



## Curiouser and Curiouser

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### Review:

**Day, Sara K. *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Print.**

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In her book, *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, Sara K. Day explores the relationships that form between adolescent women readers and the narrators/characters of the books they read. This is often an active choice on the part of the author, a device that Day terms *narrative intimacy*, defined here: "narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share" (Day 3). These narrators consciously disclose information to a constructed reader, either through direct address or more general narrative construction. Referencing Seymour Chatman's narrative theory "Real author [Implied Author - Narrator - Narratee - Implied Reader] Real reader" solidifies Day's definition of narrative intimacy and the relationships between author and reader (13). Because of these complex relationships, all of the narrators in this study are characters who speak for themselves and share details with the reader in order to form an intimate relationship.

Narrative intimacy is not something unique to young adult literature, but because of the emphasis on friendships and romantic relationships as part of the adolescent transition period, this type of storytelling is very common in YAL. Through a series of chapters focusing on different types of intimate relationships and disclosures, this book takes both a broad and deep look at YAL. A chapter is devoted each of these relationships: friendships, romantic relationships, abusive relationships, diary fiction, and fan fiction. Each chapter explores the role that narrative intimacy plays in several novels that fit the topic. Day frequently draws on psychology and sociology when she discusses each type of intimacy throughout the text. She also looks at examples of narrative intimacy and advice in non-fiction and self-help books as they relate to the themes of each chapter.

In the introductory chapter, Day clarifies that the types of relationships modeled in fiction for adolescent women reflect the cultural expectations for adult women: "the roles of wife and mother [...] are closely tied to larger concerns about intimacy as a primarily female pursuit" (9). This chapter also points out that for the purposes of this study, Day considers the reader as a white, middle class, heterosexual adolescent woman. Though she acknowledges that this is not the actual norm, it is the cultural norm portrayed in film, TV, and fiction. It would be interesting to continue this study with a multicultural lens.

Chapter two builds on popular psychology that frames adolescent friendships as a double-edged sword: "either crucial or detrimental to their psychological, emotional, and social 'survival'" (29). Citing various self-help books for girls and their parents, Day points out that these books often also create narrative intimacy with their readers by using direct address and offering experienced advice. This chapter discusses five standalone novels and one series: Sarah Dessen's *Keeping the Moon*, Natasha Friend's *Perfect*, Stephanie Hemphill's *Things Left Unsaid*, Siobhan Vivian's *A Little Friendly Advice*, Elizabeth Zindel's *The Secret Rites of Social Butterflies*, and E. Lockhart's *Ruby Oliver* series. In each novel, Day compares the fictional relationships with the relationship that the narrator creates with the reader. In most cases the reader functions as a confidante, the narrator reveals more to the reader than to the other characters. Several of these novels present dysfunctional or failing relationships, and both the narrator and the reader work through these ups and downs together. Day offers detailed summary of each book and careful analysis of the narrative intimacy at work, leading to the conclusions that "despite the potential dangers, seeking intimacy is ultimately worthwhile" (58).

The third chapter deals with fictional romantic relationships by exploring Sarah Dessen's *Someone Like You*, Kristen Tracy's *Lost It*, Sara Zarr's *Story of a Girl*, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga, and Rachel Cohn's *Cyd Charisse* series. In each of these novels, the narrative intimacy created by the author mirrors a close friendship. The narrator usually constructs the reader as naïve and allows her to vicariously experience the romance. Because our culture encourages girls' desires for love and relationships and ignores their sexual desires, many of these stories include a first experience with



sexual intimacy. Many of the romances explored in this chapter don't end with a happily-ever-after moment, and the reason comes across as a clear lack of emotional disclosure before physical intimacy. Although the reader is often welcomed as a voyeur, as the romantic relationships stabilize, the narrator shares fewer details. Day posits that this is because the narrator no longer needs to rely upon the reader for a stable, intimate relationship. The chapter as a whole questions the "rhetoric of readiness [that] offers young women an impossible challenge, requiring them to determine whether or not they are 'ready' for sex without allowing them to acquire the necessary evidence to support that determination" (99). Day claims that YAL's role as the most powerful cultural image of romantic relationships can help young women make more informed decisions about love and sex.

Chapter four deals with how "explicit violations of intimacy—namely, abuse and assault—challenge both narrators' and readers' concepts of narrative intimacy" using Deb Caletti's *Honey, Baby, Sweetheart*, Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland*, Niki Burnham's *Sticky Fingers*, Louisa Luna's *Brave New Girl*, and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (101). Sometimes these novels are used as bibliotherapy, to allow victims to voice their own experiences after reading about the experiences of others. Day argues that the novels themselves are "reverse bibliotherapy": the reader becomes a type of therapist for the narrator who is in the process of reclaiming control after the violation. Another important purpose of these stories and the narrative intimacy in them is to help adolescent women recognize emotional abuse cycles and show them ways out, should they find themselves in similar situations. The narrators create a different type of intimacy with their readers, not attempting to draw them close at the beginning, only letting them know bits at a time.

Chapters five and six turn away from types of relationship and disclosure to forms or locations of disclosure by looking at diary fiction and fan fiction, respectively. Diaries have come to be closely associated with teen girls in American culture, and fictional diaries challenge the private/public nature of the form. Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries* series and Megan McCafferty's *Jessica Darling* series demonstrate how the narrator's relationship with the diary (and the reader) transitions from close, exclusive reliance to rare instances of writing as the series progress, and as the narrator grows and develops stronger relationships outside of the diary. Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* features a diary that starts as a school assignment and becomes crucial to the physical and emotional survival of the writer. This chapter also explores two novels that include letters, blogs, emails and journal entries in a multimodal form of narrative intimacy, Alyson Noel's *Cruel Summer* and Julie Halpern's *Get Well Soon*. Day argues that all of these novels, like the previous ones, remind that though intimacy is problematic throughout adolescence, it is valuable.

Chapter six on fan fiction changes the dynamic of narrative intimacy by blurring the lines between author/narrator/reader. Readers are encouraged to participate in the narrative and often claim characters and remodel them after themselves. Day digs into the ways that readers become writers and change the stories to suit their imaginations by pairing different characters together romantically, inserting fictionalized versions of themselves into the stories, or taking characters down paths unfollowed in the original text. Fan fiction writers also encourage narrative intimacy with their readers by asking directly for feedback, "Let me know what you think!" (199). In a way, narrative intimacy invites fan fiction in ways that other writing styles don't necessarily.

As a whole this book does interesting things with young adult fiction by analyzing how the narrators intentionally relate to their readers. It would be interesting look for narrative intimacy in multicultural YAL and see how it compares. Many definitions of YAL include statements of purpose such as fostering identity growth or creating a moral compass; Day makes an interesting implicit argument that the purpose is to demonstrate relationship building by modeling healthy and harmful relationships. *Reading Like a Girl* is well researched and opens a new avenue for discussion in studies of young adult literature.

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