

# The Function of Liminal Entities in the Grief Process of Young Adult Contemporary Novels

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## ABSTRACT

Liminality is a state of existing between, in which the subject is not inhabiting one particular space or another. In the context of contemporary young adult grief narratives, the liminality of the deceased characters allows them to transcend death in order to communicate with the narrator, literally or figuratively, and shape the narrative. The deceased, referred to in this article as the liminal entity, has an impact on the narrative through reflection on the past, troubles in the present, and a loss of representation in the future. This article examines the presence of liminal entities in three young adult grief narratives: *Long Way Down* (2018) by Jason Reynolds, *Goodbye Days* (2017) by Jeff Zentner, and *A Short History of the Girl Next Door* (2017) by Jared Reck.

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## INTRODUCTION

“There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me” (1), C.S. Lewis wrote in 1964 in *A Grief Observed*, the personal recollection of his emotions following the death of his beloved wife. Lewis does not just denote the idea of grief being a suffocating emotion, but suggests that the period of mourning is marked by a distinct separation from the rest of civilization. Grief is a place unto itself. Mourning is marked by a stage of transition: the bereaved move from the state of ‘during’, a time when the loved one was living, to ‘after’, the reality of a world in which the deceased is gone. In his 1908 publication, *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold Van Gennep states “[mourning] is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society” (147). Mourners “constitute a special group” following the death of a loved one, and “how soon individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person” (147). This in-between phase, in which the bereaved are not part of society and not completely detached, is referred to as the liminal period. Liminality, based on the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, refers to a state of instability and transition. Defined by Victor Turner, a liminal being is “neither this nor that, and yet is both” (Turner, “Betwixt-and-Between” 7). A liminal phase is between two concrete states of being, which is an apt description of mourning: the bereaved is caught between the living and the dead in a variety of ways. In young adult literature, this idea of separation and transition is heightened, not least because death provides a stark contrast to the vitality of youth. YA literature emphasizes interpersonal relationships and changing bonds between characters. In the event of the death of a character close to the main character or narrator, the reader follows that main character on the path of grief to acceptance. Within a YA novel, this idea of liminality allows the main mourning character to cross through the stages of grief and into a state of acceptance. In this way, engaging with grief allows these characters to move forward rather than remaining in a state of liminality. YA grief narratives model behavior that allows for active, confrontational grief in an effort to carry the character through the mourning period. This article will discuss liminality in YA literature, trace the paths of liminal entities in three selected novels, and examine the relationship between youthful death and the liminality of adolescence. The primary texts discussed are *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds (2017), *Goodbye Days* by Jeff Zentner (2018), and *A Short History of the Girl Next Door* by Jared Reck (2017). Through these texts, this article seeks to establish liminal entities and liminal personas as character types in young adult grief narratives.

YA literature inherently occupies a liminal space in terms of development, in which both the characters and intended audience of readers are caught between childhood and adulthood. Representations of events within YA literature allow readers to process similar events in their day-to-day lives. YA grief narratives, which focus specifically on the period of time after an important character has died, follow this tradition. In these novels, the main

character, generally the narrator, is affected by the death of someone close to them. The main arc of the novel follows this character as they traverse through the liminal stage of “ambiguity and paradox” to the final stage of acceptance (Turner, “Betwixt-and-Between” 7). Though the deceased character is no longer living in the world of the narrative, they continue to have a lasting impact on the plot and the narrative itself. The chronological time of the narrative has already passed into the ‘after’, the designation in which the deceased is not physically present, but the focal character is still fixated on the ‘before’. In Matthew Salesses’ essay about the loss of his wife, he states, “[o]ur linear experience of time, combined with our selective memory means that as we live, humans construct ongoing stories about who we are [...]. When your beloved dies, your memory is at risk. Your past no longer fits your story of who you are” (n.p.). In the focal character’s ongoing narrative, they are no longer able to align their present to the past due to the presence of the deceased. It requires confrontation of this absence to move on.

In these narratives, the liminal phase is defined by two specific actors. The ‘liminal entity’ works as the guide to bring the person undergoing the liminal period, otherwise known as the ‘rite of transition’, through to the other side (Turner, “Betwixt-and-Between” 8; Van Gennep 147). The person experiencing the liminal period is known as the “liminal persona” (Turner, “Betwixt and Between” 8). For the purpose of this article, the two will be referred to as ‘the entity’ and ‘the persona’. In the case of YA grief narratives, the deceased acts as the entity. They exist in a realm outside of the chronological time and physical space of the narrative, yet still play an active role in the events of the story. The entity is instrumental in guiding the persona through the liminal stage. The persona, usually the main character, must confront their attitudes towards the entity in order to move on from unhealthy grief into healthy grief, or a state of acceptance. The confrontation with the entity is vital for the persona to accept that this character is gone and move on with their lives.

Though the narratives in the three selected texts by Reynolds, Zentner, and Reck differ acutely in content and structure, they follow the same pattern of liminality, in which the entity is present in the narrative after their death through memory, as the persona is recalls times past; conjecture, in which the persona poses questions of what the deceased would want; and physicality, including both hallucinations and concrete reminders of the deceased, such as their social media pages or possessions. Through these devices, the entity has a continual impact on the persona through the liminal period, even though they are missing from the linear period of time in which the liminal phase takes place. In all three novels, confrontation with the deceased is necessary, and appears directly in the main characters’ emotional conflicts, though indirectly in the characters’ own lives, as they are no longer able to interact with the deceased. In order for the character to move on, they must confront how the liminal entity shaped their past and persists in their current state of being through grief, and finally, accept an absence of the physical presence of the entity in their future.

YA grief narratives have come a long way since John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), which acted as a grounding text for adolescent grief. More recently, highlights of teenage grief narratives include Ashley Schumacher's *Amelia Unabridged* (2021), which confronts a girl's grief after the death of her best friend, and Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* (2020), which begins after Yadriel attempts to summon the ghost of his cousin and calls forth the deceased town bad boy instead. Other highlights include Nina Moreno's *Don't Date Rosa Santos* (2019), Akemi Dawn Bowman's *Summer Bird Blue* (2018), and many more. The three books I selected for this essay only scratch the surface of available grief narratives. They each feature cisgender male narrators; this is an intentional choice, as it is often teenage boys who most feel the need to repress emotions. Further study would be needed to assess the way that gender, sexuality, race, and other marginalizations impact the path of grief narratives, and how liminal phases vary based on these differences.

### **LONG WAY DOWN: LIMINALITY AS A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE**

The study of liminality in YA literature is well-documented and thoroughly argued. Liminality refers to a time in which an individual is in transition. A liminal phase is “a very long threshold, a corridor almost, or a tunnel” (Turner, “Variations” 37). This liminal state begins with the child entering puberty, looking to adulthood, and ends with a fully matured adult. As a child passes through adolescence, they leave childhood behind and enter into a new phase of existence. As such, young adulthood, usually the years between 12 and 18, acts as a transitional period in which the child is changing and evolving. The teenage years are encompassed in this liminal stage as “adolescence is always ‘other’ to the more mature stage of adulthood, often perceived as liminal, and in constant growth towards the ultimate of maturity” (Waller 1). The area between childhood and adulthood is a true state of transition, as “the adult is figured as a subject, the self that experiences the world, and the child is figured as an object, the past self that is accessible only through recollection” (Owen 121). As Gabrielle Owen explains, “[t]he adolescent is left to function as the abject, the self that is nowhere, in-between”, allowing for the idea that the young adult is caught between two phases. The adolescent “exists ‘nowhere’” and is the kind of person that exists always outside of somewhere, defined against the definable location of adulthood” (119).

Joseph Campbell regarded the path between childhood and adulthood as its own form of hero's journey. He considered the path of adolescence as a “spiritual deed” in which the “child is compelled to give up its childhood and become an adult – to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult” (Campbell 124). This phrasing is particularly interesting, as Campbell regards the venture of adulthood to be the death of childhood. Though the hero figure is not literally dying, there is a metaphorical death occurring: the death of the child, of childlike tendencies, of irresponsibility, and of “a

temporary fluctuation of agency” (Owen 118). Though these critics are discussing the death of childhood as a liminal transition, literal death adds further complexity to the discussion of liminality.

In YA grief narratives, the main transition is that of the liminal persona, traveling from a state of unhealthy, unmanageable grief into one of acceptance. This grief is presented as aggression toward ghosts, physical confrontations, repressed memories, and more. Acceptance does not necessarily mean that the persona is ‘over’ the death of their loved one: instead, it signifies a transition from unhealthy anger and complex grief into a healthier state of mind. The presence of the liminal entity is intrinsic to moving the persona through the stages of grief, as well as through the stages of adolescence. Unless they directly confront the entity, the persona is unable to cross the threshold at the end of the liminal phase of grief.

Reynolds’ *Long Way Down* examines grief, adolescent loss, and the cyclical nature of violence perpetuated in a revenge-oriented bereavement process. The narrative, told in verse form, takes place after Will’s brother Shawn is killed in a shooting. The collection is framed around an elevator ride, at the end of which Will intends to take Shawn’s gun and kill the person he believes murdered his brother: “*I’m about to do what/ I gotta do. What you/ Woulda done [...] Follow the Rules*” (Reynolds 101). Because of the nature of his brother’s death, Will has a specific path to follow, as “a close relationship exists between deathways and other ideological and social systems” (Metcalf 111). In the system of Will’s community, revenge and retribution are a part of the grieving process. As Will rides the elevator down it stops on every floor, and a deceased relative or friend of Will’s joins him in the elevator with some wisdom to impart. Though Will is interacting with the deceased throughout the narrative, the primary focus here will be on his relationship with Shawn as the liminal entity. Shawn does not enter until the last floor, and even then, he does not speak until the final page when he asks Will, “[y]ou coming?” (Reynolds 322).

The function of Shawn as the liminal entity acts to allow Will to reconcile with his past. Shawn’s presence brings about “a cyclic resolution of the past, present, and future direction, a unification” (Proukou 63). Through the deaths of the significant characters in Will’s life, he learns that “the exit of every person that inhabits [his] life and stands between sense and senselessness, fullness and void, impoverishes that life of [his] which feeds and in turn feeds on the drive to survival” (Bauman 37). Will has had the rules reinforced time and time again. By watching his father, uncles, and now his brother die, he knows the harsh reality of living in his environment, and what it means for him in the event of Shawn’s death. From the beginning of the novel, Will is following the same path as his brother, who felt the need to take revenge on those who killed the men who were close to him. A critical point in the narrative is that these boys must follow “the rules”:

No. 1: Crying

Don't.  
No matter what.  
Don't.

No. 2: Snitching

Don't.  
No matter what.  
Don't.

No. 3: Revenge

If someone you love  
gets killed,

find the person  
who killed

them and  
kill them. (Reynolds 35-37)

Throughout the novel, Will's goal is to uphold the rules his brother set before him and lived by. Due to the reciprocal nature of violence and the gang-dominated environment Will grows up in, he is unable to let go of the past, especially after his brother's death. According to the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement, "[d]estructive codes may give rise to 'structural violence' as a means of social control" such as the cycle of violence detailed in the novel (594). Will has no control over the cyclical violence that led to Shawn's murder, so he chooses to become an active part of the cycle by continuing it. Shawn's death was a direct result of someone else following the rules:

*What does this have to do  
with Shawn?*

I asked.

*Shawn stuck to The Rules,*

Frick replied.

*You mean...*

I swallowed.

*You mean he... he...*

I struggled  
to get it out.

Now Buck put  
the finger gun  
against Frick's  
chest and repeated

*Bang-bang* (Reynolds 280-281)

Will learns that the occupants of the elevator (such as Buck and Will's father) were mostly killed by other occupants of the elevator trying to uphold the rule of revenge (such as Frick), even though they were not always correct in assigning guilt for the proceeding death, including his brother. In a community, it is not uncommon to have such a reaction to a tragic death, as "people feel they want to *do something* to express their sorrow and to acknowledge both their individual and shared sense of grief" (Eyre 251). The impact of the community is especially noticeable in this novel, as Shawn's death "occurred as a community activity" and the "community enjoyed a partnership with the dying person" (Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* 151). Because of Shawn's role in the community, he was an active participant in certain deaths that occurred, and as such, his death calls for reciprocal participation from others: action which, in this case, falls to Will.

The rules themselves lead to another pivotal community problem: instead of allowing those affected to deal with their grief in a healthy way, such as through open mourning, they force an endless cycle of death through revenge. According to the rules, "mutual avoidance is the solution adopted by one or both sides" by avoiding crying or outward projections of inner pain (Walter 18). Based on the rules, Will must avenge Shawn's death, which puts him at risk of being killed himself. Shawn perpetuates the idea that "young males often hold to a tough code of 'honor', which values bravery and pride above gentleness and humanity" (International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement 593-4). Like Will, Shawn was once in the position in which he had to decide whether he was to continue the cycle of violence by avenging Buck or staying his hand.

Over the course of the novel, Will interacts with his memories of the deceased. Since his father died when he was young, Will only knew facts about him through Shawn:

I HAVE NO MEMORIES

of my father.

Shawn always tried to get me to  
remember things like

Pop dressing up as Michael Jackson  
for Halloween and, after trick-or-treating,  
riding us up and down in this elevator,  
doing his best moonwalk but  
not enough space to go nowhere,  
slamming into the walls. (Reynolds 212)

Thus, Shawn acts not only as Will's present brother, but his link to a past that Will does not remember. Most of the male influences in Will's life die early, so he only has Shawn to look up to. As such, Shawn bears the brunt of responsibility of being a role model for Will in the only way he knows, even if it means enforcing the highly dangerous rules. While alive, Shawn reinforces and contributes to the cycles of violence which killed their family members in the preceding years. The entire novel is based on conjecture, as Will is communicating with those who are no longer around to advise him. As he was unable to learn from their mistakes while they were living, they return to teach lessons after death. The dead in this case are looking to offer "new codes" and alternatives to Will to replace the cycle of violence that is to be disrupted (International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement 594).

This scenario clearly establishes Shawn as the liminal entity. As he is not present in most of the novel outside of Will's memory and the final chapter, his impact on the narrative should be reduced in comparison to the other deceased present, but his absence only amplifies the effect he has on Will. Though Shawn is not present on the elevator until the very last floor, he is present in the narrative as an impact on Will's life and as a character he interacts with throughout. Since Will lost his brother unexpectedly and violently, "the personal implications of the loss" are different than those associated with conventional grief (Field 2). The unexpected and violent nature of Shawn's death leads to a disruption in "the bereaved's preexisting meaning structure and attachment to the deceased" (3), which forces Will to re-analyze the structures and organizations within his own life. The disruption alludes to the reconfiguring Will must do to create a new future outside of the cyclical violence. The elevator ride allows the liminal period to be framed with a distinct beginning and ending, with the transition in the middle. In the space of the elevator ride, Will "wavers

between two worlds” (Van Gennep 18). When he steps off the elevator, he is a different person from who he was when he stepped on. When Will passes through his liminal stage and exits the elevator, he understands that he must end the cycle of violence and honor his brother’s memory by disregarding the rules altogether, creating a future of peace that his brother did not live to see.

Will’s journey through the liminal phase of complex grief requires direct confrontation with the deceased in order to understand events of the past. The open discussion Will has with the deceased characters focuses on topics that were prohibited to discuss during their lives: namely, cyclical violence, the meaninglessness of community sacrifice, and perpetuations of masculinity within social groups. Will’s avoidance to confront the implications of his role in the cyclical violence in the community is further represented in the delay to his confrontation with Shawn, the liminal entity. Will faces his brother first through memory and discussion before he is confronted with his brother’s ghost, and finally, his brother’s voice. The importance of Shawn’s presence in the narrative is enhanced by his absence in the elevator until the final floor. The other deceased characters around Shawn are able to direct Will’s future by discussing these important issues with him through the elevator ride. Shawn is present as the entity through memory before he is physically present in the narrative, with his absence carrying the weight of grief on the page. In this way, Will is able to change the direction of his future and escape the cycles of community violence along with the complex grief that follows Shawn’s death. The presence of the Shawn as the entity Will to find some closure, and to move forward with his life in a healthy manner.

### **GOODBYE DAYS: LIMINAL ENTITIES AS A PRODUCT OF GUILT**

In contrast, Zentner’s novel *Goodbye Days* does not frame the story around only one liminal entity, but three. The novel centers around Carver, whose three closest friends die in a car accident that he himself might have caused. As he was texting the driver at the time of the incident and the driver’s phone was recovered with a “half-composed text responding to [him]”, Carver is almost “certain that it was [his] text message that set into motion the chain of events that culminated in [his] friends’ deaths” (Zentner 2-3). Carver’s grief is then amplified by the guilt of contributing to the death of his friends, and heightened by the fear of a possible court case initiated by the deceased driver’s father. Carver believes he is directly responsible for their deaths, and that “the one piece of writing he ever did that most impacted people’s lives was a lethal text that said, “[w]here are you guys? Text me back” (112). Rather than one entity, Carver carries “a trinity of phantoms” (233). His response fits the description of complicated grief entirely, featuring an “inability to trust others, numbness and shock, and bitterness or anger surrounding the loss” (Crunk 227). The community reels at the loss of his friends also, as “the loss of a child is generally considered far more

traumatic” than that of someone older (Walter 51). This senseless loss of life turns many other characters against Carver due to the implications of causality between the text message and the accident.

The liminal entities in *Goodbye Days* are: Blake, Carver’s comedian friend with a tragic family history; Eli, the romantic and musical friend and boyfriend to Jesmyn; and Mars, the driver of the vehicle, and son of a judge who pursues legal action against Carver as a result of the car accident. Carver’s grief for Eli and Mars is more complicated than that for Blake. After Eli’s death, Carver finds himself growing closer to Eli’s girlfriend and suffers from both feelings of inadequacy as compared to his deceased friend and the painful realization that pursuing her would cause further complications. His grief for Mars is complicated both by the fact that Mars was driving and therefore shares some of the blame for the accident, and because Mars’s father is seeking legal retribution. Throughout the novel, Carver suffers panic attacks as he is unable to cope with the stress of losing his friends coupled with the guilt of his contribution. The name of the novel comes from the days Carver spends with the families of the entities. Through interacting with the liminal entities and having these ‘goodbye days’ with their families, Carver is able to come to terms with what happened and process his grief in order to live with the reality of the present. Additionally, the goodbye days serve to give Carver some agency back in the liminal stage he is occupying. As Owen writes, “one of the logics necessary for maintaining the social division between childhood and adulthood is agency” (117). This phase of Carver’s life, both through adolescence in general and the tunnel of grief he is traveling through, is marked by a distinct lack of agency. By communicating with the entities and putting each to rest through the goodbye days, Carver is reclaiming the agency he has lost bit by bit.

The three goodbye days function along a narrative timeline, as well as mirroring the stages of a ritual itself, “subdivided into several parts” (Van Gennep 149): Blake’s, the first, is the initiation; Eli’s, the second, is the complication, leading into the part of the narrative where things go from bad to worse and Carver’s despair intensifies. Mars’ goodbye day leads to a sort of catharsis, as Carver has time to make amends with his companion in guilt. Carver’s goodbye days are a “transitional period” for acceptance that acts as “a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased” (Van Gennep 147). The goodbye days operate as a rite of passage. As such, they “*must hurt*” and “a divine or semi-divine hero may lead them, a spirit guide or psychopomp may point out the path, but the way is bound to be very hard even if we follow it by participating symbolically in another’s ordeal” (Grainger 13-14). The entities, acting as spirit guides, lead Carver on the goodbye days to a stage of acceptance in which he can function in his daily life. As Owen alludes to in her writings, these goodbye days take Carver through his liminal stage in which he has no agency in his own grief, to a new future in which his agency is restored through personal growth.

The first goodbye day is initiated by Blake’s grandmother, Nana Betsy. As Betsy raised Blake by herself after rescuing from his abusive mother, she is particularly affected by the

pain of losing him. To come to terms with his death, she proposes an idea to Carver: together, they will live out a day of things Blake loved to do, in order to share stories and honor his memory; a “day together doing the things she’d have done with Blake if she’d gotten to have a last day with him” (Zentner 143). The day consists of fishing, a special breakfast, and a filmed prank video, among other activities. Carver, who is wracked with guilt, finds the goodbye day with Blake’s grandmother captures his presence and allows Carver to come to terms with some of his grief. The goodbye day for Blake acts to move Carver from the “preliminal rites” of the boys’ funerals and private grieving to the “liminal rites”, in which Carver is directly interacting with the liminal entities and their families (Van Gennep 121). Blake’s presence throughout this scene allows Carver to realize that “no one knows how anyone lives through anything. People just do” (Zentner 215). This realization allows Carver to accept that he is not going to wake up to find his friends still living: this is a grief he will have to live with for the rest of his life, and he must come to terms with it and find a place where he is comfortable living with Blake’s memory as a constant presence.

Unlike the grief related to Blake’s death, Carver’s grief for Eli is more complicated, featuring “confusion about [his] role in life” (Crunk 227). As Carver grows closer to the girlfriend Eli left behind, he finds himself struggling with gaining from his friend’s death. During his goodbye day for Eli, Eli’s father states, “I’m not entirely at peace with your role in my son’s death”, and later, in regards to Jesmyn, “you at least deserve not to actively profit from his death” (Zentner 215). The function of Eli’s entity is to help Carver to realize that he is not completely guilt-free in the death of his friends, but there is nothing he can do to change the past, or his feelings in the present. Through Eli’s goodbye day, Carver contemplates his own “learned helplessness”: a description of “how people come to think of themselves as helpless in the face of certain circumstances or demands” (Davies 33). Carver knows he is partially responsible for the death of his friends, but he does not see how he can change his behavior in regards to his grief. After the confrontation with Eli’s father, Carver realizes that he is not helpless in his expression of grief, and the choices he makes from this point on will dictate how his life continues after the death of his friends.

The function of Mars as a liminal entity is to help Carver come to the realization that though he might have had a hand in his friends’ deaths, he is not completely to blame, no matter what responsibility is assigned to him. Mars is the entity Carver interacts with least throughout the narrative, probably as a direct result of shame. Carver knew Mars would answer his phone, even if he was driving; and Carver knows Mars was texting him back at the time of a crash. As such, confronting his memories of Mars are painful as there is some sense of shared blame between the two of them. Mars was driving, but Carver does not want to place the blame on his deceased friend for killing everyone in the vehicle, himself included. As Eli’s sister, Adair says, “I have plenty to say to Mars [...] It’s just that, well, he’s not here because he’s *dead* and you’re *not*” (Zentner 152).

The death of his three best friends changes Carver's life, and knowing he is directly involved in the accident does not make reality any easier. Carver finds himself confused about his own guilt, and confronting it through the goodbye days helps him to process, as "funerals or memorial services help many people define how they feel about the dead person" (Lukas 130). The goodbye days give Carver an opportunity to come to terms with the deaths through "ceremonies and rituals that are meaningful to the survivor", a process which acts as "a kind of punctuation mark, an ending and a beginning, a way to help the survivor move on to the next emotional step" (Lukas 130). Carver is able to interact with the entities through the goodbye days, giving him the opportunity to come to terms with his guilt and grief. By the end of the novel, Carver is able to reflect upon his memories peacefully, without them intruding on his daily life. He understands that his grief will stay with him for the rest of his life, in a less obtrusive form, as he "believe[s] we are stories of breath and blood and memory and that some things never finally end" (Zentner 176). Through interaction with the liminal entities, Carver is able to come to terms with his grief and be actively present in his own life.

Both *Long Way Down* and *Goodbye Days* involve active interrogation of the liminal entities in order for the liminal persona to move on. In *Long Way Down*, Will allows the entity to teach him lessons that they did not pass down while he was living. In *Goodbye Days*, on the other hand, Carver is able to use his reconciliations with the entities through their families as he regains agency over his own life and choices. As in adolescence in the real world, this form of adolescent grief "works to simplify and distance aspects of experience that are strange, disturbing, or unknown" (Owen 114). By actively confronting their respective liminal entities, the characters of Will and Carver are able to process the strange and disturbing events of their lives, and move through the liminal stage of grief, and eventually, adolescence.

In *Goodbye Days*, Carver's grief is also a perpetuation of guilt. Carver believes the loss is his own fault, and he is unable to reckon with a reality in which he is solely responsible for the death of his friends. The reader understands that this single choice to text was not only on Carver, but on Mars as well, and it is not healthy for Carver to dwell on these events, nor does it change the past. By facing the liminal entities, Carver is able to confront his own guilt and accept that he was not responsible for the death of his friends. In the context of YA literature, this reinforces the idea that young people can only control their own decisions and they cannot take responsibility for the actions of others, nor total blame if these actions lead to consequences. *Goodbye Days* shows how Carver is able to seek help, confront his guilt, and move towards a healthier future.

## **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE GIRL NEXT DOOR: LIMINALITY AS A RECKONING WITH A NEW FUTURE**

The shift toward a healthier future can be fraught when the deceased holds a romantic place in the narrative. Though romantic relationships in childhood may not commonly last into adulthood, they hold a particularly important role in the lives of many teenagers. In the analysis of YA literature, it is important to remember that young adulthood itself is a liminal state. It is not merely a time of being, but a time when the self is being shaped. As is echoed in the phenomenon of Peter Pan's "Lost Boys", children are not meant to remain childlike forever, nor are they meant to be caught in the phase of adolescence that is young adulthood. Adolescence is "messily straddling" the "binary opposition between childhood and adulthood" (Owen 116). It is not meant to be a state of permanence. As such, "the separation from childhood is a complex trial", yet in YA grief narratives, the liminal entities never completed the separation (Proukou 63). In a way, these deceased characters are caught in endless loops: they have not completed the transition to adulthood, and they are unable to cross fully into death unless released by the liminal persona.

In Campbell's analysis of young adulthood as a hero's journey, signaling the death of childhood and move into adulthood, this journey is complicated by the presence of literal death. In the case of Reck's *A Short History of the Girl Next Door*, the death of the liminal entity, Tabby, is marked by the echo of what could have been. The story begins as a classically framed childhood-to-teenage crush story, reminiscent of a conventional teenage romance film. Fifteen-year-old Matt has spent his entire life living next door to, and growing up with, Tabby. Now, in high school and in love with her, he has to confront the reality of his position as her friend, rather than a romantic interest, when she starts dating Matt's older basketball teammate, Liam. Matt acknowledges that his situation of being "completely in love with [his] best friend from childhood", and that "she has absolutely no idea, and now she's interested in older, more popular guys", is cliché to the point that it "sounds like a bad movie already" (Reck 8). Matt sorts through his own feelings, coming to the conclusion that he is satisfied with Tabby's friendship rather than losing her entirely, when she is tragically killed in a car accident halfway through the novel. Just as Matt came to terms with his relationship, Tabby's "story stopped on a dark, icy road, without any meaning or closure or resolution of any kind" (Reck 199).

Matt's grieving process is focused not only on the loss of a person, but also on the loss of a future. Tabby's presence as the liminal entity guides Matt to accept the reality of his future. The death of a young person removes not only that person's existence, but also their ability to have a future and give meaning to society. In Matt's mourning of Tabby, he is mourning her as well as "the destiny at which we have never arrived [...] is an inability to mourn a past that can never meet our expectations" (Hutton 154). By holding onto the physical evidence of Tabby's existence, Matt is clinging to some preconceived destiny that he believed they would

create together. In seeing the perfection of their shared childhood in alignment with his personal desires, Matt is deriving “dramatic meaning from the entirety of” his life, and creating “coherence from one moment to the next” in order to manufacture a narrative with a beginning, middle, and ending that he can populate with his personal goals and wants (Shabad 197). The prolonged grieving period surrounding Tabby’s death is rooted in regrets that could impact Matt’s future more so than physical presence of the past. Matt is unable to accept Tabby’s absence from her future – his present – and the removal of her from his own future. In class, he considers how little her death affects anyone else:

No grade will be entered. It won’t affect her average, won’t even be made up, but it doesn’t matter because there’s nowhere for her stupid report card to go to anyway. No reason to report a numerical representation of her understanding of meiosis versus mitosis [...] Her cells don’t do that anymore; no study of living things because she’s not a living thing. Her name just disappears from the roster while the rest of us are expected to complete our assignments like normal [...] Everything keeps going, except Tabby. (Reck 157)

This idea of a lost future is further investigated later in the novel, when Matt spends time with his grandparents. Matt’s grandfather also suffered a tragic loss: when he was in his early twenties, his first wife and daughter were killed in an accident. Matt reflects on his current relationship with his grandfather, who has also passed through the liminal phase Matt is currently enduring. “Will all this just be a life that predates my real one someday?” (Reck 167), Matt wonders, considering the dulling of his grief over the coming years. About his grandfather’s first wife, he remarks, “it’s like this part of him that’s buried, this part of him that no one else will ever know about. Is that really all I get to take from Tabby? A sad memory to bury while I start a different life?” (Reck 241). This line of thought echoes Allan Kellehear’s statement, “[t]ime is a measure of our social relationships. It is not some abstract and neutral idea of duration” (238). For Matt, to exist around people who knew Tabby “was to be aware that a *moment* is all that stands between life and death. Time was the only distance; life felt *close by*” (Salesses n.p.).

Matt’s perception of his life thus far is colored by his interactions with Tabby. His life has been intrinsically twinned with hers, nearly from birth. As Matt’s mother establishes, “I’m not over it. I watched her as a *baby*, Matthew. I was there when she learned to walk – it was in our living room. I was there when she got on that bus to kindergarten [...] I’ll never be over it” (Reck 217). Matt’s entire identity has been shaped by his relationship with the girl next door, as “it is through human relationships that we come to a sense of our identity and through their loss that we come to know grief” (Davies 25). Matt has not considered a future that does not include Tabby, in some way. As such, the removal of Tabby from Matt’s life, and thus the disruption of his sense of linear time, leads to another end result of the liminal stage

Matt endures after her death: the acceptance of a new timeline, namely one that does not include Tabby. This negotiation of past and future is indicative of a more mature pathway of thought, such as that discussed in Angel Daniel Matos' essay on historical narrative in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. As *Aristotle and Dante* is a historical narrative, there is the time for reflection and acknowledgement of change. *A Short History* allows for this same reflective manner through the grandfather's perspective. Situated as it is, *A Short History* is like *Aristotle and Dante* in that it is a "text for young audiences that is a product of an adult's pain, desires, and anxieties" (Matos 50). Though Matos is specifically discussing the queer Latinx experience, this idea of adult pain applied to a young adult narrative is also present in Reck's novel. The grandfather's advice to Matt is indicative of an adult urging a child to move on and guiding them through the liminal stage into a healthier relationship with grief.

Beyond reconciliation with a new image for a future, Matt must confront his past relationship with Tabby in the face of her death. After the death of a loved one, it is a common reaction to reflect upon the times shared. This reflection can turn into melancholia, especially common in a dramatized fictionalized narrative:

When a beloved object disappears as a result of separation or death, the survivor conjures imaginative representations of the lost object and, over time, comes to reconstitute that figure in full, contradictory complexity, internalizing a multifaceted image that releases the sufferer from fixation upon an idealized singularity that releases the sufferer from fixation upon an idealized singularity that, over time, could lead to melancholia. (Homans 72)

This melancholia results in the manifestation of the entity in the persona's memories. The persona interacts with their memories of the entity in such a way that they may not interact with everyday memories of someone who is still living. This is a result of hindsight, in which the persona considers what they could have done differently in interactions with the entity in their final days. Before her death, Matt and Tabby had an argument about Tabby's boyfriend and they had only just begun to resolve their disagreement. Throughout the novel, Matt repeatedly remembers the last moment he saw Tabby alive: "Tabby, waving her box of Nerds as she and her dad drive away, flashes over and over in my head, this grainy clip losing a little of its impact with every loop. The last time I saw her" (Reck 175). This memory becomes a motif, revisited throughout the narrative as Matt imagines the scenarios that led up to the accident. In the general scheme of Matt's life before the accident, this memory holds no importance. Once Tabby passes, though, this memory gains significant meaning. Matt is like most people grieving, who "activate their memories and selectively draw from them as they will" (Davies 123).

Unlike *Long Way Down* and *Goodbye Days*, the loss of the entity in *A Short History* has romantic connotations. Though the other boys struggle with questions of ‘what if?’, it is more closely related to loneliness or hopelessness rather than the loss of an imagined future. Tabby’s presence as the entity allows Matt to come to terms with the fact that, though his grief is warranted at the loss of his best friend, he cannot blame others for sharing that grief, and other characters are permitted to grieve in their own manner just as Matt is. He also cannot accept what may have come to pass as a concrete reality. Through Tabby’s presence as the entity, Matt allows himself to accept his friendship with Tabby and look fondly on it without regrets for what might have been. He can also be more accepting of what passed between Tabby and Liam, being happy that his friend knew love. Through Tabby’s presence as the entity and absence in the physical world, Matt allows himself to come to terms with the fact that “Tabby’s ‘once’ is over” (Reck 264).

*A Short History of the Girl Next Door* reflects Matt’s shift in agency as he takes control of his future. Through support from his grandfather and parents as well as real-life consequences from his actions, Matt realizes that he cannot allow Tabby, his own liminal entity, and the future they might have had together, to shape the rest of his life. Though Tabby was his entire past, Matt has the power to shape his future and live in a way that honors her memory without fixating on her absence. By the end of the narrative, Matt is able to build a new future for himself, setting aside the complex grief and anger he felt earlier, and move forward.

## CONCLUSION

Young adult grief narratives give adolescents the space to process and understand emotions that they may otherwise be struggling with. Adolescence itself “is conceptualized as unstable, as transitional” (Owen 112) and, as such, introducing a complex transition such as grief muddies the waters. Literature, particularly that for young people, “teach[es] child readers how to feel” and models emotions in a fictional world that they may confront in their own lives (Moruzi 13). Because of the relationship between reading and emotional development, it is crucial that literature for young people discusses topics that young adults have a particularly difficult time confronting.

*Long Way Down*, *Goodbye Days*, and *A Short History of the Girl Next Door* utilize liminal entities to model patterns of complex grief. In *Long Way Down*, Will uses his conversations with the deceased to make real change in his community. Though he is unable to change the past, he can take the lessons the deceased members of his community passed to him to continue to end the cycles of violence that claimed so many other lives. As the liminal entity in Will’s story, Shawn’s physical absence leaves space for growth, and his final appearance and last lines to Will motivate true change in his reaction to the rules. Will is able to see the

truth of what happened in the past and how it still has a long-lasting domino effect on his future, and through the revelations of the entities, how he can change his own path. In contrast, Carver from *Goodbye Days* does not need the liminal entities to assign responsibility, but instead, to absolve guilt. As Will reckons with the gauntlet of revenge his brother Shawn passed down, Carver wrestles with the idea that he may be the reason his friends died. Through the presence of the entities in his life, existing through visions, dreams, and imagined conversations, Carver is able to confront his own complex grief. The presence of the other families and the world of the living reinforce the idea that Carver is not alone in his grief, and there are others he can rely on. Where Carver seeks out these support systems, Matt from *A Short History of the Girl Next Door* does everything in his power to push his support away until he learns that he cannot shut out the living in his own grief. Matt's path to acceptance requires acknowledgement of the loss of a future he thought he would have. All three boys interact with the entities to reckon with memories of the past, push through the complex grief of their present, and reckon with a future completely unlike the ones they expected.

The novels discussed in this article model a path to healthier grief as readers take in the events of the novel. In a real-world scenario, these narratives are especially important in helping adolescents confront their own trauma. To see a book character enduring the same pain that a teenager is feeling can be a freeing experience, and could open dialogue on melancholic grief. These novels create a pathway for discussion with teenagers who have lost a loved one and are unable to communicate. The role of literature is to entertain, of course, but also to instruct, to guide, and to provide comfort when possible. The liminal entities in these grief narratives are able to show adolescents that they can still confront the deceased in a manner that is healthy, even as they move on with their own lives.

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