature centers on this theme of teens asserting their independence, often with unintended consequences. But what if? What if adults limited teen freedom not just with rules, but

by more nefarious means? That "what if" has manifested itself into a subset of young adult novels about brainwashing, manipulation, and other mind control techniques. The majority of these titles are speculative fiction set within a dystopian society.

For many students, manipulation isn't speculative fiction, but a fact of life because of the convergence of technology and events. Technology can be used by society to limit freedom. Events such as Columbine and 9/11 become justifications to limit freedom. Titles about mind control lend themselves to discussion about personal freedom in a society that seeks to limit liberty with just cause. This idea is a daily reality for many high school students as their freedom to learn has been limited by a society obsessed with standardized test scores. No Child Left Behind is the modern Big Brother, thus titles about mind control are not only realistic, but relevant and ripped from the headlines.

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In spring 2011, a cheating scandal was discovered in Atlanta's schools related to test scores (Severson, 2011). In fall 2011, children in St. Paul schools began to receive a free breakfast and lunch in the belief that better nutrition would improve scores (Koumpilova, 2011). In Detroit, failing public schools have been transformed into charter schools with a promise of improving test scores (Abramson,

2011). What if a school district went further? Not a little cheating, but a policy of faking scores. Not

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better nutrition, but secretly drugging students to improve their focus. Not drilling students to learn math, but brainwashing them to be obedient. These are some of the issues I explore in my upcoming novel *Control Group*.

Control Group is the story of five culturally diverse teens whose Newark, New Jersey, public school (North East) is privatized and run as a charter school (New Eden). Friends at the start of the school year, they are divided into differ-

ent “groups” as part of the experiment to improve test scores. And the scores do dramatically improve in the three groups that are subjects of drugging, cheating, and mind control. But when some students don’t get with the program, they meet an unfortunate fate. In researching my novel, I wanted to explore how mind control had been portrayed in fiction, particularly in contemporary realistic young adult literature.

Mind Control in Literature

Mind control emerged as a theme out of Gothic literature (Seed, 2004, p. 8). In the late 19th century, the books *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897) and *Trilby* by George du Maurier (1894) introduced to popular fiction the “evil character” who would use hypnosis as a form of mind control. The character Svengali from *Trilby* has even entered the English language as “a person who manipulates or exerts excessive control over another” (Merriam Webster). Both novels would become films in 1931, helping to popularize the mind control theme.

In the early 20th century, the fictional use of mind control moved from one evil character using it for personal gain to a society or regime for political control, when the novels *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1921) and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932) depicted mind control as a technique used in dysto-

pian societies to exert control over the population. In *Brave New World*, mind control is achieved through drugs and manipulation, while in *We*, a totalitarian state demands and enforces rigid conformity. The ideas of *We* served as the foundation for the ultimate mind control novel *1984* by George Orwell (1948). *1984* produced phrases such as “Big Brother,” “doublethink,” and “Newspeak,” which have entered the language, while “Orwellian” has become a descriptor for any society that uses propaganda or other manipulation for political control.

Political events in the 1950s furthered the theme of brainwashing in literature. *The Manchurian Candidate* by Richard Condon (1959) would popularize the idea of the brainwashed assassin. This concept actually emerged earlier in the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Calgari* (1920), where the evil character hypnotizes another to commit murder. The difference is motive. In *Calgari*, the murder is personal; in *The Manchurian Candidate*, released during the heyday of the Cold War, it is political. By the 1960s, with the explosion of science fiction, the theme of mind control was used frequently, perhaps most notably in the influential novel *Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (1962). The hero of that novel, Alex, is an “out of control” young man until his mind is re-engineered through an aversion therapy called the Ludovico treatment. Written in a time when juvenile delinquency was on the rise, the novel explores the conflict between society and individual freedom.

In the 1960s, as young adult literature began to take shape, the theme of mind control found another genre, though it appeared most often in speculative fiction, books about cults, or, on occasion, in a realistic novel like *The Wave* by Martin Rhue (1981), which is based on actual events. In the novel, Rhue (actually Todd Strasser) explores a classroom experiment about mind control that goes horribly wrong. A few classic titles also explore this theme, such as *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (1974) where students and faculty at Trinity School use intimidation and manipulation to maintain control. More than just a school group or gang, the Vigils border on being a cult. *The Giver* by Lois Lowery (1983) concerns a tightly controlled society where freedom is surrendered for the sake of harmony. *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (2002) focuses on an individual in an Orwellian society, featuring mindless zombie slaves

(Eejits) and a forced labor camp (the Plankton Factory). More recently, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008) concerns an Orwellian police state that controls personal freedom in the name of order and safety. The success of the Hunger Games trilogy has spawned a new wave of speculative fiction about mind control, but the topic has also worked into three recent realistic teen novels: *Candor* by Pam Bachorz, *After* by Francine Prose, and *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow.

Mind Control in Realistic YA Literature: *After*

This question of how much freedom people will surrender for safety is a central idea in *After* by Francine Prose (2003). Written in the aftermath of school shootings, in particular the murders at Columbine High School, Prose imagines one school's response. Days after a shooting at a nearby middle school, the students at Central High are called to an assembly where they are introduced to Dr. Henry Willner, a clinical psychologist consulting with the school. Willner announces another of the book's themes—the needs for conformity—early in the novel, saying everyone must “change their lifestyle to keep our community safe and make certain that it *won't* happen again . . . maybe giving up some of the privileges that we have” (p. 16). Prose reinforces the theme with allusions to two movies about innocent people overrun by mindless creatures: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Night of the Living Dead*.

Very quickly, the school starts to change. New metal detectors are installed, more security guards are hired, a new dress code is enforced, lockers and backpacks are subject to random searches. The protagonist, Tom, plays sports and must submit to random drug tests. The school takes more control by banning books, forbidding rap music, and instituting a no cell phone policy. The control extends home as parents are encouraged to turn their kids into snitches and “report any suspicious or possible criminal behavior on the part of their classmates” (p. 151). As happened in many schools post-Columbine, a culture of “snitching” is encouraged.

When even these measures are not enough, students like Tom's friend Silas are removed from school and sent to Operation Turnaround. Operation Turnaround is more than a brainwashing re-

education camp. Silas has learned that it is a place where “kids check in and they don't check out” (p. 166). Tom goes to the school library and learns how Stalin used re-education camps, genocide, and the fear of those fates for political ends. Willner, Tom realizes, is doing the same things: “[H]e wanted us to know . . . one tiny hint of rebellion and we could find ourselves in an even more terrible place” (p. 204). Like Stalin, Willner rewrites history through “Bus TV” and further extends control of parents: “[M]y friends have told me that their parents have started acting like robots. Whenever they try to talk to their parents . . . they repeat the stuff they've read in the school emails” (p. 243).

Mind Control in Realistic YA Literature: *Candor*

While the mind control techniques used in *After* are used in politics, the ones detailed in *Candor* by Pam Bachorz (2009) emerge from commerce and advertising. In 1957, Vance Packard claimed that two-thirds of advertising agencies were using subliminal messages to “get into their consumers' minds . . . to open their psyches, and sell more products” (Streatfeild, p. 185). Subliminal messages are introduced in *Candor* early on: “[M]y Dad's messages stream into my brain. *Academics are the key to success*” (p. 1).

This is the story of Oscar Banks who lives in Candor, Florida, an *extremely* planned community. Not just a subdivision, Candor is a town where mind-controlling messages fill the ears of every person. Most of the messages are aimed at getting children not to misbehave. Oscar's father is the brains behind Candor, and Oscar counter-programs the messages so that he remains the only non-brainwashed teen in town. He uses his freedom to help others, for a price, to escape. When a new girl arrives in Candor, love not money becomes Oscar's motive, and that changes everything. Like *After*, the ending of *Candor* is very dark and resembles another seminal work about mind control: *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey (1962).

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The motive behind the mind control in the town of Candor is two-fold. For Oscar's father, it is wealth.

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For parents, it is the idea of a perfect family as the messages work quickly: "One day kids are blasting their music . . . doing whatever they're not supposed to do. And then they're dusting. Cooking dinner. . . . Thousands of kids, all changing to fit the same ideal.

. . . Candor fixes everything" (p. 18). Bachorz alludes to mind control touchstones: a character named Winston references *1984*, while the "listening room" resembles both room 101 in *1984* and the behavior modification room from *Clockwork Orange*. The idea in *Candor* and other books on this theme is that society is broken, but mind control works because "the messages were invented to fix us" (p. 84). Like the dystopian society in *The Giver* or the students in *After*, the teens of Candor have unknowingly sacrificed freedom and individuality for harmony and safety.

Mind Control in Realistic YA Literature: *Little Brother*

The idea of surrendering civil liberties in the name of security is also a theme in *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow (2008). Like *After*, Doctorow takes a very real event (a terrorist attack on US soil) and the real response (Department of Homeland Security [DHS] is created and "enemy combatants" are tortured) as his jumping off point. But Doctorow adds a big "what if?" What if the DHS suspected that the terrorist attacks were carried out by US citizens? The response would be a clampdown including a "Gitmo by the Bay." The heavy hand of the state is evident even *before* the attack as Marcus, the main character, comments that living in the high crime Mission district of San Francisco "makes me one of the most surveilled people in the world" (p. 9). Much like Oscar in *Candor*, who subverts his dad's messages, Marcus is a hacker extraordinaire and cracks the security systems employed

by his school, like the ones that trace students on school computers by tracking their every keystroke.

But Marcus is in the wrong place at the wrong time when terrorists blow up the Bay Bridge and he and his friends are hauled into custody. The terrorist attack becomes the lever to crack down even more on privacy. It becomes an Orwellian world with a "destroy the village in order to save it" logic; as an illegally detained Marcus is told, "You want to preserve the Bill of Rights? Help us stop bad people" (p. 55). Marcus learns in this post-Bay Bridge world that the battle is about control. He says about his interrogator, "She wanted me to submit to her. To put her in charge of me. To give up . . . all my privacy" (p. 56). But Marcus fights back using his skills, which "made me feel in control. My technology was working for me, serving me, protecting me" (p. 88).

The bulk of the book focuses on Marcus using technology, such as setting up the Xnet, to fight back against the takeover of his city by the DHS. He doesn't view himself as a terrorist but rather a freedom fighter against his own government. The DHS clampdown occurs so fast it seems almost pre-planned, with "a lot of surveillance gear lying around, waiting to be installed. . . . The attack on the Bay Bridge had been just what they needed" (p. 89). As Marcus learns more, he discovers a vast conspiracy run by Kurt Rooney (an illusion to Karl Rove?), an adviser to the President; Rooney uses the attack for political gain, to reduce dissent, and to limit privacy in the name of freedom.

The politics of privacy are at the center of this book. The book contains afterwords by hackers who encourage readers to hack into security systems in order to protect their freedom. Those afterwords are followed by a bibliography of pro-hacking books, websites dedicated to open source coding, as well as touchstones of counterculture literature. Those three topics fit together with the theme of *Little Brother* (as well as *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*) to support the idea that individuals must rebel against an unjust society to maintain freedom.

Critical Reaction

While the reaction to *Little Brother* was across the board praise, this was not true with *After* and *Candor*, perhaps in part because of the integration of speculative fiction/dystopian setting into the real world. The

review of *After* in *Booklist* noted that “Prose wants to make a political statement about the gradual process by which we lose personal freedom, but she runs into trouble. Caught somewhere between allegory, dystopian fantasy, and YA problem novel, her book never finds a home for itself . . . many of the best fantasy elements—brainwashing the kids’ parents with e-mail—seem patently ridiculous in a realistic context” (Ott, 2003). The review in *Publishers Weekly*, however, argues the exact opposite, “Prose manages, for the most part, to connect shocking events to a reality familiar to most teens. Her introduction of a science-fiction thread seems chillingly plausible. . . . This drama raises all-too-relevant questions about the fine line between safety as a means of protection versus encroachment on individual rights and free will” (*After*, 2003).

Similarly, the *Booklist* review of *Candor* noted that “enforced conformity is obviously a potent metaphor for teenagers and a terrific seed for a dystopian novel, but readers may have to occasionally make the leap from suspending disbelief to abandoning all logic” (Chipman, 2009). The *School Library Journal* review calls *Candor* a “chilling dystopian novel set in the present,” but adds “the rationale for the creation of *Candor* also seems a bit far-fetched” (Rawlins, 2009). The *Publishers Weekly* review notes that *Candor* is a “dystopian novel that takes place in the present, giving the genre a fresh twist. . . . Some of the premise is difficult to swallow, such as that within days, residents of *Candor* become so addicted to the Messages that even a few hours without them could mean death” (*Candor*, 2009). The reviewers of both *Candor* and *After* struggle with dystopian ideas in a realistic setting. Yet perhaps the worlds in *After* and *Candor* are just dystopian for teens but utopian for adult society where teens follow the rules, study for the test, and obey their parents.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the first YA novel to explore mind control in a realistic setting was 1981’s *The Wave* by Todd Strasser (writing as Martin Rhue). *The Wave* concerns a history lesson/experiment that goes wrong when students at a school begin to parrot the behaviors of Nazi Germany. At the end of the book, the teacher who started the experiment looks at his obedient

students and wonders after stopping the experiment just “how long it would be before he’d begin seeing sloppy homework again. . . . Is this the price we pay for freedom?” (Rhue, p. 135). The ordered, safe, and secure worlds described in *Candor*, *After* and *Little Brother* are exactly what many adults want for their teens, but at what cost?

This central question runs through most dystopian fiction with the theme of mind control as well. In return for the perfect state or school or family, how much liberty will people surrender? As people usually do not willingly surrender their liberty, it is often taken from them (for their own good), without their consent, through mind control. Such issues are relevant for students and ripe for discussion. Titles like these are well suited for reading across the curriculum in conjunction with Social Studies classes.

Many of these novels were written in response to societal concerns. How do we reduce juvenile delinquency? Use the Ludovico treatment? How do we make schools safe? Ship people to Operation Turn-around? How do we prevent another terrorist attack? Increase the power of the Department of Homeland Security and reduce the Bill of Rights? How do we make families perfect? Bomb them with subliminal messages until they suffer for aural addiction? At the core, all mind control novels are political novels, meaning they focus on power within a society: who has it, who doesn’t, and how is power maintained? The way to control a people, history has shown, is to control their minds. The fact that mind control fiction emerges when society is “out of control” due to terrorist attacks or school shootings is no coincidence. *After* and *Little Brother* are reactions to the perceived overreactions within society to those threats.

T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men” (Eliot, 1925) ends with “This is the way the world ends / not with a bang but a whimper.” Most dystopian fiction takes place after some world-altering event, but if Eliot is right, then the end will come quietly. What is horrifying about *After*, *Candor*, and *Little Brother* is they

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show the subtle progression from a free society to a controlled one. They show adults with good intentions who manipulate teens for the good of society. Perhaps personal freedom won't be taken away with a bang, but the whisper of a subliminal message, a random drug test, a DHS spy camera, or with students bombarded with messages about succeeding on standardized tests. If freedom for young adults continues to diminish, no doubt more novels like *After*, *Candor*, and *Little Brother* will emerge.

In some ways, all three novels harken back to one of the great books from the YA Canon, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. Like Jerry in that novel, Marcus, Tom, and Oscar all dare to disturb the universe, and the universe bites back, hard. The dark endings to *Candor* and *After* echo the harshness of *The Chocolate War*'s finale. Thus, the real core of these three novels is not so much mind control, but teens taking brave, sometimes futile, stands against schools, communities, and societies that would attempt to control them. That core theme is, as noted, the core theme of the adolescent experience: the desire for independence. In response to institutions determined to control their minds, these characters know the only response is two words: stay free.

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