



Emerging Voices

David Beagley, editor

A Genre Against Them: Regulating Young Adults Through Literature

Nicole Galante

Nicole Galante is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Higher Education program at Elon University, where she also earned a bachelor's degree in English.

This article comes from her undergraduate thesis, titled "Literary and Social Narratives of Young Adult Power," in which she studies power in young adult literature through aetnormative and youth theorist lenses.

Young adult literature is not doing its job. Many critics have defined it as a genre for and about adolescents, but a close look at the definition in comparison to the content of the genre reveals cracks in the foundation. The genre might be about young adults, but in too many ways it is not *for* young adults: it is against them. A genre *for* young adults is one that is empowering, one that counters societal messages that consistently tell adolescents they should stay in their place. There are, of course, many things the genre does do to empower adolescents, like providing mirrors and windows into worlds other than their own; but, in small yet crucial ways the genre is doing a very poor job at serving the audience it claims to champion.

Several scholars have argued that young adult literature is all about power. Roberta Trites asserts that power is "the chief characteristic that distinguishes adolescent literature" (2). She also articulates that the production of adult power and adolescent powerlessness, both outside of and within the genre, is cyclical (2001). Powerless young adults will someday grow into adults and consequently acquire power; and, as they acquire power, they will repress the power of the next generation. Building off Trites' ideas, Clémentine Beauvais calls for a reconceptualization of the notion of "power." Beauvais agrees that adults traditionally have more power than young adults—she calls this adult power "authority"—but she doesn't believe that young adults are entirely powerless. Beauvais argues that while adults have authority, young adults have "might": "a form of power intrinsically linked to the 'possession' of a future" (81). In other words, young adults are powerful because their future days are greater than adults'. Both of these explanations of power, Trites' and Beauvais', are concerned with the future. Young adults do not have the same power as adults *yet*, but if they just wait, their might will turn into authority when it is their time.

For this reason, I argue that much of the narration in YA is oriented towards the future. Rather than focus on the present moment, narrators are mostly concerned with what is to come: college, moving out, and falling in love. To write a novel focused on the present and powerless moment, it seems, would leave young adult readers feeling hopeless. To focus on the future, however, takes readers' minds off their lack of present power and gives them something to look forward to. YA pretends to be about the "now," but it usually about "later." I argue that such future-oriented narration only serves to reinforce the cycle of adult power and adolescent powerlessness.

Adolescents might not have as much power as adults, but they do have *some* power. On this matter I agree with Beauvais; however, where we differ is how we choose to define that power. "Might" is an inadequate definition for the power that adolescents possess because its temporal position in the future prevents it from ever being achieved. Young adults can never really possess might, because, by definition, it will always be just beyond their grasp. If might is unattainable, then young adults are left with no power at all. Beauvais' attempt to rectify the idea of adolescent powerlessness as posited by Trites is a worthy cause, but her inclination to define unique adolescent power is, I believe, inadequate.



Rather than pick a word to define adolescent power like Beauvais, I choose to call adolescent power exactly what it is: power. Defining adolescent power as anything other than “power” reinforces the notion that it is fundamentally unlike the power of adults, and strengthens the divide between adolescence and adulthood. Rather than focus on the abundance of future power or the lack of present power that young adults have, we ought to focus on strategies that young adults can use to negotiate the power they do have in the present moment. YA can foster those strategies by shifting its narrative gaze from the future to the present. Authors who focus on present power are rare, but they do exist, as this essay will argue.

Along with an abundance of future-oriented narration in the genre, YA has an overwhelming and problematic fascination with death. Rupert Wallis notes, “The use of death... is a key component of this darker, growing genre of fiction” (2004). Trites, too, discusses death, noting that “death in adolescent literature is a threat” (118). Sometimes the threat is subtle, but most often it is overt. Commonly, the characters who die are those who drink, smoke, and have sex. In these cases, death is used to scare readers into following the rules set forth by adults.

Together, YA’s use of future-oriented narration and the high frequency of young adult deaths reveal something troublesome about the genre. By simultaneously situating power in the future and killing off young characters, YA is both promising future power and removing the possibility of it altogether. Not only is this contradictory, but it is inherently problematic. I argue that this contradiction serves as a regulatory strategy for the genre. By promising power in the future and pulling the rug out at the last possible moment, YA is threatening readers: if young adults do not act in the way they are supposed to—if they try to step over the socially constructed line that separates adolescence and adulthood by breaking adult rules—then not only will they never acquire power in the future, but they may also die. Here it becomes clear that the genre is not trying to empower young readers, but rather it is trying to regulate their power in order to preserve the status quo. In order to illustrate such regulation, I analyzed 21 contemporary realistic award-winning novels. I initially sought to understand how power and the future operate in the genre, and the high frequency of death was a surprise outcome. All titles can be found in Appendix A.

“And she will grow up to change the world”: The Limitations of Future Power

Understanding the shortcomings of might and the values of reclaiming adolescent power as “power” becomes clear when YA novels are considered in terms of the type of narration they employ: future-oriented narration or present-oriented narration. The first two novel I analyze in this essay, *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* by E. Lockhart (2008) and *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (2012), provide a narrative of future-oriented narration, as well as a narrative that demonstrates the limitations of such narration. Finally, I look at *The Spectacular Now* by Tim Tharp (2008), a novel narrated in the present that provides a case-study for adolescents about leveraging the power they have in the present to enact change in their lives. Readings of these novels demonstrate the problematic construction of future power in the genre.

The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks is a useful example of future-oriented narration that overtly promotes notions of might. Narrated by an unspecified third-person, the novel chronicles Frankie’s tumultuous sophomore year at the prestigious Alabaster High School. Frankie quickly finds herself in trouble with the administration after infiltrating the school’s all-male secret society, the Basset Hounds. Once inside the organization, Frankie charges the male members of the Basset Hounds to play pranks targeted at the administration. While the administration finds her impact on the school negative, the Bassets are outraged that a girl was able to ruin their society’s male-sanctity. Throughout the novel, Frankie’s power seems present, and the change she enacts appears to have profound effects; however, the last chapter of the novel negates everything that comes before. Rather than focus on the ways that Frankie’s plans positively affected the school in the present moment, like the way her actions made the Geek conglomerate more assertive on campus, the end of the book reorients readers’ gazes towards the future. The narrator explains:



And so, another possibility—the possibility I hold out for—is that Frankie Landau-Banks will open the door she is trying to get through.

And she will grow up to change the world. (337)

The present moment, the moment in which Frankie's original plans to completely overturn and expose the Bassets fails, is ignored entirely, and instead focus is placed on the things she will have the ability to do in the future.

Choosing to focus on the successes Frankie will have in the future rather than her present limitations to enact true social change, to focus on her might rather than her lack of present power, could seem like a positive strategy at first glance; however, a closer examination reveals the negative consequences of this narrative choice. Shifting narration towards the future at the last minute only serves to reinforce the binary of adult power and adolescent powerlessness. Readers spend the majority of the novel believing that Frankie is making a difference at Alabaster, only to make it to the end of the novel and be told that she is just a sophomore, and consequently cannot make real change until she is older. Here, Frankie's failure to make change and her lack of power are conflated. In truth, Frankie is not powerless; rather, she is uncertain and confused about how she can leverage what power she does have to navigate the social structures around her because her initial plan did not pan out. The novel's focus on the doors that Frankie "will" open in the future rather than the ones she can open in the present moment blur the lines between uncertainty and powerlessness, and consequently paints a picture of Frankie as a powerless adolescent. Noting the unique privilege of the future that adolescents possess is a worthy and necessary cause, but to conflate future and power too heavily only serves to reinforce the cycle of adult power and adolescent powerlessness as explained by Trites. Young adults will never truly understand their power until we stop insisting that, like Frankie, they will be powerful *if they just wait*.

The notion of might and future-oriented narration is further complicated by the universe's failure to guarantee a future for both adolescents and adults alike. If no one can promise a future to young adults, then displacing power to the future is a futile act. John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and stories like it provide a useful counterpoint to notions of might and future, and also reinforce the importance of defining adolescent power as power. The novel features teens Hazel and Augustus who meet in a cancer support group. Hazel has been diagnosed with terminal thyroid cancer, while Augustus "had a little touch of osteosarcoma" before meeting Hazel (11). Despite his good odds and Hazel's bleak ones, Augustus' cancer returns and he dies before the close of the novel. Because the future is not guaranteed for Hazel and Augustus, they are always conscious of death. The novel does not focus on the future, but rather focuses on the opportunities the pair can capitalize on in the present: traveling, falling in love, and having sex. To operate under the framework of power as might as articulated by Beauvais implies that Hazel and Augustus have no form of power whatsoever because they are young adults without a future: no might today, no authority tomorrow. The novel's purposeful choice to orient narration towards the present moment reveals the failings of the might/authority binary, as well as the failings of defining adolescent power as something fundamentally different than the power of adults. Not only can the case of Hazel and Augustus help us better understand adolescent power, but it can also serve as a model for the genre that rejects future-oriented narration. The genre's tendency to console young people about their lack of present power by reminding them that they will acquire power if they just wait is both damaging and insulting.

A novel in the genre that neither focuses on the future nor kills off adolescents, rendering it a worthy novel of study, is *The Spectacular Now* by Tim Tharp. The novel features Sutter, a teen who parties and drinks his way through senior year. Along the way he meets Aimee, a shy girl from school who is anything but his usual type. Sutter and Aimee spend their last year of high school together, slowly but surely falling in love. Sutter eventually breaks Aimee's heart when she plans for the future, for a life after high school, and he can't pull himself out of the present. He ultimately stays in his town with his parents to attend summer school while she moves on. Aimee's decision foils Sutter's in that hers follows the traditional path that adolescents traverse in order to acquire power: high school, moving



out, college, and getting a job. He, on the other hand, believes himself to be powerful despite failing to follow the typical path set forth by adults.

While Sutter's situation seems unappealing, he never fails to look on the bright side and live in the present—a philosophy that is all too rare in YA. Early in the novel he admits, "I was never big on the future. I admire people who are, but it was just never was my thing" (53). Whenever a bump in the road comes, Sutter maintains his attitude, preferring to focus on immediate concerns instead of potential future consequences: "To hell with tomorrow. To hell with all problems and barriers. Nothing matters but the Spectacular Now" (232). This theme continues throughout the novel, even as he continues to make mistakes.

Despite Sutter's denial of his problems and his tendency to use the present to avoid his future, his story is valuable and holds the potential to disrupt the cycle of adolescent powerlessness. Sutter's story could very well be read as a cautionary tale, because after spending his high school years partying, he stays for summer school while his friends leave for college and presumably "grow up." This reading, though, serves to reinforce the cycle of adolescent powerlessness. If it were a cautionary tale, Sutter would have died. Rather than using Sutter as an example of what not to do, Tharp is deconstructing the social message that young adults who are good and follow the rules will get power when they grow up. On the contrary, Sutter takes power without following the rules, and despite that he doesn't die. To him, his actions are not harmful and his future is not depressing. Remaining home after Aimee and all of his friends are gone, a trajectory that counters the dominant one as set forth by adults—high school, college, career—he remarks, "The night is glorious" (293). He may not have a glamorous future based on his actions, but he's not really much worse off than a lot of rule following young adult characters and readers: alive and trying to figure out his place in the world. Furthermore, his choice to disrupt the dominant trajectory challenges the narrative that only one kind of post-high-school plan is productive. Too often young adults are told, like Frankie, that they will "grow up to change the world" (337). While this is a positive message in and of itself, it detracts from the power that young people have in the present moment to enact change—not might, but power. Focusing on present power tips the scales in favour of adolescents and blurs the binary that represses them. Novels like *The Spectacular Now* that utilize present-oriented narration are our hope of chipping away at the binary and restoring power to young adults. Sutter's story might not be the most didactic one, but its focus on the present over the future serves as a strong model for young adult literature.

...Unless she dies first: Regulation through Death

Along with future-oriented narration, YA has an overwhelming fascination with death. To put the phenomenon into perspective, I used my initial list of 21 novels. Of the 21, six include an adolescent who dies in the course of the narrative: *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005), *The Fault in Our Stars* also by Green, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007), *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray (2010), *Where Things Come Back* by John Corey Whaley (2012), and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017). That's 29%. While this statistic might not be representative of the entire genre, it is nonetheless shocking. It is perhaps *more* shocking than statistics of death in the genre as a whole because these books are all award winners. To further contextualize this statistic, it's necessary to look at the frequency of actual teen deaths in the United States. In 2015, of all recorded deaths in the US, only 0.38% were young adult deaths (Murphy et al. 2015). This means that, according to Murphy's statistics as well as the statistics I generated, young adults are *seventy-six times* more likely to die in a YA novel than in actual life.

The high frequency of death in the genre has been noted by many; however, rather than viewing it as problematic, most see it in a positive light. Wallis argues that death in the genre "allows young adults to engage with the reality of dying through the safe act of reading" (2014). While I do think that death serves a purpose and it would be irresponsible not to include it in the genre at all, I fail to believe that the incredibly high frequency of death in the genre does readers any good. Librarian Sharon Rawlins notes, "a lot of teens like realistic fiction because it doesn't lie or mislead," but what do we call a young adult being seventy-six times more likely to die in a novel than in actual life (2016)?



The overbearing presence of death in the genre is problematic when combined with the overbearing presence of future-oriented narration. By looking to the future despite the death of adolescents, YA simultaneously promises future power and removes the hope of it altogether. Moreover, death is used as a threat. The young adults who die in the genre are usually those who make a grab for power before a socially acceptable time. For example, Alaska dies in *Looking for Alaska* after spending her teenage years drinking, smoking and having sex; Oslo in *Where Things Come Back* dies from an overdose, breaking the adult rule of Don't Do Drugs; and Mary in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* dies after moving off the reservation despite traditions that warn against it. A subtler version of this tactic is used at the close of the *The Disreputable History*. The narrator says, "Frankie Landau-Banks is an off-roader. She might, in fact, go crazy, as has happened with a lot of people who break the rules" (337). Frankie isn't dead, but being threatened with the label "crazy" disenfranchises her as a punishment for breaking the rules set in place by adults.

Young adult readers' options are as follows: wait for power and spend years sticking to the status quo, or make a grab for power and die in the process. Because both options, waiting and dying, are bleak, young adult readers can internalize the message that power is always out of reach, and therefore they'll never try to break the cycle of powerlessness. In this way, power remains in the hands of adults, and it becomes unfortunately evident that YA is not trying to empower young adult readers, but rather it is trying to regulate them.

Changing the Landscape: Towards Creating Ethical Maps for Readers

In a New York Times opinion piece, author of children's literature Christopher Meyers writes that adolescents "see books less as mirrors and more as maps" (2014). To read YA as it currently stands provides young adults with a map that leads them in the wrong direction: a direction that is socially acceptable and carefully constructed by powerful adults. This direction leads towards subservience, repression, and powerlessness. It's the exact road that most adults want young adults to traverse, and it should be the exact road that YA is warning against. But it isn't.

In order to begin to restore power to adolescents, YA must stop doing two things. Firstly, it must stop relying so heavily on the future that the present is forgotten, and young adult readers are consequently are rendered powerless. Secondly, it must stop killing off "rule-breaking" characters. There are a million and one ways to punish characters for breaking the rules that don't involve killing them—and nearly every single one of those ways is more ethical than death. Of course, there are benefits of discussing the future and including death. It would be irresponsible of the genre to never look forward in time, just as it would be to paint a picture of the world that ignores the reality of premature deaths. However, mention of the future should never be so overbearing that the Spectacular Now is erased of all meaning, and death should be represented realistically rather than with exaggerated frequency.

YA has an ethical responsibility to readers that is not currently being fulfilled. Rather than simulating authentic adolescent voices and consequently providing readers with a worldview that is accurate, the genre is keeping power concentrated in the hands of adults and covertly infusing threats into the text that further disenfranchise adolescents. All too often, YA, a genre for and about young adults, violates its ethical responsibility by siding with oppressive traditions. Until the genre begins to change the way it deals with topics like the future and death, it will be in the service of regulating young adults rather than empowering them. It will continue to be against them.

Nicole Galante

Appendix A

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