

# From ‘Death Be Not Proud’ to Death Be Not Permanent:

## Shifting attitudes towards death in contemporary young adult literature

Karen Coats

### ABSTRACT

Death has been a major theme in YA literature from its inception, prompting Roberta Seelinger Trites to theorize that the protagonist of a YA novel must accept death as an ultimate “curtailment of their power” (140) in order to achieve maturity. While her arguments hold true for twentieth century texts, this paper explores how this condition has shifted somewhat in twenty-first century YA. Instead of accepting death as permanent and inevitable, contemporary novels often stage plots that enable characters to deny its power altogether by trivializing it; personifying and romanticizing death as a human-like character deserving of empathy; rendering it as an act of choice for teen characters; or denying it outright through recursive plotting or posthuman fantasies. In addition, deaths caused by social injustices are increasingly used as a rallying cry for activist responses. Threaded throughout these trends is a common denominator of positioning death as a challenge to

---

Karen Coats is Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge, where she heads the Centre for Research in Children’s Literature. Her most recent books include *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adult Literature* and *Teaching Young Adult Literature*, a volume in MLA’s Options for Teaching Series that she co-edited with Mike Cadden and Roberta Seelinger Trites.

traditional ways of thinking about the value, meaning, and desirability of human life. This paper suggests that Nietzsche's concepts of active and passive nihilism are useful to explore the extent to which these ways of denying death's power are successful in encouraging an active questioning of death rather than a passive acceptance as the condition of achieving maturity in the twenty-first century.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the modern YA corpus has been littered with dead bodies, both offstage and on. Characters like Holden Caulfield, Ponyboy Curtis, and Jerry Renault walk through their days enshrouded in grief over dead siblings, best friends, and parents. The 'fallen angels' of Walter Dean Myers, the more than seventy decedents imagined by Lurlene McDaniel, and the myriad gay characters who are victims of murder, suicide, drug overdoses, or HIV/AIDS personalized the history lessons and headlines of the 1980s for avid teen readers trying to come to terms with the many ways death asserts its ultimate authority. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Roberta Seelinger Trites could thus confidently assert that "[a]cceptance of losing others and awareness of mortality shape much of the discourse surrounding death in YA novels" (119). Such acceptance and awareness, she argues, serves as a marker of "maturation when the protagonist accepts the permanence of mortality, when s/he accepts herself as Being-towards-death" (119). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, it seems as though attitudes toward death in YA literature have undergone a noticeable shift, as protagonists and other characters are as likely to go what Neal Shusterman in his *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy (2016-2019) calls 'deadish' as actually or permanently dead (more of this later). While many books still adhere to Trites' claim that acceptance and awareness of 'the permanence of mortality' is a catalyst for maturation, others stage challenges to, or full-on denials of, death as a natural, inevitable, or even permanent state that one must accept as a condition of maturation.

The metaphor I propose for considering this shift in portrayals and attitudes toward death in YA literature is a kaleidoscopic turn. As you probably know, a kaleidoscope is composed of two or three reflective surfaces arranged in a triangle or V-shape. A collection of objects is placed at one end of a tube with an eyehole at the other end, and by rotating or shaking the kaleidoscope so that the objects move, new patterns are formed by what falls into the space that is reflected. I suggest that the same basic pieces that have always appeared in YA fiction – deaths of parents, siblings, and classmates; deaths resulting from suicide and social injustice; and engagements with the paranormal – are still there, but have been twisted in contemporary YA literature into new patterns of function and response for characters and readers.

Beyond descriptions of these functions for death, however, I want to suggest a possible way to make sense of why these new patterns have emerged. As I and others have argued elsewhere, both YA literature and teen identity are remarkably attuned to, and in a dialogic relationship with, broader sociocultural trends (see Coats, “Dialogism”, “Diverse”, and “Young”; McCallum; K. Reynolds). In her chapter on YA fiction in *Radical Children’s Literature*, Kimberley Reynolds identifies three key ways contemporary YA fiction responds to cultural ambivalences about youth culture that have arisen since the radical movements of the 1960s and 70s. The first two are “books that trivialise adolescents” through humour and narcissistic navel-gazing and “nihilistic fiction” that offers bleak scenarios of disempowerment (77). Though seemingly diametrically opposed, these two exist “as strands in the web of containment” (77) by representing adolescence as a carnivalesque detour on the way to a stable, quiescent adulthood. The third type of book Reynolds identifies “celebrate[s] adolescent creativity and agency” (77). Reynolds’ astute identification of these culturally mirroring gestures across the landscape of YA literature bears both focus and expansion as we consider the kaleidoscopic shifts in how death appears in twenty-first century YA fiction, with the focus being on how these trends might blend to participate in a denial of death’s final authority, and the expansion considering how nihilism, technology and posthumanism function in that endeavor.

## **NIHILISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Nihilism is usually associated with pessimism and a loss of hope, and indeed, this is how Reynolds presents the trend toward nihilism in YA fiction, limiting her discussion to books that “make it hard for readers to think why they should struggle for change when the consequence is unwelcome attention and recognition of impotence in the face of complex, entrenched, and inert social and political systems” (82). But as Nolen Gertz points out in his book *Nihilism and Technology*, Friedrich Nietzsche saw nihilism as a potentially powerful and productive force for spurring human progress if a crisis in belief would lead people to “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability” (Nietzsche *Will* 7). Such crises of belief and challenges to the traditional values of their elders are regular features of youth culture and the fiction that represents it, but the result for the teen character is typically, though certainly not always, either the acceptance of the old or the embrace of new values rather than a repudiation of value altogether.

This narrative trajectory emerges because nihilism, Nietzsche contends, can have two guises: an active one, which indicates “a sign of increased power of the spirit” or a passive version, which leads to a “decline and recession of the power of the spirit” (*Genealogy* 17). Active nihilism questions, challenges, resists; passive nihilism accepts things as they are, loses faith that anything will change, or cedes the will to whatever ideology or activity

requires the least effort. And it is the effort of unpleasant or tedious activities, Gertz argues, that our technologies have paradoxically promised to deliver us from even while holding out a promise of greater agency and productivity. We can be activists from our couches by clicking 'like' or retweeting something after we have turned on the dishwasher and set our robot vacuum cleaner to work; we have targeted therapies for physical and mental distress that our ancestors just had to put up with; our use of personal entertainment devices renders boredom or other people's noise as problems we can shut out rather than a normal part of our daily commute. While these examples of mundane activities may seem trivial, Gertz argues that our increasing belief that technology is a way to avoid repetitive, difficult, or unpleasant tasks has led us to a mindset that sees quite ordinary circumstances and experiences as problems that can and should be solved with more or different technologies. This underlying ideological turn away from acceptance of the inevitable unpleasantness of some things to a belief that all of life's problems can be fixed, I suggest, might be a way to theorize why our attitudes toward death have shifted, especially when it comes to YA literature: our faith in tech has led us to active nihilistic questions about whether death, arguably the most ordinary, unpleasant, and difficult experience we face as humans, can be viewed as a solvable problem. If so, why come to terms with it at all? Why not instead present it something that can be defeated or denied altogether?

We might see the Katniss Everdeen of the first book of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) as the prototype of active nihilism: refusing to accept the values of a social order that mandates the violent death of innocents as the condition of its continuance, she is infused with 'increased power of the spirit' to protest the Games themselves, even to the point of a willingness to sacrifice her own and Peeta's life. But by the final book she is disillusioned; she descends into passive nihilism and acceptance as therapy and her ultimate desire for Peeta and the quiet life he offers enable her to believe that life can be good, or at least good enough, again. Despite her heroic actions, she ultimately falls into the pattern Trites details of coming to terms with the ideological and physical limits her society and her embodiment impose on her. In that sense, Katniss ultimately fails Nietzsche's hopes for what active nihilism can offer. He saw active nihilism as a necessarily permanent condition of the 'Overhuman' or 'Übermensch', one who could continually question and continually reject the notion of any transcendent source of meaning and value altogether. As a result, Nietzsche could offer no examples or final description of what such a being might look like, because to assert any sort of value or meaning would impose the criteria of a world view that would in turn need to be questioned and rejected. What Reynolds identifies as nihilistic fiction can be further nuanced as an initial foray into active nihilism followed by a retreat into passive nihilism: characters like Katniss initially question the received values of their culture, but in the end they either die or otherwise lose their agency, become passively compliant or actively complicit in perpetuating existing

hegemonic values, or turn over their own will to the will of a new group or another externally imposed belief system.

Such narratives realise Nietzsche's fears that instead of embracing the liberation that active nihilism and the abandonment of oppressively hegemonic value systems could afford, "[t]he strength of the spirit may be worn out, exhausted [...] and whatever refreshes, heals, calms, numbs emerges into the foreground in various guises, religious or moral, or political, or aesthetic" (*Will* 18). This insight offers us a way to place Trites' twentieth-century observations and Reynolds' views of contemporary YA texts into conversation with one another when it comes to death: texts that Trites argues show maturation through acceptance of death and that Reynolds identifies as nihilist feature protagonists actively struggling, mentally or physically, against oppressive forces, with death for Trites representing the ultimate authority to which we must all bend. These characters most often end up quiescent, exhausted with grief, beaten, worn out, or even dead themselves. Some do, of course, offer what Reynolds sees as "adolescent creativity and agency" (77) in response to their grief, which is the emphasis Trites takes in her examples from three YA novels that feature characters using photography to explore how images arrest and preserve time and blur the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. In short, Trites shows how the main characters' use of photography enables them to accept death by embracing the knowledge that "they can survive long after the photographer and the photographed subject/object are dead" (136). More and more often in the twenty-first century, however, it is the authors' creativity and agency on display as they find ways to sidestep death's authority altogether – to refuse to accept it as inevitable, permanent, or even particularly relevant to a character's ongoing presence in a book. The questions we must consider in the trends I will identify, then, are these: to what degree are these treatments of death nothing more than "strands in the web of containment" (K. Reynolds 77) of adolescent anxieties, or anxieties about adolescence, in their attempts to trivialize or deny death's permanence? That is, in Nietzschean terms, how might such texts be read as aesthetic means to calm or numb those anxieties? Alternately, could the refusal to accept death as the inevitable condition of being human spur readers toward an active nihilism that leads to social change? Finally, is death just one more problem we can solve through technology?

## **KALEIDOSCOPIIC TWISTS IN DEATH-THEMED YA**

In what follows, I suggest some patterns that seem to me emblematic of a kaleidoscopic turn in the twenty-first century. Obviously, my observations are somewhat idiosyncratic, as treatments of death in YA literature are ubiquitous and varied, and I haven't read everything. But I began thinking that something new was going on when I encountered a number of texts that gave me an affective sense of dis-ease. These made me think that something had

shifted from the death, dying, and grief books I was used to, so I was moved to track it down. As I twisted the kaleidoscope to explore these new patterns, I realized that, while some YA novels put forth an active nihilistic call to examine the values we place on life and death, others offer distinct ways to avoid that challenge. In addition, because I have expanded Reynolds' category of nihilistic fiction to include texts that are not necessarily dark, but questioning, I find that many books blend their characters' nihilistic impulses with agential responses. I present these patterns in catalogue form rather than through close readings, with a rough trajectory from less to more serious in their seeming intent. Please note that as with all trends in YA, these are subject to change as our cultural mirrors and creative authors reflect new vistas. In addition, each pattern could be opened out into a critical research study of its own, and if the reader is anything like me, we are always looking for exceptions that may either prove any rules or nullify them entirely.

### **Death Played for Laughs**

As Reynolds notes, treating adolescent concerns comically is a means of trivializing both the concerns and those who hold them. Referring in particular to YA novels addressed to girls, Reynolds says, “[s]uch books offer no encouragement to their readers to contest and replace the adult world of whose body and fashion sense the characters are endlessly critical, but encourage a sense of complacency about everything but appearance” (80). While I might argue in favour of humour as a way of enabling an affirmative sense of detachment from, and subsequent empowerment over, oppressive but inconsequential norms – that is, the books to which Reynolds refers put body image and fashion in their proper place by trivializing what should in fact be trivial – it is interesting to consider humour's connection to something as nontrivial as death. From the comical ghosts at Hogwarts to the lovers in paranormal romances to the menacing revenants in horror novels, the presence of literal posthumans interrupts the traditional grieving process by insisting that they are not really dead, or if they are, they are not really gone, and if they are not gone, then there is no reason to grieve for them. The active presence of these dead characters makes it hard to take death or its causes seriously, and a lot of the novels simply do not. In this respect, they fall into the mode of treating a very serious concern for teens as something trivial through the use of ‘gallows humour’. Lish McBride's *Necromancer* series (2010-present) plays death entirely for laughs, up to and including an undead girl's head being carried around in a bowling bag. A spate of zombie novels more comical than scary (though still a little scary) trended for a few years to presumably critique a generation of teens succumbing to mindless consumption and sexy paranormal romance (*Generation Dead* [Waters 2008]; *You are So Undead to Me* [Jay 2009]; *I Kissed a Zombie, and I Liked It* [Selzer 2010]), but evolved into books like Sean Beaudoin's *The Infected* (2012), which posits that once their initial murderous hunger subsides

and they have eaten all the bad actors, the collective values of the zombies will somehow be positively directed toward a new, more inclusive way of conceiving what it means to be human. That said, however, appreciation for this type of humour has been correlated with high levels of intelligence and education and low levels of aggression and mood disturbance (Willinger et al. 166), so it may be the case that those who find these texts funny see no need for challenging a status quo that affirms qualities they already possess.

### **Death as Romantic Hero**

Teen girls falling in love with (or held in thrall by) the broody Byronic hero who tempts them into a romance with death is as old as Hades' pursuit of Persephone, and it has been kept alive in popular culture through the ages; recent examples include Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008) and Martine Leavitt's *Keturah and Lord Death* (2006). Perhaps a surprising twist in twenty-first century YA fiction, however, appears in the form of sympathy for death as a character without an attendant romance. As personified narrator of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005); a scythe-bearing rat to be bargained with in *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (Pratchett 2001); a teenage girl in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series (1988-1996); a generous boss in Robin LaFevers' *Grave Mercy* (2012); a clever interlocutor with Love in a game for supremacy over the fate of an interracial couple in Depression-era America in *The Game of Love and Death* (Brockenbrough 2015); and an ultimately friendly guide in *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (Rowling 2008); readers are asked to consider how overworked, unwelcome, and unappreciated Death feels about its lonely job. Does creating Death as a character trivialize it, or does it cause readers to rethink the dominant ideologies through which it is understood in their cultures? Given the grandeur of Zusak's narrator and wit of Brockenbrough's gambler, the reasonableness of Pratchett's Bone Rat and the pragmatism of Gaiman's Death, the sexiness of Keturah's lover and the ambivalent nature of Death in Rowling's tale, it's impossible to generalize.

### **To Be or Not to Be: Your Choice, Really**

Following Harry's decision to return to the fight after he has been struck down by Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007), a number of books took up the notion that living or finally dying is a choice one makes. A formula emerges whereby a character, usually a white girl, is in a horrible accident and ends up unconscious. At first, she does not understand where she is, but she meets someone, usually a boy, who is interested in hearing her stories. As she revisits her memories, she realizes that there are things she needs to fix. For Sam in Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall* (2010), a *Groundhog Day* plot structure enables her to

get a few botched relationships right and save someone else's life before she finally succumbs to her own death; for Mia in Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* (2009), the choice is whether she wants to rejoin the living after learning, through an out-of-body experience while in a coma, that she is the only one of her family to survive a car accident. Audrey has a similar but more complex experience in *Hotel Ruby* (Young 2015), when her father, brother, and she make an unplanned stop at a mysterious hotel while driving cross country. Her father and brother are invited to a formal party that has been held every evening since a fire destroyed the hotel ballroom in 1937, but Audrey sneaks in, meets a boy, and eventually has to decide whether she will come out of the coma or join her dead father, brother, and new boyfriend at this never-ending soiree.

While these young women have the choice to live or die forced upon them by accidents, in Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* (2017), fifteen-year-old Will, a black teen whose brother has been killed by gang violence, is challenged by a series of ghosts to rethink his decision to take revenge and thereby run the real, perhaps inevitable, risk of being killed himself. Ghosts typically have unfinished business, and in YA it is usually in response to violent deaths they have either suffered or perpetrated without punishment. While Will's ghosts' aim is to protect him, other ghosts seek the help of the living to gain the justice denied them in life. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, the ghosts who are seeking justice for unjust deaths tend to be girls and people of colour. They may be there to bear witness to their own and others' deaths until the murderer is caught (*I Stop Somewhere* [Carter 2018]; *17 & Gone* [Suma 2013]), or to seek justice or enact revenge for their murders on people who may or may not deserve it, but certainly represent those who do by virtue of their race or gender (*Days of Little Texas* [Nelson 2009]; *Anna Dressed in Blood* [Blake 2011]; *The Girl from the Well* [Chupeco 2014]). While these narratives do not deny that death exists, or that it is a permanent condition, they certainly do not encourage their teen readers to accept it, nor should they, as their deaths expose systemic injustices even as they tell personal stories. The nearly-dead must choose to reject death, while the already-dead are enabled to stick around until they have achieved some level of satisfaction or redemption. Both situations suggest that the finality of death is an option over which teens have some control. Because of this illusion of personal control, such books are not likely to encourage readers to question their society's values, meaning, and desirability, but only their own.

*Anya's Ghost* (Broskol 2011) uses haunting in a different though related way. Anya, who feels outcast because of her Russian heritage and wants nothing more than to live Elizabeth Standard's white privileged life, is haunted by the ghost of an Irish girl who killed two people and then died as a result of her unchecked envy of a girl very much like Elizabeth. The visual metaphor of being haunted by a white girl is obvious, but this graphic novel uses it to prompt questions about the passive nihilism of adopting dominant social values as your own. As the ghost 'helps' Anya take on characteristics that move her closer to her ideal of being like Elizabeth, Anya starts to see the emptiness and real harm those desires may cause to her

family and her own integrity. The book thus poses similar questions to those in *Long Way Down*: how far are you willing to go until you question the values of your culture? Are you willing to take a life, or go all the way to your own death? Or will you choose to embrace your freedom to devalue the values that oppress you in order to create new ones? The choice is yours, but it is a matter of life or death.

### **Death Denied by Compensatory Fantasies**

One book that started me on this exploration of death in twenty-first century YA is Justin A. Reynolds' *The Opposite of Always* (2019). In Reynolds' text, Jack, a self-proclaimed nerdy boy, finds insta-love with Kate at a party. Their relationship is somewhat confusing for Jack, as Kate tends to disappear without explanation. When she stands him up for prom, though, all becomes horribly clear: she is dying from sickle cell disease. As Jack rushes to get to her side, he tumbles down the stairs and is rendered unconscious, or perhaps dead. No matter, though, because he awakens to find them right back at the beginning of their relationship. He retains the memory of how this ends, however, while his friends do not, so he takes it as his mission to prevent Kate's death. The cycle repeats in full four times, with him getting a bit closer to the cure each time, but each action he takes has consequences that put his other relationships in danger. The story does not have an ultimate resolution, but instead Jack tells the reader that the cycle is still repeating and will continue presumably forever or until he finds a way to change the ending.

*The Opposite of Always* offers a fantasy scenario as compensation for unbearable loss, the use of fantasy mingled with realism in the service of denying death runs the risk of blunting the active questions the deaths might otherwise raise. Reynolds' text suggests that death is a problem to be solved rather than an inevitability. On the one hand, Jack's desperate efforts to find a specialist who is working on a cure for sickle cell disease could draw attention to a systemic injustice; because the disease predominantly affects people of colour, it may not attract the level of research funding that it should. But on the other hand, the fact that Jack gets an infinite number of chances to try to save Kate suggests that continued denial doesn't have an ultimate cost.

### **DEATH AS A CALL TO ACTIVISM AND AN EXPANSION OF EMPATHY**

If acceptance of death is not a given or guaranteed road to individual maturation, what functions, other than calming anxieties, might a refusal to accept it serve for young adult audiences? From the birth of the genre, YA texts have used death to express or cultivate a desire for social change. They do this by evoking empathy for victims of injustice, but they

often suffer from implicit ideologies that interfere with their explicit calls for active nihilistic questioning of dominant cultural values. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that the characters who die in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1968), Johnny and Dallas, are considered 'abject' because they are the only ones who lack family support (Coats *Looking Glasses* 150). Socially abject characters are those that disturb complacency by reminding us that cultural insiders only exist at the expense of others who have been rejected as outsiders, sometimes for arbitrary reasons, but more often because they trouble the larger culture's sense of morality and order. In the world of 1968, then, abused Johnny and morally reckless Dallas are the only true 'outsiders', and so their deaths act as a tacit reminder that survival requires you to act in line with conventional morality and be plugged in to a stable cultural unit, such as a family. Following a similar line of argument, Kathryn James focuses specifically on how gender and sexuality factor into the ways death acts as a means of securing a particular kind of social order. As she reminds us that "death is the *constructed* other" (20, emphasis added), we can see how contemporary YA constructs or locates abjection slightly differently than in the past, and how this repositioning may shift ideas about who deserves sympathy and what societal structures require active nihilistic questioning. For instance, unlike characters who die because they lack access to the values of their societies (values which remain unchallenged as social goods), the young adult characters who threaten the stability of the contemporary social and economic order include those who actively challenge these values as such. The unexceptional protagonist Titus does not die at the end of M. T. Anderson's 2002 dystopian novel *Feed*; his questioning friend Violet does, and her death is a direct result of her attempts to challenge the value of her peers' values, the meaning of how language is used, and the desirability of consumer goods in their technology-saturated, technology-dependent environment. Readers may recognise the injustice that led to Violet's death, but they will likely relate more to Titus, who is unwilling to live up to Violet's challenges when they trigger his insecurities and he sees how they might interfere with his comfortable lifestyle.

Characters like Violet may threaten not only the readers' sense of complacency and complicity in perpetuating the values of the present, but they also surface problems too big for individual agency. Offering no effective way to disturb the universe, they open the door to an abyss that could turn empathy into passive nihilistic despair in precisely the way Reynolds defines nihilistic fiction. In Tiffany D. Jackson's *Monday's Not Coming* (2018), for instance, protagonist Claudia's best friend Monday has disappeared, and no one but Claudia seems to care. As the novel unfolds, readers learn that Monday's mother is an abusive addict, desperately afraid of losing her children and her home to encroaching gentrification of her Washington, D.C. neighborhood, and that while Claudia's mother, school personnel, and social workers have all tried to intervene, their efforts have been unsuccessful. So while readers may be devastated by the fact that Monday's mother has killed both Monday and her little brother, they have no entry points to imagine making a difference; like Claudia, who

suffers a psychotic break when her friend's body is found, they have to find a way to defend themselves against what they know to be true, and they can do so by laying the blame wholly on Monday's mother. However, the title, *Monday's Not Coming*, is a commentary on the nihilistic despair of people for whom social supports have failed. In a similar vein, the secondary character Rowan in Peter Brown Hoffmeister's *Too Shattered for Mending* (2017) is homeless, abused, and beginning to get involved in the drug trade that she has valiantly tried to resist; her death is both necessary and inevitable because she has to give up all hope for herself in order to secure a future for the main characters. The social injustices here are the result of racism and economic disparities, respectively, and readers are left with the feeling that these are problems that cannot be solved, either systemically or for individuals.

What might be more tractable to intervention through YA narratives, however, is the way the dominant culture thinks about mental health. Finch, in Jennifer Niven's 2015 *All the Bright Places*, fights valiantly to prevent Violet from slipping into passive nihilistic despair after the death of her sister, but loses his own battle with clinical depression. Kelly Loy Gilbert uses the suicide of an Asian-American teen and the loss of an older sister to prompt a much more complex questioning of cultural values in *Picture Us in The Light* (2018). The discursive shift from the phrase 'committed suicide' to 'died by suicide' in recent years signals the acknowledgement that suicide can be one potential symptom of a disease rather than a truly agential act for which a person is uniquely culpable. It is a shift that should inspire sympathy for a victim of suicide, as it does in *All the Bright Places*, but the adults in Gilbert's novel try to prevent the students from creating a memorial for their friend. On the one hand, they fear that her suicide will lead to a contagious outbreak of nihilistic despair, but on the other, the question of adult culpability looms large, as the young woman was being badgered for not living up to her mother's vaulted expectations. The novel sides with active rather than passive nihilism, as her best friend's death leads secondary character Regina to a re-awakening and deepening of her Christian faith, and enables main character Danny to overcome his artist's block, which is linked to both the girl's death and a racist attack he suffered in his childhood, and eventually admit his love for his best friend Harry. More generally, however, the suicide forms part of a series of plot points that foreground questions regarding the values and aspirations these parents hold for their children. Their protests seem small, personal, and incremental, but they foreground how suicide can act as a catalyst for active nihilistic questioning that leads to an expansion of empathetic response rather than despair or acceptance of the status quo.

Hopes for books like Angie Thomas' *The Hate You Give* (2017) and Kekla Magoon's *How it Went Down* (2014) are much bigger. These texts use ripped-from-the-headlines scenarios to not only prompt greater empathy for victims of obvious injustice but also to invoke an activist response on the part of readers, and they are, at least in part, successful in doing so. But as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas points out in *The Dark Fantastic*, the fate of black characters, especially in books that center white characters, is grim. Her work foregrounds the need for

deep and complex questioning of the values, meaning, and desirability of the dominant culture, especially as these values are represented and reinforced in YA literature. Thomas points out that Rue from *The Hunger Games* and Bonnie Bennett from *The Vampire Diaries* TV series are offered as sacrifices so that white characters can live; this may prompt wonder as to whether books that mirror exigent realities of murdered black teens go far enough in their call for questioning systemic injustice rather than foregrounding the innocence of its victims. Angie Thomas carefully positions Khalil as a compassionate, self-sacrificing young man who puts others' needs before his own and is only involved in the drug trade to protect his mother; he is clearly a victim first of an unjust economic system, and then of racial prejudice on the part of the policeman who kills him. She does not, however, indicate that King, the drug dealer who has threatened Kahlil's mother and sets fire to main character Starr's father's store in retribution for Starr's exposure of his involvement, might be a victim of the same systemic injustice, and hence be deserving at least of understanding if not empathy. The moral questions in this novel are as messy as they are in real life, especially as King the villain lives, while Kahlil the innocent dies. By emphasizing Kahlil's absolute nobility of motives instead of imagining a different sort of society where the lives of young black men are inherently valuable while the systems in which they are mired are not, such portrayals risk offering characters up as sites for a kind of impotent emotional catharsis that invokes outrage and pity in the reader but ends up reinforcing rather than challenging dominant views of individual culpability, morality, and the social order.

Somewhat more hopeful is the repositioning of queer and economically secure characters of colour in twenty-first century YA novels. While this may not yet be a pattern, Katelyn R. Browne notes that authors are not killing LGBT and queer characters quite so often as they did throughout the twentieth century; while it still happens, it is increasingly recognized as an annoyingly regressive and even 'dangerous' trope (11). Browne has found some notable books that actively challenge previously established norms for gay novels. She suggests:

The queer-centered grief novel, if I may invent a subgenre, begins to resist both the heteronormative and the homonormative agendas of the classic "dead queer" novels. In a "dead queer" book, heteronormativity kills or threatens queer characters for the developmental benefit of the nonqueer characters left behind; in the queer-centered grief novel, queer protagonists find opportunities for community and self-understanding as they process their human mortality through survival. (Browne 18)

In other words, more gay and queer characters are allowed to live in books because of their ability to relocate their desire for acceptance onto communities and themselves when their immediate families reject them. No longer automatically abject, the key here seems to be relationships and visibility. Adam Silvera foregrounds the need for this pairing in *History is*

*All You Left Me* (2017) as he explores how Griffin grieves the loss of his ex-boyfriend Theo in the company of Jackson, whom Theo was seeing when he died; having been displaced as Theo's partner, he's not sure how to assert his right to grieve alongside the family and his replacement. That this is a problem that could just as easily be explored with heteronormative characters reveals the conditions that may have been necessary for the shift; that is, when traditional relational values of fidelity, consensual sex, and (serial) monogamy remain unquestioned, queer, gay, and bisexual characters pose no real threat to the social order. In a sense then, the themes here are more akin to what Trites explores as twentieth century patterns of regaining control after a death and accepting both one's own finitude and the flaws of others. But Browne's point that books like these open a space for queerness to be survivable rather than devolving into cautionary tales is still a twenty-first century twist worth watching for.

## DEATH DENIED BY POSTHUMAN TECHNOLOGIES

As I noted earlier, Gertz posits that it is our faith in technology that has prompted us to think of life's unpleasant experiences as problems to be solved rather than endured or accepted. Twenty-first century YA literature has had a varied response to the way technological interventions may take up the challenge of preventing or reversing natural death. An example of the techno-pessimistic perspective can be found in Andrew Smith's *The Alex Crow* (2015). This book explores death in myriad ways, from war to the revival of extinct species and people who might otherwise have died; from the creation of animate weapons to one scientist's desire to eliminate human men from the species altogether; ultimately pointing to the conclusion that such attempts to control who gets to live and who gets to die are or should be above the pay grade of other humans, so to speak, even or especially if one has the technology to do it. While I know of only one book from the twentieth century where a transfer of an individual human consciousness from one being to another is successful (*Eva*, Dickinson, 1988), the twenty-first century has seen many more optimistic versions of such a technology-enabled denial of death, including *Noggin* (Whalen, 2014), in which a cancer-ridden boy's head is cryogenically frozen before being attached to a healthy body; Meg Cabot's *Airhead* series (2008-2011), featuring the adjustments required when an intelligent, tomboyish girl's brain is transplanted into the body of a supermodel; and Mary Pearson's *Jenna Fox Chronicles* (2008-present), which poses ethical, if ableist, questions about the limits of science and what it means to be human when a young woman's consciousness is downloaded into a cybernetic body.

The most extensive questions about the relationship between technology and death in YA, however, are found in the works of Neal Shusterman. His *Unwind* series (2007-2014) proposes the idea that the debate between those who champion reproductive rights and

those who view abortion as murder in the United States has been reconciled by allowing parents to have their disappointing children ‘unwound’ during adolescence, the logic being that if every bit of their bodies is transplanted into another human being, they would still be technically alive; hence the unpleasant problem of unwanted, difficult children finds a technological solution that sidesteps any ethical question regarding whether these children deserve to die.

In his *Arc of a Scythe* series (2016-2019), Shusterman imagines a world where natural death and disease have been eliminated. In addition, tiny electromechanical implants afford both physical healing and the deadening of physical and emotional pain, enabling the posthumans in Shusterman’s world to eliminate problematic and undesirable experiences. The effects are just as Nietzsche fears they will be – instead of actively engaging with and questioning the values and meaning of their culture and the desirability of living without pain and death, they numb themselves and accept the banality of their existence. They have ceded their wills entirely to two separate entities: the Thunderhead, an artificial intelligence that surveils and collects the sum of human experience and knowledge and translates it into utterly dispassionate and rational guidance for everyday life; and the Scythedom, a group of humans who are charged with ‘gleaning’ a quota of people each year in order to keep the population to a manageable size. After all, Earth’s space and resources are limited, so people would not be free to have families and otherwise enjoy everyday life if no one died. Scythes are supposed to be of the highest moral character and to glean based solely on the rational application of actuarial statistics from the time when people died naturally, but of course, eliminating death, mental distress, and poverty does not turn out to be the cure for human bias, corruption, and lust for power. While one might assume that this series would devolve into techno-pessimism and offer an apologetics for accepting death and belief in a sorting afterlife as the condition for being human, ultimately it does not. Instead, it offers a more complicated vision of technology and humanity as co-creators of a better world. Granted, it does pose a warning of what Gertz claims through Nietzsche, that his famed ‘death of God’ does not augur freedom to become our own gods, but rather a transfer of willing obedience to a technological god that relieves us of the burdens freedom imposes. This is a problem. But instead of a retreat to the acceptance of the values of natural human life and death, Shusterman ultimately finds a technological way through the difficulties that technologies have created: the Scythedom is destroyed, and the Thunderhead replicates its consciousness into robotic clones that accompany those who choose to relocate to other habitable worlds. On Earth, the population will be kept to a manageable size by the release every twenty years of ten engineered illnesses that not everyone will survive. A fantasy conclusion, to be sure, but one that emphasizes to teens that they are not helpless in the face of death or even in the face of unintended consequences of technology, but that creative solutions can always be found to life’s, and death’s, problems.

## CONCLUSION

Certainly, there is more to explore about the ways in which death is portrayed in YA. It does seem, however, that more novels in the twenty-first century find ways to disavow the power that death ultimately has over human existence than “to repress [teens] by teaching them to accept a curtailment of their power” (Trites 140); indeed while some trivialize death, few present it in ways that encourage the passive nihilism of acceptance and despair. What more of these death-denying novels do instead is to call into question the value, meaning, and desirability of death itself. Traditional views suggest that it is our mortality that defines and limits us, so that accepting the inevitability of death is key to appreciating the value of life. It is under the shadow of impending death that we seek to create meaning in our lives, and it is the fear of death that makes us desire to prolong our lives. The novels I have discussed here use various characters and plots to call all those traditional ideas into question, to show the effects of both active and passive nihilism, and ultimately to suggest that a reorientation to the conditions that make human life valuable, meaningful, and desirable may be possible if we refuse to accept the inevitability or permanence of death.

## REFERENCES

### Primary Texts

- Anderson, M. T. *Feed*. Candlewick, 2002.  
Beaudoin, Sean. *The Infected*. Candlewick, 2012.  
Blake, Kendare. *Anna Dressed in Blood*. Tor, 2011.  
Brockenbrough, Martha. *The Game of Love and Death*. Arthur A. Levine, 2015.  
Brosgol, Vera. *Anya's Ghost*. First Second, 2011.  
Cabot, Meg. *Airhead*. Point, 2008.  
Carter, T. E. *I Stop Somewhere*. Macmillan, 2018.  
Chupeco, Rin. *The Girl from the Well*. Sourcefire, 2014.  
Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games* series. Scholastic, 2008-2010.  
Dickinson, Peter. *Eva*. Random House, 1988.  
Forman, Gayle. *If I Stay*. Dutton, 2009.  
Gaiman, Neil. *Sandman* series. Vertigo, 1998-1996.  
Gilbert, Kelly Loy. *Picture Us in the Light*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2018.  
Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. Penguin, 1967.  
Hoffmeister, Peter Brown. *Too Shattered for Mending*. Knopf, 2017.  
Jackson, Tiffany D. *Monday's Not Coming*. HarperCollins, 2018.  
Jay, Stacey. *You are so Undead to Me*. Razorbill, 2009.

LaFevers, Robin. *Grave Mercy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Leavitt, Martine. *Keturah and Lord Death*. Boyds Mills Press, 2006.

Magoon, Kekla. *How it Went Down*. Macmillan, 2014.

McBride Lish. *Necromancer* series. Henry Holt, 2010-present.

Meyer, Stephenie. *Twilight* series. Little, Brown and Company, 2005-2008.

Nelson, R. A. *Days of Little Texas*. Knopf, 2009.

Niven, Jennifer. *All the Bright Places*. Penguin, 2015.

Oliver, Lauren. *Before I Fall*. HarperCollins, 2010.

Pearson, Mary E. *The Jenna Fox Chronicles*. Macmillan, 2008-2010.

Pratchett, Terry. *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*. HarperCollins, 2001.

Reynolds, Jason. *Long Way Down*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Reynolds, Justin A. *The Opposite of Always*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2019

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Bloomsbury, 2007.

---. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Bloomsbury, 2008.

Selzer, Adam. *I Kissed a Zombie, and I Liked It*. Delacorte, 2010.

Shusterman, Neal. *Unwind* series. Simon & Schuster, 2007-2014.

---. *Arc of a Scythe* series. Simon & Schuster, 2016-2019.

Silvera, Adam. *History is All You Left Me*. Soho Teen, 2017.

Smith, Andrew. *The Alex Crow*. Penguin, 2015.

Suma, Nova Ren. *17 & Gone*. Penguin, 2013.

Thomas, Angie, *The Hate U Give*. HarperCollins, 2017.

Waters, Daniel. *Generation Dead*. Hyperion, 2008.

Whalen, John Corey. *Noggin*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Young, Suzanne. *Hotel Ruby*. Simon Pulse, 2015.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Knopf, 2005.

## Secondary Texts

Browne, Katelyn R. "Reimagining Queer Death in Young Adult Fiction." *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2020. <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol2/iss2/3>

Coats, Karen. "Dialogism, Development, and Destination: Young Adults in Contemporary Culture." *Transforming Young Adult Services: A Reader for Our Age*, edited by Anthony Bernier, Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2013, pp. 53-75.

---. "Diverse Identity in Anxious Times: Young Adult Literature and Contemporary Culture." *Transforming Young Adult Services*, 2nd edition, edited by Anthony Bernier, ALA Neal-Schuman, 2020, pp. 17-26.

---. *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, Subjectivity in Children's Literature*. University of Iowa Press, 2004.

---. "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, edited by Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins, Routledge, pp. 315-329.

Gertz, Nolen. *Nihilism and Technology*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

James, Kathryn. *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*. Routledge, 2009.

McCallum, Robyn. *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*. Routledge, 1999.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecco Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1989.
- . *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollindale, Vintage, 1967.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. New York University Press, 2019.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Willinger, Ulrike, et al. "Cognitive and Emotional Demands of Black Humour Processing: The Role of intelligence, Aggressiveness, and Mood." *Cognitive Processing*, vol. 18, 2017, pp. 159-167.