

## Writing Bridges:

How Writers Scaffold Mature Content in YA Literature

**Y**oung adult literature frequently challenges its young readers. Its ability to connect compelling plot and characters with experimental and literary technique offers readers a unique reading experience that provokes and engages them. Chris Crowe's 2002 survey "YA Boundary Breakers and Makers" is distinguished for reviewing a selection of books that impacted the category of young adult literature. Among the texts reviewed was S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, a novel recognized for capturing teenage voice and experience; the author herself was only 16 years old at the time of publication. Other titles included Robin McKinley's *Beauty*, which revisited the classic fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast," and Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, an American novel narrated in poetic verse that overturned the expectation that young adult novels need to be told in prose style (Crowe pp. 116–117). Crowe's article illustrated how young adult literature today provides an exciting, vibrant, and innovative environment in which writing can evolve and connect with readers.

Three recent novels—Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* (2008), Libba Bray's *Going Bovine* (2009), and Andrew Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010)—characterize this distinctive environment. Lanagan's medieval portrayal of a damaged young woman who retreats into a fantasy world, Bray's protagonist Cameron, a teen suffering from Mad Cow Disease who sets off on a hallucinogenic adventure, and Smith's transportation of his protagonist to an ultra-violent fantasy world when he puts on a pair of glasses all contribute to broadening the category of young adult literature.

Recently, the Michael L. Printz Award (introduced in 2000) has recognized young adult literature by innovative and exceptional writers, and the books that appear on this list each year bear a striking similarity to those that Crowe recognized as important books for teens. Bray's novel was a 2010 Printz Winner while Lanagan's was a 2009 Honor Book. Michael Cart (2010) notes that the award was created to recognize the "newly literary, sometimes experimental, and increasingly diverse character of young adult literature" (p. 28). The key to describing many Printz Honor and award-winning books is "experimental," and they can be characterized by a blending of forms, types of stories, re-visitations of familiar stories, and a focus on unique and challenging language.

However, an examination of the Printz Award winners and books most recently reviewed and discussed reveals that there is crossover between these titles and the ones often challenged and banned from school libraries. A highly publicized example of this conversation is Meghan Cox Gurdon's 2011 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Darkness too visible: Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence, and depravity. Why is this considered a good idea?" This article discussed the presence of darker material in young adult literature, a visibility that she found unnerving and dangerous for teenage readers. Yet many of the books she refers to are the most popular among teens, librarians, and teachers. These include novels such as Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (which won the National Book Award in 2007), Suzanne

Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and Lauren Myracle's *Shine*. Her article drew discussion and disagreement from writers of young adult literature, young adult readers, and others who love the literature.

The novels by Lanagan, Bray, and Smith have been widely reviewed and discussed in the last few years; specifically, they have been criticized for mature content and praised for exceptional writing. The mature content in each of these novels is flagged and documented by reviewers that otherwise praise style, language, and story. For example, Ian Chipman's 2008 review of *Tender Morsels* (Lanagan, 2008) notes, "Lanagan touches on nightmarish adult themes, including multiple

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rape scenarios and borderline human-animal sexual interactions, which [should be reserved] for the most mature readers" (p. 69). A *Publisher's Weekly* review makes this focus on mature themes explicit when the reviewer writes, "With suggestions of bestiality and sodomy, the novel demands maturity—but the challenging text will attract only an ambitious audience anyway" (p. 52).

The maturity critics identify as necessary to read *Going Bovine* (Bray, 2009) is perhaps of a different sort; rather than the darker themes present in Lanagan's novel, Bray's calls for the reader to recognize advanced ideologies, themes, and theories. *Publisher's Weekly* reviews the novel as "an absurdist comedy in which Cameron, Gonzo (a neurotic dwarf), and Balder (a Norse god cursed to appear as a yard gnome) go on a quixotic road trip during which they learn about string theory, wormholes, and true love. . . . [Bray] trains her satirical eye on modern education, American materialism, and religious cults" (p. 46).

Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010) takes the maturity called for by Lanagan and Bray a step further. Indeed, Smith's novel was the most attacked in Cox Gurdon's *Wall Street Journal* article, where she refers to it as inappropriate and dark. Reviewers signpost

content, but at times they neglect style, format, and other aspects of the writer's craft that these authors use to engage an audience.

In this article, I argue that the maturity of content is consistent with the complexity of language, style, and form. These new novels present content that may challenge readers, but that content is paired with a sophisticated form that mirrors many adult literary and canonical novels. In this way, these three writers scaffold content with literary technique. Scaffolding, a term often used in educational theory, "attempts to frame, support, and guide" readers through difficult or mature material (Kemp Benson, 2011, p. 126). Readers are therefore able to comprehend advanced literary technique and mature content as writers build bridges for learning within their novels.

In addition, writers rely on a form that emphasizes a back-and-forth structure between the real and a fantastical world. Modeling scaffolding throughout their novels, Lanagan, Bray, and Smith encourage readers to then bridge fantasy with reality. While this imperative is recognized positively by important institutions such as YALSA, *The School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and award committees, it has attracted the attention of critics who disregard the stylistic contributions of such literature and focus instead on what is deemed "inappropriate content." The young adult reader is the ideal consumer of content, style, and form, all of which will be considered in this article.

### ***Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan**

Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* introduces Liga Longfield, a young protagonist who is 13 years old at the beginning of this medieval-novel set. The reader finds her trapped in a smoky (but not burning) house, the smell of which makes "her insides dangerous, liquid, hot with surprise and readying to spasm again" (p. 6). Her innocence and naiveté prevent her from understanding that the smoke causes her to have a miscarriage, and it is not until her second pregnancy, when she is 14, that she realizes that the smoke and teas her father brings home from town are designed to cause her to lose the babies she carries.

The mature themes of *Tender Morsels* are introduced not because of the miscarriages Liga suffers, but because the babies that Liga carries are her father's. When he dies traveling home on the road from town, Liga finds herself alone and unprotected, 15 years old

with a newborn. It is here that she suffers a gang rape from five town boys, a horrific incident that causes her to attempt to kill herself. A small piece of magic envelops her and her daughters, Branza and the still-unborn Urdda (the result of the gang rape), and she is whisked away to her own personal heaven, where she stays for almost 25 years. This place becomes her new home, and, as critic Mavis Reimer (2008) notes, “If homes are places from which people can be kept out, they can also keep people in their places” (p. xiv). Liga is unable to remember or imagine another, less ideal world. Yet, over the time she spends there, tiny holes appear in the wall between her heaven and the real world, where experience, reality, and pain seep through. Liga and her daughters are forced to confront the realities of life, both positive and negative, bringing back the full extent of what happened to Liga.

Lanagan’s impressive and complex use of language supports this mature plot with literary scaffolding. For example, *Tender Morsels* uses slang and language that has to be decoded throughout the novel, calling for strong reader engagement. The prologue is disconnected from protagonist Liga, yet it introduces two characters, Collaby Dought and Muddy Annie, who become important later in the plot. The prologue immediately makes the real world seem unfamiliar to the reader as Lanagan’s Collaby Dought narrates, “Well, we lay there in the remains of the hay cave, that we had collapsed around us with our energetics. We looked both of us like an unholy marriage of hedgehogs and goldilockses. I laughed and laughed with the relief of it, and she laughed at me and my laughter” (p. 1). The language and situation immediately craft the medieval setting, and show word play, slang, and dialect that continue throughout the novel.

Another characteristic of the language is that it distracts from the action of the novel. For example, Lanagan employs instances of lyrical language during Liga’s miscarriage, such as, “She pressed her nose and mouth into the crook of her elbow, but she had already gulped smoke. It sank through to her deepest insides, and there it clasped its thin black hands, all knuckles and nerves, and wrung them, and wrung them” (p. 6). The reader is aware that the smoke aborts her baby, but the language distracts from the event through detail and lyricism. Lanagan’s novel also creates the opportunity to search for parts of speech, such as kennings—compound expressions

that describe Liga’s movement as “top-heavy, slick-thighed, numb-footed, and hollow” (p. 8), Branza and Urdda as “hoar-daughters” (p. 111), and Urdda as a “waster-space” (p. 167).

Language is also a marker of character. Liga has the ability to communicate personality, selfhood, and individuality through the language she uses in dialogue. An important moment of revelation is when the usually goodhearted Liga borrows the language of her father to tell him, “That’s what has killed me, that woman’s poison. Strong bones, my arse” (p. 13). To this, her father “laughed that she had borrowed his way of talking” (p. 13). Characters change the way they use dialogue to reveal something important about themselves. For example, as they grow up in the bubble of Liga’s heaven, young Branza and Urdda have never heard speech patterns different from their mother’s. When Collaby Dought breaks in from the real world, they are taken aback by the way he speaks:

Yes indeed, liller smoocha-pooch, I am foul and cruel. Let your friend take you back to Niceland, or Sweetland, or Lovey-dove Land, where you belong. Or sisters, is it, did you say? Don’t look like it. Poked of different dads, I’d say. Slut-mothered, and no doubt of such matter themselves, eh? . . . You don’t know what I’m saying, do you, so iggenrent you are? I could flap out my old man, no doubt, and you’d think it was a turnip or some such. (pp. 166-167)

The time spent decoding slang and dialect leads a reader to the heart of the subject matter. But for Branza and Urdda, the real meaning is concealed, even though they clearly hear Collaby speak.

Lanagan’s style emerges through her desire to rewrite and reinterpret fairy tales, a facet of YA literature that Crowe (2002) discussed in his article using Robin McKinley’s *Beauty*. In contemporary literature, rewritten fairy tales and mythology are frequently employed to recast old stories in new contexts. Writers of both adult and young adult literature engage with archetypes that demonstrate the ability of old stories to reverberate within new. Recent collections of contemporary fairy tales, such as Kate Bernheimer’s

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*My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010) and Ludmilla Petrusherskaya's *There Once Lived an Old Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby* (2009) are indicative of the seditious edge a contemporary hand can lend to revisitations, especially when considered alongside the work of Margo Lanagan.

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Indeed Susan L. Roberson explains, "Spatial movement . . . invites a remapping of the various spaces, lines, borders, definitions, and names that define or attempt to define our lives and our stories" (p. 10). Similarly, writers interact with stories sometimes relegated to the category of children's or young adult literature by simultaneously removing them from this

category and allowing them to retain inexorable links to childhood. Donald Haase agrees, "[B]oth adults and children desire to tap into the liberating potential of the tale, to recapture home as a place free from repressive constraints and governed by the utopian imagination" (2000, 361).

*Tender Morsels* reworks "Snow White and Rose Red," a Grimm's fairy tale that tells the story of two sisters who befriend a bear and defeat a dwarf. The bear and dwarf are central to the novel itself, and it is perhaps the relationship between these two sisters that best mirrors the fairy tale, one with blonde hair (Branza) and the other dark (Urdda). The fairy tale is a unique mode for telling this story. The strange disconnect between the harsh and mature stories of the Brothers Grimm and the reenvisioned Disney versions shows Lanagan to favor the former. She uses traditional fairy tale tropes and bends them toward a mature theme.

For example, Lanagan introduces two magical bears in Liga's heaven; however, these bears are men participating in a fertility festival in the real world. When they cross over still dressed in their bear furs, they become the animals they pretend to be. Although the first bear visitor spends time living in the cottage with Liga, Branza, and Urdda and conducts himself with a certain respectfulness, the second bear, a less moral man, forgets his man-self and Liga must warn

her daughter, "You should not let him nuzzle you so" (p. 182).

Another example involves the plants that grow in Liga's heaven, which turn into gold coins when the character Collaby Dought brings them home. Money and gold, common in fairy tales, are not welcome in this one, because they represent currency, economy, and patriarchy, which Liga tries to leave behind. In this way, the fairy tale supports the mature content, using common tropes while subverting them. It remains a strong and recognizable foundation, and Lanagan uses this familiarity to show teenagers how to reinterpret and reexamine what they know to develop a new understanding of its meaning. By using the familiar to begin in one place, Lanagan offers another kind of story that teenage readers must adapt to, learning that no text is stable, but rather it changes and evolves.

### ***Going Bovine* by Libba Bray**

Contrasting the medieval setting of *Tender Morsels*, Libba Bray's *Going Bovine* is an almost up-to-the-present contemporary novel, using fictionalized representations of current trends in popular culture to flesh out the story. Main character Cameron Smith is an ordinary 16-year-old who is apathetic about school and life in general. His twin sister Jenna goes to school with him, and Cameron sums up their social disparity by saying, "Jenna's seen me but she's pretending she hasn't. When you're pre-majoring in perfection, having a brother who's a social paramecium is a real drawback" (p. 15).

Cameron doesn't express too much ambition outside of smoking pot at school and checking out his sister's friend, Staci Johnson. When he starts hallucinating fire giants (something he thinks is a side effect of bad pot) and getting uncontrollable muscle twitches, he is diagnosed with Mad Cow Disease, a terminal illness that he is told will quickly turn his brain into a sponge. When he goes into the hospital, he meets/hallucinates an angel named Dulcie who tells him he must save the world, a task that will also give him a cure for his disease. This leads him on a cross-country adventure from Texas to Florida—Disney World is the destination—punctuated with bus rides and party houses and jazz clubs and restaurants with incorrectly spelled names (the "Kountry Kitchen"). All the while,

the reader watches Cameron travel between a fantasy world and his small hospital room. The reality of his situation is blurred, and the question of whether his adventure is a hallucination makes this a rollicking read.

Although this book's mature content is not at first apparent, the intertextuality and the referencing across important canonical literature, popular culture, politics, and society encourage teenage readers to search out and make connections across several texts. Literary theorist Michael Riffaterre (1990) explains that "An intertext is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance" (p. 56). In *Going Bovine*, these include Norse mythology, the canonical *Don Quixote*, the Bible, the pop culture of Disney World, and positivity and self-esteem movements, all of which demand a certain amount of prior understanding in order to make meaning of passing references. It is the particular use of intertextual style that makes it possible to make connections among Bray's references, detouring reader attention from the overarching fact of Cameron's eventual decline and death from his disease.

This technique is visible in many contemporary novels, such as S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967/2012). As novelist Dale Peck notes:

[T]his and other echoes strike me as crucial to the success of Hinton's novel. They soften the challenging nature of the book's subject matter by wrapping it in references, tropes, and language familiar to its adolescent readers. . . . Ponyboy's older brother, Sodapop, is characterized as "16-going-on-17." A quotation from *The Sound of Music* would seem out of place in a novel rife with "blades" and "heaters" and teenage pregnancy, but it's hard to deny after Ponyboy's immediate assertion that "nobody in our gang digs movies and books the way I do." (n.p.)

In the same way, *Going Bovine* uses colloquial language that is punctuated by the vocabulary of pop culture, mythology, and America. Examples include Parker Day, the host of Bray's fictional YA! TV, who finds his parallel in Carson Daly and MTV; SPEW, or the State Prescribed Educational Worthiness test ("Please turn in your SPEW test prep books to Chapter Five: Why Thinking Can Cost You on Test Day" [p. 9]); *Star Fighter*, a cult sci-fi franchise; Buddha Burger, a play on the ethical eating movements in America; and Ragnarok, the end of the world in Norse mythology. All are presented briefly but in detail, and each

contains implication and meaning.

Alongside Cameron's language, Bray employs the language of pop culture and intertextuality. She expects readers to be fluent in reading across sociological texts, and expects that if they are not, they will seek out the references and parallelisms that she employs. She uses an MTV-like station with a hip DJ named Parker Day to encourage a critique of pop culture, mimicking speech in order to make these comparisons. Iphigenia, another DJ at the Party House in Florida, says to Cameron:

"Cool! Hey, you wanna see the rest of the Party House? We've got a pool that shoots Rad XL Soda—'The Soda for Our Generation'—out of a fountain in the back. It is so nuclear." She sighs. "I've been trying to get 'nuclear' to catch on for ages—like, at least three weeks—but so far, all the feedback forms say it's just not time for it yet. Sometimes I'm so far ahead of the curve that no one gets me." (p. 377)

The language and mannerisms create an intertext of their own, and encourage teens to make connections through mimicry.

Yet, Bray takes this a step farther. Her style employs intertextuality by structuring the novel on two large texts: the canonical novel *Don Quixote* and Norse mythology. The references and allusions to these become another form of language. Cameron's hallucinations and fantasy world are based on the things in his everyday life that are set up at the beginning of the novel. For example, in Spanish class he reads *Don Quixote*, and he notes, "The only thing I know about Don Quixote is that he and his sidekick go off and have imaginary adventures, battling windmills disguised as giants and that sort of thing" (p. 32). Cameron's adventure takes on aspects of Quixote's. Accompanied by Gonzo, he becomes engulfed in an imaginary world where he battles the physical manifestations of his disease. In addition, Cameron notes that his mother used to read him stories from books of Norse mythology (Cameron notes that she could be an English professor, but she didn't finish

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her dissertation [p. 33]). Then, halfway through the novel, Cameron meets Balder, a Norse god in lawn-gnome form. Cameron remembers some of the Norse mythology, while Balder fills in the extra details.

This intertext is canonical and veers away from the pop culture that Bray employs throughout the rest of the novel. However, she equates canonical intertext

with the intertext of pop culture, showing teens that they can read texts across borders and boundaries, and make comparisons for themselves in whatever form they come in. In this way, she dissolves borders between texts and genres in her novel, and does it by using a sophisticated and important form of literary theory. Bray's style involves sprinkling references throughout her

novel, making them so plentiful and ubiquitous that teen readers have to find the interpretative agency to attach to many concepts, questions, and ideas.

Through all of this is Cameron's own impending death from Mad Cow Disease. Bray uses humor, language, and religious stereotypes to help Cameron think about and try to make sense of death, something he knows he will soon be facing. Alongside Cameron, this intertext is aimed at mature and engaged teenage readers. Bray uses language to support this intertextuality, and Cameron's character becomes the bridge that connects language, pop culture, and the canon.

### ***The Marbury Lens* by Andrew Smith**

Although *The Marbury Lens* is set in the present, the fantasy world it conjures is much different than the ones offered by either *Tender Morsels* or *Going Bovine*. Jack Whitmore is a 16-year-old boy living with his grandparents in California. His parents—a teen mom and a dad he doesn't know—are absent, and he counts his best friend Conner as the closest family he has. The story begins at the onset of summer vacation, when Jack and Conner are about to embark on a trip to England where they will visit a private all-boys school that they may attend in the future. Before they

leave, Conner throws a party during which Jack wanders away; he is drugged and abducted by a doctor named Freddie Horvath. Jack eventually escapes the doctor, but after this event, he constantly questions his sanity and wonders if the drugs Freddie Horvath gave him have permanently affected his grasp on reality and fantasy.

When he arrives in England, he is given a pair of glasses called the Marbury Lens that allows him to travel to a fantasy world ravaged by ongoing war. However, Jack's abduction makes it difficult for the reader to determine whether Jack is physically going to a fantasy world called Marbury or whether Marbury is a figment of his imagination. There are refrains that repeat throughout the novel, one of which is of Jack reciting, "*Freddie Horvath did something to my brain and I need to get help*" (p. 78). This demonstrates his uncertainty over whether the man who kidnapped him created the violent world of Marbury in his mind or altered his brain in a way that confuses his understanding of reality.

Yet, the world of Marbury is physically real to Jack. There, Jack travels with two boys, Ben and Griffin, as they run away from horrible creatures that attempt to kill them. The more time he spends in Marbury, the harder it is to return to his own world; he loses large chunks of time in the real world, and finds that he can spend days in Marbury when only a few minutes will pass in England. Jack's breakdown is palpable, and the violence of Marbury becomes more and more real as the novel progresses.

Unlike the sometimes-concealed violence in *Tender Morsels*, hidden by complex dialect and slang, the violence of Marbury is carefully detailed and described. The language used is graphic and unrelenting, and Jack's calm experience of it is unnerving at times: "Most of the bodies hung upside down, those with heads arched their necks backward, chins petulantly angled like hell-trained magnets at the ground. Men and children, adorned, every one of them, with stained stakes or arrow shafts" (p. 148). Young Ben and Griffin swear constantly, making exclamations that seem too old for their age, yet it is appropriate because of what they have been through. This is the language of violence, war, and conflict, and Smith is careful to use his descriptions to his advantage. He uses language to mark the differences between two worlds, while using common refrains—"Freddie

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Horvath did something” (p. 267) and “You haven’t gotten away from anything” (p. 176)—to work as a lyrical binding together of Marbury and the real world. This deliberate attempt to characterize both worlds by using different narrative language in each encourages the reader to determine which place is more unreal.

The style similarly reflects this overt directness. Jack is a first-person narrator whose quick thoughts and back-and-forth speech between present, past, first person, or third person emulate and reflect the style of Smith’s writing. *The Marbury Lens* uses a short, quick style in both worlds. The story places the reader entirely in Jack’s head, which makes his switch to talking about himself in third person (“Jack doesn’t cry, though. Never has.” [p. 25]) underscore how the war in Marbury is both personal and distant. Style and language work together in a direct way, particularly in Marbury, to show that Jack’s abduction in the real world seems more violent than the overwhelming violence of a fantasy world. The subdued scene of Jack’s abduction occurs primarily as his mind processes the event, yet his thoughts and reflections when lying as a prisoner in the small room on the top floor of Freddie Horvath’s house come across as more horrifying than the decapitations, death, and destruction of Marbury.

Smith seems to want his readers to consider whether reality or Marbury is harsher, particularly since the more Marbury intrudes, the more the real world softens. Yet it is the horrors of the real world that seem to have created the necessity for a fantasy world. The directness is unflinching, yet it does raise the question of the difference between fantasy violence and real-life violence, and which moments are more truly horrifying.

The language of conflict and war is direct and strong, which makes the small moments that depict the experience of getting through young adulthood stand out clearly throughout the novel. Jack’s own ambivalence about his place in the world and his budding relationship with a young English girl named Nickie are very much in the vein of contemporary realistic fiction. It isn’t until late in the novel that Jack says:

I hated being sixteen. It was worse than anything. For all the crap I’d ever read in “teen issue books” about the clumsy awkwardness of my age, how a guy’s voice changes, how goofy we act, and how we are enslaved by embarrassing and involuntary bodily functions like wet dreams and unman-

ageable boners at the least convenient times, being sixteen was never comfortable, cool, or even remotely humorous for me. (p. 211)

Yet this normality only heightens Jack’s breakdown by the end of the novel, where fantasy and reality begin to mix together without sense. Marbury and the real world become mixed up, emphasized by a section that crosses the present with the past, the real with the fantastical, and Jack’s several burgeoning identities.

*Quit it, Jack.*

I begged myself, Seth, whoever. “No!”

I hammered my fists down into my thighs. I stripped naked, shaking, stood in the tub, turned the shower on full cold.

*Cold, like Ma giving me a bath in the well water.*

*Quit it, Seth.*

Roll. Tap. Tap. Tap.

*Come on, Jack. It’s only going to be for a second.*

*Come on.*

“No! Please!”

It’s too easy. (p. 216)

The intertwining narratives of Jack in Marbury, Jack’s abduction, and a third story about a young, murdered boy named Seth confuse Jack’s own sense of reality.

*The Marbury Lens* is one of the outstanding titles that have been discussed for their maturity, yet Smith contrasts the theme of war with language in order to match structure to content. Although youth are regularly exposed to violence in news and media, depicting it so visibly allows Smith to show how one young man makes sense of it.

## Form and Implications

While these authors employ language and style differently, their novels typically have a similar form: a back-and-forth structure between a real and fantastical world. They share the intricate creation of secondary worlds—Liga’s heaven, the hallucinated fantasy world that Cameron navigates, and Marbury. The maturity of content in these three novels is tempered

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by the fact that each novel is not completely realistic. Although real situations lead each of these three characters into a fantasy—Liga’s rape and traumatizing childhood, Cameron’s terminal illness, and Jack’s abduction—the fantasy seems to make it more realistic . . . and perhaps better understood. However, the way that each character deals with these difficult issues is to retreat into a fantasy world, although none are entirely convinced that it is a fantasy. An educational research study suggests,

Children’s ability to distinguish reality from fantasy in media presentations is a complex process involving the development of a number of analytic skills. Such evaluations require knowledge about the nature of the medium as well as knowledge of the real world phenomena being portrayed. Given the amount of time which children spend with television and books, two prominent sources of fiction, it would seem that such encounters must contribute to the development of these skills and may in fact constitute the primary context in which these skills develop. Moreover, both media present varying levels of reality and fantasy and, by so doing, challenge the child to formulate criteria which enable a determination of what is real and what is not. (O’Reilly Landry, Kelly, & Gardner, 2011, p. 40)

These young adult characters cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality themselves, which makes teen readers question the reality or fantasy of certain

situations. The effectiveness of moving between fantasy and reality creates an in-between space that helps to scaffold mature content with literary complexity. Scaffolding is used throughout these three novels to bridge what is difficult with the language needed to understand it; furthermore, readers are

supported as they negotiate reality and fantasy in relation to one another.

Readers develop the interpretative skill to experience the space “in-between.” Each novel contains both a fantasy and a realistic world, and the characters navigate between the two places, adapting to the situation that arises in each world. Bray in particular challenges the reader to question whether or not the real world presents a true reality or if instead the fantasy world creates a better version of real experience.

For example, the separation between Cameron’s “real” world and the hallucination from his sickness blurs the borders between truth and fiction. At points in the novel, the two worlds read almost as one, as Cameron encounters “The Wizard of Reckoning” in his fantasy, while also slipping out of fantasy into the reality of his nurse, Glory, speaking to him at the hospital:

The Wizard of Reckoning points his finger at me again, and my body screams in anguish, as if I’m on fire. It brings me to my knees, shutting my eyes against the swearing pain.

“Just relax, baby. You be okay.” It’s Glory’s soothing voice. I open my eyes, and she’s shooting something into my IV line.

“Try to sleep.”

“Cameron!” Gonzo’s cowering behind the high hat, using the sticks like a cross in a vampire movie. (pp. 162–163)

As a *Horn Book Review* noted, “Readers will have a great time trying to sort everything out and answer the question at the heart of it all: even if Cameron’s experiences are all a dream, are they any less real?” (p. 554).

Ian Chipman’s *Booklist* review identifies the real and the fantastic worlds in *The Marbury Lens* by suggesting that “although the many gut-quivering story elements are not clearly defined, they always speak to each other, and Smith wisely leaves much up to the reader. People will talk about this book and try to figure it out and maybe try to shake it off. But they won’t be able to” (p. 52). Jack even compares the interconnectedness of worlds, real and false, to “one of those Russian dolls that you open up, and open up again. And each layer becomes something else” (Smith, p. 3). Fantasy helps these characters cope with difficult and disturbing contexts by stepping outside of the real world and experiencing how problems play out in a new world. As Jack Zipes has noted, “It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more” (p. 78). The fact that the connection between these worlds is both strong and tenuous means teen readers have to navigate between real and imagined experience.

The reconciliation of reality and fantasy differs in each of these three novels. Liga realizes that keeping herself out of the real world is no experience at all, yet the only way she could cope at the time was through retreating into a fantasy. Her “heaven,” however, was shown to be bland and lifeless without the other

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side of experience. As Miss Dance explains to Branza, Liga's daughter, upon her return to the real world:

Now you are in the true world, and a great deal more is required of you. Here you must befriend real wolves, and lure real birds down from the sky. Here you must endure real people around you, and we are not uniformly kind; we are damaged and impulsive, each in our own way. It is harder. It is not safe. But it is what you were born to. (pp. 356–357)

Likewise, Cameron's bleak reality necessitates the fantasy world; however, the indistinct border between the two worlds challenges teen readers to understand how the problems of one world may affect another. The novel ends with Cameron running out of time in both the fantasy world and the real one, yet this allows him to enter into a third, new space. Similarly, the end of *The Marbury Lens* seems to conflate the real world with the fantasy one, and insinuate that they are the same place. Back at home at the end of the story in what Jack sees as "the real world," he encounters characters he only knew in Marbury, including Ben and Griffin. This makes teen readers reexamine the horrific world of Marbury through the lens of reality.

Although these novels employ important literary devices paired with mature content, there is more to their popularity. Teen readers often require a startling hook into the novel, which, in this case, comes in the form of strong, empathetic, and well-written characters. Character is overwhelmingly important to making the mature content and literary devices work. Liga, Cameron, and Jack form an additional bridge between these two, scaffolding elements of mature content and literary complexity. The sympathy that the authors create for these characters at the beginning of the novels makes it possible for readers to view difficult content empathetically. Though the mature themes might involve situations difficult for teen readers to imagine, recognition of why and how a teenage character becomes implicated in a negative situation is important to reader agency and development.

As readers, we may recognize mature themes that are difficult and foreign, those that we would rather skip over in favor of escapist literature, but finding characters who are sympathetic and believable makes these themes engaging and worth the effort to read further. These characters also make it possible for authors to introduce a literary sense of language, form and style, because it is their unique voices and

situations that call for the experimental and elevated aspects of writing. Through the voice of a protagonist whose age matches that of many teenage readers, writers introduce a variety of literary techniques. Rather than avoiding difficult material, the literary scaffolding and important aspects of character will not only meet young adult readers' goals for reading good, engaging, and challenging literature, but will also increase their propensity and ability for transitioning into more adult literature.

Although some critics believe that this new trend in young adult literature toward experimental and mature content is a danger to younger readers, I believe it encourages them to read more actively and at a more demanding level. In a recent interview with Jian Ghomeshi on *CBC* radio, author Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) was asked about his new book, *13 Words* (2010), a picturebook for children that contains the word "despondent":

**Jian Ghomeshi:** "Do you think we underestimate children's capacity to understand multisyllabic words?"

**Daniel Handler:** "Oh, definitely . . . I'm proud to introduce the word *despondent* to very very young children. . . . it makes me happy that perhaps it would replace the word *sad* or *unhappy* . . . in a young child's vocabulary."

Handler used the picturebook form as scaffolding for beginning readers to understand and encounter complex words, while also learning how to read. Similarly, the novels I have discussed here use mature language, style, and form as scaffolding for mature content. The confusion created between reality and fantasy is purposeful and important, and allows readers to experience the in-between space that these writers actively fill in with a scaffolding structure of mature content and literary devices.

Teen readers can be given credit to read what is deemed "darker" or more mature material because writers provide the necessary tools for them to understand this content while also acquiring the skills for reading more complex literature. Readers who want to be challenged can be, since the literary forms that are necessary in higher levels of reading comprehension prepare teen readers for more difficult literature. Writ-

ers are celebrated for this experimental new literature, and it is only fair that their readers be given due credit and respect, allowing them to explore challenging books for their age group.

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