

Editorial

Alison Waller, Emily Corbett, and Amy Waite

Young adult literature scholarship is fascinated with identity: with the identity of YA as a field, genre, or marketing category; with the identity of YA's creators and readers; with the identity of the characters who populate the pages or pixels of its primary material; and with its own identity both within the multidisciplinary umbrella of YA Studies and as an area of research that is related to, but distinct from, children's literature scholarship. Given this fascination, it seems pertinent to take a moment in this first editorial to establish our own identity as the *International Journal of Young Adult Literature*.

IJYAL aims to fill a gap. It is an international, English language journal publishing new research on YA literature, including theoretical work, considerations of form, genre, theme or style, author studies, comparative analysis, explorations of reception and response, and publication histories. In the vibrant round-table discussion published in this issue, Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips brought together members of the journal's Editorial Board and the recently-formed YA Studies Association's leadership to talk about the current state of YA Studies and the role that each organisation might play in its future ("Ploughing the Field"). Discussing the launch of the journal, Mike Cadden used the following analogy: "We're opening a bar here. We can put whatever we want on the wall and we can serve whatever drinks we want, but who is going to come and hang around the bar?" (17). It is just one image amongst several that we have found useful when thinking about our ambitions and approach for *IJYAL*, and towards the end of this editorial we will reflect on other metaphors that have shaped our intentions for the journal. We hope, for instance, that the people hanging around our bar will be academics, students, practitioners, publishers, teachers, librarians, and readers (and viewers, players, etc) of YA who want to engage with the theory, critical interpretation, literary history, and cultural production of YA from all parts of the world. We hope everyone will feel welcome, safe, and intellectually stimulated by the buzz of new ideas and debate.

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We have begun our work with an issue that asks how YA literature engages with the plurality of the human experience. Five of the articles featured continue and expand upon discussions that were started at the *Being Human in YA Literatures* symposium, run in partnership with the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature in London in May 2019.¹ The success of the symposium confirmed what was becoming increasingly apparent to each of us: that there is a body of excellent YA literature scholarship that needs a space to call its own. This realisation was the catalyst for *IJYAL* to come to fruition in 2020. The mix of emerging and established academics involved in developing our exciting discipline has encouraged us to try and showcase original, robust, and inclusive research from scholars of all career levels in an open-access format.

In the months since the original *Being Human* symposium, the world has changed irrevocably. Never have discussions about the nature of humanity, and what it means to be human, felt more relevant or urgent. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has shattered the routines and rhythms of everyday life across the globe, the Black Lives Matter movement has called out insidious prejudices, and forced us to begin acknowledging the various privileges and fragilities upon which lives have been both built and tragically destroyed. The fault-lines of the human have not just shifted: they have imploded.

In the midst of this 'new normal', Alison Waller's timely article "The Art of Being Ordinary" examines two tropes of 'ordinariness' – cups of tea and bus journeys – in a range of British YA standalone novels, interrogating how normality and ordinariness function in realist representations of British adolescent life. Waller argues that these seemingly insignificant activities in the realist novel, activities that bring people together whilst also highlighting the forces that might keep them apart, offer both their adolescent characters and readers much-needed time for important reflection and re-negotiation. Just as we now know that staying at home can indeed save lives, Waller underscores the significance of the everyday in expediting change: never again will we underestimate the power of 'massive mugs' of tea. By stepping away from a critical focus on the extraordinary (beings, situations, objects, activities) and paying attention to the oft-overlooked quotidian worlds created by YA authors, Waller presents new ways of engaging with vital questions of difference and commonality.

Amy Waite, author of "Teeming Stomachs and Infinite Spirals", similarly steps away from the extraordinary in YA fiction – this time focussing on the prosaic world of bowels and bacteria. During a time when the idea of 'ontological hygiene' is under intense scrutiny,

1 *Being Human in YA Literatures* is among a number of YA focused conferences and symposia that have been organised by doctoral candidates and early career researchers in the UK over the past few years. Anthony Stepniak organised the *YA Identities* symposium at the University of Northampton in 2017; Sean Donnelly organised the *Reading YA* symposium at the University of Birmingham in 2018; and Gabriel Duckels, Nic Hilton, and Lisa Kazianka are due to host the *Let's Talk about Sex in YA* conference at the University of Cambridge in 2021 (the conference was originally scheduled for 2020 but was postponed due to Covid-19).

when the repeated washing of hands is simultaneously a call-to-arms and a panicked obsession, Waite's examination of adolescent OCD in John Green's *Turtles All The Way Down* and Patrick Ness' *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* offers a new perspective on what it means to be posthuman in YA fiction. Waite argues that recent critical focus on spectacular narratives of posthuman empowerment in fantasy, sci-fi, and dystopian novels has a) excluded important facets of the posthuman experience and b) evangelised the curative power of YA fiction. Just as posthuman protagonists can be worried – rather than inspired – by their ontological status, YA fiction can (and perhaps should) be something other than the excited indie-kid 'hero' rushing in to save the day and empower its readers.

The 'quieter' aspects of YA narratives are also examined by Emma Reay in "Empathy Puzzles: Solving Intergenerational Conflict in YA Video Games". This article considers two video games – *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* – that prioritise reflection, exploration, and domestic activity instead of the conventional explosive fights or heroic feats that one might expect of such media. Reay argues that empathy operates as a ludic skill in these video games, expediting considered action by training us to reflect, mediate, and intervene. As the teenaged protagonists navigate their *unheimlich* homes – handling objects, moving from room to room, uncovering stories – their interactions enable new opportunities for familial reconciliation. As Reay suggests, gestural empathy is problematic: a superficial show of connection that does little more than reaffirm dangerous power dynamics. This rings particularly, painfully true right now. The blacking out of Instagram squares might operate as a gesture of support for Black Lives Matter, but what good does this do if not coupled with an acknowledgement of complicity in prejudiced infrastructures? In order for empathy to initiate true agency, it needs to be rooted in active processes of self-interrogation – processes which can and should be practised regularly. Reay argues that YA video games such as *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* provide a valuable arena for doing so.

Waller's, Waite's, and Reay's articles all look beyond the extraordinary spectacle so often associated with YA to uncover divergent narratives and perspectives. In his review of *Beyond the Blockbusters: Themes and Trends in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction*, Gabriel Duckels demonstrates the scholarly importance of such work – of moving past the blockbuster hypercanon to expand, deepen, and diversify our understanding of what YA is and does. Duckels lauds this particular collection of essays for actively expanding our knowledge of divergent YA texts and trends, but also for taking YA seriously: even, or especially, when it is at its silliest. Yes, this collection – examining everything from YA ballet novels to disability peritexts – successfully interrogates overlooked and understudied perspectives, but it does so whilst also embracing YA's penchant for entertaining melodrama and laughable, lavish emotion.

During this time of global emergency, we might be tempted to turn to YA fiction and expect it to lead the charge: to be extraordinary and transform the world in earnest. But as

these four pieces suggest, YA narratives are often most impactful when they are at their most ordinary, prosaic, quiet, or even ridiculous. By directing our critical attention to these smaller moments, by highlighting the ways in which YA provides time and space for a different type of interpretative energy, potential new modes of response emerge: modes that might just help facilitate the kind of meaningful change and connection needed right now.

While a number of articles in this issue look inwards at the minutiae of the individual or the everyday, others direct their gaze outwards, at literary trends, ideological contexts, and global developments. Karen Coats' invigorating overview of death in twenty-first-century YA demonstrates the continuing importance of this theme and its centrality in framing moral and practical dimensions of adolescent maturation. Using a range of theoretical tools drawn from philosophy, posthumanist thinking and postmodernist criticism, in "From 'Death Be Not Proud' to Death Be Not Permanent" Coats explores the way that contemporary YA helps its readers to question the very boundaries of life. As technologies increasingly promise a challenge to the inevitability of decline and death, it seems that fictional adolescents are invited to reject conventional responses to mortality involving acceptance and awareness of loss and try out alternatives that centre resistance and social activism. Coats' speculative think piece suggests that literary nihilism can, in fact, generate a whole kaleidoscope of possibilities for young readers.

Emily Corbett's "Transgender Books in Transgender Packages" looks in more detail at possibilities opening up to youth readerships by presenting a recent history of transgender YA literature, a subset of YA that entered the market in the early twenty-first century. Corbett maps how the field of transgender YA fiction has grown and developed over the last five years to encompass greater variety, intersectional diversity, and Own Voices authorship across the UK and US publishing industries, thus representing a broader spectrum of transgender identities than it did in its early years of publication. By considering how the commercial packaging of a number of these books might usefully signal the audience each is intended to attract, Corbett makes the case that transgender young adult novels are frequently marketed to cisgender readers at the expense of transgender and questioning adolescents who might be seeking nuanced reflections of their lived experiences.

Deborah Williams' analysis of two speculative novels in "Witches, Monsters, and Questions of Nation" reveals how "monstrous female bodies" (16) – particularly adolescent ones – can be activated in order to critique existing structures of Western hegemony. The novels examined, *Trail of Lightning* by Black Native author Rebecca Roanhorse and *Akata Witch* by Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor, use magical and fantastic elements inspired by a mixture of indigenous cultures and mainstream literary traditions. These are employed as strategies within the narratives to challenge ways of being that are destructive for local communities and for the earth's environment. In examining these complex texts, Williams draws on theories of cosmopolitanism, calling for a literary landscape that allows authors

and readers to move beyond restrictive ideas of national identity and towards global citizenship.

The articles and reviews in this first issue represent approaches to identity and connectivity that *IJYAL* broadly shares. One of the key moves for this journal is to highlight global and inclusive texts and approaches to YA, and to include and amplify a multitude of the critical and literary voices who have already begun to destabilise what can feel like a dominant Anglo-American clique. In her review of Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera's *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature* (2020), Kristina West commends the edited collection for "successfully fulfil[ing] its aim of and repeated call for representation of a range of Latinx and Chicanx identities, a representation still lacking in YA fiction and its academic analysis" (8) and notes that the collection will surely "become an important jumping off-point for many further discussions the field" (8). We want to amplify such discussions and support a community of scholars working on YA from every part of the world. This is not to say that national, regional, or local differences should be ignored: indeed, we hope that we can provide a platform for research into distinct and varied literary traditions, publishing trends, audience needs, and thematic and stylistic patterns.

In "Young Adult Literature for Black Lives", Ebony Elizabeth Thomas starts this work in earnest. Her position piece acts as an invaluable overview of a strong but contested tradition of Black scholarship. Thomas asks for the rich differences in perspectives brought by African-American, Native, Caribbean, Black British, and African academics to be brought into the developing narrative of YA Studies, and their contributions to the growth in the field to be acknowledged and – where they have been overwritten or ignored – to be recovered and celebrated. Her critical reflections remind us that some voices are still repressed in the academic world, and YA Studies is not innocent in all this. As she puts it, "the field of young adult literature studies has largely left Black scholars and Black scholarship behind" (13), while "[t]here is a growing tension among scholars, authors, and other stakeholders who have been in the field for decades, and those who began their careers in the 2010s" (13). Susanne Abou Ghaida's review of Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (2019) also highlights this point. Ghaida places Ramdarshan Bold's monograph in the context of a "broader social and political project of documenting racial inequalities in publishing by way of pushing the industry to re-examine its practices so that real, substantive change can finally take place" (1). In doing so, Ghaida argues that Ramdarshan Bold had produced "a pioneering study that can be used as a model to examine other aspects of diversity" (6).

We want the 'I' in *IJYAL* to be truly international and inclusive, rather than solipsistic. It is true that we have not achieved everything we might have wanted in this first issue, but as an editorial team we are committed to strive towards internationalism and global connections in future iterations. As Corbett and Phillips write, "YA scholarship organic and

blossoming, [but] it is also open to productive disruption in the manner of ploughing” (1). The contributors to the round table discussion commissioned for this issue highlighted some of the exciting and important work of YA and its scholarship, but they also brought to the fore some of the ongoing issues in the field. YA Studies remains beset with the institutional elitism, structural discrimination, and precarity that allow only some voices to be heard, and it is important that we, as scholars and editors, acknowledge our complicity within the structures that feed oppression, marginalisation, and ignorance.

One small way to make change is to build connections. The term ‘network’ is another metaphor we have found to be useful in drawing up our editorial policies and expressing our general philosophy. It can represent a net for safety, as scholars work together; it can indicate the way that small independent tributaries contribute to a larger body of research; and it offers the frisson of electricity that comes from sparking new ideas in dialogue. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, scholarly networks have been created or sustained through virtual conferences and online discussions, stimulated in part by the increasing awareness that we are all implicated by global challenges and threats to humanity, not least in our attitudes towards the next generation and narratives that involve them. Over the last two decades, YA literature and its scholarship have benefited from the increasing visibility, popularity, and recognition that have seen it become a thriving part of academic and cultural discourse, paving the way for this journal. This first issue includes one round table (Corbett and Phillips), two position pieces (Coats, Thomas), five research articles (Corbett, Reay, Waite, Waller, Williams), and three review articles (Duckels, Ghaida, West). We are excited to see what comes next...

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