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Changing the Narrative: The Educational Power of Reading Young Adult Literature

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CHANGING THE NARRATIVE:
THE EDUCATIONAL POWER OF READING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Thesis Presented

by

Cary Jewkes

to

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of

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ABSTRACT

We are what we read.

People read for many different reasons and outcomes. We may read for information, affirmation, escape, or inspiration. We may read to get in a better mood. Various studies have shown that readers are more apt to be empathetic, to understand that their experience is not the only experience. Through Scholarly Personal Narrative, I trace my own evolution of reading and my curious preference for Young Adult (YA) literature. Contemporary YA literature offers a unique combination of viewpoint, emotion, and transportation which allows for a deeper understanding of diverse backgrounds, and I explore whether a program of purposeful choices can influence perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Let us agree on this: That we live our lives through texts. These may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us of what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories are what have formed us all, they are what we must use to make our new fictions...out of old tales, we must make new lives.

– Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

We are the experiences that we have lived and those experiences become stories that become parts of larger narratives that in turn build the chapters of our lives. Those of us who love to read have long understood that we are privileged to lead dual lives: our own real experienced life and the lives we live via books...not only dual lives, but multiple lives.

Ernest Hemingway wrote: “All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterward it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.”¹ For me, that is the essential nature of a good book – it becomes part of you; we are not only the stories that we tell, we are the stories that we read. “We all hold our books somewhere inside us and live by them. They become our stories.”²

We are also guided by the books we read. When I consider the authors and books that have affected my life the most deeply and importantly, often the works and their writers are intertwined for me. Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway have all been major influences in my life as an artist. Not only their works, but the way their lives intersected with their art, the way they lived that infected their stories. In fact,

it is almost more inspirational for me to read about Plath's process than it is to read her poetry, although I do find the best mixture is to go back and forth – biography to poetry to biography to *The Bell Jar* to biography. Studies have been done that show that reading allows us to understand experience vicariously and that our brains do not necessarily record the difference. "In short, the scientists discovered that specific areas of a monkey's brain light up not only when they grab a nut, but when they see another monkey or person grab a nut."³ So as I was trying to learn to become a writer, reading about the lives of other writers became a valid way to learn.

Yet the books I go back to most, the new books I seek out most now, are young adult (YA) books. I am in my mid-50s. Whenever this thought crosses my mind, that with all the wealth of books that exist and continue to be published, that I am most attracted to YA, I ask myself: *Why the hell am I wasting my time with books intended for teenagers?*

Nick Hornby, in his book *Polysyllabic Spree*, says that the books we choose for ourselves are the aspirational us, who we want to be. I used to have limited book shelf space.⁴ Okay, I still do. It is a family joke that whenever I do a big clean-up of the house, I need to buy more book shelves. In my 20s, when I really did have only one book case and too many books, I would double shelve, The YA went behind, Austen, Plath, Hemingway, Kundera, Chabon went in front, to show the world who I hoped to be. I was ashamed of reading YA.

When it was only physical books, I would have the check and shame of sneaking more books into the piles that rose around and above my place at the dining room table. Now, with e-books, not only does no one know how many I buy, but I can buy them in the flicker of an instant. Read a review, change a tab, type a few words and bang – it is

mine. And no one knows how many books I buy; it is probably at least 100 a year. If I had to put a number to it, I would say about 75 percent of the books I read are young adult. Some of them are re-reads; many – most I would say – are the newest of the new. I call it researching the field. I have always bought more books than I can possibly read.

A survey done in 2012 declared that 55 percent of the purchasers of young adult literature were in fact adult adults – not young ones – and of those adults, 78 percent said they were purchasing the books for themselves.⁵ This drew a series of critical articles and counter articles about the value of reading YA as an adult. Clearly, I am not alone in my proclivity for YA.

Perennially, opinion pieces pop up decrying this tendency for adults to read YA. It is infantile, escapist, unchallenging. Just as often, there will be rebuttals, readers spouting off about what makes YA great. “Unlike a lot of grown-up novels, children’s books never lose sight of the primacy of storytelling. Children like to be swept up right away in plot, and frankly, most adults appreciate this too; it’s why so many readers gravitate toward spy novels and science fiction and thrillers, books in which things happen and people get caught up in those events. It is, after all, children’s books that turn us into readers in the first place.”⁶ YA books have everything that adult books have only tighter, leaner and more to the point. In this age of diminishing attention spans, YA writers have to compete with cellphones, iPads, streaming video, movies and TV. Anything that is boring has no chance. A book has to hook the reader and not let go. There is no tolerance for three page descriptions of ice cubes or other authorial, self-indulgent pretensions. “It should go without saying that the best children’s literature is

every bit as rich and rewarding in its concerns, as honest and stylish in execution, as the best adult literature – and also as complicated, stubborn, conflicted, and mysterious.”⁷

Betsy was very conscious of being on the threshold of the adult world; although, unlike her sister Julia, she did not long to enter it. Betsy had clung to every phase of childhood as it passed. She always want to keep life from going forward too fast.

– Maud Hart Lovelace, *Betsy and Joe*

Part of my reluctance to let go of YA books definitely has to do with aging.

I realize I am supposed to be insulted if someone calls me a girl instead of a woman, but usually, I do not mind. I am a girl in my head, still 19. I hate when salespeople call me “ma’am.” I wear my hair long and in a ponytail most of the time. Recently I overheard a colleague being complimented on her new, shorter haircut and the compliment was “you look more mature.” I do not want to look mature. I do not want to look old. (Of course, neither do I want to turn into one of those embarrassing women who dress like a 20 year-old. I have accepted that I will never wear a mini-skirt again or a bikini – then again, I did not ever feel all that comfortable in a mini-skirt, such a lot of tugging.)

I do not want to be old.

Our culture worships youth. There is nothing worse than being old – or being perceived as old – and this is especially true for women. Some cultures worship their elders and they are revered for their wisdom. Here, the old are tucked away into retirement communities, excluded from regular society into their own, separate one. “The question ... then, is not why adults in the United States are reading (usually American) young adult fiction, but whether we should mourn or celebrate the death of adulthood.”⁸

I think, too, that for me, part of the resistance to adulthood, aging and the attraction to YA is that I do not feel my own identity is done. I am still evolving, still trying to figure it all out. I am not settled – or settling. In an article for *Library Journal* by Angelina Beneditti, the YA author, and editor David Levithan is quoted as saying: “Our emotions don’t really change. Issues of identity and belonging and finding your way in the world are new when you’re a teen, but they never actually go away.”⁹

In her foreword to Lizzie Skurnick’s *Shelf Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stopped Reading*, author Laura Lippman writes: “By the time we realize the profound influences of our youthful reading, it’s too late to undo them. Yes, if I knew then what I know now, I would have read more seriously and critically during those crucial years that my brain was a big porous sponge.”¹⁰ In other words, we are what we read and much of it is decided before we have the tools to choose wisely.

The timing of when you read a particular book also plays a part in its resonance with you. It is like dating – sometimes it is the right person at the wrong time or vice versa. When the right book clicks, though, it becomes a part of you and you can draw on it, be reassured, be buoyed, be reaffirmed, be comforted or be loved. “The second thing reading does is to build empathy. When you watch TV or see a film you are looking at things happening to other people. Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You’re being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you’re going to be slightly changed. Empathy is a tool for building people into

groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals. You're also finding out something as you read vitally important for making your way in the world. And it's this: The world doesn't have to be like this. Things can be different."¹¹

There are many theories about the function of fiction in society. It can be seen as a simulation or practice for life. It can be a way to understand other people or a way to find characters with whom to identify. In his book *Becoming a Reader*, J. A. Appleyard traces the development of a reader through certain stages. In childhood, the reader uses reading as an extension of fantasy and pretend play. Older children use reading to identify with the hero. In adolescence, the reader seeks to further identify with characters, but also to find meaning for themselves. College age readers then move on to more textual concerns and authorial choices and interpretations of the text. Then, in adulthood, readers combine all of the previous functions, using some for some things and the role the reader assumes depends on what the reader wants in a particular moment in time.¹²

"But narrative is incomplete until it is read," writes Appleyard.¹³ This concept of a mental dialogue between author and reader is another of the functions of fiction. It is the mind-to-mind conversation that the best fiction demands, which pulls the reader into the experience the author has initiated. The reader brings their own world view, experiences, and biases – unconscious or not – to the story. I am old enough that when I was in college for my undergraduate degree, there very much was one correct way to interpret a text. As I reflect back on that, I am amazed that anyone could presume to know the meaning for someone else, that there could possibly be one right way to read a text.

This whole idea of being in someone else's mind is, well, mind-boggling. It is almost more intimate than sex. "Because of the experience of being within another mind

is also accompanied by other perspectives, such as impressions of the protagonist formed by other characters in the novel, it offers the reader not just the possibility of clarifying his or her mental models of self, but also a sense of polysemy and self-transformation; such a potential is unique to fictional narratives.”¹⁴ You have spent all this time in someone else’s mind, your own brain thinking it is a dialogue when really you have been listening to a monologue. We automatically assume the author is on the hero’s side – or shares a similar world view – and while that may be true 60 percent or even 95 percent of the time, it cannot be assumed. And how many of us, upon receiving a weird gift from a friend or relative, have marveled at the strange object while at the same time thinking, “Do they know me at all?” It is the same with an author. One book may hit all the right notes, you are simpatico, you trust. Then the next you think, did I even know them? And you did not, which is always a shock after spend 300 plus pages in someone else’s mind. Yet the gift we readers get and understand is that there are more views than our own, more philosophies than Horatio dreamt of.

When I was in college I majored in creative writing, although the major was formally called Writing Fiction, which tells you a lot about the program. I was not a very brilliant student at the time, preferring to spend most of my time strolling around in a herringbone man’s overcoat, smoking and conversing about the Meaning of Life with my equally pretentious friends, planning artist’s lives in Europe or New York.

Even then, I knew my primary interest was going to be children’s literature and that was not an option. It was not considered serious enough.

A lot of so-called literary fiction, now as always, relies on the kind of writing that is valued in Writing Fiction programs. Linguistic gymnastics are valued over clarity. The more you have to machete your way through the words to get to the story, the better.

Much of YA contemporary fiction is marketed toward teenaged girls.

“Historically, popular culture was equated with the feminine and consequently critiqued as lowly, frivolous, and passive (Chabot Davis 19). After popular culture eventually gained entry into the pantheon of acceptable academic subjects, feminine genres such as ‘women’s weepies’ and romantic and costume dramas became the latest site of devaluation (Mayne 2).”¹⁵ Teenaged girls and their passions are devalued and disrespected in our society. If you want to insult someone’s taste, you say “That’s something only a teenage girl would like.” It is one step below calling someone a “nerd,” although nerd has relatively recently been reclaimed and given more positive connotations. “It is familiar enough to say, with some archness indeed, that all this crying over *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014) is mere manipulation, a cheap pulling at the heartstrings, not to be taken seriously. The dismissal is historically familiar for the ways it connects the badness of a given art form to its popularity amongst female audiences. Women are sentimental and so is the art form they like, the well-worn story goes.”¹⁶

Girl culture should be appreciated. We can simultaneously appreciate girl culture, acknowledge its value and currency, and strive to understand that there are other important cultures. We have a powerful urge to validate ourselves, which is fine, but we must also look outside ourselves, to cultivate empathy for those whose paths and lives have been different from our own.

We all want to know and be known.

In Pamela Paul's *Life with Bob*, she writes about reading critically and not: "I didn't question, I didn't ponder, I didn't criticize. I merely absorbed, down to the word."¹⁷ Is that why I read YA? I have always been what I call a gullible reader, ready to follow wherever the author wants to direct me, trusting unreliable narrators, falling for twists, the better to be shocked at the end. Sometimes I try to guess where the author is taking me, especially in mysteries where solving the crime along with the sleuth – amateur or not – is part of the fun. Perhaps it is the act of falling into the narrative flow and going along with the current allows me to continue to mine meaning from books when I re-read. "And escapist fiction is just that: fiction that opens a door, shows the sunlight outside, gives you a place to go where you are in control, are with the people you want to be with (and books are real places, make no mistake about that); and more importantly, during your escape, books can also give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, give you weapons, give you armour: real things you can take back into your prison. Skills and knowledge and tools you can use to escape for real. As JRR Tolkien reminded us, the only people who inveigh against escape are jailers."¹⁸

We also read to put order onto the chaos that is life, do we not? I know that sometimes in this crazy world, I find comfort in books. In a book, actions can be random, but more often than not, they are part of the plot. There is reason. There are explanations. Some people hate a nice tidy ending, but not me. Give me a happy ending every time. Does this mean I read to escape? I do not think so – or not only for escape. I think it means I read to make sense of life, of the human condition. Do we read to get a happy ending? Or even an ending at all? In life, the ending is death – so we both know how it

turns out and do not know, since we do not know what happens after our death or the manner in which it will happen.

Let us define the genre of Young Adult or YA for the purposes of this thesis. Funnily enough, I find that many of the articles critical of adults reading YA go on to cite works that I consider middle grade, and in fact, Maud Hart Lovelace's *Betsy-Tacy* series, which I will explore in Chapter One, straddles both middle grade and YA classifications by virtue of following the characters from age five through marriage and adulthood. Middle grade fiction is generally defined as stories geared for eight to twelve year-olds. YA ranges from twelve to eighteen, with much of it focused on fourteen to sixteen year-olds. As in adult fiction, there are sub-genres of YA. Although I have read and enjoyed the major dystopian series and Harry Potter, those are not my primary focus here. My sub-genre of the YA genre is called Contemporary YA. I am interested in real world ethics and problems, not magical powers and imaginary societies no matter how allegorical. Contemporary YA is the closest genre to adult literary fiction. Contemporary YA examines social relationships and societal power structures in a deep and significant way. Most, if not all, of the studies of the effect of reading on empathy have been concerned with literary fiction as opposed to popular fiction.

The books in this thesis will span ones that I discovered as a child as well as the ones that became meaningful in my adulthood. I will begin with Lovelace and her *Betsy-Tacy* series and then continue with the confounding appeal of the "malt shop" stories of Rosamond du Jardin. Of all the books I plan to consider, these are the most embarrassing books to cherish; they certainly would never qualify as Literature with a capital L. I will then move onto books I discovered as an adult, with the novels of Sarah Dessen,

illustrating my reading to validate my seeking reaffirmation of my worldview, but also my social media interactions with her as an author. Finally, I will come to a discussion of reading YA in a more purposeful way in order to expand my worldview.

The main virtue of fiction is that we have a rich experience and don't die at the end.

– Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*

My purpose is to share my journey through YA books, so that others may reflect on their own paths, those they have taken and those they might still take. Originally, I intended my audience to be counselors or educators, but the more I read diversely, the more I realize everyone should have the chance to change their narrative, to have the chance to experience the world through others' eyes. It can only benefit the reader. I think it could go a long way in helping us all to understand each other.

Fiction can change people and the key appears to be the emotion experienced by the reader during reading. "Emotion, therefore, was central to the experience of change in the ways in which they viewed themselves, that is to say in their personality."¹⁹ The same transformation was not observed when people read non-fiction. And these changes not only happen emotionally: "We know from laboratory studies that stories affect us physically, not just mentally. When the protagonist is in a tight corner, our hearts race, we breathe faster, and we swear more."²⁰

I propose that we are not only changed by fiction, but that we can orchestrate that change with purpose. I am not going to proscribe a particular reading list, that is for each person to define for themselves, but I will share my journey and the books I have discovered that I might not have. First, however, I will pause to discuss why I chose to write this thesis in the Scholarly Personal Narrative genre.

CHAPTER ONE WHY SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Like any worthwhile art, great children's books are capable of speaking in many different ways to many different readers.

– Bruce Handy, *Wild Things: The Joys of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult*

Am I a perpetual adolescent stuck in some developmental stage, a female Peter Pan, destined to never grow up and out? Through an examination of the significant books of my life, the books that have formed me, that I turn to again and again, I plan to explore this question with the lens of the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN).

I write this SPN as a novelist (YA of course, need you ask?), an educator and sometime counselor, with a desire to work with young adults. The young adults I currently advise are a bit older than the target YA audience, but not by much. As the director of admissions for a medical school, I often work with prospective medical students and the most essential skill is figuring out where they are in their journey and experience, so I can give them information they can use to inform their decisions. It is necessary to read them as it were, to figure out what information they are ready to absorb, to actually hear. A recently rejected college senior is going to require a different conversation than a questioning career-changer and it is vital to tailor the message to the student-to-be.

The SPN form of writing was created by Professor Robert Nash. During a class, Nash once described the differences between subjective research (SPN) and qualitative research. He told us it begins with a theme as opposed to a thesis. It is concerned with honesty instead of validity. And, perhaps most importantly, it goes from the particular to

the generalizable instead of the other way around. Narrative is universal. “Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places and in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural.”¹

Narrative is how we understand ourselves, each other and the world. SPN uses the personal narrative, adds scholarly wisdom, and emerges with work that is personal as well as universal. Fiction is a narrative that tells Truth. In examining the effect of YA fiction on my personal narrative, I see a striving toward Truth and an understanding of myself, yet now expanding that view to understanding the experiences and Truth of others. “People often think the word ‘fiction’ means untrue, but this is not true. The word derives from the Latin *ingere*, which means ‘to make.’”²

Recently, I was listening to a guided meditation and my mind had wandered off, when a sentence from the instructor penetrated my thoughts. He said something along the lines of, “You don’t have to be the stories you tell. You can shuck off those narratives that no longer define you.” I am sure I missed some of what he was saying, but what got through is that we let our stories define us and sometimes we hang on to them out of habit or because we tell ourselves, “Oh well, this is who I am, this is who I will always be.” We can choose a different narrative and we have to be willing to do so.

The major attraction for me to the SPN genre was echoed by the responses of many of the student responses in Robert Nash’s *How Stories Heal: The Journey*. Over and over again when SPN practitioners spoke of their experience, they spoke of the

journey. When I began this SPN, I knew my theme, I knew my question, but I did not know what the answer would be, where it would take me. Many of the stories I ended up telling were not the ones I planned to tell – ever. And even after only a few weeks wrestling with the elements of my story, I began to discover the answers and the wider implications of my story. The SPN process is, at the end of the day, that journey from idea to story to conclusion. It is a living, breathing process that puts into practice Robert Frost’s maxim, “The only way out is through.” It is transcendent, even miraculous. “Learning begins and ends in love. Every single one of our students is a miracle waiting to happen. So, too, each of us is miracle waiting to be born...every single moment we, and they, spend in the classroom is a potential birth experience.”³

An SPN aids our understanding of what we are trying to say. “Remember Joan Didion’s wise counsel to authors: ‘We write to discover what we think.’ Thus, self-discovery is a highly acceptable motivator for writing. We would add: ‘We write to discover who we are.’ Is there any purpose more important to achieve in our writing, except to help others do the same?”⁴ And as Nancy Slonim Aronie says, “Writing is where you can find out who and where you are.”⁵

Non-fiction, on the other hand, is supposed to be fact, every word true, but Truth with a capital T is not necessarily the ultimate goal. The purpose is more informational or historical: This is what happened. SPN bridges the gap between fiction and non-fiction, by using stories and narratives of things that actually happened, but then search for the Truth with a capital T, the search for meaning. SPN is the literary offspring of fiction and non-fiction.

If “narrative here is perceived as basic to who we are as human beings, fundamental to explaining how we process time, how memory works and how we come to conceive of our own identities,”⁶ then SPN elevates our narratives by adding the scholarly aspect and by taking the personal and making it universal. By seeing the greater value in the personal, we can establish the meaning in our own narratives as well as explain that meaning’s relevance to others. With SPN writing, we are giving meaning to our lives through personal stories. This is, in fact, the way humans have invested their lives with meaning throughout time. “The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning.”⁷ We create meaning.

For writers or educators who work with teenagers, it is essential to remain aware of the particular intensity of emotion at that stage of life. They have not necessarily learned how to successfully hide that aspect of themselves. They may try, but it is still there, waiting to explode, and understanding those wrestlings of the heart and mind can be important in helping teens to understand they are at the beginning of the process to find meaning. There may never be a final answer to the question, “Who am I?”, but journey to understanding that fact is in its infancy. They need to know that it is okay not to know. There is so much pressure on young adults today to know what college to go to, to know what major to pick, to know what career they want. There is such an emphasis on figuring this important stuff out as soon as possible, that those who have not figured it out become more stressed. Students need to have the time and opportunity to figure out their path and those who read YA are going to be more in touch with that developmental phase.

We should not be ashamed of re-reading our favorite books, only of re-reading them thoughtlessly.

– Laura Lippmann, foreword to *Shelf Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stopped Reading*

As I examined my reasons for reading, I found they echoed J.A. Appleyard's stages of reading.

I realized I read for many different reasons, in many different ways. All are valid. All are important. Yet, I found myself, especially after taking classes in diversity and inclusion and even more so as the national debate about structural racism and identity politics grows ever more divisive, wondering if books could help solve this problem. Whenever I have a problem, I read.

There are more YA books than ever before and more of them are written from the point of view of those who are not suburban white people. When we read outside of our own experiences, we search more and more in the intersection of our lived experience and the experience of the characters in the narrative. Commonality may be harder to comprehend at first; that moment of connection may be harder to see. That is partly why I argue that YA, with its frequent emphasis on identity and self and emotion, can be instrumental in understanding others' experiences. It is accessible.

We can read not only about under-represented minorities, but we can read about political views or spiritual beliefs that are different from our own. In my experience, books that are written by someone outside of the true culture – often seen as “appropriating” said culture – tend to lose sight of the story and end up being preachy and didactic. These stories do not seem authentic. “The situation, now and in the past, is that

the minority and marginalized communities are often not voiceless. They're simply not heard."⁸ We need to listen to these voices.

Diverse voices, also called Own Voices in publishing, to indicate the author is part of the culture they are writing about, have stories to tell that deserve to be heard. "But the best children's books also encourage young people to ask big questions about who they are and what their place is in the world. When you read children's literature as an adult, you get to revisit the same sense of newness and discovery that you did as a child. You can delve into big emotions, without cynicism or jadedness. You let all that go."⁹

A recent study done in the United Kingdom found that memories from adolescence are the most profound, the ones that shape us the most, with those memories from the mid-twenties having the next most powerful impact. This may explain why we can remember every word of that song we played over and over in our rooms when that boy broke up with us, even thirty years later.

"Our self-image from those years, in other words, is especially adhesive. So, too, are our preferences... It turns out that just before adolescence, the pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain that governs our ability to reason, grasp abstractions, control impulses, and self-reflect – undergoes a huge flurry of activity, vying young adults the intellectual capacity to form an identity, to develop the notion of a self."¹⁰ Maybe because I read so many YA books at the time I was an actual teenager, which I do not think many of my peers did, is part of why the genre still speaks to me.

CHAPTER TWO

Reading for Identification and Validation

There are three authors whose body of work I have read more than once over my adult life: Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Maud Hart Lovelace.

– Anna Quindlen

I can still remember where the book was on the shelf in the Springdale Library.

The Springdale Library, a branch of the larger Stamford, Connecticut, Public Library system, had been constructed out of an old, small, wood-framed house. It was adjacent to the elementary school, so every couple of weeks our whole classroom would troop out of the front door and down the sidewalk, almost to the street, to go to the library. I do not remember much about the inside besides the Children's Room – I suppose there must have been adult books somewhere – but by the time I went to the library independent of school, there was another, bigger, branch that we went to for books, a branch that was much newer and mid-century modern. I remember Springdale's dark brown shelves built into the wall and the books themselves were rather dark, but the whole room radiated with light, because the outside wall was all windows, like a sun porch.

The book was slim with a navy blue cover; the title was *Betsy-Tacy*.

The *Betsy-Tacy* series of books, by Maud Hart Lovelace, have defined me more than any other books. It feels so odd to write that. There are so many books that formed me, but the *Betsy-Tacy* books were the ones above all, the ones that even now I come back to again and again. They are the oldest and dearest of friends. The ten-book series, along with three companion books, tell the story of Betsy Ray, who grows up in the early

1900s and wants to be a writer. They are semi-autobiographical stories of Lovelace's own life.

A surface discussion of the *Betsy-Tacy* books might make them appear frivolous. The first couple of books are virtually plotless, consisting more of linked episodes than of an overarching theme. As the series continues, though, the books become more plot-driven. Throughout the series, Betsy tackles weighty life decisions, experiences and expectations, aided by her faithful friend Tacy. In the very first book, which does not even qualify as YA, Tacy's baby sister dies and the girls struggle to understand living, dying, death and life – from their five-year-old perspective.

The first four books trace Betsy's life from the age of five through the age of twelve. "But no character meant as much to me as Betsy Ray in her high school years. At a time when library shelves groaned with books about modern teenagers facing all sorts of modern dilemmas, Betsy was the most relatable character I could find."¹

The next four books follow her through high school, one volume per school year. *Heaven to Betsy*, the first high school volume, which has appeared on lists of banned books, Betsy and her older sister convert from being Baptists to becoming Episcopalians. (This switching of religions was the basis for banning.) More important than the controversy of changing one's religion, though, is that Betsy and her sister do not make the change capriciously. They consider, they control their narrative, they do not blindly follow convention.

"Mr. Ray grew serious then. Still with a thumb in his vest, he looked at them with wise, kindly eyes.

"Let me set you right on one this first of all," he said. "We aren't going to decide this on the basis of what people will say. You might as well learn right now, you two, that the poorest guide you can have in life

is what people will say. What the Baptists in Deep Valley will think of mother and me if our girls go off and join the Episcopal church has nothing to do with the matter.”²

After listening to their reasons for wanting to join the Episcopal church, he tells them they do not need his permission, but he hopes they will be good citizens of their chosen church community, outlining the ways in which members should support their organization.

Sophomore year, Betsy tries on a new personality – she is going to be Dramatic and Mysterious. These are characteristics that none of her friends – including those who have been her “friends” through reading the previous five novels – associate with Betsy. She learns that she cannot fake it with the people who know her well, but that she can with the sullen, rich Phil Brandish. Yet all through their romance, it is apparent that he is not worthy of her, that he does not share any of her interests and does not care that she even has interests. And of course, throughout the action of the novel, she comes to understand this herself, realizing that she does not want to continue a relationship with him.

William J. Brown has researched audience involvement with media personae, which he considers people both real and fictional who are accessed through visual media. I would extend his work to include textual fictional characters as well. He identifies four kinds of audience involvement: Transportation, parasocial interaction, identification and worship. My relationship with Betsy falls into the identification category. Brown quotes H. Kelman to define identification as “the internalization of the attitudes, beliefs and values of the object of identification by the person who is being influenced.”³

When I began to be systematic about trying to be a writer while I was in elementary school, I emulated Betsy and Harriet the Spy by using black-and-white composition notebooks. Betsy's stories are at first heavily influenced by the hired girl's dime novels. I copied her titles and made up my own lurid tales – *Hardly More Than a Child*, my version, involved a child murderer. Melodrama all the way! I learned that it was important to read the classics. I dreamed, like Betsy, of writing something good someday.

When I started one of my innumerable journals that never got finished, I stole Betsy's metaphor from *Betsy in Spite of Herself*. I began with the Winding Hall of Fate. I reveled in her idea of the twists and turns of the future and that one day the pages would be filled with my story, but I did not yet know what it would be.

Betsy is decidedly feminine. She cares about boys and clothes and perfume. She wants to be popular. But she is serious about her writing and her aspirations. These desires are not mutually exclusive. So many books force the heroine to be serious or frivolous, Betsy holds multiple aspects; she is complicated. She is not perfect.

The final books in the series are chronicles of a trip to Europe (at the dawn of World War I) and Betsy's marriage and beginning of her career as a writer. Of the three companion books, one is middle grade; one follows a familiar character in the main series as she spends a summer at home after her first year at Vassar; and the final volume introduces a new heroine, Emily Webster, and is one of my favorite books of the entire series, even though Betsy only appears in a cameo.

“They are ultimately books about character, and especially about the character of one girl whose greatest sin, throughout the books, is to undervalue herself.”⁴ Betsy grows in each book and over the course of the whole series.

Yes, but back at the University, she had lost herself again. Was life always like that, she wondered? A game of hide and seek in which you only occasionally found the person you wanted to be?

– Maud Hart Lovelace, *Betsy and the Great World*

No one in my family “got” me.

They loved me.

They thought I was special. They had hopes and dreams for me. My parents were stewards of the community. They ran for local office, sat on boards, they volunteered for a variety of organizations from serving the homeless to the arts. They networked. My dad was an “old boy.” They navigated a world where bloodlines still mattered.

They had no idea that the emphasis on family trees and societies left me out. Every time I read the book *Emma*, when Knightley says, “She’s the daughter of nobody knows who,” it cut me. That I was adopted had never been a secret.

I have heard it said that writers, whether consciously or not, develop themes in their writing. These themes emerge from your inner self and I discovered that one of the major themes of my writing is parental abandonment.

My father and I did not fight.

My mother – I fought with. My brother – I fought with. But rarely my dad. There was that time he chased me around the kitchen because I called my mother stingy for not letting me use butter in the cookies I was baking, but that was an exception.

My whole modus operandi as a kid can be boiled down to this: Make your father proud. Somehow I knew my mother, despite our differences and fights, thought I was pretty special. With my father, I was never sure. The worst thing he could say to me was “I’m disappointed in you.”

He said it rather often.

He had very high standards. He had gone to boarding school and I ended up going to the same one. He had been the top of his class, not part of the top, *the* top, and his name headed the list of names carved into a teak plaque that hung in the auditorium. When I had first seen his name carved up there, I had been proud. As the months went by, the words, all capitalized in an ecclesiastical font, became an accusation. I did not even get into the Cum Laude Society. When it came time to apply to colleges, I decided not to apply to Harvard, where he had gone. As a kid, I had always planned to go to Harvard. That is where Dad went; it was the best. He even did alumni interviews for prospective students. I knew if I applied, I would never know if it was because of him or because of me. I think it was probably one of the stupider things I have done, not applying to Harvard. I do not know if it would have been the best choice for me, but I could have benefited from the advantages of being a Harvard alum. He was disappointed, again, that I made that decision.

It was 1993, almost a decade since I had graduated from college, and the Betsy-Tacy Society had announced a convention. It would be held in Mankato, Minnesota, the real-life counterpart of the fictional Deep Valley. I had saved enough money to go and, during a parental visit, I excitedly told them about planning to go to the convention.

My father disapproved.

It was not the money or the time away from my job or my husband (it was to be three days long). What he disapproved of was that I wanted to go at all.

“It’s not worthy,” he told me. “It’s not worthy that you want to go. Those are children’s books and you should not want this.”

I was stunned. This criticism cut to my very core. How could I explain to him? As Judy Blume wrote in her foreword to *Betsy and Tacy: Over the Big Hill*, “They were too deep to share.”⁵ I was scared I would not be able to find the words. I could have written an essay about them, but even that would have been difficult.

Mom and Dad went back to their hotel with the fight unresolved. I know fight sounds like a strong word for this exchange. There was no actual shouting and definitely nothing physical, but then WASPs do not fight that way. Their way of fighting is more lethal than any physical blow.

Ian, my husband, was furious. He understands me without me ever having to put anything in words and for him, if I find value in something that makes it valuable to him. He has said he never could comprehend my father’s reaction to me wanting to go to the convention. I am fairly certain he spoke to my father about it, although he has never told me he did.

All night I rehearsed my counter-argument in my head. I was still afraid of being tongue-tied, of sounding childish and, yes, stupid.

But when he returned, I found the words. I told him about respected authors who also loved the books. I explained their meaning in my life. He listened. Perhaps he regretted his initial over-reaction, perhaps, as I said, Ian spoke to him, but he listened. It ended with him agreeing to read one of the books. It seemed like a penance, but maybe it

was an apology. I gave him *Betsy and The Great World*, where Betsy travels to Europe and starts becoming a published writer. I do not remember exactly what he said, but it was something along the lines of I can see its appeal.

I did not go to the convention that year.

Good things come, but they're never perfect, are they? You have to twist them into something perfect.

– Maud Hart Lovelace, *Betsy's Wedding*

The fear of abandonment, common for adoptees, was very real for me. As I said, I had known forever that I was adopted. In fact, my mother successfully avoided the messy where-did-I-come-from sex conversation by telling me I came from the Family and Children's Services. The nagging thought was always there, though: If I did not live up to their expectations, they could turn me in, get a better model, someone who would eat runny eggs and vegetables, who was not introverted, who did not spend all her time with her nose in a book. "Cary, go outside and play!" was my mother's constant admonition.

I never had any desire to know, because I thought that knowing would mean I had to give up my adoptive narrative, that that story would no longer be a part of me. I realize now that is not true in the strictest sense. If we can absorb the stories we read as part of our own stories, then the stories we have lived are also a part of us, for better or for worse. Stories are not static. They change and grow and shift meaning as we change and create new larger narratives. Maybe it is a sort of clarifying as the chapters unfold, reactions are explained, understood.

Sometimes our true families are the families we adopt and who adopt us. We can be open to more than one family – having one does not preclude having another, even

birth families, even fictional families. I have my family who raised me and I have the family Ian and I created. I have my family of close friends. Some families we choose and some families choose us. The fictional Ray family is another of my chosen families.

I believe it is possible to choose families in a mindful way. If the experience of being in someone else's mind is transformative, then we can choose those narratives, be open to unexpected forces. Every book will not do this, of course; some books we read at the wrong time or wrong place. Some do not take, some may need two or three tries before we connect, however much we want to meld with a particular book. (I am looking at you, *Lord of the Rings*.) If we read widely enough, we can be astonished in unpredictable ways.

Not knowing anything meant I could make up my own stories about my birth mother. I imagined a young woman, sixteen or eighteen, who would have gotten pregnant and did not tell her parents until it was too late to do anything about it. I was born in Greenwich, Connecticut in the early 1960s. Any married woman in Greenwich, at that time, who would have gotten unexpectedly pregnant would either have kept the baby or been able to afford to have it "taken care of." So it had to be an unmarried girl, I reasoned. It was an understandable, logical narrative. I never thought she would have wanted to keep me, because if I had been pregnant in those circumstances, I would not have wanted to raise a baby either.

So I had this comforting tale and never had any desire to challenge it. What if something terrible had happened to her, what if I were the product of rape or incest? I did not want that story and if I did not try to find out anything, then I would not have to accept a story I had no control over.

Then I gave birth to my first son.

I was thirty-four and for the first time, someone looked like me. It was amazing and powerful and so unexpected. He had my eyes and hair and my husband's ears and round head. For most people, that probably does not seem remarkable, but for me, it was illuminating.

I wanted, suddenly, to know.

Initial stabs at searching revealed that to find out anything from the state agency that handled my adoption, it would cost \$350. For us at that time, it was a lot of money, a family with a new baby and one income. So I did nothing about it, even though my husband urged me to continue the search.

Another child later, I still had questions, but the money became something I objected to on principle. Why should I have to pay to find out information that most people know? It seemed unethical. Adoption is one of the only contracts where a person who is bound by it has absolutely no say in the terms.

The curiosity door opened a crack further when I met the parent of one of my son's friends who had found his birth mother and brothers and sisters. Then my brother (also adopted) married another adoptee, and she had also connected with her birth mother, who been forced to give her up when she was two.

I began searching public adoption forums online, where birth parents and adoptees could search for each other. I did not want to meet her if she did not want to meet me. But what if she searched for me? And I realized then, that is what I really wanted. I wanted her to want to find me.

My searches turned up nothing, no clues. I only had a handful of details – not even that much – my birth date, time and location.

In 2013, I learned a law in Connecticut had passed that allowed adoptees access to their original birth certificates, but this law only applied to people born after 1983. I had not even known that there would have been a different birth certificate to the one stored in our lock box. Part of my narrative surrounding my birth had been that I had been chosen for my adoptive parents before my actual birth. I was born and their names went on my birth certificate – my name, date of birth, place of birth were all true. But it was a lie.

And I did not have access to the truth.

This time, however, I went one baby step further. I sent in a check and asked for non-identifying information, hoping for medical information. What I got instead was a story. A story that raised more questions than it answered, but a story nevertheless.

Her name was Danielle (they wrote – and I have no idea whether this is a pseudonym or not). She came to the United States from England to be a nanny, but left that job and took one as a bank clerk in Greenwich, Connecticut. She was 22. According to the adoption agency, the biological father, David, was 30, Irish, and lived in nearby Larchmont, New York, a few minutes train ride from Greenwich. They had been in a relationship, had thought to get married, but he had called it off. Apparently, he was a bit of a rogue, owing his parents money, abandoning his pregnant girlfriend. His parents allowed Danielle to live with them while she was pregnant. (I note the fact that I wrote “the” biological father rather than “my” and it calls attention to the fact that my questions and searches revolve around my bio mother. Always about the mother.)

All was pretty much as I expected, with the added charm of her being actually British.

The surprising part to me was that my birth mother had seen me once after I was born. I had been placed in foster care a week after my birth and they called me Melinda. Danielle visited me a few days later and called me Siobhan. She signed the final release several weeks later. I had always assumed that since she knew she was giving me up for adoption that they would have whisked me away and she never saw me. Somehow, that part made the sting of rejection pierce me again, the only part of the whole report that hurt.

I still do not want to meet her, but I still wish she wanted to meet me.

Muster your wits, stand in your own defense.

– William Shakespeare, as quoted in *Emily of Deep Valley*

I crossed the threshold and hesitated, my table assignment in my hand.

It was a typical hotel conference room: innocuously patterned carpet in dried blood/maroon and almond colors, designed to hide dirt and stains; white draped tables, surrounded by insipid chairs. About half of the expected 200 attendees were either at their tables or milling about. There were cries of welcome and hugs. Others, like me, were clearly new and awkwardly unsure.

And as I took in all the room, the thought that went through my mind was: “Is this what I look like?”

I had met other Betsy-Tacy fans before and had not had this uncharitable reaction. I had a small group of friends at home who were fellow devotees. A couple of us had even travelled to Boston to meet up with other New England Maud Hart Lovelace

groupies. I had never been to Minnesota, though, and here I was, after nearly two decades of wanting to go, at a Betsy-Tacy convention.

The other women seemed, as a group, extremely overweight, prone to frizzy hair and shapeless, floral dresses.

The disloyal thought occurred again: “Is this what I look like? Is this what my father was warning me about? Had I made a mistake?”

For a moment, I had the outsiders’ unbiased view, not colored by knowing, and I could see why we looked like a bunch of kooky, children’s-book-loving weirdos. It did not help that frizzy hair and weight are the two aspects of my own appearance I am most sensitive about.

Once I began talking to people, though, the judgement was gone and I did not care what anyone looked like. These women spoke the language of my inner heart. They were intelligent, witty, sensitive, passionate people. They cared deeply about books. Nothing else mattered. They were beautiful. As I had known all along, my father had been wrong.

The trip to the convention was my 50th birthday present to myself. My father had died by then. I brought my mother with me. She had not read any of the books, but I wanted to share this part of my life with her, to see if she could possibly understand. I think she did a little. It was nineteen years since my father had told me not to go the original convention.

Although I write about Betsy-Tacy and Maud Hart Lovelace to illustrate the formative works on me, I would also like to take a moment to point out that Lovelace did address racism and other cultures in this series. As I mentioned previously, Emily, of

Emily of Deep Valley, is the character I most identify with after Betsy herself. Where Betsy and I share a passion for writing, Emily and I share unconventional families and quiet personalities – the type of personality where small talk is painful, but when you are interested in a topic you can chatter away.

Disappointed that she cannot go to college with most of her friends because of family obligations, Emily at first tries to live her life looking back, hovering around the activities of the High School, and also trying to experience life through the adventures of her friends. She discovers her own purpose through interacting with the immigrant Syrian community in Deep Valley, like her, a group on the outside of conventional community, both socially and emotionally. At the end of the book, when Emily fights the school board to get social services and citizenship classes for the immigrant community, she does not use statistics or charts to convince the board. She uses personal narrative.

“Jed exulted all the way home. ‘You were wonderful, Emily! I always regretted that I never heard you debate. Well, tonight I found out what everyone has been talking about.’

He looked down at her radiantly through the still thickly falling snow. “What makes it so unbelievable is that you’re not ordinarily much of a talker. In fact, you’re the most restfully quiet girl I know.’

Emily smiled up at him happily. “I’m so glad it came out as it did! I was pretty personal.’

‘It was the only way to get them.’”⁶

Claudia Mills, in her essay “Diversity in Deep Valley,” points out another unusual feature of Lovelace’s treatment of racism and prejudice: Not only bad people have racist views. Good characters, favorite characters, also have negative views of the immigrants and are seen to change those views.⁷

While I do not think Emily of Deep Valley “counts” in my quest to expand my worldview through YA fiction, I do think she planted the seed that began to root its way into my world.

First, however, there were some detours.

CHAPTER THREE

Reading as Escape

The foolishest book is a kind of leaky boat on a sea of wisdom; some of the wisdom will get in anyway.

– Oliver Wendell Holmes

When I was in college, for the most part with occasional lapses at Christmas and on summer vacations, I put away young adult books. With the same instinct that led me as a twenty-something to hide less impressive books behind other books on my shelves, the books I carried in college, the books I let people see me with, were designed to impress and to give an impression of who I was or wanted to be.

I had discovered Sylvia Plath, as many college girls do (and I use the word girls here with purpose), seduced by her tragic, passionate tale of love, ambition, and writing.

In many ways, especially in her novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath wrote with an adolescent world view. She will never grow out of it, never mature. Her insights will never marinate into something richer because of her death by suicide.

I was writing a paper comparing the poetry of Plath and Emily Dickinson and I was in the Writing Fiction major finally (you had to apply to be in the major, the only one with that requirement at the time, and I had been rejected the first year I applied). It was dawning on me that to be a writer, especially a woman writer who would be taken seriously, you had to be crazy. I wanted to be a woman writer, ergo, I had to become crazy.

This was in stark contrast to the Flaubert quote that I loved, “Be orderly in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work.” Of course, I

discovered that a little later, but the writer's life of Betsy was not a life of a crazy person, and that had been my guidepost.

Women writers in general have always been taken less seriously than men writers. They are criticized for their subject matter. Their preoccupation with domestic life and, yes, love, is denigrated. Their world view, then, focusing on the small intricacies of daily life is perceived as less important. Women writers are reviewed less often in the New York Times. In the same way that teenage girl culture is disrespected, so too is women's writing and women's concerns.

As with women's writing, those who write for children are not respected either. Accomplished writers in the field are greeted with sneers of "when are you going to write a real book?" It is the same type of criticisms that are leveled at women writers, that somehow this writing is less. Less worthy, less interesting, less significant. Writing a book is hard. Even books that do not end up being "good" have hundreds of hours of someone's labor of trying to tell a story in them.

Of all the authors I plan to examine in this SPN, Rosamond du Jardin is the biggest enigma to me – I almost do not understand the appeal she has for me. The other authors I examine wrote autobiographically of their lives – especially as writers – or have social media where daily habits and tidbits of their lives are shared. And I never had much curiosity about du Jardin. I knew, vaguely, that she had at least one daughter, because they co-authored a book. I suppose I knew, in some deep sense, that her books were complete fiction.

There are three main series by du Jardin. (Even her name sounds hokey and obvious in a pink rosebuds and eyelet sort of way – oh, and you would better not throw in

the white picket fence, too). I suppose her most popular books were the Tobey Heydon series, which begin with *Practically Seventeen*. We follow Tobey through junior and senior years of high school, summers at the lake, and then on to sororities and college and, finally, marriage. Once Tobey has entered the hallowed halls of Engaged Young Woman, the series' focus shifts to her younger sister Midge. Yes, Midge.

I confess to being charmed by the descriptions of the clothes, of gloves and hats and sheaths and formats. “Whatever their value as lasting literature (and I did find these books, upon rereading, not at all silly, coy or dull), they are illuminating as cultural documents, revealing how the values of their decade were transmitted to young readers via the vehicle of story.”¹

Du Jardin has several themes that recur throughout her books: Avoiding social pressures to be “fast” or run with a “smooth” crowd, do not conform if it means betraying your values, do not go steady, do not settle for stability. All wholesome and good.

The du Jardin books were old even when I read them. Libraries did not necessarily carry the whole series. To read some of them, I would have to go to different branches and my mother would hardly ever take me downtown to the main branch. Where the Betsy-Tacy books were about my grandmother's generation, the du Jardin books were about my mother's generation. (And Sylvia Plath was three years younger than my mother. I had never thought of them as contemporaries.)

In the du Jardin books, the girls have no set career plans. They do not plan to be writers or actresses or presidents. They expect to work possibly at the beginning of marriage – as a teacher or nurse or secretary – but once the children come, they will be homemakers. Their one desire is for a boyfriend/husband.

Not one of her heroines is trying to have it all. It all seems so simple and if you could limit your desires to only that, you could be happy.

They might be called the anti-Plath.

“I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story.

“From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and about these figs were many more figs I couldn't make out.

“I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.”² (*The Bell Jar* p. 77)

The du Jardin heroines did not want any of those figs except the first one. They were different from Betsy, who was proud of being un-domestic. But they also did not want to be writers.

When I think of Sylvia Plath, the images are black and white, I suppose because the images I associate with her come from the glossy-paged photo sections stuck in the middle of the various biographies of her I have read. then of course, the images of red in her Ariel poems bursting onto the page – tulips, blood, anger.

She is seductive. She punches you with the force of her emotion; it must be real. It must be true. Her voice clutches at you.

What makes Sylvia Plath adolescent? She will never grow up for one thing. She has the confidence of youth, the need to bite it all off and chew, to possess it wholly. She is in the moment. Sensationalist. Dramatist. Everything is turned up to 100 percent or higher.

She is romantic. Certain girls in college worship her. Those girls tend to wear black and tell stories over candles and dead flowers in dark rooms. Those girls wallow in Sylvia Plath. Her words speak a certain truth. Not, as I have come to realize, the Truth, but in a particular time, you be deluded into thinking so. Then there is the yearning. So much yearning. She yearns. You yearn. Grasping for something solid to hold onto. It is akin to growing up.

Sylvia Plath was determined about her art, her ambition clear and unbidden. She worked hard at it. She took risks. I own about 75 books relating to Plath and Ted Hughes – biographies, poetry, novels, short stories. (Seriously, books about Sylvia Plath are their own industry – just last week I discovered three new ones. Of course, I bought them.)

Craft is something to be mastered. It can be practiced. It can be taught. Art is loftier, a bigger ambition and in some ways, it seems almost like hubris to set that as a goal. Is it not better to try to learn your craft as well as you can and if you are brilliant or lucky or a bit of both, your craft will be recognized as Art. Is Art not like obscenity in the eye of the beholder – “I know it when I see it.” That is the way I feel about Literature, too... this grand designation that is bestowed upon work, upon craft. Stories are more accessible, more everyday stoneware, not the fine bone china that stays in the cabinet except for Christmas.

Sylvia Plath worked on her writing. Through her, I learned, not only that you had to be crazy to be good, but you had to work at it (both the crazy and the writing). In college, I still operated under the illusion that stories came out whole, perfectly formed, no editing necessary. It was like taste, either you had it or you did not. If you had to work at it, then you were not any good.

I think books are like people, in the sense that they'll turn up in your life when you most need them.

– Emma Thompson

I never tell this story.

I do not tell it because I feel like a fraud, because I never intended to die. I meant to be found.

How could I be a member of the “crazy artist” set if I wasn't crazy? It was an act. I was not authentically crazy.

I remember with some friends, it would be a competition as to who could be sicker. Sometimes you just wanted to scream: “Let me have this.” In a way, my suicide attempt was that cry of “let me be the sickest. Let me be *something*.”

You think about an act in your mind, you plan how it will be. You line the pills in a row. Fifty. You know Sylvia Plath took more, so you should be okay. Besides, she took sleeping pills and you are just taking aspirin. Coated aspirin so they go down more easily.

You leave the bottle and a couple of pills out on the desk, so they will know, when they find you. You crawl into to the top bunk, your bunk.

Even though it was a triple – ergo, not desirable – I loved that room. It had a bunk bed and a single, a big desk under the window and built in wardrobes. The window was

huge with cranks to swing them open. If you got up on the desk, you could step out the window onto the roof of the bay window in the living room below, so it was our own private balcony. It was a room filled with light.

So the clues are there, I am lying in bed, not feeling great, and no one is discovering me. Maybe I will pass out and miss everything and that would be fine, because I am beginning to regret everything. How do I go back to before? It was exam week. I still had two more exams, but it did not matter. Nothing mattered. I was sure I would fail my geology exam. But it was also that I would fail to get into the Writing Fiction major at the end of the previous semester, a jolt that had knocked me in the gut.

In the last thirty years, I have only told this story once before, and funnily enough, it was to my husband-to-be on our second date over a diner breakfast. I guess I wanted him to know this before we got too far, but then again, maybe I knew he would be the one who I wanted to fully belong to and so I gave this part of me to him.

It always struck me as odd, as a punchline to the story I told – if I told it at all – the woman in the hospital, who I had to wait for before they would release me to the infirmary. At this point, I was so tired of the whole thing, ashamed I had done it and caused all this unnecessary trouble.

She came, finally, and pushed through the curtained wall to stick her face in mine.

“This was a cry for help!” she shouted at me.

I recoiled, chastened. I mumbled something or nothing, I cannot remember.

I wanted to shout back, “No! It was a dramatic gesture, a part I was trying to play, a person I was trying to be, but I’m not. It’s not what you think.”

In retrospect, she was right in a way. It was a plea for attention, an attempt to be seen, really seen. I am embarrassed by this episode in my life because I did not do it better. I wanted to be a tragic figure, a tortured artist, given all the authority and seriousness that came with such suffering and knowledge. I just did not realize it would be so embarrassing. One of my treasured quotations, one that I keep on my wall in my office, was written by Barbara Pym: “She liked exciting scenes in films and novels but found them embarrassing in real life. She knew that, when all is said and done, fiction is really stranger than truth, and was glad that it should be so.”³

One of my roommates, Meredith, held my hand and cried. She offered to get me anything I needed. I sent her off to the Evanston Public Library to get me that copy of *Double Date* by Rosamond du Jardin they had.

So the antidote to too much Sylvia Plath was Pam and Penny, living the perfect, prescribed 1950s girlhood, with dates and sock hops and the quiet one becoming Queen of the Prom. I remember my professor of the class for which I was writing the Sylvia Plath/Emily Dickinson paper. He loved *Moby Dick* and when we talked about it in class he would wear a whale belt buckle and a whale-patterned tie. I am not sure how many of my fellow students noticed that. He came to my sorority bedroom after I had been released from the infirmary – a man above the second floor! – awkward in the over-feminine room, me in my old-fashioned, ruffled, Lanz of Salzburg flannel nightgown. I asked him if he thought you had to be crazy to be a writer and he told me no, he did not. Although he had excused me from my final, when I showed up to take it two days later, he gave me a smile and I thought that he was pleased.

The information available at that time about Plath was incomplete. Her collected poems had just won the Pulitzer Prize; her journals, although recently published, were abridged. The then current biographies sought to explain her via pathology – searching for just exactly what kind of crazy was she. She was multi-dimensional, but not wholly explained. Some dimensions that would give her more depth were not known at that time.

Clearly, the du Jardin books provided, and sometimes still do provide, escape. This is one of the oft-cited purposes of fiction, although there are those who disagree to the extent that this happens. Gottschall, in his book *The Storytelling Animal*, writes, “if fiction offers escape, it is a bizarre sort of escape. Our various fictional worlds are – on the whole – horrorscapes. Fiction may temporarily free us from our troubles, but it does so by ensnaring us in new sets of troubles – in imaginary worlds of struggle and stress and mortal woe.”⁴ I am not sure anyone would describe the world of Marcy Rhodes (a du Jardin heroine) as a world of struggle, even though there are, of course, as Gottschall points out, problems to be solved, because otherwise there would be no story.

Perhaps, then, the du Jardin stories were vehicles of escape because they were books I was re-reading. I knew exactly what I would find there.

Mar and Oatley contend that fictional narratives make readers feel emotion, both new emotions and remembered emotions. “Once having chosen book, the narrative itself act to evoke and transform emotions, both directly through the events and characters depicted and through the cueing of emotionally valanced memories. Once evoked by the story, these emotions can in turn influence a person’s experience of the narrative.”⁵ They go on to expand this to include a theory about changing feelings. “Mood-management theory is essentially a hedonic explanation for media choices. It proposes that readers and

viewers select entertainment media that will promote or maintain positive moods, or those that will help to reduce or circumvent negative moods.”⁶ This is exactly how I used the du Jardin books at that time. I knew, from having read them before, that they were unlikely to be taxing and that the mood they would evoke was a pleasant one. They would not challenge me, would not engender new emotions, but rather take me back to a secure time. They were the security blanket in book form. Appleyard expands on this. “Virtually all readers offer some version of this distinction when they are asked about their reading. Juvenile and adolescent and college-age readers distinguish between school reading and voluntary reading, but adults distinguish between escape reading and books that are challenging or demanding. So it may not be only their own problems that adult readers want to turn away from, but also the kind of fiction that, withers complicated narrative methodology, ironic perspective, and lack of clear resolution, makes the problems it deals with seem as intractable as those of the readers’ own real lives.”⁷ We can read to escape from reading, too, it seems.

Sylvia Plath proved to be a poor mentor. I had chosen unwisely in many ways. She wrote with emotion and precision and art. She had strong ambition and worked at her art. I could not take from her the way to be an artist. I could not take that from the du Jardin books either. There was, instead of danger, security, but an insipid, unchallenging, and yes, perhaps unworthy, sense of security.

I needed to find inspiration in other places.

CHAPTER FOUR Reading as Social Simulation

No matter what happens, I'll have some good stories to tell. And that, in the end, is all I really ever want anyway.

– Sarah Dessen, *writergrl*, *livejournal* entry, January 21, 2002

One of my high school friends works as a wardrobe supervisor on Broadway.

When she is on a show, I can get permission to go backstage afterward to see her. It is always fun to get to go behind the velvet rope, past the “authorized personnel only” signs? Joby comes up for us and we get to walk on the stage, maybe meet some of the actors – or at least brush past them.

The stage in real life is much smaller than you would think from watching the show, where the magic of theater creates depth and meaning out of nothing. The wings, too, are small and intimate and you see then how people can do it. On stage is manageable. Only from the audience does it look impossible, grand and expansive, our minds filling in the details of what is not there – another wall here, a second floor there. On the stage, I find myself wondering how do they all fit without running into each other or tripping.

Anyway, Joby was doing the Noel Coward play *Present Laughter*. I had been to see it once already and now I was back again with my husband, brother and sister-in-law. We gave our names to an imposing man with a clipboard and slipped past the crowds waiting to see Kevin Kline emerge, and into the back of the theater. Joby met us, gave us a tour of the stage, took phone-photos of us on the couch on stage. We then went downstairs to see hair and makeup, dressing rooms and of course, the wardrobe room. A washing machine and dryer were tucked into a corner of the hallway because the

costumes must be washed every day. A rack of costumes stood in another part of the white-washed, cinder block room, with alternate costumes for the understudies.

Several of Joby's co-workers were in the wardrobe room; there were two small desks in the far corners as well as more racks of costumes and a long table with chairs. She introduced us to her co-workers and we all exchanged pleasantries.

"And this is Andrae," she said, and I smiled at him, a man with a shaved head and a smile that wrinkled the corners of his eyes.

As we all chit-chatted, my gaze kept coming back to Andrae. I was sure I had met him before. Could it have been the month before when I had visited Joby? We had gone to a cast party in this very room. My brain could not leave it alone.

The more I looked at him, the stronger the feeling grew. I knew this guy. My brain kept trying to put him in context.

I asked him, "Have I met you before?"

He smiled and replied maybe, but he did not think so.

My brain said, Vermont, you knew him in Vermont.

Andrae said he had never been.

My brain insisted, you know him. You know him from Vermont and what is more, he has been in your house.

Joby came to my rescue. "Andrae's actually famous," she told me. "He was on *Project Runway*."

A TV show. I knew him from a TV show.

I was mortified. I blushed and stammered, told Andrae how much I had enjoyed watching the show and how silly of me not to recognize him, and other platitudes.

But I could not get over the powerful feeling I had had, the certainty that my brain kept trying to tell me – you know this guy; he is a friend and he has been in your house.

The episodes of *Project Runway* he had appeared on had originally aired 12 years before I meet Andrae in person, although I had probably seen some episodes more recently, but still the feeling of knowing him was incredibly strong.

Such a delusion can be classified as a parasocial relationship. “Decades of research on the ‘parasocial’ relationships many people form with fictional characters show that while these relationships are, by definition, one-sided, these imaginary relationships have many of the hallmarks of real relationships,” writes Dr. Jennifer Lynne Barnes. In an article about the psychology of fanfiction and its writers, also notes that these parasocial relationships can be formed with real celebrities, and by extension, authors.¹

I have always had obsessions with books and authors. In grade school, it was Noel Streatfeild and the “shoes” books – Ballet Shoes, Skating Shoes, Dancing Shoes, as well as the *Betsy-Tacy* series I described in Chapter One. In those days, learning about the author meant going into the reference section of the library and browsing through the “biographies of authors” encyclopedias, hoping there was an entry. The ones for Streatfeild and Lovelace were about two paragraphs long.

Then in high school and college came fascinations with Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen and Ernest Hemingway. With these more established literary authors, I could find mountains of biographical materials and it was possible to read more about the authors than their actual literary output.

With all these authors, there was no real interaction. Most of them were dead by the time I read them. Maud Hart Lovelace died when I was in high school. So communication with them was not an option.

Now my obsession is with a living, breathing, writing author and there is social media, which facilitates these parasocial relationships. My interaction with my Sarah Dessen meets all the hallmarks of a one-sided, imaginary relationship.

I know the exact month and year I discovered Sarah Dessen: April 2002. I had decided that year to keep a reading journal, a list of every book I read each month. A friend of mine had kept one since she was in middle school and the thought of such a guide to my own reading was appealing. Keeping a list like that did not work out well for me. The first month I tried it, I read twelve books and after that I was competitive with myself, pushing myself to read at least twelve books every month, or more, and it made me nuts. It did, however, give me a record of that year in a different way than I had ever considered – a year of books.

My regard for Sarah Dessen borders on obsession. In these days of social media, as I have mentioned, it is fairly easy to get obsessed. I started by reading her *livejournal* blog in the early 2000s and she was a prolific blogger. She would post entries five times a week. I am fascinated with this notion that you can know an author with such seeming intimacy, yet really not know them at all. You have followed their adventures, you think you know everything. And yet, you do not know what you do not know. It is such a weird feeling – vaguely stalkerish – to have such an attachment to a person who does not even know you are alive.

Nancy Aronie talks of the importance of mentors in her book *Writing from the Heart* and I realized that Sarah Dessen is my mentor. I look to her to model the success I desire. In the way that we idolize the popular senior girl at school, surreptitiously eyeing her clothes, hair, the way she stands, I study Sarah Dessen.

I have followed her to New York City, Cape Cod and have considered other trips. In a happy coincidence, one branch of my family vacations in the same North Carolina beach community as she does, although we have never been there at the same time. Almost half of her books are set in a factionalized version of Emerald Isle, North Carolina, so I spend a lot of the time I am there hunting down landmarks and seeking real-life versions of places in the books – or from Sarah’s life. I follow recipes because she has made them. It sounds like copying, but I think of it as absorbing.

This sort of author-stalking is not new to me.

One time, on a family visit to England, we decided to visit Haworth and the Bronte Parsonage, once home to Emily, Charlotte and Anne Bronte. Relatives told me it was dark and disappointing, so my expectations were low. Literary vacations can be amazing, but they can also be crass and sad. When I visit Stratford-upon-Avon, I find it hard to relate to Shakespeare, the writer, the person. It is all too Disney-fied.

So I approached the visit to the Parsonage with the same sort of dread. The Bronte sisters are, after all, an industry, with books and movies and new versions coming out all the time. We parked in an out of the way parking area and came upon the Parsonage not from the usual direction, via the town, but from the Moors, into a graveyard that seemed filled with children (including a couple of Bronte children) and it was the front yard of the house.

The facade of the Parsonage was, indeed, dark with soot and the ages. Smaller than I imagined, but then so many places are. We got our tickets and walked in through the front door, guided by a docent. My first impression was not darkness but light. A large window over the staircase flooded the hall with brightness, sunshine and a sense of cleanliness, almost purity. Then we were shown the dining room, where Emily Bronte had given birth to Heathcliff, Catherine and *Wuthering Heights* right at that table, and had also died on the little green couch.

It was incredibly moving. Here, at a small wooden table, a young woman wrote stories more than a hundred years ago and here I was to see and pay homage and there are many other people making the same pilgrimage and it is incredible. I do not even like *Wuthering Heights* all that much. I adored it in high school, but now it seems to me the sort of story someone who has never been in a relationship would write. I do not like Heathcliff or Cathy – but I understand the appeal. And having had such an inspiring visit at the Parsonage, it is not too surprising that I might attempt to recreate similar experiences with other writers I admire – only it is a bit more difficult when they have not been dead for hundreds of years.

It ends up being a little different, when the author is alive.

I had driven 300 miles.

With a six year-old and a nine year-old.

To Cape Cod.

By ourselves.

To stay in a seedy hotel I had never heard of, because it was cheap and I could book a room at the last minute.

A person observing could have made a lot of guesses about this woman cajoling two little boys to follow her – kidnapper, woman fleeing abusive marriage, witness protection, stressed mother in need of a beach vacation.

Probably no one would guess “going to a book signing.”

Well, they might if they knew me.

Sarah had just published her sixth book, *Just Listen*. As always, she went on a book tour and closest stop to me was Cape Cod. So I booked a hotel and took my children on a road trip. Then, at the signing, I was so awestruck, I could barely form coherent sentences. I smiled and mumbled inanities about reading her blog and being a fan as she signed my book. All that distance and I shuffled aside as the next person came forward.

But you can't always get the perfect moment. Sometimes you just have to do the best you can do under the circumstances.

– Sarah Dessen, *Just Listen*

I read a review in the New York Times of Dessen's latest book, *Once and For All*. The review was fine, a bit dismissive, but it made me aware of something. First of all, that this was only the second review in the Times I had seen for one of her books, which for a writer who has been on the Times bestseller list for her last seven books seems odd. Then again, of course, they are “children's books.” It also made clear to me that Sarah Dessen is rather like Jane Austen in that if you just break it down to a plot description, it sounds simple, kind of dumb and a bit formulaic. But also as with Austen, it is the writing itself that compels, the voice, the universality of the emotion and experience. That is why Austen has survived all these years – a person in the 2000s can read about Harriet Smith

crying over a puppy because its brown eyes remind her of Mr. Elton and can recognize that silly, but very real, feeling and know human experience has not changed so much after all.

Dessen's earlier books are grittier, dealing honestly with teenage drinking, smoking and partying. Her honesty comes from not preaching about these activities, just acknowledging that they are part of a teen's life. In her later books, some of the drug use and partying seems a bit more sanitized – although in her most recent book the heroine lost her virginity to a boy she has only just met. (Then again, they are, in a way, punished for it in the way that teenagers who have sex in horror movies are – one of them dies.)

Some years ago, a group of rabid Sarah Dessen fans created a website devoted to her called *Sarahland*. She has created a unique world that has rules and a resemblance to real life. Her heroines are not necessarily going to become movie stars or save the world. They are everygirls, trying to navigate girlland, *Sarahland*, and come out whole. There are best friends, new friends, mean friends and, of course, boyfriends. There are reserved mothers, strict mothers, kind fathers, clueless fathers.

Jane Austen wrote of her heroine Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her to be born to be a heroine.” It is the Catherine Morlands of the world who populate Sarahland. Girls who, like Dorothea Brooke from *Middlemarch*, live in graves that no one visits, but our lives have been made a little bit better because they existed.

Reading her blog, you would never suspect she had any turmoil or problems in life. Then you read *Lock and Key*, and the heroine's sister has fertility issues and it feels authentic and you know Sarah's been through this herself.

Her books are not autobiographical in the way that Maud Hart Lovelace's *Betsy-Tacy* books are, but, if you follow her blog or her Twitter, you recognize the elements that come from real life. Things like Jamie's fish pond in *Lock and Key*, bike riding in *Along for the Ride*, quieting a colicky baby in the same book, the heroine's encounter with a creepy older guy in *Saint Anything*.

Dessen's books are about "nice girls," even if they lapse or flirt with alcohol or drug use, they always come back to clean orderliness – even though perfection is time and time again rejected as an ideal.

Readers of the entire oeuvre are rewarded with cameos and snapshots of characters from previous books.

Many themes and ideas develop through the course of Dessen's novels. Through this progression, you can watch a baby author take the first tentative steps with language and themes, then those steps grow increasingly confident. Her strongest novels are *Dreamland*, *This Lullaby*, *The Truth About Forever*, *Just Listen*, books written in the middle (so far) of her career. These novels successfully integrate theme, symbol and plot. The novels that come after these books, for the most part, seem safer; a lot of critical action happens off camera, so to speak, the dangerous encounters and uncomfortable conversations are played off stage. I understand that desire not to have bad things happen to your characters; I believe her less direct writing corresponds to the time in Dessen's

own life when she became a mother. I get that, too. Once you have children, seeing children in jeopardy becomes almost impossible to read, write or understand.

Most of her books begin with a loss: the death of a friend, the death of a father, the disappearance of a mother, sister or brother – major life events that have left the heroine vulnerable and removed from former patterns. Life has changed; she is coping with the new normal. Of course, she meets new people who help her in her journey to understanding the world, and more importantly, herself. They are about finding meaning and purpose in life. Dessen says, “It’s a pretty universal experience: much of adolescence is just trying to figure out where you fit in, where your spot is, who your people are.”²

Unlike the G-rated, sugary depictions of adolescence in Lovelace’s or du Jardin’s books, Dessen’s contemporary stories do not shy away from serious topics: relationship violence, teen pregnancy, sexual assault, school shootings, but she approaches them in an accessible, non-threatening way. In most cases, the darker aspects of the story is experienced once-removed – the pregnancy happens to a best friend, the shooting happens a year before and the heroine is not physically at the school where it happens. If readers need a safe space to begin to understand experiences like this, to learn to handle the emotions, Dessen’s books can be a starting point.

The books are written in the first person, which, as Sara K. Day observes, creates narrative intimacy as well “because narrative intimacy relies on a narrator’s willingness and ability to disclose to the reader thoughts, feelings, and experiences.” She also reminds us that the narrator and reader “share” the experience of the story together, creating even deeper intimacy.³

As Jennifer Barnes notes, “Experimental work has also indicated that parasocial relationships may convey many of the benefits of real-world relationships.”⁴ You can draw support from them, be mentored by them. So reading about Sarah Dessen and reading her books helps me in my aspirations to be a published YA writer, but they are books that validate and reinforce my own world view. Sarah is a white, college-educated woman as I am and part of the reason I relate to her is that I feel like she is just like me, that if we met in real life, we would be best friends because we have so much in common. This realization led me to wanting to expand my world through YA. If it was a given that I was going to read YA, okay then, let us make it count.

CHAPTER FIVE Reading for Change

Books may well be the only true magic.

– Alice Hoffman

People often describe a time when this or that book “changed their life.” For me, books have created my life. They have shaped it, defined it and supported it.

If books can and do change our lives, can we consciously expand our lives, choosing books with deliberate purpose to change our character, not just to learn new facts or information, but to seek personal or emotional alterations in ourselves? “Yet interest persists in the transformative potential of art on its consumers. Sabine and Sabine (1983), who interviewed 1,382 readers around the United States as a part of the ‘Books That Made the Difference’ project, found that for avid readers, books were powerful instigators of self-change.”¹

The world of YA books is changing rapidly. In 2010, YA author Justine Larbalestrier rightfully raised objections when her book *Liar* was published with a picture of a white girl on the cover when the heroine had been described as a biracial African-American girl.

As Melissa Schieble notes in her article *Critical Conversations on Whiteness with Young Adult Literature*, it is not only about writing about minority experiences. “Without bringing multiple representations of whiteness into the discussion, whiteness remains unseen and normalized.” She also quotes Beryle Banfield: “In a racist society children’s trade books and textbooks must be viewed as one of the most effective tools of oppression.”²

There have been studies that show that fiction does a better job of creating empathy for people from a different group than actually interacting with members of that group.³

In 2014, a group of children and YA authors noticed the lack of diverse authors lined up for the upcoming panels at BookExpo and BookCon. BookExpo takes place annually in New York City and is a week-long, industry-only extravaganza where publishers, booksellers, authors, editors and agents are able to preview upcoming books and schmooze and attend presentations. Ellen Oh, a YA writer who is Asian, noticed that all the featured authors and presenters were white.

Her first step was to call attention to this and through her social media campaign was able to generate enough attention that the convention planners hastily put together a panel of writers of color to discuss diversity in children's books.

From there, Oh created We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a non-profit organization devoted to getting the publishing industry to publish more books with diverse characters and more books written by diverse authors so that every child has the chance to see themselves in the pages of a book. A book tells us "this is what it's like for me." Care must be taken, though, not to market books in a way that indicates that certain books are only for certain people. Philip Pullman says, "Segregation always shuts out more than it lets in. When we say 'this book is for such-and-such a group,' what we seem to be saying, what we're *heard* as saying is 'this book is not for anyone else.'"⁴ Access to books should not be censored. Forcing particular books on people does not work. There need to be diverse choices and for too long there have not been, but diverse books cannot be only for certain groups.

Can a white person ever understand the African American experience enough to write authentically about it? Versions of this debate have been roiling around the internet for several years now. I understand the audacity of trying to appropriate someone else's culture. And I get that white authors have privilege over centuries of the publishing industry allowing only a select few to tell their stories. So if diverse stories are "trendy," allowing white authors to cash in naturally is seen as taking away from writers of color. But deep down, I have an issue with the idea that we can never write from another's perspective. If that is true, then no woman can ever write about men and no men can ever write about women and I do not think that is accurate. Of course, there are some men who do not write about women well and vice versa. So I believe if an author attempts to immerse their fiction in someone else's culture, they must live up to the standard of any other writing – is it authentic, genuine, real and true? I would never try to write from the perspective of an African American person, but I can read about it.

Oatley and Djikic contend that literary art "can enable us to understand people more deeply, including their inner contradictions. It invites us to identify with others of different kinds, to enter unexpected circumstances, and thereby to live many lives, some of which are difficult." And living vicariously through those difficult experiences makes us more empathetic to the plight of other people. By entering another's life, we change. As Oatley and Djikic point out, "We become enabled to change ourselves not when an author has tried to persuade us or to direct our emotions but by indirect communication. When this occurs, but means perhaps of a perturbation within that can occur as we enter into a piece of literary art in a writerly way, we can begin to transform ourselves."⁵

Oatley and Djikic researched whether literary fiction really can change someone's personality. They found it could. "We found that those who read Chekhov's story [as opposed to a non-fiction, non-literary version of the same events] changed their personality by small but statistically significant amounts. The changes were not all of the same traits and not all in the same direction. Each person changed in her or his own way, and the amount of the change was mediated by the amount of emotion experienced in reading the story."⁶

As Richard Gerrig notes in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: The Psychological Activities of Reading*, "A text cannot force a reader to experience a narrative world."⁷ In other words, the experience of the text is between the reader and the text. Once the author has put it down on paper, the experience is beyond their control. Reading is an interactive experience and both sides make contributions. "Fiction is essentially a shared activity, involving the audience of a narrative as well as its maker."⁸

Also, Mar and Oatley contend, "For this reason, literature may be helpful for reducing bias against outgroup members. To comprehend such narrative fiction, we must acknowledge common humanity present between ourselves and dissimilar others. Without the reader assuming the same (or similar) emotions, desires, and beliefs as the protagonist in the story, the phenomena of transportation, enjoyment, and ultimately understanding would remain elusive."⁹

Before I discuss several recent YA books with diverse characters and how or if they had an impact on me, I would like to give you a glimpse into my own background and interactions with some diverse people, to give insight into my own experiences. We bring our own knowledge to what we read and this influences how we access a text.

Stamford, Connecticut, circa 1988

I had never thought of myself as particularly insulated until I went to college. After college in Chicago and a first job in a small husband-and-wife business publishing company, I decided I needed to find a new job. I was idealistic, not realistic, and thought I should not look for a job while I had a job, so I quit and began waitressing in a downtown sports bar. I ended up working there for most of a year, but there were a lifetime of lessons learned.

I started as a kitchen waitress, which meant that instead of taking the orders, I delivered them from the kitchen to the tables. I also did a little bit of food preparation.

The kitchen was windowless and smaller than my parents' home kitchen. And hot. So, so hot. Since the owner of the restaurant was a local guy who had played major league baseball on several teams, all the menu items had baseball-inspired names (or variations on Bobby Valentine's name) and the waitresses wore sweatpants and T-shirts.

Most of the workers in the kitchen were African-American; the dishwasher was an immigrant from Haiti – grandfather age – who spoke little English. We communicated in gestures and smiles.

All the waitresses and bartenders were white. The guys who bussed the tables were African American. The manager was an overweight, white guy with shaggy hair, who sat in the basement office all the time, the only light in that dark burrow that seemed to extend forever into the darkness.

One of the cooks, Darnell, who could not have been more than a few years older than me, had a particular temper and all the waitresses were afraid of him. Wiry and always wearing a black nylon do-rag on his head to keep the sweat out of the food, he

terrified everyone with a fierce scowl and tendency to scream at people. He held a fierce tension that seemed to snap abruptly and randomly.

Yet slowly, I picked up on the fact that his anger seemed to come when he made mistakes. His yelling deflected deeper inquiry, put other people on the defensive. And then I realized something else: He could not read. I had noticed that he would make a ticket correctly as long as there were not any additions or substitutions or other added instructions.

On my way out one night, I passed by the manager's office and overheard the manager helping Darnell sign his paycheck.

I began paying more attention. I realized Darnell "read" the tickets by having memorized the shape of the words and what menu item they corresponded with. He knew "Met" meant a bacon cheeseburger with lettuce and tomato. But if a waitress wrote "Met – no lettuce" he did not understand.

When I had customized items on my slips, I learned to verbally tell him, saying things like, "Oh, I know my handwriting's so bad" or other fibs so he did not know that I knew his secret.

Working with Darnell led me to volunteer with a local agency that worked with adults who wanted to learn how to read. Since I could not confront Darnell head on, I would help others in a similar situation. I envisioned myself helping this person, giving them the key to a better life through reading. They get a better job, and and and...

At the training to be a tutor, they told us we would most likely be paired with someone for whom English was a second language. I altered my savior vision.

They also made a big point during training about helping the ESL students navigate everyday life, with a big emphasis on bus schedules. After we taught them how to read the schedule, we were supposed to go on a field trip and ride the bus together, with the tutor as support and back-up. I did not know the first thing about the bus system in Stamford, but okay, I was going to learn it, too. I was going to take my student to the bank, to the grocery store; we would conquer coming to America together.

Reality, as it is likely to do, turned out differently.

My student was a young Haitian woman in her late 20s who worked in a laundry. She already knew how to take the bus, how money worked, in short there were not any life skills she needed some privileged white woman to teach her.

I had no idea how to help her. We ended up meeting bi-weekly for two years, during which time she would read to me and I would define the words she did not know and help with pronunciation. I think she kept coming back because she did not want to hurt my feelings.

Bobby Valentine's was busy and there was not much down time to chat with co-workers. As the kitchen waitress, if I had any down time, I would be in the back, assembling salads or wiping down counters. All the waitresses were young women; there were not any guys or even 35 year-old waitresses. Bobby Valentine's Sports Bar and Grill liked their waitresses young.

So the people I became closest to were the other kitchen workers –Darnell, Phillipe, the dishwasher, and Reggie.

Phillipe was from Haiti and still did not speak much English. He always had a quick genuine grin, even though he worked in a constant cloud of steam in that hell-hole

of a kitchen. You just felt better when he smiled at you. It was the summer of the movie *The Bodyguard* and Whitney Houston's *How Will I Know* played practically every other song on the radio. That song is one of those that compels you to sing along, preferably at the top of your lungs, even if you cannot sing. Phillippe loved that song. He would smile and clap with glee every time it came on the greasy portable radio we had in the kitchen. That would be my cue to crank it up and we would sing and dance. Phillippe would rock back and forth, saying the words, "How will I know? How will I know?" as if the words were a mantra. He was the one uncomplicated bright spot in that inferno.

Reggie was just a kid.

Eighteen, still in high school, on the wrestling team, and working part-time at Bobby V's. Reggie was short, a half a foot shorter than me, but solid and muscled. He was a bus boy, there to clear tables, heave the heavy black plastic tubs of thick, white plates coated with leftover food and smears of ketchup.

We had a high-five relationship, high-fiving each other for support during rushes, having each other's backs against the customers. I remember a customer accusing me of something and Reggie standing up for me. Or maybe it was the other way around.

He was like my little work brother. I felt protective of him. Neither he nor I ever imagined a relationship outside of the restaurant. He was a high school kid from the rough side of town. I was a recent college graduate with a degree in creative writing.

I liked him, I really liked him and at the time I would have described him as a friend. In retrospect, I realize that is probably not true.

In my memory, the asphalt outside the restaurant is always wet and reflecting streetlights. It was the part of town where women did not walk alone at night and if they did, they put their hand on their purse, keeping it close, ever aware of the surroundings.

As work friends, Reggie and I would say hi, talk about the weather maybe, or how tired we were or how we wished we were not at work. But I never considered inviting him into my non-work world and he never considered asking me either. There was, of course, the age thing, but it was more the race and socio-economic thing. We had a workplace in common, but that was about it. He was not tough and touchy like Darnell. He was not sweet and goofy like Phillippe.

I was wiping down tables when four policemen came, quietly, through the front door.

When I first started working at Bobby V's, I had never seen a policeman in person, up close to talk to, or seen a real gun. Cops came to Bobby V's routinely, so now I was used to them, but this time was different. Yet it did not really register with me in the moment. I was concentrating on my work, on getting it done so I could cash out.

“You know Reggie Johnson?” one of them asked me.

“Yeah.”

“Where is he?”

I gestured toward the back of the restaurant. “I think he's in the kitchen.”

Suddenly, they were running, guns drawn and next thing I know, Reggie was splayed against the wall, pinned by two cops so they could pat him down.

This being the 80s, they did not shoot him. They handcuffed him and walked him away.

I had a terrible sense that I had betrayed him by telling the police where he was, but I had not known what they wanted. I did not find out what they arrested him for until a few days later: Rape.

I followed the trial, what little coverage there was, on the news wires, because I had started working at the local daily newspaper as an editorial assistant, a direct result of working at Bobby V's because the business editor saw me there, realized she knew my mother, and offered me a job.

But Reggie? Rape? Reggie was a kid, barely eighteen. And I liked him. I could not believe I could misjudge someone so much. I could not believe he did it. The Reggie I knew would not rape someone. He would not.

When the judge handed down the sentence, he was quoted as telling Reggie that he was sorry he could not give him a harsher sentence. It still did not match my experience of Reggie.

He got six years.

I never heard anything more about him, but I know he had no chance after that. Sometimes I feel as though I betrayed him, I see myself answering the cop's question with a pointing finger – he is there. Then again, I exalt my own role, which, in the end, had nothing to do with what happened.

The incident shook my faith in myself, in the law, in justice. We could not all be right, so someone or something had to be wrong. I still wonder if he was guilty. At the time, I took it to mean that my judgement of people could not be trusted. Yet, now I wonder if he had been mistreated by the system. It never occurred to me then that the

judicial system could be rigged against him from the start. I do not know what happened to him ultimately.

My professor Robert Nash loves to dissect words, to explore their derivation to add extra meaning. Inspired by him, I decided to look up two words that were jumbling around my brain as I had been writing lately: Savior and rescue. Savior, it turns out, comes from the Latin word to save. So, no big revelation there. Rescue, by way of old English and Old French, comes from the Latin word *escuterre*, which means to shake, as in shake free, I supposed? Shake up?

Why did I feel a need to save Darnell and Reggie and my reading student? What right did I have?

My parents were professional rescuers; my father through his volunteer work, my mother through her jobs and also volunteer work. They were always trying to make the world better, whether through the arts, the community or the church. That their “good works” imposed judgements and values on other people never occurred to them.

They never did these good works to get accolades or gratitude. My father especially was compelled by a sense of duty that was completely selfless. But they were appreciated and publicly lauded for their work. From that, I think my brother got his sanctimonious nature. I resent this behavior in him because I see myself reflected and I do not like it. He craves the high that having people thank him brings. I try to separate myself from actions like that. I want to help, but I do not want to want gratitude. I recently attended a conference where “white savior” was defined as the good white girl deciding what someone else needed and giving it to them, regardless of the fact that the recipient may or may not have identified the need for themselves. This is the sort of

behavior that my parents practiced, but as a frequent receipt of their “improvements,” I know the feeling of those on the receiving end.

A Sampling of Recent YA Books

In my quest for new perspectives, my own personal experiment, if you will, I read nearly 20 YA novels. Their viewpoints ranged from Dominican to Mexican to queer to Indian (Asian) to Korean American to African American, in my search for a wide variety of backgrounds different from my own. It is not about how many I read, though, or what I read. It is how they affected me and the changes they wrought. I have attached a list in the Appendix of the books I read, but I will discuss three of them here.

The Long Way Down, by Jason Reynolds, is a slim novel, almost written in verse, about an African American teenaged boy riding down the elevator of his building, intent on using the gun he found in his dead brother’s room, to get revenge on his brother’s death. It was a multiple award-winning book including a Newbery Honor Book, a Corretta Scott King Honor Book, and a Printz Honor Book.

When I was a kid, I had certain rules about books – my own rules. Anything about England, Japan, theater, dancing, and creativity was good. Orphans – really good. Adopted orphans –even better.

There were two characteristics which disqualified a book: a male protagonist or a talking animal protagonist. (This was after my picture book phase, when books were read to me, because I will always love Frances the bread-and-jam eating badger.) No Hardy boys for me. Give me Nancy Drew all the way. Bobbsey twins had the fascination of the twin thing – two sets! – going for them, but that was as close as I would get to a boy main

character. (I wonder what my reaction would have been if Harry Potter had been around when I was growing up? Identified with Hermione, I guess.)

My dislike of talking animals grew to a dislike of magical realism. Roald Dahl, he of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* fame, wrote: “Those who don’t believe in magic will never find it.” Whenever I read that quote I feel slightly sad, because I want to be the sort of person who believes in magic; I did believe in magical things as a kid. As I grew older, lost my religion, I also stopped believing in ghosts, fairies, hocus-pocus magic. I still believe moments of magic are possible, moments when the snow sparkles as it falls and it is suddenly snowing diamonds. But I no longer believe in the suddenly being able to fly kind of magic, with or without broomstick. In a novel, when magical realism appears, it tends to irritate me.

“No fair!” I want to say to the author. “You put this character in this situation and you have to get them out – without tricks.”

As mentioned in previous chapters, I often read for self-affirmation, for that wonderful high that comes from seeing your own self as the hero of a book, for seeing your values and beliefs take on a larger meaning. Because I read such self-congratulatory books so much, I find that my reaction to them is muted and the instinct is to keep them to myself.

By reading narratives with new perspectives, we can make those new perspectives part of our own narrative. The old rules are out, especially in light of my contention that reading about diverse characters can change us.

Jason Reynolds wrote a book that he has described as a book for kids who (think) they do not like to read. Months after I read it, I find myself still thinking about it. The

emotional impact lingers well beyond the act of actually reading and that is one of the ways I would define a really good book – one that keeps you thinking and wondering and pondering the characters long after you have shut the book.

On the surface, this book, *The Long Way Down*, has many of the elements there that were against my self-imposed “rules.” It is about a boy. There is magical realism involved.

But man, oh, man it packs a punch. It has the power to truly change lives by making readers aware that the power for all change lies within each of us.

In the same way that universalizability takes an SPN from good to great, a great novel instills that same kind of cartoon lightbulb over the head moment of recognition with the reader. Even if the experiences and actions of the novel are completely alien, when the reader can sympathize with the characters, the experience then becomes more likely to be one that can be absorbed. A novel has to have some indication that it is authentic and genuine. The author has to gain the reader’s trust that this story is true – not in the literal sense, but in the emotional sense. It has been said that “fiction is the lie that tells the truth” and that is what elevates books into classics.

This book gave me further insight into the African American experience. I had never considered the amount of death that kids are exposed to from a very young age. White suburban people can choose to be segregated from this reality. Reading *The Long Way Down* brought back memories of Reggie. Access to emotional memories is one of the ways that books become meaningful to readers, and that was my sense with this book.

The Hate U Give is Angie Thomas’ awarding winning novel that tells the story of Starr and her community’s reaction to the police shooting of Starr’s unarmed friend. I

note here that the three books I am writing about all won their awards after I had read them – I did not pick them because they were award winning.

What are the reasons a person might choose a particular book?

“One’s choice of fiction is a product of many things related to emotion, including (1) current emotional state or mood; (2) an appraisal of what emotions will result from reading a particular text; and (3) personal goals with respect to felt emotion”¹⁰ We read to affirm, enlighten, escape. None of these are bad reasons and none of these are the only reasons people read. We read either to confirm a mood or change it, depending on particular feelings in the moment.

I would argue that it is not the specific plot points or action of a novel that creates empathy, it is connecting emotionally with the characters, trusting the voice will take you to “real” places. In other words, it is the emotion and identification with character that breeds empathic understanding of someone outside yourself. Can you identify with a character that is fundamentally different from you?

I am not trying to argue that an African American young woman growing up in Newark can, should or would identify with Betsy Ray. But maybe, if she had access to books that portrayed her own world, that did give her chances at self-affirmation, then she might trust enough in the power of story to allow other experienced worlds to have a chance. As J.K. Rowling said, “Anyone who doesn’t like to read, hasn’t found the right book yet.”

And it works both ways. Can a white, over 50, college-educated woman find commonality in the story of a young African American girl growing up in Newark? She absolutely can.

So then my questions expand – is that identification because the African American young adult in the story goes to private school and is well-educated, straddling worlds between the inner city and the suburbs? Maybe. Angie Thomas, who wrote *The Hate U Give*, does a masterful job of creating multi-dimensional characters, from the friend of the main character who is killed to her policeman uncle. No one is all good or all bad; there are no types here.

As a kid, I loved books about orphans. I have always resented how adopted people are treated in books. Give me any mystery where there is an adopted son or daughter and I will show you the murderer. There is this distrust of anyone whose lineage is not known. It does not matter what you do, it is who you come from. I tend to avoid fiction where I know that adoption plays a prominent role. It can only indicate a book that will either infuriate me or make me cry.

The book *Far from the Tree*, which won the National Book Award for YA fiction in 2018, therefore came as a surprise to me. First of all, I read it before it even won the award. I cried multiple times in a perfectly earned, non-manipulative way. I wanted to hug the characters. They lived. They were real.

Books with adopted characters often treat those characters as “less than.” Why is the assumption always that? Why does the person never get assumed to be nobility?

Families are sometimes described as “the place where they have to take you in.” For an adopted person, this is not true. You are always there by the grace of someone else and that permission is retractable. My feelings of conditional love are not based in fact but in emotion. I know my parents loved me. But they always, always tried to improve me. Nothing I did was ever enough. And they certainly did not understand introversion at

all. If I was a four on the introvert/extrovert scale – need my down time, can interact with other people but it drains me – my mother was a fifteen extrovert on a ten scale. Her last three years were miserable because she fed off people and there were no longer any people around. So she got mean. She was always strict with me, but she had a talent for making other people love her.

At the core, adopted people have a deep sense of not belonging. Belonging to a group is a primal need, a human instinct for survival. Adoptees go around thinking *I am not part – at least not part in the same way*. There is always this inkling that your group, your tribe, is Out There. Unknown destination perhaps, but decidedly Not Here.

Adolescence, too, is about finding your tribe, who your people are. Am I a jock or a theater geek?

If I found my birth parents, would I finally belong? And there lies the rub, because I think truly I would not belong to them. I would be like a child raised in two countries, always the foreigner or outsider no matter which country.

Arguably, since this book was about adopted people, one might reasonably think I was reading in my own comfort zone again, but the characters in *Far from the Tree* are Latino and the book explores the interaction of culture and the adopted child. By investigating three siblings who were adopted, each character lived a different aspect of life as a minority as well as an adopted person, giving multiple perspectives of each.

All three books – *The Long Way Down*, *The Hate U Give* and *Far From the Tree* – transported me. Gerrig describes such transportation as integral to a book or movie that changes someone – the reader leaves the world they are in for a narrative world and when they return from the journey, they are changed.¹¹

Emotional engagement also plays a big role in the impact of a text. My experiences at Bobby Valentine's and as an adopted person had an impact on how I engaged emotionally with these three books and therefore made them more transformative.

Not everyone who reads these books will have my experience; I am not advocating that everyone run out and buy them (although, they are worth reading). I do hope that from my experience, other readers may find the courage and impetus to read outside their own comfort zones, to seek change through reading. If our current politicians took some time to read novels, perhaps they, too, could learn empathy and understanding of those who are different from themselves.

It is very easy to recognize fiction, but very hard to explain it.

– Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory

We necessarily see the world through our own cultural lens. That lens can and should be expanded by what we read.

“The adult reader may read in several ways, which mimic, though with appropriate differences, the characteristic responses of each of the previous roles: to escape, to judge the truth of experience, to gratify a sense of history, to challenge oneself with new experience, to comfort oneself with images of wisdom.”¹² All these ways of approaching a book and all these different ways of learning about other people's stories. Reading can expand our experience of other people and in turn expand our understanding of the diverse experiences of the world, but only if we read. Reading can be an act of

social justice in a sense and "...all these ways of reading are choices we make and that we shift among them for our own purposes as we discover our mature selves."¹³

"The best metaphor for our relationship with a fictional story is friendship. Friends affect us. They change us. And just as we are careful whom we choose as friends, drawing as Virginia Woolf reminded us (in her 1924 talk at Cambridge) on our abilities to judge character, so we are careful what we read and what literary characters, or what narrators, we become mentally involved with."¹⁴

As I have spent the last year trying to be more mindful of my YA reading choices, I wondered if this experiment has had an effect on me. I believe it has.

I travel to New York City frequently. My younger son recently started college there and before that, we would go two or three times a year. Although I do not recall what my thought processes were before – maybe because it was a case of not even noticing – what I can say is that I know my thoughts and feelings are different when I see an African American man. I have always tried to not be the sort of white woman who clutches her purse more closely when she passes by an African American man on the street. But I never really *saw* them. Now, I imbue them with a different sort of back story. I imagine a life. I see. I know they have most likely encounter struggles I can never understand, but I also know that these stories are not invisible to me anymore. I hear their stories.

The opposite of love, as Professor Nash has said in one of the classes I took with him, is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference, in not noticing. In that sense, I have already changed immensely and I cannot wait to read more diverse YA stories, even if I am an adult. "Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're

big and thoughtless and they always know what they are doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. Truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world."¹⁵

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Appendix

This is a list of the YA books I read specifically for this thesis. I've broken them into categories, but of course, like all the best books, they are about so much more than just a category.

YA Novels about a Latinx experience

Far from the Tree by Robin Benway
I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter BY
If Birds Fly Back by Carlie Sorosiak
The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo

Books exploring African American perspectives

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas
Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds
Everything, Everything by Nicola Yoon
Tyrell by Coe Booth
Monday's Not Coming by Tiffany D. Jackson

YA books and an LGBTQ point of view

Everything Leads to You by Nina LaCour
I'll Give You the Sun by Jandy Nelson
The Summer of Jordi Perez by Amy Spaulding
Simon vs the Homo Sapiens by Becky Albertalli

YA novels with an Asian American take (including Asian Indian)

The Way You Make Me Feel by Maurene Goo
To All the Boys I've Loved Before by Jenny Han
When Dimple Met Rishi by Sandya Menon

Other Diverse Viewpoints

Love, Hate & Other Filters by Samira Ahmed
Does This Make My Head Look Big by Randa Abdel Fattah
Flying Lessons and Other Stories edited by Ellen Oh