

Review

Beyond the Blockbusters: Themes and Trends in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction.

Edited by Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson.

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Gabriel Duckels

If the so-called Golden Age of children’s literature has been successfully calcified into the canon, as decades of scholarship might attest, then the merit, breadth, and possibility of young adult literature continues to be underplayed and overlooked. *Beyond the Blockbusters: Themes and Trends in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction* goes some way in remedying that and makes me wonder whether we are today in a Golden Age of YA, of sorts. As Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson note in their introduction, in the twenty-first century YA “has become increasingly popular; both the YA fan base and YA publishing imprints have continued to grow at a time when many other subsets of book publishing are shrinking” (ix). This explosion of interest in YA is frequently conflated with the global domination of a handful of novels-cum-franchises, such as *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, which blur the connotations of the humble YA novel with those of an entire media industry. In response, scholarly work on YA orbits this “hypercanon” of “huge blockbuster fiction titles” (ix). This situation only reinforces the hegemony of these blockbusters and, in particular, their white gaze. With this in mind, Fitzsimmons and Wilson’s collection sets the goal of showing that “a vast forest of YA texts exists beyond the first few major blockbuster trees” (xxi) and that

recognising this range will “elaborate, expand, deepen, or diversify” (xxii) our scholarly and practical conceptualization of what YA is and does, and indeed, who YA purports to be for.

The shadows of Bella, Katniss, and Harry (among other verboten colossuses) do loom up from time to time, invoked as points of reference for the hypercanon we are not supposed to be talking about. The essays that follow Fitzsimmons and Wilson’s introduction, however, all spotlight “understudied *and* overlooked” (xvi) texts, trends, and subgenres. These are almost all published after 2005, “a year marked by a variety of changes to the media landscape: the launch of YouTube, the expansion of Facebook to high school students, and the release of landmark YA texts like Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* and John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*” (xvi). In this way, *Beyond the Blockbusters* distinguishes itself from Roberta Seelinger Trites’ long-cited, seminal work on twentieth century YA, and aligns itself with recent scholarship that advocates contemporary YA as an increasingly important arena for offering young people transformative narratives, especially with regard to diversity and authenticity (see for example: García; Mathison; Matos; Ramdarshan Bold; Toliver). This advocacy, surely, is more important than ever in a social landscape which is not only post-9/11 and post-crash but mid-Trump and mid-pandemic.

The collection is divided into three sections, although this division feels fairly arbitrary: more a way of bracketing these fabulously heterogenous essays into some order. The first section, *Defining Boundaries*, examines “the overarching shape and themes” (xvii) of genres and subgenres that go unnoticed when we focus on single texts. This includes Fitzsimmons’ study of the well-trodden but enduringly iconic trend for dystopian fiction that kickstarted the Golden Age of YA. Fitzsimmons compares Patrick Ness’ *Chaos Walking* trilogy (2008-2010) with blockbuster dystopian trilogies like Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011-2013) and – you guessed it – Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), establishing what should become a handy typology for understanding the triadic structure of YA dystopian sequences. Following this, Rachel L. Rickard Rebellino interrogates the rising influence of the YouTube star in the YA market, noting the financial motivation behind this trend, where print books can open up a “multimodal, multiplatform” (26) extension of stars’ brands. The authorial voice of the stars in these texts, Rebellino argues “is no less of a performance than their YouTube persona” (29), despite the illusion of intimacy that the print experience of the text seemingly seeks to elicit.

In the next chapter, we swerve in another direction, as Rachel Dean-Ruzicka attempts to define a subgenre that stretches across “the boundaries of historical fiction, fantasy, boarding-school narratives, Black speculative fiction, and traditional high school novels” to bring together novels which contain “paranormal teenagers capable of stopping a serial killer” (33). This vast set of reference points for such a specific narrative does beg the question of whether it is useful to offer it in the first place, but that aside, Dean-Ruzicka’s chapter provides a study of these novels in which canny young protagonists murder serial killers without regrets and so apparently challenge narrative assumptions of good versus

bad. To my mind, this essay does falter, however, by talking itself into a corner. At one point, Dean-Ruzicka suggests that if the intrigue around famous white serial killers is because we do not expect nice white people to kill, then the absence of representations of non-white serial killers might have “an underlying message that brown male bodies are expected to transgress the law” (44). The author implies this is unfair, given that there are numerous non-white serial killers who are not “household names” (44), such as the three Black and Latinx serial killers listed as examples. There must be a point here, perhaps even a useful one, but it seems a little like critique for the sake of critique. In a world in which Black men are fatally misrepresented, why would representing more Black male murderers be a good thing? On that note, should we be saying “brown bodies” when we really mean Black and Latinx people? At what point is describing people as bodies a device that draws attention to embodied aspects of injustice, and at what point does it risk becoming a symptom of that injustice? These are not meant as questions to the authors or editors, but rather, for white scholars who, like me, wonder how the language we use shapes the same world we love to deconstruct.¹

Amber Gray’s subsequent chapter explores the recurring role of the mermaid in numerous recent YA novels as “a point of identification for readers wrestling with how to begin an independent life and how to create and shape their own identities as they prepare to enter their own adulthoods” (51). One of my favourite aspects of this chapter is Gray’s wonderful summary of the intertextual connections between early folkloric impressions of the mermaid, Hans Christian Andersen’s iconic fairytale, and its subsequent tentacular (so to speak) impact across children’s and YA literature and culture. I was surprised that this chapter did not pay much attention to the motif of the mermaid in the LGBTQ+ community. While this omission does not reduce Gray’s argument, it does highlight one of many areas for future research that this collection makes possible. Following Gray’s chapter, Kaylee Jangula Mootz considers the emergence of YA novels that respond to anti-Black racism and police violence, most notably the bona fide blockbuster that is Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* (2017). Mootz shows how other YA novels by Black authors such as Nic Stone and Jewell Parker Rhodes are “invested in the truth telling” (70) of structural racism and the empowerment of protest and Black history. Notably, Mootz asserts that some of the novels in this subgenre are framed towards an implicitly white readership, and so risk seeming like “roadmaps for understanding whiteness during times of racial tension, rather than inspirational reflections of radical Black youth” (64). The essay is marred slightly – at least to my mind – by imprecise phrasing when Mootz’s notes that the Obama presidency was

1 As Mark Peters notes in *The Boston Globe*, the use of “female bodies” and “black bodies” to describe the specific embodied aspects of female and Black experiences has become commonplace. On the other hand, Peters observes that some commentators find issue with its widespread use: “People think they’re being so deep when they say ‘black bodies’ when they are objectifying us more!” (n.p.).

“plagued by an epidemic of racialized police violence” (64) rather than, surely, a time in which the normalisation of smartphones heightened the circulation of images of white supremacist acts of murder, and thus created greater awareness of anti-Black racism. As we have seen over the last few months, that violence is not new or unique to the Obama administration, making its representation in YA – and Mootz’s chapter – all the more important.

The collection’s second section, *Expanding Boundaries*, explores “collisions of subject, theme, and character in ways that challenge the limits of long-established genres” (xviii). Jason Vanfosson offers a fun example of this in action. His chapter brings recent works of queer YA into conversation with the tradition of the American road trip novel. Vanfosson argues that the use of the road trip motif in contemporary YA shows how “individuals who remain marginalized by the larger culture have limited mobility” and therefore that these narratives offer “insight into effecting change” (91). Second up, Jill Coste explores the intertextual relationship between fairytales and YA dystopia, arguing that recent novels by authors such as Sarah J. Maas and Marissa Meyer “call upon a long history of feminist fairy tale subversion [to] underscore the way YA literature has shifted to provide more empowering narratives for girls, narratives that pose complex scenarios regarding agency and awareness” (96). Following this, Tom Jesse and Heidi Jones propose a typology of masculinity in YA to be put into use within a framework of critical literacy. This involves four tropes of masculinity: “the stereotypical dude-bro” (113), “the sensitive thinker” (114), “the rebel outsider” (116), and finally “the problematic other” (117). Although these tropes provide a good template to consider how YA novels can help deconstruct (and even detoxify) the role of masculinity in the real lives of young people, they risk obfuscating the issues and identities represented in the novels used to define them: such as sexuality, disability, racial profiling, and police brutality. In the final chapter of this section, Leah Phillips considers the expansion of what she calls ‘mythopoeic YA’ – YA with politically potent fantasy worlds that “give space to resistance, [and] resist, in big and small ways, dominant hegemonic norms and standards” (123). Beginning with the feminist world-making of Tamora Pierce, Phillips argues that the counter-hegemonic possibility of mythopoeic YA can today be seen by its own “journey towards diversity of representation” (134) within the fantasy worlds of writers such as Rin Chupeco and Tomi Adeyemi.

The collection’s third and final section, *Revealing Boundaries*, “works to critique existing categories by tracing often unspoken genre norms and pushing back against expectations” and so challenges “unspoken assumptions” (xix). To my mind, this section contains some of the strongest chapters in the collection, perhaps because they necessarily undermine the otherwise prevalent notion that contemporary YA is a dynamic space that challenges hegemonic norms. It begins with Megan Brown’s fascinating analysis of the paratextual content of thirty YA novels which represent a range of experiences of disability, arguing that “those writing from outside of the direct experience of disability need to remember that they

occupy a complicated space” (152). By considering how book jackets and biographical information do or do not make gestures towards the authenticity of each novel’s representation of disability, Brown performs an extratextual method of analysis that could be taken forward in any number of ways for future research. In the following chapter, Sara K. Day argues that “it is particularly perplexing and potentially troubling [...] to note that one trend in recent YA literature is early marriage, especially in novels for and about adolescent women” (157). The resurgence of the marriage plot, Day argues, “signals a decidedly postfeminist impulse tied to ongoing cultural debates about marriage as institution and calls into question the potential of YA literature as a potentially feminist space” (167).

Subsequently, Roxanne Harde considers the “cultural significance and pedagogical value” (172) of recent YA novels which depict acquaintance rape, building upon Laurie Halse Anderson’s classic novel, *Speak* (1999). Whereas *Speak* concludes with the act of telling, these newer novels begin with it, emphasising what comes after the rape itself: “coping with the trauma, learning how to live with a drastically changed worldview, rebuilding the ability to trust, and testing the connections with family and friends” (172). As a trend, Harde identifies around forty novels published since 2005 which fall into this category, indicating that rape is perhaps a lucrative as well as important subject for YA writers to handle, and has been ever since Gregory Peck’s *Are You in the House Alone?* (1976). The ability to sell books, however, is not the same as handling the issue well. As Harde notes, YA authors “must begin to make clear that rape is no accident or mistake, to imagine new ways in which to rewrite rape and rape culture, and to redefine male and female sexuality” (184). These chapters, in particular, are a reminder of the inherently ambivalent status of YA in the popular imagination. Like the liminal figure of the adolescent that these novels rely upon, YA novels often re-enforce the same boundaries and ideologies that they call into question.

S.R. Toliver’s next chapter argues that blockbuster dystopian YA “promotes the idea that white female adolescent protagonists of the future get to experience freedom, equality, and societal progress, while adolescent females of color get to remain ignored as they continue to struggle for mere existence” (187). Toliver examines alternatives to these blockbusters which foreground the experience of girls and young women of colour, such as the work of Nalo Hopkinson, Marie Lu, and Nnedi Okorafor. If dystopian narratives stage contemporary concerns about what the future holds, then including and centring the experiences of girls and young women of colour in the genre is paramount; it affirms their “existences and experiences as a part of the future of humanity” (200). Toliver’s powerful chapter is followed by Sarah E. Whitney’s discussion of the intersectional feminism of YA novels about ballet, which demonstrates how these novels use the highly gendered, white supremacist cultural context of ballet to “offer frank new discussions of ballet’s darker side, including body image disorders, rape culture, and racism” (204). Bringing together a wide range of plots united by their shared use of ballet as a theme, Whitney argues that contemporary representations of

ballet “diversify the bodies featured onstage” and “challenge the objectification and sexualisation of girls’ ballerina bodies” (214).

In their introduction, Fitzsimmons and Wilson note that YA still tends to be understood as an “overly simplistic genre filled with superfluous melodrama and silly, overused plot devices – not least because of the rise of more visible blockbuster books” (xiii). It is to their credit that none of the editors and authors attempt to rebut this. Indeed, many of the novels analysed here count as silly by those standards, even those that grapple with the most serious social issues. I am grateful to the editors and authors for treating their objects of study with such gravity because YA novels can so often seem to resist being taken seriously. Indeed, that is surely one of their strengths. For example, in Whitney’s final chapter on ballet novels, I found myself laughing out loud at her summary of one novel’s character development: “Her masks slips when she murders two fellow dancers who have never accepted her” (209). Ah! Whose mask has not slipped in those same circumstances? Unintentionally, Whitney foregrounds what is admirable about YA – its unambiguous use of explicit symbols, its lavish emotion, its relentless combination of pathos and action, qualities that Katie Kapurch has elsewhere named its melodramatic impulse. Narrative events that seem unbelievably extreme are not meant to be believable per se, but rather offer dramatic metaphors and heightened solutions that respond to the subtly insidious issues in young people’s lives amid the high stakes of adolescence.

Although it is a pity that none of the chapters in the collection make moves to deepen our understanding of YA’s affective and melodramatic potential, or indeed its connection with the larger industry of youth entertainment that the title acknowledges, the editors and authors nevertheless embrace these fundamental aspects of YA. It seems apt that this collection comes ten years after Karen Coats’ call for scholars of YA to “honor the energy” (321) of adolescence in their research. As she argues,

critics, like teens, will need to rebel against established theoretical orthodoxies and adult-inflected expressions of value, to be constantly attentive to innovation, to follow cool, to take risks, to be unapologetically presentist, to research strong but always provisional conclusions, to adapt our critical identities to the objects we study, to be fickle in our pleasures. (322)

The editors and authors of *Beyond the Blockbusters* answer this call by treating YA with respect, by advocating for it without becoming uncritical, and so generate exciting new knowledge of divergent texts and trends. These essays do not waste time quibbling about realism or speculating whether YA will ever come of age, but rather, recognise the field as it is today in front of us. I imagine that the authors and editors understand that scholarship itself is a political gesture: the additional reading lists at the end of each essay demonstrate this, providing important recommendations for scholars, educators, readers, and, of course,

young adults themselves (those mythical creatures) to broaden their understanding of the field. By choosing which texts to read and write about, we make decisions to keep those texts alive; scholarship is a palimpsest, and we make choices about what we want to mark into it. As scholars, can we allow ourselves to enjoy YA novels at the same time as we take them seriously, for better or for worse? In the case of *Beyond the Blockbusters*, the answer is a resounding yes. As with all blockbusters, the editors of this collection must get a sequel into production as soon as possible, because its premise and various research foci have so much potential for future research.

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