

# Challenging the Love Triangle in Twenty-First-Century Fantastic Young Adult Literature

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## ABSTRACT

From Stephenie Meyers' *Twilight* (2005-2008) to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), the love triangle is a controversial but pervasive feature of 21st-century fantastic YA literature. The setup and outcome rarely vary: a female protagonist must risk souring friendships to make a final choice between two eligible boys, inevitably disappointing the alternative suitor and the readers who favoured him. Drawing on theories of triangular desire and reader-response theory, this article considers the factors governing fantastic YA's continuing use of the love triangle, its adherence to the final choice, and the barriers to alternative polyamorous outcomes which can offer continuity to friendships. Considering YA's readers, writers, and market, this article argues that this resistance results from general anxiety about polyamory's effect on the characters' desirability from the reader's perspective, and society's particular aversion to male bisexuality. Meanwhile, constraints on writers include the logistical effort and page space required to develop a satisfying polyamorous relationship. Facilitated through a discussion of two of the few polyamorous triangles in mainstream YA fantasy and science fiction, found in Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* series (2012-

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2013) and Tessa Gratton's *Strange Grace* (2018), this article proposes that if popular negative perceptions of polyamory can be overcome, its inclusion can provide freeing possibilities for both readers and the genre itself.

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'true' romantic love, and the lifelong pursuit of it, is so ingrained in Western societies that most people cannot remember the first love story they heard. Perhaps it was a childhood viewing of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), wherein heroine Belle snubs chauvinistic Gaston's advances in favour of the Beast's affections, or bedtime stories about King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Love-story literacy begins early in our monogamous society, and as we can see, intertwined with that comes love-triangle literacy. Although use of the love triangle as a literary motif predates the recognition of YA as a genre by thousands of years, early 21st-century Anglophone fantastic YA novels made it their hallmark, encouraged primarily by the phenomenal success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010).

In spite of its ubiquity over the last 17 years or so, I propose that the love triangle in fantastic YA is at a significant crossroads. Its power has waned far from its peak, with many fewer love triangle titles seeing publication in the last few years. Fantastic YA's readership is increasingly aware of the general format and accepted ending: a heterosexual, cisgender girl must choose between two heterosexual, cisgender boys. Choosing between two romantic options is a fundamental feature of literary love triangles regardless of publication date or genre, and therefore not unique to these fantastic YA novels, but I argue that the context of YA fiction's readership gives particular impetus to challenge it.

My analysis draws on examples from three fantastic YA series whose love triangles end in a choice (Meyer's *Twilight* series, Collins' *The Hunger Games* series, Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Cycle* series [2012-2016]), and one duology and one novel whose triangles do not, (Malinda Lo's *Adaptation* [2012] and *Inheritance* [2013], and Tessa Gratton's *Strange Grace* [2018]). Viewing the texts primarily through a lens incorporating reader-response theory and theories of desire, I suggest that there is a complex, interconnected confluence of factors driving both fantastic YA novels' employment of love triangles and their general adherence to monogamous outcomes. This article considers the influence of the commercial publishing market, the reader's personal fantasy of power and desire through their identification with these novels' protagonists, and wider societal bias against (male) bisexuality. It also considers concerns for fantastic YA writers, such as the difficulty of dividing page space between the work of establishing a new parallel world and the work of constructing a convincing polyamorous relationship.

Beyond offering an alternative to the love triangle's binary choice and therefore another option for the writer, the case for polyamory as a valuable outcome in YA hinges on how this alternative philosophy of relationship organisation allows friendships to be as deeply felt as romantic relationships (Klesse, *The Spectre of Promiscuity* 104). Adolescence is a time when "close friendships" are of "increased importance" (La Greca and Harrison 49). In support of this centrality of friendship in adolescence, YA texts can harness polyamory's ability "to challenge the mutually exclusive categories of 'friend' and 'lover'" (Barker 81), and confront the idea that romantic relationships must supersede or replace the state of friendship, which is "generally seen as less important than love" (82). Most scholarship on love triangles does not consider the possibility of polyamory as an outcome, and it is here that I propose my own organising model – a circle of relationships, imagined as a node situated within a broader network of friends.

## THE RISE OF THE LOVE TRIANGLE IN FANTASTIC YA

Before I consider the centrality of the love triangle to fantastic YA, it is helpful to first discuss the multiple genres included in my primary corpus, beginning with a clarification of 'fantastic'. The boundary between fantasy and science fiction is contested and difficult to navigate; for the purposes of this discussion, I am defining fantastic YA novels as those taking place in a world that is fundamentally different in some way to our own, telling stories that would not be possible outside of this altered or invented world. I have chosen to use the term 'fantastic' as it allows science fiction and fantasy texts to be considered simultaneously.

The second genre question to consider is the interaction between romance and YA. Michael Cart highlights romance's significance to the germination of YA fiction, writing that the 1942 publication of Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, a novel of "sweet summer love" (12), was the "signal occasion" (11) heralding the dawn of YA. Cart also notes a "trickling down" (42) of publishing trends from romance novels for adults to YA fiction in the 1980s. The intertwining of romance and YA then continued into the next century with the "runaway success" (Cart 120) of *Twilight*. This goes some way to explaining the general significance of the romance genre to YA's development, but not specifically the prominence of the love triangle in fantastic YA. To account for this, I believe we can look to the marketing surrounding *Twilight*, a series in which vampire Edward and werewolf Jacob vie for the affections of human protagonist Bella. This was not fantastic YA's first love triangle, but the fervour it inspired attracted intense media attention. Despite it being unclear whether the 'Team Edward versus Team Jacob' phenomenon came organically from *Twilight's* readership itself or was "invented purely by business strategists" (Doty n.p.), many readers of the novels and viewers of the subsequent wildly successful film adaptations (2008-2012) eagerly divided themselves based on which boy they endorsed as Bella's partner. As of 2020, 10 million

copies of the novels had been sold in the UK alone (Comerford n.p.). The ‘Team Edward versus Team Jacob’ phenomenon does not solely account for this, but the rivalry was a core component of the franchise’s marketing.

The position of the love triangle in fantastic YA was then cemented by its appearance in *The Hunger Games*. In this dystopian series where teenagers compete in televised fights to the death, an uneven triangle is drawn between protagonist Katniss, her best friend Gale, and her fellow competitor and eventual romantic partner, Peeta. Like *Twilight*, it has spawned several wildly successful film adaptations and its own direct echo of the ‘Team’ phenomenon: ‘Team Gale versus Team Peeta’. Marketing, however, does not by itself explain fantastic YA’s fondness for the love triangle. Rather, the interaction between the love triangle and the reader, and specifically what is ignited in the reader in response to the desire contained within the triangle, is crucial.

### HIM, OR HIM? LOVE TRIANGLES, THE READER, AND THE ATTRACTION OF BINARY CHOICE

In René Girard’s influential model of triangular desire, the triangle consists of the “subject” who enacts the desire, the “object” who receives the desire, and the “mediator” who influences the desire (2). The mediator directly encourages, or perhaps even originates, the subject’s desire for the object, whose “nature’ [...] is not sufficient to account for the desire” (2). It is thus primarily the mediator of the triangle who is in control of the flow of desire (3), and the mediator and subject may be rivals for the object (9). Girard’s model engages with a broad conception of desire, simply the act of wanting to possess something: as well as people, this can be an object or an intangible token of status (3). ‘Desire’ in the context of this article refers specifically to the desire for a romantic relationship, and the triangles are all ones in which the mediator and subject are rivals for the object. However, unlike in Girard’s model, the success of these fantastic YA love triangles depends – crucially – on the reader believing each protagonist to be loved and desired by her two suitors on her own merits.

Wayne C. Booth writes that “every book carves out from mankind those readers for which its peculiar effects were designed” (136); this imaginary reader has been referred to as the “implied” (Iser) or “intended” (Wolff, qtd. in Wilson 849) reader of a text.<sup>1</sup> We can conjure an image of the reader that these selected love triangle novels are primarily marketed towards – female-identifying, aged from approximately 13 to 18, cisgender, and heterosexual. The protagonists of the love triangle novels under discussion – Bella of the

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1 Throughout this article, when I use the singular ‘reader’ I am referring to this imagined and extrapolated figure, who does not exist in reality. The plural ‘readers’ acts as a synonym for ‘readership’ or ‘general audience’ – connoting a collective of real, unknowable, flesh-and-blood readers.

*Twilight* series, Katniss of *The Hunger Games* series, and Blue of *The Raven Cycle* series – also fit these characteristics (as far as can be ascertained from the texts), and therefore reflect this reader. This monolithic reader obviously does not represent every possible reader of fantastic YA – or even most readers, considering the fact that a 2012 Bowker Market Research study found that the majority of people who buy YA novels are over 18 (“New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults” n.p.) – but I propose that it is this small subset of readers that the market identifies and specifically sets out to court. Norman Holland suggests that the reader of any literary text “use[s] the literary work to symbolize and [...] replicate [them]selves” (816), and more specifically, that the reader seeks “from [the text] the particular kind of fantasy and gratification he responds to” (818); I venture that the love triangle protagonist functions as a vessel for the reader to do this self-replication work, being simultaneously familiar and aspirational. On the theme of reader gratification and engagement, Louise Rosenblatt states that if “the text offers little or no linkage with the [...] interests, anxieties, and hopes of the reader” (305), then it will not resonate with that reader. Situating the protagonist within a love triangle presents the reader with a twofold fantasy: being desired by two boys and having the power to choose between them. Girard’s conception of the triangle model is driven by masculine desire and “eclipses the role of women” (Dee 392), but in fantastic YA’s iteration of the triangle, the protagonist enacts the final choice. That said, other YA critics have disputed this idea of free choice, particularly in Katniss’s case. Katherine R. Broad claims that “there is no moment of decision, no expression of desire, and no evidence of Katniss exhibiting agency or control over her life” (124): but I would argue that Katniss does in fact make a final romantic decision, even if that decision is to accept Peeta’s love rather than refuse him and seek out Gale, or indeed refuse him in favour of living alone.<sup>2</sup>

Broad comments further on the “centrality” of *The Hunger Games*’ love triangle to the series’ reception, discussing its potent effect on “readers [who] are as much on the edge of their seats asking ‘Peeta or Gale?’ as they are wondering how the trio will outrun, outsmart and outlast the enemy at their heels” (118). Publishers have a vested interest in converting first-time readers into engaged readers who drive book sales, buy tickets to movie adaptations, and purchase merchandise; and as it is near impossible to read about a love triangle without forming an opinion over the outcome, the triangle is a straightforward way to create these engaged readers. The triangle is particularly effective at provoking this conversion, not only due to the nostalgic familiarity stemming from its long literary lineage, but also the way a love triangle remains in the mind after reading is concluded. The triangle becomes a problem or debate with two possible outcomes for the mind to chew over – Jacob

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2 This example does draw attention to the fact that the option of challenging the love triangle through refusing all suitors is a vastly underutilised one in fantastic YA; this is likely because this option would frustrate the reader’s fantasy. Having the protagonist at least acknowledge this as an option could, however, lend a greater sense of agency to whatever decision she finally makes.

or Edward, Peeta or Gale. This act of “reducing complex phenomena or choices to a binary set of alternatives is part of human nature”, and these binaries “quickly [acquire] an emotional tone when we begin struggling to decide which option is ‘right’ and which is ‘wrong’” (Wood and Petriglieri 32). In this case, the overwhelming, difficult-to-define concept of first love and its attendant emotions are simplified into a binary choice between two suitors, and, powerfully, the reader vicariously experiences making this emotional choice for herself. Another possible reason for the triangle’s ubiquity in fantastic YA is that it is highly replicable and translatable; it can easily become a component of novels across disparate genres, times, and places. The dystopian Panem of *The Hunger Games* may have little in common with *Twilight*’s Forks, for example, but the love triangle can easily appear in both novels due to the consistency of human nature. That is not to say that YA novels that make use of the device are necessarily formulaic, or even that their portrayals of love triangles are in themselves always formulaic – rather that over the last decade and a half, the love triangle has become a fundamental component in the fantastic YA writer’s toolbox.

The love triangle in Stiefvater’s *The Raven Cycle* series, for example, marks a departure from the triangles of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, despite using the same binary ‘him or him?’ setup. In the novels, protagonist Blue finds out via a vision that Gansey is almost certainly her one true love near the beginning of the first volume in this four-book series, and readers are thus aware that even though she dates Adam for the majority of the first two novels, there is no future in it. A similar script is in fact activated near the beginning of *The Hunger Games*: Katniss reflects that “[Gale] could be [her] brother” (Collins 8) within the first few pages of the trilogy’s opening novel. When Gale suggests the two of them could “run off” together and “live in the woods” (9), Katniss is troubled and confused by the romantic overtones of this suggestion. In the second novel, *Catching Fire*, she reconsiders this rejected plan to run away, but is stunned and dismayed by the profession of love Gale makes in return. Her emotions seem less surprising when one remembers her early casting of Gale as her brother. At the same time, the fact that he is presented as a viable romantic rival for a significant portion of the series confusingly undercuts this. Even though government-ordered wedding planning (for a sham marriage between Katniss and Peeta) is a prominent feature of *Catching Fire*, Gale and Peeta have a discussion in the final novel over whom they think Katniss will choose. At least in the characters’ minds, some doubt remains over the outcome almost until the end, regardless of the imagery evoked by even a false wedding.

By including the information about Gansey as Blue’s likely one true love at such a preliminary stage in *The Raven Cycle*, and then dissolving Blue and Adam’s romantic relationship relatively quickly, Stiefvater pushes this script raised by *The Hunger Games* further. The psychic prophecy functions as an emotional safety mechanism for readers about to invest their time, emotion, and money in the triangle’s outcome, assuring them that a wise investment in Gansey will likely see a return. However, this highlights a key pitfall with the love triangle: the engaged reader has a shadow, and it is the disappointed reader.

Deliberately attempting to present two romantic possibilities as equally viable candidates requires an author to decide to knowingly disappoint approximately 50 per cent of their readership by the series' end, thwarting their fantasy. The alternative to this is to make one boy into the obviously unsuccessful suitor from the beginning and avoid inviting reader investment in the wrong candidate, as Stiefvater does with Adam, but the reduced stakes result in a love triangle that is more underwhelming for the reader to experience. Complicating matters, the lure of binary choice itself also only extends so far; as this same choice between suitors has been enacted across many YA novels, for a significant subset of readers the choice mechanism itself is losing its appeal.

What if there were an alternative for writers to either disappointing their readership, or setting up an intentionally underwhelming “erotic rivalry” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 21) between the suitors, one which additionally satisfies the significant subset of readers who have tired of the protagonist having to choose between her suitors at all?

### **CIRCLING THE TRIANGLE: POLYAMORY AND THE FRIENDSHIP-LOVE HIERARCHY IN FANTASTIC YA LITERATURE**

The solution may lie in the reconfiguring of the love triangle model into an alternative structure. This is achievable through polyamory, a term denoting a relationship style which refuses monogamistic relationship organisation (Klesse, “Notions of Love in Polyamory” 14). Elisabeth Sheff provides a succinct definition, writing that “polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously” (“Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power” 252), while Christian Klesse points out that the term “literally translates as ‘many loves’” (“Notions of Love in Polyamory” 4). Polyamory comes in many different configurations; featured in the case study novels are one triad (a relationship involving three people who are all partners) and one V-formation (where one person has two partners who are not partners to each other). As the effect that the fantastic YA love triangle has on friendship is an urgent but overlooked issue, it is significant that polyamory can also confront dominant western ideas of friendship's subordinate position to love. As Klesse explains, “within polyamory, friendships are taken seriously and can demand as much affection, attention and consideration as sexual relationships” (*The Spectre of Promiscuity* 104).<sup>3</sup> In addition to eliminating the requirement to choose between two suitors, polyamory can therefore afford friendship the same status as

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3 Friendship's position relative to romantic love is, of course, culture specific. Daniel J. Hruschka writes that, for example, “among Pashtun herders in northern Pakistan, the love felt for close friends is extolled in poetry and compared with the feelings of lovers” (63). Hruschka notes that a wedding-like “formal and elaborate cementing of a close friendship before an audience (and sometimes with signed contracts) is documented in hundreds of cultures around the world” (72).

romance in these novels, honouring and reflecting the fact that “friendships become more important and complex during adolescence” (Jones et al. 65) and therefore are equally worthy of page space.

How, then, do friendship and love interact in triangle novels that persist with the final choice between suitors, and do not interrupt the established friendship-love hierarchy through polyamory? In those cases, writers must figure out how to convincingly remove the unsuccessful suitor from contention in a way that is both adequately final and satisfies readers, and this can result in the breaking or diminishing of the friendship bond between the protagonist and the unsuccessful suitor. Gale, for example, virtually disappears from *The Hunger Games*’ narrative after the event that irrevocably makes him an unviable romantic candidate. As Broad also notes (124), towards the series’ close Katniss finds out that Gale has left for a different district, a revelation that makes Katniss feel no “longing” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 448), and he does not appear again. Problems in their friendship surface repeatedly throughout this final novel, giving a clear foundation for their relationship to break down regardless of Katniss’ romantic choices, but several of these problems are directly related to monogamistic conceptions of romance. For instance, Katniss suspects Gale of being jealous of her platonic contact with Finnick:

I catch Gale watching me and Finnick unhappily. What now? Does he actually think something’s going on between us? Maybe he saw me go to Finnick’s last night. [...] I guess that probably rubbed him the wrong way. Me seeking out Finnick’s company instead of his. (Collins, *Mockingjay* 185).

Katniss herself also engages in this jealous behaviour. When Haymitch obliquely implies that Katniss’ friend Madge’s gift of painkillers to Gale may mean she has romantic feelings for him, Katniss reflects that “the implication that there’s something going on between Gale and Madge” very much “nettles” her (Collins, *Catching Fire* 116).

The erosion of their friendship gathers pace in the final novel. Katniss overhears Gale and Peeta discussing who they believe she will choose for her partner and is upset by how “cold and calculating” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 386) Gale believes her to be. She does not refer to him using the term ‘friend’ again after this point, despite previously repeatedly calling him her best friend. That said, the key motivating factor for the final implosion of their friendship is Gale’s contribution to Katniss’ sister’s tragic death, rather than Katniss’ choice to be with Peeta. However, as Gale’s involvement was relatively marginal, his position as the epicentre of Katniss’ grief and his subsequent timely exit feels inevitably tied to his position as the unsuccessful suitor.

Due to Stiefvater’s focus on building an effective secondary friendship network, *The Raven Cycle* does manage to end its love triangle without employing polyamory or terminating friendships. Unusually, Blue is an addition to a pre-established friendship group



rather than the lynchpin; her potential romantic partners have a prior friendship that significantly predates their knowledge of her. In contrast, *Twilight*'s Jacob and Edward are set up as enemies thanks to their status as vampire and wolf shapeshifter (though they do eventually reach an accord towards the end of the series), and Peeta and Gale's relationship is neutral at best; both sets of boys interact only because of the protagonist's presence. *The Raven Cycle* prioritises platonic bonds to the extent that it actually provides an additional layer of friendship fantasy for the reader alongside the fantasies of desirability and power: Blue initiates herself into the boys' world and experiences a friendship surpassing any other, describing it as "all-encompassing [...] blinding, deafening, maddening, quickening" (Stiefvater, *Blue Lily, Lily Blue* 103). The love triangle between Blue, Adam, and Gansey has the most satisfying resolution of the triangles discussed so far, as this intense friendship is preserved. Adam is eventually assigned a partner from elsewhere in the established friendship network (another boy named Ronan). The reader has developed an emotional attachment to Ronan as part of this network, and therefore he is a more suitable romantic replacement than a new character, or even a character who was not previously part of this network. As Ronan does not present an external threat to the characters' group bond, his romance with Adam does not disrupt the reader's fantasy of friendship.

Stiefvater's resolution is inaccessible for the many love triangle novels which do not prioritise this network building. Where there is no suitable candidate for the unsuccessful suitor to direct his affections towards, it is more likely that it will instead be his exit from the narrative which lends finality to the romantic outcome. Polyamorous novels tackle this problem by making both suitors successful. Like *The Raven Cycle*, these novels examine friendship and romance in thoughtful ways. In Lo's *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, protagonist Reese and her friend David are experimented on by aliens after an accident. Reese has romantic feelings for David before the narrative begins, but struggles with the idea of a romance with him as she has been badly affected by her parents' relationship breakdown:

For months [...] her feelings for David had been building up. She had tried to ignore them, because they scared the living daylight out of her [...]. She had promised herself a long time ago, after overhearing one too many fights between her parents, that she wasn't going to get involved in anything romantic. (Lo, *Adaptation* 49-50).

Given her vehemence, it is strange that she then meets and successfully begins a romantic relationship with an alien named Amber.<sup>4</sup> This is despite the new relationship requiring her to not only look past the trauma of her parents' divorce (just as a relationship with David would), but also re-evaluate her perception of her own sexuality. The idea of ruining her

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4 Amber's gender is complex. Though the text uses she/her pronouns to refer to her, her alien species does not use gendered pronouns, and she tells Reese that they "don't have a similar concept of gender" (Lo, *Inheritance* 126).

friendship with David causes more distress than either of these things: Reese views the move from friends to a romantic relationship as a permanent loss, an irrevocable move from one absolute state to another, rather than an extension or development of the friendship. After she dates Amber, she does eventually move on to dating David, though with considerable trepidation. She then breaks up with both as she cannot choose between them. When she later confides in David that she has struggled with the idea of being “friends again” post-breakup, he simply replies that they “never stopped being friends” (Lo, *Inheritance* 350). Unlike Reese, David understands friendship as continuous, regardless of romance. At the end of the series, Reese is in a V-shaped polyamorous relationship where David and Amber are romantically involved with her, but not with each other. The polyamorous relationship offers Reese an alternative to the monogamous romantic structure she has seen to fail (her parents’ marriage), therefore alleviating the anxiety over repeating the cycle with David and losing him.

Gratton’s fantasy *Strange Grace* also features characters who struggle with the sometimes fragile nature of friendship. Set in an undefined past, the novel tells the story of Mair, Rhun, and Arthur,<sup>5</sup> who live in a magical village where illness does not exist. All three experience attraction towards one another, but Mair and Arthur’s relationship is strained as Mair has embarked on a romantic relationship with Rhun. Although Mair describes herself as “both glad and annoyed to see [Arthur]”, her attraction to him is clear; it is only “because of Rhun [that she] refuses to love him” (Gratton 65). It is thus Rhun, not protagonist Mair, who initially plays the part of the doubly desired member of this love triangle. The term polyamory is never explicitly used, but it is implied that the three characters are in a triadic relationship at the end of the novel. The text suggests that the concept of monogamous romance is preventing Mair and Arthur from being friends with each other the way they are with Rhun, who longs for “them [to] be better friends” (Gratton 65). The eventual integration of friendship and romance through polyamory improves relationships between the three characters in general, breaking down these barriers and reconfiguring their relationship into a more circular structure.

That said, polyamory is not a miracle cure for all relationship ill-harmony. Whilst David and Reese’s friendship is preserved in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, the relationship between Amber and David is decidedly unfriendly. Polyamory is not the sole method of protecting friendships amid a love triangle, either; *The Raven Cycle* is an example of achieving this through other means. However, as this section has demonstrated, polyamory’s unique offering is threefold. It permits authors to develop both of a triangle’s romantic candidates to their fullest extent, it avoids the author having to find a convincing way to remove the

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5 Arthur appears to identify outside the gender binary, though he/him pronouns are used to refer to him throughout the text. Mair identifies as female, and Rhun as male. Interestingly, this means that both of the polyamorous trios discussed in this article involve characters who identify outside the gender binary. Detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this article, but the intersection of polyamory and gender identity in YA is fertile ground for further research.

unsuccessful suitor from consideration, and it does these things while also challenging the idea that friendship and romantic love are incompatible. Lo and Gratton can consistently present their protagonists' romantic candidates as being equally thrilling and attractive because both will succeed in the end.

A final useful function of polyamory in young adult fiction is how it challenges what Sara K. Day terms YA's "rhetoric of the permanence of first love" (157). Both Katniss and Bella marry and have children with the victors of their teenage love triangles, despite this being patently at odds with reality as "few adolescents expect to remain with their 'high school sweetheart' much beyond high school" (Arnett 473). Although adolescent loves can, and do, lead to lifelong partnerships (the frequency of which often depends heavily on cultural, social, and geographic contexts), adolescence for many people in a US/UK context is a time for gathering information about how to communicate with and love others. Allowing YA protagonists to engage in more than one relationship within the same text (and make mistakes in these relationships) requires them to negotiate with more than one romantic partner simultaneously. This maximises the amount of information on relationship practices and pitfalls that is available to readers, and reduces the emphasis on perfect, charmed first love – something useful even for monogamous readers.

#### **THE PROBLEMS WITH POLYAMORY IN FANTASTIC YA: THE READER AND THE POTENTIAL ROMANTIC INTERESTS**

The main issue with implementing polyamory is that it interrupts two of the imagined reader's fantasies: it requires the protagonist to be romantically involved with two partners at once, and it alters the desirability of the potential romantic interests. Although the state of being wanted by two boys is favourable for the protagonist and the reader who identifies with her, the polyamorous protagonist's decision to engage romantically with both suitors intrudes on the fantasy, implicating the reader as also possibly being 'that sort of girl'. There is a fundamental misunderstanding at a societal level over what sort of girl a polyamorous girl is. Polyamorous people, according to a 2016 study by Kevin T. Hutzler et al., are perceived to be "higher in promiscuity" and "lower in trustworthiness and morality" (74) despite the fact that "polyamory endorses commitment" (Klesse, "Notions of Love in Polyamory" 15). Exemplifying this anxiety, *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* pre-empt and directly address the misgivings that readers may have about their bisexual, polyamorous protagonist. Reese grapples with internalised biphobia, and even once she has accepted her identity, says: "I know what people think about bisexuals. That we can't make up our minds or that we're nymphomaniacs [...] I can't like two people at once. [...] Talk about stereotypes" (Lo, *Inheritance* 234-235).

The complex intersection of biphobia and resistance to polyamory affects not only the female protagonists, but their potential partners. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws an intriguing aspect of Girard's original triangle model to prominence, declaring that for Girard, "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (21). The move from a love triangle to a polyamorous relationship, even a V-formation, draws attention to this bond between the two male suitors, disrupting the plausible deniability of masculine rivalry by suggesting, at the very least, some degree of cooperation and compromise. I venture that it is primarily this implication of male bisexuality that makes polyamory an unattractive solution for these novels, as Western society's prejudice against bisexual men has been well-documented. Megan R. Yost and Genéa D. Thomas' 2011 study evaluating bi-negativity in heterosexual people found that "participants described male bisexuals negatively" (691); they also doubted the men's status as bisexual and labelled them as "really gay" (691). Considering this, it is intriguing that the love triangle in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* avoids having two male rivals; it is protagonist Reese's bisexuality that is instead confirmed, and therefore David's desirability is unaffected. The text supports this by frequently asserting his unquestionable appeal, highlighting his good looks, intelligence, and affability, referring to him as "an all-around golden boy" (Lo, *Adaptation* 20).

Compounding this, one of the issues surrounding the portrayal of even monogamous bisexual boys as romantic candidates in YA is the existence of a possible threatening 'other'. If a suitor identifies as bisexual, they are attracted to multiple genders, and thus there is the implication that they have desired someone of a different gender to the protagonist at some point. A heterosexual suitor lacks this inevitable shadowy other, and the protagonist has a greater sense of being the sole recipient of their desire.<sup>6</sup> If the female protagonist represents the reader's fantasy self, the male suitors represent perfect fantasy objects for this heterosexual reader to consume. They should be perfect repositories for her desires, not have alternative, conflicting desires of their own. The bisexuality of the male suitors interrupts their image as perfect fantasy objects, as saleable commodities, as abstract vessels of boys ready to receive the reader's projections – boys who, crucially, could possibly sell the next 'Team Edward vs Team Jacob' phenomenon. Complicating this further, if the most satisfying polyromantic solution to the love triangle is the triad, which not only produces maximum narrative pay-off by avoiding the romantic exclusion of one suitor but is also the

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6 It is worth noting that Adam of *The Raven Cycle* series is bisexual, but he only realises his bisexuality after he and Blue have broken up and he is freed from the confines of the love triangle. Therefore, at the time that he is a suitor to Blue, from the reader's perspective he lacks bisexuality's shadowy 'other'. Stiefvater portrays Adam as handsome, hard-working, and desirable, but the example demonstrates the incompatibility of bisexual boys with the traditional fantastic YA love triangle. As the text positions Blue's victorious suitor as her fated one true love, this lends weight to the idea that it is Adam's 'other' which specifically causes this conflict with the triangle structure.

most “idealized, iconic” (Sheff, “Poly-Hegemonic Masculinities” 626) polyamorous relationship type, then this lurking spectre of male bisexuality is no longer a spectre, but definite. This form of polyamory forces the direct confrontation of this shadowy other.

## FINAL STUMBLING BLOCKS: ISSUES FOR THE WRITER

So far, this article has utilised fantastic YA as an umbrella term, one which does not differentiate between fantasy and science fiction. However, this broad genre is no longer sufficient when discussing exactly how the two polyamorous case study texts – the science fiction *Adaptation* series and fantasy *Strange Grace* – construct their polyamorous relationships, and then speculating on how other writers may do the same.

Science fiction seems, in many ways, a natural ‘home’ for explorations of polyamory – Meg Barker explains that the word itself was coined “to refer to the type of responsible nonmonogamy advocated in Robert Heinlein’s (1961) novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*” (75), which is a work of science fiction. The alien society in *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*, for example, has normalised polyamorous relationships, providing a vehicle to introduce this concept to readers. Reese acts as the readers’ mouthpiece, asking questions and voicing doubts that they may also have, such as in this conversation with Amber:

‘I can’t be with you if I still want to be with him,’ [Reese] said miserably. ‘I can’t be with either one of you.’

[...]

‘That’s a really limited way to think about it.’

Reese groaned. ‘It’s reality. Why don’t you get that?’

Amber’s expression hardened. ‘I do get that you think that way. I’m saying you don’t have to.’

‘What do you mean?’

[...]

‘I mean you could date both of us.’

Reese stared at her in astonishment. ‘At the same time?’ (Lo, *Inheritance* 340-341)

Amber later informs Reese that she herself comes from a family of “three parents”, and that her people have developed the necessary technology to produce children using “genes from all parents” (Lo, *Inheritance* 442). Alien biology also supplies a solution to what the series regards as the biggest barrier to practising polyamory: jealousy. When Reese says that polyamorous relationships are “pretty unusual for humans”, Amber explains this is “because humans are jealous all the time” (Lo 341). She concludes that the jealousy arises as “they don’t have any idea what their partners are thinking because they can’t do *susum’urda*” (Lo 341). As Reese and David are made into alien-human hybrids by an experimental medical procedure, they too develop this alien emotion-reading ability. The series therefore unfortunately positions polyamory as extremely difficult for humans. Still, it does not frame polyamory as an entirely alien phenomenon: Reese’s best friend is aware of human polyamory practitioners, and Reese mentions receiving “support from the tiny polyamorous community” (Lo 464-465). Thus, although Amber is a primary source of polyamory knowledge within the text, the practice is not unheard of in the novel’s version of San Francisco in 2014, just as it was not in our San Francisco of the same year. Reese reaps the benefits of being a science fiction protagonist, as the genre gives her enhanced tools to aid her practice of polyamory and a vision of an alternate society which truly embraces it, while the novels’ 2014-2015 setting gives her the language to define it. It is significant that the Imria do not have a specific word for their practice of polyamory, and that Reese does not need to be supplied with one.

*Strange Grace*, on the other hand, lacks the intervention of mind-reading science fiction powers to aid the practice of polyamory, and its setting in an undefined past means that the text does not use the term. Ursula K. Le Guin has contrasted science fiction’s and fantasy’s unique relationships to time; the work of the science fiction writer often involves projecting the concerns of now into a future world, primarily to better illuminate our current reality (“Introduction to the Left Hand of Darkness” n.p.). Le Guin likens this process to the concept of a “thought experiment”, concluding that the genre is “not predictive; but descriptive” (“Introduction to the Left Hand of Darkness” n.p.). Science fiction is therefore often simultaneously futuristic and intensely of its time, as *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* are. For Le Guin, fantasy novels in which “there is no borrowed reality of history, or current events” instead embrace a “timelessness” of language (“From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” n.p.). Use of the term polyamory in *Strange Grace* may therefore be deemed too anachronistic, as the OED records 1992 as its year of first use (“Polyamory” n.p.).<sup>7</sup> *Strange Grace* is unmoored in time, situated in its own bubble; although it explores many of the same contemporary issues as *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* do, including gender identity and sexuality, it must do so differently. There are ways to overcome these barriers: the fantasy writer can invent another culture within the fantasy world that practices polyamory, and then invent a word for the practice, while a mind-reading spell could substitute for *Adaptation* and *Inheritance*’s alien

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7 Though, as stated previously, Barker traces the term to the sixties (75).

ability. However, fantasy's and science fiction's fundamentally different approaches to time means that the fantasy writer arguably has a larger hill to climb to fulfil readers' expectations. Readers may expect to see direct commentary on social concerns in science fiction, but stumble over them in fantasy novels set in worlds far removed in time from our own society.

That said, both the fantasy writer and the science-fiction writer must indicate their work's individual relationship to time, considering time's intense effect on cultural perceptions of relationships. *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* make clear their relationship to our contemporary time and draw on this period's popular understanding of polyamory. They also make their geographical and cultural context clear; Reese is obviously in San Francisco as we understand it, simply with the addition of aliens. Fantasy can do this, too. *The Raven Cycle* novels are situated in time through their references to technology such as mobile phones, and their US setting is meticulously rendered. Again, it is recognisably our world, but with additional magic. On the other hand, *The Hunger Games* series is set in a fundamentally altered future US, but one which readers are supposed to assume still upholds its preferred monogamistic relationship structures. Indeed, Broad notes that Katniss' marriage to Peeta reflects "the social and sexual status quo of our own world" (125). As polyamorous texts deviate from this norm, space within the text must be devoted to establishing the new society's attitude to polyamory. *Adaptation* and *Inheritance* are able to draw on the novels' proximity to our own time and society, but facilitating this is more complex in those polyamorous novels that are set in an invented location and culture, and more difficult again when the invented culture is a remote fantasy past. This is not entirely negative; the freedom to create completely new social rules can in fact make the task of portraying polyamory even more creatively stimulating. However, finding room in the narrative to establish all this is difficult when page space is automatically at a premium for novels involving polyamory, especially those including reciprocal triads.

The work of constructing the central triad in *Strange Grace* – the only case study text that attempts this – must also be balanced alongside plot construction and general world-building, which already occupies a greater page space in fantastic YA than other YA subgenres, such as contemporary realism. Reviewers have noted these difficulties: the Kirkus review of the novel notes its "relatively thin plot" and criticises the "generic setting" (Kirkus Reviews n.p.). The task of producing a satisfying triadic relationship automatically entails more work for the author. As equal reciprocal relationships must be established between all three characters, the romantic portion of the book inevitably then expands, vying for more page time. Gratton has eschewed a fixed narrative voice to mitigate this and build relationships between the characters more quickly. Each of the three characters is given sections of the novel from their point of view, but this creative act of artistic management cannot erase the burden of the extra work required. There is also the question of how this extra labour is perceived by readers, who have come to expect their heroine to

make a choice. Readers may perceive a polyamorous outcome as writers realising that they have failed to make a reasonable case for the protagonist's selection of one suitor over another, and so instead opt to have their protagonist not choose between them. Polyamory, an outcome that seems designed to satisfy all possible readers, may in fact dissatisfy more of them than a monogamous choice would. When this is coupled with the fact that there are so few polyamorous YA novels available that it is hard to ascertain the market for them, the lack of YA with polyamorous outcomes becomes less surprising.

## CONCLUSION

“I love you [...] Both of you, and all of you.” (Gratton 373)

Klesse writes that “in polyamory love is construed as an active agent which has a potential to grow eternally”; it is “unlimited and overabundant” (“Notions of Love in Polyamory” 14). There is an undeniable joy to the concept of boundless, unrestricted love. The feeling is well demonstrated by the final scene of *Inheritance*, in which Reese stands with her two romantic partners on a departing alien ship, looking with rapture upon the expansiveness of the universe, with its “masses and masses of stars” (Lo 470). To Reese, “[Earth] seemed lit from within, as if every life on the planet gave off a luminescence that together created an ethereal lantern in the dark” (Lo 470). These lines convey a fantasy of community, of having an assured place within a branching network that never ends. It is a paradisiacal conception of polyamory, but this feeling of acceptance and idea of being part of a wider branching network of relationships is not beyond what polyamory can provide at its most optimistic. Fantastic novels should, in fact, be a place where the most optimistic of outcomes can be achieved, and for YA novels this is even more vital.

However, readers, writers, and publishers are ultimately involved in a tug-of-love of their own: another triangle, perhaps, if you will permit revisiting that shape for a final time. Writers must weigh up the exciting possibilities of polyamory with its logistical challenges. Publishers must decide whether imbuing the tried and tested formula with something new and widely misunderstood is worth the risk. Readers must decide what it is that they truly seek in a protagonist and love interests, and what, to them, makes the most satisfying story. This article has proposed a very specific reader, but this monolithic reader is an unreal construction. The many real readers of YA have their own perspectives, feelings, desires, and experiences, and the genre should live to serve them. To close, I argue that if there were a better general understanding of polyamory and its practitioners in our society, more fantastic YA would adopt it. Considering the genre's construction of fundamentally altered or even entirely new worlds, it presents a unique environment for challenging these stereotypes. Ultimately, polyamory's emphasis on loving relationships, elevating of



friendship, and porous boundaries between platonic and romantic connections could crack the oppressive restrictions on love and friendship for the classic love triangle protagonist, ultimately offering her – and all of her readers – an alternative, unfamiliar, but perhaps freer fate.

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