

Complicating Killing in Young Adult Fiction

“Often the products of our popular culture appear to take violence casually. . . . Rather than try to shield children from the world they live in, we ought to be trying to give them the tools to read this world carefully and critically The important thing is to open a dialogue.”

—McGillis, 1997, p. 130

Among the characterizations and experiences blooming in young adult (YA) literature, one noteworthy branch is a small but strong collection of books that feature protagonists who kill. These titles complicate the concept of killing by exploring relatable protagonists placed in a position to kill another character. The novels incorporate techniques that highlight the complexity of this situation: the choices, consequences, and impact upon the protagonist’s identity go beyond the time-honored motif of dealing with the guilt of an accidental killing in contemporary realistic fiction or the self-defense killings common in traditional fantasy.

Conventionally, unintentional killing in YA literature has served as a cautionary tale for young adults to be careful or has served as preparation for healing from such a situation. *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1999) and *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1994) are classic examples of protagonists who dealt with the guilt of killing someone after driving under the influence of alcohol. An alternative is the killings in speculative fiction—in the last book of the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 2008), Harry’s killing of Voldemort is a metaphoric conquering of evil, and the violence is reasonable given the rules of Rowling’s imaginary world.

More recent novels accompany these more traditional stories of killing, instigating discussion among parents and educators about their depictions of violence for young adult readers. Some parents and

educators’ concerns appear to follow the assumption that suggestible young adults will “respond to depictions of violence by becoming violent themselves” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 87). It is unlikely that any of the authors of this collection of YA novels intends for readers to copy the violent behavior of these protagonists. On the contrary, several of the authors discussed in this article mention their hopes to trouble depictions of violence or to deter violence with their writings. Neri (2010), Sedgwick (2010), and Strasser (2002) each include an author’s note that expresses anti-violent sentiments; Strasser even dedicates *Give a Boy a Gun* “to ending youth violence” (p. 3).

Even if a text has the power to incite violence, it should be noted that the premise of responding to violence in literature by becoming violent suggests a passive reader, one who is unable to read against the actions presented in the book. Instead, Eco, a reader response theorist, suggests that readers have three options: to “assume the ideology of the text and subsume it into their own reading,” to “miss or ignore the ideology of the text and import their own,” or to “question the text in order to reveal the underlying ideology” (as cited in Sarland, 1999, p. 49). We posit that the texts we examine here encourage the reader to choose the third option and question the text through specific literary techniques that complicate the act of killing.

Recent young adult novels that include protago-

nists who consider the compulsion or experience the consequences of killing create an accessible space for exploring and interrogating the nature of killing. Traditionally, such violent plot points might be glossed over or accepted as commonplace within the book's genre. In these pioneering YA novels, however, the characterizations of the protagonists and the choices and consequences they face are typically well described, which we argue encourages reflection, discussion, and interrogation of the act of killing.

We sought YA novels featuring protagonists who kill in order to examine the value of such literature. We examined over 42 YA titles spanning four decades. All of these YA novels include relatable protagonists faced with the choices or possible consequences of killing another character. We observed that the collection of YA novels included characterizations and plot points that encouraged the reader to take a critical or analytical perspective when reading about killing. The techniques are:

1. The protagonists are often placed in positions where they must kill.
2. The protagonists only choose to kill people whom they believe deserve it.
3. The protagonists reevaluate their identities as killers.
4. The protagonists often rationalize their determination to kill extensively.
5. The protagonists' expressions of guilt demonstrate they are good people despite their deeds (see Fig. 1).

To restrict the sample size, we limited our focus to novels that were published within the last decade, that extensively addressed one or more of the techniques we observed in the greater sample, and that represented both realistic and speculative fiction. Using content analysis, or inferences from the texts to their contexts (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 10), we conducted a close reading of 13 of the YA novels. To ensure standardization, we both read all of the novels in the sample and extensively discussed our interpretations to ensure the meanings we pulled from the novels were logical and consistent. These novels comprised a stratified sample used to investigate how these techniques were used and the value of complicating killing in YA literature.

Techniques	Realistic Fiction	Speculative Fiction
The protagonist is forced to kill.	<i>Sunrise over Fallujah</i> <i>Purple Heart</i>	<i>Graceling</i> <i>Hold Me Closer, Necromancer</i> <i>Ship Breaker</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The protagonist is a vigilante/antihero who only kills people who deserve it.	<i>I Hunt Killers</i>	<i>Slice of Cherry</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The protagonist reevaluates his/her identity in light of considering killing or shifts his/her identity to reflect himself/herself as a killer.	<i>I Hunt Killers</i> <i>Purple Heart</i> <i>Revolver</i>	<i>Graceling</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The killing requires a lot of rationalization in order to comfort the protagonist.	<i>Revolver</i> <i>Yummy</i> <i>Right Behind You</i>	<i>Fire</i>
The protagonist's expression of guilt helps prove that he or she is still a good person.	<i>I Am the Messenger</i> <i>Sunrise over Fallujah</i> <i>Purple Heart</i> <i>Right behind You</i>	<i>Fire</i> <i>Graceling</i> <i>Ship Breaker</i> <i>Hold Me Closer, Necromancer</i>
The book mixes genres, bringing elements of metaphoric killing in Fantasy into contemporary realistic fiction.	<i>I Am the Messenger</i>	<i>Slice of Cherry</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>

Figure 1. Titles of recent young adult fiction that use the listed techniques separated by genre

Many of the novels listed include multiple techniques to critique or address the nature of the violence. Whether through gritty realism, fantastic metaphor, or a blending of genres, these books call into question the psychological states of the protagonists. The novels may also help the reader to take a more active or questioning role while reading. Genres, considered “contracts between a writer and his readers” (Jameson 1975, p. 135) establish what the reader can expect from a text. When an author combines genres, the reader cannot take the expected rules of the world of the novel for granted and must read the text critically. Often, the techniques complement or influence one another to create a complicated picture of motives, identity formation, and consequences.

Blending Genres to Question the Protagonist’s Understanding of Reality

Ten of the YA novels comprising this sample play with genre to unsettle expectations of the plot and characterizations (Jameson, 1975, p. 135). Within the scenes in which characters express their motives to kill or in which the actual killing is depicted, the genre expectations are often mixed with those of another genre. This can add fantastic or gritty elements to the scene and demonstrate the protagonist’s altered state of mind. For example, in *Slice of Cherry* (Reeves, 2011), Kit and Fancy, daughters of a convicted serial killer, live in a small Texas town. The outcast siblings, who share their father’s compulsion to kill, are moved to kill people who have wronged others. This provides Kit and Fancy with an opportunity to befriend those who have been victimized in the town.

As magical realism, *Slice of Cherry* is primarily a piece of fantasy, but its incorporation of typical issues from a bildungsroman and its focus on characters and relationships import a strong flavor of contemporary realism. When Kit and Fancy kill, the sisters enter a fantastical “happy place” or alternate world to commit the murders and dispose of the bodies (p. 160). This “home” or “garden” (pp. 161, 163) may be read literarily either as a fantasy land that the sisters access through a magical device or as a psychological escape in which the protagonists are omnipotent and find freedom from the difficulties of their daily lives. The blending of fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary realistic fiction genres plays with readers’ expecta-

tions. This may encourage readers to view the motif of killing from a kaleidoscope of angles, considering it from literal, metaphorical, and even psychological perspectives.

Similarly, *I Am the Messenger* (Zusak, 2002/2005) incorporates fantastic elements into a contemporary realistic plot. Ed Kennedy’s coming of age story is told among elements of a quest, with surreal events that contribute to his transformation along the way. If fantasy typically presents killing as metaphor and contemporary realistic fiction as mirroring reality, combining these two approaches adds depth to both. This also requires respect for the reader’s ability to determine reality from fantasy and to read inquisitively. When books like these blur genre lines, they move readers out of their comfort zones. This discomfort seems to allow readers to see the ordinary extraordinarily and encourages them to think critically about what they are reading and to reevaluate their own expectations.

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How Writers Encourage Self-Reflection

Force the Protagonist to Kill

One technique we investigated was how the protagonists are forced into killing another character. In contemporary realistic war stories, like *Purple Heart* (McCormick, 2009) and *Sunrise over Fallujah* (Myers, 2008), the protagonists are required to kill in self-defense or in defense of another as part of their military service during the Iraq War. Similarly, *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010), an urban fantasy, sets its protagonist, Sam LaCroix, in a situation where he must kill or be killed. He is forced to make this choice when Douglas, a more experienced necromancer, kidnaps Sam and attempts to drain his powers and take his life. Instead of viewing Sam as a murderer when he kills Douglas, Sam maintains his position as a hero in the reader’s mind. Sam defends himself, overcoming necessary obstacles as he comes of age and into power.

However, it is not just the act of self-defense that complicates killing in *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010). Complications also stem from the brutally graphic depiction of the scene, such as the taste of Douglas's blood as some of it hits Sam's tongue—"a viscous, heavy saltiness" (p. 309). Sam

is overwhelmed by the experience and blacks out, later admitting that "it was too much" (p. 310). Sam later invites investigation as he reflects on the deed and the emotional aftermath: "'I still didn't want to kill him,' I said, looking at the floor. I waited for some feeling to emerge. Remorse, maybe. But nothing came. I felt hollow as I stared at my dirty carpet"

(p. 333). Rather than letting the killing go unquestioned, understood as something necessary and acceptable given the fantasy world, McBride deliberately probes at the moral issues involved in killing.

In all cases of killing that involve extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the protagonist, the reader can view that protagonist more sympathetically. Several books (such as Lyga, 2012; Reeves, 2011; Wells, 2010) depict characters who question whether their environment or a genetic predisposition toward murder has influenced their thoughts and actions. Furthermore, by taking a sympathetic view toward the protagonist, readers can more easily place themselves in the character's shoes, allowing them to personally investigate the complexity of the actions and the rippling ramifications of killing in the character's life. These books also provoke the reader to think critically about horrible acts committed by well-meaning protagonists.

Position the Character as an Antihero

Some books present protagonists as antiheroes who limit themselves to killing only people who presumably deserve it. Sanderson, Tayler, and Wells (2009) refer to this type of antihero as the "Punisher," named after the Marvel character who first appeared as a nemesis for Spiderman. This hero "kills people, but they were all bad." *I Am Not a Serial Killer* (Wells,

2010) was not published as a young adult book in the United States but is often considered one, given that it is about a 15-year-old protagonist who believes he is a sociopath. John Wayne Cleaver uses his fascination with serial killers to help track down a local serial killer and learns that the killer is actually a demon. When he locates the Clayton Killer, he kills him as punishment for his crimes, but also to protect future victims. Here, the killing is justified because the victim has previously killed and intends to do so again. While John's act is the lesser of two evils, this complex character has to deal with the result of indulging his homicidal impulses.

The antihero protagonist typically reflects both before and after the killings, justifying why the victim deserves to die. This repeated examination of his or her choices reinforces the question of whether the antihero can ever truly justify killing. Sanderson et al. (2009) note that this type of antihero is often shallow, "because people think that this is enough to hang a whole character on" (2:34-minute mark). *Jenny Green's Killer Junior Year* (Belasen & Osborn, 2008) is the fictional account of a girl who initially kills in self-defense, but soon turns to killing boys she thinks have done wrong according to her personal moral reasoning. This book demonstrates how an antihero can be perceived as shallow when the killing is not interrogated through the stylistic and narrative choices. In contrast, John Cleaver struggles to avoid killing and contemplates the choices and ramifications extensively. When fully fleshed out, these characters address the idea of killing in complex ways as they urge the reader to question his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Reevaluate Identity

When dealing with the reality of killing another character, these protagonists often question their identity or value as a person. This explores how such actions influence the identity formation of the character and, by extension, allows the reader to see the impact such deeds have. Literature can serve as an entry point, allowing the young adult reader to "consider how one defines one's own identity, the role which peers and society play in that defining process, and how the repercussions of moral decision can affect identity development" (Bushman & McNerny, 2004, p. 64). The paths and relationships protagonists navigate

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are complex when faced with an identity defined by another's death.

In *I Hunt Killers* (Lyga, 2012), the protagonist, Jazz Dent, is the son of an imprisoned serial killer. Jazz is raised by his variably abusive and senile grandmother while wrestling with his identity and his impulses to kill. After his grandmother hits him, Jazz contemplates the choice of killing or caring for her and the impact this choice would have on his personality:

Maybe in caring for her, he would observe something, learn something about his lineage, something that would give him some sort of insight into his father and his own upbringing. Anything. Something to help him figure out how to avoid a future that, on some days, felt inevitable. A future that ran thick with blood.

Or maybe, more likely—

“Just like your daddy,” Gramma gasped, fumbling into a chair, having apparently decided not to die. “You’re just like your daddy.”

Now *that* hurt. More than a beating ever could. (p. 96, emphasis present in text)

Jazz's fear of being like his father drives many of his choices—from his treatment of his grandmother to his choice in girlfriend—as he struggles against his upbringing and desire to kill. This tension comes to a head when Jazz and his grandmother are captured by the Impressionist, a copycat killer who follows the example of Jazz's father. The Impressionist urges Jazz to kill his grandmother as a rite of passage. When he refuses, Jazz admits to the reader that he “was more trying to convince himself than deny the Impressionist” (p. 343). By facing and resisting killing, Jazz learns more about himself and vows to hunt killers.

These books show young adult readers the possible twists and turns of personality development as they see the impact of the protagonist's choices. Rather than a literal warning against poor choices, Jazz's story presents a metaphor for making choices. When identity formation is clearly depicted as a multidimensional part of character, reading books like *I Hunt Killers* (Lyga, 2012) and *I Am Not a Serial Killer* (Wells, 2010) become a process through which readers can reflect upon their own identity formation.

Rationalize Killing

Some young adult protagonists within our sample develop substantive rationalizations to kill. This shows

that they are struggling with committing an act they know to be wrong in a way that the reader can access. In particular, Sedgwick (2010) uses the entirety of *Revolver* to focus on the question of whether Sig Andersson should use his father's gun to kill Gunther Wolff, the man who has taken him hostage in hopes of obtaining the gold that he swears Sig's father stole. Sedgwick weaves together both Sig's past interactions with his mother and father as well as Wolff's actions and threats to argue for and against killing. The alternation of chapters between the present—1910 in the Antarctic—and Sig's childhood in 1899 allows the reader to participate in the protagonist's choice and rationalization by tying past parental guidance and choices to their present impact. In the end, Sig takes a middle approach in which he is responsible for Wolff's death but does not kill him with the gun. Instead, he uses indirect means, allowing Wolff's own actions to contribute to his imprisonment and eventual death.

By including extensive and deep consideration over the choice to kill, this sample allows room for reflection. These reflections take up more space on the page, and thus require the reader to spend more time

reading about the killing and interrogating it. This period of inquiry can happen either before or after the event. In the case of *Fire* (Cashore, 2009), the protagonist, Fire, revisits throughout the story the role she played in her father's death. She eventually comes to terms with her use of her psychic abilities to convince her father to put himself in danger in order to prevent him from killing a young man (p. 303). As Fire gradually reveals her responsibility, her admissions evolve from suggesting that she was a witness, to claiming responsibility, to rationalizing why she did it.

In contrast, the 11-year-old protagonist in the biographical graphic novel *Yummy* (Neri, 2010) avoids taking responsibility for his own actions by referring to the murder he committed as an “accident” (p. 69). In response to his unintentional killing of a 14-year-old girl in a gang shooting, older members of his gang shoot Yummy for becoming “too much of a problem”

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take away from the significance of the situation. In the end, this type of extended introspection prevents the reader from avoiding the subject or taking it lightly, instead demanding a deeper or more critical reading.

Investigate Guilt

Another key feature of these books that investigate killing is that protagonists' feelings of guilt are typically emphasized. These expressions of remorse demonstrate the gravity of killing, requesting that readers take the act as seriously as the characters do. One of the reasons that Printz-award winning *Ship Breaker* (Bacigalupi, 2010) makes such an impact is that Nailer is very open about his feelings of guilt after killing his father, Richard, even though he acted in self-defense. His friend Sadna comforts him, saying, "Richard never felt a thing when he hurt people. Just didn't give a damn. It's good that you feel something. Trust me. Even if it hurts, it's good" (p. 319). Nailer's guilt is contrasted with Richard's presumable lack of feeling. This suggests that part of being a redeemable protagonist is feeling guilt, even overwhelming guilt.

Books like *Ship Breaker* (Bacigalupi, 2010), *I Am the Messenger* (Zusak, 2002/2005), *Sunrise over Fal-lujah* (Myers, 2008), *Purple Heart* (McCormick, 2009), *Fire* (Cashore, 2009), *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008), and *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010) focus on guilt and acknowledge the seriousness of killing. None of these stories take killing in stride. Instead, through the use of these techniques, they demonstrate their commitment to respect death. While it seems that the novels within this sample are focused on death, books that respect the gravity of killing also suggest a focus on life. If the taking of a life is serious, then life, too, is important.

(p. 84). This prevents further introspection or reconciliation of his actions, and readers are left to choose for themselves how they feel about Yummy and his choices. The progress of working through these issues cannot be casual, easy, or quick because that would

Conclusions and Implications

Many variables influence the formation of trends and shifts within young adult literature, from what inspires individual authors to what captures the attention of editors and interests young adults. Coats (2011) wrote, "YA texts tend to appear in thematic clusters, revealing an intertextuality that responds to the market, which in turn responds to prevailing cultural and personal fantasies" (p. 318).

Although examining why there are so many YA novels that depict killing is beyond the scope of this article, this literature functions within an ideology that sees children-as-capable by addressing a previously forbidden topic through new and complex ways (Dresang, 2003, p. 24). Interrogating such young adult protagonists allows readers to explore complex and difficult issues from multiple vantage points and through metaphors and relatable emotions. Dresang considered children-as-capable to be "worldly wise," "technologically savvy," and "media rich"; "there is little [these children] have not seen or heard" (pp. 22–23), including violence. Reflecting this "children-as-capable" ideology, literature intended for such readers is often "many-voiced, rhetorically diverse, and composed of many genres and perspectives within a single book" (Glasgow, 2002, p. 41), as we see in the techniques described here and used in our sample.

In a culture that bombards young adults with violence (see Miller, 2005, p. 87) and news stories of murders and suicides, Mauro (1997) notes that violence "can be a soft, subtle, often unfelt thing" (1997, p. 113) due to oversaturation. Similarly, McGillis (1997) wrote, "[M]uch of the reading that people do is unthinking absorption of familiar messages" (p. 129). The challenge to educators, then, becomes following the lead of books like those examined in this sample. With a teacher's mediation, young adults can begin to think critically and interrogate the ideas and images that they encounter daily rather than passively absorb or ignore them (see Miller, 2005).

Finally, through examining the five criteria described in this article—whether the protagonists are forced to kill, whether they are operating as vigilantes or antiheroes, how these choices impact their identity, how they rationalize the act, and whether they feel guilty—readers are encouraged to take a critical stance and interrogate the nature of killing and the

characterizations of the protagonists in the novels comprising this sample. This allows readers to explore complex and difficult issues from multiple perspectives. McGillis (1997) writes about using such critical stances to examine the familiar and to “understand the forces that impinge upon us. In doing so, we gain a distance from these forces and a vantage point from which to assess what we read. We become critical readers, active rather than passive readers” (p. 129). Seeing *Jazz*, *Sig*, *Nailer*, *Fire*, and *Fancy* deal with the consequences of killing provides different perspectives through each story with which to critically consider the ramifications of death and murder.

Reading and interrogating young adult novels within the child-as-capable ideology allows readers to situate and develop their own stance toward understanding the nature of killing. This can be extended to address basic issues of death and, consequently, life. YA authors often acknowledge that when they write about death, they are actually writing about life (e.g., Lauren Oliver, personal communication, 2012, October 3). Young adult novels that are engaged in complicating the choices and consequences of killing—whether fantasy, science fiction, realistic, or genre blending—provide a strong and vibrant branch for teens to rely upon as they read critically.

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